The Tale of the Ranger and the Chomper
by CasuallyCompetent

Summary

The colorful story of a cop and a hustler, reimagined in an archaic setting.

For in all times there has been prejudice, and there have always been pariahs surviving it.

In all times there has been injustice to fight against, criminals to fell and conspiracies to unearth.

In all times there were the brave and the cautious, the righteous and the cunning, the sympathetic and the cynics, the dreamers and the disillusioned ones; and at least once upon a time, there was a ranger and a chomper, and they shared an adventure.

This is their tale.
The tall roadside inn was bustling with activity.

Its location was ideal, standing just before the crossroads of the two main roads that ran through the local country, and so the large wooden building, underwhelming as it was, never failed to catch the eye of the traveller; and, more often than not, of their ever so tired ride.

Many of the smaller mammals found that riding the larger breeds of mount-lizards was a comfortable and efficient way to get from point A to point B, when the weather allowed for it. For the bigger mammals, however, and especially the ones that were not built for covering great distances, the better choice was always hiring one such skilled runner from an agency to carry their weight. It was a tough and undignified job, and if it included carrying multiple people -or, God forbid, a pig- it was downright exhausting; but such carriers were in great demand, and the agencies paid their muscle enough to feed a family.
Case in point, the young horse that was currently trying to sit upright on his chair, puffing and sweating profoundly. His employer, a well dressed elderly goat, was sitting across of him, sipping his brew with a disdainful look that portrayed his opinion of the drink, the overall establishment and his unclean companion.

Truth be told, the inn's success was entirely due to its location, as neither the structure nor the staff had anything remotely appealing about them. The lone innkeeper, a notably tall middle-aged male swine, had never found a reason to bother himself with complex brewing techniques, cooking that went beyond boiled vegetables, or even basic hygiene. Both he and his customers were well aware of what he had to offer: a convenient and cheap stop on the latter's way to the capital. They didn't expect much in the way of hospitality or comfort, so few found it in themselves to complain over the complete lack of both; and those who did were silently pointed to the creaking door, only to sit back down in resignation, gulp down their fill of terrible ale and pay the swine its measly worth.

Yes, it was a good and easy life for the innkeeper, who had never even entertained the thought of leaving the crossroads to sneak a peek at the wonders of the city his patrons journeyed towards.

The big, illustrious capital of their great nation. The alluring centerpiece of every young dreamer's visions of success, grandeur and glory, and the home of animals such as the lordly-looking goat sitting a couple of tables away from his bar.

_Hogwash_, as the swine would say, completely unaware of the joke he would be making. Why bother with any such visions in the first place? Why leave the comfort of your home, your inn, your farm, to go lock yourself behind the tall walls, past which half the animals would spit on you as soon as they'd look at you and the other half would munch you down to your bones?

For while Zootopia was known as a city for the folk of quality, there were also some rumors going around; rumors that sent chills down the inkeeper's spine.

Because people would claim that, in Zootopia, prey lived alongside _chompers_.

Hogwash, most likely. It was too absurd for the swine to believe. But then again, having been born this far south, he had never seen a chomper up close in all of his uneventful life. And he'd very much like to keep it that way.

He served two large cups of ale to a couple of adventurous young hares who didn't know any better than to believe they could keep them down and turned to the two antelopes that were leaning against the bar, grabbing a dirty glass and mechanically wiping it with a slightly dirtier rug.

The antelopes were having an interesting conversation.

"Twenty men! Twenty!"

"That's a load of shit and you know it, Butch. News from the north can't be trusted. They were likely two hundred for all we know."

"I'm telling you, my auntie lives close to the border! She said she saw it with her own eyes! An entire _garisson_, mate, with just-"

"Just twenty men, yah yah. _Hogwash!"

The swine entered the conversation with a contemptful spit; by pure chance, it missed the glass he was wiping. "If half the shit I hear about that Savage fella were true, the fuckers would be at our doors by now."
"Exactly! Thank you!"

"But my auntie-

"Son, does your auntie lie any less than all the other aunties of the world?" The swine curtly cut off the one whose name was Butch, who seemed mildly offended; the other one begun laughing. "Well said! As if a bunch of rotting degenerates and their chomper buddies would have any luck against imperial forces anyway."

Butch let out an exasperated sigh. "Frederick, do you know why we call them preds chompers? They have teeth and claws, dumbass, and they know how to use'em!"

"Yeah, and the army has guns! Give a sloth a musket and he'll take down a lion before he can get halfway through his roar. I'm telling ya, the war's as good as won; that's why we never hear any news from the front. Any credible news."

"You've never even held a musket!" Butch complained. "You've never even seen a musket! Only the army has them, and they've been way up north dealing with Savage and his crew for a good decade now, so how the hell are you an expert on guns all of a sudden?"

It was true; there had been a policy of strict firearm regulation in effect since they had first been acknowledged as an effective killing tool, and its enforcement had been extremely strict, to the point that a functioning gun of any sort outside of the military was an extreme rarity.

"Besides," the antelope continued, pausing momentarily to the sound of loud retching that came from the two hares who had finally decided to try their drinks, "Savage has guns too. Dunno where he gets them, but everyone agrees on that."

"As in, all the aunties?" The swine teased his patron, finally putting down the now downright slimy glass. The swine and the antelope named Frederick laughed aloud once more, but before the trio could continue their chat, the inn's door swung open.

The swine looked past the antelopes' horns, and was perplexed to see the door's threadbare panels swinging but no sign of the newcomer. A second later his ears caught the sound of planks creaking to the steps of an approaching mammal, even through the incessant buzz of the numerous bleats, neighs, squeaks and belches that filled the room. Soft creaks. A small animal; smaller than a hare. "Oh my God."

The words belonged to Frederick, and both his and his friend's expressions mirrored the sentiment behind them. They were now staring tactlessly at a spot on the floor, which the swine assumed was the position of the unidentified small animal. Now frowning curiously, he prepared to stoop over the bar to take a look himself, but just then two dark spots of fur jutted over it and into his line of sight. The tips to a pair of ears; a pair of characteristic shape. So it was a hare after all. A small hare. No, wait; a small hare would be-

A bunny?

The two black spots suddenly rose, revealing the rest of the mammal they belonged to; a small, fluffy, gray figure. Giving a light hop, they had effortlessly made it on top of the empty tall chair next to Butch, allowing for the swine to examine them properly; but he hardly had the mind to do so, really, because against all logic, he had guessed right. A small hare. A bunny. A bunny in his inn.
What new hogwash was this now? Everyone knew bunnies never left their burrows, and typically the only mammals to ever catch sight of them were their copartners, who of course had to visit said burrows to conduct their business, unable to expect the little creatures to leave their farms.

And why would they? They were masters in their trade, and with an army of relatives to work the farms, they were uncontested in the field of agriculture. Bunnies famously produced the best berries and vegetables in astounding quantities, and they lived safe and content lives, not unlike his own—although arguably much more productive.

Bunnies didn't leave their cozy fields in the eastern provinces. Bunnies didn't travel. Bunnies didn't enter large, inhospitable inns by the roadside. Bunnies didn't casually walk past an assortment of large, stinking and drunk mammals without batting an eye.

As mentioned above, however, the swine was not fond of traveling, and his shock in seeing a bunny before his eyes was not shared by his two patrons, who had likely been in contact with that particular species before, one way or another. Their own reaction was not caused by the mere sight of a bunny; it was caused by the sight of a bunny in uniform.

Namely, the duo, now joined by the swine, were gawking at the bunny's green woolen cap, which impeded the movements of her disproportionately large ears, and the red feather which adorned it. Her outfit was complete with a recognizable light brown vest, neatly worn over a plain white shirt of expensive, soft fabric, and trousers of a slightly darker shade held in place by a black belt with a fine metal strap portraying a feather similar to the one on her cap.

She also wore a purple cloth around her neck and a thin dark travel jacket, but these articles were of notably lesser quality than the rest of her clothing. That is to say, they were the only things on her which where not provided by the government.

The swine blinked in confusion. **Bunnies don't wear ranger uniforms.**

And yet, there she was. Undoubtedly a bunny, proudly bearing the ranger's crest on her vest and belt.

"Good afternoon, sir. My name is Judy Laverne Hopps, ranger lieutenant."

Her voice was friendly, firm and professional. As she spoke, her paw briefly disappeared inside her vest to emerge a second later, holding a small scroll, which she then unfolded in an instant and held out for the swine to see. It too bore the ranger's feather crest, an official wax stamp of the Burrows' province and a text which validated her claim, written in words far too small and lovely for the swine to read.

Not that he tried, of course; he was still blinking at her.

The scroll disappeared back in the vest as quickly as it had left it. "I wish to make a few inquiries, if that's fine with you. I'm following the trail of a perpetrator wanted in the Burrows who is believed to have fled to the capital, and it is likely that they have passed through your establishment."

Judy Laverne Hopps finished explaining with the same air of efficiency that she had used for her introduction. She tied her paws behind her back and smiled at the swine once more, awaiting a response.

"... You's a... Ranger?"

Not the one she was hoping for, but certainly the one she was expecting. She wasn't bothered, though; not anymore.
"I showed you my documents, sir. Would you kindly comply? This is official state business."

With a gulp, the swine finally came back to his senses. He averted his small, dark eyes from her own -large, purple, awake- and, suddenly desperate for something to do with himself, grabbed the same slimy glass he had just finished cleaning and gave it another rub.

"I dunno, little bun. Lots of people drop by here, ya know, and most aren't."

"Ma'am."

The swine once again eyed her in confusion. "Huh?"

For all her composure, she couldn't hide the irritated glimmer in her overly expressive eyes. "It's ma'am, sir, if you will. I am here as a ranger."

"Oh… Yes, certainly. Apologies, ugh… ma'am."

"That's quite alright. Now, regarding the individual in question, it is believed to be a ram, unknown age. He would be traveling lightly and in a hurry. He should have been through here about five days ago. Does any of that sound familiar?"

The professionalism was back. For her small stature and her undeniably cute looks, the bunny ranger had a surprisingly imposing force as she questioned him. Efficient, focused; the swine could claim neither of these traits, but he was inclined to respect them. He found himself briefly forgetting his surprise and scanning his memories, absorbed in the pace she had so firmly set for them.

"Don't get many sheep 'round here. They tend to stay in the capital, you see; they like walls."

Judy nodded and stared on, waiting for him to continue.

"I, ugh… Yes, I believe there was one around that time, yah."

Her ears perked up. "Male? In a hurry?"

"With no luggage, yes. No carrier either, which is rare for sheep, they hate getting tired." He chuckled heavily. "Well, everyone does, I guess."

The bunny bit her lip in annoyance. "Sir, please focus. What else can you tell me?"

The innkeeper shrugged at her. "Not much, ranger ma'am. He arrived close to nightfall, but didn't ask for a room. Just ordered water and grass and went on his way." As he struggled to remember more, his eyes absently rested on the cloth around the ranger's neck. "Oh!"

She eyed him with renewed interest. "Yes, sir?"

The swine put the glass down and threw the filthy rug over his shoulder. "He seemed a real poor fellow. No carrier and all, as I told ya, and he bought the cheapest food I had. But when he paid me, he took the coins out of a pretty looking pouch, velvet or something. The kind rich folk have, ya know? I think it was purple, like your scarf."

"… Hm."

The bunny contemplated on the detail, finally looking away from the swine. The latter figured it was a useless thing to note, but then again, he wasn't a ranger; and this one in particular seemed to have a good head on her tiny shoulders, what with all the fancy, formal talk she used.
"What did he do, ma'am? Did he pick the pouch off some rich bunny's pocket?"

She held back the urge to roll her eyes; like she'd travel halfway across the country to catch a pickpocket. "Not quite, sir." She chuckled, signaling that the questioning was over. "He's suspected of crop theft and smuggling. The laws in the east are rather strict when it comes to our products. Not to mention- well, nevermind that. You've been a huge help. Thank you!"

She beamed at him, and he retorted with a crooked smile of his own, displaying most of his remaining teeth. Were all bunnies this adorable?

"Will you have anything?"

"Some water would be lovely, I-" Her eyes flickered to the glass he had just cleaned twice. "I'll use the trough outside, for me and my ride." She dropped a couple of cooper coins on the bar and hopped off the tall chair. "Have a good one, gentlemen!" She waved as she walked towards the door.

"… What."

"The hell."

The two antelopes, who had not stopped staring at her the entire time, now turned to stare at each other.

"A bunny! A ranger bunny!"

Butch shook his head in astonishment. "No one's gonna believe us, Fred."

"They made some dumb bunny a ranger?! I've always wanted to be a ranger!"

"I know what they say 'bout them, folks, but this one didn't seem too dumb t'me." The swine noted.

"Well, yeah, I guess they don't make the dumb ones lieutenants."

"How is she even a ranger to begin with though?!"

"Hell if I know! Go and ask her!"

She could still hear them clearly as she opened the door across the bar and exited the building; a bunny's ears were second to none. She didn't pay their words any mind, however; she had long since understood that it was impossible to force everyone she ever came in contact with to acknowledge her worth. It had taken her forever to prove herself just to her superiors and colleagues back home, but in doing so she had been rewarded with the red feather that stood proudly next to her left ear, proving her rank.

She let ignorant foreigners be ignorant foreigners. Her people back in the burrows knew her by name as the bunny who took down the renegade rhino and personally handed him back to his unit. Or as the bunny who unveiled the grand smuggling ring that had been plaguing their farms for ages, cutting their fat incomes short and causing the big bellied landowners much grief.

It was that exact smuggling ring that she was after at the moment, two weeks after the interrogation of a young buck concluded with the mention of a shady ram orchestrating the entire operation for the better half of the past decade.

She had requested that the following investigation be handed to her, partly because she viewed the
case as her own and considered it a sacred duty of hers to personally see it through to the end, but also because the ram appeared to be heading out of the Burrows, or even the eastern provinces, running ever further to the west. To Zootopia.

"Hooves, I bought us trough privileges. Or would you prefer a stiffer drink?"

She spoke merrily to her carrier, a bulky, tenacious moose that had been hired by her organization to see her to the capital. His name was not Hooves, but in the two weeks they had spent together the nickname had stuck with him, and they both rather liked it.

The sweaty moose was wearing the plain white outfit and the light blue cap that was typical of mammals in his occupation, and despite his light panting, he seemed to be in a far better state than the horse Judy had seen inside the inn. Then again, she'd like to believe that his load was lighter than the horse's.

Hooves shook his head with a smirk. "I've been here many times, lieutenant. The service is as bad as it looks, and the ale's worse! You made the right choice." He spoke with a deep, nasal voice in a light northern accent. She thought it sounded kinda funny.

She smiled to that and nodded towards the trough. "Well then, help yourself!"

They took out their flasks, the moose's being almost as big as her, and held them under the water.

"What about food, lieutenant?"

"I've enough to last me another day. Do you need anything?"

"Nah, it'll give me a belly ache. Better to run on an empty stomach than a full one, I think."

She took out her flask and drank a healthy gulp. "Are you sure you don't wanna catch your breath here? A few hours won't make much difference to me."

"I've been way too slow with you, lieutenant, considering how light you are. We should have reached Zootopia a couple of nights ago." He too collected his flask, drank half of its content and smiled at the bunny. "I don't normally talk that much during the journey, you see. It takes a toll on your endurance."

She smiled back at him. "If only you weren't such good company, Hooves, your job would have been much easier."

"Heh! Bless ya, ma'am."

She let him drink and refill his flask a few times, walking across the stone paved road absentmindedly.

He claimed he could run the rest of the way, a day's worth of travel, in one go and without eating. These large mammals were amazing in their own right, she thought; or maybe it was just this one. Hooves' demeanor spoke of kindness, honesty, and a healthy dedication to his duties, and so the two had hit if off right from the start. She would be a little sad when they parted ways, but she had decided to put in a good word to his employer, despite the small delay.

She halted on the grass at the side of the road, observing the sun's gradual dive in the edge of the horizon. They would resume their journey when the light was no longer bothersome to the moose.

Onwards to Zootopia, to catch myself a sheep.
A frugal sheep with an impressive purple pouch.

A pouch he had stolen? Perhaps.

A pouch he was given? More likely.

Because the thieves and smugglers she had put in cells back in the Burrows were not bright enough to organize themselves as they had, and to sell the fruits of their labor outside the province they required connections; connections fanning all over the country, allegedly provided by the mysterious ram.

The ram had been leading the ring in the Burrows, but if Judy's gut was right, he wasn't alone in his endeavors. Someone had been pushing the products a long way. Someone had provided the money needed to set up the operation. Someone had provided the pouch. And if that someone was the mammal she had been chasing for the last couple of weeks, then she was sure he would have had better ways to make himself disappear than to run really fast in a straight line.

So maybe, just maybe, he himself was but an agent rushing to give his report.

…

She always did that.

Strange cases got her inordinately excited, and her imagination would often run wild; but she had learnt to keep it in check, thankfully. She had to keep her head leveled, now more so than anytime before. Because now she had left the Burrows. Now she was outside her comfort zone.

Now she was heading to Zootopia.

The sky was painted a lovely deep orange, but the sun itself had all but vanished. "You ready Hooves?" She yelled at her ride and traveling companion from across the road. "Aye aye, ma'am! Hop on!"

She walked back to him with a grin. "Bunny jokes, Hooves? And I was gonna leave a tip…"

They both chuckled as he knelt down, allowing her to reach the small leather saddle strapped onto him; with a hop, as he noted, but chose not to comment on it.

"Alright, Hooves! Let's get away from this dump!" she urged him cheerfully, grabbing the front of the saddle and steadying herself. As the moose stood in all fours and prepared to take off, she shot a decisive, almost challenging look towards the setting sun, and the city that lay in its direction.

"We've both got work to do!"

Chapter End Notes

As prologues go, this one is pretty short.

And I'm fine with that.

Now on to see where this is gonna take me.
Welcome to Zootopia

Chapter Summary

Where the reader is introduced to the setting while a bunny gets her city legs.

Chapter Notes

I am still bothered by how squashed the letters seem when I upload the text; it's just aesthetically off putting. I can only hope you're not as nitpicking as myself, but if the writing does feel too thick for comfort, then I suggest zooming in your browser. I've found it helps.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zootopia was a city with rich history.

At the time of its founding, it had been a modest, circular assortment of tents and carts set next to the shallow, calm running waters that would later come to be known as the Softstream River. The founders were said to have been a group of mammals that had traveled to the region from a southern land, chased away by violent conflicts that had shaken their original homeland. The identity of their species was unknown.

What was known, however, was that whoever these first mammals truly were, they displayed a disposition none before them ever had: they were eager to accept other local species into their population. And so it was that the bank of Sofstream became the home of the first ever inter-species community.

More species were assimilated and more space was needed to house them, so a proper village was built. Then it became a town, and much later, when its accumulated riches made it worth attacking, a wall was built around it. And still more animals were drawn in by the otherworldly allure of the peculiar, multicultural society that prospered like none before it. That society would eventually grow beyond the confines of the settlement, spread its influence in all directions and eventually form the vast, holy country of Animalia.

Despite its humble beginnings, Zootopia was now the hub of all life in the country of which she was the birthplace, and it showed in her every aspect; from the magnanimous architecture that typified its numerous large buildings of stone and marble to the way its imposing width dwarfed the river that flew through her, dividing into milliards of smaller canals.

Judy would never forget the time she first caught sight of her. Hooves had been fast, faster than he had expected, and so they had arrived less than a day after their departure from the roadside inn, just before nightfall, when there was enough light to make out the enormous walls of stone that embraced the capital. With the sun setting behind it, the city seemed to emit an eerie crimson glow.

She figured it had to be the most majestic sight in the world; by the time they had reached its gates, her jaw had been agape long enough to ache.
There were a total of seven districts in Zootopia, each many times larger than Judy's hometown.

First and foremost, there was the illustrious St. Marie's Plaza, located at the very center of the city. It had been named after the famed elk nun who had instigated the unification of the numerous religious parties that had been in constant conflict in the earlier days of Zootopia. St. Marie was remembered as a deeply compassionate mammal, loved by locals and foreigners alike for her candid demeanor and unprejudiced treatment of all fellow prey. She had erected a small oaken chapel at the bank of Sofstream dedicated to all of the numerous deities worshiped by the different species at the time, and in doing so she introduced a spirit of religious tolerance that would come to define the entire country.

The Zootopians of later years, recognizing the importance of her life and works, sanctified her and built a grand cathedral in her name right next to the river's bifurcation point, on the exact site that St. Marie's small chapel had once stood. The construction, based solely on marble and decorated with patterns and statues of finely worked stone, had taken the locals countless decades to complete, but it now stood as the city's largest and arguably most impressive building. It was a true landmark, as well as an ode to the saint's teachings, for the vast cathedral housed numerous different sections, each large enough to stand as a church of its own, dedicated to all the different religions of the citizens of Animalia.

That being said, religion had long since lost its central role in the lives of the people, likely due to the change brought about by the saint. Most had now adopted a vague idea of an existing higher power and afterlife, but rarely committed to zealous worship of any kind; in truth, each of the gods once worshiped at the cathedral could be considered equally eligible as the country's main religious figure. Instead, the citizens would refer to the cathedral itself, the saint or any of the numerous other historical figures that had been elevated to a similar status of majesty in their hour of prayer.

In a similar fashion, the clergy that operated the cathedral in contemporary times were essentially in service to the city, acting as the guardians of its history and actively involving themselves in its management; their religious duties, while preserved for the sake of tradition, were considered to be purely ceremonial.

The plaza that stood before the cathedral did not expand as widely as the colossal structure itself, but even so, it was unquestionably the ever beating heart of the city. It consisted of a wide, open area of paved stone, surrounded by the district's countless stores and technicians' laboratories. These were known to offer the best quality in their respective fields and were, of course, appropriately expensive.

The plaza, however, also offered a solution for its poorer visitor; each dawn would find a small sea of carts, booths and makeshift counters of planks, crates and barrels covering the open area below the cathedral in its entirety. St. Marie's Plaza was commonly referred to as the Central Market, where traders, peddlers and even a decent number of street performers and supposed miracle workers gathered to earn their living.

All of them, along with the common citizen that served as either customer or victim, came together during the day to create the chaotic, lively buzz that could be recognized as Zootopia's own pulse.

The city's western side was home to its second largest building, the famously impregnable Rockwood Castle. It was a giant construction of wood and stone surrounded by a moat formed by Sofstream's deepest filial canal; it used to be located outside of the city, but the latter's most recent expansion, which came with the construction of the thick stone walls that now stood around it, had placed the castle within its confines some two hundred years prior. It was connected to the city's road network through a small stone bridge, purposely built too narrow to allow more than a large cart to pass through.
Rockwood Castle was the oldest standing structure of the city. It had allegedly been built by the first monarch of the blossoming community who had wished for a safe vantage point to turn to, should the city's enemies dare an attack. It owed its name to the legend of the goat druid that had instructed the monarch to build the castle using trees from the forest that surrounded the area at the time. It took the monarch no more than thirty years to clear out the entire forest and raise the imposing castle. Using nothing but logs and planks, the deed was accomplished with remarkable swiftness, but at the cost of its result being laughably vulnerable; that is, until the goat blessed the wooden stronghold, turning it into hard, solid rock overnight.

Even though none of the modern Zootopians believed such folklore, the extravagant tale did its part in fleshing out the city's colorful history, and so they appreciated it and made sure to recount it at any given opportunity.

Whether the castle had been built on magic or the exhausting efforts of generations of workers, the fact remained that it had proven to be more than effective in its purpose. Numerous foreign armies, usually considerably mightier than the defenders', had perished at its gates, and it was thanks to such martial accomplishments that the city's inhabitants were allowed to prosper and expand over the centuries.

Now the castle served as the military's base of operations in the capital. In more peaceful times it would have been full of imperial troops working alongside the local rangers in keeping the peace; now, however, with war raging in the northern provinces, the army had been mobilized and nearly every capable soldier was either fighting battles or marching towards them. As such, military presence in the city had been drastically weakened, further adding to the rangers' already heavy workload.

The district surrounding the castle, appropriately named Rockwood District, was largely residential, filled with most of the tall, plain buildings that were used to house the lower classes of the city, and was also rife with inns and taverns specialized in catering to the average mammal. What was most notable about Rockwood District, however, was its particular urbanization, which differentiated it from the rest of the city.

It being the most recent addition to Zootopia, there had been much thought put into its construction so as to make it hospitable to all the varying sizes of mammals that now lived in the city; a mentality that would undoubtedly be applied to the rest of the city in the centuries to follow. As such, Rockwood District was at the time the only place in the city where residential buildings could be tall enough to house a family of giraffes or small enough to facilitate a single mouse, while the inns and taverns had been built with many access points of different shapes and sizes.

It was not the most prestigious part of town, to be sure, but in being the only place where one could spot a squirrel and an elephant sharing a drink, it was certainly charming in its own right.

The northern district was home to the city's most glamorous residences, made to house the upper class; the city's numerous rich entrepreneurs, land owners, nobles and vastly successful merchants. They were exclusively large detached houses, with private yards enclosed behind decorated walls of finely worked stone, while the houses themselves were each built with good taste and a sense of grandeur, counting numerous floors. They were all old, built long ago on the turn of an era, but their residents had always been wealthy enough to preserve them finely, making sure they never looked any less impressive than an actual mansion.

The north of Zootopia had been the housing site of the royalty for many centuries. It was there that a monarch of old had built his palace, and it had held for countless generations of rulers who had all seen their glorious capital spread before their feet as they stood on the palace's highest tower, said to
have been the tallest building ever made by mammals.

None living could testify to that, however, as the palace had fallen along with the bloodline it had housed for so long. After the royal family’s demise at the hands of a revolting mob some six hundred years prior, the Council of Mammals, newly formed at the time, had decreed that the majestic symbol of the monarchy was to die along with the outdated regime. The palace was taken down in its entirety, the marble from its tall walls serving as the material for the first of the luxurious houses that would come to replace it. They were initially meant to be given to individuals chosen by the Council as a reward for exceptional service to the country, but that notion had long since been sidelined by pecuniary criteria.

Even more so than its height, the palace had been known for the capacious gardens that environed it. Prior to the revolution that brought it down, there had been acres upon acres of grass, trees, flowers and tall bushes surrounding it, and the royals would allegedly stroll within the confines of their artificial paradise for hours on end, stretching their feet and making their way back to the palace without ever having to set an eye on the common mammal.

Most of the current northern district, named the Liberty District in memory of the heroic revolutionaries of those times, was build upon the very soil of those gardens, the beautiful houses and wide, clean streets replacing the vast expanse of green that had been. Part of the gardens remained, however. At the western side of the district lay a part of them that had remained unspoilt, large enough to make for a desired destination for many citizens who would visit the natural reserve regularly, taking in the serene sight and sniffing the odorous flora; maybe even having a taste of it, depending on their species and their ability to go unnoticed by the numerous rangers that patrolled the area.

The park-like space was called the Royal Garden and it served as a clear border between Rockwood and Liberty District, as well as between the common folk and those rich enough to land themselves a spot among the powerful of the city.

Next up was-

"Nnnghaah…"

Judy threw her head back as she yawned, a fist brought to her buckteeth in a gesture of courtesy that was very much unnecessary, her being alone in the dimly lit room. She smacked her lips a couple of times, blinking tiredly at the scrolls that lay open on the table before her, spread and disorganized, lit only by the dying candle that she had placed on its corner; documents provided by her superior, detailing basic facts about the capital and its districts to give her a general sense of what to expect in her mission. Buried under the scrolls was a large map of the city, marked all over to highlight points of interest, such as ranger outposts or possible criminal hubs.

The markings had her handwriting and were applied two weeks before over breakfast, back at the common room of the Burrows’ ranger headquarters. Judy would always memorize every fact remotely related to her cases the second she got a hold of it. The scrolls were no exception.

That is to say, she had no need to revisit the documents; but it wasn’t need that had moved her paws. It was excitement.

After getting past the guards at the gates, Hooves had taken her straight to Rockwood District and the inn that was to accommodate her for the duration of her stay. She was sad to bid him farewell at the doors of the inn -or rather, the door that was her size, as she so happily noted- and so was he;
though he was visibly cheered up by her lavish tip. Sure, people matter, but so does coin.

Judy had seen next to nothing of the city, racing down its main roads on Hooves’ back in the last glimmers of daylight, but she was still affected by the strangeness of it all. There was an unmistakable atmosphere; the suffocating feeling of buildings towering over her every step of the way, the occasional glimpse of an enormous monstrosity of a church in the far distance, which was of course the grand cathedral praised all across the country, the discreet sound of running water that indicated their passing by one of the countless canals of Softstream...

Everything in this place was a constant reminder that there was so much more to see, that every sight that overwhelmed her at each turn the moose took was but a tiny brushstroke in an enormous canvas. **Huge, huge, huge.**

And more than a little queer for this country rabbit, however open minded she considered herself to be.

The same went for the people.

Judy had caught the giant city in her last sleepy blinks, and the animals in her streets were few; she had seen bunnies in the Burrows flocking to and fro their farms in far greater numbers, so the sheer amount of mammals in the city wouldn’t leave her stunned until the next morning, when she would pass by the Central Market and feel the rare need to catch her breath before crossing it. No, the first thing that had managed to impress her about the citizens was arguably the main reason Zootopia was so well known; their variety.

She had caught sight of a peculiar species she had never seen before entering a tavern close to her inn, and she had gawked tactlessly at him -her?- as Hooves had sprinted past the establishment. She would later learn that it was called a capybara, and the sense of wonder she had felt in that first hour within the city would return in force; then she’d inquire further, because she had no idea whatsoever what a capybara was.

There was also an incident with a flying squirrel, the kind of which she had never encountered in her hometown. The squirrel had thrown himself off a window as they passed, meaning to gracefully glide across the street, but ended up rudely bumping on the tips of her erect ears in the process, causing her a soft gasp. Hooves had given a chuckle and noted that he thought very lowly of squirrels. Judy took his word, as both mooses and squirrels hailed from the northern provinces and the one squirrel she had encountered thus far was, undoubtedly, a bit of a jackass.

And lastly, the icing on the cake: her innkeeper was a fucking **kangaroo**. She had to bite back an excited squeak when she first saw the mature female marsupial behind the bar, and again when she came by her room to make sure the bunny ranger had settled in nicely. She hopped a lot, Judy noted, and instantly decided that bunnies and kangaroos were natural allies.

Her name was Adeline, and she had been eager to take her luggage, feed her a decent meal in one of the tables lined up before her bar and see to her overall comfort; much more so than when it came to the rest of the patrons, as Judy could plainly see, and she figured innkeepers everywhere were just wired to give rangers better treatment than their common clientele. Which was sensible enough.

She had entered the inn tired, cramped from her long journey; she had then satisfied her hunger, wobbled to the dusty stairs, climbed them all the way to her floor and sleepily pushed the door to her room open. She was met with the inviting sight of a bed sitting under a window across from the door; she could swear she saw it wink seductively at her. To her right was a chair and a slightly oversized table, with all her stuff carefully placed on it by Adeline.
Had she not been so bloated with good broccoli and lettuce -she would have to make special orders for the kangaroo to procure her favorite snacks- she would have doubtlessly hopped over the length of the room and onto the bed in an instant, but now she regretfully had to hang her cap, scarf, jacket and vest on the chair's back and drag her tired feet the entire way.

And that had been her doom.

For at her slow pace, she couldn't have missed the view from the window sitting atop the bed's frame. A series of flickering lights caught her eye, and as she approached she saw that they belonged to a line of enormous torches, likely placed by elephants, that traced the length of the building across the street; a building of solid rock, so large that she had initially mistaken it for the city's walls.

She was thrown back to a scene from her childhood, when she and the rest of her litter had gathered around their grandfather who was sitting at the root of an apple tree upon a mound at the edge of the farmlands. It was noon, the adults were working the fields and the wrinkled rabbit, which young Judy considered unfathomably old, had been overlooking his offspring's work, far too senior by then to join them. His grandchildren, who in turn were far too young, had decided that the heat had made their games too uncomfortable and so had surrounded him, eager to hear one of the tales old people anywhere always had to share.

That day the old buck had told them the legend of Rockwood Castle, the wood-turned-to-stone, and they had all been appropriately impressed save for Judy. Already blessed with the skeptical and meticulous nature that would one day carry her across the ranks of the rangers, she was quick to run the fairy tale through a thorough examination and decide that it was just that; a fairy tale holding little to no truth.

But she had been touched by the awe behind the buck's words as he described the imposing structure and the battles fought and won at its walls; he had certainly been a gifted storyteller, for he himself had never laid eyes on it. In any case, Judy could now feel that same awe surge through her in waves as she found that the width of her window was not enough to frame the entirety of the structure from this close a distance. The flames along its wall reflected on the waters of its moat, which also ran too silent for her to hear over the galloping of her carrier as she arrived, or even the drowned noises coming from the bar below her feet.

And for but a moment, Judy thought that maybe, just maybe, there really had been some magic involved in raising the mighty castle.

Or the entire city, even.

Well Judith, she thought to herself numbly, nose pressed against the blurry glass. Here you are.

That's Zootopia.

Zootopia, the faraway capital. Zootopia, where it all had started. Zootopia, the magnificent wonder of a city that lay an entire world away from the Hopps' farm in the far east.

Here she was.

A bunny's heart naturally beats faster than most mammals', sitting at approximately 130 beats per minute, give or take. Had Judy taken the time to count her own pulse at that moment, it would have been alarmingly greater. There was no sleeping for her.

So she had made for the chair, taken out the documents and set off to review everything she knew about the city that had put her in such a flushed state.
She had gotten about halfway through the documents when she felt her excitement finally dry out. It was far too late, she was exhausted and she had an early morning ahead of her, so she leaned forward and extinguished the candle's weak flame between her two fingers. The local rangers would show her around the ropes tomorrow, so it was okay even if there were some important pieces of trivia she had missed; but she honestly doubted that.

She got up and dropped herself on the bed, burying her face in the straw pillow and relishing in the blissful, long desired sensation of proper rest that worked itself across her body. She drowsily grabbed a folded cover from the foot of the bed with her legs as her paws worked on unbuttoning her shirt and unfastening her belt. She then threw the clothing on the table, tucked her ears under the covers with the rest of her body and once again rubbed her cheek against the pillow, nestling in it; the hard straw reminded her of home.

But as sleep took her she was still keenly aware, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she was a long, long way from home.

There were countless minor ranger outposts scattered in the city and five different central headquarters managing them. The one located in Rockwood District was the one Judy had been instructed to report to in the morning.

Her lack of sleep had little effect on her save for a displeased grunt she gave when Adeline knocked at her door to wake her, as she had been instructed. Judy only had to twist her ears around a bit and catch the sounds of the waking city for her blood to start racing anew, forcing her into awareness. Minutes later, an energetic mass of gray fluff in ranger uniform was hurriedly munching her way through a light breakfast, eager to set off.

As she exited the inn, she took a moment to appreciate the sight of the castle, now clear under the morning sun. She sighed, eyes glimmering and ears reaching for the sky, and took her first step in the streets of Zootopia.

The headquarters she was looking for were easy to locate. They stood right across the castle's small bridge as the only stone building on that side of the street, and it of course bore the rangers' feather crest on the flag hanging above its main entrance. She was happy to notice that it too had numerous doors, unlike her outpost back in the Burrows which only had one heavy wooden one, far too large for a bunny to operate; they had eventually decided to jam it open during the day just for her, which was a tad mortifying.

Upon entering the headquarters, she found that the sight of the wide common room was pleasantly familiar. A large, clean booth with a large zebra sitting behind it -clearly the assigned coordinator- large tables full of large mammals struggling to keep themselves awake and proceed to their duties, large doors leading to the kitchen, the lavatories, the cells, the weaponry and the storage rooms, and large stairs leading to the upper floors, where the rank holders' private offices were located; likely behind more large, heavy doors.

Indeed, when it came to rangers anywhere, two things were naturally expected: a feather crest and a mammal with a huge, imposing build. No wonder Judy had had trouble fitting in when she had first joined.

The zebra had apparently been notified of the bunny he was to expect that morning, because he readily directed her towards the local chief's office after a brief, polite greeting. He still stared, however, and so did everyone else in the room; people always stared at the bunny who donned the green cap with the red feather.
And so did the chief, though naturally, his own blue feather meant he had no obligation to make his
gaze a friendly one. His name was Higgins and he was a hippo, larger than average due to abundant
excess fat no field ranger would ever be allowed to accumulate, with light blue eyes that brought ice
to mind. He left the bunny in her salute for a few moments, stooping over his desk to take a good,
blatantly disapproving look at her before putting her at ease and urging her to take a seat.

Judy hopped on the tall chair across the fat hippo, fighting the urge to form a bitter smile; this entire
scene was a spot on reenactment of her fist meeting with her own chief a few years back, so she
more or less knew what to expect from that point on. But now, she reminded herself, she was no
bright eyed rookie, but rather a decorated lieutenant, so the hippo would be forced to show her a
certain level of respect, at least.

"You'll have to excuse my awkwardness, lieutenant Hopps." He spoke after a while, clearing his
throat. His voice was throaty, but not quite as deep as the cape buffalo's that she normally reported
to. "We here in the capital are not used to rangers of your…. Stature. Frankly, it's a bit…"

"Unorthodox?" She suggested evenly, cocking a brow.

"… Quite, yes."

"Ah, I get that a lot. Not to worry though, sir; I've perfected the art of avoiding getting stepped on by
my coworkers long ago!" She smiled faintly at him, resorting to humor to test the reactions of the
mammal that would be handling her in this case.

A curt snort. No smile.

Bogo would have chewed her out in an instant; this one was a sweetheart by comparison. She would
be fine.

"Still, I can only hope this won't affect our collaboration on the case…?"

Another snort, followed by a light shake of his flabby head. "Your chief is well known even around
here, lieutenant. I wouldn't question Bogo's judgment. If he gave you that feather, that means you
deserve it, odd as that may seem; and if he's the one that sent you to me, then I'll make sure you get
all the help you'll need."

*Odd as that might seem.*

"Glad to hear it, sir. Thank you."

"*However.*"

From behind his desk he produced a large scroll bearing the Burrows' seal. It had been brought to he
city by Judy herself and had been delivered to him last night by the guardsmen of the city's gates.
Now he spread it before him and scanned the text before proceeding.

"There are more than a few aspects of your case that I find disconcerting, lieutenant."

Her nose twitched lightly. "Disconcerting, sir?"

"You're looking for a ram?" She nodded in affirmation, looking a bit confused. "As in, a sheep? A
criminal sheep?" Another nod, now with a perplexed frown. They stared at each other for a moment.

"… Lieutenant, how much experience do you have with sheep?" He asked her eventually, a
condescending tone in his rough voice.
There was a flicker in her purple eyes as she got the urge to avert them from his blue ones. She fought against it. "… There are not many sheep outside of Zootopia."

"None, then?"

"I've met sheep before!" She exclaimed, sounding much more peeved than she'd have liked. Okay, maybe a little bright eyed still.

The hippo clearly thought the same. "Well, Hopps, sheep aren't known for taking to mass organized crime, let alone when they're not surrounded by their own. They're the most docile of our citizens. It's not in their nature."

"Well, this one did. Sir." She replied matter-of-factly, reclaiming her composure.

The hippo gave a shrug and fell back into his seat with a loud creak, closing his eyes and giving his temples a soft rub. "Okay. So what are your plans now, then?"

"My plans...?"

"Your plans, yes. You do have a plan, right?"

Judy opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again and gestured widely, clearly at a loss for words. "My plan- I- Well, I was going to investigate, sir! Look up known perpetrators, sheep that arrived at the city within the last week. I was planning to work on the case, with your help. I-"

"You were gonna look up known perpetrators?" He cut her off, sounding overly amused. "I suppose there might be a sheep or two in our lists, Hopps, but you'd be damn lucky if yours is one of them. As for the sheep that arrived within the last week..." He barked out a laugh dipped in sneer. "There are about two hundred sheep going in and out of the city daily, lieutenant, and if you think we're keeping tabs on every single one of them, you've seriously overestimated us."

Or maybe yourself, little bun, he thought to himself as he saw her lower her gaze, trying to hide her scowl. She was appalled at the chief's negativity; hunting perps in the Burrows wasn't nearly as complex as in the city, she was certain, but surely things weren't that bad.

"Are the guards alerted now?" She asked him curtly, raising her head with renewed determination. Or stubbornness; likely a touch of both. "Have they been given descriptions of the ram?"

"They have, lieutenant." He replied with an exasperated sigh. "But-"

"Then we know he's not going anywhere." She cut him off. "So I'll find him, sooner or later. I just need some of your rangers to help me look for leads and comb the city. Standard stuff."

"Now hold on, lieutenant!" The hippo leaned forth, looking down at the unfazed bunny. "I cannot afford an entire platoon just to help you comb the city! Let alone for a case of theft that transpired halfway across the country!"

"With all due respect, sir, it was an entire ring. A ring of thieves and smugglers, and it likely spread all the way to Zootopia."

"No one's smuggling anything in or out of this city, Hopps; not with these walls around us. And the thieves are dealt with swiftly here. This is a case of the Burrows, make no mistake about that."

Against her better judgment, she was now staring purple flares at the infuriatingly uncooperative chief. "You said you'd provide me with all the help I'd need... Sir."
"And I will. I'm assigning you a partner, Hopps, to show you around and help you get started with your investigation."

Her ears quivered to the despotic derision in his last word. Things were worse than she had expected; the damn hippo was hardly concerned with the issues of the Burrows, and he sure as hell didn't acknowledge bunnies as ranger material no matter what feather decorated their caps. If he had one such ranger under his command, he'd certainly jump at the opportunity to send them on a wild goose chase miles away just to keep them out of his feet. Surely, he was convinced that Bogo had done just that.

She had hit the nail on the head and she knew it. She wouldn't be getting any substantial assistance from the local rangers, or at least not from the ones at Rockwood. She had to adjust her game plan.

"I understand. Thank you, sir."

The hippo nodded at her absently, collecting the scroll and ignoring the fact that she had addressed him through gritted teeth. "Talk to our coordinator, he'll show you to your partner. Dismissed."

She hopped off the chair and made for the appropriately sized door, ears burning, trying her best not to stomp at every step.

"Oh, and lieutenant?" She paused and turned to see him already leaning over another document, seemingly absorbed in its contents.

"Welcome to Zootopia."

---

Bernard Logger had learnt not to expect much from his life.

His father would have surely agreed with him; he had always considered his son to be a lazy halfwit, and just grooming him to take over the family woodcutting business in the country surrounding the capital had been enough of a challenge in all of the sixteen years he had spent raising him. Bernard, however, would not stand for it. He had hopes for himself back then. He had dreams, and those dreams didn't involve working through hard flora with axe and teeth until the latter fell off and he was forced to push the responsibility to the next Logger in line.

So he had fled to Zootopia with a good part of his father's savings to find a place for himself. And sure enough, he did; it had only taken him seven years to be accepted among the ranks of the local rangers. The perfect occupation; status, recognition, fear and respect by the common citizen, and a decent pay. Surely, his father would feel stupid for doubting him if he could see him now.

He would often think something along those lines in a successful attempt to avoid the harsh truth, which was that his father had been completely right about him. He was, by all accounts, a lazy beaver.

The first criteria for joining the rangers was literacy, which he had thanks to his late mother. Typically, a mammal would walk in the headquarters, prove he could read and write decently and, just like that, they'd be set for further training. He had done just that, and within days of memorizing legislation, physical strengthening, martial training and combat simulation exercises, he had come to the conclusion that life as a modest lumberjack wouldn't have been as unrewarding as he had initially thought.

Despite that, and in his life's only act of diligence, he had persevered, largely out of spite towards his old man. Failing numerous times, being kicked out and accepted back to the training grounds on six separate occasions and testing the patience of his instructor, a one-humped camel that would
regularly share the beaver's story over ale with a near traumatized expression, he had eventually managed to achieve the bare minimum of results to be handed his green cap.

He had worked long and hard, and he had been rewarded. He felt satisfied; much more so than most novices, who had long ago switched the plain white feather they were given by their instructor for a colored one. Bernard had been Rockwood's eldest cadet upon graduation, and he had been holding onto that title proudly for three years in a row.

Now a Zootopian ranger cadet aged twenty six, Bernard Logger had his life all figured out. He didn't need to work too hard to earn his living, with his superiors always making sure to hand him the simplistic of tasks. The feather crest earned him a certain glamor outside of the outposts, and among his coworkers he was known as the guy that looked out for the newbies, his fellow cadets, who in turn remembered him after climbing the ladder and usually returned the favor.

A day's work filled with minor accomplishments followed by a pleasant night at one of Rockwood's numerous pothouses; an easy and safe life for a lazy mammal. Indeed, Bernard had learnt not to expect too many extraordinary things from his life.

And so it was that, basking in his comfortable routine one chilly morning in early autumn, he had not expected to be given an assignment involving a bunny -whoever heard of bunnies leaving their burrows anyway?- let alone a bunny that was also a ranger. Higher rank than him too, but pathetically enough that did not surprise him all that much.

And he had certainly never thought that, in the off chance that he ever got to meet a bunny face to face, they would be so horrifyingly intimidating.

To be fair, Judy Hopps was having a bit of a shitty day. One look at her new "partner" was enough to verify the conclusions she had drawn about Higgins' opinions on her and her case, and as the plump beaver first laid eyes on her, mildly shocked and neglecting his salute, she couldn't help a deep sigh and a spastic tap of her foot against the common room's clean, wooden floor.

She had been assigned a tour guide; one who could hardly keep up with her relaxed pace, to boot. Things were really going to be a lot harder than she had expected.

Was the beaver to blame for her predicament? Was he really responsible for Higgins' moronic ass? No, not really. But he was an extremely convenient outlet for her frustration, and given his inadequacy as a ranger, Judy would have probably chewed him out eventually anyway. The ranger's oath was a sacred one, and she considered mammals such as the beaver, who had clearly joined for the sake of status or power rather than a desire to safeguard their community, a disgrace to their order.

Being only a year or two younger than herself, still a cadet and rocking a majestic belly, the mammal Higgins had stuck her with was either tragically incompetent, and thus a liability that should have been laid off long ago for both his own and everyone else's safety, or a bum who couldn't be bothered to apply himself to his duties; whatever the case, he had no place being a ranger.

Bogo wouldn't have allowed it, but Higgins clearly didn't care enough. Which made perfect sense to her, because Bogo was an excellent chief, while the hippo was a sad excuse of a ranger, a stinking bureaucrat, a self-serving piece of trash, an-

*Ignorant, ugly, slimy, rotten piece of prejudiced pachyderm who won't give a fellow ranger from a different branch some proper aid!*  

"I know who St. Marie was, Logger! Can you tell me something that will help me find my ram
instead?" She yelled at the stammering beaver, cutting him off as he was stupidly reciting the tale of the grand cathedral. He truly seemed to have no information to share with her other than historical trivia for the city, which Judy might have even appreciated had she not memorized them all already.

The thoroughly whipped beaver and the fuming bunny had just entered St. Marie's Plaza, and that outburst was the last one Judy would have for a short while; the sight of the cathedral, as well as the chaotic concentration of mammals that stretched beneath it, caused her enough awe to briefly sideline her raging mood, allowing Bernard to catch his breath while she lost hers.

"… Cheese and crackers." She whispered sharply, eyes wide and ears hanging.

The Central Market alone was impressive enough, rife with mammals of all shapes and sizes, their scents, their voices and their merchandise, lively and noisy beyond measure; truly her kind of place. But the fact that the enormous crowd, in all its glorious entirety, stood in the shadow of the grand cathedral was what really pushed her over the edge.

She was well aware of how small she was, physically. She knew how insignificantly little she must have seemed to a giraffe or an elephant that looked her way, if they would even notice her presence. Her size was the main reason for the world's persistent underestimating of her, and she had spent a good part of her life thus far proving everyone wrong. So of course, she knew she was small.

But actually standing in front of the old cathedral, with each of the dozens decorative stone gargoyles staring down at the Plaza from above its gigantic windows of colorful stained glass set in beautiful, symmetric patterns, that statement took on a whole new meaning.

It was just stupidly, absurdly, impossibly large. Mammals couldn't have built something like that; this time it really had to have been magic.

"It's -oof- pretty big, huh ma'am?" She turned to the beaver and saw him bent over his knees, breathing heavily. Sweat had damped his uniform, and between his flushed cheeks sat a nervous hint of a smile; seeing the bunny finally come to a halt, he had allowed a small hope for rest to blossom on his face.

Judy was hopelessly impulsive, or even downright neurotic at times, and she knew that. Emotions swelled inside her and took over in a matter of seconds, urging her into actions her lucid self would not always agree with. These emotions were typically positive ones; she was an optimist by nature, and those who knew her well considered her excessive kindness to be her greatest drawback in the rangers' rough occupation. But there were also times when, despite her normally bright disposition, anger was the emotion that flared up; and it was in such times that rhinos fell and beavers shook in their sweaty, brown ranger vests.

The brief respite her mind had gotten from Higgins' case as she stared at the Plaza and the cathedral had been enough to put it at relative ease. Now, looking at the panting beaver, she found herself regretting the way she had been treating him. Not to say that she rescinded her opinion of him, but that certainly didn't mean she had any right to abuse the poor guy.

She took a step towards him and saw him flinch, clearly expecting her to yell at him once more; indeed, she couldn't stay mad at such a pitiful creature without feeling like a monster herself. Her expression softened and she looked him in the eye as she spoke, deciding to come off as friendly as a lieutenant should be to their under qualified subordinate.

"Listen, Logger… Level with me here. Is there anything you call tell me that would be useful to the case?"
He blinked at her, taken aback by her sudden change of tone. "Ugh… With the case? Well, ma'am, your case is a bit -"

She shook her head briskly, cutting him off. "I know! I know, Logger. But there must be something that comes to mind, right? Some tips, some rumors, some wild ideas; anything could help! So, come on… Where would one look to find a crop smuggling sheep?"

And for the love of God, no more tourist-friendly facts.

The beaver, now clearly appreciating the absence of bunny hollers aimed his way, took a minute to think. "Ma'am, I really can't think of anything linking sheep to criminals. Never heard of anything like that in all my years in Zootopia. But I guess there are some places where sheep like to gather, in general."

Her face lit up. "Yes! Excellent! That would be a great start, Logger!"

"Ah, but don't get your hopes up! If anything, it'll be more difficult to find your ram there, among all the others."

"All information is good information, Logger; just so long as it's true." She stated knowingly, grabbing his arm and leading him further to the edge of the Plaza, right outside a stone building that served as an esteemed glassmaker's laboratory. "Alright then, go on. Where does one look for sheep in this city?"

"Okay, um… Sheep are basically everywhere, but there are many of them holed up in Liberty District. Just the loaded ones, though, and I doubt they'd need to get smuggling for extra coin."

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Judy's eyes narrowed as she nodded at him to continue. Liberty District. The homes of the rich. The place where one could find lovely, purple money pouches. Of course.

"What else?"

"Well, other than that, there is the cathedral, ma'am." He said plainly, gesturing towards the imposing building that hid part of the sky.

She shot him a puzzled look. "What do you mean, the cathedral?"

"Why, the clergy there is largely sheep! Didn't you know?"

Her ears stiffened with surprise. "Wha- No, I didn't!" She exclaimed, thinking how absurd it was that the legend of Rockwood Castle was contained in her scrolls but such actually useful details weren't. She was also happy to note that even Bernard Logger had proven useful once she had decided to treat him decently. Really tells you something about people. "How come?"

He shrugged. "Beats me, ma'am. Guess people trust sheep. As you know, there aren't-"

"Many criminal sheep, yes." She eyed the cathedral once more. "Do we have jurisdiction in there, Logger?"

"Uhh… No. No, we don't; you'll need special permission to investigate in the cathedral. By the Council itself, at that, so it could take a while."

She gave a displeased snort. "And what if a perp had somehow holed up in there?"

"Why, he'd stay right where he was, ma'am. The main gates are the only way in and out of the whole
thing, can't slip away unnoticed."

"I see. So you can take your time smoking them out."

"Yes, exactly."

She fell silent, bringing a paw to her chin and staring absently at the large building, deep in thought. After a couple of minutes, she heard Bernard clearing his throat, asking for her attention. "Well, we still could, uh… Go in, if you'd like. See if there's anything useful to note in there. What do you say?"

Oh, she definitely wanted to see the inside of the cathedral; but that would take an entire day, maybe even more, and she wouldn't be allowed full access until she got the proper scrolls from the Council. Sadly, it was not time for her to visit it just yet.

"Not right now, Logger. I'll get started on that permit as soon as we get back to headquarters. For now, I wanna see Liberty District- And we'll get carriers." She added with a light chuckle, seeing the despair forming on the beaver's face.

"What will we do there, ma'am?" He asked as he guided her towards a nearby carrier agency, away from the commotion of the Plaza. "We'll head for the district's headquarters and look into their files. Then we'll ask around a bit, take a walk, see what there is to see. We're just testing the waters for now, Logger."

Bernard nodded, and as he entered the agency to procure their rides to the northern side of town, she allowed herself a brief moment of concern. She had told the hippo she'd catch her perp sooner or later; and with just two people searching an enormous, foreign to her city, later was where she'd place her bet.

This was going to be a long case.

"That would be the last one, ma'am." Bernard announced as they exited what must have been the hundredth ranger outpost they'd visited that day. She just sighed and squatted on the pavement, rubbing her face with both paws, equal parts exhausted and desperate; her lack of sleep was finally showing through.

Liberty District had proven stale concerning their inquiries, and after asking around in every ranger outpost in the area, Judy had reluctantly ordered the beaver to guide them back to Rockwood, where they did the same. They avoided returning to St. Marie's Plaza, recognizing that it would require more time than they currently had to look into it, so after Rockwood they moved straight to the eastern part of the city. Needless to say, their carriers -two unusually thin but speedy gnus- had by then cost Higgins a small fortune; a petty but welcome victory for Judy.

The eastern district of Zootopia was called the Farmer's Avenue and it was a wide road of finely paved stone stretching across the length of the city's walls. The road had the worst traffic Judy had ever seen, full of carriers transporting people or moving carts, and most of the local ranger force had its paws full just trying to regulate the flow of people through the avenue.

At each side of the road there were a series of large booths, far cleaner, steadier and of overall finer quality than the ones she had seen at the Central Market. Farmer's Avenue owed its name to those booths, which belonged to the state and were rented to farmers from the surrounding country or food merchants that transferred goods from faraway provinces. Judy hadn't been surprised to spot a booth worked by some hares from the Burrows, and had even treated Bernard to some of her hometown's
trademark blueberries; she had also stocked up on her beloved carrots, though she was sad to find that they tasted far better fresh.

She had also planned for the Avenue to be their last stop for the day, certain that there would be a lead to her ram there somewhere; this was, after all, where those stolen crops would end up, had they really been transferred to Zootopia. Alas, the local rangers had only repeated Higgins' words regarding the possibility of someone smuggling things in or out of the city, meaning they had confirmed that it was null. If anything, they were preoccupied with preventing minor thefts, which were more than common in this part of town.

So neither the rangers nor the farmers -none of which were sheep- had proved to be of any help. She had even ended up interrogating the staff at some of the shadier booths pointed out by the most eager of her coworkers, but had once again come out empty handed.

"So, uh… What now, ma'am?" Bernard asked her reluctantly, leaning against the wall of the outpost. She didn't respond. "Ma'am?"

She suddenly shot to her feet, forcing herself back into action. "What indeed, Logger! What indeed!" He humored him a chuckle, trying her best not to sound discouraged. "Well, let's see… I believe this is the best place for us to look into, despite what the local rangers think. It's unlikely, but there could be some underground activity no one's aware of. So we'll revisit the Avenue when we're better organized, with more people."

She paused for Bernard's input on the plan, but the beaver had none to give. She couldn't blame him, really; it wasn't so much a plan as it was a general strategy of blind fumbling. But it was all she could put together thus far, having literally nothing to work with.

"Alright, ma'am." The beaver sounded much more tired than herself, and after stuffing himself with quality blueberries, he had been eying the resting chambers of the outposts they'd visited with burning desire. "Shall we return to Rockwood and give our reports for now?"

"Logger, it's still afternoon! We've got a few good hours ahead of us before nightfall, and there are still districts to look into."

Bernard gave her a perplexed look. "Ma'am, there's only the Zone and Happytown left, apart from the Royal Gardens. There ain't no sheep there."

Judy's look was adamant. "No stone unturned, Logger. That's how we work."

"But it's absurd, ma'am!" He protested loudly. "There's nothing but chompers down there! No sheep would ever come close!"

"That's speculation, Logger. If the ram is trying to avoid us -and I assure you, he is- he'd go where we wouldn't expect him to. Elementary."

"But everyone would notice a sheep down in the Zone!"

"Excellent!" She beamed at him, her features nothing but fluff and innocence. "Let's go see if anybody has, then!" She concluded, making for the booth they had told the two gnus to wait for them at. "Or are you afraid of predators, Logger?" she added in a light hearted tease.

He seemed shocked by the question. "Am I- Of course I'm afraid, ma'am! Aren't you?!" She stopped and turned to face him, tilting her ears sideways; that was the most brazen he had been with her, and it had caught her attention. "I thought you Zootopians would be more comfortable around predators!"
"Yeah, well, not exactly, ma'am." He replied somberly. "Have you seen many around the city?"

Judy gave it some thought before answering. She had been actively looking for predators among the numerous crowds, and sure enough, she had spotted some; a small group of racoons selling their goods at the Central Market, a tiger down in Rockwood sweeping the streets in the morning, and a bear standing next to one of the taller booths in the Avenue, clearly hired for protection. Official data claimed that only one tenth of the citizens of Zootopia were predators, but she had seen significantly fewer than even that so far.

"I've seen some, yes. Not many, but some. But most live down at Happytown, don't they?"

"Exactly! Happytown and the Zone, that's where them chompers are all holed up. So do you think sheep would really go down there?"

"Wait a minute, Logger." She crossed her arms at him, now genuinely interested in the beaver's words. "Happytown and the Zone are the districts they _live_ at, but they can move around the city freely, correct?"

"Wha- no! Not correct, ma'am! By Marie, do you think we'd let chompers roam around as they please? We'd have all been eaten!"

She took the statement with a grain of salt, unconvinced that they could be this big a threat, but still nodded that she understood his point. It was common sense to take precautions, after all; especially if there were as many preds in the city as there supposedly were.

"I see. So how are they regulated?"

"Some chompers are allowed out of the Zone when they're employed by certain prey. Like that bear we saw here, remember?" She nodded again. "Right, they are allowed in the rest of the city as long as they're kept on a tight leash. Their employers are responsible for keeping an eye on them, and typically preds aren't allowed to cross from one district to another without the company of prey. But most chompers never get past the Zone, thankfully. I'd wager the folks at Liberty District haven't seen a chomper at their doorstep for generations."

So the city had deemed it necessary to segregate the predators. Such details typically didn't reach the ears of country folk, who would always wonder how Zootopia functioned with so many predators living among prey. _Interesting._

"… What are they like, Logger?"

He frowned. "The chompers? Real bad eggs, I hear. Haven't had many run-ins with their ilk, but from what I've been told from some buddies down at the Zone, most of them are thieves and murderers; or worse, gypsies."

She arched a brow. "Gypsies!"

"That's right, ma'am. Many gypsy chompers down in Happytown, they say, and they sometimes get to the Zone too. They set up shops without permits, steal from the prey that visit the Zone, that kind of business. Obnoxious things, those gypsies. My pa always told me that gypsies are the worst, even among chompers."

"But… How the hell do gypsies enter the city in the first place?"

That, Bernard had to ponder on for a while. "I know some were allowed to enter back in the day, before them walls were built. Maybe they're all their descendants…? Or a few somehow manage to
slip in over the years, though I can't imagine how. Only sure thing is, there are a lot of them, and they're causing regular trouble down in Happytown. Rangers are sent there as punishment, and I've been told they don't dare exit their outposts most of the time."

Judy stared at him in disbelief. "Wait a minute… Then is Happytown effectively lawless?" The beaver shuffled awkwardly, scratching his head. "Ugh… In a sense, it… is?" The bunny rolled her eyes with a scoff; she was continuously disappointed by the city's rangers. Elite my fluffy tail.

But if it really was lawless, then any sheep would be in serious danger there. Indeed, it was unlikely that her ram would have gone there; which in turn made it likely. She had no leads to work with anyway.

"Alright, Logger; the Zone it is!" She announced with closure, ears picking up. The beaver gawped at her for a second before issuing his inevitable complaints. "But ma'am, didn't I just tell you it's hopeless? There could be nothing but trouble for sheep down there!"

"Yeah, it's a long shot." She admitted with a nod. "But like I said, Logger: no stone goes unturned. There's no harm in looking around."

"There could be!"

She narrowed her eyes at him, now slightly irritated by his persistent arguing; then she gave the matter some more thought.

"Are you really that uncomfortable around predators, Logger?"

He gulped nervously. "I… Really am, ma'am." He admitted, desperate plea in his tone. "I avoid the southern part of the city, everyone does. Only the crazies go set up shop in the Zone, ma'am, and no prey ever gets as far as Happytown."

"… Hm."

She weighted her options. Dragging him around with her had made sense thus far, as he had proven to be a useful guide around the districts. Now, however, she would be heading into territory that was unfamiliar even to him. She could perhaps make use of those "buddies" of his down in the Zone to help move things faster, however…

But eventually, she decided that he would be more of a burden than an asset. There was likely not enough daytime left for a proper look into both of the remaining districts anyway, so she would have to move fast just to get a feel of the area; which, as she could plainly tell, would be a whole lot different from the Zootopia she'd seen thus far. She could just bring him along the next day if she thought it necessary, after all.

And really, had she not put the poor fellow through enough already? He'd likely walked more in a day than he would in a whole month of his regular duties, and if his incessant wheezing was anything to go by, she figured he could collapse on her any minute now.

"You know what, Logger?" She spoke up as she turned around and resumed walking towards their two rides. "I think you've done enough for now. You should return to Rockwood and call it a day, make sure you're rested up for tomorrow."

He stared at the back of her erect ears with the expression of a convict on death row that had just been spared the guillotine. "Are- Are you sure, ma'am?"

"Yes, certainly! You've earned some rest, Logger." She flashed him a generous smile from over her
shoulder. "I'll see you at the headquarters tomorrow."

"… Thank you, ma'am!" He wasn't even trying to hide his enormous relief as he mounted his gnu, all sighs and thankful looks; but as she too followed suit and leaned forward to give her own carrier his instructions, he thought to ask her one last thing, "Ma'am, you're not going to go down there alone, are you?"

For the first time since he they had been introduced, the bunny threw her head back and loosed a clear, crystal laughter that betrayed a softness she tried not to demonstrate while on duty. "Are you concerned for my well being, Logger? That's awful sweet of you!"

She then averted her eyes from him, a smirk still lingering on her lips. "You shouldn't, though. I'll be heading straight for the outposts, and only in the Zone. Happytown can wait."

He didn't look too reassured, but he knew a lost battle when he saw one. "Do as you will, ma'am. Just be careful; there ain't gonna be just prey down there anymore."

"I will, Logger. Tomorrow it is!"

And with that, she signaled her gnu to kick off down Farmer's Avenue, leaving the beaver alone to give his own carrier directions and dream of the soft bed waiting for him back at Rockwood.

Always an adrenaline junkie, Judy Hopps was, despite the fatigue wearing down on her, far too eager to reach the slumps of Zootopia and meet its frightening residents; not to say that she was expecting a breakthrough, though. It really was too long a shot, so she had no idea that these shadier parts of town would actually be where she would make her first few inches of progress.

And she certainly couldn't imagine that this was where she would cross paths with the mammal who was to become both her most valuable ally in the capital and the veritable bane of her existence.

-Chapter 1 End-

Chapter End Notes

Writing is so wonderfully cathartic, it should be considered a legitimate therapy method.

Maybe it is.

...I'll have to look into that.

Leave a review on your way out, if you please.
The Zone

Chapter Summary

With beautiful faces
excessively violent rangers
and fateful encounters

Chapter Notes

Upon clicking this chapter, you might have thought something along the lines of "this is pretty long".
You, person whose gender I will not dare assume, have no idea.

The second chapter of this Tale originally sported a whooping 30,000 words, give or take. However, I felt that daunting length to be distracting from the reading experience, which should not be too tiring; otherwise, I might as well write the whole thing and upload it in a single chapter. Can't have that now, can we?

Thusly, "The Zone" covers the first half of what was originally intended to be the second chapter.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Predatory mammals had been a stable presence in most of Zootopia's colorful history.

Needless to say, they had not been among the first species that came together at the bank of Sofstream, as even the founding mammals had not been tolerant enough to allow natural killers to join their blossoming community. It was not until many years later, shortly after the first few expansions of the forming town took place, that the prey species of Zootopia first came in non hostile contact with predators.

The predators of those times were organized in tribes of a single species, numbered few mammals each and were strictly nomadic. The early Zootopians were not particularly threatened by these tribes, seeing as they outnumbered them significantly, but instinct and past enmities had established a resting distrust between them and their former hunters.

So it was that when, at a certain point in the town's early days, a small group of nomad hyenas reluctantly approached them, expressing a desire to conduct trade, the locals had initially been unwilling and responded with threats. Eventually, however, and with all precautions imaginable, they agreed to the hyenas' proposal, and they watched with relief as the latter left after all exchanges had been completed without any blood being spilt.

The Zootopians were satisfied with the goods the nomads had provided them, and the nomads had procured a good amount of bird meat which would ensure them a good year on their travels. In short,
both parties felt oddly happy with the result, considering they had just risked doing business with their natural enemies. Then both their thoughts turned to the irregularity that was Zootopia, the community of various species, and how that peculiar arrangement seemed to work miraculously well. And the more they thought about it, the more they pondered. The more they imagined.

For the first time ever, predator and prey alike dared wonder what a community consisting of both of them would be like.

The hyenas added Zootopia to their yearly route. They returned time and time again, did business with the increasingly diverse mammals that occupied it and went on their way; and every time the procedure ended, everyone involved felt a little less skeptical, a bit less reluctant, and ever more eager for the profitable trading to resume the year after.

Eventually, the hyenas suggested a different agreement, one that would allow them to finally make a home for themselves, hopefully next to Sofstream and its residents. The locals had blatantly rejected them, of course, but when the hyenas, ever unwilling to take a clue, retorted with a nonchalant shrug and begun building a town of their own to the south of Zootopia, they had seen little merit in forcibly chasing them out. So it was that the hyenas ended their nomadic ways by claiming a land close enough to the small riverside town to allow for easy transactions but far enough for the comfort of both them and the nearby prey.

Zootopian merchants benefited greatly from the presence of the hyenas. They visited their crummy looking settlement and made a profit by providing them with chickens and lizards while also selling their knowledge on breeding and harvesting them. They were the first prey to ever become truly accustomed to the presence of predators, and even grew somewhat fond of the hyenas and their peculiar speech, so reminiscent of contagious, fractious laughter; the mirthful sound gave prey the impression that these mammals were in a state of constant elation.

Historians claimed that this was the origin of the town's name: Happytown, the town of sharp teeth and laughter.

The hyenas were the first to see Zootopia's worth and reach out to it, but certainly not the last. Before long, they were joined by other predators who followed in their footsteps, slowly earning their trust as well as that of the local prey, whose authority remained largely undisputed even as Happytown grew along with the original town.

That authority was evident in Zootopia's superior architecture, each expansion embellishing the existing constructions and enriching it with new, ever grander ones, eventually leading to the construction its first set of thick stone walls. All the while, the predatory residents of Happytown settled for a mere increase in the number of huts of wood and clay that were used to house them, and no better protection than a reinforced fence surrounding them.

That clear gap in power between predator and prey owed its existence to a vast difference in their populations. By their biology, prey multiplied at an exceedingly fast rate, while predators typically only had two or maybe three kits per litter at best; and with the safety provided by their city, prey found their numbers growing exponentially over the years.

That numerical advantage solidified their supremacy in the area, and predators never really cared to contest it as the two greatly different towns rarely involved themselves in the internal issues of one another. It was a practical, live-and-let-live situation that favored them both, and they remained cooperative enough through those early ages, conducting business regularly or even assisting one another in the face of external threats. Indeed, the support of Zootopia meant that any small bandit group would think twice before raiding the shanty based Happytown, and the predators’ immanent prowess in battle, as well as their dependence on prey, made them valuable and affordable
mercenaries in many of Zootopia's first petty wars.

That era of relative peace was not to last, however, as the monarchs that came to be in Zootopia eventually sought to expand their territories and inevitably set their eyes on Happytown; this occurred shortly after the construction of Rockwood Castle, which in itself stood as a clear indication that resistance from the predators was futile. Happytown was occupied by Zootopian troops and its residents, who had by then grown into masterful breeders of livestock, were made to work their aviaries and lizard farms for their new masters.

Over the countless centuries of Animalia's ceaseless growth, all predator species encountered and conquered were gathered in Happytown, where they were gradually assimilated and made into a powerful working force for the country. They were essentially slaves under the monarchs, who had a disdain for them even greater than that they harbored for the common prey.

So it was that, when the uprising came and revolution broke out in the capital, predators too took up arms and played a pivotal role in the fight. One especially gallant leopard, a dashing male remembered as Adam the Kingsbane, was even viewed as a leading figure by the revolutionaries, and he had famously been the one to spearhead the final assault across the streets of both Happytown and Zootopia, lynch the royal family and initiate the sacking of the palace. He would eventually be revered as a legendary hero among predators, despite the fact that his tale reinforced the widespread beliefs regarding their savage and aggressive nature.

The Council of Mammals rewarded the residents of Happytown with their freedom, reinstating their rights and giving them dominion over their homes and businesses. It was at that point that the predators of Animalia split into two groups.

Some chose to stay in Happytown and rebuild their homes alongside their newly liberated prey brethren or move to other nearby provinces, away from the place that had served as their prison for countless generations, to try and coexist with the hopefully less despotic mammals that occupied the rest of the country.

Others thought back to their ancestors and saw that their vagrant ways, for all the perils they invited, offered a freedom they lusted for more than anything. They built caravans and moved away from the prey dominated south, heading ever to the north; some passed the borders of Animalia never to be seen again, while others managed to survive the thinly populated northern provinces whilst traveling the long distances from town to town, trading and offering whatever services they could to the locals. Those would eventually come to be called gypsies, and their "uncivilized lifestyle", as it was considered by prey, would lead to them being widely frowned upon and distrusted; "the worst, even among chompers", as a certain beaver would one day so eloquently describe them.

Predator presence in the southern country eventually waned, with merely scattered families surviving, bound in the service of wealthy prey. Most returned to Happytown, where they were allowed to prosper, to a certain extent; but wherever they went, they where always shunned by prey who remained forever suspicious of the mammals who had originally evolved to kill them.

Things for the gypsies in the north were arguably better. The remote province became a safe haven for them, so much so that some abandoned their nomadic ways anew, founding small villages or, more rarely, finding jobs in the existing ones, working with and under prey that was far less prejudiced than their southern counterparts. The Council would make more wars to expand Animalia to the north over the years that followed, but the local populations of the conquered areas, who were largely predators, were treated with relative decency, allowed to peacefully assimilate and join either the gypsies or the settlers.

In the centuries following the fall of the monarchy, and while the newly freed predators struggled to
find their new place in the world, Zootopia continued to grow, eventually becoming the great capital it now was. The constant expansions, however, meant that eventually the colossal city approached the site of old Happytown. As it became more and more apparent that the latter would eventually have to either be destroyed entirely or be made a new addition to Zootopia itself, tensions grew among the residents of the capital who had remained ever apprehensive of predators, even after all these years, and would not easily accept them inside their tall walls. A solution needed to be found.

And one such solution was indeed found when the construction of the Control Zone was decreed. It was an expansive, semicircular district that was put together crudely and hurriedly, with emphasis given to the wall and fences that surrounded it, allowing for effective control of the mammals who passed through it.

The Zone stood between Happytown, which was now enclosed in Zootopia's sturdy walls and considered a district, and the rest of the city, giving prey a feeling of safety and predators an uncomfortable reminder of the time Happytown had served as a work camp for their ancestors. Still, predators back then had been pleased to finally be allowed into the majestic city, despite being strictly regulated; and the most sly of them could always figure out illicit ways past the Zone, much like the stray groups of trouble making gypsies that would occasionally venture to the south and sneak into Happytown before the construction of the walls was complete, drawn in by Zootopia's magnificence. These gypsies, who readily disregarded the implications of living among scornful prey, were arguably the most adventurous, as well as the most foolish among the northern predators.

Bogo's scrolls contained some of that information, but the rest was up to Judy to find out for herself. The gypsies' presence in the city, for example, had come as a bit of a shock, as had the local prey's fear of the predators that occupied the southern part of Zootopia.

Aside from a numbered few lowly workers she had come across in the Burrows, she had little experience with predators and so was inordinately curious about their community and their interactions with the rest of the citizens; and, most of all, she wondered if the predators would prove to be more frightening than the mammals she'd come across and taken down thus far in her career.

Smugly enough, she couldn't imagine they would.

And so, as she saw the vegetable and fruit booths of Farmer's Avenue gradually being replaced by hucksters selling chicken and lizard meat and the traffic becoming thinner and thinner, signaling her imminent arrival to the Zone's outer fences, she was not the least bit worried about what she was to encounter there.

If she only knew.
their duty, which would require them to swiftly apprehend unruly predators as they stumbled through
the fences or, in the worse case scenario, pursuit them before they could take shelter in the city's
labyrinth.

Larger groups stood guard at each of the three wide entrances to the Zone, where the brick wall
broke to allow the authorized mammals passage in and out of the district. Judy's gnu guided them to
the eastern entrance at the edge of the Avenue, where Judy only had to hand her identification scroll
over to the mammal currently in service there, a young, languid hedgehog who clearly resented his
assigned position. Judy couldn't blame the guy, really; just writing down the names and descriptions
of both the predators who left the Zone and their employers and keeping track of how many of them
returned before nightfall seemed so hopelessly mundane a task that she would have probably let an
unauthorized predator slip through just so she could give chase afterward.

The hedgehog briefly looked at the document to check its authenticity before handing it back to her,
signaling her along. She figured there was no need to be too strict with people entering the Zone, let
alone ones so glaringly of the prey variety as the amethyst eyed bunny and her carrier. She inquired
about regulations for prey exiting the district after nightfall before entering, and after being informed
that there would be other state workers pulling night shifts at the entrances to accommodate just such
foolhardy prey, she moved on with a sympathetic tip of her cap.

And so, ranger lieutenant Judith Laverne Hopps found herself in the eastern Zone a few hours before
sundown, ears standing attentively and eyes cautiously taking in her surroundings. The venturesome
rabbit was managing to moderate her enthusiasm, just as her gnu was managing to somewhat contain
his resting unease, if the nervous twitching of his muscles was anything to go by.

The urbanization of the Zone was reminiscent of that of Farmer's Avenue, it being a series of wide,
parallel streets with various shops at either sides of them. The shops in question were clearly oriented
towards predators, with the signs hanging over the numerous inns and taverns advertizing their
recipes for chicken dishes or the tiny booths at the roadside selling skewered lizards. Judy felt a retch
brewing in her throat as she caught the smell of burned meat and urged her gnu to move away from
the establishments and further into the district.

There were different kinds of shops to be seen in the streets deeper into the Zone, such as tailors,
shoemakers -for the few mammals who felt comfortable actually wearing shoes-, tilers and even a
few merchants dealing in trinkets, cheap fabrics, tools and utensils; Judy figured that those parts of
the district served as the predators' equivalent of St. Marie's Plaza, although the astronomical
difference in quality made any comparison between the two feel unfair.

At some point the bunny spotted a relatively large wooden structure that caught her attention. It
resembled an inn, but the single paneled door and the shapely female panther that stood outside of it,
dressed in inappropriately revealing rags and sporting an insinuative look above her whiskers, made
the establishment stand out from the inns Judy had come across in the city. It took her a few moments
to realize what the establishment really was.

Brothels and overall prostitution were illegal in the Burrows. She knew that was not the case in
Zootopia, but after not seeing any such businesses in the city so far, she had assumed the citizens
simply had the decency not to endorse in transactions of that nature. Clearly, the predators had no
such inhibitions.

The panther eventually noticed the bunny staring at her brothel with a derogatory scowl and shot her
a challenging smirk, pulling lightly at her rags to make her outfit even more revealing. Judy
responded with a crinkle of her nose and looked away in disgust, signaling her carrier to move along.
Her disapproving frown remained, however, as she now noticed that the Zone was actually riddled
with such establishments, brothels and whorehouses big and small, squished between the numerous
inns and likely in collaboration with them.

Other than that, Judy also noticed the underlying presence of a bothersome scent; not quite as rancid
as the smell of charred meat emanating from the booths close to the entrance, but certainly
unpleasant. She would later learn that many of Softstream's canals exited the city through its southern
end, and a number of them served as drainage for the city's inhabitants; that explained both the
admirable cleanliness of the other districts and the fowl odors she had encountered in the Zone.

The wastes of the citizens were thrown into specified canals, and the accumulated squalor traveled
through them to eventually peak in Happytown, from where it exited the city's confines. These
canals actually went through the western part of the Zone, meaning that the smell Judy had caught
wind of in its eastern end paled in comparison to the one near the source. How the canine predators
of these parts, whose noses were commonly known to be most sensitive, could cope with it was
simply beyond her.

As for the local residents, it goes without saying that they were primarily predators. Judy had met
only certain kinds of predators before, such as foxes, jackals and even a timber wolf at some point,
but standing in an entire crowd of them, rife with countless different species of their ilk, was a
different experience entirely. Admittedly, she felt a little uncomfortable, and was glad for her carrier's
rushed pace as he made for the closest ranger outpost, clearly sharing the sentiment.

What helped ease her instinctive worry was the constant presence of fellow rangers in the streets,
who actually gave off an air of competence and efficiency she had not found in any of the others she
had encountered in Zootopia so far, as well as the fact that there were prey citizens to be seen among
the numerous predators. Logger had mentioned that only "the crazies" set up shop in the Zone, and
judging from the poor quality of everything she'd seen in the district so far, it was not exactly a
desirable destination for prey to visit, but even so, there were more flat-teeth mammals among the
predators than there were predators outside of the brick wall; few, to be sure, but present nonetheless.

Once again, Judy found herself questioning the danger the predators actually posed, as well as the
unlikelihood of her suspect actually being among them. As the gnu came to a stop in front of the first
outpost she was to visit in the following hours, she thought that perhaps her investigation in these
parts wasn't so hopeless after all.

"Ma'am, my shift ends at nightfall, and I will have to take you back all the way to Rockwood.
Shouldn't we be leaving soon?"

The gnu did his best not to sound annoyed, but it was clear that the extensive detours his employer
had decided to take -in such a dangerous part of town, no less- had bothered him greatly; he had
originally been hired for a one way ride to the fancy Liberty District, after all.

Judy no longer had it in her to argue. The Zone had the strongest ranger presence in the city by far,
and at every corner there was another outpost for her to inquire at. The process, along with the rest of
her full day and her lack of sleep had left her positively drained; which would have been totally fine
with her had she had anything to show for it. But alas, the blind fumbling she had so zealously
committed herself to stubbornly refused to bear any fruits.

She didn't need a mirror to know the bags under her eyes now aspired to contest her ears, which she
could hardly keep alight at that point, and the gnu's slow pace had her rocking to and fro in an almost
cradling motion that made it that much harder to keep herself awake. Adding to her overall
discomfort was the chilly breeze that accompanied the descent of the sun behind the western walls,
causing her the occasional shiver and making her regret not taking her scarf with her that morning. In
short, the gnu's suggestion was guaranteed to pass; only not immediately.

"We're approaching the local headquarters, aren't we?" She replied, trying to blink the fatigue off her heavy eyelids. "I'll ask around there for a bit and then we'll head straight to Rockwood, I promise."

In response, the gnu grunted something incomprehensible and darted forth, eager to bring their risky trip to an end; Judy yelped in surprise and barely managed to grab onto the front of the saddle to keep herself seated as they suddenly gained speed. She would have berated her carrier had his impatience not given her her second wind; or third, or even fourth, considering how long her day had been. She had gotten up to five in the past, but she wasn't as young as she used to, so there was no telling where her reserves now stood at.

After a swift blur of a ride, they had reached the headquarters, and Judy's want for sleep further diminished at its sight. It was easily the largest one she had seen so far, and by far the less glamorous, with dirt and deterioration having left their mark on its frontage of wood and stone and the big flag with the rangers' crest aged and dusty. It conveyed the exact same feeling as the rangers the bunny had met in this district so far: hard, seasoned and telling, ready to take drastic action against any breach of the law they were meant to enforce.

For all the things Judy disliked about the Zone so far, she certainly approved of its rangers.

She dismounted her carrier with a promise that she'd wrap things up quickly, straightened her shirt and vest and finally entered through the open panel of the headquarters' elephant sized doors; busy as it was, the local force likely didn't have the luxury of building more than one entrance.

She was met with an unexpected commotion. The spacey common room of the headquarters was filled to the brim with mammals of all kinds, predator and prey alike, standing in messy lines before the booths where all of seven different ranger coordinators were seated, their paws clearly full with catering to the colorful assortment of animals. Numerous other rangers stood guard at the walls, overlooking the citizens to make sure no one left the common room to sneak into the weaponry or the storage rooms and begrudgingly accompanying them to the lavatories when they expressed the need.

One of the coordinators, an aged porcupine with a number of missing spines on his coat which spoke of years in active duty, was calmly and professionally responding to the indignant shouting of an angry lemur, but Judy couldn't make out the conversation over the loud clamor of the room. There was also a giraffe who had almost stepped on a bobcat, starting a fight that forced one of the rangers on standby, a bulky rhino with short but sharp horns and an austere scowl, to intervene and restore whatever semblance of order there was to be among the obnoxious crowd. She also briefly spotted a raccoon and a fox close to the back of the lines, a moose and an elk chatting irritably about how long these procedures took, an anxious looking otter conversing with another fox and a pair of a tiger and a lioness laughing boorishly at some joke from the far end of the room.

In other words, the atmosphere of the common room was downright suffocating.

It was easy for the bunny to figure out what was happening. Mammals were typically encouraged to actively communicate with the rangers, to express their worries, give pointers to potential criminals or, more commonly, site their numerous complaints, serious or petty, and demand that the rangers work things out. Such complaints were issued far more often than Judy or any of her colleagues would have liked, and dealing with them had for the longest time been the most irritating part of her duties back in the Burrows before she was promoted to her current rank, enabling her to push such tedious work to her juniors with a slight pang of guilt and enormous relief.

Still, in her hometown she had never encountered anything nearly as hectic as what she was now
witnessing, let alone so late in the day. Could it be that things were even worse for the local rangers in the earlier hours? *Those poor souls…*

With the coordinators clearly out of reach at the moment, Judy instead decided to head for the tall brown horse with the yellow feather that stood at the stairs leading to the second floor, looking as intimidating as his comically patterned face would allow; the white spot over his right eye made it look as if he was constantly half-goggling.

She bit back an amused grin as she approached him, pushing and squeezing her way through the lined mammals until she stood before his hooves, greeting him to draw his attention. Either the horse's reaction to a bunny ranger was unexpectedly mild or he really had been goggling all along; Judy really couldn't tell.

She was about to explain her business to him, but to her surprise, the horse addressed her first.

"Hold on! You… You're that bunny!"

A confused blink was all she could manage in response to his delighted exclaim. "I… I *am* a bunny, yes." She then cleared her throat and straightened her back, intent on giving a proper introduction of herself as per usual.

"Amazing!" Clearly, the horse was not one for formalities.

"Deputy, I am your superior." She pointed out strictly, tapping her foot. "And you *will* address me properly. Am I understood?"

"Ah, of course! Apologies, ma'am, I- I couldn't help it. I'm sure you understand."

She sure did. "Yeah, whatever. Look, I wish to make a few inquiries, and I can't afford to wait until this whole mess is cleared up." she begun explaining, hiking a thumb towards the noisy center of the common room and neglecting her introductions in the face of the rude ungulate. "I'll need access to your-

"Sorry to interrupt you, ma'am, but we have been instructed to lead you to the chief should you show up."

Her aggravated stance instantly switched to surprise. "*You have-* wait." She spoke, her long ears tilting curiously. "Your chief knew of my arrival in the city?"

He nodded; she noticed that his goofy smile was not of malign amusement, but rather excited and friendly.

"The gate's guardsmen informed him yesterday. We have a lot of guys in- Err, you know what? I'm sure he'd like to explain everything himself! Would you follow me, lieutenant?"

She numbly agreed and followed him up the stairs, leaving the commotion of the common room behind them.

"Deputy, I've been in contact with many rangers in this district. Why did no one take me to the chief?"

"It wasn't really an order, strictly speaking." The horse responded merrily. "Word just got out, and we here at the headquarters figured he'd like to see you if you happened to drop by."

Word got out, he said. "… Huh. And why would he like to see me?"
"Obviously, lieutenant," he replied, smiling over his muscular shoulder as they reached the tall building's third floor, "because you're very interesting."

Unsure if she should be flattered or offended, she chose not to respond.

The horse promptly entered the local chief's office to announce her. It took him literally seconds; with her ears at the right angle, Judy could clearly hear the short exchange through the door.

"Chief, she's here! The bunny!"

There was a rustling sound.

"Wha- You serious, Oates?!"

"Unless it's some other bunny ranger, then yeah."

"Well what are you waiting for, dumbass?! Send her in!"

She gave a hop backwards to avoid the panel that swung open with force. The horse, still looking hilariously jesting with his white spot and toothy grin, kept the door open for her and saluted her as she entered before leaving to supposedly return to his post.

Now utterly confused at the chief's apparent fascination with her and with no idea what to expect, Judy allowed herself a second to regain her composure before walking up to the desk and saluting the mammal in question, formally announcing herself and noting that she had, in fact, never met him before in her life.

The Zone's ranger chief was a middle aged boar with a characteristically slovenly appearance. He was unusually short for his species, his skin and ruffled fur were the exact same shade of pitch black and his muzzle was squashed, likely due to an injury sustained in the past. Another injury had taken the tip of his right tusk; the left one, on the other hand, seemed to have been regularly sharpened and it could now pose as serious a threat to an adversary as any predator's fangs.

His desk, much like the entirety of his office, could only be described as an appalling mess. There were crinkled sheets of paper laying all over, furniture had been moved out of place for unimaginable to Judy reasons, and the small pile of official scrolls resting before him among half eaten fruit were indicative of both the boar's untidy nature as well as his activities before she had been announced by the deputy. Even the room's structure came off as messy, as Judy took notice of a framed shutter on the wall to the chief's right, at a height above his seat; it couldn't have been a window, as the wall was connecting the office to a subsequent room.

She was given the time to take her peculiar environment in as the boar, much like Higgins had before him, left her in her salute for a long time, sizing her up inquisitively. He had hazel eyes, and the way they were framed by the numerous tufts of coarse black fur on his face made it look like they were two glowing yellow spots in a shapeless mass of darkness.

But when they finally rested on her purple ones, she did not flinch away in the slightest.

"You really are small!" He remarked with a deep frown and a heavy chuckle; then he nodded towards the seat before his desk without putting her at ease.

After a short sputter caused by the chief's horrendous disregard for both formal procedures and common courtesy, Judy reluctantly broke her salute and hopped onto the chair, unable to help a light scowl. She then eyed him once more and waited for him to speak again.
"Hopps, do you know who I am?" His voice was raucous to the point of being incomprehensible; Judy noticed that he bore another hideous scar at the base of his neck and figured that was the reason behind his impaired speech.

"I have not been given your name yet, sir, no."

He chuckled softly. It sounded like grating a rasp against rock.

"My name is Walter Tusk. Not Tusks, mind you; fitting, ain't it?" He said, idly gesturing at his broken tusk.

Set as she was on remaining professional, Judy did not allow her brow to furrow. "It's a pleasure, sir." She responded evenly, really unsure as to what she was doing there.

He blinked at her and made a curt nasal grunt; boars, pigs and swines typically avoided oinking but the chief before her didn't seem to give the sound much thought.

"I should be offended, really, but I guess he has never been one to talk much." He stated with a shrug and a crooked smile, adding to her confusion.

She decided she had had enough. "Sir, I was told you wished to see me; or that- that your men figured you'd wish to see me. Do you know me somehow, sir?"

Another loud oink; she supposed it was an expression of mirth. She had never known.

"Right… Apologies, lieutenant. I imagine you're fairly confused right now. My bad!"

"And to answer your question, yes. I do know you, Judy Hopps; or at least know of you. You see," he paused for the dramatic effect, smirking at her, "there's this good friend of mine in the Burrows, and he's been writing to me about the bunny who made the rangers. So when I heard from my people at the gates that some bunny with a feathered cap had entered the city, it got me a little excited is all."

Judy's ears shot up in perfect unison with her brows. The thought of a fan from the Burrows writing about her caused a sear under her face fur, and for a second she struggled to find an appropriately modest response to the revelation; but the boar wouldn't let her.

"So, tell me, Hopps!" He spoke up with his rasp voice, leaning in with an intense, riveted frown. "There was a rhino, yes?"

"A rhino…? Oh! Um… There was, yes. Sir."

"Military man?"

"Ugh, yes."

"And you took him down?"

Her lips would never allow her to break character by grinning proudly at a superior, but the sparkle in her eyes certainly conveyed the emotion just fine. "That is correct, sir."

His frown deepened. "… How?"

Her lips did betray her, in the end. "Have you ever been kicked by a bunny, sir?"

He stared at her perfectly still, just long enough for her to begin wondering if she had gone too far;
then a low rumble begun in his chest, gradually growing until it burst through his mouth in a long, loud and monotonous laughter, every bit as coarse as his normal speech. It resembled the sounds of a drowning mammal.

"Spunky indeed!" He exclaimed, repeatedly striking his knee. Judy couldn't decide if the complete absence of any formality bothered her or not, but she eventually settled on appreciating the hearty boar for the stark difference between him and the annoying hippo of Rockwood.

Flattered as she was, however, she had not forgone her intense curiosity. "If I may ask, sir," she begun as the boar's hollers dwindled, "who is this friend of yours that's written you about me?"

"Why, I believe you know him as Buffalo Butt. Or at least, I hope so; I was the one who started that nickname, in case you didn't know!"

She had apparently also dropped all thoughts of formality, because she was now gawking incredulously at him, ears recoiling and mouth agape. "Chief Bogo?!"

"I suppose you'd call him that, yes." He chuckled, amused by her reaction. "We were cadets together in the Savannah. Been exchanging scrolls for a good… Let's see, thirteen? Maybe fourteen years now, ever since he made major and left for the east."

She sputtered anew, feeling the corners of her lips pick up once more as mirth accompanied clarity. "You will be happy to hear that the nickname did catch on, chief." She announced cheerfully, causing another surge of laughs from the boar.

"Why would he not tell you to come to me though?" Tusk wondered.

"Well, sir, I imagine he wanted me to focus on my job. That's kinda his line with every one of us in the Burrows."

"That's exactly it! I would have helped you! Pulled some strings here and there, given you some proper men; I dunno if you've noticed, but the rest of the rangers here are a bunch of plump loafers."

Judy thought he was incredibly likeable for such an ugly mammal.

"I believe he didn't think I'd be nearing the Zone at all, chief. I'm here looking for a ram."

It was his turn to recoil in surprise. "A ram?"

She was now comfortable enough with him to allow herself a desperate eye roll. "Sir please, could I mention my case once without having this reaction? It's getting real dull." She groaned.

"There's a reason for that, Hopps. I've never in all my years come across a criminal sheep! What the hell did he do?"

"Crop theft, smuggling. He led and entire ring back in the Burrows. Real bad egg."

"Hm! And you chased him all the way to Zootopia?"

"Precisely."

"… And you ended up in the Zone."

Her sigh was enough of an answer. "Is it really that unlikely?"

He shuffled in his seat, looking thoughtful. "Oh, there are prey here, as I'm sure you've noticed. Just
not… *that* kind of prey. Too many wolves, I think; and they're just natural cowards."

"I've heard rams can deal some damage if they build up speed."

"Honestly, Hopps? I feel like something this wooly couldn't possibly be truly dangerous." He noticed her buckteeth protruding through a smirk and chuckled once more. "Okay, I see your point. You and your case seem intent on breaking all stereotypes, huh?"

She shook her head appreciatively before getting them back on point. "I have visited a number of nearby outposts to see if there were any sheep standing out, but no luck so far. I figured I'd take a look at your files here, see if there's anything that could be… useful…" She trailed off, seeing the look the boar was giving her.

"It's certainly meticulous of you, lieutenant; and just a little desperate. Have you really got no leads on him?" She shook her head miserably. "Hm… I'm sorry to hear that, Hopps, but this is literally the last place one should come to looking for sheep."

"It *is* the last place I came to, sir." She gave an exhausted sigh, smiling bitterly at the boar. "It's been a long day."

"I bet. You look like death."

They stayed silent for a minute. "Tell me one more thing: where did he end up sending you to?"

"Rockwood. *Yeah*." She nodded somberly at the boar once she saw his grimace.

"To Higgins?" He oinked, shocked. "That stupid hippo couldn't help you catch your sheep if he was living at his headquarters! All this moron knows to do is push papers and hand out promotions!"

Upon closer inspection, Tusk wasn't that ugly by bunny standards, really.

"Chief, I'm planning to come back tomorrow and take a proper look into the Zone and Happytown. Could you help me out in any way?"

He oinked once more; Judy now figured it was more of a nervous tick than an expression of some kind. "Bluntly put, Hopps, no. I cannot describe to you how busy we are around here; did you see the people downstairs?"

"Yeah, I thought so." She was far too weary not to sound dejected.

"Well, it's not like I will deny you assistance, lieutenant." He pointed out with another oink. "I just need you to find something first. Anything will do; evidence, rumors, any kind of pointer. Just give me something to warrant an official response and I will mobilize whatever force I can afford to look for that ram, even if I have to send them all the way to Liberty District."

She gave the boar a thankful smile. "Thank you, sir. I'll turn to you as soon as I find anything."

"Good. One more thing though…"

She raised her ears attentively. "Yes, sir?"

"You mentioned Happytown."

"That is correct."

"No."
She blinked at him. "I… Beg your pardon?"

He stared at her intensely, similar to the way his friend, her chief, would, and spoke as slowly and clearly as his destroyed voice would allow. "No prey goes to Happytown alone. And I don't mean that you bring a carrier, Hopps; I mean you bring a platoon of big, burly rangers or soldiers to keep the chompers away. Preferably both. And by no means are you to investigate anywhere close to the Garden. That is final."

She was about to argue, but the moment she opened her mouth the room shook by a terribly loud noise. It was the toot of an elephant in close proximity; far too close for the bunny's sensitive ears, which she folded immediately as she hopped off the chair in alarm. The boar across her merely gave an annoyed grunt and turned to the wall on his right, yelling.

"What the fuck, Trunkaby?!"

The framed shutter Judy had noticed while walking in opened, pushed by a gray trunk which reluctantly came through it; if it had an expression, it would have been abashment. Then it spoke, its voice deep yet undeniably feminine. "Apologies, chief, but it wasn't my fault! Oates pulled at my tail again!"

"That fucking horse." Tusk mumbled through his teeth before shouting back at the trunk. "Tell bright eye that he's just earned himself this week's night shifts! All of them!"

A sad neigh could be heard through the shutter as the trunk retreated.

"Francine. She handles most of the paperwork around here, God bless her, but she's a bit jumpy; and Oates is a fucking idiot, but a lovable one at least." He explained merrily to Judy, who was just calming herself down. "You're fairly jumpy yourself, it would seem." He added, tauntingly arching a brow.

She shook her head weakly, chuckling. "I am… Not at the top of my game right now, sir."

"No, you aren't." he agreed. "So get your ass back to Rockwood and get some sleep. If you're still itching to visit my district tomorrow, drop by and we'll have a thorough talk as to why Happytown is a bloody stupid idea."

She nodded tiredly, causing her saggy ears to flutter around her face. "Understood, sir. Thank you."

She got up and made for the door -which she'd have to hop to swing open, sadly-, but she stopped halfway through and turned back to the boar with an inquisitive look. "Sir?"

"Yes, lieutenant?"

"You mentioned some garden, I believe?"

"Come here first thing tomorrow, Hopps, and I'll tell you everything you need to know. Oh!" His face lit up with a sudden inspiration. "Would you like to see the scrolls Buffalo Butt has sent me? He mentions you a lot in the most recent ones!"

She did. She'd kill to read them.

"I don't think chief Bogo would approve of that, sir."

"Yeah, you're right! So, I'll have some copies made for you then. Tomorrow!"
She smiled at the hideously ugly boar, the most beautiful face she'd come across in her first day in the capital. "Right, sir. Good night."

"I heard you're in for a lovely week, bright eye." She shot at the horse deputy she had run into in the corridor, grinning teasingly at him.

He gave her a snort before raising his chin dismissively, comically whipping his blonde forelock. It was clear to Judy that he was this headquarters' proud clown ranger, a position involving a lot of aggressive jokes and love from his fellow coworkers. Sadly, it also got him the occasional extra shift when he went too far; but he didn't regret it.

"If I gave you a good scare, ma'am, it was worth it." he replied in kind, the goofy grin back on his long face.

"I admit to nothing." She said stoically, earning her a pleasant neigh that might have been the silliest laughter she had ever heard.

They went down the stairs together, chatting absently until they reached the common room. Judy noticed that while the crowd had lessened considerably by then, there were still a few mammals lined up before the booths of the coordinators. It really put things in perspective for her, considering the booths back in the Burrows would not even be manned at this hour; it was getting dark outside, and she was thinking she'd have to pay the gnu extra just to shut him up for the rest of the ride. It was Higgins' money, though, so as far as she was concerned, the more the better.

"These guys are still going at it?" She wondered aloud for the horse to hear.

Oates sighed from behind her. "Yeah, some people are just too persistent. And the shit they come at you with, God…! Wouldn't want to be behind those booths, lieutenant, I tell you that."

"Seconded."

She mirrored the horse, meaning to bid him farewell, when suddenly a loud, high pitched plea echoed in the now quieter common room, grabbing her attention.

"Please, sire! It's been four days! You have to do somethin'!"

Judy identified the source of the voice; it was a small otter speaking to the porcupine coordinator behind the booth. The coordinator had an expression of reserved disdain as he gave his calm response, which only seemed to add to the otter's frustration.

She was a female of advanced age, maybe close to fifty, with unkempt brown fur with specks of gray, grimy paws and a broken clownish accent that spoke of poor education, or complete lack thereof. Her speech was made all the more sloppy by her many missing teeth, a sign of both her age and her background, and the ones still in her mouth were yellowed. She was dressed in a number of overlapping threadbare rags which were as dirty and unsavory as herself and a number of cheap, likely makeshift earrings adorned her ears.

As Judy observed the otter, another mammal stood beside her and begun speaking to the porcupine in a far more communicative manner, seeming to be calmly making a request. It was a fox, and he was clearly together with the ragamuffin otter; Judy faintly recalled spotting the pair earlier when she had first entered the headquarters.

The horse behind her gave an exasperated snort. "Gypsies."
Judy arched a brow and eyed the duo curiously, furtively approaching them to make out the conversation between them and the porcupine; she had never seen a gypsy up close, and from what she'd heard it was to be an experience. Her attempts were made significantly easier by the otter's desperate cries.

"Please, mister, you don't understand! We's been here so many times! Ya have to start lookin' for my man!"

The ranger collected his paws from the booth as the otter reached out to grab them; he seemed incredibly uncomfortable. "Ma'am, I feel for you, I really do. But we simply cannot look for such a small missing mammal with no clues to go on!"

"We might be able to help you on that end, sir." The fox cut in with a stable tone, gingerly resting a paw on the otter's shoulder to hush her. "You haven't actually taken our statements, that's why we're here. And we have reason to believe it's an abduction, sir, not just a disappearance."

"That's right!" The otter confirmed, nodding frantically. "We think we knows who took him too, sire! It'll help ya find him!"

The porcupine took a deep breath, trying to keep his composure. "Listen- We cannot currently open an investigation for a missing otter from Happytown. We can't afford the people or the time, regrettably. And I'm sorry to say that, ma'am, but if your husband really did go missing in Happytown… Well…" He shrugged apologetically and allowed his voice to drift off, his insinuation leaving the fox with a troubled frown and the otter with a puzzled one.

"What do ya mean, sire?"

"He means he's likely been killed by some of your ilk, gypsy, so what's the point in looking for him?"

The insensitive explanation had come from a ranger that stood guard at a nearby door; a young bull with a white feathered cap and especially large horns who had been listening to the trio for a long time, growing increasingly aggravated at the two predators and their persistence.

"Wha- no! Of course not, sire, my folk would never."

"Now now, Mrs. Otterton," The fox interrupted her, wrapping an arm around her. "The rangers are clearly very busy today. We will just have to come back later, yes?"

He moved to guide the otter towards the exit, smiling submissively at the bull; he had spotted the look on the latter's face and immediately recognized the need to distance themselves from him.

"But- But we's been here so many times already!" The otter complained with teary eyes, resisting the fox. "It's been four days! He could be hurt! He could be dead!"

"He likely is, lady. We're terribly sorry. Now move along, there are others waiting." The bull blurted out from his corner.

"But maybe he ain't!"

The otter managed to slip away from the fox, ignoring his hushed warnings, and darted towards the bull, pulling at his trousers in a final desperate plea for help.

"There's so many of ye rangers in the streets! If ya just had them keep-"
She couldn't complete her sentence as the bull aggressively pushed her away with a loud grunt, nearly sending her flying. The fox moved quickly, managing to grab her before she fell, and then hurriedly struggled to set the crying otter back on her feet, putting himself between her and the advancing bull.

"Don't touch me, you filthy gypsy scum!" The ranger bellowed angrily, taking a step forward. "We get enough trouble from your kind as it is! He told you there's nothing we can do for your man, so get lost!"

The fox supported the shocked, stammering female as they tried to make their way through the lines of mammals, a paw raised in the direction of the bull to signal their unconditional retreat. "We're leaving. We're leaving." he repeated again and again, calmly, trying to placate the aggressive ranger.

Judy had so far been observing the scene without interfering. She wasn't from around these parts and she couldn't claim to understand the workings of the district or the situations the local rangers faced there, so she didn't feel comfortable calling them out on their methods. That was why she had chosen not to comment on the porcupine's clear reluctance to listen to the predators' request or his wildly unprofessional contempt for the otter, which he had done a very poor job at obscuring.

But the bull's case was different. The abuse of a citizen -any kind of citizen- was one of the core taboos of the rangers' order, and she believed that its blatant violation, such as that she had just witnessed, warranted an altogether expulsion from the order; she was actually shocked to see that none of the other rangers in the room had made a move yet. Finally realizing that it was up to her, she took in a deep, angry breath, ready to call at the bull and demand his name.

Then the otter spoke one last time in a loud, broken shriek from over the fox's shoulder.

"But- Sire! We even- But we even know who it was!"

"Sire, t'was that sheep!"

Judy was looking at the bull when she heard those lines. She saw his face contort in a sarcastic scoff, identical to the one she had been getting all day whenever she mentioned her case and her perpetrator; but she didn't hear his response.

For a second, she couldn't hear anything.

"Cadet!"

Her bawl had such unexpected volume that it left her throat taut. In an instant every ranger and citizen in the room, including the bull and his two victims, had stopped whatever they were doing and were either staring at her or scanning the room for the source of the holler, unable to spot the short mammal.

The bull, for once, had spotted her right away and recognized her from his chief's descriptions after a mere second.

"Oh… Oh! You're-"

"Give me your name, cadet." She demanded sternly, cutting him off as she approached him.

"I- What?"

"Your name, cadet! Now!" She yelled at him once more, clenching her paws in fists shaking with fury; and, unbeknownst to anyone but herself, excitement. "And an explanation for not saluting your
superior. A really fucking good one, I hope!"

He hurriedly saluted her and gave his name with a completely justified sense of foreboding that had him shaking under his green cap.

What followed was a sight to behold for everyone present. None of them would ever forget the scene of a bunny reducing a bull to a whimpering mess, locking him in a salute and yelling bloody murder at him before sending him off to the resting chambers, promising to do everything in her power to relieve him of his feather. The bull himself least of all, as the bunny's large, violet eyes, which should by all means have caused him nothing but a warm buzz in the stomach, had been aflame in a way that would haunt him for a long time afterward.

Judy didn't waste any time addressing the frozen porcupine next. "Coordinator, why have you refused to take these people's statements?" She asked him with a berating frown the porcupine realized was incredibly mild, considering the execution he had just witnessed.

"They- Well, um… As I told them, lieutenant, we cannot currently afford the men to look into-"

"We can now." She cut him off curtly. "I will be taking on their case."

The porcupine sputtered incoherently for a second. "The- Ma'am, this is hardly a job for a lieutenant! I'm sure there-"

Her gaze was intense enough to stop him on his tracks. He swallowed thickly.

"I am not from any local branch." She announced, her voice growing progressively calmer, now portraying decisiveness rather than rage. "I have my own assignments, and I judge that I can handle them and this otter's case just fine. Will that be a problem, coordinator?"

Given the context, it would be difficult for the porcupine to tell the lieutenant that it was. Not to mention, it really wasn't; she would just be relieving the locals from a minor bother.

"No, ma'am. Of course not."

"Good!" She said with finality before turning away from the ranger and towards the small crowd of mammals, who were all staring openly at her. She payed them no mind as she scanned the room for the fox and the otter.

She spotted them exactly where they had stood when she had first yelled at the bull, frozen in place just like everyone else in the room. She made towards the duo with an animated pace, absently noting that her thundering heartbeat meant she was still young enough to get her fifth wind after all.

"T'is- T'is a tiny hare lady, Nicky!" The otter whispered in the fox's ear, awe coloring her voice. Judy could hear her just fine as she approached.

"I believe it's called a bunny, Mrs. Otterton." He replied, not bothering to hush his tone, eyes set on the mammal in question.

"Hello, miss. My name is Judith Larvene Hopps, ranger lieutenant of the Burrows province." she begun formally as soon as she reached them, addressing the otter. "I'd like to apologize on behalf of the cadet. He will be reprimanded properly, I assure you."

"Oh, I'd say he was reprimanded plenty." The fox quipped with a smirk, but was completely ignored.
"You's a lieutenant?" The otter asked her, confused.

"I am, ma'am. And I'd like to look into your case." The small predator gasped with delight and instantly grabbed her paws - she had a thing for grabbing others, it would seem, like an obnoxious beggar - and although Judy was bothered by how dirty they were, she gave no sign of it.

Instead, she went straight to the point. "You mentioned a sheep, I believe? Some sheep took your husband?"

"Yes! Yes! T'was a sheep, lieutenant, some crafty, shady sheep, I'm sure! Ya don't believe me, lieutenant, but it really was! On my word!"

"Easy, miss. Easy." Judy calmed her down, still holding her paws in her own. "I'll take your statements now, but not here. Follow me, if you will."

"So, then. Let us begin with your name, miss…?"

"T'is Mary Otterton, dearie."

Judy dipped her quill in the black ink and begun taking notes on the blank scroll before her, using the light from a fresh candle that burned next to her paw. She was mirroring the gypsy otter from across a table in the headquarters' refectory, which she had emptied just for the three of them; she liked her privacy when collecting possible clues.

"Okay. And your husband's name?"

"Emmett. Emmett Otterton."

"… Right. When did he disappear?"

"Four days ago, dearie." She apparently fancied calling her "dearie", and Judy wasn't bothered, considering the otter's age.

"He was runnin' our shop down at Happytown. A little bakery, it is, at the western wing. There ain't much work there, so I take some loafs and head to the Zone every day to try an' sell something extra. Only-" She paused, tearing up again. "Only four days ago, I- I came back to the bakery and he was gone!" she wailed. "Folk said he hadn't opened up shop at all!"

The fox, who was not seated and instead stood above Mary, gently placed a clawed paw on her shoulder, calming her fit. He had told Judy that he had no statement to give himself, but was only looking out for the otter, keeping her safe and lucid. It was clear that she was not well from a mental standpoint, but the fox seemed to be able to work around her various little episodes, so she had allowed him to be present. Now she was glad she had.

"What did you do then, miss?"

"Why, I looked for him! Nicky here came along to help me, and we's been looking together, but there's- he wasn't anywhere, and the other rangers wouldn't help for shite!" She sniffled and gave her yet another thankful look. "God bless ya, dearie. You've a good heart."

Judy smiled back at her; she was so disoriented and repulsive, the poor thing, but there wasn't a drop of evil in her.

"I'm sure that sheep took him out of the Zone, that's why we couldn't find him anywhere!" She
added with an angry scowl.

Judy's ears picked up. "Right, the sheep. Can you tell me how they fit into the story? For starters, is it a male or a female?"

"Oh, I don't know, dearie, I haven't seen 'em myself. Emmett spoke of some sheep the day before, is all."

_Here we go._ "What did he say?"

"He was gonna to do some business with 'em the morning he disappeared. I told him that it was nuts, that no sheep would come this south, that I didn't like it. And I was right!"

"Business? Was the sheep a customer?"

"Oh no, they-"

She suddenly paused, blinking as if she remembered something; then she reluctantly turned towards the fox -Nicky, she had called him- and gave him a questioning look, as if asking for permission. He looked back at her and, after a moment's hesitation, nodded at her to continue. Before Judy could pry into the curious exchange, the otter resumed.

"He was gonna… Sell some things to the sheep. Some stuff we- we find… Every now and then."

"It's illegal, lieutenant." The fox added evenly, stating the obvious. "Gypsies procure their merchandise a number of ways, but it's typically illegal work. I'm sure this comes as a shock," he went on with an easy grin, "but I hope we can focus on finding the man before dragging him in a cell. Isn't that right?"

She held his gaze for a second. Past the grin, there was nothing she could make of him.

"I appreciate your honesty, sir; and no, I don't plan to press on that subject right now. Finding him is a priority."

Mary, who had been holding her breath since the fox had spoken to the ranger so openly, breathed a sigh of relief. The fox, on the other hand, merely stared on, the grin still on his lips.

Staring, grinning; almost as if with a hidden meaning.

Judy forced herself to focus back on the otter. "Where was he going to meet that sheep?"

"I… I dunno, dearie. Never told me."

She held back the urge to bite her lip. "Did he mention anything else about the sheep?"

"No, nothing."

_Goddammit all._

"Do you have anything else to add, miss?"

The otter meekly shook her head. "I's… I don't think so, no."

"So, to recapitulate: your husband was going to conduct some illegal business with a mysterious sheep, he disappeared the morning the business was to take place, and you have been actively looking for him in the Zone ever since with no results."
"And Happytown, also." The fox spoke once more. "There are many people looking for him. He's not in either district, we can be sure of that."

Her ears quivered in his direction. "Many people? As in?"

He shrugged. "Many. Loads of gypsies in Happytown, as I'm sure you're aware."

She narrowed her eyes at him, skeptical. "So in just four days from the man's disappearance, the entire gypsy community mobilized to look for him?"

"Oh, we's all real close down in Happytown! Everyone's been such a great help."

"... I see."

She made some final notes on her scroll, asked for Emmett Otterton's description and then finally placed her quill on the table and stood up. "Thank you for your cooperation, both of you. We're done here."

"Will you find him, dearie?" Asked the otter in an expectant tone that made the bunny uncomfortable.

"I will try, miss. I will be keeping an eye out for otters and suspicious sheep outside the Zone, I promise." The sheen of hope her words brought out in the elderly mammal's eyes caused her a light pang of guilt. In truth, the inexcusably rude bull had been right; Emmett Otterton was likely a lost cause.

But hopefully the enigmatic sheep wasn't.

They walked back into the common room, now pleasantly silent with the citizens and most of the rangers gone. The porcupine was still behind his booth, and Judy moved towards him after seeing the two predators off, enduring many of Mrs. Otterton's very physical expressions of gratitude; on a side note, she felt like she could use a bath. She meant to leave the scroll from her largely disappointing questioning session for copying and archiving.

As she handed the scroll over, she wondered what connection her ram could possibly have with the sheep Mrs. Otterton had spoken of. Her husband's disappearance or alleged kidnapping had occurred shortly after the date of her ram's arrival in the city, but this was likely a coincidence. On the other hand, if criminal sheep truly were as unheard of as everyone claimed, then she could not yet pass the otter's story over as irrelevant.

She had to ruminate on it. And to do that properly, she had to sleep, which in turn meant that she had to ask the porcupine where she could hire a carrier at this hour, because she had broken her promise to him; it was well into the night now, and the light from the small candles on the booths did little to illuminate the wide, spacey common room.

As she was wondering if she should ask for a bed there at the headquarters rather than head back to her inn in Rockwood, a voice came from behind her.

"You're a bunny."

It was a good voice to hear; easy on the ears, smooth, calm and fetching. There was no mistaking its owner.

Judy turned to face the fox she thought had left along with the otter. She immediately noticed Mrs.
Otterton standing at the large door, likely told to wait for her companion; she also noticed the underlying mirth in the fox's eyes as he beckoned her, and the slight upward curve of his lips.

Damn thing figured he'd take the time to pull her leg.

"And you're a fox." She retorted idly, folding her ears in annoyance.

"Guess we've both been given the short end of the stick, huh?"

His response came with no time lag whatsoever, like the words have been sitting at the tip of his tongue since before she had finished speaking. He was impressively glib.

"I don't think of being a bunny as a hindrance, sir." She replied with an air of defiance.

"You don't?" He playfully arched a brow, grin slowly forming. "I imagine it makes it hard to be taken seriously, lieutenant."

She grinned back at him. "That problem is easily solved once people meet me, sir."

His shoulders shook by an inaudible chuckle; it was like the better she responded, the more she satisfied him. Her eyes momentarily flickered to his sharp teeth; they were a full set, white and healthy, and seemed capable of a decent bite. Apart from her expected discomfort, she found herself curiously considering the fox's appearance.

He had a fur of reddish orange save for the creamy white at the lower half of his face and the black at his paws and the tips of his pointy ears. It was thick, rich and even, peaking at his especially puffy tail; a natural quality he had clearly cared for to preserve and enhance, much like the teeth that had first grabbed her attention. His eyes were a bright green, standing out in the red of his figure.

It was impossible to determine his age. The linings of his face spoke of an older mammal, but the unremitting hint of mischief in his every word and gesture betrayed a youthful disposition. He could be anything between twenty five and forty.

His build was not the least bit intimidating. He had over a head on her, naturally, but he was rather thin, sporting a slender build that lacked some of the average bulk of his kind. He didn't seem the fighter, and Judy believed she would have no problem overpowering him should the need arise; he wasn't much stronger than her, compared to other mammals she'd faced in the past, and she was certainly faster.

Most notably, he carried himself with an air of confidence mirrored in his feint smirk, which seemed to be ever present, as well as in his fluid gait and precise gesticulating. It was almost regal, in a way, and certainly not befitting a supposed gypsy.

The same went for his clothes, a simple green tunic and tan trousers held in place by a thin rope; cheap articles of poor quality that managed to fit him just right, further bringing out his eyes. Just like himself, they were clean and spruced up despite their subtlety, worlds apart from the rags of Mary Otterton or most of the outfits she had seen on predators in the streets. They were by no means a sign of wealth, but rather of taste and care put into one's appearance.

And that care had payed off. If Judy, a bunny, would think of him as handsome, then she could only imagine the impression he would make on a vixen.

Ever since she had begun taking Mary Otterton's statements she had wondered by what peculiar twist of fate the fox could have ended up with her, as it was strikingly difficult to associate the two. One was ragamuffin and dirty, the other was neatly dressed and clean. One would totter giddily
while the other had an airy posture, adroit and comfortable in his skin. One could hardly put together a coherent sentence, while the other was arguably the most articulate mammal she had met in Zootopia so far.

It was a real shame he was using that commendable eloquence of his to get on her nerves.

"Are there other ranger bunnies where you come from, lieutenant?" He asked her with a false front of polite curiosity. "Are they all as jittery as you?"

She wasn't going to play his game. "I am not looking for idle chit chat at this time, sir." She said curtly, meaning to bring the pointless exchange to an end. "It's been a long day, and I need to rest. Goodnight."

"A long day, huh?" He repeated breezily as she turned her back on him, intent on ignoring the rest of his words.

"Guess sheep are pretty evasive! Who'd have thought?"

A loud click echoed in her head for the second time in a day. Her foot was left hanging.

Staring. Grinning.

Almost as if-

She mirrored him slowly, reluctantly, numbed by the sudden rush of interest that washed over her. She scanned his face with complete advertency, looking for the hidden meaning that had evaded her thus far.

His grin widened, eyes narrowing at her bewilderment; he seemed pleased, as if her reaction had confirmed a suspicion of his.

"Oh?" The soft exclaim bubbled out of his throat as she took a step closer, carefully noting every twitch of his vulpine features with a deepening frown. They locked eyes; a standoff of green and purple, colliding in a silent struggle to pierce through each other and into the secrets they each hid.

Judy's approach was to be the most direct.

"You know something."

"I never said that..." He puckered his lips, the taunting countenance contradicting his claim of ignorance.

Another forceful step forward. "You know something."

It wasn't a question and they both knew it. She kept on examining his face, searching for a chip on the smiling mask, a hint that he would drop meaningless pretense and speak clearly.

She found what she was looking for. His gaze wavered momentarily; then the grin slowly lost its curve, eventually dropping to a thin, toothless line. He blinked, averting his eyes from hers with a curt, frustrated sigh. He took a quick look over his shoulder, his ears folding and then standing on end, ready to catch any sound of approaching footsteps.

Judy had been in the game long enough to recognize this behavior; worry and indecisiveness, the last signs of reluctance before the questioned party cracked. She had broken through.

"Okay." His tone was hushed, cautious, unsure. He leaned closer, whispering straight into one of her
stiff ears. "Listen, I- I could get in trouble for this…"

"Trouble? With whom?" She whispered back, still skewering him with an intense, attentive gaze.

"The folk down at Happytown." He noticed the question on her face. "The gypsies." He elucidated with an impatient click of the tongue.

"I was just supposed to look after her, but… This is getting us nowhere, and it seems like you could help." He continued, nodding towards the otter patiently waiting near the entrance.

"I-Yes! Of course I can help! Just tell me!" She encouraged him, grabbing his arm, rapt in the thrill of unexpectedly stumbling upon a new lead.

"I can't just tell you, bunny! That's not how it works!" He lashed at her quietly, retrieving his arm. His visible trepidation only added to her eagerness; she could hardly stop the nervous tap of her foot against the wooden floor.

"We don't- we deal with our own issues, lieutenant. We're generally not very fond of rangers."

She could see him wavering once more. This was unfortunate; had she perhaps pushed too hard…? In any case, she wasn't going to let this one slip through her paws. She narrowed her eyes menacingly, settling on a different approach.

"Sir, if I suspect you're withholding information on a criminal, I could see you arrested here and now." She stated harshly.

Her experience had taught her that threats worked wonders on mammals that had lost their composure, and the fox was clearly standing on shaky grounds.

So naturally, she had not planned for him to respond with yet another devilish grin.

"Now now, lieutenant." He retorted, shaking his head with playful reproach, as if admonishing a thoughtless kit. "That would be a serious misstep on your part. Why make an enemy out of a potential friend?"

Her approach had backfired, and that was always reason enough to be annoyed; but by all that is holy, did that smug asshole of a fox not play his part.

"Should I take that as a threat, fox?"

Thankfully for the both of them, the fox was quick to forsake his grin and turn serious once more. "You most certainly should not. I am in no position to threaten you, lieutenant; not to mention, I do need your help."

"Well, if you won't talk to me, then I don't see how this is gonna work."

"I can't tell you, no; but I can show you."

He paused and beckoned her with a shrouded expression, contemplating, weighing his options. Judy could only wait for him to reach a decision.

He took a deep breath and held it, shutting his eyes. Upon releasing it, the nervous wag of his tail came to a stop and his shoulders sank, free of tension and uncertainty. She saw it in his eyes when he looked back at her; he had made up his mind.

"I'm- God, I'm really sticking my neck out here, but…" Another breath. Another struggle to steel
himself. "… Come find me tomorrow, before sundown. There's this inn in the eastern Zone called *The Rabid Drinker*. Big thing, made of stone, you can't miss it. Go there and ask for Slick. I'll be waiting."

And with that final rushed, furtive whisper, he promptly turned tail and made for the door, taking her by surprise.

"Wha- Hold on a second!" She called angrily, stepping after him. "You can't expect me to just-"

"I will get you a sheep, lieutenant."

He spoke to her over his shoulder without so much as a jib. She stopped as if she had hit a wall.

He spared her a short, telling glance before disappearing into the night, keeping an arm around the fragile elderly otter who was already blabbering on about who knows what. Judy, left staring after him wide eyed, caught the discreet movement of his lips the second before he walked out the enormous door.

*Tomorrow.*

"Cripes, dear, you look like death!"

Adeline was always eager to please the rangers she accommodated, so the discourteous comment must have been genuinely spontaneous. She had been putting together a plate of fresh grass, an order made by the rowdy group of oxes that occupied three of her larger tables, but the second she had caught wind of Judy's late arrival and momentarily turned her attention to the bunny, ready to smile and offer her dinner, she blurted the words before she could stop herself.

The kangaroo brought a paw over her mouth and begun stammering in an attempt to mitigate any offense she had caused the ranger, but Judy simply chuckled weakly and put her at ease.

"You're the second mammal to tell me that today, Mrs. Adeline, so it must be true enough." She joked, dragging her feet over to the counter.

"Long day, miss Hopps?"

"Longest of my life."

Adeline yelled a warning at one of the oxes who was banging his table with force in a fit of hysterical laughter. Then she turned her attention back at the grass she was to serve them.

"You sound like you could use a drink." She suggested without looking at the exhausted bunny.

"I bet I could, but I'll have to pass. I will be on duty tomorrow."

"Alright, dear. Need another wake up call?"

She peeked over at Judy and saw her head wobbling on her tiny shoulders; she was giving her a dramatically unamused stare.

"… Or maybe a late morning would be better?"

The bunny's buckteeth showed in a soft smile, signaling her approval.

She denied the kangaroo's offer of fresh radishes and only asked that she have a bath ready for her
when she woke up. Then she drowsily made her way to her room, abandoning her garments with uncharacteristic carelessness and gracelessly throwing herself on the neatly made bed; the entire process took her less than five seconds. She hadn’t even glanced in the direction of the mighty castle outside her window.

She had a head splitting headache, her whole body felt cramped and she was pretty sure she lacked the energy to shift under the covers and get to a more comfortable sleeping position; but despite all that, she had yet to stop thinking.

Absently thinking about the carrots she had given to Logger, which he had likely left for her at the headquarters. She would go pick them up first thing tomorrow.

Making a mental note not to forget to bring her scarf with her the next day, even if the morning -or the noon, more likely- felt relatively warm.

And, of course, thinking about the Zone. About the friendly, likeable boar and the shady, mysterious fox, both of whom had asked for a meeting with her.

Tusk had her best interests in mind, and was sure to advice her well. He had no pointers to give her per se, but he would properly explain how things worked around his district, and possibly around Happytown; not to mention, he had promised her a series of desirable documents that would create some interesting situations back in the Burrows.

But he would never approve of the fox’s invitation. He had made his opinions about predators abundantly clear, and Judy knew he would either assign some of his men to join her in her meeting, which was certain to keep the fox from ever showing up in the first place, or just downright forbid that she attends it. She couldn’t blame him, really; there was nothing about the fox that didn’t spell suspicious.

Only, Tusk hadn't seen the guy. He hadn't seen the genuine despair once he had dropped his mask, his reluctance, the effort it had taken him just to ask for her help.

And more importantly, Tusk hadn't promised her a sheep.

*What did he mean by that anyway?*

She couldn't imagine, and the possibilities ate away at her, somersaulting in her mind one after another, taunting her, daring her to go out there and find the truth.

*Tomorrow.*

This was the most promising hint of a lead she had gotten by far. Every other aspect of her investigation had been so painfully stagnant that she could not bear to ignore a potential breakthrough; even if it came in the form of a rather vexing fox that had likely gotten himself mixed up in something he couldn't handle.

*But it could be a trap.*

Supposing this really was some kind of trap, what would he hope to gain from it? Did harming her hold some merit to him? No, she got no such vibe from him, and she had learnt to trust in her gut. Not to mention, with that many able enforcers in the district, the thought of a ranger being randomly attacked in an inn seemed highly unlikely; she had seen first hand how safe prey felt in the Zone, despite what the other citizens believed. Indeed, it's not like she would be jumping head first into the lawless Happytown.
Besides, she had to proceed with her investigation. That was her number one priority.

But then again, she would also hate to affirm the rumors pertaining to her innate recklessness; and, of course, she would hate to die a stupid, meaningless death. That, too.

The thoughts and dilemmas swirled around in her brain, hurtling behind closed eyes and between languid ears, softly lulling her into a deep sleep rife with vague, colorful dreams.

When she woke up a full twelve hours later, feeling thoroughly reinvigorated and positively famished, there was a single question floating before her eyes, a remnant of either her dreams or the somnolent musings of the night before.

Who the hell is Slick?

In the clarity of a new day, she realized she was determined to find out.

So come the night, this bunny would be hopping straight back into the den of claws and teeth.

-Chapter 2 End-

Chapter End Notes

So apparently, writing really is considered a legitimate therapy method. "Expressive Writing".

I never had a doubt.

As always, every review is heartily appreciated
Chomper Garden

Chapter Summary

With slow servers, fastidious deceptions, irrevocable oaths and other generally unpleasant experiences.

Or: "How to traumatize your bunny"

Chapter Notes

So.
I am writing a book, apparently.

Over 20,000 words on this chapter alone; now that's a scary thought. But then again, this will probably be one of the longest ones, as it's quite packed.

So arm yourself with a drink and bear through the daunting size, brave reader.

May you enjoy the ride.
(And my brief experiment with dialogue-driven exposition.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Apart from the rangers' headquarters, there were not many stone buildings in the Zone, as little effort had been put into making the district comfortable or aesthetically pleasing. Its body was wood and straw, with aged clay occasionally popping up in the form decrepit huts scattered throughout the dirty streets to break the mold; shabby buildings, quick to rot and fall and cheap to reconstruct. This was largely the reason for the perpetually transforming scenery of the district, which still never managed to escape the scrubby ambiance that had been woven in its core since the time of its making.

This is why the inn Judy had been directed towards, a tall building with thick stone walls and multiple wooden floors, had proven remarkably easy to find. It was a welcoming touch of proper construction in the Zone's otherwise tasteless lines of decaying shanties and hovels, and with its height dwarfing every such adjacent building, it looked almost regal in comparison; impossible to miss, just as the fox had claimed.

After a hearty breakfast -or lunch, if one was to nitpick- she had taken her bath in the short barrel of water Adeline had carried to her room. Seeing as the amount Judy would require was proportionately small, the kangaroo had gone through the trouble of heating up the water beforehand, granting the small ranger a luxury she had neither asked for nor was accustomed to.

The time spent soaking in the steaming barrel had worked wonders on her nerves and, after expressing her gratitude to the innkeeper, she had left the establishment with a perky tread; her head was clear, her gaze was focused, her ears were standing in a constant, frisky salute, her tail was especially bushy and she smelled pretty damn nice.
Confident was the word for Judy Hopps that day, when she found herself in truly peak condition, finally ready to take on the treacherous city.

It was a good thing too, because there was drama waiting to be dealt with at the Rockwood headquarters. Higgins had been less than pleased with the money the bunny had managed to cost his division in just one day and, after taking an unnecessary amount of time to berate her, he had put her on a tight budget. The hippo had made some belittling allusions regarding the quality of Burrows' rangers while he was at it, but at that point Judy thought little enough of him not to take offense; she just saluted him and exited his office, briefly scowling at the door before ridding her mind of him and focusing on more practical issues.

One such issue was Bernard Logger, who was still officially assigned to her. She had found him in the common room grunting to some sympathetic colleagues of his, viciously sore all over and full of dread for the second day he was to spend assisting "that bitch of a bun". She had announced her presence just as he was mouthing the words and, after having her fun with him for a bit, had declared that she was relieving him of his duties for the day. Her excuse had been purposely vague, involving Logger earning a good rest and her planning some incognito investigating that would not require his presence -which was partially true- but naturally, Logger had not thought to question her decision; he had just thanked her and made for a nearby tavern to get himself a proper lunch.

Another issue was the time left until her rendezvous with the shady fox and how best to occupy it. She considered revisiting some of the city's districts, but without hiring a carrier it would have been sheer folly. She was also itching to see the Royal Gardens, which were conveniently close to Rockwood, but doing so would be pure recreation as there were no indications of criminal sheep, or really any noteworthy illegal activity, in the vicinity of the park; and Judy would never allow herself recreation while she was on duty.

So instead she had settled on St. Marie's Plaza. She had spent the afternoon in the hectic market, examining the area and the crowd of mammals, admiring the laboratories at its edges and finally growing accustomed to the cathedral's ridiculously daunting size. She had filed a request to the Council before leaving the headquarters, but the permit granting her jurisdiction in the awe inspiring building would not be issued for a long time; bureaucracy had always been her sworn enemy in the order, and this case was to mark the apogee of that sentiment, apparently.

The hours passed with thoughtless minor purchases from the booths of the Central Market and spontaneous questionings in random outposts she had not visited the day before, which were not any more enlightening than the ones she had. The sun was still high when she decided to head for the Zone, considering the time it would take for her to get there on foot and find the right inn.

Always punctual, Judy arrived at the southern district early and, after navigating its streets for a short while, she found herself standing outside the Rapid Drinker, mildly impressed and increasingly at ease; she had taken the time to locate the nearest ranger outposts, many of them located close to the stone inn, and there were a number of rangers patrolling the area, giving off that vibe of efficiency that was characteristic of their branch. The establishment's location was central and well guarded.

She had decided not to return to the local headquarters after all, knowing Tusk would pry into her plans and inevitably mess them up. She didn't feel comfortable lying to him either; not only was he a decorated superior commanding respect, but he was also the closest thing to a friend she had in this hornets' nest of a city. As such, the only course she felt happy with was leaving him in the dark, for now.

She was struck by a premonition of some kind as she stood at the inn's door, as if something important was about to transpire. Trusting her instinct, she took a moment to prepare, breathing
calmness in herself while urging her senses into awareness; then she swung one of the door's wooden panels open and strutted in with a resolute gaze.

The inside of the inn was comfortably spacey. There were tables lined up along the wall to the left of the entrance and more of them orderly scattered to the right where a fireplace was crackling softly, imparting a warm vibe of hospitality to the room. Across of the entrance were a set of narrow stairs leading to the upper floors, and next to them was the counter embracing a single paneled door which surely led to the kitchens.

A single glance was enough for Judy to deduct a few interesting points. Firstly, the size of the entrance, the tables and the steps of the stairs betrayed that the building was constructed with relatively small animals in mind; a wolf or an antelope would be comfortable there, but there was no way a rhino or a bear could even enter the building. There was also the pattern the tables had been placed in, forming small groups as if to cater to parties meaning to converse without easily being heard.

Lastly, Judy noted with no small amount of surprise that most of the patrons were prey, at least on the ground floor. Indeed, apart from a pair of a badger and a skunk sitting at the counter, there was a koala sharing a table with a goat and a wombat, an opossum with a couple of shrews on his shoulders standing at the far end of the room with a drink in his paw and a female beaver ravenously devouring a large meal before the fireplace.

In all these points, Judy saw a clear indication that the fox had meant for her to feel safe and able to talk with him in private. Going there was the right decision.

She walked to the counter and hopped on a chair to speak with the innkeeper, but she saw no one behind the clean wooden bar. She was about to call out to the kitchens when she heard a small clanking sound from below; stooping over the counter, she spotted a crouching mammal cleaning the bottles and cups lined up below it.

Her shoulders instantly sagged along with her ears as she regarded the mammal. She quickly turned to scan the room once more, desperately looking for a waiter she could speak to instead. Finding none, she slowly turned back towards the innkeeper with a grievous cringe, gritting her teeth and cursing her luck with a passion.

For the mammal in question, who had by then barely managed to stand up and mirror her, was, regrettably, a sloth.

Her frustration was wholly justified; it took all she had not to groan as the sloth, a greasy haired male around his thirties, smiled politely at her over the course of ten excruciatingly long seconds before opening his mouth to address her in an astonishingly slow motion.

"Hello, sir." She greeted him sharply, cutting him off with a rushed smile; she knew she had to take charge of the conversation to speed things up or the procedure would be the death of her. "I'm here looking for a fox. Slick."
The initial lack of reaction had her thinking that the sloth had put on his poker face, but then she noticed a brow slowly -so very, very slowly- rising. He nodded in understanding before meaningfully gesturing to an empty table next to the stairs; he then dragged his feet to the kitchens, not once uttering a single word, just as Judy had intended.

All in all, it had taken him just over a minute, which Judy knew was as good as it could get. She gave herself a little pat on the back before making her way to the table she had been pointed towards. She took the seat closest to the exit, crossed her legs and waited.

It took the sloth no less than twenty more minutes to finally reemerge from behind the kitchen's door. Judy’s eyes immediately shot up once she heard its creak, expecting her fox to have entered along with him; the innkeeper was alone, however, and as she watched him slouch towards her with a drink in his long claws she came to a harrowing realization.

It had taken him twenty minutes to prepare her a drink; now, as he whispered to her conspiratorially while placing the drink on her table, he would go get Slick.

He winked at her and made for the stairs, somehow missing the anguished twitching of her nose. She stared after him with dead eyes for as long as it took him to climb the steps and disappear into the higher floors; then her forehead banged against the table with enough force to spill some of the drink on one of her droopy ears. A scream was muffled against the wooden surface.

She was excited for this. She had been restless since noon just thinking about her meeting and what it would reveal, fixing scenarios in her head, imagining all the spectacular breakthroughs or potential disasters it could lead her to with childlike enthusiasm, as per her bad habits. That is to say, she was currently not at her most patient; and yet, she would have to work with the sloth's idle pace, just like every other mammal he accommodated in his inn.

Upon reflection, it was actually quite baffling; how could a sloth possibly run such a business efficiently? The inn was clearly successful judging from its impressive build alone, not to mention the clean luster of the counter and furniture or the lovely, tidy interior; to call it out of place in that specific district didn't do it justice, honestly. It was hard to imagine the languid mammal she had seen managing such an establishment, so she had to assume there was more staff assisting him. Hence the crotchety rabbit's reasonable question: why the hell had he not sent for the fox instead of taking it upon himself to call him?

Whatever the case, now she could do little but invoke what patience she could muster and keep waiting; its not like she had other plans to attend to, after all, and her mind was set on meeting the irritating vulpine. She silently pouted against the table, wondering if the guy had actually planned for the sloth to wear her down before they could meet. If that were true, then she could only commend the bastard.

Fixing a cup of ale was the most rudimentary task of innkeepers everywhere, and it had taken the sloth twenty minutes. Now, as Judy watched the few patrons on the ground floor leave one after another and no mammal descending the stairs she was facing towards, she was growing increasingly certain that it would take him even longer to fulfill her request.

She was proven right. More than an hour later, she was still there, stewing in her seat with her drink untouched; as she had told Adeline the night before, she never drank when on duty. The fire across the room had faded to cinders and with the sloth gone and whatever staff he employed remaining unseen there had been no one to light some candles and illuminate her surroundings as the day's light grew dimmer. Soon Judy would be swallowed by the dark of the night, blind and alone in her seat; the inviting atmosphere that had initially welcomed her into the inn had gradually become almost as grim as her own fowl mood.
She was about to take drastic action and barge into the upper floors herself when she saw a feint glow appear from the top of the stairs. It was the sloth -alone, as she noted with resounding ire- finally coming down, carrying a small candle.

"Sir, what in Marie's name were you doing up there?!!" She demanded angrily as he approached her with that obnoxiously sluggish gait of his. "It's been over an hour! I was to meet Slick before sundown, and it's already getting dark outside! Where the hell is the guy?!!"

"I sent… word to him… ma'am." He replied with a maddening tranquility that sent her nose into another twitching fit.

"Sent word to him?!!"

She shot to her feet, causing the innkeeper to recoil with a time lag of several seconds; how his species had survived to evolve in the first place eluded her.

"What do you mean you sent word to him?! You were upstairs! Wasn't he with you?!"

"Ah…! No, there are… other exits, ma'am… So I-"

She shook her head hard, rising a paw to cut him off. "Okay, okay, whatever! I don't care, sir; just get me that damn fox already! Is he on his way or what?"

"He's… here."

She blinked at him, easing her scowl. "Well, I don't see him!" She quipped harshly, gesturing around the dark room.

"He's… waiting… outside."

Outside?

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Didn't… say. Just told me… he's waiting… outside."

She narrowed her eyes at him briefly, confusion now adding to her annoyance, but eventually decided that any attempts at deception would be glaringly obvious on his dilatory face. Spotting none, she content herself with a grunt vaguely resembling an expression of gratitude -politeness had long since dried out along with her patience- and hastily stomped to the exit, darting into the street with her long ears flapping behind her as she went.

The crowd in the street was thinner than when she had entered the building; a clear sign of the time she had wasted there, along with the rapidly expiring daylight. She stepped away from the inn to stand in the middle of the muddy street, scanning her surroundings to try and make out the shape of a fox among the numerous larger predators that flocked to their shabby homes.

And finally, she did spot him.

There was a small, swaying mass of red in the street a couple of buildings away, which upon closer inspection proved to be a swimming, thick russet tail. She stepped past a tigress and a small group of ferrets, getting a closer look at the mammal for confirmation before marching towards him with an aggravated snort; not only had he been so horribly tardy, but he had not even bothered to wait for her right outside the inn? The guy was in for it.
That being said, Judy could already picture the smug face from the headquarters giving her that infuriating grin and a suave, unsatisfying response as to why he would arrange to meet at an inn run by a sloth, of all mammals. With her tolerance already stretched thin from the numerous inconveniences the fox had caused her, there was no guarantee she wouldn’t lash out at him.

Except it wasn't the same fox at all.

This one was nervously pacing to and fro with evident disquiet, a concerned frown sitting above tightly pursed lips. The contours of his face were tense and his ears were folded, only perking up momentarily as he caught sight of the bunny before disappearing back into his fur once more. There was no trace of the confident vulpine with the easy smirk and the silver tongue she had met the day before; now he was overcome with worry and fidgety, rubbing his paws together and huffing curt breaths to calm himself down. Wagging his tail rather than his tongue, he was giving off a rather disconcerting vibe.

Judy's anger evaporated, replaced by a vague worry that grew with each detail of the not so slick mammal she took in. Sure enough, he had appeared afraid of something back in the headquarters, but not nearly as much as he did now.

Something was off.

Something had gone wrong.

"I'm sorry, lieutenant." He begun with an apologetic look that had her guts twisting. "I- I tried to stop them, but they…” He gulped. "… They really did a number on him."

She stepped closer and got into his face, eying him with concern. "What do you mean?” She grabbed his arm, and this time he didn't pull back. She shook him hard. "What happened?! Where's the sheep?!

He had trouble meeting her eyes. "Well… We caught this ram, right?"

"He was also looking to buy stuff down at the Zone, being all conspicuous, so we…” He paused once more to give a brusque, disappointed sigh. Her grip on his arm tightened, hurting them both. "We figured we'd bring him in to- to question him, about Otterton."

"But you see, the folk at Happytown, they're- they're a bit impulsive, and…”

He allowed his voice to trail off, weakly shaking his head.

Her ears slowly wilted. "They… They killed him?"

"Nearly." He shuddered. "Might have been better if they had, to be honest."

He took a deep, shaky breath and finally looked straight at her, managing to collect himself somewhat. "They wouldn't like it if they knew what I'm doing, bunny; I've basically gone rogue on them. I had to sneak the guy out of there, but he's- he's too hurt, I didn't want to risk carrying him too far.” His lips quivered as he went on. "… He doesn't have much time, I think. It's, uh… It's gruesome, lieutenant."

"We weren't able to get anything out of him, if there even was anything to get, but I just- I figured, maybe if it was prey… Or, you know, maybe you rangers have your ways to interrogate people? I- I don't know…!"

He gave a dejected shrug, looking away from her; he was passive, looking unnerved and resigned, as
if his plan had already failed.

Judy crudely tugged at his arm, pulling him down to her height and causing him a sharp yelp; then she forced herself into his vision, locking eyes with him.

"Where is the ram now?" She demanded, her tone commanding yet calm; she had reached that familiar state of focus, inextricably connected to the efficient work that had earned her her red feather. "You said you got him out of Happytown, right? Is he here?"

He gulped once more, dispirited green eyes flickering between her focused, unwavering violet ones, doomed to yield to their imposing force.

"Y- Yes. But I'm afraid he's likely expired by now, lieutenant. He was-

"Take me to him. He might still be alive. I must talk to him."

He frowned at her. "I- I don't think-

"Now, fox!" She curtly whispered against his snout, giving him a tense, personalized command; it was the way rangers spoke to their shaken juniors or civilians during perilous situations, asserting their dominance while urging the mammal out of a trance and back into action.

It worked. The fox stared at her for a second and then nodded at her numbly, acknowledging her order. Judy let him escape her grasp and run a paw over his ruffled green tunic; she was satisfied with her handling of him, having established her authority, thus ensuring his cooperation. He was the perfect collaborator for a ranger: a criminal who was at odds with his associates, fearful and completely dependent on her.

"Very well, lieutenant." He spoke eventually, the newfound composure in his tone unable to obscure his persisting trepidation. "Follow me."

He begun walking down the street, further away from the Rabid Drinker, with the bunny right behind him. She considered calling a patrolling ranger for assistance, in case they would need to move the injured ram or fight off any of the ruthless gypsies her unlikely companion had spoken of, but with the ram in such critical condition she could hardly spare the time. Instead she remained on edge as she silently followed after the fox, nearly glued to his anxiously waving tail.

It took several minutes for him to come to a stop. They had reached a small, modest brothel in the eastern wing, the framed windows of its interior casting a dim light into the shadowy alley that stood between itself and an adjoining inn.

Judy realized that it was the alley that the fox had guided her to as he turned towards its entrance, eyes piercing the thick darkness that shrouded its furthest end. Warning bells rang in her head, briefly supplanting her zealous eagerness; it was very dark, where his night vision would give him an advantage over her, and her decision to not call for backup suddenly made the alley seem inordinately threatening.

For a second, she was skeptical again; skeptical of the fox, of his intentions, of his words and the truth behind them. She jibbed reluctantly, instinct dictating that she not follow after her principal natural enemy in the uncomfortably narrow space enveloped by darkness. She turned to the fox to voice her protests.

And she saw that the fox himself had made no move to enter yet. His tail was rigid and bristled, his eyes were squinting at the alley, as if trying to make something out among the shadows, and his ears were standing on end, scanning ahead. His muzzle split, revealing sharp canines as he hissed under
his breath.

"Shit."

His distress was palpable enough to become her own. "What? What is it?" She inquired, eyes shooting back to the darkness.

"… I think he's already-"

She understood what he was going to say; the ram had given in, and she had lost whatever clues she could have gotten out of him. It nearly caused her a frustrated wince, but it was not given the time to form; for what had cut the fox off was an eerie, unpleasant noise that softly echoed in the dark of the alley.

A rasp, painful bleat, alarmingly weak and distant.

Two entirely different sets of ears perked up in perfect unison. The fox released the breath he was holding in a sigh of relief and instantly darted forth, closely followed by the bunny who had abandoned all reservations upon hearing the strained sound. The two sprinted down the alley, looking for its source.

Judy's eyes struggled to find focus in the darkness, frantically searching for the outlines of the shape that would be a terribly wounded sheep. After a mere couple of strides, however, she had realized it was pointless; the strongest weapon in her arsenal had always been her ears, after all, so she elected to focus on them instead. She used them to scan the alley once more, confident that her acute hearing would catch the labored breathing of the lethally injured mammal.

Instead, she detected a feint shuffling sound from the entrance of the alley.

She froze.

It took the fox one more stride to come to a halt at a small distance from her. A million thoughts raced through Judy's head in the span of a second, accompanied by a familiar, deafening click.

He had asked to meet just before sundown, at an inn run by a sloth; a sloth that had naturally held her up quite a while, so night had caught her.

Night. Emptier streets.

She had made sure there were rangers nearby and at the ready before entering the building.

We're far from the inn.

She had found him crestfallen, instilling a sense of urgency in her. He had been reluctant to guide her, making her push for it, feeding her eagerness. He had given in to her demands, satisfying her, implicitly assuring her that she could bend him to her will. Putting her at ease.

And the shady alley he had led her to, so suspiciously ideal for an ambush, which she never would have entered-

Had it not been for his transmissive alarm, and that well timed bleat.

He slowly mirrored her, and in that moment she saw him again; that fox from the day before, the one who had so deftly tried to avoid a confrontation with the bull; who had managed to grab her attention through meaningful stares alone; who had said just enough, just the right way, so she would come
find him. No trace of worry, no stiffness, not a hint of uncertainty. A different persona, a different fox altogether; one confident, composed, manipulative-

And so very much in control.

His puffy tail softly danced behind him in an almost leisurely manner. His shoulders were relaxed, his pointy ears at ease, fangs obscured behind his lips and claws receded in his paws. He lowered his head as he met her gaze, lifting his arms slowly without so much as a single hair extended in her direction.

He had entered the alley flustered and rigid, true to his meticulous, disturbingly convincing act. Upon dropping it his movements had lost their taut edge, his demeanor turning so impeccably casual, completely devoid of all urgency or hostility, that for a second she almost felt herself ease up under the influence of his placating form.

She had enough sense to tense further instead, finally recognizing his adept use of body language as another testament to his specialty. His nature.

*Trickster.*

He had tricked her.

Another shuffle came from behind her, signaling the cautious approach of the newcomer -the newcomers- but she didn't turn around; the biggest threat, the one she absolutely could not allow out of her sight, was the immaculately proficient thespian she was already facing.

"Now, lieutenant." He drawled in a communicative tone, silky voice licking her ears. "Stay calm. We just want to talk to you, that's all. We mean you no harm, I promise you."

His steady gaze conveyed a strong desire to avoid any conflict, to get what he wanted without causing trouble; it could even be viewed as considerate, in its own, twisted way. Friendly, almost.

*False. Liar.*

*Dangerous.*

Judy could feel the adrenaline pumping into her bloodstream, causing her pulse to skyrocket. She crouched, legs apart at the width of her shoulders and arms raised, ready to dart in any direction the instant she decided on an escape plan. Her eyes never left his, but her ears remained active, dancing around on the top of her head until every single noise in the alley was registered past her own thundering heartbeat.

*Beat, beat, beat,*

*Calm down. Assess.*

Another shuffle. They were getting closer. She had to run.

*Front, back?*

The fox was talking again. She couldn't hear him.

The mammals behind her were two, large, their footsteps nearly muffled; felines, most likely. Burly but agile.

The fox was not prepared to give chase, but past him lay a complete, debilitating darkness. The
animals behind her would be harder to evade, but should she manage to flee the alley, she would be safe.

*Beat, beat, beat-

*Front, back?*

She made the final call when she caught a movement with the corner of her eye; the darkness surrounding the fox suddenly shook and crept as more formless figures projected from behind him, moving to close in on the trapped bunny.

*Back.*

The fox saw it in her eyes a moment before she turned and kicked off against the dirt. He shouted a warning to the mammals behind her just as they saw the crouching lapine turning into a speeding blur of gray coming their way. The one closest to her, a tall, muscular tiger, heeded his warning and anticipated her, ready to stop her advance.

Judy was done thinking; it was up to her body alone to carry her the rest of the way. She was comfortable with that, trusting in her muscle memory to shine through once more, polished as it was through years of facing foes many times larger than herself; and surely, a tiger wasn't tougher than a rhino.

Hopefully, he wasn't smarter than one either.

She kept her ears erect as she approached the tiger, mechanically employing a well-tried strategy that payed off once more. The protruding articles were a weakness made deliberately plain, far too tempting for the tiger not to try and exploit; his clawed paws shot for them as she approached, but she folded them back at the last minute, harmlessly sliding past the series of curved knives adorning his fingers.

The tiger's name was Charles Delgato, and there are a couple of notes to be made about him at this point in the tale. The first is that he, much like everyone else in the great expanse that constituted the land of Animalia, knew with decisive certainty that bunnies never left their farms; that was one of the constants of the world. Secondly, the bunny farms were a place that tigers did by no means frequent, and if a family of tiger laborers had at some point in time been hired by the rabbits to work the fields, they were neither memorable nor relevant. In short, Charles had never before in his life seen a bunny, let alone fight one.

Not that he worried, of course. Small things, they were, fangless and fragile; if anything, he was concerned with not breaking the little doe, as per the fox's orders. So when the bunny ducked under his extended paws, he tried not to follow her movement with too much force.

Had he known how much teasing this encounter would earn him in the future, he would have certainly risked squashing her instead.

The bunny sped up once more, seemingly aiming for the space between his legs. He tried to retreat and bring them together to close off that route, and he would have succeeded had that truly been Judy's plan; but what she did instead was leap clean off the ground, shooting straight to his knee.

As small as a bunny is, their feet, much like their ears, are disproportionately large and ideal for their typical hopping motion. Using the momentum she had built through her dash, all Judy had to do was use that natural trait to launch herself upwards with surprising force and collide with the tiger's knee in an outward angle.
She had bent her legs to her torso as she jumped, and upon contact she kicked away at the larger mammal's kneecap, instantly swatting the bent limb away from his center. His balance shattered, Charles suddenly found himself falling and begun frantically waving his arms in an attempt to remain on his feet; he knew that the bunny's impressive maneuver had earned her a couple of seconds in which she would doubtlessly try to pass by his comrade, a skinny female bobcat who he now thought to assist once he had regained his footing.

But he had once again misread her, for Judy made no such move. The same kicking motion that had pushed Charles' knee away had given her new momentum, which she rode to reach even higher and meet the tiger's head just as it was beginning its involuntary descent.

The third kick landed square on his chin, causing him to stagger and forfeit all control over his legs; it also sent the sharp tip of a broken tooth flying to the wall of the brothel amidst a rich splatter of blood.

Judy's bouncing display had unfolded and concluded in the blink of an eye. By the time her feet touched ground again the pursuers behind her had hardly managed a couple of steps and the bobcat had merely positioned herself next to her now wobbling comrade, covering the space he had not been blocking himself; but seeing as the tiger had against all odds been incapacitated, there was now a large opening for the bunny to escape through.

*Perfect.*

*Go.*

Judy flew off once more, making sure to put the tiger between herself and the bobcat to obstruct the latter's path, keeping her from catching up to the expeditious ranger. She was lucky enough that the tiger collapsed on the smaller feline when his feet finally gave way, allowing her to safely traverse the rest of the alley, confident that she was far faster in a short sprint than any of the mammals on her tail.

She had made it. She had escaped the perilous death trap.

A feral sense of accomplishment washed over her as she took the final stride and shot into the street, past the shadowy walls of the strait alley and away from the menacing group of predators lurking in it.

"*Now!*"

The call came in the fox's voice, curt and blaring, echoing in the alley and reaching her ears the instant she jumped past its confines. She wasn't given time to process it as she was instantly struck by a hefty mass that shot towards her from a blind spot to her left, taking her by surprise.

The mass was another mammal many times larger than her, so the bunny had no way to resist the momentum of their heavy body slam after their collision. Her only hope would have been evading it; the attack was a crude one and she could have dodged away easily had it not been for its flawless timing. A split second earlier and she would have seen it coming and responded accordingly; a split second later and she would have already been in the street, the slam safely missing her.

The fox had placed two larger, agile predators behind her to cut off her escape, and her slipping past them was a surprise to everyone present safe for Judy herself, because that scene had played out many times in her past; big, scary opponent prepares to fight the fluffy little doe, never expecting her to put up a serious fight, and is promptly and efficiently put in the dirt.
The fox hadn't expected it either, but he still had another lackey hide at the entrance of the alley as he was not one to take chances. And that had been the deciding factor, in the end; for the fox had avoided the cardinal mistake of every adversary Judy had faced in all her years in the order, the mistake she had come to depend on after a point.

He was the first one not to underestimate her.

The arms of her new assailant begun closing around her, threatening to trap her in an immobilizing embrace she would have no hope to escape from; but Judy wasn't quite done for yet. Almost immediately upon contact with the mammal she had curled up, and a moment later she was releasing another deadly kick against the attacker's midriff. The kick was every bit as strong as the one that had downed the burly tiger, and not only did it leave the mammal gasping for air but it also propelled her further away from them and into the safety of the street-

That's how it had played out in her head.

But despite the force of the kick, she didn't actually shoot away and the mammal didn't even reel. Her feet found their body and kept stretching into it, meeting almost no resistance, until they were lost knee deep into their fur and their arms locked around her, pressing her against their wide frame.

Understanding came in a flash as she too was swallowed into the soft material; where she had expected to find toned muscle, like on the tiger she had fought seconds ago, the hefty mammal had fat instead. Bernard Logger had a sizable belly and Higgins was sufficiently plump, but the mammal hugging her now was more than that; they were downright obese, swimming in layers upon layers of fat. And now she was swimming in them too, floundering helplessly, movements restricted and screams muffled against the mammal's imposing bulk.

Her ears alone remained free, and they caught hurried footsteps and the beginnings of a conversation.

"Good job, Ben!"

It was the fox.

Her captor gave a clammy groan in response.

"I- I think I'm gonna be sick, Nicky. She kicks pretty hard."

"Well, yeah." he chuckled. "I told you guys she was feisty."

More footsteps. A third one joined the conversation with a deep, jeering laugh.

"Feisty?! Man, that little bun floored fucking Delgato!"

"Oh, yes… You alright there, buddy?"

A spitting sound came from the alley; if Judy had to guess, the tiger was ridding his mouth of the remaining blood. "I'm- I'm fine, just- shut up already, Fin!"

The tiger begun cursing indecorously, causing the deep voiced one to loose another loud, delighted howl, laughing at his expense.

"Is- Is that a broken tooth…?! Are you serious?!"

"C'mon Fin, not now." The fox's voice again. "Ben, can you carry her in?"

The fat animal -a cheetah, judging by the smell- groaned once more and got on his feet. Judy could
feel the vibrations of the many loose folds surrounding her as he stepped back into the dark alley and she redoubled her efforts to break free, but to no avail; all she managed to do was intensify her growing need for air.

"Can't say I blame you for trying to run, lieutenant, but I saw no other option." The fox addressed her as he walked alongside the cheetah, sounding relaxed and just a tiny bit apologetic. "What I promised you still stands, however, so don't worry. You won't be harmed."

Judy wasn't sure if he stopped talking then or if she had finally suffocated into unconsciousness; her lungs had been burning for a while now and her spastic movements were gradually dwindling. The fear clutching her heart and speeding it up further also did its part to ensure that she wouldn't remain aware for much longer.

But she hadn't given in just yet, apparently, for she heard the fox speak one last time, his voice echoing distant yet clear enough to make out an abrupt surge of alarm in it.

"Ben, can she bre-

Silence.

What got through to her first was the smell.

From the darkness she had been thrown into for an indeterminable amount of time, she suddenly caught odors. Many different scents thrown together in a random, sharply pungent mix that was almost painful for her brain to register. Her nose begun twitching uncontrollably.

Her ears responded all by themselves, perking up to scan her environment. Suddenly she could hear as well; and the sensitive organs were invaded by the deafening chorus of a hundred different mammals yelling, screaming, screeching, panting-

*Growling.*

She finally opened her eyes to hell.

Hundreds of faces, all horribly distorted. Eyes wide, twitching, shining with a perverse excitement, staring at her. Smiles so incredibly big and delighted and *wrong*, showing teeth yellowed, long and so, so very sharp.

Hundreds of predators. They shouted and they smelled and they grabbed her with clawed paws and pushed, pulled, lifted, threw her around in that room-

That room with no exits. Those walls so tall that the light from the fires could not reach their end so there was no telling if there was a roof or not. That wide, open room, built in stone like Rockwood Castle, wide as St. Marie's Plaza; and filled to the brim with predators.

*Hundreds of predators.*

She had a terrible migraine, unable to process all the countless stimuli. Her heart was about to explode.

She couldn't move her arms. They were tied.

Something-a feline- screeched into her ear, and she folded it back with a yelp before being tossed once more, further into the room, deeper in this impossibly loud hellhole of teeth and claws.
Something licked her elbow. Her nose twitched to a rancid breath; next she was vomiting in the air before landing in a grizzly bear's embrace, only to be tossed again, and again, and again-

Her neurons went haywire. Something primal circumvented her brain, translating her every sense into an absolute command to *run*.

*Run.*

*RUN.*

*Where?*

Where would she run?

Her feet were free, true enough; but should she run to the right? No, because that's where that wolf just howled from. Left? She couldn't; she could see that ferret's fangs shining in the torchlight to her left. And should she hop backwards she'd land straight into the gaping jaws of that tiger whose musk she had just clearly smelled.

Except now it wasn't a tiger, but a lynx. No, a- a canine? Wolf? Fox? No, it was a tiger, a lynx *and* a fox.

And a wolf, and an ocelot, and a panther, and another ocelot, and a bear, and another fox, and two lionesses, and an ermine, and that leopard-

And every other predator in the book, as far as her disoriented, blurry eyes could see. All so happy to have her, so willing to hold her, so eager to taste her-

Judy Hopps was, by all definitions, a brave bunny. She always had been. But alas, bravery was a virtue of the living; and she was *dead*.

Her last thought before shock completely overwhelmed her was a surprisingly lucid one:

*Fuck that shifty, lying fox.*

She had lost all sense of direction by the time she ended up among a group of hyenas, having passed through the paws of innumerable predators to get there. Her mind had gone blank but she still jerked away instinctively when they begun sniffing at her, cackling at her afflicted countenance; then they promptly tossed her in the air once more and as she flew she found herself wishing her heart would just burst right there and then rather than be torn apart by the savages that had shown no interest in expediting her torment.

Then she landed, and after a second it became clear that she had not been thrown into the arms of yet another predator. Instead she had hit solid ground; quite softly too, surprisingly enough, so much so that she could have landed on her feet had she had the presence of mind. Now she was left sitting on a hard wooden surface, her rump sore from the fall and her members far too numb with shock to do anything but shake uncontrollably along with her shoulders.

She was on a heightened level, for the seamless crowd of predators now stretched below her; a wooden stage of some sort. Her head weakly turned to the crowd and she saw their fangs bared, their jaws moving as they waved their fists in the air, but their cheering could no longer pierce through the loud, unrelenting buzz that filled her ears.

What did pierce through it was a mighty roar.
With her normally acute reflexes completely out of order, Judy didn't even flinch to the deafening sound; she simply allowed her head to wobble towards its source.

A male lion was standing next to her on the stage, a lengthy roar still rushing out his throat for a long time after the crowd had quieted down. The ragtag predators had given him their undivided attention.

He was easily the most impressive mammal in the giant room; tall and muscular, with a lordly, prideful stance that grabbed the eye and seemed to command respect from the observer. His jaws had split to an impressive width, revealing a series of long, sharp teeth that appeared sturdy despite their yellowy shade. These fangs would easily make another lion recoil, let alone prey.

The same went for his roar, whose volume was every bit as great as Francine's toot, only much lengthier and far more ferocious. His puffed up chest visibly deflated during its course, his lungs gradually emptying until he finally stopped, allowing for the room to fall into an eerie silence. Hundreds of predators were quietly staring at him, and he in turn quietly stared at the shaking bunny that lay collapsed beside him.

Upon closer inspection, his regal and imposing demeanor came in stark contrast with his appearance. He was big with impressive fangs, to be sure, but the mane framing his face, which was certainly rich and must have at some point served to further justify his arrogant conduct, was shrubby and dirty, with numerous unkempt hairs stiffly protruding in random tufts. It almost hid his disproportionately small ears, which were nearly covered with countless iron earrings; the telling sign of a gypsy, as was commonly known throughout the land.

His clothing gave the exact same vagabond impression as all the other predators', consisting primarily of overlapping rags, except he had clearly put some effort into making his outfit stand out through numerous notable particularities. A deep purple overcoat was thrown over the rags, which were themselves a mixture of bright green and dark brown, and he wore pants of deep yellow; the chaotic composition of mismatched colors made him a sight impossible to miss, as was his intention. He even wore shoes, although they were so terribly worn and undersized that they were essentially strips of lizard skin around his ankles and heels, leaving most of his feet and all of his toes bare.

He appeared to be dressed in accordance to a lowly tramp's impression of a lord, taking the use of offensively flamboyant and flagrantly combined colors and articles as a sign of majesty. He was a hobo impersonating a king.

He reached her with a single step, and again Judy was far too numb to react in any way; not even when he slowly bent over her, leaning in until he was almost close enough for his sniffing brown nose to touch her madly twitching pink one. He was goggling tensely straight into her hazy eyes, making his own unblinking ones seem ready to pop out of their sockets.

He observed her closely for a few seconds. The constant tremor of her small body; the lifeless ears that hung over her neck; the overly dilated pupils that swallowed the surrounding violet in its entirety and the small nose which was practically in spasms, pulling the muscles of her face along in its jerky motions, further contorting her expression.

The bunny reeked of fear. Literally.

Which was just perfect for the show.

"A bunny." He suddenly whispered, almost too quietly for even Judy to hear despite the absolute silence of the huge room.

He slowly leaned away and stood still for a few seconds, frowning and puckering his lips at her as if
struggling to understand what she was and what he was to do with her. Then he faced the crowd and spoke again, this time loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Guys…!" He had put on a comically perplexed expression, wide eyed and gawking through a half smile.

"There's a bunny here!"

The crowd instantly broke into a booming cheer, even louder than its initial one, coupled with scattered cackles where hyenas could be found. The abrupt transition from complete quiet to snafu clamor was as impressive as it was unpleasant.

The lion chuckled along with them. "But look! She seems a bit shaken, the poor doe! You guys weren't rough with her now, were you?" he reprimanded them, bringing his fists to his hips in a frolicsome gesture that only added to their laughter.

"Because that would be very inappropriate of us, people! Very inappropriate!" he drawled loudly, casually strolling around Judy. "Far be it from us lowly critters to mistreat such noble, reputable prey! Ain't that right, you leeches?!" The crowd roared in affirmation, growing more amused by the lion's antics with each passing second; he was being as superficially pompous as his attire would imply, and they seemed to adore him for it.

The huge feline paused next to Judy and raised his big arms in the air, unsheathing his claws. "Exactly! So let us receive her as is right, friends! Let us welcome her to our humble abode!"

"Our Chomper Garden!"

His shoulders shook by an erratic, maniacal laughter as he basked in the crowd's reaction, pleased by their passionate screams and the absolute sway he held over them. It was a power high like no other, he knew, but demonstrating his control to a third party was what really made it intoxicating; that's why he was so glad for the trembling bunny that lay beside him.

"Oh, oh! But that's not all!" He bellowed anew, childish excitement coloring his voice. "I've another treat for you slimy crooks! For you see, this," he went on, stooping over the rabbit and bringing their faces close, "is not just any bunny!"

With the lion now filling her vision, Judy couldn't help but examine the vociferous predator. He was brimming with joy, like a kit presented with a brand new toy, but there was more than that. His eyes were wide with delight, but the brown irises seemed to shake lightly, unable to find proper focus, and a nervous tic had his left eye twitching hard. His jaws were wide open, demonstrating his large teeth in what was at first glance perceived as an elated smile; but from this close Judy could see the corners of his lips quivering uncontrollably, as if torn between mirth and sorrow. Or anger, surprise, distress, amusement and all of the thousand different sentiments that seemed to coexist on his face.

She had seen her fair share of madmen during her time in the order, but none quite as wholly deranged as the lion with the horribly convulsing, twisted visage.

"No, no; this bunny."

He leaned in closer and managed to lock eyes with her; she could see the spark of insanity dancing in them clear as day. They were so euphoric and cheerful, so inordinately happy, so-
Infuriated.

"-is also a ranger!"

He suddenly roared against her face with full force, nearly pushing her back with his breath alone. Judy gasped and winced away; she would have cried if she could summon the tears.

The mood of the crowd switched in an instant, just like his own; loud booing echoed in the stone walls, roars and growls intertwined in a shared demand for the bunny ranger's demise. The lion grabbed her ruffled vest and lifted her clean off the stage with no visible effort, crudely shaking her for them to see.

"Take a good look at that fine vest, friends! That lovely, shiny belt! Do you recognize them?"

A cry of enraged affirmation swept the crowd.

"We're missing her cap, though! Poor thing must have dropped it on her way here!" His shake grew inexorable; she could have thrown up had she not done so already. "Such a shame; we'd know how important or guest is! We'd know just how many preds she's locked up or murdered to get where she is!"

He was feeding their anger as efficiently as he had their delectation; bears were roaring, wolves were howling and hyenas were snapping their jaws at the bunny who could do nothing but hang from the lion's paw, helpless and exposed to the chaotic rumble of hate and hostility directed at her.

Then the lion's huffing stopped and his face relaxed, his tantrum ending as abruptly as it had begun. He tossed her aside nonchalantly, letting her hit the floor with a hollow thump, and then walked past her, gesturing widely at the crowd.

"So, my question to you all is simple: what do we do with her?"

Hundreds of different predators shouted hundreds of different suggestions, and the lion nodded at each of them with keen interest, but it was soon acknowledged that the prevalent notion was to consume the rabbit.

The lion hummed, pleased with the result of his unofficial poll. "Ah, but we still need to decide on a *recipe*, friends! We're not savages, after all!" He quipped as he paced up and down the length of the stage. His outburst had shaken Judy just enough to momentarily knock her out of her trance, and now that she was somewhat aware she had to listen to them discuss her death; and she was *this* close to fading away again, she thought to herself bitterly, hardly bothering to keep up with the lion's words.

"Stew! Yes, that's good, I heard bunnies make for good stew…! Oh, we won't *skewer* her, you morons, there would never be enough!"

The lion raved brightly, giving animated responses to the crowd's colorful ideas; and they truly were incredibly diverse, from what her spent ears could pick up. They prompted the question in her; how would she like to die?

"Stew isn't so bad, I guess. Like *taking a bath. A real hot bath, like Adeline's.*"

Yes, that would be nice.

"*Shut the fuck up, you flea ridden inbreds!*"
The lion flinched, taken aback, and the crowd reluctantly moderated its bloodthirsty chant.

A voice had suddenly risen up above the rest, dwarfing them almost as efficiently as the lion's own roar had minutes before. It was characteristically baritone and coarse, impossible to ignore as it resumed its imaginative cursing at high volume; many predators turned to its source, somewhere within the sea of rags and fur, some surprised, others offended but most simply curious.

The lion scowled as the unruly crowd he had so artfully riled up broke their unified yelling and begun muttering among themselves, wondering what had happened or just blindly cursing back, distracted from his show. This new chaos of overlapping voices was one he had no control over. The mood had been ruined.

Still, another roar was sure to put the people back on track, and perhaps he could even squeeze some fun out of punishing the rude buzz kill of a mammal that had dared interrupt the procedure; but he didn't get a chance to, as he noticed the presence of an uninvited newcomer on his personal stage.

And so did Judy. She had remained unresponsive through the aggravated yelling that had replaced the dreadful culinary suggestions, but her eyes instantly found focus when a red figure stomped past her, approaching the lion that had just turned to face it.

She had no idea how to feel about the fox's reappearance at a time like this.

The lion, on the other hand, seemed delighted to see him. Always loyal to his theatrics, he raised his paws towards him as if to hug the smaller mammal and gave a long, affectionate exclaim.

"Nickolas, dear! You've joined us, finally!"

The fox initially gave no response. He hurriedly walked closer until the large predator was towering over him and only then did he stand still, stabbing the smiling lion with his eyes.

Standing side by side, their respective builds were brought out that much more; the slim fox took a small fraction of the space the tall lion occupied in every dimension, and from this close he had to raise his head all the way just to meet the latter's gaze. Their attitudes were also polar opposites, with the fox's subtle scowl and nervously swaying tail portraying quiet anger, while the mental feline who could easily maul his head clean off with a single swipe smiled on, surprisingly receptive of his hostility; his friendly demeanor betrayed that he did not demand the fox's unconditional veneration as he did with the other predators, and he had even mitigated his antics to mere jovial gesticulating, with which he tried to appease the agitated mammal.

The fox leaned forward to speak to him, his voice stern and even; the lion had to stoop over him to catch his words over the disorderly buzz of the crowd, but for Judy it was enough to simply raise an ear in their direction.

"Leodore, what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

His accusatory tone flew right past the lion whose name was Leodore, as the latter simply blinked innocently at him.

"Whatever do you mean, Nickolas!" he chuckled. "A ranger found her way into our Garden! Naturally, I'm taking care of the problem."

The fox slowly brought a paw to his forehead, and Judy caught its light shake; he was struggling to control himself. "The problem being my guest, Leodore?"

Leodore arched a brow at him, losing his smile. "Your guest...? Nickolas, you brought a ranger to
our doorstep as a guest?!

His tongue clicked in annoyance. "I didn't let her see the entrance, obviously! She was unconscious! Do you really think I'm that stupid?!"

He nodded at him, reassured. "Right, good. Of course you didn't."

The lion smiled merrily once more.

The fox stared on, foot tapping against the wood.

"... Well?!

Leodore's large head tilted in question. "Well, what?"

"Well, what the hell is all this?!" the fox demanded, gesturing widely between the bunny behind him and the rambunctious crowd to his right, finally shedding his composure.

The lion leaned back with an offended grimace that was far too hyperbolic to be genuine. "I didn't know she was your guest now, did I!"

"Your guys snatched her from our paws, you insufferable cretin!"

"Did they! I assure you I will rebuke them appropriately, my friend!"

The fox stepped further into his face, growling through gritting teeth. "Do I look like I'm joking, Leo?"

Leodore broke character for the first time, dropping his wide smile with a frustrated snort. "I'm not saying you are, my good man! But it's not like I ordered them; they probably just saw the bunny in a ranger uniform and- and one thing led to another. You know how it is!"

The fox stooped his head and shook it dejectedly, bringing two fingers to his eyes and giving an exhausted sigh; he appeared to have a migraine. "You ruined everything, you know that?"

"I- Nickolas, we were just-"

"You know I'm very fond of you all, Leo; but you are imbeciles and you fucked everything up."

They both went silent for a while, the lion pouting like a berated kit and the fox standing with a paw over his eyes like a disappointed parent.

"Alright... Damage control." The fox muttered with another sigh, his gaze picking up again. "We're taking the bunny."

"Oh! Um..."

"... Yes?"

The lion shuffled under his gaze. "Well, the thing is... I'm afraid everyone's gotten a bit riled up over your friend, and they- I mean, they would be so disappointed..."

It took the fox a few seconds to turn a would be snarl into a smile. "Still, you should be able to handle them without a hitch. Right, buddy?"

Leodore took a moment to clear his throat, reclaiming his palatine air. "But the people need their
entertainment, Nickolas! I can't deny them their fun now! I'd be a terrible tease!"

The puffy red tail bristled in an instant. "I'm sure they can entertain themselves just fine without eating my guest."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic, Nickolas! We weren't gonna eat her! We were just- giving her a bit of a scare, is all! It's all in good fun!"

"A bit of a- Hm!" He brought his paws together before his muzzle, forcing his mouth shut to keep his imminent tantrum in check; it would do no good against the lion, he knew, and he had to wrap things up. He begun nodding tensely at the wooden floor, searching for the right words.

Seconds later, he had found them.

"... How many winters have we gotten you through, Leodore?"

The lion recoiled in surprise, as if hit by a low blow. He winced at him and shook his head with plea.

"Oh, come now, Nickolas...!"

"Ten? More?"

"Please, don't do this! You know I consider you a friend!"

"But that's just it, Leodore!" The fox brought a paw to the lion's arm, grabbing it in a kindly gesture; with a game plan in mind, he had managed to collect himself. "This is the perfect chance for you to prove to me just how much you really value our friendship; and our partnership." He paused to give the louring feline a meaningful look. "I'd hate to see either go down the drain for no reason, Leo. I'm sure you would too."

There was a still moment between them, warped by tense silence. They both knew their exchange had reached its conclusion.

Leodore huffed in surrender and turned back to the crowd without another word, raising his voice to grab the refractory predators' attention once more.

"Alright, alright! That's enough now, friends... Would you- just... Quiet down! People!"

The crowd ignored him, absorbed by the increasingly aggressive wrangle of numerous loud mouthed mammals. Leodore didn't appreciate that; he snapped his jaws open and released another roar, yelling a curt and concise command.

"Shut it!"

That did the trick. All heads turned to him.

He cleared his throat. "Well...! It would appear we have a terrible misunderstanding in our paws, friends! This fluffy miss here is actually a- a friend to our dear Nickolas and his crew."

An exclamation of disappointment swept the crowd, forcing him to raise his voice anew as he went on. "And of course, we cannot harm our friend's friend! So don't let me hear that any of you rascals mistreated the bunny; for real this time. Alright?!"

Loud boooing broke out from several spots, causing him a sharp pain in the chest; a dedicated performer's worst nightmare was an unhappy crowd.
"Hey, hey! None of that! The night is still young, after all; lots of time for you all to get your sorry asses hammered." He laughed and gestured to the edge of the crowd where a few animals stood relatively calm, awaiting their cue. "Start the fiddles, friends! Let us sing and drink our woeful disappointment away!"

The crowd seemed to shake by a collective shrug as instruments begun playing their merry, off tone tunes, and the predators slowly dispersed, heading for the nearest barrel of ale. It was the most Leodore could do for now, but he knew his people well and was certain they wouldn't sulk for too long; before the night was through, they would be a formless mass of laughing, singing, fighting and puking cheer, the bunny that had collected their passionate hatred mere minutes ago all but forgotten. A whimsical lot, to be sure.

But for now, Judy could hear their numerous loud complaints coming from the front of the wobbling crowd.

"Aw, man! I wanted a taste!"

"I know, right! We won't be gettin' another chance like this, dammit!"

"Oh, can it you morons! None of y'all's ever had prey before, what the fuck you missin'?"

"We'd like to, though! An' this one seems nutritious!"

"Aye, but there ain't enough meat on her. Lionfart would probably swallow her whole, vest and all."

"But we'd catch a whiff at least! Ain't ya curious?"

They went on, but Judy couldn't hear them; her fragile attention was drawn by the fox who had walked up to her, giving her a coy smile.

"Apologies, lieutenant." he begun. "This whole thing went a bit sour. Let's, um… Let's get you out of here."

She didn't respond. His smile quivered; the ranger was still in shock, naturally, and he wasn't sure she could understand him, let alone walk. He swallowed hard and turned to the fat cheetah who had appeared behind her. "Ben, if you would…"

The cheetah gingerly grabbed her and lifted her, as concerned as he was apprehensive. "Heeey…! Um, I'm just taking you away from the crazies, yes? No need for kicking. Please." He chuckled nervously; his voice rang with an intrinsic, almost childlike benevolence that was impossible to fake.

"Where's Finnick?" asked the fox as they made their way off the stage.

"I think he started a fight." Ben responded, nodding towards an especially clamorous part of the shuffling mob; there was indeed an ongoing brawl, with a small bunch of mammals rolling on the ground and many more surrounding them, laughing and encouraging the fighters. "Should we go get him?"

The fox shrugged, pulling an easy grin. " Eh, let the poor guy have his fun. He's earned it."

As the trio put some distance between them and the noises of jarring fiddles and shouting predators, tracing the rocky walls of the enormous plaza-like space, Judy found herself drawing breath once more.

Comfortably cradled in the obese cheetah's large, furry arms, she numbly realized that somehow,
against all logic, she was still alive.

The tumult of the predators still echoed clearly, albeit more distantly. It came from far below through the barred window of a cold, damp chamber in the highest floor of a construction sitting at the edge of the enormous room where the gypsies partied the night away; the structure was also made of stone and it blended perfectly with the tall walls, almost as if carved into them. A red fox with green eyes was standing at said window, gazing at the obnoxious crowd with a saturnine look on his face.

The fox named Nickolas, who typically went by "Nick", was observing the mammals he considered his allies, witnessing their degeneracy in all its indecent glory and mentally reminding himself of how endearing their childish mentality typically was, how genuine their solidarity, how entertaining their jesting and how strong his bonds to them had grown.

He had to remind himself of all that, because by Marie, they really had fucked everything up.

At first it was a simple matter of reading into the bunny's various little reactions; how passionately she had stood up for them upon mention of a sheep, how attentively she had asked and listened about the sheep as she spoke to Mrs. Otterton. How quick she was to respond to his own similar mention, betraying her keen, borderline obsessive interest in the matter. It took less than a genius to put two and two together; for whatever reason, the peculiar bunny ranger was on the prowl for a sheep.

That's when he knew he needed to somehow get the doe into his turf and strike a propitious deal with her.

It hadn't been too challenging, really; once you figure out what they want, it's all downhill from there. Just a touch of his finely polished impromptu acting, a few key words thrown in at the right time and not only was she convinced that he had some sort of lead for her to follow, but also that he was neck deep in trouble and was desperate for a way out of it. That last part was a necessary touch, he knew, for desperate meant weak, and weak meant non threatening, which she had to see him as for her to take such a risk.

Of course, it is easy faking desperation when you actually are desperate. But luckily for him, so was the rabbit.

He had caught her shooting skeptical looks at him at every turn of their brief conversations, observing and analyzing his every word and gesture; if he was a seasoned liar, she was an astutely cautious listener. His craft alone could only have carried him halfway, for he was able to work past her countless misgivings only as far as the dark alley; he had never expected her to actually enter it. Sure enough, he and the young ferret who was notoriously gifted at mimicking voices had done their part, but for her to forsake her reservations in an instant and dash into the ridiculously obvious trap he had set up she had to be nothing sort of desperate herself.

That deduction was promising because it meant there was a chance, however small, that their respective despairs would align and his crazy, audacious plan would ultimately bear fruit. Even he didn't honestly believe it upon conception, but by the time the lieutenant was lost in his friend Benjamin's suffocating embrace he had felt the beginnings of a furtive hope brewing in his chest.

Which was then promptly snuffed out by the horrendously irreverent halfwits of the Garden, who he was know realizing he could fancy and despise at the same time. He clicked his tongue to a nearby group of wolves dancing amidst the overall cheery ambiance of the wide room below, his frown deepening.

A ranger desperate to catch a sheep had been lured into the Garden, his comfort zone, where he
could be most at ease, play his game and eventually get his way; an opportunity almost too good to be true, ruined in a flash by a couple of vindictive morons who thought they'd tease some fun out of an unconscious ranger. And of course, the rest of the idiots had readily played along.

He was contemplating whether or not to spit on the wolves whose dance had carried them close to the structure and under his window when he heard the creak of the chamber's aged wooden door. He turned around, expecting a hefty mammal to have entered through it; on the contrary, the one now walking towards him was a short, surly fennec fox sporting a sizable contusion on his left cheek and a bloody nose.

The afflicted face with the harsh, humorless expression was exactly what the taller fox needed at the moment; the combination of the fennec's permanently irritable scowl and his undeniably adorable qualities, such as his tiny stature and the large eyes he could never hide for all his menacing squinting, always brought a smile to his face.

The fennec wordlessly climbed to the window with a grunt and settled on its stone frame, producing a sour apple from his plain, black tunic. He took a bite out of it and chewed loudly, staring down at the crowd and ignoring his friend's eternally taunting grin.

"Loving the bruise, Fin."

The shorter fox whose name was Finnick gave a loud scoff. "You should see the other guy." His voice was impossibly heavy for such a small creature; one could say it was even strong enough to rise over the overlapping cheers of a hundred other predators. He took another bite and went on, speaking through his munching. "Bloody weasels can't hit for shit."

Nick chuckled. "Right. I'm just glad you guys don't bite each other, at least."

Finnick shot him a side look. "Yeah… they don't."

The taller fox cringed at him.

"Dude!"

"Oh, buzz off! The fuckers deserved every bite in the world this time!"

That, he could not argue. He sighed and turned back to the crowd, eyes narrowing.

Fin followed his gaze. "… So, this was a proper fuck up." he stated evenly, taking another bite.

Nick simply hummed.

"Don't get me wrong; your plan was plenty fucking stupid to begin with. Now it's just a confirmed shipwreck."

He gave the fennec a wry smile. "Thank you for the bright outlook, buddy! We need an optimist on the team."

"Oh, sorry! Am I wrong?"

Nick dropped the smiles and eyed him bitterly, loosing his humor. "What would you have me do, then?"

Finnick held his gaze for a few seconds, then blinked away without a word.

"Thought so."

With nothing more to say, they allowed the noises of the cheerful crowd and the loud munching of
the fennec to fill the silence.

Some time had passed when the door swung open once more, and this time it was the mammal Nick had been expecting. Benjamin Clawhauser, the cheetah with the recognizably wide frame and the equally recognizable smile, was not the least bit cheerful as he entered the room, but his face did light up upon noticing the fennec's presence.

"Aw, look at you, you little rascal! Love the bruise; so manly!"

"Ugh. Spare me."

"Ben." Nick walked up to the cheetah with serious eyes, missing his cue to snicker. "Did they find it?"

"Hm…? Oh! Right, yes; Fang's got it, he's waiting outside her room."

Nick hummed, satisfied. "Good. Let's go."

"Um… are you sure you don't wanna give her some more time, Nicky? She's still a bit…"

The fox shook his head. "I know, buddy, but this could take a while. I need to get started."

The cheetah reluctantly nodded and exited the room with Nick on his tail.

"Slick."

Nick paused and turned to Finnick. The smaller fox was still seated on the window's frame, apple in hand and face comically swollen, but his look was now a supportive one; a true rarity when it came to the peevish fennec.

"Good luck."

Once again, Nick found himself forming a playful smile. "Aw, don't look so sullen, Fin! You know me!" he exclaimed merrily, genuine smugness oozing through his antics. "I can still charm our dear bun straight out of her wits!"

*Or what's left of them, anyway.* he thought; but he didn't say that.

He had to be the optimist, after all.

______________________________________________________________

Truth be told, it really did feel like Judy's wits had left her.

For the longest time, all she could do was try to breathe, her lungs burning in the struggle to keep up with her heart's wild pace. The latter's drumming persisted, implacable enough for it to simply ache after a point; yet it still beat strong, never allowing her to relax, to think, to assess what was happening. It was almost like it recognized that it should have been put to rest for good back there on that shabby stage and was now trying to finish the job itself.

She was in a small, dark room made of stone, but she couldn't recall getting there. To her left stood a small table, ancient and rotting in the excess dampness of the room, upon which a couple of fresh candles were shedding their meager light. Behind her must have been a window, for she could still catch the disturbing racket of predators celebrating their existence; her ears proved to be a curse at that point, for no matter how hard she tried she could ignore neither them nor the traumatic memories their voices repeatedly triggered.
She knew she had been left alone with the morbidly obese cheetah for a while, and he had taken great care in tying her up. Her arms were now bound to the slightly oversized chair they had procured just for her, another rope was keeping her tied to its back and -perhaps due to the cheetah’s still aching belly- each of her legs had been firmly tied to said chair separately. She couldn't move an inch.

Not that she tried, of course; all she could manage was to weakly shift her head to avoid the noises from outside and give a painful wince with each failed attempt. Her eyes, rarely blinking, lacked focus and shivers ran down her spine at random intervals, sometimes violent enough for her to hurt herself against the tight bonds that restricted her. A strained, sob-like sound would occasionally escape her throat, but she couldn't determine exactly what it was; in any case, she had not shed a single tear. She was almost certain.

She had been alone for about half an hour -or was it five minutes?- when she heard a polite knock on the door opposite of her. She didn't know if she was expected to respond, but she couldn't have even if she tried; she just kept breathing, unsure if the sound was a hallucination of some sort caused by her crippling stress. That was not the case, however, for after a brief pause the door slowly swung open with an ominous creak.

And in went the single mammal that could possibly trigger a hint of fury amidst the mush of hazy fear that was her mind. It was a fox. The fox.

She shook to another powerful tremor and lowered her head, eyes closing. Breathe. Just breathe.

Nick beckoned her in silence for a second, concealing a troubled expression as he shut the door behind him. Ben had told him she had remained unresponsive, not even resisting him while being tied up, and thus he had begun fearing the worse on his way to her room. Rightly so, it would seem; she was completely enervated, nothing sort of a fidgety wreck, shriveled and shaking, appearing only half aware.

He gave an inaudible sigh. He had his work cut out for him, so he might as well begin.

"Lieutenant." he addressed her in a formal tone, voice clear enough to reach her but soft enough not to offend her.

Apart from a slightly deeper breath, she gave no response.

He cleared his throat and took a step closer, going for another swing.

"Once again, lieutenant, I am terribly sorry for what happened out there. This was my fault, I got careless. It won't happen again, I promise."

Really, now.

He promises.

"… Fuck you…"

The lifeless whisper might have been meant as an insult, but Nick only saw it as a much welcome sign of progress early on in the game.

"Right! I completely understand the attitude, lieutenant; but for all my fuck ups so far, I do only have both our interests in mind. I'll explain everything in a minute, and you'll see that I really had no other
choice."

"But before that, can I get you anything?" he asked politely, eagerly scanning her visage for another sign of sobriety. "Water, perhaps? Or maybe something stronger; after an ordeal like that, I imagine you'd appreciate a cup of ale or two…"

He was relieved to hear her respond once more, muttering to her knees. "… Untie me."

Nick blinked at her. He was ready to procure any number of items to get on her good side; this one request, however, he could not grand.

"I-I will, lieutenant, I assure you. I just want to make sure we've reached an understanding first, yes?"

She swallowed hard. "Untie me."

Her voice was a mite steadier now. Nick's tail gave a quick, subtle wag. This is good, right?

"I'm sorry, bun, but after what you pulled in the alley, that would be too much of a risk. Just hear me out first and you'll be free to go."

She flinched. The alley.

Where he had rounded up his act. Where he had tricked her.

Her teeth gritted audibly. "Untie me."

His ears folded back. Is this good, though?

He closed in some more. "Listen; I'm not going to untie you yet, and you know that. You are just in shock right now, which is perfectly understandable; I know the guys can be… quite a handful." He softly nodded towards the window behind her as more cheerful yelling reached them from far below, wearing a solicitous smile he was most confident in.

Judy's teeth gritted even harder to the sound. Her jaw ached.

"So," he went on, gingerly placing a paw on her shoulder, "why don't we just take our time and-"

"Don't touch me!"

The bunny suddenly shrieked into his ear, causing him to jump back with a curt yelp. She had jerked away from his paw as much as the ropes would allow and now she was struggling with the bonds, frantically pulling at them with every inch of her body; all she managed, however, was to shake the chair and cause her joints even more pain. She ignored it as she went on, her tiny whispers now replaced by more hysterical screams.

"Don't touch me!" she repeated with a shake of her head, hard enough to send her flaccid ears whipping. "Don't ever touch me, you lying, conning… M-Manipulating… Shifty piece of… Fox!"

"Okay! Sorry!"

He backed away, paws raised in retreat and tail fully bristled; not that he was in any position to complain, but the damn bunny had nearly given him a heart attack. He clutched his chest and frowned at the disturbing sight of the struggling doe, feeling more and more overwhelmed by the task at hand.
No, Slick. This is not good. Not good at all.

She kept twisting against the ropes, calling him every name in the book through indistinct squeals until her cries slowly died out and she stopped fighting. She was left silently whimpering to herself, head hanging and chest burning; a couple of tears landed on her knees, but she had no mind to acknowledge them.

Nick thought to speak again, but decided against it; it would probably just throw the bunny in another violent fit, and while that might have proved cathartic in the long run he couldn't risk her seriously hurting herself. So instead he reached for a second chair behind the rotting table, placed it at a respectable distance from the trembling bunny and took a seat with downcast eyes, looking as glum as she did shaken.

They went silent for a long time.

In the end, the fox's presence only had a negative effect on Judy, turning her somewhat comfortable numbness into an afflictive blend of anger and anxiety she could do nothing to defuse in her current state. It was a peculiar feeling, wanting to get as far away from him as possible while simultaneously fantasizing about choking the life out of him with what semblance of lucidity she retained.

She didn't look at him, and he didn't look at her, perhaps electing to give her an iota of privacy while she collected herself. Except she didn't, because she couldn't; she couldn't relax around him, firmly tied and listening to the mirthful hollers of the half crazy degenerates partying outside the room. After some time had passed and it became clear she would not recover on her own any time soon, Nick begun silently racking his brain for a way to help her and expedite the process.

Minutes later, he was struck by an inspiration.

Judy heard him shuffle and spared him a glance from her stooping position. She saw him unsheathing his claws, each as sharp as any knife; then, to her surprise, he reached into his green tunic to produce an actual knife from some hidden pocket. That was strange; he was clearly well equipped to threaten his captive without any additional weaponry.

He did not seem threatening, however; in fact, he hadn't even turned to look at her. He just absently felt the knife in his clawed paws, looking bored and distracted. It was a small, light throwing dagger with a razor sharp edge. Her teary eyes found focus on the deadly item, curiously wondering about its purpose.

Then he nonchalantly tossed it into the air, letting it mark its trajectory before falling back into his paw, blade facing down; for a second Judy was sure it would pierce the careless fox.

But he managed to grab it without so much as a scratch; and most notably, without the use of his paw. He only employed a single claw, bringing it down along with the blade, killing its momentum before stopping it completely. Judy couldn't help but stare as the point of the knife vertically balanced on the edge of the curved claw, both so sharp that their actual point of contact escaped her vision; it was a stunning, almost eerie sight.

He gave the bunny a side look and noticed her large eyes fixed on the knife, still far too shocked to conceal the spontaneous hint of awe in them. He stood up with an absent hum, now donning a cocky
smirk, and begun slowly pacing up and down the free space between their two chairs. He then whipped his sleeve to quickly produce a second, similar knife; it joined the first, soon followed by a third and a fourth, and before long there were more knives than Judy could keep track of bouncing lively between his claws or hurtled into the air.

Claws and fingers worked together to construct a flashy juggling act. There were always at least a couple of daggers flying high over the fox's head, others jumping and spinning to the soft, accurate touches of his frantically moving claws and a few even resting briefly on their tips before rejoining the wild dance; at some point he even placed his snout under one, keeping his muzzle up to balance its standing handle on his nose. All the while he kept walking, changing directions and humming lightly. The knives seemed to graze each other with each rotating motion but, miraculously, they never actually touched.

The grinning fox was handling the knives with an uncanny precision that implied countless hours of practice. Judy was genuinely astonished, not only by the quality of his demonstration but also its complete randomness. She stared on, as impressed as she was confused, the spectacle distracting her discomposed mind.

The fox eventually glanced at the captivated bunny once more and his grin instantly bloomed into a wide smile. He gave a loud, dramatically triumphant exclaim and begun properly retrieving the knives, snatching them mid air by the handle and setting them aside upon the rotting table.

"Why, would you look at that face!" He gestured merrily towards her, causing her puzzled frown to deepen. "I knew it; I'm the best there is! Aren't I the best there is, lieutenant?"

She could only gawk at the jubilant fox, unable to make heads or tails of his antics. "W-what?"

"You're weirded out!" He announced the obvious with absolute delight, chest puffing proudly. "And dare I say, a little impressed; but no longer in shock! Worked like a charm, I'd say."

She blinked at the self satisfied mug of the vulpine as the latter begun chuckling, awaiting a response. She suddenly felt it brewing in her throat against her will, and as she swallowed it back she realized it would have been a hybrid between a disparaging scoff and a bemused giggle.

Her heart still thundered away, but it no longer ached. The incessant buzz in her ears had weakened slightly, the tremors shooting down her numb, restricted members had momentarily stopped and she found that she could now somewhat moderate the fierce twitching of her nose.

She was lucid again. Terribly shaken still, but lucid nonetheless; just as the fox had intended.

She let out a bewildered sputter as apprehension dawned on her face. "You...! I- God, you're just... j-just..."

"Resourceful?" he suggested, playfully cocking a brow. "Considerate? Thoughtful?"

Her eyes, wide and still moist, rested on his own. "Crazy."

"... Crazy thoughtful?"

She shook her head with a gasp, resuming her manual breathing and finding that it finally worked; she could feel her pulse gradually slow down with every deep breath she held and released. He let her do what she needed as he collected the daggers, hid them into his tunic and sat back down, mentally praising himself all the while. Now there was progress to be made.

"... So..." she begun with a snittle, testing her hoarse voice. "What? You're a juggler, then?"
"I'm a gypsy." he responded, spreading his arms. "I'm everything I need to be. You pick up on all sorts of skills on the road."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Such as lying through your teeth? Conning folk?"

"Exactly! See, you get me."

She scoffed and looked away, stubbornly rejecting his mirth; but as betrayed by his persisting grin, he wasn't the least bit fazed.

"So then, Carrots; you good to talk yet?"

"Don't- don't call me that!"

"Aw, why? I think it's pretty cute!"

She shot him a spiteful, inordinately offended look and nearly growled at him.

"And I think you should jump off a cliff, Nickolas."

Nick arched a brow at her, impressed and decidedly unperturbed.

"Hmm! I had thought you were totally out of it back there."

"Well, yes. The name's Nickolas Wilde; but most just call me Nick. Slick Nick, if you will. A pleasure to formally make your acquaintance, miss Hopps." He almost offered her a pawshake, but he decided otherwise; not only would it be a joke in poor taste, seeing as she was still restrained, but as he had just verified minutes before the last thing she needed right now was a clawed paw reaching for her.

Judy swallowed thickly, only now realizing how dry her throat felt; she was slowly regaining her composure, but at the moment her thoughts were still turbid. She considered asking for some of that water he had offered her, but eventually decided to simply continue the conversation and try to find out what in the world this entire abduction was ultimately all about.

"That lion seemed to prefer "Nickolas", though." she stated absently, speaking only to give herself time to further recuperate.

He clicked his tongue once more, irritated by the mention of the feline. "Yeah, well, he's a bit eccentric, as I'm sure you noticed; but hey, at least he's charismatic."

She pulled a frustrated grimace. "Charismatic?"

"Around these parts, yes. Smartest and craziest of the whole lot! No wonder they made him king."

Judy's reanimated ears tilted in question. "Wait a minute… King?"

"More of a glorified jester, really." he clarified with a limp wave of his paw. "The Court's fool is also at its head. Quite fitting, wouldn't you say?" he concluded with yet another sharp grin.

Her frown deepened. "Wha- Nickolas, where exactly-"

"Nick." he cut her off evenly. "You're not my grandma, Carrots. It sounds creepy."

"Tell you what: I won't call you Nickolas and you won't call me Carrots. Deal?"
"Alright, fine. Your loss." he complied with a shrug, casually sinking into his chair. "So what should I call you, then? Judy? Hopps? Ooh; how about Laverne?"

"Lieutenant will do." she responded curtly, visibly annoyed by his chatty, carefree stance. "Anyway… Would you mind telling me where the hell you've taken me, Wilde?"

He seemed surprised by the question. "I figured you'd have put this one together yourself, lieutenant!" he exclaimed. "We're in the Garden, of course."

"Yeah, I heard the lion, thank you very much; but what the hell is this Garden?"

He sat back up, eying her in disbelief. "Are… Are you serious? You haven't heard of the Chomper Garden?"

"I- Look, I'm not from around here, okay?!" she lashed out, sounding much more defensive than she'd have liked. "I had made arrangements to be filled in regarding the Zone and Happytown, but I never did make it because someone urgently asked me to meet!" As she spoke the words she remembered Tusk mentioning one such Garden by passing, warning her to stay away. If only she'd gone to him first…

"… Right." Nick cleared his throat and brought his chair a bit closer to her, testing her reaction. There was none, which was extremely positive. She was becoming increasingly responsive, and that seemed to be a result of their conversation; so naturally, he aimed to continue with it for now. "So, what do you know about Happytown, lieutenant?"

She thought about it for a second. "I know there are many gypsies there."

"Evidently."

"Ah- so we're in Happytown?"

He nodded. "What else?"

"Well… Not many rangers here… Lawless…" She was just now realizing what this meant for her; making an escape to the Zone would be nearly impossible under these conditions.

"Hm… Alright, I get the picture." Nick settled back on his chair once more and cleared his throat.

"So as you said, there are plenty of gypsies in Happytown, and they effectively run the whole district. Naturally, your ilk have made many attempts to seize control over the years, but it somehow never worked out. Can you imagine why?"

Again, Judy took a moment to think. The entirety of Zootopia's ranger force, consistently outmatched by the disorderly brutes flocking a single district…?

"… Guerrilla?"

He beamed at her. "Bingo."

"Which means… The gypsies can hide themselves in Happytown?"

"Oof! Someone's on fire today!"

"Thanks. I try." she replied before she could stop herself; she had decided to remain somber throughout the entirety of their exchange, but his immoderate smugness was irresistibly taunting, teasing out her own, strictly monitored one.
"Right; so gypsies have been around for generations, and they've always had a knack for inhabiting the dark corners most wouldn't spare a glance for. As such, they're now the only ones who know all of Happytown's peculiar little secrets; like this here catacomb, for example."

"Gypsies aren't the most organized folk, and for the most part everyone's free to do as they please; but come the night, everyone knows to gather at their "safe haven", as they call it, to be given any instructions by Lionfart, if need be, or to simply… have fun." As if on cue, a chorus of drunken howls echoed through the window; Nick absently wondered if they belonged to the same wolves that had narrowly evaded being spat on.

"So, the place they gather at is the Chomper Garden?" Judy pressed him to continue, now curious beyond measure. "This place?"

"Precisely." he confirmed. "There are a couple more, of course, but this is the biggest one. Chomper Garden, or Gypsy Court, is the name given to the bevy, though, not the location; the Garden is wherever they chose to gather each night."

"But what are these places?" she persisted. "You don't mean to tell me the gypsies built all this, do you?"

"No, of course not; our ancestors did."

"… Huh?"

It was Nick's turn to wish for some water, but just like Judy had minutes ago, he decided he'd rather continue speaking now that they could finally communicate properly.

"Remember your history lessons, Car-lieutenant? In the time of the monarchy, when us chompers were locked up in Happytown and made to work till we broke…? Well, this here's were the royalty of old kept us all."

Judy's ears picked up. "It's a prison."

"Or was, anyway." he agreed with a nod. "A prison built by chompers, for chompers. I imagine digging all these catacombs must have been a real back-breaker; no wonder we revolted."

"They were perfect for housing slaves; one entrance and one exit, so they're easily guarded, spacey; and I imagine the doors of the cells used to be sturdier back in the day." he added, hiking a thumb towards the threadbare door behind him.

Judy nodded in understanding. "And all these entrances were just… forgotten?"

"I imagine those who stayed after the revolution kept their distance. A couple of centuries of that attitude, coupled with all the new buildings they raised in the meantime… It doesn't take much more. And ironically," he continued with a smirk, "these same catacombs that imprisoned the chompers of that age now serve as a place of refuge for their descendants. Who'd have thought?"

She hummed. "So no one else knows where the entrances are? Not even the other predators?"

"None beside the gypsies, no."

Judy took a minute to process all this new information.

"… Nick?"
"Yes, my dear?"

"Did you say… Lionfart?"

Nick smacked a paw against his knee, laughing for the first time since she had met him. It was a pleasant sound, tempting the listener to relax and follow along; charming, just like everything else that ever came out of his mouth.

"His real name is Leodore Lionheart, actually, but it ain't quite fitting for the king of the gypsies now, is it? So the lousy miscreants went and gave the guy a nickname. I know it's an immature one, but… Well, you gotta appreciate it; especially when he's acting all regal and someone from the crowd calls him that… Ruins the immersion for him. I love it."

She waited for him to stop chuckling. "Is that so? It really seemed like they respected him."

"Oh, they do! They just define "respect" a little differently, is all; just like with everything else."

Judy's eyes narrowed once more.

"They."

"Hm?"

"You keep referring to them as "they", Nick." she pointed out, employing a tone she typically saved for interrogations. "And to tell you the truth, you don't strike me as your typical gypsy yourself." she added, eyes flickering to his pointy ears, which were notably unburdened by any piercings.

He noticed and raised a paw to stroke them. "I am the rarest of beasts: a gypsy with a fashion sense. But I'm sure you've already noticed that."

She rolled her eyes to the vain remark. "A gypsy with an ego, maybe."

"Well."

"And just what was this partnership you mentioned with, uh… Lionfart?"

Nick recoiled on his chair, once again impressed. "Those ears aren't just for show, are they?"

"Answer the question, Slick."

He ran a clawed finger over his chin, considering his answer; how much should he tell her about himself, and how much of that should be true?

But just then he caught the glimmer in her eyes and recognized it in an instant; she was trying to read into him, and now she was sure to be excessively skeptical of his every word. He couldn't risk lying, not if he ever wanted to earn her trust.

He huffed in surrender, feeling somewhat uncomfortable; honesty wasn't exactly his go-to method, but… Oh well. Desperate times.

"I am a gypsy, lieutenant; just not from the city."

She raised her brows in silence, waiting for him to continue.

"I travel the country with my companions. We are… Merchants, essentially." he continued. "We buy provisions, then visit Zootopia once a year, sneak in and sell our stuff to the locals. It's a good
market; hard to get decent food in Happytown, and it's safer for them to buy it from us at a low price than try to steal some from the Zone."

"So you're smugglers."

He nodded in affirmation.

"… Liar."

Her lips drew back in an acrimonious scowl, her tone accusatory. "No one can sneak in or out of the city, let alone smuggle merchandise; not with these walls."

Nickolas Wilde had a habit for smiling in situations where he should shrivel, it seemed, for once again he responded with a broad, self-satisfied grin.

"I imagine the local rangers told you all that jazz; which just goes to show that we're excellent at what we do."

Judy eyed him in thought for a second; if there really was a way, it could shed light on new possibilities regarding the stolen merchandise from the Burrows.

"… Alright, I'll bite. Tell me how you do it."

He shook his head at her, loosing the grin. "I'm afraid not, lieutenant; just as I can't let you know the entrances to the catacombs. It could be dangerous to my people or the local gypsies. There's nothing stopping you from turning on us once we let you go, after all."

Her ears quivered; they had reached a point that was in her most immediate interests. "Implying you are going to let me go."

"I most certainly am, lieutenant." he assured her without a moment's hesitation. "As I keep telling you, it was never my intention to hurt you."

"Well what are your intentions, then?"

They locked eyes, just as they had done back in the headquarters, and with Nick's theatrics finally over it was now clear neither green nor violet could come ahead in that silent battle. An impasse had been reached, and it demanded a truce.

Or as Nick had phrased it, it was time for honesty.

"… Right. Let's get to the point, then; but first, I'm gonna need some water." he said, getting on his feet and making for the door. "Can I get you anything, Carrots?"

"Just some water for me too, Nickolas."

He nodded and exited the room. The door closed behind him with a loud creak.

And only then did both bunny and fox allow themselves a quiet, bitter chuckle.

Nick held the wooden mug against the bunny's lips, slowly bringing it up as she greedily gulped its contents down to the last drop. He placed the empty mug on the table as Judy wiped her wet cheeks against her shoulders, smacking her lips. He took a sip from his own, still half full mug, and held onto it as he reclaimed his seat across of her.
"So, lieutenant… If I may have your undivided attention, I will now explain my predicament." he begun with a dramatic sigh, twisting the mug in his paws.

"Do I look preoccupied?" she quipped with a mordant grin.

The fox chuckled. "Touche."

"Well… As I said earlier, the local gypsies are a bit… loose, for lack of a better term. So to say, not everyone always attends the Garden, and it's not like anyone's taking roll calls either. So if some of them where to, let's say, not show up for a couple of nights, no one would loose their sleep over it; and if they weren't seen for more than that, they'd probably just be forgotten."

"You see, the residents of the Garden do tend to vanish from time to time. Trouble with the authorities, collaborations with dangerous people gone sour; there are all sorts of plausible explanations for a disappeared gypsy. It's an integral part of life around here, so no one would bat an eye; they just move on."

"What about Otterton?" Judy cut him off. "You told me the gypsies have swept the two districts looking for him; or was that a lie as well?"

"No, no, they did. Leo gave out the order, at my own behest."

She arched a brow at him. "Did you know the guy?"

"Nope. Had never met him or his wife before."

"Then why…?"

He gave her a sportively berating look. "I suppose you'll find out once I'm done explaining, won't you?"

"Right, sorry." She apologized, aware of how impatient a listener she could be. "Go on."

"The thing is, while locals disappear regularly, my crew doesn't. Like, ever. We report to each other daily, keep track of what everyone's working on, where they are; and we do have actual roll calls. We're a tight bunch."

"Yet in the last month, I've had three of my people gone missing."

He frowned, lips drawing back and paws tightening around the mug. He paused to take another sip.

"We usually stay in Zootopia for a month, two tops, and then scurry on to the next stop. This year we've almost closed three, because a week before we were scheduled to take our leave, one of my guys working at the Avenue never made it back. Then another disappeared at the Plaza, and the last one went missing just over a week ago; from the Zone, no less."

"You people get employed in other districts?"

"Of course! We're here to make coin, lieutenant; we take on all kinds of jobs in the rest of the city."

Judy was quick to accept that; the fox and the fat cheetah were easily the most presentable predators she had seen in the city so far, the kind employers would prefer. If the rest were like them, then they'd be the first choice of any prey interested in hiring predators.

"But that's a bit of an obstruction now, you see." Nick continued, sitting up with a light scowl. "Due to this stupid segregation business, I cannot pass the Zone to look for them. Granted, I could find a
job in another district, or just sneak past the wall -you'd be surprised how easy it is, really- but if I'm busy working or avoiding rangers I'll never manage to investigate properly."

"No, what I need is some prey to employ me specifically to look for them, get me access to all the other districts and let me move freely; which is where you come in."

She stared at him wide eyed.

"… You want me to… employ you?" she stammered in disbelief.

"That's right."

"… Do you really need me to spell the answer out for you, Nick?" she guffawed.

He smiled knowingly, unperturbed by her unwillingness, and stooped closer. "Now now, lieutenant. Let's not be too rash. There's a couple more facts to take into account."

"Oh? Such as?" she asked sarcastically, trying to conceal her renewed curiosity.

"Such as the sheep."

She scoffed. "Nice try, Slick, but it won't work twice."

His smile persisted. "Why do you think I targeted you specifically, Hopps? Or why did I waste time looking for Otterton while my friends are also missing?"

… Good question.

"As I told you, I'm always keeping tabs on my people's undertakings; and it just so happens that all three of the ones that have disappeared were affiliated with sheep, one way or another."

Judy's ears stiffened in an instant. "They were employed by sheep?"

"Not exactly. The first one was a bear lifting crates at the northern Avenue, close to Liberty District; his job per se had nothing to do with sheep. But I know he was approached by some of the wooly bastards who claimed they wanted to get their hooves on the merchandise he was handling. He would let some crates slip from his employer, they'd pick them up and cut him a share. It was unusual, but we didn't think much of it back then."

"And then he vanished." Judy concluded his narration, unaware that her nose was once again giving a light twitch.

"Precisely; but that's not all. A week later, a female ermine that had been hired to work a small jewelry booth at the Central Market went missing as well; and what do you know, she had mentioned that a couple of sheep had been frequenting her booth, chatting her up and buying way too many low quality jewels. Now that got me thinking."

"And the third one?" she inquired eagerly, leaning forth as much as her bonds would allow.

"The third one was a jaguar, working a simple carrier business at the Zone. I know, you don't have chomper carriers past the Zone, but they're not unusual there; most other carriers are uncomfortable visiting the district."

"Yeah, I've noticed. So a sheep was in the Zone, and they hired your jaguar?"

"Apparently." he nodded. "I never heard him mentioning a sheep being his regular or anything, but
another one of my crew saw him carrying a sheep on his back close to the western wing; and a sheep in the Zone is noteworthy enough as it is. That was also his last sighting."

Judy hummed, her eyes dropping to the floor. An entire city couldn't even imagine a sheep going bad, yet here in Happytown she had stumbled upon an abundance of suspicious coincidences linking them to criminal activity.

"Too many coincidences, wouldn't you say?" Nick asked as if reading her thoughts; he could fully relate with the bunny's thoughtful expression. "So I had a suspect, or suspects, to look into. Only problem was, I couldn't get past the Zone, as I said, and there was no way I'd turn to the rangers for help. A chomper accusing sheep, some of whom had allegedly come all the way down to the Zone? It was hopeless. Sheep generally-

"Don't do crime, yeah." she completed his thought with a bitter edge. "I've heard that enough times, Nick, believe me."

He gave her a wry smile. "That's right. So I had to work inside Happytown and the Zone. I asked Leo for help, and he delivered, but my friend was nowhere to be seen."

"Not even a body, huh?"

Much to her surprise, he winced to the question. "Don't ever say that again."

His harsh tone took her aback. "Yes, of course. I'm- I'm sorry."

"... No, it's- it's fine." He gazed at the cup in his paws, clutching it. "It is a possibility. But I have to believe they're all alive somewhere. I'm... I am responsible for them."

This also surprised Judy. He wasn't simply angry for loosing men; as far as she could tell, he was genuinely concerned for them. That was why he hadn't even considered leaving the city without them. A tight bunch indeed.

She respected that.

"So you pulled some strings for Otterton and assisted his wife personally because he had also gotten involved with sheep?"

"You guessed it."

"And I..."

The fetching smile found its way back to his lips. "You, Carrots, were clearly also interested in sheep; enough so to allow me to kidnap you. So I, in turn, am very interested in hearing your story."

"I thought we had a deal about that "Carrots" thing, Nickolas." she grumbled.

"True; but I've decided it bothers you more." he retorted mirthfully, draining his mug with one last sip and placing it on the table, next to her own.

What could she say? It was true.

"I come from the Bunnyburrows province." she begun.

"Now, ain't that a surprise!"

She groaned to the snarky remark. "Do you mind? I shut up when you were talking, didn't I?"
"Barely." he pointed out teasingly, but complied.

"Anyway; the Burrows. There was this huge criminal ring there, stealing crops and smuggling them out of the province. It had apparently been active for nearly a decade, but we recently had a breakthrough and closed it down for good." She resisted the urge to brag about her own involvement in its disbandment, having realized how intoxicating impressing the smug fox could be.

"Laws in the east are very strict when it comes to our products, so we made it a point to catch everyone involved. And we did, save for one mammal; a ram who everyone interrogated had pointed to as their leader. I was sent off after him, chased him on the road for two weeks and eventually followed him to Zootopia."

"… That's all?" he asked, somewhat disappointed. "Your ram is probably just hiding in the city, waiting for the dust to settle!"

She nodded. "Perhaps. But there are many indications that the ring spread out further outside the Burrows, possibly all the way to the capital."

"Smugglers? In Zootopia? How absurd!" he mocked, mimicking her voice. "So does this mean we have competition, then?"

"Not to mention," she went on, ignoring the interruption, "that I have reason to believe he's not the mastermind behind the operation."

"Oh? Why's that?"

She shrugged. "Just a gut feeling; but it's usually reliable."

"Hm! Was it reliable when you followed me into that alley?" he teased her.

"It most certainly was." she replied through her teeth. "It kept telling me not to trust your lying fox face, but I was too stupid to listen."

"Credit where credit is due, lieutenant; you were indeed a hard bunny to deceive. I had to be very meticulous." he noted solemnly, tilting his head to her in respect. She wasn't entirely sure if he was teasing again.

"Well, in any case… Either this has been an especially naughty month for sheep everywhere, or there is something fishy going on with both our cases." he said, crossing his legs.

"There's no obvious connection between them." Judy pointed out.

"No, there isn't." he agreed with a sigh, leaning back and tying his paws behind his head. "Which is really disappointing; I was hoping you'd be on the trail of some possibly-abducting sheep, not a confirmed-smuggling one."

"But even so, lieutenant, you should still hire me."

"That so?" She cocked a brow at him. "And why should I do that?"

"Well, for starters, you need help." he stated matter-of-factly. "And don't try to deny it, Carrots. I was the definition of suspicious back at the headquarters; you wouldn't have taken the bait if you hadn't hit a snag."

"Yeah, well, that's your perception." she replied, forcing stability on her gaze; but she didn't deny it.
"Sorry; do you have any substantial leads on him, then? Or are you just looking for shady sheep?" he asked her with a feint smirk, leaning closer. "Because if you are, it would mean that right now we are looking for the exact same thing."

It was a valid point, but it was made by the irritating vulpine that had tricked her into the blasted mess that had been this entire evening; and she wouldn't let that go anytime soon.

"What are you asking of me, exactly?"

"It's simple: hire me to help you in your investigation. The best course of action for you is to look into the sheep that were in contact with my people, which is exactly what I want to do; I've even got the details of their jobs to help us get started. No payment, obviously; I just want to get to the bottom of this, same as you."

"Do you really expect me to trust you again after- after all this?" she asked, nodding to the ropes tying her down.

He shuffled in his seat. "Well, as I told you, that whole scene out there wasn't on me. It was all that-"

"Besides the insane lion and his gypsies, Nick," she cut him off angrily, "did you really think that abducting me, knocking me unconscious and tying me to a chair was gonna predispose me to listen to anything you say? Because if so, then you're no less crazy than Lionfart."

"I… I didn't mean for you to get knocked out…" he mumbled, awkwardly fumbling with his thumbs.

"Bullshit. You said you didn't want me seeing the entrance!"

"What I had in mind was, like, a blindfold and fingers over your ears! Not my fault Ben squeezed a bit too zealously; which might I add, was only because you kicked him so damn hard!"

"Excuse me?!" she bellowed. "Should I apologize for fighting back?!"

"That's not- Okay, okay! Time out!"

Nick raised his paws, calming the both of them before resuming.

"Listen, Carrots; do you think I could have told you all that back at the headquarters?"

"I told you not to call me that, goddammit!"

"Sorry, fine, lieutenant; do you? Do you think I could have spoken about my crew, about our business, about our friends here in the Garden? Chances are, you would have ordered me detained before I could get halfway through explaining everything. I told you, I don't normally trust rangers."

"You figured out I was hunting a sheep." she retorted, a deep frown sitting above her chafed gaze. "You could have confided to me what was necessary and I would have looked into it."

"Yeah, without me," he pointed out. "As I said, I'm responsible for them. I have to be out looking for them myself, not just give a tip to some random ranger who's only distinctive quality is that she wouldn't laugh at my face and kick me out the door!"

"I didn't know you, lieutenant. I didn't know how serious you were, how much effort you'd put into finding my friends rather than catching your ruffian. I couldn't trust you to be capable enough, or care enough."
"Wha- Of course I care!" she protested. "I am a ranger! Protecting civilians is always our number one priority!"


She was genuinely shocked at the accusation. "That is not how we work!"

"Not how you work, maybe; but again, I couldn't know that, could I? Listen-"

He got off his chair and knelt before her, bringing his face close enough for Judy to feel the heat of his breath on her nose. "It all boils down to this: if I had left it all in your paws, it would be out of mine. And I have to be the one overlooking things, because the truth is, we're the only ones looking out for our own. Not prey, not rangers or soldiers, us."

"I don't know how things work in the Burrows, miss Hopps, but around here rangers are given credit for killing chompers, motive notwithstanding."

Judy was huffing through her twitching nose, agitated by the fox's invasion of her space, but also by the tension in his words. She thought back to Leodore's words to the crowd, to Tusk's opinions on predators and, more importantly, to the scene with the violent cadet back at the headquarters, where at least twenty of his senior rangers stood by idly as he harassed the two far smaller animals who were begging for his assistance.

She had fallen silent by the time Nick retreated back to his chair, the rich tail swimming nervously behind him. "So yeah, I know this wasn't the best way to earn your trust, but I had to do it to be absolutely certain you would take me with you. Necessary evil, and whatnot."

He stopped talking, awaiting for her response with an anxiousness he could barely contain behind his calm exterior. He had actually lost his cool for a second there, and it could cost him; having his fanged face shoved into hers was hardly the way to get on her good side.

"… So I get you out of the Zone; then what?"

His head whipped to her, stunned. She was facing the table at her side, where the candles were slowly expiring, with a contemplative look on her face. She was thinking about it, she was-

She was considering it.

His brain froze for a second, but he quickly overcame the sensation; what, couldn't foxes be lucky every now and then?

"Why, I help you with your investigation, of course! We could be like- like partners! Yes!"

Ease up, Slick. Stay cool.

"Just the two of us?"

"Of course. And, I mean… After what you did to Charles- to that tiger back in the alley, I'd say I should be more afraid of you than the other way around."

She hummed. True enough.

"… How can you help me, though?" she inquired, skeptical. "You're no less a visitor to Zootopia than myself."

"Ah, now, that's where you're wrong, lieutenant!" He gave her a broad smile, gesturing widely. "I've
been visiting the city for well over a decade now. Me and my crew have been pretty much everywhere, and I've got my fair share of connections, the kind of which rangers could never acquire. If they're unlawful and worth knowing, I'm friends with them; and chances are, they owe me favors."

Judy hummed once more. After the way he had saved her from Leodore and his people, she was convinced he had a high enough standing in Zootopia's most significant criminal force; no doubt, he would prove to be a useful ally.

... Am I really doing this?

She looked back at Nick and caught him staring, eagerly awaiting her answer. Despite her justified reluctance to trust the fox, she couldn't bring herself to consider his words lies. Perhaps that was a testament to his honesty; if even she, who was arguably the most suspicious of him at that point, believed him, then he had to be speaking the truth.

He was desperate, and so was she. They were desperate and determined, both of them; and, pretenses aside, they did need each other.

So yes; apparently, she was doing this.

"… Deal."

The short, simple word echoed distantly in his ears like the coveted object of a desire he had never expected to realize; if he were standing, he would have felt the need to take a seat. He slowly lowered his head, idly nodding to the floor with a silent sigh.

"Really?" His voice rang hoarse all of a sudden.

"Yes. You win, Slick; but-

Judy raised her chin, giving him a stern look. "There are going to be rules. No illegal actions and no abuse of ranger resources. You don't leave my sight for a second while we're outside the Zone, got it? In fact, don't do anything without passing it by me first. I'm the employer here, and I won't let you do anything unrelated to the case; I have to make sure this isn't some agenda of yours to get into Zootopia and do your dirty business. And no more nicknames!"

Nick raised his head again, chuckling; after his brief moment of overwhelming relief, he had managed to compose himself. "Yes to all! But you must understand, lieutenant, that the same goes for you."

She allowed her ears to tilt. "Excuse me?"

"Well, I have to make sure you won't use our collaboration against us gypsies!" he elucidated. "So: no prying into my methods or my previous activities, unless it pertains to the investigation. No demanding to know where the entrances to the Garden are, either. If we find my guys, you have to let me take them to Happytown, no rangers involved but you. Also, you cannot arrest me for whatever crimes I've committed or admitted to here, or for covering for my friends. Lastly, if it turns out that my sheep and your ram are completely unrelated, you'll have to keep employing me regardless, and everything else I mentioned will still stand."

Judy considered his demands. "That sounds reasonable; except for that last bit. I can't have you running around without supervision, so we can never separate. If they really are unrelated, then I'll have to send you straight back to Happytown; but in that case, I'll be willing to forget about this whole thing and let you go without any trouble."
Nick considered arguing, but he didn't think he could change her mind. If it came to that, he'd just have to improvise; and he was the best at doing just that.

There was, however, one last thing.

"Fair enough. But now we need to cement our agreement, don't you think?"

His grin left no room for doubt; he had something planned. Working with the guy was sure to prove exhausting.

"What do you have in mind, Nick?" she asked him in resignation, rolling her eyes.

"Only… this little thing right here."

He reached into a pocket of his trousers to produce something that caused Judy a hollow gasp.

Nick held the red feather high, tauntingly sweeping it in front of the stupefied bunny's face.

"So, my guys found this curious little item outside, close to where we lost you, along with a green cap and a lovely lavender scarf which I believe are yours."

"Give it back!" she demanded, eyes glued to the precious feather as it danced before her nose.

"Oh, come now, lieutenant!" He retrieved his paw with a playful click of the tongue, shaking a finger at her. "I know you're shaken, but you can't allow people to see through you so easily! That's elementary negotiating!"

He brought the feather close to his face, examining it. "Now, I have leverage."

Judy was practically fuming from her seat, staring knives straight through the fox's skull. "Wilde, if you do anything to this feather, the deal is off. You hear me?! Try anything funny and I'll have you rotting in a cell for the rest of your miserable life!"

It was a much more explosive outburst than he had anticipated. "Woah, lieutenant! Easy! I'm only kidding!" he hurriedly assured her. "I won't do anything to your feather. I wouldn't dare; that's no way to start a healthy, fruitful partnership! And that's what I want us to have, really."

She calmed down, overly vexed but reassured. "Jackass." she blurted at him.

"Yeah, I suppose that was uncalled for." he admitted, making sure to sound as apologetic as possible. "But that aside, I really have found a good use for it; especially since it's so important to you."

She frowned balefully at him once more. "Wilde, I'm warning you…"

"It's a most benign idea, lieutenant, I assure you; an oath!"

"Oath?"

"That's right, a simple oath. This," He paused to shake the feather between his fingers, "is the symbol of your rank, your order, and the oath you took when you joined it. You strike me as a person who values their oaths, lieutenant, so we'll make use of that."

"I want you to swear on this feather, on your honorable order, that you will uphold your end of the bargain."

"Well, that hardly seems fair!" she protested with a light pout. "I can't have you swear an oath to
anything, can I?"

He shrugged. "The feather's like, really important, isn't it? I could just swear to that."

"Oh please, be serious; like you give half a crap about my feather, or my order!"

"Okay, okay." he chuckled. "Fair enough. How about this then: if I break our deal in any way, we will consider your oath invalid. You will be free to prosecute me and my buddies to your heart's content. That fair enough?"

Her taking such an oath would bind them both. She had to admit, it was well thought out.

They went over the terms of the agreement once more, both making sure they weren't leaving any loopholes for the other to exploit, and then proceeded with the actual oath.

Tenderly clutching her precious red feather in the paw of a restricted arm, Judy stared right into the fox's green eyes and saw her every sentiment, all the nervousness, the uncertainty, and even that furtive hint of excitement, mirrored in them.

And she swore.

Judy finally felt the rope around her paws loosening; they must have been tied for over three hours, leaving them numb and sore. She tested them by twisting her wrists as other, larger sets of paws removed the black cloth from around her eyes and the pieces of wax stuck in her ears, causing her no small amount of itching. She was greeted by absolute darkness, save for the weak light emanating from the windows of a small brothel.

They had released her in the same alley where she had first been caught; even the tiger's blood was still visible on the wall of the brothel. It wasn't a welcome sight by any measure, as it reminded her of a most unpleasant, and equally embarrassing, event, but even so, it meant that her trip to the predators' turf had finally come to an end.

"Here we are; where it all begun!"

Judy turned and made sure to give the smiling red fox her most unamused look.

"Oh, sorry. Too soon?"

She let out a heavy sigh. "You're really pushing your luck, Wilde."

"Aw, c'mon!" Nick spread his arms, his posture expressing his unrequited feelings of solidarity. "It's called a banter, sweetheart! That's what partners do, no?"

She just sighed once more, lacking the energy for the spirited response he expected. "Are you certain the other gypsies won't be giving me any trouble?"

"Positive." he responded without hesitation. "And that means no one else here is touching you, either. The word's out that the bunny ranger is a friend to the gypsies."

"I'd much rather it stayed between us, honestly."

Nick gave a hearty laugh, along with the other predators that were accompanying them; Benjamin and Finnick, with whom she had been introduced, as well as a dozen other predators big and small who had remained at the back of the alley, some of whom she recognized from their hostile encounter at that same spot hours prior, such as the skinny bobcat. The tiger she had downed was
notably absent.

"You got a point there, cottontail." Fin spoke, yet again surprising her with the depth and volume of his voice; it was mind boggling, considering that the guy was even shorter than herself. "Can't stand these fuckers either. No class, know what I'm saying?"

"Oh, shush!" Ben cut in, waving a paw at him. "They can be real sweethearts, Judy; you just met them under difficult circumstances."

"Right." Judy smiled softly at the cheetah who, despite being the prime agent of her earlier abduction, was easily the most likable of the predators.

"So, lieutenant." Nick spoke again, drawing her attention. "I can expect you tomorrow morning, right? Time waits for no mammal, as you know."

"Yeah, I'll be there. Just please wait for me at the entrance this time; I can't handle dealing with that sloth again." she told him with an almost imploring look, letting him know she was serious.

"Ah, yes; my buddy Flash! Fastest sloth around, I'll have you know. The Rabid Drinker truly has a rapid server."

She raised a brow at his grinning mug, remembering something she had been meaning to ask him. "By the way, was that sloth working with you? Did you tell him to stall me?"

He guffawed. "I didn't need to, lieutenant! The fastest sloth is still a sloth, after all. No, he had no idea what I was about; I had just asked him to send word when you showed up, then let him work his magic."

"… Of course you did."

"Well, then, gentlemammals, it's high time I take my leave! It's been a… pleasure." The bunny blurted her unconvincing lines and begun walking away into the darkness, heading for the nearest ranger outpost.

"Ahem!"

Her ears visibly wilted to the sound of Nick's fake coughing. With a subtle wince, she turned to see him offering a paw to her.

"I believe this is also necessary to cement our agreement… Partner." He winked at her with meaning.

Judy stared at his proffered paw, considerably larger than her own, and after a moment's hesitation she reached out and gave it a firm shake. Nick's smile widened, and she too found some satisfaction in the gesture, for all her sense of foreboding.

Then the fox noticed she wasn't letting go.

"One more thing though, Slick."

Her voice had an ominous ring to it. He met her eyes once more and felt his tail go rigid; he absently thought how disconcerting it was for these lovely orbs of purple to harbor such a menacing shimmer.

"At some point during our partnership-I don't know where or when- I'm gonna kick your face in. Just once."
It was a perfect example of an entertaining, solicitous banter, just the kind he had wished for; and yet he couldn't find it in himself to chuckle.

But Finnick certainly could. "Deal!" he yelled from behind him in absolute delight, loosing an asinine laughter.

"Wha- No! No deal!"

"It's settled!" Judy finally smiled at the red fox, releasing his paw and stunning him with how deceptively innocent she could make herself look; in that aspect she put even himself to shame. "I'll see you tomorrow; partner."

The bunny walked away without another word, leaving the group to their own banters.

"Man, I like that bun! Hope she sticks around." remarked the fennec, still chuckling.

"Oh, yes! She's so lovely; did you see those eyes!?" squealed Ben, clapping his paws.

"Hmph… Certainly did." Nick sounded the least excited of the three, yet he was the one who'd be stuck with her for the time being.

"Hey, can you tell her to hold onto that kicking pass?" asked Fin, giving the taller fox a strong nudge. "I wanna be around for it!"

"… Why couldn't you go missing instead?"

They disappeared back into the alley, but Judy could still catch bits of them bickering back and forth in an almost endearing way. She wiped a forming smile off her face, reminding herself that they were, after all, dangerous criminals who were not to be trusted.

And she had just shaken paws with the worst of them.

- Chapter 3 End-

Chapter End Notes

This was exhaustingly fun to write; the best kind of fun.

But alas, I'm gonna have to take a break, as I feel a tad burnt out; besides, not only do I need to catch up on life, but I also have to solidify my plans for the next chapter, so I suppose it could take some time.

Or not. I'm a capricious one, so who's to say I won't find myself flipping the bird to my responsibilities and indulging in a sudden rush of inspiration by this time tomorrow?

Oh, I dunno. Just leave a review and get out (thanks).
More Than A Gut Feeling

Chapter Summary

In which we delve into the immoral affairs of two wooly criminals.

Chapter Notes

For the wonderful Humanities_Handbag, whose stellar writing never ceases to amaze.

May she remain inspired, to keep inspiring.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For all of Zootopia's beauty, which could be largely attributed to the tasteful elegance put into the distinct urban planning of its districts -save perhaps from its two southernmost ones-, there was an unmistakable touch of chaotic disarray woven in its streets, perpetuated through the days by the lively crowds flocking to them from dawn to dusk. As expected of a city this massive, it rarely allowed its residents a moment's respite.

Yet at its northern end stood a special district, faultlessly orderly and sumptuous to excess, proudly declaring itself an exception to that rule: the luxurious Liberty District, home to the wealthiest mammals in all of Animalia, as well as the calmest streets of the capital.

Its residents were similarly placid, unsuspicious high-standing prey, finely dressed and well behaved, rarely causing or getting involved into any kind of trouble. They liked their comfort and their quiet, which were truly hard earned either by themselves or, more commonly, by their enterprising forefathers, and to disturb them was greatly frowned upon in their circles. Only visitors to the district could be accused of doing so from time to time, but such visitors were rarer than one would expect; mostly sightseeing country folk, as other Zootopians held a certain resentment for the ostentatiously arrogant mammals whose opulent lifestyle they coveted.

As such, poor mammals rarely found themselves in Liberty District, let alone any of its numerous famed pothouses, the most modest of which would put an establishment such as the Rabid Drinker to shame.

The one-storey tavern located close to the Royal Gardens, however, was nowhere near modest, even by local standards. Framed portraits of important figures who had patronized the establishment over the years hung above their respective favorite spots -adding to the already extravagant prices customers would have to pay to occupy these seats-, a fireplace softly crackled in the dining area of the ground floor, masterfully cared for at all times to ensure it remained optimal for the patrons' comfort, and half a dozen smaller round tables were placed on the other side of the floor to accommodate those who entered seeking a glass of the establishment's renowned wine, produced only by the finest vineries in the land. A tall bar stood between the dining and drinking areas, impeccably clean and organized, and a female lemur was sitting on a stool at the corner closest to the fire, striking note after note on her lyre to produce a lovely, atmospheric music and complete the
tavern's wonderfully serene ambience.

Needless to say, the owners were not wanting when it came to coin, and the same went for their patrons; it was a necessity for any who wished to frequent the glamorous tavern which, after generations of establishing its reputation, had elevated itself into one of the best in the district despite its relatively small size.

That was why the caribou standing behind the bar couldn't help curiously eying the shady character that had appeared during his shift on that early autumn evening; the gray cloak concealing their appearance and the palpable disquiet emanating through their every fidgety look over their shoulder set them apart from the usual clientele, enough so to be cause for worry. They were clearly not wealthy, likely unable to afford the services offered there; and even if they could, there was no way they would be allowed in looking like this, lest they ruin the tavern's precious climate of luxury.

Yet despite his initial instincts, the tall mammal who had been tasked with tending the bar had made no move to force the cloaked figure out. When he saw them enter he simply offered them a reserved seat, the most isolated one in the drinking area, and served them a cup of his strongest spirit without them ever exchanging a word; so all in all, he had treated the conspicuous patron he was told to expect exactly as instructed.

Why had his boss given these instructions, and at who's behest? The caribou knew about as much as he cared, which wasn't much indeed; all he was concerned with was keeping his snout out of trouble whilst maintaining his well-paying job, so he would pause his staring and make a conscious effort not to remember anything about the mysterious mammal the next morning.

But alas, the few looks he had stolen as he served them had been enough for them to leave a couple of vague impressions. They were an ungulate, horned, much smaller than himself, nervous and with a thirst for alcohol.

Yet "subtle" wasn't the first epithet she brought to mind. She was in her forties, he knew, but looked considerably younger; if it weren't for the tranquil air of maturity that surrounded her, she could have passed as a much younger sow. A single, thick bang of pale blond hair hung over her forehead all the way to her light blue eyes. She had a short snout, which was considered a sign of beauty among her species, was healthily plump and her small, delicate hooves shone with a clean luster.

It didn't take a boar to notice she was nothing short of ravishing, more than capable of impressing the observer. Drawing their attention.

The ram wriggled nervously to the thought and took another sip, face wrinkling as the strong drink flowed down his throat.

But he was wrong to worry, for the pig truly was being subtle, in attitude if not in appearance. She had sat down, clicked her hooves once to the caribou who had immediately understood and fetched
her a glass of their richest red wine, taken her first sip and smacked her lips with pleasure without giving anyone other than the bartender and the ram any reason to take notice of her. The place was packed with lordly, rich looking mammals, after all; if anything, the ram was the one standing out like a sore thumb.

She apparently thought to comment on that.

"Really now, Marcus? A cloak?" Her voice rang deep and clear, collected and with a friendly undertone reflected in her smile. "Did you draw a target on your chest as well?"

She herself was clad in a puffy white dress and a red overcoat that she had hung on the back of her chair, both of which cost more than the caribou's monthly pay. That, the latter couldn't help but notice.

"I can't be seen. My face is out there now."

"People can't tell sheep apart at first glance, Marcus; you're all just so wooly. What could draw attention, however, is a ram hiding his face and shuffling constantly as if the whole world's out to get him."

"But they are out to get me!" he hissed at her, stooping over their drinks. "The rangers have my description! I'm a wanted mammal!"

"That's what we're here to discuss, Marcus; if you manage to compose yourself, that is." Her tone had a tincture of strictness to it, almost discreet enough for the ram to miss; then the pleasant smile returned, as friendly as could be. "And to start off, I'd like you to explain what went down in the Burrows. You've not been known to disappoint."

The ram named Marcus took another gulp from his drink, bigger than he could manage. If the pig was cross about his inelegance, she gave no sign of it; she just took the chance to savor another delectable sip of her wine as he struggled to muffle a coughing fit.

"It was going great at first, ma'am." he began teary eyed, still gasping for breath. "I was running a tight ship- I mean, for all these years, there had been no incidents whatsoever! I hadn't drawn attention, I- I was making sure the- the merchandise got to the city safely. For almost a decade, I hadn't been compromised! Not once!"

"Yes, indeed, Marcus; but I believe I asked you about how you did get compromised."

He snorted angrily, whipping his head to the wall in contempt. The alpaca hanging above them -an esteemed member of the Council from ages past- was there to meet his gaze, and in his mild stupor Marcus imagined that the guy was giving him the disenchanted look the pig had chosen to merely imply.

"It was those damn hillbillies in the country, ma'am. Everyone I had working under me was dumb as a fucking stump; my hooves were full just cleaning after the morons in all my years in the east! But of course, there were too many of them too look out for, and they- they were just so incompetent, ma'am, that in the end I couldn't-"

"Incompetent, yes." she repeated with meaning as she took another long sip, not bothering with his incoherent stammers.

"But… No I- M-ma'am, I assure you, I-"

"So the rangers of the Burrows found out about the little business you had set up." she cut him off
again, twisting the glass in her hooves to admire its content's sanguine color. "It's unfortunate, but that in itself isn't such a great loss, luckily. What truly concerns me is how much they might have learnt by it. About us, I mean."

"Nothing…! I've been very careful, ma'am, I-"

"How many among your associates knew of us?" she demanded tersely.

"None! It was a typical smuggling ring for all they knew."

She hummed. "But surely, they were aware that you were sending crops to Zootopia. And I imagine some, if not all, must have shared that information with the local rangers."

"Yes; but-"

The ram leaned closer, giving her a tremulous smile as he whispered on. "I also had crates shipped to all corners of Animalia, ma'am. I've been doing so since the beginning, for precaution; it even made me a decent profit! They'll see no reason to distinguish the Zootopia branch!"

She deigned a nod of approval. "Well done, Marcus. That was actually a good idea."

He laid back and went for another sip, wooly chest puffing visibly. "Thank you, ma'am."

"-if only you hadn't rushed straight to Zootopia yourself."

The cup paused before his mouth. "Why's that?"

"Because obviously, my dear cretin, you were followed." she elucidated, heaving a soft sigh.

The self-satisfied grin froze on his face, then slowly melted off. "I-what?"

"Oh, yes! Or did you assume they would just let the ringleader to their biggest, most organized den of iniquity in recent years go free if he fled the province?" she asked derisively, absently toying with her glass.

The ram, clearly shocked at the news, was left sputtering. "But- but this far, I- I left their bloody section, their jurisdiction! Who the hell would even bother?!" he wondered in bewilderment.

"Well, apparently…" The pig paused to give a chuckle; the answer to that question was amusingly preposterous. "They sent a bunny after you. A bunny ranger."

For the first time since he had entered the luxurious establishment, Marcus' fidgety twisting came to a stop. "A bunny?"

"Indeed; but do not think this makes matters any less dire, Marcus. The fact remains that-"

"That fucking bunny."

His hooves shook again, this time with anger. The pig arched a brow at him, allowing for a bump on her disengaged front. "You are familiar with the bunny?"

"Familiar?" he guffawed, snorting in bitter fury. "She was the one who smoked us out! If it weren't for that hopping wench and her tiny, snooping nose I would still be working the ring in the Burrows and we wouldn't be in this goddamn mess!"

"Lower your voice, fool!" she chided him, taken aback by his sudden outburst; she had either
overestimated his self-possession or underestimated his drink's potency. "If this is how you conducted yourself in the Burrows, I can see how she was able to get to you!"

He complied and quieted down, shaking his head. "I should have known…!" he bemoaned. "She's tenacious, she's- she's fucking obsessive. We threw her off our tracks on three separate occasions, ma'am! Three! In the end we had some small fry pose as the head and get caught, all investigations were closed and yet she still kept probing!"

The pig hummed once more, contemplating. A bunny ranger was ludicrous enough, but an efficient one? *The world really is a strange place.*

"Well, now she's here, Marcus; and she's looking for you. But don't worry." She let go of the glass and put her hooves together, adopting the palatine air of a merciful savior. "We will protect you. Arrangements have already been made for you. She won't find you or anything pertaining to your ring here in Zootopia."

"You most certainly are, dear." she agreed evenly, reclaiming her glass; then she gave a curt scoff before bringing it to her lips, eying down the obsequious ram. "But there's no sense in giving me thanks. I wanted to have you killed."

The ram wilted in his seat, dread and surprise clutching his stomach. As endearing as his trepidation was, the pig decided not to let him express it lest he became too vocal again.

"Relax, Marcus." she added with another soft, fetching chuckle, cutting him off before he could sputter his desperate plea. "If you were to die you wouldn't be talking with me now. No, the notion was put down; you have shown laudable dedication, after all. No one can deny that."

"So surely, you of all people must understand that this is bigger than us, Marcus; greater, than us." She leaned towards the trembling ram to stress her words; the latter thought that the blue of her eyes was every bit as cold as it was beautiful. "So personal feelings aside, we have to make sure we allow no liabilities."

Marcus swallowed what felt like a ball of lead. "I- I won't be one! I swear, ma'am, I'll vanish, you'll never hear of me again! I-"

"I know, Marcus." She reached out and gingerly placed a dainty hoof over his own rugged ones, her eyes never leaving his; the solicitous gesture contrasted the clear implications of her gaze. "I know you won't force my hooves."

"Go now." she ordered him neatly, retrieving her arm. "Lay low, don't leave your house. We'll be keeping an eye on you."

"Your drink's on me. Go." she added with finality, preventing another shaken stammer before it could leave his throat.

The ram tentatively complied. He got on his feet and made for the exit, holding onto the empty chairs and tables on his way to support himself; his knees were weak, and not only due to his minor inebriation. He vanished behind the door with a near inaudible creak.

Upon hearing it the pig raised her head from her drink and scanned the dining area at the other side of the room until she found a pair of eyes aimed at her direction; another ram, bearing much larger horns and more appropriately mantled than the previous one, was sitting close to the fireplace, a full
plate of silage and a glass of wine similar to her own resting on the table before him. He alone had been observing the two throughout the entirety of their exchange, frowning disapprovingly at Marcus’ outburst and following him with his gaze as he exited the tavern. Now he was sitting up on his comfortable chair, giving the pig an inquisitive look.

She gave her head a light shake. He immediately relaxed and nodded in understanding before turning his attention to his food and the lovely music of the lemur close to his seat.

She wouldn't require his services after all. Marcus was thoroughly whipped, respectful and apprehensive to an appropriate degree; he was sure to follow his orders to the letter, as always. For all the obtrusive inconveniences that had popped up, in the end there was no real cause for concern.

So the pig too relaxed and took the time to enjoy the rest of her wine; wonderfully rich, with a subtle fruity aftertaste that lingered pleasantly on the palate. Truly exquisite; she should remember to refill her own stock soon. The tavern with the acclaimed cellar didn't typically sell their alcohol wholesale, understandably wishing to maintain their monopoly, but the pig was a special case as she was close friends with the owner, who had grown largely dependent on her in more ways than one; the best kind of friend, in her not so humble opinion. That was also the reason she had chosen to have her meeting there.

She finished her wine, signaled the caribou to come over and, after asking him to convey her genuine praise to the owner for their superb quality, paid for both drinks; she also left a lavish tip, earning her the caribou’s most servile bow, slightly deeper than his usual one.

Then she put on her red coat and made for the door, placing her lovely purple pouch back into the coat's inner pocket before disappearing into the wide, clean streets.

"Do they taste good?"

Judy paused her loud munching to shoot the fox a puzzled look. "Huh?"

"Carrots." Nick clarified, gesturing to the half-eaten vegetable in her paws. "I was wondering how they tasted."

She took a second to swallow her mouthful. "Can foxes even eat vegetables?"

"Sure we can! I mean, it's not the top of the list, but they're just so much cheaper than meat. Berries, though; now that's the real deal!" he enthused, lightly patting his belly. "Just serve me fish and berries and you're looking at a happy fox."

"Fish, huh?" Her nose wrinkled to the thought; the fox, on the other hand, licked his lips with a dreamy look on his face. "Oh yes; but I haven't eaten in years, I'm afraid. The prices are embittering, lieutenant, you wouldn't believe."

She hummed, taking another bite. "Carrots aren't that expensive, though; surely you could afford some." She shot him a sharp, austere look before adding: "Or simply steal a few, I suppose; if that's not beneath you."

"Of course it's not beneath me, lieutenant!" he replied in an affronted tone. "They've just never caught my interest until now."

"That so?" she asked absently, looking away.

"Well, yes-"
He was suddenly leaning down to her face, smirking. "-ever since I met you, though, I can't help thinking carrots actually look kinda tasty." he added with a playful wiggle of the brows.

She held the grin stoically, reciprocating with an icy stare. "Nick…"

"Ah! But you see, I didn't actually call you anything, did I?" he reasoned cheerfully, springing back to his full height in an airy motion. "It was merely insinuated. You've got nothing on me, bunny!"

She groaned and looked away, convincing herself that the fox's antics weren't getting to her. "Will you really make me cash in that kick now, Wilde? Not one day into our partnership?"

"You do realize I never agreed to that, technically." he pointed out, the mirth in his voice unabated; the overly expressive bunny and her vivacity were far too easy to read into.

"And you do realize I never swore not to hit you, technically." Judy echoed back at him, harsh tone contradicted by the buckteeth protruding through a gamesome smirk. Try as she might, she failed to be menacing; besides, she had forgotten that the fox appreciated a snippy comeback as much as she loved giving one.

"My, my! An abusive ranger! Who'd have thought?" he bellowed, adroitly feeding their frolicsome exchange with an underlying sense of accomplishment; the bunny ranger was far too enjoyable an interlocutor to be allowed to remain as distant and frigid as she tried to be around him.

"Hardly! It's only righteous retribution for my previous trip to the Garden, Slick." she retorted. "Once I satisfy the craving I'll be much more focused, more efficient; and that will surely make our job that much easier. So, you know; what was the word?" She eyed him with meaning, oozing of taunting innocence no more honest than his own. "Necessary evil, and whatnot."

Nick's grin was now so sharp that she thought it would cut right through his furry cheeks. The bunny was turning out to be thrilling.

"You're more vain than I give you credit for, aren't you?" he remarked. "But in any case, my trigger-happy rabbit, I would seriously advice against it; Finnick would never forgive you if he missed it."

"Hm…" She brought the reduced end of the carrot to her chin, as if contemplating. "… I could totally charge him to watch, couldn't I?"

"Ah hah, lieutenant…! See?" he chortled in dramatic approval. "Now you're thinking like a gypsy!"

She shook her head and took the final bite, forcing her lips flat as she resumed chewing.

They were making their way between the wooden booths of the Central Market, speaking loudly to be heard over the vociferous merchants passionately advertising their products to passerbies. The sound of a thousand mammals shouting, bargaining and laughing at the numerous street performers scattered throughout the Plaza nearly made the ground shake, and they had to be careful not to get separated for it would be impossible to find each other given their small sizes.

Jasmine, the female ermine who had disappeared from the Central Market two weeks ago, had been working a jewelry booth in the Market's southern end, along with a male llama. They had decided to begin their investigation by looking for that booth and questioning the llama, hoping he'd have something to say about the two sheep that Jasmine had mentioned.

In all honestly, Judy wasn't too pleased with her current situation. There were no clear links between the predators' disappearance and the stolen crops she was supposed to be looking for, and she feared this would turn out to be a waste of her time.
And besides, if her gut was right, this entire story was a veritable boulder, related or not; and she never could keep her paws off a good mystery.

The bunny was forced out of her musings by an elephant's deadly stomp, which she barely managed to evade; it was truly a wonder how these mammals managed to step through the thick a crowd without leaving a trail of mushed animals at their wake. She paused next to a large clothing booth and turned to Nick in frustration.

"Nick, it's been almost an hour." she began, crossing her arms. "Are you sure it's around here, or are we just wandering around aimlessly?"

For an answer, the fox simply reached into his tunic and produced a small, folded piece of paper. He held it out between two fingers, offering it to her.

She took and unfolded it. "What's this?"

"The details on Jasmine's work in the Market, lieutenant." he elucidated. "I wrote them down as soon as she began and added anything noteworthy she mentioned since; including the sheep, as you'll see."

Judy took a moment to scan the paper's contents, appreciating the pleasant, practiced handwriting. "You keep a record for everyone who gets a job in Zootopia?"

"Yes, of course; as irritating as formalism can be, it is instrumental to running any decent business." he declared knowingly. "I always keep my notes for as long as they're relevant."

She gave an idle hum, eyes still on the paper; indeed, everything was as the fox had told her.

"Is it possible they simply haven't set up the booth today?" she suggested, turning to Nick.

"Very unlikely." he responded, resting his body against the clothing booth. "If you fail to occupy your reserved position by mid-day, others are allowed to take it, and then they'd have grounds to claim it as their own. Lots of unwanted drama."

She turned her attention back to the paper, ears hanging flaccid as she put her mind to work. Nick averted his eyes from her, leaning further against the booth with a disillusioned huff. He couldn't understand; they should have found it by now.

"… Nick?"

"Mm?"

Her expression hadn't changed in any way, save for a sudden perk of her ears. "It says here that they were hired by a male wallaby. Is that right?"

He arched a brow at her. "Ugh, yeah?"

"Didn't we see a wallaby running a jewelry booth somewhere around here?"

Not as far as he could remember, no; but then again, he had been keeping an eye out for a llama, not a wallaby.

"He wouldn't run the booth himself, lieutenant. Most of the owners, including our wallaby, have a proper shop they need to operate elsewhere in the city; that's why they hire others to look after the
"Yes, but you said he would stand to lose his spot if no one opened the booth for a day." she insisted, turning to him once more. "Maybe the llama was unavailable and he had to come himself to keep the booth."

"Unavailable, huh?" He rubbed the back of his neck, considering her theory. "I mean… I guess it's possible; although with as much competition as there is around here, I doubt anyone would risk displeasing their employer like this."

"But we can't be sure, right?"

A feint smirk creased the bunny's lips as she waited for confirmation. Nick hardly thought of such random speculation as cause for excitement, but lacking any alternatives, he figured he might as well put his faith in her instincts; after all, they would simply be looking for a wallaby along with a llama. That was hardly an obstruction.

"No, we can't." he admitted with a nod. "Alight then; do you remember where you saw him, exactly?"

"I'm- not certain, no." She folded the paper and handed it back to him before turning around, heading in the direction they had come from. "Let's just retrace our steps, we'll run into him eventually."

"Easier said than done." he mumbled to himself with a light snort, hiding the paper back into his tunic before following the bunny's lead.

Yet despite the chaotic clutter of chattering mammals that was the Market, it didn't actually take long before Judy let out a soft exclaim and pointed him to the right booth. Nick's reservations waned as he too caught sight of it; a jewelry booth, in the Market's southern end, run by a male wallaby in his forties. This could be more promising than he had initially believed.

"Good." Judy heaved a satisfied sigh before turning to him, eying him sternly. "Let me do the talking, alright? It's better if I question him alone, as a ranger."

"Unless he's got something to hide, of course." he remarked with an easy smile. "But sure, it's your call, lieutenant; you're the employer, after all."

The wallaby was standing on the booth rather than behind it, pacing to and fro amidst the jewels he was selling while brightly waving his arms and calling out to every passerby, trying to draw their attention to his merchandise just like every other merchant in the Market. He proudly declared their superior quality and unmatched beauty, but Nick knew enough about jewels to shoot these specimens a skeptical look as they approached.

"Excuse me, sir?" Judy called out once they were standing before his booth. The merchant paused his aggressive touting and gazed down at her, instantly losing himself to surprise as he caught sight of a bunny.

"My name is Judith Laverne Hopps, ranger lieutenant, sir." she gave her typical, firm introduction. "I'd like to ask you a few questions regarding an ongoing investigation."

Naturally, the wallaby's initial response was the confused frown Judy had come to also consider typical at that point. "You're… You're a ranger?"

"I know; outrageous, isn't it?" Nick breezily chimed in, not averting his eyes from the jewels or bothering to conceal the blatant disapproval on his features. "Still, she is a lieutenant, so you might..."
"I want to comply, buddy."

"Indeed, sir." Judy spoke up again, decisively reclaiming control of the conversation; her curt tone betrayed vexation, but chiding the fox over his undesired interference would have to wait for now. "We are looking for a female ermine who would have been wor-"

"Ah! Have you made some progress on the case, then? About fucking time!" he exclaimed, briefly forgetting his bewilderment upon mention of the ermine; then his face darkened as he looked at Judy anew, no doubt resenting the fact that the ranger working on said case was a bunny.

Both mammals below him recoiled to the sudden yelling. "Which case are you referring to, sir?"

The wallaby tilted his head, confused once again. "What…? The case, of course! The theft! Ain't that why they sent you to look for the blasted ermine?"

Fox and bunny shared a perplexed glance. "Sir, we're not aware of any theft; we were just looking for an ermine who's gone missing. She was working a jewelry booth around these parts until she vanished some two weeks ago."

"Yeah, that's her! That's my ermine!" he confirmed with an angry scowl. "But if you're gonna bother looking for her, it should be to bring the bloody sod to justice! Fucking weasel made away with my jewels before disappearing!"

The bunny's ears stiffened, tilting attentively towards the merchant; that was new information. "Could you give me some more details?"

The wallaby crossed his arms and began tapping his foot on the booth, clearly vexed; a set of earrings jingled underneath him, and the wallaby's indifference to the sound reinforced Nick's convictions on his merchandise. "I've already explained everything to your coworkers, ma'am. One morning she shows up as usual, works the day, closes up the booth and leaves for the Zone; then the next morning my finest pieces have gone missing, and she's nowhere to be found!"

"Sorry, but I find that hard to believe." Nick cut in once more, contemptuously gesturing to the jewels on display. "These… trinkets are hardly worth purchasing, frankly, let alone stealing. Who would take such a risk for them?"

The wallaby turned to the fox, deeply offended. "I- How dare- Excuse me, who the hell are you, again?"

"He's an asset I'm employing for this investigation." Judy hurriedly answered for him. "Please, pay him no mind, sir; he's a bit of an ass." she added, shooting the smirking fox a murderous side look.

"Well, I'll have you know, the stolen jewels were kept at my shop, not this here shabby booth, and they were the most expensive in my stock. This whole damn story's nearly left me strapped; that's why I have to work the fucking booth myself nowadays!"

"So I take it you fired the ermine's coworker?" inquired Judy. "A llama, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Ethan." The wallaby practically spat out the name. "No, the fucker quit on me a few days later. Guessing he caught wind of my failing finances, figured he'd start looking for another job a moment earlier. Truth is, I'd probably have fired him by now even if he did stay."

She nodded. "We'd like to question him as well. Can I ask you for his address?"

"No point, ma'am. He's moved out, dunno where to."
"Moved out?"

"To a cheaper place, I'd reckon." he added with an indifferent shrug. "Unemployment can do that to a mammal. Been considering it myself lately."

"... So you have no idea where we can find him?"

"His old landlord was no help when I asked, and I don't know of any family he might have here, so I guess not. But he had already given his statements on the ermine to your colleagues; just check your records."

Judy nodded once and let her gaze trail off, long ears sagging, looking deeply pensive. She went silent for a while.

Nick figured this was his cue to enter the fray anew. "One more question, sir; did either of them ever mention two sheep frequenting the booth?"

The wallaby turned to him with a disgruntled expression, clearly remembering the vulpine's disparaging comments on his merchandise. "No, never. They wouldn't bother me with every insignificant little detail, fox. I am a busy man; or was, anyway."

Nick shrugged, canting his head with pity. "Well, that explains your current predicament, pal. Can't be that lax with your employees."

Peeved, the wallaby retorted with a sarcastic scoff. "Right; because a fox, of all animals, would know the first thing about running a business. Don't you have to go steal an honest mammal's savings or something?"

"Maybe I will, once I see something worth stealing," came the blithe answer from the fox not a second later. He wasn't the least bit offended, actually; only amused, keen to see for how long the wallaby could keep up.

But unfortunately, Judy chose that exact moment to exit her trance. "Did your employees have access to the main shop?" she asked curtly, cutting off the wallaby before he could muster a response.

"Limited, but yeah." He turned to her, inwardly glad to be spared a longer exchange with the irritating fox. "They had to bring in the day's profits and all remaining jewels by nightfall, and they came by again in the morning to fetch more jewels before they set up the booth."

"Sounds difficult to rob the place, if they only visited it briefly twice a day." she remarked.

"True; but she did disappear as soon as the jewels were stolen, and that's proof enough for me. Same for your folk, apparently, since you've put her on your wanted list. Hell, you know chompers." he added, shooting a meaningful glance at the fox and his derisive smile.

"... Right."

She raised her chin and flashed him a bright smile. "Thank you for your cooperation, sir. We'll look into the matter."

"O-oh." The wallaby nodded, slightly taken aback; the questioning had reached a rather abrupt end. "Yes, of course. Best of luck, ma'am."

Nick felt likewise but chose not to comment as they moved away from the bitter wallaby and his
booth. He quietly followed the bunny until she led them to the outer edge of the Plaza, where the noise was less vehement and they needn't worry about gigantic mammals accidentally squashing them flat.

"Alright, lieutenant." he huffed as she stopped and mirrored him. "Let's hear it; what's going on in that mind of yours now?"

She eyed him for a second, biting her lip in thought. "You never mentioned your ermine robbing her employer."

"That's because she didn't." he responded coolly. "I would have known, she'd have told me."

"Are you certain?"

"Positive."

Her eyes narrowed as she fell silent yet again, not bothering with her partner's growing impatience.

"Come on, lieutenant! Talk to me!" he prompted. "What's bothering ya?"

She glanced back at him. "… The stolen jewels."

Her answer left him puzzled. "The jewels…? Why, do you think the sheep had something to do with- oh, wait a minute!" He glowered at the rabbit, ears folding in annoyance. "Don't tell me you want to start looking into the robbery now! We've enough on our plate as it is!"

Judy waved a paw in dismissal, denying the notion. "No, no- look." She took a step closer, locking eyes with him to stress her words. "What is our premise here?"

The fox stared back, a straight face masking his confusion. "Our premise?"

"Our premise, yes."

His eyes briefly shot to the sky as he pondered the question. "Um… Quirky tag team of a sheep-hunting ranger and gypsy?" he suggested, deciding there was no point in trying; he had no clue what she was on about.

"Wha- no!" She shook her head with an impatient groan. "Focus, Nick!"

"I don't live inside your damn head, bunny!" he groused, raising his voice. "So if you had some epiphany, by all means, feel free to share it!"

"Okay, okay- Listen."

"Our premise is that there are sheep going around abducting predators, yes?"

Between her unremittingly focused gaze and the growing tension in her voice as she began building towards her point, Nick quickly found himself invested in her words. "Yes, that's right."

"And they appear to be doing so without any immediate monetary gains in mind, correct?"

He rolled his eyes to the bunny's drawling voice. "I'm neither deaf nor stupid, lieutenant. Just get to the point."

"Right; what I'm trying to say is that our sheep stealing the jewels goes against the premise we've established so far!" she continued. "Remember Otterton, for example; the sheep hadn't gotten a
penny out of him before he vanished, and neither did the one who had hired your jaguar in the Zone, at least as far as we know. It seems to me that them being involved in that robbery doesn't add up."

Nick brought a clawed paw to his chin, humming. "Why did it grab your attention, then? Shouldn't we focus on finding the llama instead?"

"That's exactly it!" she exclaimed, slamming a fist in her open paw. "Tell me again; are you absolutely certain Jasmine had nothing to do with it?"

"That's what I meant by "positive", yes."

Judy began counting down fingers, violet eyes scintillating as she struggled to convey her reasoning. "So here's what we know: there was a robbery at the exact same time when the ermine disappeared, so naturally suspicions fall on her. Shortly after that, the llama she was working with disappears as well. Now, since we have no reason to assume the sheep would have any interest in the jewels, and we know Jasmine didn't do it—"

"-it means the llama is the most likely culprit." Nick finished her thought, his expression now a reflection of hers.

"Precisely!" she beamed at him, rapt in her investigator's high. "It would be only too convenient, wouldn't it? A predator's timely disappearance would have drawn all the attention, as it did, and he would be free to walk away with the goods."

He puckered his lips, skeptical. "But then he must have known she would vanish when she did, right?"

She nodded rapidly, visibly delighted to finally have him follow her train of thought. "True, which is why I'm starting to believe the sheep might not have been the ones responsible for her disappearance after all; unless they're in cahoots with the llama, I suppose."

He took a minute to process the theory; it felt increasingly convincing the more he considered it. *Bunny's got a nose for the business, huh?*

"So we really do ought to look for Ethan, the llama who so tactlessly made himself scarce?"

"That's the idea, but…"

She crossed her arms, abandoning her jubilant air for a troubled expression. "The thing is, we've nowhere to begin our search. I mean, we could look into his old residence, but if what the wallaby said was true I expect there won't be any hints to his current whereabouts." she sighed. "And the worst part is, the jewels haven't popped up yet or the rangers would have confiscated and returned them; which means that wherever this Ethan sold them off to, it wasn't close by. He could have fled Zootopia by now for all we know."

"… Not necessarily."

Judy shot the fox a questioning look, noticing the spark of an idea dancing behind his eyes; an impression corroborated by the light motions of his tail. "What do you mean?"

"Well, when it comes to trafficking stolen goods -not that I'd know anything about that sort of thing-"

"No, of course not." she humored him with a wry smile.

"-if you're smart, you wait for the search to go cold before putting them out there."
She sunk, slightly disappointed. "So what, we just wait and hope they show up in a month or two?"

"I am in a bigger hurry than yourself, lieutenant." he pointed out. "So no; instead we hope our llama, if indeed he is the rotten egg we assume him to be, at least knew to sell the stuff where it wouldn't be found."

Judy's ears quivered with renewed hope. Of course, the fox enjoyed toying with her expectations, but she didn't mind at the time; as long as he got them the results he had promised her back in that damp underground cell. "Why do I get the feeling you've got something in mind?"

"Do I ever!" he exclaimed, flashing her a broad smile; and for the first time ever, she openly smiled back. He winked at her. "Let's go visit some acquaintances of mine, lieutenant."

"I think it's time I demonstrate just how much of an "asset" I really am."

While Rockwood District could by no means boast the fanciest establishments in the city, its were certainly the busiest. The taverns, inns and, on a smaller scale, the shops located in the proximity of the imposing castle offered the most reasonable ratio between price and quality of service, thus catering to the majority of the lower class citizens on a daily basis. The mornings found most of the traffic directed towards the Avenue and the Central Market, where one could hope to strike a decent deal on food or general merchandise respectively, but at the afternoon there was a shift in momentum towards Rockwood as people visited the district's pothouses to unwind and end the day.

Getting to any district from the Plaza was relatively easy, so the duo found themselves navigating the streets of Rockwood while it was still noon, before the crowds surged in to briefly make the atmosphere suffocating before disappearing into the watering hole of their preference. Apart from employees preparing their shops for the upcoming rush hour and the occasional carrier -Judy had by then learnt that theirs was a constant presence in the capital- the streets were nearly empty. It was the calm before the storm.

Nick was leading the way, mechanically walking towards their destination with the swift air of a fox who knew where he was headed, making turns and switching sides on the road without once breaking pace. Judy easily kept up with him, persistently bombarding him with question after question. For you see, the bunny ranger had been rapturous at the fox for claiming to have a solution to their stalemate; for about two seconds. Then she remembered what had transpired the last time he had made such a claim, so she made sure to put him through a proper interrogation as they walked, if only to put her mind at ease; or the exact opposite, if deemed appropriate.

"Nick, this friend of yours… they won't be like Lionfart, will they?" This question in particular was especially important to her.

He chuckled. "Sorry to disappoint you, lieutenant, but no; Leo's utterly unique."

"Aw! Shame." The contradictory relief in her tone earned her another chuckle.

Nick took a final turn through a relatively narrow street and came to a stop just as she was running out of questions.

"Here." he announced, gesturing to a large, wooden building with a sign hanging above its two paneled door. "This is the place."

Judy examined the structure; an inn, as made clear by the hanging sign. It was slightly larger than most, had no entrances for the tallest species and the pinkish color of its walls was maybe a bit too garish for her tastes, but other than that it was exceedingly upright and normal. Too normal, almost.
"This is it?" she asked the fox incredulously, gazing at the sign. "Just an inn at the side of the road?"

His head whipped towards her, and she thought she saw a shadow of surprise pass over his features as she mirrored him; but it was so brief she might as well have imagined it. What she certainly didn't imagine, however, was the grin he gave her next, or the fact that it took him an extra second to answer.

It wasn't his usual one; not the wide, riling one he wore when expecting a response to his teases, or the half-smile that accompanied his chuckles; and definitely nothing close to the joyous laughter he had loosed as he explained Leodore's nickname to her the night before.

This one was sharper, fainter and overwhelmingly saucy, brimming with subtle yet unmistakable mischief; if anything, it reminded Judy of the one the fox had on when he had approached her in the Zone's headquarters, right before luring her into his trap.

Every single hair on her body bristled in an instant.

"Despite common belief, we scoundrels tend to avoid suspicious places, lieutenant." he began. "A clean, inconspicuous hub is the telling sign of any respectable underground business; that's why the ones your people catch are typically shady and queer. They're the amateurs."

"So, what kind of hub is this then?" she inquired, endlessly suspicious of her vulpine companion.

"Oh no, this establishment's totally legit, as far as I'm aware; and my friend isn't a criminal per se either. She just knows some people, so I'll ask her to be our intermediary."

"Intermediary to the city's jewelry black market?"

"The black market in general, actually." he clarified. "Ah, but remember; no prying!"

"I know, I know." she sighed. "Don't worry; as long as you keep your paws clean, I won't look into any of it. But are you sure the jewels would have ended up there?"

"Not one hundred percent, no, but it is the obvious choice. If our thief knew of this existing market, I wager he'd have turned to them. It's a safe gamble."

"In any case; shall we?"

He politely gestured to the entrance of their size, now giving her one of his more casual, toothless smiles. Judy didn't trust it any more than she trusted him; she stared dead into his eyes, ears in faint tilt and face set in stone. Nick braved the look for a couple of seconds before relenting, entering first with a nonchalant shrug. After taking one last quick look to make sure there were no assailants approaching her from behind, she followed after him through the swinging panels and into the establishment, remaining ever vigilat.

If the inn's front had struck her as unremarkable, the inside definitely cast that impression. It was an utter deviation from the typical build, with an enormous, arch-like opening, akin to a rhino sized door with no panels, placed next to the bar, leading to the inner parts of the structure; a truly peculiar touch, the likes of which Judy had never seen in an inn before, be it in Zootopia or the Burrows. Another oddity that caught her attention was the seats; there were many couches and armchairs randomly scattered throughout the room, coated with rugs and comfortable pillows, with small round tables and stools placed around them. There were no dining tables.
Last but not least, upon entering the room they were welcomed by a mild commotion. Despite the emptiness of the district outside, the inn was all but swarmed; a number of customers were comfortably spread over the couches, fully relaxed and with drinks in their paws, while a notably large number of waiters and waitresses -some of whom were even predators- were ambling between them holding small flagons of wine with which they refilled the seated mammals' cups. Aside from them, there was a disheveled yak with a languid smile working the bar and a large, muscular white ox standing guard beside the arch, keeping an eye on the numerous servers who went through to carry more wine into the subsequent rooms. Overall, the establishment seemed much more expensive than its modest exterior would imply.

*Legit my fluffy tail,* thought Judy as she took in the picture. Despite the apparent innocence of its front, this particular inn carried the impression of a typical crime boss' den; the imposing ox with the menacing look alone imparted that sentiment avidly.

"You're right; this place looks all sorts of inconspicuous." she derided bitterly, looking around the room.

Nick flashed a taking smile at a blue eyed arctic fox that passed them by with a jar in her paws before striding towards the arch with a purpose, satisfied with the girlish giggle he had caused the exotic vixen. "Try not to stand out too much, lieutenant." he told the bunny without facing her. "I'll be over in a jiffy."

"Huh?"

Judy's eyes shot back to him in alarm. "You're not going anywhere without *me,* bud; those were my terms!"

He stopped at the bar and mirrored her, the cherubic curve on his lips adding to the bunny's unease. "And I'm totally okay with them, lieutenant. I'd love for you to tag along."

"*He* wouldn't, though!" he whispered with a conspiratory tinge in his voice, hiking a thumb towards the ox behind them. As Judy's attention turned to the ox she caught Nick's other paw with the corner of her eye as it snatched a full flagon from under the yak's nose; a motion far too swift and fluid to attract the attention of anyone not actively supervising him, let alone the dull-looking mammal behind the bar.

She was about to rebuke him over what she perceived to be wine theft -yet another violation of their arrangement- when she noticed one more thing about him; or rather, a number of things. His vexing, invariably smug expression had vanished, replaced by a dry, impassive look; his eyes were downcast, ears folded back and tail lowered, kept only inches above the wooden floor and, perhaps most importantly, his regal posture had visibly deflated, rigid shoulders bent in a slight hunch that further lowered his head.

As he took the first step with the flagon held carefully in his paws and she saw that even his airy gait had regressed to a series of small, quick steps, she understood; what she was seeing was yet another persona, one neither the ox nor anyone else could tell apart from the rest of the small army of waiters going to and fro with that exact swift, busy walk. His naturally flamboyant presence had practically vanished.

A pony and a sow entered through the arch carrying more jars, and the red fox that entered between them was hardly registered by the intimidating bovine who didn't think it the least bit weird that he couldn't remember him; there were far too many servers in the establishment, after all, and he couldn't be expected to know them all by name. He also missed the furtive wink the fox threw over his shoulder, in full discrepancy with the rest of his servile act.
The only one to catch it was Judy.

"Hey- Wait!"

She reached after her partner just a second too late, her paws missing his tail for mere inches as the latter crossed the arch; then she found herself facing a hoof of the ox who had moved to block her way, giving a temperate snort which implied it would not remain so if the tiny mammal stirred up any unwanted trouble.

"Easy there, missy!" he addressed her with his appropriately gruff voice, raising a front hoof in her direction. "I'm sure you're eager, but you ain't going anywhere before paying." he added sternly, eyeing her down.

Judy stretched her neck to look past the ox's burly leg, loudly clicking her tongue as she caught sight of Nick’s red figure slipping further away; she could easily picture the shit-eating grin spread on the fox's face through the light wag of his tail alone.

She looked back at the ox in a moment of consideration; Nick had told her not to stand out too much…

"Sir, I am a ranger lieutenant and my mission requires immediate access to this establishment. Step aside!"

On a different note, Nick could go fuck himself.

"Your "mission", right." the ox sneered without complying. "I'm sure you'll have a warrant with you then, bun."

She didn't appreciate being called a "bun" while on duty -or at any other time, really- but she let it pass in favor of his other statement. "A warrant? Why on earth would I need a warrant for a simple inn?" she inquired with a chuckle of her own, shrugging and motioning around the room; indeed, warrants and permits were only required for access to specified areas, such as the cathedral or Rockwood Castle. Inns, on the other hand, were always fair play, be it country or capital.

The ox simply blinked at her question; then his demeanor softened. "... You're not from around here, are you?"

"I- Well, no, actually. I'm not." she admitted, shifting her weight between two legs.

"Thought so." he mumbled. "Well, here in the capital, establishments such as ours are protected by a... a compromise with the local chief. You folk need a warrant issued by him to search our premises, bun; else the business would be crawling with capped freeloaders, if you catch by drift." He raised an eyebrow at her and nodded to the rest of the room to make sure that she did, in fact, catch his drift. She frowned as she met his gaze, then reluctantly turned her head around to see what he was referring to.

And she saw the room -really saw it- as if for the first time.

The servers of either gender all had a type; namely, scantily clad and impressively attractive, but still diverse enough to cater to every taste. The pigs were nicely plump, the impalas were tall and slender, and the single arctic fox in the room had a silky, snow-white tail to die for. The male swine she was currently serving was giving that exact tail a lecherous stare, even running his hooves over it as she passed; and all she did in response was give him an alluring smile before moving on to the next customer with the jar in her delicate paws.
There were thin veils covering the windows and aromatic candles slowly burning away on most of the tables, creating a shadowy, mystifying ambience for the mammals enjoying the servers' attention, leisurely spread on their seats; an ambience which only now struck Judy as inappropriate, as-

As suffocatingly \textit{erotic}, or just downright obscene; just like the moans of pleasure her rigid ears were now nibbling at, mere whispers coming through beyond the arch.

Judy felt herself physically contract. A vicious sear spread from her cheeks all the way to her ears, which instantly hung as her shocked eyes met the vixen's. Whatever look she was wearing at the moment must have amused the latter greatly for she giggled anew and leaned close to the yak behind the counter, whispering to him while shooting the flabbergasted bunny beguiling side looks.

One of the greatest points Judy had taken note of in Zootopia was its complete absence of brothels, save for the Zone, of course. Indeed, she had noticed none in the core of the city; only an oddly large number of your average, unsuspicious looking inns, many of whom she was now realizing were probably not as innocuous as she had initially gathered. Suddenly finding herself in one, surrounded by the overwhelming licentiousness of the establishment and its patrons, she could do nothing but silently sputter as she turned back to the ox, completely aghast.

\textit{This cannot be legal}, was the first thought to cross the dazed bunny's mind as she mechanically applied her Burrows mentality to the situation.

Then she remembered where she was. \textit{Cheese and crackers, it IS legal…!}

"Right." The ox spoke again when her expression told him she had finished putting two and two together, struggling to conceal his amusement at the expense of the now formerly clueless bunny. "Well, you see, without a proper warrant, you've no jurisdiction here; so if you want in, you'll have to pay."

She stammered something she didn't quite catch herself and numbly nodded no at him, stepping away from the arch. Just as she was realizing how lost she suddenly felt, she noticed the yak motioning her over, the dreamy smile still on his face; likely a product of intoxication, she'd wager. She slowly approached the bar and, lacking her typical confidence, didn't hop on any of the chairs, forcing the yak to stoop over the counter to keep her in his sights.

"Hey there, little fella…!" he greeted her, speaking in a monotone, lackadaisical drawl; if he didn't appear as drunk as he did, Judy might have believed he had some enunciation impediment. "Can't afford the services, huh? Well, we've got a whole bunch of packages for folk like yourself! And you're in luck; Carmen over there was just telling me she'd make a discount just for you!"

Judy looked over to the vixen and found her still smiling, staring meaningfully at the bunny. As soon as the charming vulpine caught her gaze, she sent her a seductive wink.

"No-no, no. No-no need, I'm- I'm not here- I'm here for work. Sir." she hurriedly responded, turning back to the yak with a fresh sear coloring her ears. "I just didn't realize the- the \textit{nature} of your business, is all." she added, thinking back to Nick's sly grin just before they had entered; the bastard knew she had misunderstood things and had purposely left her oblivious.

"You didn't know this was a pleasure house?"

"Well, no. Prostitution is not looked at favorably where I come from, so I haven't really-"

"Oooh, it's one of those backward places, eh?"

She gave a wry chuckle. "Backward, huh?"
"Well, yeah, no offence but- it's only your body!" he exclaimed, laughing in that lazy tone of his. "Why not have a bit of fun with it every now and then? You ain't hurting no one!"

Judy thought to invoke the values of decency, but eventually decided otherwise; given the circumstances, it would be discourteous of her to call the yak out on the abhorrent practices of the business.

"What can I say, sir? Guess I'm still a bit backwards myself, unfortunately."

"Oh…" The yak nodded with what appeared to be heartfelt pity. "Well then, while you're here, I suppose I'll get ya a drink, eh? Everyone everywhere drinks, at least! What'll you have?"

She looked up to his smiling face, feeling more than a little awkward; she and her tastes certainly didn't belong in there. "Do… do you have, um… water?"

The yak blinked at her in mild surprise, then gave the matter some serious thought. "… You know; I-I think we do, actually!" He fumbled around under the counter for a minute before producing a dusty clay jar. He sniffed at its contents for good measure. "Yeah, that's it. Water don't go bad, does it?"

She assured him that no, to her knowledge, water kept in clay containers did in fact not go bad, after which he served her a glass. She paid him with a copper coin despite his well-disposed attempts to put her "drink" on the house and then stiffly traipsed towards a vacant armchair in a corner of the room, deftly avoiding the arctic vixen on the way. She clutched her glass in both paws and sat at the edge of the armchair, crumpling in on herself in an attempt to take up as little space as possible on the seat which, as with all the others in the room, had likely provided accommodation for more lascivious acts than she cared to imagine. Her discomfort was hard to overstate.

It took Nick less than twenty minutes to reemerge from the arch as discreetly as he had entered it. He abandoned the now empty flagon on the bar when the yak’s attention was aimed elsewhere -at a spot in the wall which had somehow enthralled him, as far as the fox could tell- and began scanning the dimly lit room, searching for a pair of grey bunny ears with a black finish.

There was no need, however, for these exact ears were shoved into his face not a second later.

"This is a brothel!" Judy hissed at him, yanking him down from his tunic. To his credit, he didn't yelp this time.

"Indeed." he calmly confirmed with a nod, still bent under the bunny's grip. "How astute of you to finally notice!"

"You lied to me!" she went on, sounding as enraged as her hushed tone would allow. "You lied to me and then left me behind! I told you you're not to leave my sight!"

"Listen, lieutenant. My friend is vastly expensive, so it was either that or us spending the entirety of your resources to talk to a prostitute; which would be totally worth it, I assure you, but you also said not to abuse ranger funds. So I was being obedient, really." he explained evenly, the judicious look of offence he had adopted adding to her brewing ire.

"You could have told me all that!" she persisted. "You could communicate your stupid plans beforehand!"

"You know what? You're right. I'm beyond excuse." he admitted, working to deny her any outlets for her anger; in another life he could have been a torturer. "But I only did it for you, lieutenant! I just wanted to give you some time to relax here; you looked like you could use it."
The bunny released him and took a step back in shock, as if to let him savor the results of his allusions. She took a moment to collect herself.

"Out. Now."

He shrugged and followed her as she stormed towards the exit.

Just as they reached the door to the district, a smooth, feminine voice called out from behind them. "Come by again, sweetheart!"

Judy turned around to the white vixen smiling in her direction. She raised a finger and opened her mouth to respond; then she realized no words were coming to her, so she just let her flushed ears sag once more and turned tail, promptly exiting the premises. Nick cast the vixen a thankful glance as he too stepped after the bunny, muffling a giggle behind his fist.

"Alright, now; explain yourself."

Nick honestly tried not to smile at the bunny furiously tapping her foot against the dirt, but it was beyond him. "Explain what, exactly?"

"The lying, for starters; then we can move on to your methods."

"You know, you keep saying that, but I don't recall ever claiming this was an inn, lieutenant." he pointed out with a face of studied ignorance. "So I never did lie, technically."

"You withheld information!" she lashed out. "Lie of omission!"

"Okay, true; but I only did it to pull the leg of my adorably innocent hillbilly of a partner! I made sure not to impede the investigation in any way." he retorted sardonically. "That I'm serious about, and that's what matters here, right?"

A huff, a snort, certainly the passive-aggressive foot tapping and maybe even a wry chuckle and a defeated sigh to end her tantrum and let them both proceed with their business; the perfect conclusion to a good joke, ultimately harmless, which Nick was confident he could even mention to make her laugh after some time. The natural, expected reaction.

It never came.

Judy's taut shoulders sank, her clenched fists loosened, the irate tapping coming to a brusque halt; even her expression seemed to freeze, truly blank for the first time since he'd met her, nose still and lips gently pursed. Her ears were erect but not stiff, bent in a forward curve towards him as if to guide the focus of her gaze; the green, suddenly unsure eyes of the red fox who found himself staring into a purple that was never meant to be this cold. The relaxed body language of the small bunny must have portrayed one of the most neutral, least hostile forms anyone in the city had ever encountered.

He nearly recoiled when it took the first step towards him, burned by purple ice. The remnants of his grin melted off as if on cue with her slow, alarmingly calm approach.

"Nick, pay close attention, because I am only gonna say this once." The even, colorless tone in her voice only brought out its natural sweetness. It disturbed him. "Don't ever... call me cute or adorable again."

His brief surprise allowed him to recuperate, if only for a moment. His head gave an indignant shake. "Oh, come on...! You don't take offense to that, do-"
"Nick." she cut him off, taking another steady, menacing step. "I know you don't understand, and I don't need you to. I only need you to comply. Capisce?"

The tense cadence of her voice finally gave her away. Nick wasn't the victim here, he realized; that was a mere misconception caused by her own fiery temper and his unprecedented inability to read her properly. She was, in truth, only offended; deeply, horrendously offended.

Which had never been his intention. A good tease, he knew, should on some level be appreciated by both parties. He relished her discomfort, her annoyance and her wit, and his every antic was ultimately meant to tease each of these out, not actually hurt her in any way.

Yet hurt her he had, stepping over an invisible line without even realizing it; a rare mistake on his part, made all the more significant since it involved the single ranger in all of Animalia who he could have put through what he did and still earn himself a partner rather than a cold, damp cell in one of their dungeons. The only prey in the entire world he felt ethically indebted to.

So Nickolas Wilde steeled himself and held her gaze, refusing to retreat an inch even as those enormous eyes threatened to swallow him whole. When he spoke his words bore genuine honesty; yet another rarity he found himself offering the bunny for a second time in less than a day.

"Yes, lieutenant." he responded, noting the subtle shift in her stance with an unexpectedly strong surge of relief. "I'm sorry, it won't happen again. And I'll try to keep the teasing to a minimum while we work."

"And no more taking off without me." Judy added sternly before he could take a calming breath, taking advantage of the mood she had set for them. "I want to know what you're thinking, what you're planning, at any given time; that's how a "healthy, fruitful partnership" works. I can't cooperate with a guy who'd yank my chain at any given opportunity, regardless of whether it directly impedes the investigation or not. I won't compromise on that. Am I clear?"

He nodded solemnly. "You are. I promise."

"… Good." She deflated, consciously bringing her quiet tantrum to an end. "Because Finnick has done nothing wrong, and he doesn't deserve to miss the kick."

Nick gave her a thankful smile, glad to hear her quip again. The bothersome weight on his chest regressed. "I will behave, lieutenant, but don't expect me to be the prude child all of a sudden. That still falls on you."

"I didn't dare hope, Slick." She briefly smiled back, only to assure him that the matter was over and done with before turning serious once more. "Anyway; back to work. I'll let this whole impersonating an employee issue slide if you tell me your friend gave us something useful."

"She most certainly did." he confirmed. "We have a name now."

Her ears perked up. "A name? Whose name?"

"Someone who'll give us another name, and so on and so forth until we reach a contact who will know where our llama is; supposing your theory checks out, of course."

She gave a displeased grunt. "Doesn't sound like a quick process."

"It won't be; but that's how my friend and her immediate associates keep their paws clean." He shrugged. "Still, better than nothing, right? With any luck, we'll have found this Ethan character in a couple of days."
Judy eyed him in thought for a second, preserving her scowl.

She might not have approved of it, but the way he had snuck into the brothel did save them a lot of time. She would never turn to such methods herself, but perhaps that was exactly why she needed someone like the cunning gypsy to do so for her; and in that case he had spared her the need to crawl back to Higgins and ask for a warrant, which the hippo was sure to make as difficult as possible. At the end of it all, there was no denying his efficiency when he put his mind to the task, be it the investigation or his unholy eagerness to annoy her.

Coupled with the earnest apology she had just received for his one truly damning misstep, she found herself oddly satisfied with her ambiguous ally.

"… Good job, Nick."

The bunny's sudden praise pleased him as much as her earlier vexation did, and Nick took a moment to bask in the feeling. He was slowly beginning to realize how validating her acknowledgment could be, as was the case with the few mammals he genuinely respected; that was likely also the reason her forgiveness had mattered as much as it did.

That didn't mean Slick Nick could neglect the "slick" part, though.

He grinned at her and at once she knew he had meant his earlier words; the fox had no intention of being the prude one. "I know I can be hard to work with, lieutenant, so I've gotta compensate with results. It's a matter of pride."

She looked away to hide her own smirk as they began walking away from the brothel. Indeed, she didn't want him behaving too much. It would feel off. "I'm glad you see it that way."

"M-hm. Got me some spare change, too!"

She tipped an ear towards him. "What?"

"Yeah, gotta love the old ladies." he went on breezily. "Always generous with their tips if you can wink at them right."

He looked back to her upon hearing her gasp. "What?" he chuckled. "For all our rotten reputation, lieutenant, you can't deny there's a certain charm to our "savage nature", as they call it; or just teeth and claws, I dunno how it works for these people. Hell, almost half of the prostitutes in these pricey cribs are predators!"

She gulped, awkwardly considering her next question. "Are there… a lot of predophiles in Zootopia?"

He beheld her for a second, piquing smile gradually moderating to a softer, less sassy one. The transition between an astute, grizzled ranger lieutenant and a sputtering country girl with innocence to spare made for a glaring contrast which the fox found incredibly endearing.

"Oh, no! God no! None whatsoever!" he replied with force.

"Closeted ones, though? Damn near every single female prey I've met here, whether they know it or not; most go for the lions, though." He made a face at her, ruffling the fur on his head with meaning. "It's the mane."

Judy gave a curt snort, disapproval portrayed in her grimace; the bunny's disgusted visage got Nick laughing. "Well, at least I can count on you to keep those sweaty paws off my bushy wonder of a
"tail, lieutenant!"

"Unless it's to chop it off." she ribbed with a morbid smile.

It was Nick's turn to gasp as he brought the tail in question to his paw, putting the rest of him between it and rabbit. "Don't even joke about that…!

And so their exchange ended with the bunny laughing gaily and the fox protectively clutching his tail, both enjoying the hearty banter they found themselves committing to with surprising eagerness.

"What about meat?"

The fox cocked a brow at the bunny, slightly surprised with her choice of topic. The two hours they had spent waiting for their llama suspect to show up, even more so that the two days they had dedicated to questioning small time criminals one after another in order to get to the current whereabouts of the mammal who was looking to sell jewels in their closed circles, had put their aptitude for small talk to the test. Luckily, they were both getting better at it.

"What about meat, lieutenant?"

"Well, I'm curious!" She sat up from the barrel she had made her seat, chewing on a mouthful of nuts procured from the same booth the barrel belonged to. "I know I hate the smell, but your kind seems to find it… appetizing. So, how does it taste?"

He leaned further against the booth and crossed his arms, considering the question; it was a surprisingly complex one to answer. "I wouldn't say "tasty" so much as- well, like you said. Appetizing."

She stared at him, thoroughly unimpressed with the vague answer, and tossed another couple of nuts in her mouth. "Uh-huh. And what's that supposed to mean?" she prompted.

"It means that the taste itself can be anything from horrid to delectable, but what it always does is set off this rush of sorts. This excitement." He faced her and saw her still eying him in question. "I'm guessing we predators are just wired to seek it out, on one level or another; kinda like you guys and breeding, I suppose."

The bunny recoiled in semi-genuine offense. "Hey!"

"Oh, I'm sorry; how many siblings did you say you have, again?"

She pouted for a few seconds before blinking away. "… It's fun for everybody, isn't it?" she stated with a defensive shrug. "We're just a tad more… effective."

Naturally, he burst out laughing. "Effective…!"

"Oh, can it you slimy fox!" she cried through a crooked smile of her own, casually throwing a couple of nuts his way. He paused his laughing just long enough for his jaws to snap around them, and then went on chuckling as he chewed.

"I'm not the best person to ask about meat, though." he added shortly after. "I don't eat much."

"How come?"

"Well, Finnick loves meat, you see; as in passionate, steamy-hot kind of love, you can't imagine. So I usually trade my rations with him. I give him my meat, he gives me his berries, and everyone's
happy."

She hummed, looking down at him from her heightened position on the barrel. "You really love berries, don't you?"

"Mm, I really do!" he confirmed, swiftly licking the remnants of dry nuts off his teeth. "Berries are basically my carrots, Car- yeah, my carrots."

Judy rolled her eyes to the slip of his tongue, which she recognized as anything but, and put that information away for future use. If that day went well, she planned to reward the fox with a trip to the booth from the Burrows she had spotted the other day; they were already in the Avenue, so it was rather convenient. Providing recompense like that would also be a good way for her to try and claim the reins in their relationship, which the fox had made extremely challenging thus far; but also quite fun, if she were honest about it.

Their series of questionings had led them to an old acquaintance of Nick's, a weasel referred to only as "the Duke", who was working a booth in the southern Avenue, secretly served as a middle man for the upper echelons of the local black market and, as seemed to be the case with most shady characters they had come across in Zootopia, owed Nick a favor. From the bits Judy had put together she had understood that Nick's crew had moved something outside the walls for him in the past, which credited the fox's claims of being a smuggler. She had promised not to look into it, but her nosiness was proving troublesome, bothering her like a bad itch.

She did swear to stay true to her word when it came to Duke and his higher ups, however, so the latter had no provisos when Nick called in on his favor. He readily spoke about a llama who had recently reached out to them with a sizeable amount of jewelry for sale, looking all anxious and secretive like a mammal breaking bad for the first time; he and Nick had shared a laugh over "those damn rookies", making it that much harder for Judy to keep conniving. In any case, the weasel's descriptions were more than promising.

The Avenue was the least residential of Zootopia's districts, excluding the Plaza. Most of it was occupied by the long lines of tall booths, among which the only real buildings were typically the ranger outposts scattered throughout its length. It was only at its southern end that this didn't hold true.

Being close to the Zone's fences and thus rarely visited, it was a poor place for anyone to set up business, so the few brick houses of the district were located there, where the space could be afforded, popping up more frequently as the number of booths decreased and eventually disappeared.

These houses had also suffered from their undesirable location, most now decrepit and long abandoned. The neighborhood the weasel had directed them towards was comprised exclusively of such rundown buildings, half-destroyed by the elements and surrendered to the dirt and mud, likely accommodating only the homeless of the capital; a strikingly unwelcome addition to the city's urban view, reminiscent of the district directly to its south. It stood across of the last presentable booth of Farmer's Avenue, at the exact point where the outer fence of the Zone first appeared in the distance. It was located in the district's furthest outskirts, placed as far away from the commotion of the northern booths as possible, and the irregular spaces between its standing buildings created a complex network of narrow alleys.

In short, the distasteful assortment of bricks that was the Avenue's southernmost neighborhood seemed blatantly conspicuous to both ranger and gypsy. Judy had only been elated at the minor convenience; Nick, on the other hand, felt unduly disappointed. As someone who fashioned himself a connoisseur in the field of iniquity, witnessing such sloppy clean-up work always upset the unscrupulous fox. Damn rookies indeed, he thought. But then again, they do keep the caps busy for
He berated himself over the minor pang of guilt he felt to the thought. Cynicism was as necessary to
him as versatility, and he was far too old to be abandoning it now.

He and Judy had positioned themselves where they could safely oversee the building they had been
pointed to without standing out, waiting for the llama to eventually show up. Once they had affirmed
his description fit that of Ethan as given by the wallaby, they would make a move on him.

Nick was about to make an offhand comment and prop their conversation anew, but as he raised his
snout towards the bunny a movement from across the street caught his attention. A chubby, creamy
furred hare was approaching the target building, carrying a small sack in his paws. He softly nudged
the bunny's foot, nodding to the newcomer.

She saw him and observed his movements, ears erect with anticipation as the hare walked up to the
threadbare wooden door and knocked. Almost instantly, the door swung open and a hooved arm
reached for the sack, grabbed it and disappeared back inside. The hare was already walking away by
the time the door closed shut.

"Food." she heard Nick's voice from below her. He was following the hare with his eyes as the latter
disappeared into one of the numerous alleys, wearing a calm, almost nonchalant expression; but Judy
could by then recognize in it an attention every bit as intense as her own. "He's not leaving the house
at all. Too scared."

Judy's deductions remained unspoken. Her attention had been on the owner of the hooved arm, and
she had momentarily caught sight of his figure; the figure of a llama with black wool, an especially
long neck and, if the distance hadn't tricked her eyes, his were crossed.

"That's our guy." she announced with certainty, jumping off the barrel and wiping her paws against
each other to rid them of any leftover crumbs. Nick recognized the resolve in her eyes from the time
she had followed him to that dark alley just a few days ago. "Let's go."

"Just a second, lieutenant."

The fox's extended paw caused a brief hitch in her stride. "What is it?"

"We pretty much know he's the culprit by now, don't we?" he reasoned. "So why not call in a
platoon if you're gonna close the case?"

"I'm closing a case, Slick." she explained to him, resuming her walk in a casual pace and gesturing
him to follow. "Not ours. We'll still need to question him about Jasmine and the two sheep."

"Can't do that with the other rangers present?"

"No, actually. You see, once we report our findings, the rangers assigned to the theft will sweep in
and immediately take him in for processing. It could be weeks before we're allowed to interrogate
him properly; and you don't have that kind of time, do you?"

He cocked a brow, part inquisitive but mostly taunting. "Is it common for you rangers to get in each
other's way like that?"

The question caused her a deep sigh. "Tell me about it. In the Burrows I wouldn't even consider it,
but the rangers here have been… less than helpful, for the most part. And this case in particular has
been assigned to Rockwood's section, so…" she made a face at him and huffed once more, offering
as much explanation as needed.
"Aah, the infamous Higgins!" he chirped through an askew smirk. "Can't wait to meet the guy."

"I'm pretty sure he'd send me packing back to my turf if he ever caught whiff of our cooperation, Nick." she responded, looking away from the fox to mind the road; they were now nearing the house. "That's actually another reason I don't want to involve the locals just yet. I mean, you know-" She paused to cast him an awkward glance. "A ranger working with a gypsy from Happytown, it... it is a bit unorthodox. Plus, they'd likely end up asking us all kinds of questions; it could end up getting you in trouble despite our agreement."

He gave a disgruntled hum and looked away, putting on an insulted scowl whose hyperbole assured her that he had taken no offense. "A bunny ranger is no less unorthodox, I reckon." he grumbled.

"Yeah, it really isn't," she agreed with a chuckle, "and that alone has put me through enough trouble since I came to this blasted city; you should see the partner they assigned to me before we met!"

That last statement also had a validating effect, but Nick gave no sign of it. "Fair enough, boss. What if we end up needing backup, though?"

They had by now reached the door, which was an unsightly bunch of uneven rotting planks nailed together to cover the entrance like a patch on a torn cloth. Judy took an extra step forward to reach it, then paused and mirrored him with a calm look that spoke of unexaggerated confidence. "We won't." she stated simply and went on to give the sturdiest looking plank three firm knocks.

Nick positioned himself behind her, keeping his grin to himself. He didn't bother to argue; there was no point when she got like this.

Judy's ears nibbled at creaks and shuffles inaudible to the fox, slipping through the myriads of small holes and crannies on the aged wood. The llama behind the door had heard the knocks and appeared to have frozen.

Next there were steps, almost light enough for even a bunny to miss, as the mammal behind the door cautiously approached; there was no missing their frame, however, which showed through the gaps of the planks as they moved to peek on their callers. A blue eye appeared, and it found two pairs, a green and a violet one, staring back at it. It retreated immediately.

Nick gave a subtle wince; as he had guessed, the ungulate's incompetence was almost insulting.

"Sir, we know you're in there." Judy, with her invariably professional, authoritative tone, took it upon herself to state the obvious. "My name is Judith Laverne Hopps, ranger lieutenant, and I demand that you open this door in the name of our order!"

There was an audibly loud gulp, followed by a few more seconds of silent uncertainty before the door swung open a few inches, revealing the face of a cross-eyed llama with black wool and an exceptionally long neck protruding through the crack like the body of a snake. The quivering excuse of a smile he was forcing was likely supposed to make him look casual, but needless to say, it failed miserably in that regard.

"Greetings, ma'am!" he began in a high-pitched voice. "How can-"

The sleazy smile vanished as he lowered his gaze to the bunny standing in front of his door, replaced by surprise. He recoiled slightly.

"Wait, you- you're a..."

"A bunny. Indeed."
His brows furrowed. "And- and you're a ranger?"

Her answer was muffled by an indignant groan, coming from the fox behind her. "You get that a lot, don't you?" The llama's head turned to him and his confusion doubled; a bunny ranger, in Zootopia, joined by a fox outside of the Zone, had just come knocking at his door one early autumn afternoon. If at that moment a fairy and a ghost waved from behind those two he would hardly be impressed.

"Now you know my pain." Judy mumbled bitterly, reaching into her brown vest to worm out the tiny official scroll with her credentials. She unfolded it and showed it to the llama who, after a brief but very overt surge of alarm, put on that same toothy, tremulous smile. "Ah, I see! And, um… what can I do for you then, lieutenant ma'am?"

"Is your name Ethan Burgh, sir?" she asked, sliding the scroll back into her vest.

"It, uh- yes. Yes, that's- yeah."

"Excellent!" she exclaimed, beaming at him. "We'd like to ask you a few questions regarding the recent jewelry theft that-"

"I already told the rangers everything I know." Ethan cut her off in rushed speech. "It was Jasmine, right? The boss said so, you should talk to him. Just check your records, I've already-"

"We have talked to him, sir." It was the bunny's turn to cut him off. "And we have checked our records, but there has been no breakthrough so far, unfortunately. So we'd like to repeat the questioning, if you wouldn't mind. See if there's anything you forgot to mention, or my coworkers forgot to ask you, perhaps."

The llama's long neck drew back a couple of inches, giving away his uncontrollable urge to get back inside and slam the door shut. "I- It's just… I am afraid this is not a good time for me, you see?" he stammered. "I'm a bit busy right now, so if you could just-"

"Doing what, if I may ask?"

The llama turned to Nick once more, opening his mouth to respond. A long sputter was all that came out of his hanging, trembling jaws.

"Well, that doesn't sound too urgent!" the fox chimed brightly. "And after all, this is official state business, so…"

"It's as he says, Mr. Burgh." Judy rejoined the assault. "So, might we come in? This will not take long, I assure you."

He tried to come up with an excuse to send them off, he really did; it showed in his eyes, each of whom was locked on one of his inquisitors. He was not a quick thinker, however, and his panicked trepidation was as intense as it was obvious, so he quickly found himself numbly nodding to the mammals at his door and opening it, stepping back to let them in.

Judy could hear the slight clatter of his teeth as she stepped into the shabby residence, closely followed by Nick. Clearly apprehensive, the llama stiffly carried himself away from the two, putting the room's only large table between them and himself before coming to a stop.

The interior of the house looked as shabby and worn as its front. It was all a single room, uncomfortably small for a tall llama such as Ethan and, naturally, completely undecorated, as an interim residence should be. The furniture was accordingly thrifty, with only a small heap of crumbled blankets laying in the corner, clearly serving as a makeshift bed, a pair of plain wooden
Judy had developed the useful habit of analyzing her surroundings the second she entered them. Nick, on the other hand, had always been more keen on analyzing people, so his eyes had never left Ethan.

"Lieutenant."

It was less than a whisper; the fox had practically mouthed the words under his breath, but he knew Judy's ears would catch his warning. She aimed her attention back to the llama and saw what the fox had noticed; Ethan's crossed eyes were frenziedly dancing around in their sockets with evident panic, even as he himself had made no move; the stillness of his figure betrayed tension, and she recognized the signs of a perpetrator ready to make his escape.

The llama did not plan to put them through the trouble of a questioning, which would have been a pointless charade in the first place. Judy was glad, if anything.

But Nick wasn't. The llama was far bigger than either of them and visibly unsettled, so the bunny's casual approach concerned him. Sure enough, he had witnessed her fighting prowess for himself when she had faced off against Delgato, but as was often the case with such able individuals she bore the risk of growing careless and overconfident. He should know, after all; he was the smuggest mammal he had ever met.

"Pardon me, Mr. Burgh, but this house seems abandoned." she noted in a neutral voice. "Does it belong to you?"

The fox gave a quiet snarl as his partner closed in on the larger animal, looking as relaxed as ever. Don't prick him any further, dammit.

"Um… No, no. It's no one's, ma'am. I just settled in recently because- you know, rent and all…"

"No grumpy landlords here, eh?" she jested, taking another step. "I get ya. It has its merits, uncomfortable as it may seem. And you've been living here for… how long now?"

Ethan's shoulders stiffened; he had taken notice of the bunny's gradual approach. His one good eye paused its anxious movements and rested on her friendly face. Every hard, snorting breath the llama drew was now accompanied by a strong shudder. He was all nerves.

Judy's smile widened.

Any moment now.

"Um… Let's see…" he sighed, licking his fleshy lips; the tremor had finally spread to his voice. "It'd be around, like… ugh, two weeks?"

The bunny's feet carried her over the last stride, reaching the table. She reached up and tenderly ran a paw across its tall, dusty surface, absentely nodding to his response. Behind her, Nick was standing still, eyes frantically darting between the two, torn between rushing to her assistance and keeping the exit in close proximity.

Finally, she raised her head and mirrored the llama.
"I'd say…! Isn't that around the time the theft was reported, Mr. Burgh?"

"Carrots!"

No sooner had Nick's second warning reached the bunny's ears than she felt the table she was touching leave the ground, crudely flipped towards her by a fearful Ethan who had just decided it was time to make his move. The wooden mass turned over her in a second, heavy enough to crush every bone in her body.

But Judy wasn't unprepared, as the fox had feared; even without his call she would have darted out of the table's way in time, reaching the opposite corner of the room with a single leap before immediately turning to face the llama.

Ethan, however, did not plan to stick around long enough to find out if the small ranger could put up a fight. He was already running towards the exit; the flipped table was now blocking the bunny's way, buying him just enough time to deal with the fox and make his escape.

But foxes are chompers, armed with all the sharp, deadly articles that entailed, so Ethan decided he needed to go all out lest his own life be threatened in their encounter. Everyone had heard the stories, after all.

What he failed to realize in his panicked frenzy was that Nick had no intention to have any such encounter. The mammal running his way was many times bigger than a fox, and he himself was thin even among his own, so his only thought at the moment was to jump out of the llama's way; but alas, his body was slower to react than his mind.

He had just barely managed to raise his paws, claws still receded, when a hoof landed flat against his midriff, strengthened by Ethan's desperate momentum. All air was forced out of Nick's lungs in an instant with what sounded like a forced, heavy pant. The strike lifted him clean off his feet for a moment; he landed on his knees, wide eyed and gasping for breath, clutching his stomach as the llama moved past him and into the street.

It had proved easier than Ethan had anticipated, but he couldn't afford to relax just yet. The fox may have been incapacitated but the bunny was sure to come after him; and small as her kind might be, they were plenty fast, from what he'd heard. There was also the upsetting conviction that these two wouldn't have come alone, because really, who would send such small mammals to arrest a llama like himself? No, there had to be more on standby, and evading them was his first priority; as such, his hazy thought process concluded with the decision to make for the strait alleyways and try to lose his pursuers in them. Then…

Well, there was no then, really. He had been driven into a corner from which there was no escape, and he himself had realized that, on some level; but he was less than lucid at the moment, and all he could do was obey the instinctive command to run.

So run he did; for all of one, single stride.

A loud crushing sound suddenly boomed right next to his ear. The planks of his window's shutter, every bit as aged and worn as the ones on his door, snapped like twigs under the force of a small object just as he was passing by them; tiny shards of broken wood flew past his head, some of them narrowly missing his one good eye.

He would have likely ducked, whipped his head away and covered his eyes in the span of the next second. He would have also turned to examine the object that had flown through the window and caused this damage, but he was never given the chance; that same object had retained enough force
to strike him square in the temple, rendering any further assessments impossible.

Unbeknownst to him, the object in question was the foot of a certain grey bunny with a light brown vest.

Ethan's head went blank as his neck was sent into an uncontrollable wobble, briefly turning the blue afternoon sky into a starry one; then his world went dark as he collapsed, jaw agape and long tongue comically hanging out and into the wet mud.

Judy felt a tinge of panic of her own; the maneuver was meant to get her close to the llama so as to give chase, not actually strike the guy, but she had ended up inadvertently hitting a dangerous spot. She experienced a moment of horror when she saw him lose consciousness and, fearing the worst, she quickly rushed to check on his signs as soon as her feet touched ground. Her cap and precious red feather lay in the mud right next to him, but the ranger paid them no mind.

She shook by a deep sigh of relief; the llama was producing a steady, hollow groan and, most importantly, the bruise she had given him had turned out to be a bit higher than she had initially thought. Still a relatively risky spot, she knew, but a bunny was small and light and a llama big and heavy and she had lost a fair share of momentum whilst breaking through the shutter. He would be left with a minor concussion, at worst.

She reached for the thin, strong rope hanging from her belt. "Ethan Burgh," she began, again employing her typical formal tone, "by the authority bestowed upon me by the Council of Mammals, I hereby arrest you in the name of the rangers' order for suspected theft, assault of-

His lack of reaction gave her pause; for all his quiet groaning, the guy was completely out of it. She shrugged and mechanically mumbled the rest of her lines as she went on tying his front hooves behind his back.

As her practiced paws worked on the knots her long ears quivered to a new noise and turned around to scan the door, soon followed by her eyes; Nick had just crawled out, looking pale under his red fur. She felt a pang of guilt over her previous indifference to his injury, but there was a perpetrator escaping and the fox had broken the rules by calling her "Carrots", even if in the heat of the moment; and Judy Hopps was not only a professional, but also a considerably pettier rabbit than she'd care to admit. Regardless, now she was examining him with a concerned frown, trying to assess his damage.

"You okay?" she called.

The strain in the unintelligible grunt he offered in response was an answer in itself.

"Oh, don't be such a kit; you'll be fine!" she tossed back at the ailing fox with a condescending tone, recognizing positive signs on him. She switched her attention back to the llama who was once again writhing in pain, not unlike her partner, likely soon to regain full consciousness.

She finished her tight knot and stood up, giving a weary huff as she beheld the two floored mammals; she frequently found herself involved in similar scenes back in the Burrows, earning her heaps of trouble as well as an unflattering reputation regarding her methods, but it truly wasn't her fault! These things just tended to happen, somehow.

"If there's no blood in your mouth you're in the clear." she went on, speaking to Nick. "You'll feel better once you puke, trust me."

"Way ahead of you." he croaked, stifling a clammy retch. He tried to stand but ended up folded over his knee, panting. "I- I made a bit of a mess." he added.
Judy looked around to the mammals who were now approaching the site. There were not many people living in that part of town, naturally, but the few that did had been drawn in by the clamor of their confrontation with Burgh; curious heads were protruding through doors or windows ajar, and some had even walked out of their decrepit shelters to take a closer look.

"Same here," she mumbled, gritting her teeth; then she turned to the fox once more and was glad to find him standing, albeit a bit shaky. "Good! Quick, come over here and give me a hand. I can't move this guy on my own."

Nick wobbled to her side and began pulling at the llama's clothes with vindictive carelessness while Judy collected her feathered cap and, unwilling to put it back on until it was cleared of all the mud, began flashing it to the neighbors, declaiming that this was ranger business and asking them to disperse.

With their combined efforts they eventually managed to drag an unconscious Ethan back into his house, close the door and finally chase away the nosy few who were still trying to peek through the now broken window.

The dull, nauseating ache behind his skull was the first thing Ethan registered as he exited the darkness. His eyes slowly flickered open with a painful groan, drawing the attention of his two guests. A few blinks later his vision had cleared enough for him to acknowledge their presence; the bunny sitting on a chair across of him, head barely visible over the tall table they had struggled to set upright, and the red fox standing over her shoulder, paws locked behind his waist.

He gave another blink, dizzy and confused; then remembrance came, and with it an inexorable fear.

Now fully awake, the llama jerked away only to realize that his hooves were firmly tied behind him, elbows forced in an awkward angle that prevented any wide movements. The ropes were also attached to the back of his chair, extinguishing any chance of escape; his feet were loose but he would hardly be able to stand from that position, let alone run.

Regardless, he kept pulling at the ropes for several seconds, indignant cries marking his every futile attempt; all he managed was to bruise his wrists and rapidly exhaust himself until he was left panting, more worn from his own frenetic heartbeat than the effort itself.

Judy patiently waited for the despair on his face to give way to resignation before speaking.

"Are you done…? Good. Let us begin then, shall we?"

"Mr. Burgh, it would appear that you've been up to no good these past couple of weeks." she stated with a long sigh, acting her part. "We came here well aware of the jewelry issue, but now you've gone and assaulted a ranger and their partner…? Bad move, Mr. Burgh. Bad move indeed."

The shutter-less window behind the bunny let a dim ray of expiring sunlight enter the room, guiding it straight to the llama's face, forcing him to squint and adding to his discomfort; a deliberate choice of positioning by Judy, who had recently grown into somewhat of an expert on interrogations, following the disbandment of the ring in the Burrows. Now she clicked her tongue, shaking her head at the befuddled llama as if in disappointment.

Ethan's eyes darted from the bunny to the quiet fox and his penetrating glare, then back to the bunny and finally to his lap, eyelids closed shut as he made a conscious effort to compose himself. Swift, heavy respirations came and went through his nose, clearly audible in the tense silence.

He raised his head again, masking his helplessness with insincere resolve. He spoke in low volume,
fearing that his shaky voice may betray him.

"I have nothing to say."

"Oh, you have plenty to say, my friend." the fox cut in with a sly grin. "And you will, because that's the smartest thing you'll do today."

"As I said, Ethan, we already know about you and the jewels." Judy went on before their captive could respond, forcing him to shift his gaze between the two of them. "Denying it is pointless and will help neither of us, so I strongly advice that you come clean and cooperate."

The llama stubbornly raised his chin, inadvertently demonstrating its light tremors. "… I have nothing to say." he repeated, disingenuous beyond doubt.

Nick shook by a quiet chuckle – because wasn't the rookie just adorable – and took a short step forward, coolly eyeing the restricted mammal. "Listen here, Ethan," he began. "I think you need to assess your situation a bit better. You're not looking at a bunch of burly rangers from a local branch, with all their organized procedures and their big numbers. What you have here is just the one ranger," he paused to softly gesture towards the expressionless bunny seated next to him, "and the shady gypsy she happens to be working with. Not your average arrest now, is it?"

His words struck home, momentarily distracting Ethan from his predicament just as intended. He arched a brow at the patently immaculate fox with the clear speech, looking him up and down in disbelief.

"You're a… gypsy?"

Judy broke character with a brisk laugh, turning to the fox with a playful smirk. "You get that a lot, don't you?" she teased, mimicking his voice.

Nick raised his snout at her. "In my case, lieutenant, the incredulity is flattering." he remarked in risibly exaggerated hauteur. The llama was left gazing between them once again, further confused by the incongruously jovial exchange.

"Anyway, Ethan," the fox resumed, "what I'm trying to say is that our situation is a bit…"

"Unorthodox." Judy finished for him. "So perforce, our approach will have to be somewhat unorthodox as well."

Ethan got the overdue impression that they were building towards a point. "… What- what does that mean?"

The bunny leaned forth on the table as much as her height would allow, purple eyes piercing him with their shrewd, very potent gaze. "It means we're willing to strike a deal with you, Mr. Burgh."

The abstract hope in that one sentence was enough to get the llama's heart thundering anew. He took a few deep breaths and calmed himself despite it, finally applying some thought to the situation and his captors' possible motives.

His long neck curved down, bringing his face closer to hers and allowing his good eye to meet her own; the other one was aimed at the fox, causing him a brief incertitude as to which was which.

"If… If you promise to cover for me…" the llama commenced his tense whisper, "I can- I would be glad to share some of- of my stuff with you… ma'am."
The bunny glared on, not once blinking, and gently shook her head. "We're not interested in the jewels, Ethan."

Nick's paw suddenly entered the corner of her vision, finger aloft in a suggestive manner; she saw the greedy spark in his eyes even without turning to meet them. "Well, I mean... I suppose we could maybe."

"Not. Interested."

She cut him off without looking away from the wooly mammal across of her, causing the latter to shrink at her taut, intransigent tone. Nick's finger also retreated along with his paw, which he balled into a fist before his mouth, subtly pouting but abandoning the thought. Some battles you just can't win.

Ethan gulped audibly, shifting his attention back to the ranger. "Then... Then what do you...?"

Judy finally averted her eyes, turning to the fox who was now cocking his head at her, tacitly asking for permission. She held his gaze for a second, hesitant, before reluctantly nodding with a resigned huff, gesturing him to proceed.

Satisfied, Nick took a step closer as Judy fell back on her chair, allowing him to seize control of the process; or rather its more ethically equivocal aspects, which the ranger had agreed to go along with only after much convincing from his part. *It's the only way for you to uphold your end of the bargain, lieutenant*, he had reasoned, invoking her oath. *Besides, what's a petty jewelry thief compared to either of our cases?*

As Judy surly pondered on the possible detrimental effect her gypsy partner might have had on her, Nick leaned against the table reaching all the way to his torso and sighed, preparing to speak.

The bunny recognized his expression as the one he reserved for apprehensive prey such as Ethan. A major point of it, she had realized, was the complete absence of his dreaded, predatory teeth, which he obscured behind a soft, well-meaning smile. Even as he spoke he made sure to keep them out of sight, allowing the other to forget what they were dealing with: a fox, a gypsy, a shifty, dangerous, untrustworthy liar.

Over the course of their partnership, Judy would find herself feeling less and less embarrassed over falling for his trickery back in the Zone.

And sure enough, the winsome smile and the tempered posture had a placating effect on Ethan as well. He had been worried about the fox from the moment he first came to, considering the blow he had landed to the latter's stomach, but the vulpine seemed to pay the incident no mind. On the contrary, he now appeared almost caring, hoping to show his fellow criminal a safe way out of the mess he'd gotten himself into; he had claimed to be a gypsy, after all, so maybe they were bound by some sort of solidarity between outlaws.

Yet as Nick opened his mouth, the llama couldn't shake the prickling sensation of a nocked arrow being drawn his way.

"Well, Ethan," he began, "let us begin by addressing your current situation, which I believe you're still underestimating."

"You see, we were able to find you through a mutual friend of ours; a charming fellow by the name of Duke. Now, if we were to hand you over right now, we would be asked to give a thorough report on how we got to you; meaning we would be handing over Duke as well. Are you with me?"
He was. They didn't want the weasel caught, which meant that they didn't want him caught either. There was hope still.

"Let me ask you this, then: do you know about the people you turned to, Ethan?"

Ethan wriggled in his seat; there was no visible change on the fox, save for a slight narrowing of his eyes, yet that alone had suddenly made him seem overtly menacing. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about exposure, Ethan." he clarified, features darkening further. "About Duke's higher ups; about putting them, their names, their fronts, their contacts out there. You'll be stirring up a whole lot of trouble, Ethan, and they won't appreciate it."

"I don't know if you're aware, but the black market spreads a long, long way. They even have people in the cells, actually; inmates who loyally continue their job from where they are, under the local rangers' inept noses. And as we've already established, that is exactly where you will end up if we go through with this."

He let the words hang for a moment, observing their instantaneous effect with perfectly concealed satisfaction. "Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

He did, evidently, because he couldn't speak; but his one focused eye was enough to fully convey his terror. If they did turn him in, he'd likely die.

"Most of the folk down there come from the Zone or Happytown, you know." Nick continued, drawling to allow the llama some time to soak in his despair. "And while I have no delusions that you'd be frightened of me, there are far larger chompers down there, buddy; bears and wolves and tigers and lions alike, all with bigger mouths and sharper fangs than mine."

It was a hollow statement, really, because now he was frightened of him, just as he was of the bunny sitting beside him; in fact, he couldn't remember a time when he was as intimidated as he was now. There was something unbearably off-putting about fearing things you aren't normally supposed to fear.

"But let's not get ahead of ourselves!" Nick chimed, putting the smile back on. "As I said, we don't want any of that to happen, so we were thinking about twisting the facts a little bit."

"How about this: the mean, nasty ermine was planning to lift the store. You found out and followed her to see where she would hide the goods; surely the little thing couldn't have carried them all the way to the Zone by herself. She threatened you into silence. You complied, but were still afraid because she was a gypsy, and gypsies are fucking mad; so you figured you'd vanish as well, try to lay low until things blew over and she forgot all about you. There was, however, this friend of yours -let's say he was a hare- who knew where you were, and he let us know after we turned to him. The hare was- he was… Hm…"

He paused his soliloquy for a moment, taking some time to think; then his fingers snapped to a sudden inspiration. "A farmer; hailing from the Burrows too, because why the hell not!" he raved on. "He must have frequented the Avenue due to his job, so he knew about this place; I'm also guessing he was the one who told you about it. Sadly, though, he had to leave the city on business right after our questioning, so he'll be rather hard to pin down for an official statement. But hey- we have a ranger who can testify to that, and it all pieces together perfectly, so who would doubt us?"

He clapped his paws together with yet another toothless smile, content with his partly improvised lie. "So you see, Ethan, we are more than capable of sparing you all those woeful inconveniences! You will give us the jewels, we will mention how eager you were to assist us and you'll likely be charged
as an involuntary accessory for not turning to the rangers right away, but it'll only cost you a few
months in the nice guys' wing at worse; not to mention, Duke is uninvolved and your lovely head
remains without a price."

"That is, *if* you cooperate with us." Judy spoke up, deciding that her partner had been talking long
enough. The improvised bits of his story were the ones pertaining to hares and the Burrows, and she
couldn't help but wonder if that was meant as a jab at her, on some level.

Covering for a criminal was a first for her and she had been greatly disappointed in herself for letting
the gypsy talk her into it, but the more she considered it the more she was convinced that it was the
right choice; if ever there was a mammal who had been "scared clean", that would be the llama
sitting across of her on the verge of tears, and the wallaby would be getting his merchandise back
either way. As such, letting Ethan off would definitely be worth it if it could get them closer to their
sheep.

"… *Yes.*"

Ethan had eventually managed to croak an answer through his myriads of terrified sniffles. "*Yes-
God, yes, anything!*"

Nick bowed in her direction and stepped away, donning a sportively dignified look which the bunny
couldn't properly appreciate in the seriousness of the situation; she was already in full interrogation
mode, ears attentively slant towards the sniffling llama.

"Did you steal the jewels?"

"*Yes!*" he yelled, nodding frantically; he had begun actually crying, further alleviating the bunny's
guilt.

"Ease up, Ethan. Calm down. It's all gonna be alright as long as you tell us the truth, okay?"

The llama sniffled once last time and bit his lower lip still.

"Good. Now then, we want you to tell us what happened to Jasmine."

A new surge of panic shone in his eye. "I- I don't know! She just disappeared!"

Judy's contours tensed in an acrimonious scowl. "Ethan, we cannot help you if you won't be open
with us."

"*I swear, I have no idea! She just up and vanished!*" he insisted, a stream of fresh tears trailing down
his cheeks.

"So she just happened to go missing at the *exact* same time that you opened up your boss's place?"

Nick cut in, snout pulling back ripples in a rare expression of anger. "Come on now, Ethan."

"B-but she did!"

"So the two are completely unrelated?" Judy calmly prompted, raising a paw to stop Nick's response.

"Yes…! I- I mean, I *think* so, I… S-she just-*"

"Take it from the start, Ethan." Judy gave him a narrow, patient smile, trying to mitigate his
stammering fit. "From the very start. Leave nothing out."
It took the llama several minutes to breathe calmness into himself. Then, as the bunny had asked of him, he began explaining.

Nick's allusions regarding the wallaby's negligent business practices had not been groundless, as it turned out, for Ethan had been consistently lifting valued jewels from his main store for a very long time. He knew of a window that didn't lock properly, so every now and again he'd pay the store a nightly visit, sneak in and take a jewel or two from his stock's most expensive; then he'd replace them with one of the cheap trinkets they sold at the booth, letting the wallaby think he had accidentally mixed them up himself while sorting out the merchandise. By being cautious and not too ambitious with the ones he snatched, Ethan had managed to get his hooves on much good jewelry in the past few months, and since they were never reported as stolen he could go on selling them without a worry in the world. Life had been good on him back then.

Then life had sent him that cursed ermine to fuck everything up.

Unlike their employer, Jasmine had proven sharp enough to figure him out. She threatened to tell on him, so Ethan offered to buy her silence with a few pieces of fine jewelry, supplied at regular intervals; it would mean that he couldn't take as much for himself as he did before, but he wasn't left with much of a choice. Luckily, the ermine had agreed.

That had happened two weeks ago. The morning she had confronted him, by noon she had threatened him into admitting his crime and by late afternoon, when the time had come for them to close up the booth, they had come to their arrangement. They had agreed to meet up outside the empty store shortly after nightfall, as Jasmine would have to get back to the Zone before morning or she'd be branded a runaway; so of the two of them, she was the one in a big hurry.

And yet an hour after nightfall, she still hadn't shown up.

Ethan had never been the most self-possessed llama. He was easy to upset, which had already cost him at that point; Jasmine had most likely been unsure of his small robberies until she scared him into confessing. Upon realizing that she wouldn't join him as they had previously agreed he was quick to panic, presuming she must have changed her mind and gone to the wallaby for the reward he'd likely offer her instead. So he acted.

He went crazy in that store; every single thing of value was shoved into a large shack and carried to his home, where he stayed up all night staring at his stolen valuables and planning out his disappearance. He decided it couldn't happen overnight, so he hid the jewels and prepared to push the blame on the ermine instead; he was more credible than a chomper, after all, so this would likely work, at least until the rangers were done interrogating her.

Yet he wouldn't even need to point a finger; the next morning the wallaby was furious but completely oblivious, the ermine was nowhere to be seen and the rangers were already looking for her, convinced of her guilt, barely bothering him for a simple statement. He feigned ignorance and decided he'd go on with his life as if nothing had happened.

But something had happened; his boss was nearly bankrupt and he had a small, stolen fortune lying under his bed, keeping him twisting and turning every night and feeding his paranoia whenever the wallaby addressed him during the day. He had tried to find access to the only place he could sell it to, Zootopia's infamous black market, yet it had proven difficult and the more time passed, the more he grew weary of the priceless, incriminating sack and the implications of its existence.

This theft was bigger than any he'd committed before, and he had slowly been crushed under the weight of its magnitude. Indeed, the llama bore all the signs of crippling stress; dark bags hung under his tired, bloodshot eyes and the black wool of his long neck appeared smudgy and wilted.
He had moved a few days after the robbery, as soon as he had found his contact; the Duke of the Avenue, who also offered to provide him a place away from prying eyes. Ethan had had the forethought to hide the jewels somewhere else until his request got through to a buyer; and he had evidently been right to distrust the weasel, considering how willing the latter was to sell him out.

Nick had winced upon mention of Jasmine's ploy, shaking his head with an abject sigh and a pained expression that spoke volumes. As he would tell Judy later, he was certain the ermine decided to rush for the jewels straight away in hopes of surprising the rest of them with her new source of income rather than taking the judicious course and informing them first; after all, she could have just as easily gone for the merchandise the night after. "Stupid, stupid girl," he had mumbled with more grief than Judy had ever seen on him.

Ethan's tale had provided a satisfactory explanation to the missing jewelry but failed to shed any light on the ermine's disappearance; instead they had run headfirst into yet another uncanny coincidence. Still, though, there was one more promising question to be asked.

They asked him about the two sheep.

"Lieutenant Hopps?"

She jerked upwards in her oversized seat, forced out of her musings by the elderly mammal across of her. She was in the ranger headquarters of Farmer's Avenue, some two hours after she and Nick had led Ethan there to turn him in. Their story checked out and the perpetrator had readily admitted to the severely underplayed crimes he had supposedly committed, so he had already been marked for processing. Search for the missing ermine would redouble, and he would not only be given a reduced sentence as Nick had guessed, but also be put under special ranger protection. The last Judy saw of him was in his temporary holding cell, where the unburdened llama was now heaving repeated sighs of relief.

As she had feared, however, things would not go so swimmingly for her and Nick. Higgins, and perhaps Logger as well, had apparently informed the rangers in other districts of the city's newest peculiarity: the bunny lieutenant from the Burrows who had been officially assigned to Rockwood. Logger had likely described her as somewhat of a loose cannon, and she had no doubt that the arrogant and incompetent hippo had painted her as an arrogant and incompetent hillbilly, criminally overconfident and far too eager to cause trouble and undermine the locals. As such, when Ethan's case was over and done with, Judy had been summoned to the local chief's office.

The mammal under the blue feathered cap sitting across the desk was a female panda, at least sixty years of age, with an exotic name Judy had been given but couldn't hope to pronounce. Pandas were a thinly numbered species hailing from a faraway land, even further to the east than the Burrows, and had migrated to Animalia just a few centuries ago. Initially considered predators due to their misleading similitude to the common bear, they were eventually recognized as not only a prey species, but one of the most meek and benevolent among them; Judy guessed this meant that the seasoned chief she was now facing was a deviation from the norm much like herself, which should have made her likeable.

But sadly this was not to be, because prejudice held strong even among the best.

"Lieutenant, I am told you visited Zootopia in search of a smuggling sheep." The panda spoke with an accent, lightly stressing certain phonemes and with a strange syntax, but other than that she was adequately fluent. "How, I wonder, did you end up dealing with a local jewelry theft?"

"I was looking into suspicious sheep activity, ma'am." Judy replied. "Some such sheep were supposedly frequenting the jewelry booth of the wallaby that was robbed. Ended up asking around,
The panda nodded, puckering her lips in thought. "Your handler, Mr. Higgins, expressed his concern that you might end up affecting cases other than your own, Hopps; and while we appreciate your zeal, you have no business meddling in investigations that weren't assigned to you."

Judy stared into the black spots over the panda's eyes with a flawlessly vacant expression. "Meddling might be a bit strong, ma'am. I did solve the case, after all."

"Yes, and that is certainly commendable, lieutenant; but it's also not the point." The panda sat up on her chair, bringing her paws together on the desk before her. "The point is that you took on a case you had not been given, Hopps. This was an insult to the rangers who were officially on it."

"The biggest insult, I reckon, is that it took me three days while they've been struggling with it for weeks."

The panda's face hardened. "You're a visitor to the city, Hopps, and you appear to be having problems acclimating to the local procedures. I would suggest you lose the attitude, at least."

Judy swallowed her next answer along with her pride. "Apologies, ma'am. You're right, of course. I simply have a lot on my mind, with my own case and all."

"… Your own case. Right." Judy's ears twitched to the sarcasm implied in the panda's tone; apparently, the only mammal in the entire city not to consider a bunny ranger hunting an unlawful sheep ridiculous was a fox.

As if on cue with her thoughts, the panda resumed speaking. "In any case, Hopps, the real issue here rests elsewhere." She narrowed her eyes at the bunny in an accusatory grimace. "Your methods are… dubious, to say the least."

Judy willed her mouth shut for a moment, managing the muscles on her face; this led to an issue she had been meaning to address herself, but she couldn't come off too aggressive. "I assume you are referring to my employee."

"Your employee, yes." the chief confirmed with palpable distain for the word. "The prospect of a chomper aiding in a ranger investigation is rather alarming, I should say. How did this come to pass?"

"He's sharp." Judy offered with a shrug. "I stumbled upon him in the Zone. He has a bit of a reputation as a problem solver down there, and I offered him a pay to help me out. He's delivered so far, and I like working with him."

"A pay, you say; so how much does your vulpine friend cost Rockwood, then?"

"Zilch, ma'am. I'm paying him out of my own pocket. He's a predator, after all, not too expensive. I can afford him."

The panda hummed, leaning back in silence for a few seconds. "Even so, Hopps, I do not approve of rangers consorting with chompers, let alone working with them."

Judy's teeth gritted behind pursed lips. "You made that abundantly clear when you kicked him out, ma'am."

"He is a fox, lieutenant. A skulking trouble maker."
"He is my partner."

"Oh, so he's your partner now!"

Judy lowered her head, biting down yet another response; there was no helping the nervous stiffness of her ears, however.

"… In any case, Hopps," the panda sighed, deflating. "this is not the Burrows. I don't know if chompers are looked upon more favorably there –and perhaps your kinds aren't as rotten as ours- but the fact remains that your case is troubling. Very troubling."

She spread her thick paws on the table with an air of finality. "… I will be informing your handler of this, Hopps." she declared.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You are to report to him tomorrow morning."

"… Yes, ma'am."

The panda stole a final glance at Judy's face, once again stubbornly vacant, and thought the exact same thing as the bunny had earlier; in different circumstances, they would have probably liked each other.

"Your… partner is waiting for you outside, I'm told." She began collecting the scrolls on her desk, motioning to the door across of her. "Dismissed."

Judy grabbed her muddy cap and stomped out of the office, taking extra care not to slam the door behind her.

She went down the stairs and exited the common room to the noisy streets outside. The headquarters were located in the northern Avenue, close to Liberty District, surrounded by countless of the district's finer booths. The merchants and farmers manning them were currently closing up for the day, the nonsensical mix of their overlapping voices joined by the loud banging of wood against wood to create a lively clamor.

She found Nick there, just as the chief had told her, hunching over a stone bench next to the headquarters' entrance, elbows propped on his knees and eyes pensively narrowed to the dirt; the late afternoon sun hit his skull at an angle, casting a shade on his already inscrutable expression. She caught a feint glimmer from between his paws, which she soon recognized as the reflection of light on the blade of a knife, similar to the ones he had juggled with back at the Garden, now once again absently toyed with between his dexterous fingers.

"Hey." She approached him. "I'm sorry about that. It's like I told you; the locals are all jerks and morons."

He offered an idle hum in response. "What are you thinking?" she prompted, standing over him.

"… If the sheep did do it," he began, voice as blank as his face, "we still don't know how. How they approached her, how they knew when to strike; I mean, had she told them anything about her plans? I can't imagine she would."

"They must have done it somehow." she shrugged. "Does it really matter?"

He hummed once more and the bunny considered him anew, measuring his form. "It really doesn't
now, does it?” she asked. "You get it too."

"The gut feeling."

He finally moved, raising his eyes to the sky, over the booths across the street and past the impressive skyline of stone and marble in the distance, where the center of Zootopia lay. She followed his gaze to the tall, faraway mass of the Cathedral, the single most impressive building in the entire country, always towering above the rest, visible from nearly every point in the city. The sun would soon dive behind it and disappear completely to them, casting a premature nightly veil on a sizeable part of the city; yet another testament to the unfathomable size of the monstrous construction.

"Are you a religious person, Hopps?" he asked suddenly.

"No, not really; but who is, in our times?"

The fox squinted further, and she knew the sun was not the only reason. "Sheep." he whispered with a light frown. "Sheep are."

The two sheep Jasmine had mentioned, for example, were apparently regular visitors to the Cathedral.

Judy stared on at the church crowned by the orange frame of the descending sun, sharing his exact thoughts. She knew what he meant, and decided he was right.

This was more than a gut feeling.

-Chapter 4 End-

Chapter End Notes

Motivation is always an instrumental part in any content creator's life.

I like to believe that I write primarily for my own amusement, but there's no denying the effect a reader's comments can have on me. Some of you have shot inquiries about the plot or the world, which means that you enjoyed the story enough to spare it the extra thought, and many of you thus far have complimented it. I find it all extremely flattering, and I want you to know that, be it praise or criticism, you each help make this whole experience a bit more enjoyable for me, a bit more worthwhile, and it makes me glad I decided to share. I truly, wholeheartedly appreciate it. Thank you.

But even more so, I've found, what augments the creative process is exposure to quality.

And I'm talking raw quality, despite the nature of the content; because quality of any kind will typically leave you satisfied and excited, and a content creator will inevitably channel that excitement into their own works. I imagine it as a sort of inspirational chain stretching across fandoms, medias and art forms; be it written fiction, music, cinema or literally anything else enjoyable, it will put me into that blissful creative mood without fail. That's why we writers ought to be grateful for other creators most of all.

And that's also why, after figuring out this site's gifting mechanic, I've decided to dedicate my story to Humanities_Handbag. You can find plenty of good ideas and people capable of breathing life into them in a number of fics if you look hard enough,
both in and outside of this fandom; but goodness me, I have never encountered a writing style as thoroughly captivating as hers. If by some peculiar happenstance you have read my fic but are unfamiliar with her works, you can find her account on this site. Do yourself a favor and check it out.

Let us each take a moment to appreciate all the authors and readers out there; we're all having a real blast together, aren't we?

Until next time!
Chapter Summary

Just a well-deserved leisurely stroll 
through the town of fangs and cheer

Chapter Notes

This upload sure has been a long time coming, and for that I blame what has turned out to be a very eventful semester. Setbacks of this nature cannot always be avoided, sadly, which is why I've resolved to keep an arbitrary upload schedule –which one could argue keeps it from being a schedule at all, but they would be nitpicking and shame on them-. Still, it might have been for the best since this upload coincided with the creation of the wonderful cover art you might have noticed on your way here.

Oh, yes! This story has its own cover art now, brought to life by the immensely talented Ziegelzieg. Head over to Deviantart to give our artist some love and discover the rest of his impressive works while you're at it, most of which also revolve around the Zootopia fandom: http://ziegelzieg.deviantart.com

Lastly, I wish to point out to those who missed it that this has been a double upload. The reason is really quite simple: these two parts constitute a single chapter, which however would have been far too enormous for me to post in good conscience. I've decided to address the size issue this way for pacing purposes and to make it a more convenient read, seeing as I refuse to compromise with a shortened chapter if one doesn't come naturally.

And so we've ended up with yet another experiment in our hands; I'm counting on you to let me know if it worked out or not.

Enjoy!
The prospect of magic used to fascinate Nick.

His childhood dreams were dominated by majestic fantasies of him mastering the mystical arts, bending fire and thunder to his will, summoning sun or rain and raising mighty castles from dirt in the blink of an eye. A young fox from some tiny shithole in the far north dreamily gazing in the fire, head teeming with unlikely visions of power and grandeur given life by that peculiar, fleeting quality that defined kits everywhere.

Many years later, when he had finally cast eyes on the famed Rockwood castle that had inspired all those long faded daydreams, he had greeted the sight with a bitter smile and a shake of his head, imagining how the little fox who had yet to gain experience and lose wonder would have gawked at the sight, readily ignoring the visible deterioration that contrasted the tale's mystifying character.

Even now, those telling signs of age that ate away at the ancient structure were what he first took notice of as he moved across its length, eyes swiftly darting between the eroded rock of its walls, the planks of its lowered gate bulgy with the dampness of the shallow river running beneath it and the supportive platforms of fresh timber framing a few of its lowest towers for builders to safely work towards their maintenance; whatever great magic had supposedly erected this castle could apparently not be bothered with shielding it from the inevitable disrepair. However grand a construction it may have been, it too was ephemeral, and thus likely a product of the impressive but very earthly work of laborers rather than a spell cast by some old goat waving a stick over his head.

Yet the latter version was the one that got little kits dreaming, so as far as Nick was concerned they were right to spread it around. The cynical vulpine still enjoyed revisiting his younger, bright-eyed self in his seldom reminiscing, even if it were with a condescending smirk drawn on his lips. Everyone needed these kinds of memories, he knew; even nasty crooks such as him.
His longer limbs enabled him to effortlessly keep up with the bunny a few paces in front of him, allowing him to absently regard the castle to their right and let his thoughts drift as they went. Judy wasn't as fast when she was stomping, apparently.

Nick unfortunately didn't get to meet Higgins as Judy had been summoned into his office alone. She had initially argued against the fox joining her to Rockwood's headquarters where she had been ordered to report to come the morning, but eventually decided there would be no additional harm in bringing him along; everyone knew about him by then, after all, thanks to the panda chief of the Avenue. Might as well make a statement by showing them that she didn't care what the locals thought about her methods.

Nick had waited for her in the common room through most of the early hours, quietly seated at one of its corners, bored out of his skull and pretending not to notice all the side glances he collected from every passing mammal in uniform. All except one, at least; a plump, visibly apprehensive beaver who he immediately recognized by his partner's unflattering descriptions.

He had accosted Bernard Logger despite the latter's best attempts at avoiding him, watched him stiffen and gulp even as he kept his fangs concealed and noticed him constantly glimpsing at the exit, desperate for a way to escape the encounter. Getting such prey to relax around chompers was near impossible, so the suave fox mentally cracked his fingers and cleared his throat, thankful for the challenge; and he even had a promising strategy to tackle it right off the bat.

He simply opened with the line: "That bun lieutenant is scary as all hell, ain't she?"

Ten minutes later Logger was seated across of the fox, his deep rooted reservations all but forgotten. He was raving on about intimidating bunnies, their unreasonable irascibility and his theory regarding an unsatisfied libido's contribution to their violent mood swings. Nick was nodding attentively, pretending to sympathize with the cadet while taking mental notes; some of the beaver's absurd ideas were sure to make for excellent teasing material later on.

He was forced to separate from his new buddy when Judy stormed down the stairs and made for the exit, wordlessly beckoning him to follow. The fox expressed his appreciation of the beaver and gave his paw a firm shake, fully intent on nurturing the bond of mutual understanding he had craftily planted between them; one could never have too many connections, he knew, and a simple fellow such as Logger would make for the best kind, so he would try to keep him close given the chance.

And thus ended their trip to Rockwood's headquarters, followed by a long walk down the castle's moat; a walk filled with an uncomfortable silence which Nick allowed until he was done with his reveries, whereupon he decided it had drawn on too long.

"So, lieutenant" he called to her, "are you safe to engage yet, or do I risk invoking the wrath of your practiced bunny foot?"

The chuckle he got in response was a bitter one, but it came with a perk of her slumped ears. "To be perfectly honest with you, Slick, my foot does itch." she quipped back, checking her pace. "But you're hardly to blame this time, so don't worry."

"Suppose that would be the dastardly hippo's doing?"

She just groaned and let her ears hang again.

He shook his head and scoffed, loudly enough to convey his sympathetic disposition; he knew Judy would appreciate the gesture for all its blatant staginess. "What did he do this time?"
Nick regarded her stiff posture one more time. "He's clearly gone the extra mile this time, lieutenant."

"... He did run his mouth for a bit longer today, the bastard. Luckily, the worst he can do right now is chide me. It's not like I've broken any rules, as far as he knows; he just doesn't approve of you."

Judy instinctively raised an ear, expecting the snippy remark the gypsy was sure to offer in response; yet Nick missed his cue, making her turn to him in question. She found his patient stare intently aimed at her, silently prompting her to go into more detail.

She sighed. "Higgins gave me a nice, long speech on "cute bunnies from the country who cannot comprehend chompers and the dangers they pose to society"; or something along those lines." she mumbled through her teeth.

Nick gasped. "He- he said the thing!"

"Yeah, ha-ha, he said the thing. That's frigging hilarious, Nick." she grouched, snorting in annoyance.

"Seriously though, I've been meaning to ask about this…"

"About what?"

He shrugged. "You know… the thing. The word. Why would it offend you so much? I mean, it is a compliment, however you look at it."

"No." She clenched her teeth, picking up her pace once more. "Not however you look at it- but you wouldn't understand, Nick, so let's just drop it."

He caught up with her. "Try me."

Judy came to a stop outside the front of a small pothouse near the southern end of Rockwood District, close to the edge of the castle's walls. She stood there and blew her cheeks, foot tapping as she tried to articulate an answer.

"... Look, it's- when you call somebody "cute" it comes as a compliment because of the meaning it carries." she began. "It means you find them attractive, pleasant and all that. It's like- a positive quality you're trying to express, and that's great; but it's just not the same case with us bunnies. Because bunnies are cute, Nick. We all are, and we know it; and when everyone in your species shares the same quality, it loses all meaning."

She paused to take a deep breath, managing the cadence of her voice before she continued. "On the contrary, when someone outside our species calls us "cute" it basically confirms the way others see us: small, adorable, frail and cowardly creatures hiding in their holes and working their farms far away from the rest of the world. It's derogatory because it implies that no matter how hard you try to escape that impression, you will always be just a dumb bunny to them."

He raised his eyes to the fox’s and he saw the accumulated bitterness in them swell up, coloring her speech with added tension. "And I should know! Do you have any idea how hard it is just to get your average citizen to look at a bunny ranger and not go "d’aaaww"?! How hard I had to work just to be taken seriously, let alone progress in the order?!"

"The word "cute" might sound innocuous to you, Nick, but for me it's just another reminder that
everyone—rangers, citizens, criminals, even my own family—will always just see me as a silly little doe who could never cut it. Who could never make a difference."

"It may be spoken with good intentions but it is always patronizing; even if you don't realize it."

Nick considered her words for a moment, cogitating. He thought back to the scene between them outside that nearby brothel just a few days ago; at the time he had been confounded, thinking it ridiculous that the specific word could in any circumstance be considered offensive, but with the new insight he had just been given the matter took a different tone entirely.

He beheld the fuming bunny with the madly twitching nose and the vexed purple eyes, suddenly wistful. And so she hates being called cute, huh.

*What cruel irony.*

"… I'm sorry. I really didn't understand."

Judy blinked at him; that tone of unstrained sincerity was becoming increasingly common to the unscrupulous fox. She barely had time to acknowledge the overwhelming gratitude it engendered before he spoke again, slipping on a wry grin. "Your time in the order must have been nothing short of peachy, eh?"

She guffawed. *Peachy is certainly the word. When I started off my chief was so insulted that a bunny ranger had joined his section he spent my first year actively trying to get rid of me; I had to floor a bloody rhino before he even began to acknowledge me!"

Nick was about to call her out on that last statement but held his tongue; it wasn't all that hard to imagine, actually.

"That's how it's always been for me," she continued. "The people I've worked with all took one look at me and immediately decided they'd need to carry my weight. Every crook I've faced in my time figured they'd have an easy time beating me down or outsmarting me; but the worst by far are my parents! Eight years and three promotions later and they still secretly hope I'll get overwhelmed, come to my senses and find a nice, quiet buck to settle down and start spewing out litters!"

A curt chuckle escaped Nick, teasing out a smirk of her own. "I can say that I've taken the long road to get where I am, Slick. I've overcome many, many obstacles, and that's a point of pride for me; so when someone invalidates those achievements, I… I do get a little defensive. I think I have every right to."

Judy ended her heated maunder with a spent sigh, blissfully diffused, and waited for the fox to comment.

"… Charlie."

Her ears tilt sideways. "Huh?"

"That's how we call the tiger you knocked out back in the alley. You know; the one you left with a keepsake he could have done without?" he explained, taping one of his canines with frolic mischief.

"I was there for it, lieutenant; and I was left gawking like a moron along with all the others. Seriously, I was almost too stupefied to call out to Ben!"

"I guess what I'm saying is—sure, being looked down upon must suck for you, but if that means you get to cause such reactions all the time…" He paused and gave a shrug, flashing her with that
distinctive grin she had once found so irritating. "Well, isn't it kind of worth it?"

Judy took a moment to consider her reaction and instantly decided that her appreciation was too embarrassing to communicate. She looked away and resumed walking, certain that Nick was still smirking beside her. "Hmph. Why do I still feel like you're patronizing me somehow?" She wondered if her grousing sounded as unconvincing as it felt.

"Ah, that would be because you're still unable to associate anything positive to my person, lieutenant." Nick retorted gaily, sounding amused. Evidently, it was. "Happens to everyone I play."

And now he had given her an excuse to smile; Judy could swear he was doing it on purpose.

And smile she did, as subtly as her lifted mood would allow yet not enough so for the observant fox to miss. He pranced next to her, satisfied with the briskness of her gait and the frisky ears saluting him from the corner of his eyes as they went.

Then suddenly those ears flopped anew as she produced another stifled groan. "I'm sorry."

He turned to her, puzzled. "What?"

She huffed. "I'm sorry for- for unloading all this on you out of the blue. But you have to understand, I- I usually don't let it get to me like this; not anymore. I…It's just-"

"It's this damn city, Nick!"

Nick recoiled away from the bunny, tail bristling to her sudden bellow. He saw her pulling at her ears with force, wearing her most apoplectic expression as she raved on.

"Ever since I stepped foot here I've been stressing non-stop, working myself to the bone day and night, yet it feels like there are more bumptious mammals waiting their turn to sneer at me at every corner! It's like my cadet years all over again, only in a much bigger scale!"

"And the one ranger who's been favorable to me I cannot turn to because he'd be sure to chew me out over our partnership and order you detained despite even your most thorough fabrications!"

Nick let her vent until she quieted down; then he awkwardly reached for his nape and gave it a scratch. "Wow! Um… I suppose I'd feel guilty right about now, if only I had the capacity for it."

"There's nothing for you to feel guilty about, Nick!" she intoned, then faltered. "Well, I mean- yeah, okay, you should feel guilty for- for a number of things, actually, but that's not the point!"

"We're working this case together, and we're working it well; it's the fucking locals who can't seem to pull their heads out of their asses and let us do our bloody job!"

"They are quite the nuisance." he allowed, mindful of the bunny's overly expressive plaintiveness. It had been a long time since he was affected by such trivial grievances, as he considered them, but he was now realizing that Judy might not have been as accustomed to them as he; or, as her overly vocal bemoaning had implied, she was simply worn out by the overbearing city and its less than acceptant residents.

For the umpteenth time since their meeting Nick found himself relating to his unlikely companion far more than one would have expected.

"… Have you been getting enough sleep, Hopps?" he asked her suddenly. "You seem a bit on edge today, if you don't mind my saying."
She took one look at his piercing gaze and shook her head, chuckling weakly. "I'm fine, Nick; just had to get it all out of my system, is all."

"But have you been getting enough sleep?" he persisted, arching a brow.

She let her eyes drift to the running waters across the street. "… I've been getting some sleep…"

He clicked his tongue and waved a finger at her, scowling in playful reproach. "No, no, no; see, that just won't do! I need you to be your lively, clear-headed self, lieutenant; I've no use for a jittery mass of sleep-deprived bunny nerves in my investigation! You're getting some rest today!"

She chuckled again. "Come on, Nick."

"I'm serious!"

She frowned at his unflinching visage. "Wha- Rest? Nick, we have to work! You're in a hurry, remember?"

"In a hurry, yes; but I'm also a practical mammal." He was now drawling, mouthing each word with a purpose. "And practicality dictates that you take some time to clear your head as soon as possible, lieutenant; and today happens to be an excellent opportunity!"

"Why's that?"

"Because you currently have nothing better to do, obviously."

She gaped at him. "Nothing better to- what about Gavin?!"

Gavin was the name of the male bear from Nick's crew who had been the first to disappear from his job in the Avenue over three weeks ago. During their trip to the district the day before they had taken the chance to inquire about him and had learnt that his employer had since sold out and shut the booth for the year, meaning he had left Zootopia and his workforce had scattered.

"Tracking down his coworkers could take forever!" Judy continued. "We have to get started today!"

"Duke has agreed to help us on that front, lieutenant, and he'll do a much better job than either of us. His group practically runs the place."

"That doesn't mean we can just sit on our tails until the weasel finds them!" she protested. "We should investigate regardless!"

"Once again, lieutenant: practicality." said Nick, tapping at his temple with meaning. "Suppose we make for the Avenue straight away, yes? It's noon already, and getting to the other side of the city on foot would take us a while, so we'd arrive well into the afternoon; which leaves us with, what…? Two, maybe three good hours before sundown? Hardly enough time to comb the entire district looking for mammals we have literally no leads on. Sadly, your time in Rockwood appears to have cost us the day."

She loured, slightly cross with his condescending tone. "There is no reasoning that will convince me to idle the day away, Slick. To be efficient is to be active. Three good hours are better than nothing; more practical, too."

"And more practical still is using our time to look into the cathedral instead." he tossed, immediately grasping her undivided attention.
Her ears cant towards him. "Explain."

"Well, you don't have your permit yet- at least I assume not…"

"Nope. No permit in sight."

"Right- so the next best thing is getting someone to keep an eye on the entrance; you know, how many sheep enter and leave, what they're like, things like that. Just to know if we're right to suspect the place."

She hummed. "That… would be expedient, yes."

The fox beamed at her. "Right; so I was thinking I'd head back to Happytown and make some arrangements. Plus, there are some… personal matters I have to see to." he added vaguely.

"The kind I'm not allowed to look into?"

He let a sly grin answer for him. Judy knew not to pursue it any further. "Are you planning to ask Leo for help?"

"I might, but I'd rather avoid it. This mission will require a certain level of, uh… subtlety, so to speak, while his folk are-""

"Yeah, I remember." she cut him off dryly. "All too vividly, too. Your crew, then?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm not sending any of them out of Happytown for the time being. In light of recent events…" He left the words hanging. Judy nodded in agreement; it was probably for the best.

"So there are other, more discreet people you could turn to?"

His smile widened. "There are always more people, lieutenant; I'm just not sure if they're available right now. But in any case, Happytown is the place to be!" he declared, spreading his paws in a dramatic gesture. "Getting us some extra pairs of eyes on the cathedral is surely better than a few hours of meaningless blind fumbling in the Avenue; and you'll get some mandatory time to relax and pull yourself together. It's a win-win!"

Judy hummed once more, rubbing her chin with a skeptical look. "So when you said I should "rest", you meant that I should join you in Happytown and loiter around while you arrange for our informants?"

He shrugged. "Like I said, there's nothing better for you to do, so yeah, you might as well tag along. You never did get to see the place, after all; and I will introduce you to the rest of the crew, it'll be fun!"

She bit her lip in thought and frowned at the dirt, weighing her options; she could feel herself wavering.

"… Still, Nick… I mean, recreation, when there's so much to do…"

Now Nick's eyes were the ones rolling. "Yes, lieutenant, recreation!" he bellowed. "That little thing you do every now and then to keep you sane! Every bit as important as your oh-so-precious work; or didn't they teach you that in the order?!"

She snorted a titter and glimpsed at him, recognizing the clear hint of amusement behind his antics;
an amusement she was increasingly tempted to share in. And in all honesty, his points were fairly valid; she couldn't keep pushing her "fifth wind" threshold on a daily basis. A small break would do her good.

"… You know, this is the second time you've tried to lure me into Happytown, mister Wilde." she ribbed, allowing her smile to mirror his. "And considering how the first went down, I'm somewhat reluctant to follow you."

"Whatever do you mean! It earned you a partnership with the world's most charming vulpine, didn't it?"

"Ah, of course; how could I forget?"

Smugly noting her protruding buckteeth and the lively quiver of her ears, the red fox turned to the south and shot her a sideways wink, politely gesturing down the road to the Zone's outer fences. "Well, then; shall we?"

Judy moved after him, nearly skipping through each reanimated step. Her eyes wandered from his swimming tail to the back of his skull, picturing the grin on its other side with perfect clarity.

The first thing she had ever recognized to him was his facility as a deceiver, and for the second time now she found herself being tricked by him; tricked out of her foul mood and into placidity, consoled without him uttering a single word of comfort. A most roundabout expression of thoughtfulness, as befit him; but it was as unmistakable as the pleasant warmth it had spread in her chest.

She basked in the sentiment as she followed his lead, making for the gates of the Zone and the unruly district beyond; the unlikely destination of her first ever time of leisure in the capital.

Unsuably, Judy's first impressions of Zootopia's southernmost district ranged from shady to downright insidious.

Happytown's distinctively surreptitious ambience struck her in force already from her first step into its vicinity. Nick had taken her all the way to the Zone's eastern wing, back to the memorable alley where the bunny had been subdued. She had paused outside of the small brothel at its entrance, which appeared to be closed at this hour, and expressed her reservations on revisiting the place, but Nick explained that he wanted it to be her appointed entrance to Happytown as she was already familiar with it; he also promised to position someone in the alley at all times in case she needed to get to the Garden and he himself wasn't available.

It wasn't nearly as threatening in daylight, so Judy shrugged and stepped into it without much convincing. They traversed its length to find themselves in a rundown neighborhood, surrounded by partially decrepit buildings on all sides; one of Happytown's fanciest parts, as Nick remarked. He swiftly trod across the empty street as the bunny took in her new surroundings, deftly avoiding the numerous puddles of gooey mud and motioning her to follow.

"Decrepit" turned out to be a lasting impression, accurately describing the largest part of the district. The complete absence of the stone and marble that typified the rest of Zootopia, which Judy had first noted in the Zone, was even more apparent here; nearly every single house was built of aged clay, crudely molded and peeling, and the numerous parallel streets they passed on their way south were rife with more mud, unpleasantly damp despite the aridity of the latest weeks.

Another interesting point was the size of the residences. Everywhere else in the city there was a certain level of variety to be found in regards to height, but here all houses were notably smaller than
average. This was likely due to the nature of predator species, the largest of which were the brown bears who, for all their imposing mass, could not match up to an elephant or a giraffe. No elephants or giraffes lived this far south, however, so this urban planning served the locals just fine.

The term "planning" is employed loosely, of course; the entire district was more like a messy assortment of shabby huts smacked together to rot away in each other's company. The result was a suffocatingly dense concentration of short, largely identical residences divided in rough blocks by countless narrow, forbidding pathways. Judy figured that the chaotic maze which constituted most of Happytown must have been a crucial factor in keeping the catacombs of the Garden hidden all these years.

They passed by a couple of abandoned ranger outposts, some of the few wooden structures in sight. Their state of decay imparted a different vibe, for it was clear that it had come about not by age but rather vandalizing. Nick confirmed that the district's outposts had been raided and looted long before he ever stepped foot in the city; now there were only the local headquarters, which were positioned at the eastern end of the district, close to the Zone. The rangers there never dared show their face and spent most of their time on petty assignments in the neighboring district, assisting their much more able coworkers.

The bunny noticed only a couple of buildings that could have rivaled the daunting size of the structures found in the north, enclosed in short fences framing a surrounding expanse of open land. Those turned out to be Happytown's famed aviaries and lizard farms which, according to Nick, were the only respectable businesses to be found in this part of town, and all the locals who sought to make an honest living without setting ostensibly legitimate shops in the Zone or finding a job in the city were working there. All the rest were either gypsies or closely affiliated with them; in other words, not interested in an honest living of any kind.

Nick led them deeper into the district until they reached a significantly wider street; an avenue, by local standards. There were a number of such streets spread throughout Happytown, allegedly where the very first residences had been built back in the times of the daring hyenas that had founded the old village, when their small numbers afforded them the luxury of open space. Now they served mainly as convenient points of reference to anyone struggling to navigate the district; it was also there that most of the local residents could be found during the day, when they weren't skulking about the surrounding byways.

Indeed, Judy's ears had been nibbling at distant noises all throughout their saunter, muffled from behind closed doors or narrow places between the dated structures, and she could swear she saw a few scarce glints among the shadows here and there; likely the eyes of an unseen predator measuring them up. Naturally, the bunny felt less than comfortable to the thought.

But the more tense and aware she became, the more Nick seemed to relax, taking every step as if he owned the place; at some point he even paused to exchange genial hellos with a small group of glaringly villainous coyotes they had seen dawdling around at the side of the street, looking threatening enough to cause Judy alarm.

She forced herself to calm down after that. She was protected by Nick's presence, and by Leodore's decree. She was safe.

Upon reaching the small avenue Nick turned them west and they started across its length. Judy was glued to his tail, not so much for fear of losing him –there weren't nearly as many mammals as in Farmer's Avenue or the Plaza- but mostly to let him guide her every step as she herself wasn't minding the road. There were countless stimuli occupying her senses now that more predators had finally made their appearance, especially since they all seemed to be no less uncouth than the ones
she had encountered in the Garden, gypsies or not.

There were many booths dealing in lizard meat spread throughout the street, far larger than the ones she had encountered at the outskirts of the Zone and certainly more successful, surrounded by dense aggregations of ungainly predators shouting insults at each other, cutting lines or simply growling with pleasure as they munched on the charred meat. Judy had the forethought to still her nose before the smell could reach her.

She had resolved not to be too censorious when visiting Happytown, knowing that her views on decency would no doubt be tested there, but she could not help but feel appalled as Nick elucidated on a band of mammals she had pointed towards as they passed them by. The predators there were gathered in a circle, fists waving in the air as they released a mix of impassioned cheers and boos. She could not see past their thick lines, but according to the fox they were standing around a shallow pit to enjoy the show of two riled up roosters fighting each other to the death.

Cock fights were a popular sport among the locals, he explained, as there was a steady supply of fighters from the local businesses and it was an exulting spectacle for the predators in the idle afternoons following a day's work; plus, there were many who found the betting to be rather addictive. Judy had cringed to her partner's words and was about to stormily contest his definition of a "sport", but was glad to notice his own snout ripple in disdain as they moved away from the barbaric display. Acceptance did not necessarily entail endorsement.

Thankfully, the bunny found that there wasn't much else to frown at. The noisy predators may have been strikingly crude and queer, but their gushing liveliness made them an interesting lot to observe; her ears were dancing around frantically, avidly noting every boisterous laugh, aggravated curse and joyous howl that echoed from the mammals flocking the street.

One such howl led her eyes to an especially vociferous group at the opposite end of the street. Barrels and planks had been set near a residence, creating makeshift chairs and tables; jars of ale rested on some of them, but there was no feasting. An elderly black timber wolf was sitting on a lone barrel, striking shrill notes on a small, aged fiddle, his enthusiasm making up for his lack of artistry; the few remaining teeth on his blackened gums showed through a wide, gaping smile as he observed the younglings dancing to his tunes.

Indeed, there were more mammals standing on the planks, likely to avoid kicking up lumps of grubby dirt as they swayed in each other's embrace, emitting their dissolute joy to the passerbies with every ardent burst of motion. A small crowd had formed at their feet, giving fervent laughs and whistles to encourage the dancers.

Judy jibbed to take a closer look at the bright ensemble. Apart from the cackling hyena clapping to the old wolf's tunes, there was a skunk singing incoherently near the door and three energetic animals marking sharp twists upon the planks. She saw the stripes of two burly tigers, fangs flashing in the sunlight, clawed paws waving in perfect synch, and between them stood-

*Horns?*

A pair of long, elegant horns.

She froze. "... Nick?"

"Hopps?"

It took Nick a second to realize she had stopped. He turned to find her fixedly staring at the side of the street, positively shocked. He followed her gaze to the dancers and finally laughed in
understanding; he hadn't noticed her.

"Her" being the slender, lithe gazelle dancing with the tigers, ostentatiously unperturbed by the deadly claws grazing her at every step. She graciously spun between the two predators, her flock of blond hair fluttering about along with her rags, and wore a fetching smile that was as enticing as the rhythmic sway of her curvaceous hips.

"There's a gazelle here." Judy spoke under her breath, slowly turning back to him. "A gazelle. Here."

Seeing the befuddlement on her face, the fox laughed anew. "Of course! Everyone here loves Gazelle; she's the life of the Garden!" Truly, the ungulate seemed to stand out as the object of the ragamuffin spectators' fiery cheers.

A million questions raced through the bunny's mind, but she eventually settled for the simplest one. "Gazelle? That's how you guys call her?"

"That's her name." he responded, arms crossing as he gazed back at the group; one of the tigers had stepped off the small platform, clutching his chest and panting intensely, allowing the gazelle and the remaining tiger to intensify their dance. "Poor thing had no one to tell her her name early on. Everyone just called her "that little gazelle", so it stuck with her; or so the story goes."

"O-oh."

"… Welp, alright! Let's continue."

Nick suddenly resumed walking, moving away from the spectacle. Judy cast one last glance at the beautiful dancer before hurrying after him, finally voicing her other, more pressing questions.

"Hey- wait a minute!" she called. "Why is she here, though?!"

"Ah, I know what you mean! Prey infiltrating our communities, appropriating our culture; abhorrent, really." he jested as they went.

"Getting piss-out drunk is a universal practice, Slick." she tossed back dryly, earning another chuckle. "No, but seriously; why is she here? How is she here?"

Nick paused and mirrored the inquiring bunny. The interest on her face seemed almost afflictive.

He hummed. "Few things have proven as useful to me as gossip, lieutenant, and I'm always eager to hear some, but I rarely spread them myself."

She cocked a brow at him. "Gossip…? I don't think it's such an invasive question, to be honest."

"… You're right, of course." he relented. "I misspoke. It wouldn't be gossip per se, but Gazelle's case is a bit more… personal, I guess, than you'd realize. Look, everyone here knows her story, but I feel that it's better if you hear it directly from her. Just ask her once you get the chance."

Always the man of mystery, trying his hardest to feed her curiosity; as if it needed any more stroking. "You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?" she grumbled. He responded with yet another sharp grin, and Judy learnt that the sight could still irk her in the right context.

Nick was now leading them through more narrow streets, taking them ever southwest, further into the district. Judy had entertained the thought of sulking the rest of the way, but forwent any such plans a couple of minutes later as they reached a distinctively spacey neighborhood, too small to
constitute a street on its own.

They crossed paths with a couple of slovenly raccoons there, and right after Judy's ears caught a hushed gasp escape them. She turned to find them stepping back, looking at the duo with evident worry in their shaded eyes. She didn't think much of it until she noticed more animals going out of their way to avoid them.

"You've quite the reputation around here, don't you?" she asked him, arching a brow.

"Why do you say that?"

She nodded to the surrounding predators, more and more of whom were taking notice of them and apprehensively shuffling away to clear them a path. Nick examined them for a moment before turning back to the bunny, giving her a funny look.

He was smiling. "I suppose I do, yes; but I ain't the one drawing eyes on us, you flamboyant bunny, you."

Judy's head whipped to the animals pulling away from them; and truly, none of their eyes were aimed at the fox.

Her jaw plummeted. "Wha- they're looking at me?!"

"Yes, indeed!" he chimed. "I imagine half of them know of your involvement with Lionfart and the Garden's reprobate denizens, and the other half must have heard of poor Charlie's fate; most of Happtytown knows by now, thanks to Finnick. And all of them recognize that cap of yours." he added, nodding to the feather standing between her ears. "Your occupation makes you a veritable boogeyman around these parts, lieutenant. I'd say you're safer here than in any other place in town."

Despite the explanation, Judy still felt somewhat numb as they reached the end of the block, moving on to the last part of their lengthy walk; enough so to warrant a tease. "Enjoying the attention, are we?"

"I'll tell you what I'm not enjoying." she retorted, bringing a paw to her face in disgust. "What's with the smell?!"

The stable curve on his lips quivered into a simper. "Ah- yes, I probably should have warned you about this…"

The question was only meant to change the subject, really, because Judy had long figured out the source of the stench; she was already familiar with it from her visits to the Zone. It was there that the underlying scent of excrement first became noticeable, but the further they went into Happtytown the worse it got, to the point that it was now barely sufferable; and Nick had been steadily leading them closer to Softstream, the river who was to blame for the nauseating odor. Its crystalline waters, which did nothing but embellish the rest of Zootopia, were gradually reduced to little more than a rancid cesspool as they marked their course throughout the city, gathering its squalor along the way; and its main exit point lay in western Happtytown, which they were now approaching. The result was painfully clear to the bunny's frantically twitching nose.

"Whatever work you need to do here better be worth it, Slick." she griped, trying to breathe through her mouth.

"Oh, I don't have any work in these parts, actually; it's just where we've set camp. I'll drop you off here."
The revelation took her aback. "You've- you've set camp \textit{here}?! Next to- to…"

"Yes, unfortunately." he sighed. "There are a few advantages to the spot, you see; mainly that it's not frequented by many, for uh… obvious reasons. That also means it's spacey, which is always nice; plus it's the furthest we could be from the local headquarters. Not that it would matter much either way, but still…"

"What's the point? The air here could \textit{kill} you…! Wait, aren't your noses supposed to be very sensitive? How on earth can you bear this?!"

"Some of us have an especially good sense of smell, yes; including yours truly." he agreed, tenderly rubbing his snout. "And I can assure you that the first few times we visited the city were \textit{torture}; but we got used to it, eventually. Now most of us just get a minor headache for a couple of days, but after that it barely registers."

He shuddered to the memory, and she didn't blame him; she could barely stand it herself, and they hadn't even reached the camp yet. "I can't believe there wasn't a better alternative to this."

"Consider it another lesson in the hardships we gypsies have to face!" he exclaimed with a gloomy smile. "If you wanna survive here, you gotta be able to put up with all the shit of the world!"

"Yeah, literally." She giggled, then instantly regret it as she accidentally inhaled normally, earning her burning nostrils and teary eyes. "How much space do you guys need, anyway?"

He moved past the ruins of a home at the end of the block and stood aside, gesturing to the scene beyond. "Judge for yourself." She stood next to him and, after reeling to a gust heavy with the river's foul smell, raised her eyes to gaze at the sight.

They had reached the riverbank, and it truly had no structures as opposed to the rest of the district. The waters ran as calm as everywhere else in Zootopia, but here they were wider and colored a sickly green instead of the clear blue Judy had grown used to. The bank across was also bare save for a couple of huts that were visible in the distance, past which stood the tall walls of the city. Judy also spotted the ditch that had been dug along the walls' curve around the entirety of Happytown, making them inaccessible to its inhabitants; a precautionary measure meant to ensure that the disorderly predators were contained within the district.

Their side of the bank, however, was bustling with activity.

A long assortment of carts and wagons, significantly larger than average, were spread throughout the open space all the way to the ramshackle line of houses framing it to the east. Judy counted at least fifteen of the tall wagons and about twice as many carts positioned along the riverbank, and between them a thick crowd of mammals slithered as they went about gathering around cooking fires, performing maintenance on the wagons or otherwise occupying themselves with various tasks. It was a village set within a larger town, and a much livelier one at that.

"… Cheese and \textit{crackers}, Wilde."

"The scent, I know." he nodded with another meek smile. "I've no idea how well your kind can smell, but-"

She gulped and shook her head, cutting him off. "No, no, I just- I didn't expect there to be this… \textit{many} of you, I guess. And how many mammals are with you, exactly?"

"We've got sixty four heads, mine included." he replied, setting off towards the crowd. "Well… sixty one, currently." Judy's ears picked up on the bitter edge behind his casual tone, but it quickly faded
as they approached the camp, replaced by cheerfulness. "And I'm introducing you to all of them, so let's get started!"

"This here's Adam." He gleefully pointed to a young leopard, likely still in his teens, who was rubbing some fabric against a washboard in a soapy barrel at the outskirts of the encampment, clearly burdened with laundry duty. He didn't seem too pleased with his appointed chore, but his face lit up when he noticed the approaching duo. "The youngest critter in our merry little group! Named after the Kingsbane himself; a hilariously fallacious naming choice, as this one turned out to be no less delicate than your average princess."

The leopard only grinned to the jape, politely nodding hello to the bunny before offering his response. "I don't wanna hear that from the fox who spends half of each morning combing that ridiculous tail of his!"

"... Did I forget to mention he's also a slanderous little twat?"

Judy broke in laughter but was forced to cut it short as they crossed numerous other predators while making their way between the tall wagons, each of whom exchanged pleasantries or teases with Nick, always in the same cordial tone. They all bore the distinctive qualities of their group, setting them apart from the locals; relatively well-groomed and articulate to a basic degree, eagerly returning the witticisms of the red fox.

Judy's smile only grew wider the further they moved into the camp; those predators struck her as the most lighthearted and enjoyable people she had met in her time in the capital, and their camaraderie was almost palpable.

Wolford was a wolf with thick, shaggy fur of dark grey which constantly poked through his clothing; according to Nick, his disheveled appearance was not for lack of care, as he constantly tried to subdue his straggly hair to no avail. They found him carrying barrels of fresh water with his close friend, Fangmayer, another wolf with a silky fur of radiant, snowy white. The fox implied that this often incited Wolford's jealousy as they passed by them, leaving the two arguing and him walking away with a satisfied grin full of mischief. Judy was still chortling when he motioned to the next mammal.

There were Snarlof and Grizzoli, a black and brown bear respectively, who had greeted them with a nod and a heavy grunt each. Grizzoli had smiled at the bunny, looking pleasantly surprised and curious, while Snarlof had barely lifted his eyes from his work on one of the wagons' wheels; he was known for a taciturn and introverted mien, Nick said, and could come off rude without meaning to.

Judy was also introduced to Johnson, a slim lion with a short mane and a full, hearty laugh, Emily, the skinny bobcat she recognized from the alley, who greeted her with an awkward smile similar to her own, Maya, a female fennec with disturbingly sharp teeth and an equally agile body, Flynn, a shy, fidgety raccoon who was allegedly an unmatched pickpocket, Meryl, a mature vixen with a long snout and a somewhat judgmental gaze, as well as dozens other predators who were each introduced to her in the form of a goading quip or a backhanded compliment from Nick.

The fox even went out of his way to call over Delgato, the tiger he had mentioned to her earlier that day. Judy silently cursed her partner, thinking that she'd have to apologize for the tiger's tooth, but the latter surprised her by stately offering her a paw and an apology of his own. He even praised her for her moves and assured her that there were no hard feelings between them; he was following Nick's orders and she believed she was fighting for her life. He only asked her to kick Finnick as well, if she ever got the chance, and Nick got a hoot out of the notion of a bunny serving as a sought-after hitman in the gypsies’ inner circles. "Think about it; you've already scored yourself two contracts, lieutenant!" he enthused as they separated from the tiger.
Judy shushed him by reminding him the nature of her first such "contract", but he had already gotten his way; he had seen the rabbit blush to Charlie's compliments.

At the heart of the encampment Judy spotted two familiar faces. She recognized Benjamin's wide frame even with his back turned to her as he stirred the contents of a large pot and Finnick leisurely spread on the ground next to him with a stick in his paws, lazily stroking the small fire that crackled beneath it. Nick called out to them.

Ben immediately abandoned his spoon into the pot, bringing both paws to his plump cheeks. "You brought her here!"

"And her little nose hasn't wilted off yet." Fin added with a throaty grunt, slowly getting on his feet. "Color me impressed."

"Yeah, no kidding; this damn smell could down an ox." Judy responded for herself, causing the fennec a deep chuckle.

"Are you alright? Nicky told us you guys fought some llama yesterday."

Ben's tone held genuine concern. She looked up to his face for a moment, acknowledging the overwhelming urge to form a syrupy smile; predator or not, the fat cheetah must have been the most entirely benevolent mammal she had ever met. Those eyes just couldn't lie.

"Yes, Ben, I made it out just fine; Slick's the one who got floored."

The cheetah frowned. "What?"

She blinked at him. "Uh, yeah. He got punched in the guts- I mean, nothing serious, he just-"

Nick audibly cleared his throat to cut her off. "Truly, nothing serious. Never mind it."

"No!"

Fin stepped closer to the bunny with malicious interest. "No, let's hear it! Floored, you say?"

She openly grinned at the taller fox glaring from her side. "Flat as a plank!"

The fennec laughed in deafening jeer, drawing it out as much as possible before turning to Nick with a quip at the edge of his tongue; but his friend was faster.

"You'll have all the time to get your juicy details, Fin," he declared, lips stretching into a menacing smile. "I'm leaving her in you guys' care for the day. You're to show her around the place."

They both recoiled, wearing opposite expressions. "We're to what?!"

"Yup! See, I'll probably have to go see Lionfart, who's most likely in the Garden; and you know we can't let her know the entrance, so…"

"Why'd you drag her all the way here then?!" Fin demanded.

"Because our bunny ranger has earned herself a day off!" he exclaimed, resting a paw on her shoulder. "And what better place to spend it than good ol' Happytown?"

*What better place indeed,* Judy thought, and not entirely ironically; the prospect of further examining Nick's crew had piqued her interest.
"Well, shucks! We ain't fucking tour guides, Wilde!"

"If you guys are busy, I'm sure I can manage on my own." Judy cut in, looking between the two.

"Oh, shush! We were just loafing around!" Ben assured her, dismissively waving a paw at the fennec's objections. "Things have gotten real dull around here since we've been cooped up in Happytown. So don't you worry, Judy; you can count on us!"

The surly fennec scoffed, yielding to his friend's childlike enthusiasm. "Eh, fine. Whatever. Not much to see here anyways." Then he noticed Nick eyes still fixed on him. "… What?"

His smile grew an iota sharper. "Ben's in charge."

Fin's initial reaction was muffled by the cheetah's squeal. "Really?!"

"Wha- Why?!"

Nick took a moment to savor the fennec's disgruntled expression, tail lightly wagging behind him; the latter's grip now threatened to snap his stick in half. "Because he'll be nice and he'll enjoy it! Won't you buddy?"

Ben beamed at him. "Of course…! Oh, wait; what am I allowed to show her, though?"

Nick thought on it. "Just nothing… incriminating. She knows what we're about, of course, but you know; just to be safe." he concluded, giving the bunny a side glance full of meaning. She simply smiled back.

"Alright, no worries! Oh, Nicky, I'm so glad you're working with her; we never get any guests down here! And the folk from the Garden are always a bit… You know."

"Well, the stars have finally aligned!" Nick declaimed in a pompous manner, blithely gesturing between the cheetah and the bunny. "Benjamin Clawhauser, I hereby deliver my precious partner to your capable paws."

Ben clapped said paws together, giddy with excitement. The endearing sight prompted Judy to add her own flair to the exchange. "I guess I'm in your care now, Ben." she said with a theatrical bow. "Show me a good time!"

Another delighted exclaim escaped Ben. "Oh my gosh, she's just the cutest! I swear, I could just-"

"Ben!"

Judy was about to calmly explain her discomfort with the word for the second time in a day but Nick beat her to it. He had called his friend's name in heavy reproach, looking aghast.

Ben sputtered. "Wha- what? What did I do?"

"You can't just call a bunny cute, Ben! God…!"

The cheetah recoiled, gaze darting between the two. "Is… Is he serious? Is that like- a bad thing? For bunnies?"

"Of course it is!" Nick answered, cutting the bunny off again. "Bunnies can call each other cute, but other animals…? Come on, bud, you're better than that!"

Ben gasped and brought a paw to his chubby face, tail wilting miserably. "I-I'm sorry…! I didn't
know! Judy, I didn't- I wasn't using it as a slur or anything…!"

Nick scoffed and shook his head at the bunny, as if appalled by his friend's racial insensitivity.

Judy rolled her eyes stepped in to punch his arm, snickering. "Oh, stop it you dumb fox!" she scolded him before turning to the cheetah. "It's quite alright, Ben. You didn't know; and he didn't either until today, so don't listen to him!" she added, playfully reaching for another blow. Nick flinched away just in time to avoid it; his arm was still sore from the first one. "It's just a- a cultural thing, let's say; but I know you meant well by it, so don't sweat it! Just, you know… try to avoid the term in the future. Okay?"

Nick waited for her to look away before rubbing a paw over his aching arm. "Jokes aside, though, do not call her that again." he told the cheetah with a straight face. "She's far scarier than she's cute, believe me."

"Har, har."

"You said you were going to see the lion." Finnick had suddenly spoken up, rejoining the conversation. He eyed Nick sternly. "What for?"

"I might go see Leo." the fox clarified. "First I'll see if I can reach Tim. We need someone to keep an eye on the cathedral."

"… Hm."

The fennec kept stabbing him with his gaze. "Is something the matter?"

"It's been four days now, Slick." Fin begun. "Nine if you count your time with the otter; and so far you think you might have an idea of where the guys might be." The stressed words were dipped in sarcasm, setting the heavy tone he was aiming for. "Now you're also bringing your new bunny friend over for a vacation? Call me a scoffer, but I'm beginning to lose hope here, Nicky."

"Hey, I hope I'm wrong! But if I'm not, then perhaps we should be out there helping them instead of planting our asses here, baking under the sun next to Zootopia's filth!"

Nick took a moment before responding, nodding as if to acknowledge the short vulpine's concerns. "There's nothing you guys could help us with, Fin. We won't find another prey willing to aid us and it would be too suspicious if we had the lieutenant employ more chompers to assist her; but we're doing all we can, and I believe we're making progress."

Fin still glowered at him; it took Judy a moment to realize his expression had actually softened. "Everyone's worried sick, man. I just- you look awfully at ease, Slick, and I… I just don't want to believe that you're losing focus."

"Then don't. Because I'm not." Nick was as soft-spoken as ever, with only a reassuring tinge of finality added to his invariably equable tone. "It's all I have on my mind, Fin; all either of us has." he added, motioning to the bunny. "We've thought this through, and right now this is the best course of action. Trust me."

Finnick eyed him in silence for a time, then looked away with a dejected shrug. "I hope you know what you're doing, Slick. I really do." He didn't sound as confident as anyone present would have liked.
But nonetheless, Nick was quick to smile again. "Right…! So- I'm off to work, and you're off to get your tour started! Boy, am I envious!"

"You won't have to bear the stench as long as I, Slick." Judy ribbed back. "The envy is all mine!"

"Naw, the boys here will make it all worthwhile!" He flashed them one last grin before turning tail, limply waving the back of his paw at them. "I'll be back before sundown. You kits have fun!"

And with that the fox strutted away, whistling as he let an easy gait carry him into the crowd where his red figure was promptly swallowed by the stream of numerous larger predators busily marching to and fro.

"Alright, now!" Ben's cheerful voice rang to break the silence that followed. "Let's get started, shall we?"

"You shouldn't have said that."

Judy had spoken without turning around, still staring after the fox. The two predators caught the missing warmth in her tone, and only when she looked to the fennec did they recognize it as reproof. "You look awfully at ease?" she quoted him, scowl deepening. "Losing focus…? Were you serious, Finnick?"

Fin obstinately held her cold gaze. "I said what I said because I'm worried, fluffbutt. We all are."

Judy felt her ears flare up. Her partner was a shameless liar through and through, and nobody knew that better the bunny herself; yet past this dense cloud of mendacity he shrouded himself with at all times she had managed to single out one thing, a single sentiment that she recognized as irrefutably genuine. Having it doubted before her very eyes had proven surprisingly embittering, as if she herself had been wronged; all the more so since the man himself had appeared so receptive.

"As if he's not just as worried, if not more so. As if he's not racing up and down the entire city hunting sheep on his own just to keep you all out of harm's way. Honestly, how churlish can you be?"

"Would you calm down, you psychotic rabbit?!" The peeved fennec's deep voice quickly rose to a blaring yell, gathering stares from the surrounding mammals. "I barely said anything to him, for fuck's sake! Don't get your bloody knickers in a twist!"

"But you did say something!" she snapped back. "That's the point! That attitude! You giving him shit is the last thing he needs when he's already been spending every waking moment busting his tail with me on this hopeless clusterfuck of a case! I understand your concern, Finnick, but that doesn't excuse you for being so damn inconsiderate!"

"Oh my God."

Finnick suddenly abandoned the sonorous hollers and huffed under his breath, giving pause to her minor tantrum. He gawked at her and she blinked at him, taken aback by the sudden change of tone but eager to keep berating him.

Then he spoke again, voice quiet with disbelief. "Inconsiderate…? Bunny, do you seriously think that this got him down just now? That I- that I hurt his fee-weengs?!"

Next the fennec was doubled over, his raucous belly laughs echoing through the crowd. The nearby gypsies appeared to lose interest, deciding there was no argument transpiring after all, and went about scurrying to their tasks while ignoring the three of them. Judy, still rapt in her belligerence, was
thrown off by this new display.

"I think you at least ought to not put any more weight on his shoulders, fennec." she said harshly, trying to stir him up again. "We're struggling enough as it is, he shouldn't have to-"

"Okay, okay- back up here, cottontail." Fin's laughter dwindled to a spastic giggle; he still seemed infuriatingly amused at her expense, but made an effort to compose himself. He wiped his eyes before continuing. "You seem to have misunderstood us a tad."

"You appear to think us prissy lords and ladies in castles of wagons, little missy; but guess what? We ain't. We're gypsies; not elegant, sensitive little doves like you flat-teeth, but boorish, crude, stinkin' fucking chompers."

"If I give the guy shit it's because I know he can take it, same as me; same as all of us. If he couldn't he would have died on the road years ago, fluff. My bitching at him merely keeps him on his toes, but you think that- that he'll curl up against the next corner and bawl his eyes out because this rude little fennec was mean to him?" He burst in another fit, guffawing in her face. "Come off it, sweetheart."

Judy could only construe such an argument as audacious indifference, and all it did was feed her anger. She turned to Ben for support, expecting him to exit his silence and take her side; yet all she was met with was a coy simper.

"He… He does have a point, Judy." he offered meekly, then snorted his disapproval at the still laughing fennec. "Although he's being a total jerk about it!"

"He's got a- Oh come on, Ben…!" came her indignant exclaim, long ears drooping over her shoulders. "Don't tell me you go for this stupid bravado!"

The cheetah blew his cheeks with an apologetic look. "I can't explain it much better than Fin did, Judy, I'm sorry; but you'll realize it yourself eventually, if you haven't already. I mean, come on…!" He paused to give a shrug, as if forced to state a factual truth. "It's Nick…! A few words won't get to him!"

"Nothing ever gets to him."

The young sheep reeked of anxious trepidation.

She was a sultry ewe in her early twenties, clad in tasteful clothing that hung over a thick layer of clean, puffy wool which never failed to claim the eyes of passerby rams. She herself had a talent for being coquettish around males and could often be found in one's arms, engaging in aggressive flirting sessions that would typically end with the pummeling of said male when they came under the attention of her overly protective brother.

She was not being the least bit flirtatious at the moment, however, and not only for lack of a suitable partner; her mood was a dreary one, much like the chamber she was currently in. It was a small underground room, dingy and claustrophobic; an ambiance amplified by the half-light of the single torch burning on the wall behind her, casting formless, quivery shadows all around and marking the agitation on her comely features. Her hooves clopped on the rocky floor as she paced up and down the chamber, from the shut door on one end to the moss-ridden, windowless wall on the other, broadcasting her unrest to the surrounding darkness.

The clopping would have been the only sound to echo in the room had it not been for the male goat seated across of her, sluggishly sprawled on a wooden bench hanging from the wall facing the torch.
He was chewing through large mouthfuls of silage as slowly and loudly as possible, giving off an air of provocative tranquility which the sheep knew was meant to goad her; yet after a few more minutes of the obnoxious munching she found that she could no longer ignore it.

"Why?!"

The reposed goat languidly raised his eyes to the ewe that had paused to face him, clenching her hooves and panting with something resembling anger; but the male knew better. Above all, she was worried.

With that knowledge in mind he gave her a dispassionate stare and went on chewing, observing the ire brewing in her eyes as he took his time swallowing; he then smacked his lips and hummed in appreciation of the food before finally deigning to acknowledge the question, starting with a lazy blink.

"Why what?"

"Why am I here?!" she demanded, hoof kicking against the floor. "Why has Swinton summoned me out of the blue then thrown me in this damp hole for God knows how long to stare at your stupid face?! Is she gonna see me or what?!"

The goat took the insult with a smirk. "Miss Swinton has a lot of things on her hooves right now, sweetheart. She's gonna see you later within the day; the only reason you and I are here is to make sure you stay put in the meantime."

"Stay put?!" Her rancorous shriek bounced off the thick walls of stone and echoed back to the goat in force, forcing a grimace. "What, am I detained or something?!"

"You could say that, yeah."

She goggled at him. "Wha- Why?!"

"Why this, why that?!" he huffed in annoyance, casually reaching into his pockets for more silage. "How the bloody hell should I know? Just wait until Miss Swinton calls for you, little ewe; it should already be well past noon outside."

"… No." She took a step closer, pointing at him. "You do know. You've been up Swinton's ass since the day she took charge, Rufus. You know what this is about."

The goat named Rufus smirked again and pushed some more grass into his mouth. "Maybe; but it's not my place to enlighten you, sweetheart. I'm only supposed to keep an eye on you."

She scoffed and began pacing again, arms tightly crossed over her chest. "This is ridiculous, you hear me? Ridiculous! I've given everything to the cause! I've been nothing but dutiful and obedient in all my years working under the damn pig!"

"Though not exactly chaste, to be frank." Rufus blurted through his munching, but was readily ignored.

"And that's how she rewards me?! This is the answer to all my diligent work?!" A jeering snort escaped the goat, earning him a challenging scowl. "What? What?! What was that supposed to mean?!"

The male sized her up with mirthful eyes, weighing his options. In theory he truly shouldn't be talking without Swinton's permission, but the ewe had a point; he did stand well with the pig at the
top and that gave him a certain level of impunity, so why not poke some fun at the irritable wench who had on so many occasions denied his advances while he could?

His mug stretched by a derisive grin. "So by your account, your handling of the old otter's case was nothing short of exemplary, then?"

She gave another scoff and raised her eyes to the ceiling, but the speed of her reaction told Rufus that she had made the guess herself. "That's it…? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"You don't think it merits censure, sweetheart?"

"Well- no!" Her hooves went on tapping across the short length of the room, constantly jibbing to flash her indignant face at the goat. "I mean, I- I understand I was a bit careless, perhaps, but nothing came of it in the end! I didn't fail and there were no obstructions!"

Rufus gulped down his last mouthful before sitting up with a stern glare. "You, a sheep, approached him in Happytown, lured him with an illegal proposition and then gave him half a day's time to freely run his mouth about you before taking him. So tell me, little ewe, how was that a job well done?"

"Who could he have spoken to, huh?" The aggression in her tone only accentuated her defensive stance on the matter. "His gypsy friends who are locked up behind the Zone's fences, very few of whom may even have believed him? His old hag of a wife who's long lost her marbles? Are these the threats that have us all shaking under our wool?"

"A loose end is a loose end, sweetheart." he tossed with an indolent shrug. "And Miss Swinton's modus operandi is quite straightforward: no liabilities allowed. Sadly, you've just made yourself one."

"… You're just talking out of your ass." She dismissively waved a hoof at him, looking almost triumphant with her statement. "There's no way Swinton is alarmed by this; if she were she would have had me punished a week ago when we actually took the guy."

"Oh, I imagine she thought the same as you a week ago, little ewe; but alas, things have taken an unexpected turn."

She gritted her teeth to keep them from clicking together, further convincing Rufus that she had already reached that conclusion and the entire exchange thus far had only been a feckless attempt to ease her own nervousness. "What do you mean?"

He cleared his throat and smacked his tongue, readying it for use; he was sure to enjoy breaking the news to her.

"As you might have heard, his "hag of a wife" apparently cared enough to pester the local rangers. Our sources reported that she had been visiting the Zone's headquarters daily."

"Yeah, and was naturally ignored!"

"… Until she wasn't."

He propped an elbow on his knees and cupped his cheek, pleased with the deepening distress shining in her eyes. "You see, there is one ranger in Zootopia with a keen interest in your kind, little ewe; a bunny, word has it."

She blinked in understanding. "Marcus'?"
"Bingo."

She blinked at him once more before throwing her head back in high-pitched laughter. "Oh- oh sorry! Let me correct myself, then: I drew the attention of a hypothetical bunch of stupid gypsies and a dumb bunny! We've clearly been compromised!"

"One must wonder how dumb she really is. Remember, she was the one who dismantled Marcus' ring in the east."

"Marcus is a bloody idiot." she scoffed back in contempt.

"True, but a timorous one, which in turn made him cautious. In any case, we can't have her connecting dots now, and she's in the perfect position to do just that."

"Is Swinton seriously scared of some country rabbit searching for a random missing otter...? We're untouchable!" Her voice rose together with her hooves, filling the confined space of the chamber. "Even if she's decided to look into the little chomper's case, how could it possibly lead her back to us? Say what you will about my methods, Rufus, but I left no trace anyone could follow!"

She had found momentary confidence in the indisputable truth of her words, but the goat's sidelong smirk rekindled her sense of foreboding. "Nonetheless, our contacts in the rangers have been instructed to keep an eye on her activities, just in case. Wanna know what she's been up to?"

She inadvertently produced a loud gulp. "What?"

"She has reportedly employed a fox, and together they solved a jewelry theft just yesterday; a few valuables that had been reported stolen from a jewel shop in Rockwood some two weeks ago."

The ewe frowned, not sure what to focus on first. "A-a jewelry theft?"

"Yes, indeed! Weird, isn't it?" He settled back on the bench, teasing her worry with his apparent nonchalance. "At first we thought ourselves lucky that she had been distracted, but as it turns out the owner of the shop used to employ another one of the predators we abducted recently; an ermine, if I'm not mistaken."

She gulped again. "What, then... You think she's made a connection?"

"I think the possibility ought to alarm us, sweetheart; all the more so if there truly is a fox involved. Had a run-in with their ilk once, back in the north; the vermin are as shrewd as chompers get, and twice as treacherous."

"The ermine was taken by Walt and Jesse, by the way, and these two weren't treated as gingerly as you." he added jauntily. "Walt's already been sent west with his family and Jesse's purportedly been confined to his home, just like Marcus. We don't know what exactly the doe knows but we can't risk anyone recognizing their faces, you see; and of course, the same goes for you. If she's still looking into your otter we can't have you freely running about now, can we?"

"Well... I believe that covers just about everything. Now sit tight and wait for the jury, little ewe."

The sheep opened her mouth to respond but found that the precious temper she had so desperately been holding onto had finally abandoned her, leaving behind nothing but a hollow, gut-wrenching dread. She shut her eyes and winced to the floor, leaning next to the sizzling torch; there was no other seat to collapse on. She plainly wished to cry.

Rufus began nibbling at the last of his silage as he observed her with mean-spirited contentment,
eagerly anticipating the first sob; then he thought better of it.

He had his own petty reasons for harboring resentment towards the ewe and thus drawing enjoyment from her predicament, but such dastardly impulses were quickly supplanted by other, more pressing ones of a similarly shallow nature. He had never seen the notoriously prurient beauty look so vulnerable.

He swallowed hard and stood up, fleshy tongue sliding across his lips; had the ewe caught the motion it would have struck her as nauseatingly libertine. He slowly ambled over the small distance separating them. "Now now, sweetheart; there's no need to look so glum! You have to keep things in perspective here. There are still things you could do to ameliorate your situation."

She looked up to his approach with narrow eyes; the dubious veracity of his statement aside, there was something suspicious about the softened tone he had suddenly switched to, one she had never associated to the abject ungulate before her.

She straightened her back and crossed her arms at him, noting how uncomfortably close to her he stood. "Such as?"

"Well, there has to be *someone* willing to put in a good word for you, sweetheart; keep you from getting thrown out of the city, at the very least. You must have a few friends who can influence Miss Swinton's decision, surely." He propped a hoof against the wall, right next to her cheek, and leaned further into her face with a sordid leer that left nothing to interpretation. "And if you don't, it's still not too late to make some… wouldn't you say?"

Her response to his newest advances would be left up in the air for both of them to wonder about later for at that exact moment the lone door of the room creaked open, cutting her off before she could utter a word or raise a hoof to slap the lecherous goat. Both their heads whipped to the sound but their stances lingered a second longer, painting an unequivocally clear picture of the preceding discussion to the newcomer.

Which was unfortunate timing at best, seeing as the mammal in question was a short, burly ram who was immediately recognized as the young ewe's brother.

His was an imposing presence. Most sheep adored their woolly coat to an immoderate extent, but his was always thinly trimmed as it was "an unnecessary impediment", in his own words. The missing wool didn't take away from his bulk, however, for where other rams had the puffy material to fill their clothing, his was stretched by the muscle on his chest alone. This resulted in a risibly chunky figure which would have made the robust sheep amusing to look at given his height if it weren't for the pressure quietly emanating from his person at all times, reinforced by the permanent frown shading his dark brown eyes and the impressive set of disproportionately large horns twisting over his head. His sister would often compliment him over them, claiming that such magnificent horns would have had all the city's ewes vying for his attention if only he didn't act so aloof all the time, but he had never shown any interest in pursuing females. His priorities lay elsewhere.

Those harsh, unblinking eyes were now silently skewering Rufus as the latter hurriedly stepped away from his sister, running a chill down the goat's spine. Rufus cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure.

"Samuel." he greeted him with a nod and pleasant smile. The ram named Samuel gave no response; he simply stared on. Rufus' smile quivered.

"Has- has Miss Swinton sent for her already?"
The ram let a few excruciatingly long seconds pass in quiet before replying; his voice was kept low and threatening, retaining the stolidity of his overall posture. "She sent me. I'll be the one handling her."

The ewe, who had been startled into silence for some time, gasped in relief and darted to hug her older brother, certain that she had been spared any punishment. Samuel swayed lightly to the impact but otherwise made no move to hug her back, his unabated glare still aimed at the goat behind her shoulder.

Rufus managed to hold his gaze this time, frowning in confusion. "Hold on a moment there, Samuel. This is… highly unorthodox. You're her brother."

"Feel free to check with the pig, then. I convinced her to leave this matter to me."

The goat's eyes twitched. The pig. The ram's lips pulled back around the edges. "You will refrain from calling her that."

"Business, yeah." the ewe cut in with a scoff. "He was just telling me how he could advocate on my behalf for the right recompense, Sammy."

Rufus's gaze flickered to the ewe. "We were just… talking business, is all! Weren't we, sweetheart?"

Samuel's lips pulled back around the edges. "You will refrain from calling her that."

"Back off, Sammy. You ain't got that kind of authority here." His chest puffed to his own words and he straightened his back, looking down at the two shorter mammals. "No, that would be me; and I find it hard to believe that Miss Swinton would spare you so easily, little ewe. Everyone knows that the only things you've got going for you are that pretty face and a
bad attitude, and your brother can be replaced by any halfway cognitive muscle-head with a stick. There's nothing to justify such lenience."

He was certain that the ram would know better than to act on his anger, but he expected *some* reaction still; a show of aggravation, such as gritting teeth or clenched fists, or really anything that would add to the delectable power high he had earned by talking down to the most feared brute in their ranks. Instead, Samuel finally blinked before responding in the same firm, impassionate tone.

"She hasn't been spared, dumbass. She's leaving town."

"*What?!*"

The ewe jumped back into her brother's vision, looking at him in shock. "But- but you said she left it up to you!"

"She just told him to carry out the orders, obviously." Rufus sneered. "Because you see, little ewe, he couldn't help ya. He's got no sway over such matters; that's for someone with *actual* influence to-"

"Hardly. She wanted to keep you confined here somewhere, but I wouldn't have it." Samuel cut him off, not bothering with the surprise on either of their faces. "Let's go get your stuff ready, sis. You're leaving at first light tomorrow. The pig has arranged for a lovely spot in the Savannah, I'm sure you'll be."

"*Sammy!*"

The ewe gaped at him in disbelief. "Wha- *why* would you do that?! I don't wanna leave!"

"But *I* want you to." he explained patiently. "Things are slowly coming to a head and I don't want you here for it."

"But that's *exactly* what we've been working for! What I've been working for!*" she cried. "I *want* to be here for it! I wanna see it with my own eyes!"

His gaze grew stricter. "Absolutely *not*. It's too dangerous; besides, there's nothing more you can do for the cause. You've no reason to stay."

"B-but-"

"*No buts!*"

He suddenly exploded. "It will be *hell* out there, stupid! *Chaos!* There's no way I could manage my duties and look out for you at the same time! You've done your part, you'll see the end results and be proud to say that you've contributed, but I'm not risking your life if I don't have to! Now go get ready! Go!"

He had been pampering his little sister all her life and rarely ever scolded her, let alone shouted at her. Now it showed in her reaction; she had wilted were she stood, teary eyes lowered and lip trembling through a daunted pout. She glimpsed at her brother one last time before kicking off towards the door and darting out of the chamber, sniffles merging with the echo of her clopping hooves as they faded into the distance.

Samuel calmed himself with a deep breath and prepared to step after her, but the goat decided he had one last thing to add.

"The Savannah, huh…? Without you around to keep watch I'm sure the local rams will have the time
of their lives, Sammy."

Rufus' scathing remark had been tossed with his snout raised at the shorter ram, which was perhaps why he didn't see him turn around. He just saw a white blur of motion from under his chin, followed by a hollow cracking sound and a sudden flash of pain.

He collapsed to the floor with an afflicted groan, his flattened snout bleeding profusely where Samuel had headbutted him. His brief astonishment quickly gave way to a helpless rage as he saw the latter standing over him, carmine specks of blood splattered on his enormous horns.

He spat on the ram's hooves and raised his eyes, flashing him a red smile brimming with spite. "Amusing…!" he bellowed in a comically nasal voice. "Very amusing…! I can't wait to take this to Miss Swinton, Sammy! Oh, how she'll laugh!"

"I don't give half a turd what Swinton thinks of this, goat." Samuel shot him a contemptuous snort, returning a fraction of the contumely the floored mammal had been showering him with for the past few minutes. "Starting tomorrow, she's no longer in charge."

Rufus stopped trying to tenderly cup his snout and let his arm fall along with his jaw. For a brief moment his eyes held confusion, then slowly widened as apprehension settled. He was left gawking at the ram, no longer paying any mind to the thick rivulets of blood freely running down his face.

Finally, he managed a stammer. "You… W-Wait then, are- are you saying what I… Is the-"

"Like I said, Rufus- things are coming to a head. But hey, don't look so worried; I'll be sure to put in a good word for you to the new administration."

Invariably serious, Samuel turned tail without so much as a chuckle, exited the small room and shut the door behind him, leaving the speechless goat to soak in a crimson puddle of his own making.

-Chapter 5 Continues-
Judy's tour around the gypsy camp had gone on rather smoothly.

She made sure to only pose relatively innocuous questions, such as inquiring about the two large piles of crates and barrels stacked on opposite sides of the encampment and overlooked by a couple of guards each. As it turned out, one of them was stocked merchandise meant to be sold and the other held the provisions they had put aside for the journey across the countryside once they left the city. Judy was certain that Ben would be a horrible liar, so hearing him elucidate as such without a hint of hesitation finally convinced her that Nick's claims held true; however they may be doing it, these people were smugglers who regularly snuck past the city's walls. She could only be impressed.

The bunny had also observed the peculiar build of the tall wagons, which were relatively thin and elegantly made under the large fabrics covering their top; this also explained why they would require such frequent maintenance. Her two guides explained that they had been built so light to facilitate the larger predators of their group who were charged with pulling them across the country. Most of the smaller ones typically walked beside the wagons on the road and pulled some of the carts to further alleviate their encumbrance, but it was still an arduous and menial job; as such, most of the bears and larger felines were allowed to rest whenever they reached one of their destinations and let the others do most of the remaining work, such as setting up camp or preparing meals.

Judy was also introduced to the rest of the crew, although it was impossible to remember all of their names from the get-go; even back home it had taken her some time to memorize all of her siblings from the youngest litters. There were a few that made an impression which stuck with her, however, such as Adam the vibrant leopard and the two wolves she had met earlier, Wolford and Fangmayer. Apart from them there was also Meryl, the vixen who became memorable through her uppity stance and the passive aggressive comments that told Judy she did not approve of the bunny's presence in their camp. Thankfully, however, she was the only one feeling this way; all the others came off as affable and cheerful, openly welcoming her and even expressing their gratitude for helping look for their missing comrades.
She was particularly interested in hearing each of the gypsies recount odd jobs they had taken on in central Zootopia over the years, some of whom were truly eccentric; street hawkers dressed in lurid outfits, paid muscle charged with looking minatory to the passerbies, cup bearers in cheap brothels having to constantly remind the clientele that they weren't part of the merchandise and even rented claws hired solely to scratch the unreachable parts of a large employer's body, such as an especially plump elephant. The bunny couldn't help but note how mortifying most of those positions sounded, but seeing the predators themselves laugh to the recollections put her at ease.

She even warmed up to Finnick after a point, for despite their earlier discord it didn't take her long to realize that his boorish behavior came with a genuinely brazen and straightforward nature, which was a quality she appreciated. Ben managed to talk him into reenacting his role in an old hustle he used to pull in the capital with Nick, back when they had first arrived. The execution was simple, yet effective: the fennec merely abandoned his squinting for a moment, folded his large ears back and kept his lips shut, and suddenly the cranky middle-aged mammal with the foul mouth had given way to a star-eyed kit that could melt even the coldest of hearts with a single glance.

And it might have had such an effect on Judy had she not grown so accustomed to his natural disposition; now she simply found it tear-jerkingly hilarious. She had the sense to avoid riling him up by only offering praise, contenting herself with sharing hushed snickers with the cheetah behind his back.

And Ben certainly did his part in making the experience all the more entertaining for Judy, mostly through his interactions with the fennec. The corpulent feline appeared to be constantly torn between indignation over his short friend's crass mannerisms and enthrallment caused by the latter's unintentional bursts of cuteness. The duo's buffoonish chemistry was endearing in ways neither was aware of, and it was a real joy to simply sit back and watch them bicker, polar opposites complementing one another in their every exchange or gesture.

All in all, Judy was thoroughly enjoying herself among the colorful group of foreign gypsies; even Sofstream's overbearing stench, which at first made her squeamish, had become somewhat bearable by the time the trio completed their first round of the encampment a couple of hours later.

It was then that the venturesome bunny, perhaps emboldened by the convivial spirit of the day, decided to allow herself an act of misbehavior.

She waited for one of her guides' inevitable tiffs to distract them long enough for her to shuffle away unnoticed. She moved behind a cart to cut visual contact before building a hastened pace, basking in the childish thrill that came over her at the success of her minor mischief. Now, it was time for the major one.

She had already memorized the camp's layout, so getting to her destination was no hurdle; minutes later she was standing in front of a very specific wagon that had stuck out to her since the very beginning. It was by far the smallest wagon in the encampment, closer in size to a large cart, and had a completely unique design; it was not of an oblong shape covered by patchy cloth like the rest of them, but rather a thick wooden cubicle on wheels, closed on all sides.

Its appearance alone was more than enough to warrant a short question as they passed it by, but the even shorter answer Ben had offered in response had summoned the bothersome itch she recognized as her dreaded curiosity in all its unyielding might.

Because it would seem that the peculiar wagon belonged to none other than Nick himself.

It had been nibbling at Judy's mind ever since, and she knew it was only a matter of time before she would have to act on the itch. So act she did, slipping away from her two guides and swiftly making
her way to the front of the cubic wagon; then she paused at the small wooden stairs leading to the shut door, hesitating.

On one hand, she absolutely despised those cursed urges of hers. She recognized how petty and intrusive her nosiness could be, and even though it was part of what made her such a passionate investigator she could never quite justify it outside her work. On the other hand, she had carried it all her life and she knew that if she didn't endeavor to indulge it to some extent, at least, it would soon start eating away at her; and she couldn't handle two simultaneous obsessions buzzing in her head at all times.

… Nick was constantly bending her rules, wasn't he? And actually, she was never explicitly forbidden from entering any of the wagons; besides, she wasn't going to act on anything that she may find in there, as per her oath. She wasn't even sure if this was as big a deal as she made it out to be, and no one would know that she had snuck in in the first place.

And of course she wouldn't touch or go through any of his items. She wasn't snooping; she was just taking a quick, harmless look.

*That's right. Just a quick look.*

Later, after the itch had faded and her mind had cleared, she would revisit those thoughts and acknowledge them as childish excuses conjured solely to appease her remonstrating conscience; but for now they were all she needed to make the final call, hop up the short stairs and push the door open. She stood at the narrow threshold, her manufactured resolution mingling with her reluctance, nearly obscuring the underhanded sense of excitement that had her heart racing as she took her first trespassing step into the chambers of her private-minded partner.

The initial impression of the wagon's interior alone was enough to justify disregarding her burdensome moral inhibitions.

It had not sat right with her that Nick would keep an entire wagon to his own as it was not like him to pursue any such luxury, at least not at the expense of his crew. Now she was proven right, because "comfort" was the last word that the room brought to mind.

It was more of a mobile study than sleeping quarters, really, as nothing resembling a bed could be spotted at first glance. There was, however, a fox-sized desk facing the entrance, almost wide enough to cover that side entirely; she spotted a small bowl of half-eaten dried berries at its corner, a sure sign of the owner's eating preferences.

Behind it there was a small opening carved on the timber wall, covered with thin glass to pass as a makeshift window; it was facing east so the afternoon sun cast only a few dim slivers of light into the wagon, illuminating the specs of dust dancing about in the air. A series of racks hung underneath it, just above a wooden chair, looking like they would collapse at any minute under the weight of the numerous items filling their rows to the brim: from cracked flowerpots and an aged, worn sewing kit to a brass spyglass, some more of Nick's beloved throwing knives and numerous other miscellaneous oddities that made the bunny wonder.

To the left of the desk hung a fractured mirror and right next to it a small armoire, just the right size for Nick's green tunics or whatever other articles of clothing the fox possibly owned. Judy couldn't know for certain as its panels were shut and she had already resolved not to pry that far; she was stretching the limits of clemency towards her own bad habits as it was.

The armoire and its contents didn't occupy her mind for long, however, as her attention was quickly drawn to the floor; or more accurately, to the countless stacks of paper scattered all over the wagon,
leaving almost no room for her long feet to step on. There were some more resting on the desk and a few abandoned on the short stool standing in the far corner of the room. Judy had to take a step back to behold the scene in its entirety.

The study's unbearably stuffy ambience was actually the very first thing she had taken note of as she entered, and it had initially brought her back to the office of Walter Tusk. It too had been strikingly mussy, portraying the boar's flippant nature, yet the untidiness in Nick's wagon gave of a slightly different vibe; upon closer inspection, she decided that it could more accurately be described as an organized mess.

Indeed, the numerous heaps of paper might have been randomly scattered throughout the overloaded room, but they were even and carefully stacked on top of one another; some were even held together by twine, forming solid, easily transportable packs. This gave Judy the impression that this particular mess was brought about by a lack of storage space rather than neglect, and perhaps the fox's apparent unwillingness to throw anything away; he could likely benefit by a repository. He had once told her that he held on to his records for "as long as they were relevant", but the thick layer of dust that had settled on most of them indicated that they had not been moved in a while, let alone read, and should have probably been disposed of long ago.

In any case, Judy found the thought of a slouchy Nickolas Wilde to be inordinately amusing.

Planks creaked beneath her foot as she carefully stepped around one of the packs, briefly recognizing Nick's handwriting on the top sheet. She quickly averted her eyes, not wanting to make out any of its contents, and instead guided them to the innocuous empty space at the right side of the wagon.

But there they found new focus, for she had been mistaken; the space was not empty at all.

*Sweet cheese and crackers.*

That entire side, all the way from the small entrance to the right of the desk, was occupied by a tall, wide bookcase and the dense lines of tomes resting on its shelves. A few folded scrolls were crammed into the scarce gaps between them, but other than that there were books taking up every inch, constructing a solid mass of wood and paper; it was no wonder that she had initially mistaken it for a wall. She took a step closer, numbly staring at the contents of the overburdened furniture with an almost pious reverence.

As with every ranger, Judy's daily life had been consistently overrun by scrolls throughout her career; scrolls containing decrees, orders from her superiors, case briefings and personal credentials alike. Books, on the other hand, were not scrolls. Books, with their hard covers of fabric and lizard skin and their delicate bindings were harder and much more costly to make, and thus not utilized in state workings such as mailing services, the military or indeed her own order. In short, books were *rare*; an expensive luxury reserved for the lords who could afford to have them made or purchase them.

Truly, there had been but one instance in her life where she had seen that many volumes gathered in one place, back when she was investigating the smuggling ring in the Burrows. She had visited the mansion of one of the biggest landowners in the province to inquire about the missing crops and had spotted a similarly large bookcase at the nobby lounge she was told to wait in; it too had been completely heaped with books, though arguably in a far more orderly fashion.

But one more thing she had noted back then was the very state of said books; namely, the immaculately preserved spines facing her from across that clean, spacy room, indicative not of their owner's care but rather their infrequent use. Lords collected books and made sure to place them in clear view along with all the other tokens of their fortune to be admired and coveted by the common
mammal, but rarely showed any interest in their actual contents.

These ones, on the contrary, bore all the signs of recursive, if not regular use. Most had been adequately cared for and bore no noticeable deterioration, but scattered among them were a fair few with laces randomly popping out of their bindings and the skin peeling off of their covers; a clear sign of the repeated struggle to unjam them from the tight huddle of their respective rows and actually flip through their pages.

Judy was unaware of her ears drooping back as she took in the sight, absently wondering just how many books she was looking at; she reckoned it should be close to a hundred, give or take. The estimation left her dazed as her eyes glided from one end of the bookcase to the other in a futile attempt to count them all, until finally they rested on a thick tome a few inches above her head, right where a lone ray of sunlight landed. Its coating used to be wool, but age had worn it down to the torn, greyish fabric underneath; the bunny found that it imbued an irresistible sense of wonder. Suddenly overcome with a new urge, she raised a paw to stroke its long faded spine-

"Am I interrupting something?"

Judy was glad for the awe that had dulled her reactions; a moment earlier the mellifluous voice would have sprung her clean off the ground, but now she managed to calmly face the red fox puckering his lips at her from the entrance of the wagon without so much as perking an ear. There was a still moment as her wide eyes met his narrowed ones, but next she was speaking evenly, giving no sign that she had been startled.

"Are… Are all these yours…?"

Nick's brows rose above a smirk. We're moving past the whole privacy assault issue, I see. Cool.

"Seeing as they're located in my wagon, I'd say that's a safe venture- you snooping bunny!" he griped, climbing through the entrance and making his way to her side, accentuating every creaking step with a portentous wave of his tail and a mild glare Judy had no problem ignoring. "Some of these aren't easy to get your paws on, mind you. Took a lot of rigorous bargaining to get them here."

"Oh yes, I'm sure none were stolen or anything."

"… Said the bunny furtively running through my stuff without my leave."

"I wasn't running through your stuff, Nick. Don't be a drama queen." For all her casually dismissive tone she still made a point of avoiding his eyes, but had she not she would have noticed the glint of amusement steadily supplanting his displeasure.

On one hand he considered himself meticulous and was confident in whatever secrets he cared enough to conceal to be adequately hidden, but on the other hand he had learnt not to underestimate the bunny's incisive nature. He had spoken to Ben seconds before and he had assured him that she had only been out of his sight for a couple of minutes, which meant that her snooping session couldn't have drawn on too long, at least, and nothing did seem misplaced in the wagon.

But above all he knew the overly curious bunny well enough by that point to understand that, while he could count on her to gratuitously pry given the chance, it would also be as spontaneous and respectful as prying could be, bearing no ill intent; which was more than he could say for himself. Still, it was good that he had arrived when he did.

"Well, you're not wrong." he admitted airily, following her gaze to the thick lines of books. "Not all of these were procured legally, but I assure you that in those cases their previous owners didn't
appreciate them as they should."

"And I suppose they're better off in your possession, gathering dust in this here stuffy wagon?" she teased, looking back to him before nodding to the haphazard room. "When was the last time you cleaned up in here, by the way?"

"You will comment on my housekeeping skills as much as I will comment on your nosiness, miss Hopps." he retorted, employing one last glare for the purposes of the exchange.

They mirrored each other for a second; then Judy's ears slowly hung anew, lips curving into a guilty simper. "I, uh- kinda hoped we would gloss over that…"

Nick cocked a brow. "Wow. Guilt really does not become you, lieutenant; I half expected you to make this my fault, somehow."

"Wha- when have I ever!"

"Are you kidding me? That's what you do most of the time!"

"Most of the time it is your fault!"

"… Touché." He conceded with a nod, smiling to the giggle that bubbled out the bunny's throat. "Which is probably why I'm not really that mad at you."

She eyed him bashfully. "You're not?"

"Nah, I had it coming. I never told Ben to keep you away, after all; though you'd expect I shouldn't have to…"

"Oh, go easy on the big guy. It wasn't his fault; I snuck away on purpose."

He recoiled, grin widening. "Did you now…! Well, am I not glad to hear that, lieutenant!"

She threw an ear to the side. "How so?"

"Because it shows I'm rubbing off on you, my dear rabbit!" he declaimed in a pompous voice. "A detestable gypsy such as I, slowly but surely corrupting the refulgent champion of order that is Judith Laverne Hopps; a victory to scoundrels everywhere!"

She humored his antics with a groan that could have been another giggle. "This is what I get for relinquishing my moral high ground, I suppose…"

"Seriously though, Nick; this is amazing." she continued after he was done laughing, shaking her head at the wide, replete bookcase. "You could spend a month in here and you wouldn't have read half of these; and some of them look pretty damn rare!"

She nearly winced to her own words; if there was one mammal in the world one couldn't afford to openly admire, that would be Nickolas Wilde. And sure enough, she could practically hear the smugness oozing from him as he reached for a specific book a few shelves higher, carefully pulling it out of the tight row and blowing a puff of dust off before handing it to her. She avoided his irksome grin as she took it into her paws and examined it.

It was one of the thinner ones, just over a finger's width, with a distinctively rare coating of creamy fur. Unlike sheep with the seemingly endless amounts of wool they could produce and regularly shave off, obtaining the coat of a furred mammal for use in crafts of any kind was significantly
harder; the mammal in question would have to be either desperate for recompense or without a say in the matter, and word had it than in the earliest days of civilization animals would harvest the hide of their defeated foes along with their coat. Thankfully, however, any such practices had long since faded from collective memory.

Judy twisted it in her paws, silently admiring the luxurious if dusty cover before reading the title, woven in faded crimson thread at its front. "The Bewitching Tale of Sir Silas the Bold." she read aloud, recognizing it in an instant.

It was a tale she and her peers were all familiar with; the legend of Silas the Bold, the pig knight of the old royalty who had purportedly embarked on an epic quest across vast, uncharted lands to rescue the princess of his time from the clutches of a dastardly witch, typically portrayed as a feline. In his adventures he had crossed sweltering deserts, climbed steep mountains, raced against cheetahs and eventually fought his way through a pack of a hundred wolves before reaching the witch's lair, slaying her and freeing the distressed damsel.

It was a popular bedtime story with kits all over the country, and a personal favorite of Judy's. Sir Silas was but a plump pig with big dreams mockingly anointed a knight, yet through determination and sangfroid he managed to beat the odds, save the day and prove himself beyond all question; an ideal character she related and aspired to even to this day. It had been many years since the last time her mother had tucked her and her siblings to bed with that tale, but now the red words greeted her from beneath the tufts of fur like an old friend, drawing a soft smile on her lips.

"I had no idea there were records of it." She had spoken without averting her eyes from the cover, running a numb finger over the title. "Figured it was just oral tradition. Who would bother making a book of such folklore?"

"I didn't think to ask, I'm afraid. Its previous owner was a camel merchant from the Sahara. I've no idea how he got hold of it, but he hadn't realized what it was actually worth; I got him to throw it in as a minor extra in a deal we made." He shrugged. "Camels are patient folk, but not always canny. Love doing business with them!"

She opened the book to a random page near the end and scanned its contents, stopping at a familiar passage; sir Silas was pompously recounting the trials he had overcome to the witch hissing blood-curdling curses at him, proud and unperturbed. Her smile gradually widened as she ran her eyes through the lines of black ink, each phrase throwing her back to another fond memory of gasping kits and thrilled bunny cheers alike. "This used to be my favorite story, you know. Probably still is."

"Yeah, it seems like the kind of thing you'd like."

Judy's ear reflexively prickled; there was something distantly condescending hidden behind his words. "I suppose you don't, then?"

He shrugged. "Meh… I mean, don't get me wrong, it's a fun read and all; only a bit too… naïve, I guess, for my tastes."

"Naïve?"

She raised her eyes from the page to blink at him. "It's a fairy tale, Nick. There are bards who can put a grimmer spin to it, if that's your thing, but fairy tales are meant to be judged on the values they stand for. Silas teaches kits all over Animalia that if you truly put your mind to it, anyone can be anything."

"Well, exactly!" He shrugged again, remaining disinterested even as he explained his take on the
matter. "A tale should have *some* level of realism to it for its teachings to hold substance, right? Silas may well have been the strongest, most determined pig the world has ever known, but realistically… he was still just a pig."

"… Hm…"

Judy guided her eyes back to the open page, silently nodding at the words. Nick rolled his eyes, expecting her to prolong an argument he had absolutely no engagement in; instead, he was surprised to see her decisively shut the book before handing it back to him with a simple, easy smile. "Yeah, I suppose you're right."

"And realistically, I'm just a bunny."

With that she placed the book in his paw and proceeded to casually lumber along the bookcase, examining the rest of the volumes and paying no mind to the fox staring after her back.

It took Nick a second to realize he was smiling.

He shook his head and prepared to tenderly shove the rare book back into place, but just then his eyes fell on the title and he hesitated. Slow and uncertain, he lowered his arm and reached for the desk at his side, placing the thin tome among the heaps of scattered papers instead; then he stood over it, frowning at the red letters in question.

He had no idea why he did that.

"Some of these look really pricey!"

His attention was drawn back to the rabbit, and the book now resting on his desk was swiftly forgotten.

"Most of them are, actually; but there are many ways to work your way around high prices. Favors, for example."

Judy gave him a look. "Or thievery, right?"

He clicked his tongue. "Now, that's an ugly word…"

"An *accurate* word." she corrected him with a smirk. "But it's the most immaculate of your activities that I'm aware of, Slick, so I can't really complain. You're really just a bookworm is all."

He sportively nodded his approval, then took a step back and regarded the bookcase with a dreamy sigh. "I just… appreciate them, I guess. Plus, it's a solid investment; I once had an elephant-sized volume copied to rodent proportions, then sold it to some mouse lord in the country for a decent profit."

"Honestly, Nick, I could just sit here and listen to you recounting your commercial enterprises all day." she laughed. "It's a shame you'd sell them, though. Your collection's pretty impressive!"

The fox sighed again, deflating. "Funny you'd say that, actually; I'll be selling more than half of these once we leave the city." There was a tinge of regret poking through the stolid finality in his voice.

Judy shared in the sentiment. "What?!! How come?"

"We've lost so much time here this year, and the gang can't even work in the city right now. We've gotta make up for the losses somehow; I'd already be in the market for buyers if we weren't so
Judy said nothing; she just eyed him in silence for a moment, contemplating.

She wanted to ask him what exactly they were supposed to be doing according to their schedule, but knew she would get no straight answer; he had been consistently avoiding any mention of their activities outside the capital. She also wondered how much he would ask for sir Silas' tale if she offered to buy it off of him, but that thought too was cast aside for the time being in favor of more practical matters.

"So, anyway!" she exclaimed, paws clapping together as if to signal the transition to a new subject. "Tell me, how did it go? Do we have eyes on the cathedral?"

"Right, uh- no, not yet." He turned his back on the bookcase and made for the exit, motioning her to follow. "We weren't very lucky today."

"Do tell."

"I tried to reach a guy I know who'd be perfect for the job, but as I feared he was unavailable, so I headed for the Garden to see Leo. Turns out he wasn't there either, but his folk told me where to find him. The place is pretty close to the camp, so I figured I'd drop by to check on you while I'm at it; and good thing I did, too."

Judy hopped off the wagon after him, passing his last comment over. They began walking along the busy riverside. "I see. Did you want me to come with?"

He blinked at her. "Oh. Uh- sure, if you want. I mean, I won't need you or anything, but if you're bored here you might as well come see some more of Happytown; though I doubt you'll like it any."

"Oh no, I'm not bored! Anything but, actually; your people are real charmers." she hurriedly assured him. "Especially Ben and Finnick; they're just like an old couple, the way they bicker back and forth all the time." She shook her head, a broad smile forming to the thought. "And to think they call me...!"

"Ah!"

The sharp exclaim came from behind them, cutting off their mutual laughter. Instantly recognizing its high-pitched tone, they paused and turned to face the very duo they had just been discussing.

The fat cheetah hurried over with a sigh of relief as Fin dragged his feet across the dirt behind him, approaching slowly with a scowl of annoyance stretching his contours.

"You found her!" Ben enthused. "How did you lose us, Judy? I thought you were right behind us!"

Nick craned over her, grinning. "Why yes, lieutenant! Tell him, how did you lose them?"

She took a second to glower at the fox before answering. "I, um- actually, Ben, I wanted to get a closer look at Nick's wagon but I wasn't sure you'd approve, so uh..." She fumbled with her paws, flashing the taller feline with a coy smile. "I figured I'd just... go by myself?"

The cheetah's shoulders sank along with his flabby cheeks. "Wait, so you- you snuck away?"

She shuffled in place. "Well, um... kinda? Listen, I'm really, really sorry, Ben. I was only-"

Finnick's boisterous laugh burst out from below his friend as he reached them, cutting her off. "Oh, I
"do like you, bunny…! Gave us both the ol' sneak, eh? Hahah!" Then his smile suddenly dropped, large ears shooting up in alarm. He turned to Nick with a deep frown. "Wait- you found her in your wagon?"

"She didn't see anything sensitive, Fin. Don't worry."

The fennec nodded, mollified. Judy didn't probe into the curt exchange, but put it away to ruminate on later.

For now, she just smiled once more. "Again, I apologize. I know this was uncalled for, but I had a great time today, honestly! Thanks for showing me around; especially you, Ben!"

"Oh! You're leaving so soon?"

"We'll take a quick detour to the southern slums first." Nick explained, smiling down at the fennec. "Leo's been holed up there all day, apparently."

Fin whistled. "Alright! Lionfart!"

Judy looked between them in question. "I had thought the entire district qualified as a slum- no offence."

"No, that's- a fair point, actually; but even here there are certain streets that are considered… disreputable." For the first time, Ben's light voice held true disapprobation. "Do you really gotta take her there, Nicky?"

"This escapade's supposed to be an experience, buddy! And she's an adventurous one, after all; I'm sure she'll appreciate it." Nick placed his paws on the bunny's shoulders and tenderly urged her into motion, pointing her to the edge of the encampment. "Well, thanks for taking care of my bunny, guys!" he yelled at his back. "I'll catch you both later. Ciao!"

Judy gaily waved goodbye at the cheetah, matching her step to that of the fox prancing at her side. "What was that about "your bunny", Wilde?"

"Relax, lieutenant!" he chuckled. "By that logic, I'd be your fox! You ought to be glad, really."

Not hearing a response, he turned to find her skewering him with a suspicious squint. "What?"

"… And where exactly is my fox taking me this time?"

He grinned at her. Of course he did.

"Oh, you'll see, my dear lieutenant!" he drawled, picking up the pace.

"You'll see."

"… I see."

She spoke the words dryly, thoroughly unamused, in response to Nick's expectant smile as they stood outside their destination.

What the locals called the "southern slums" were indeed very close to the encampment, less than a twenty minute walk away and, as the name implied, lay at the southernmost end of the district. It was essentially another one of Happytown's small avenues, the widest Judy had seen there, and unique in more ways than one.
The steep ditch circling Happytown embraced the avenue to the south, and right past it were the city walls with their imposing height ominously towering above the slums. The ditch itself was not visible from up close, however, as there was a seamless line of large, patchy awnings positioned along its rim, casting their shade on the countless predators gathered underneath them; it was by far the largest crowd Judy had seen gathered in the district.

The purpose of the gathering had been abundantly clear to her, first as a sneaking suspicion and then, as they approached the site and her potent bunny ears begun nibbling at the sounds of the crowd and recognizing their indisputable overtone, as an absolute certainty.

Happytown, it would seem, had an entire street dedicated to the market of carnal pleasure; and it was pretty damn popular with the locals.

One would expect such a market to exist further away from Softstream, whose smell was likely to abate the lovemaking mood of even the most lustful of mammals, but that didn't seem to be a problem. At the beginning of the street lay one of the district's largest lizard farms, and the building apparently served as a barrier against the western winds that carried the river's foul smell; a hint of it still pervaded the air, but it was so faint compared to the source that it may as well have disappeared completely.

Having inadvertently visited a brothel in the city before, Judy noticed a number of dissimilarities between it and the slums as they traced the line of awnings, looking for the one Leo could allegedly be found at. Most notably, she could not tell the patrons and the employees apart at first glance, or any guards or servers for that matter; it all seemed like a messy, nonsensical huddle of mammals rubbing against one another, drinking, laughing and otherwise enjoying themselves, barely fitting under the shade of the awnings along with the tattered couches and the few tables and taborets scattered among them, filled to the brim with cups and jugs of ale. Any semblance of privacy had long been abandoned, yet none of the profligates seemed to mind.

All in all it was dirtier, much more dissolute and far less classy than Rockwood's brothel, not so much erotic as downright obscene, and everyone there appeared to enjoy themselves that much more.

Another observation the bunny made regarded the mammals found under each awning. There was one which had almost exclusively hyenas, another only canines, a third one was rife with felines of varying sizes and many more appeared to host numerous other mixes of species; different variations meant to appease different tastes. As one would expect, the one Nick stopped at had predominantly tigers and lions reveling beneath it.

Judy couldn't tell whether this entire street was perhaps a single business with different sectors, or if there was even any payment involved at all, but she didn't ask; she decided that the less she knew of it, the better. In any case, the overt licentiousness of the establishment—if one could even call it that—still bothered her, but she appreciated its transparency, at least; it spared her any embarrassing misunderstandings.

A similar thought must have run through Nick's mind. "Brings back fond memories, don't it?" he goaded as they paused before the correct awning, gazing at the wantonness transpiring under it.

"Brings back the itch, that's for certain." she retorted, tapping her foot with meaning.

"Well, to be fair, I did apologize; and haven't I behaved since?"

"No apology registers until you wipe that grin off your face, bucko."
That same grin widened momentarily – her occasional use of hillbilly lingo always got to him - but faded soon after, his gaiety persisting in the cadence of his voice alone.

"Off it goes, then! It's for the best, really: smile too much around Lionfart and you'll never hear the end of it. We're here for work, after all."

"That, we are; so let's go get this over with."

Leodore was sure to be a head taller than any other maned lion in sight, yet they had to wade through the tight assemble of rancorous felines in search of him; they even found themselves slipping between the embrace of scantily clad lovers once or twice, pushing them apart in their moment of greatest excitement. This earned them more than a few growls.

Judy acknowledged that, while undeniably awkward, she was not nearly as self-conscious as she had been in Rockwood's brothel; she was more annoyed, if anything, frustrated by the inconvenience the sea of lascivious predators posed rather than embarrassed by their shameless display. She had to wonder if this was a good or bad thing.

They did spot Leo, eventually. As one would expect of the vainglorious lion, he had positioned a large seat next to one of the tables and kept the surrounding space to himself even as the rest struggled to find a spot they could stand in. A topless, bosomy lioness was seated on his lap, brushing the scruffy bush that was his mane with a tender paw while landing small pecks at the base of his neck. His one paw was wrapped around her waist, idly fumbling with her tail, while the other held an entire jug of frothy ale.

Overall he looked incredibly relaxed, surrendered to the female's attentions with eyes half-lid and a languid smile spread on his mug. Judy, who had been expecting the worst, was extremely glad to see that he was still dressed, at least; she had never thought that his lurid, flagrant clothing could make for such a relieving sight. His outrageous purple overcoat was missing, but other than that he wore the same mismatched outfit he had on when she had first seen him back in the Garden; even the straps of lizard skin he meant to pass off as shoes were still around his ankles, protected from the dirt by a thin, creamy rug he likely had placed beneath the seat for him alone.

Once again, the man gave the distinct impression of a conceited beggar acting the role of a monarch and enjoying every second of it.

They paused right before him and Nick coughed to get his attention. The lion's eyes flickered open, dizzily scanning his surroundings for a second before spotting the red fox coolly smiling at him from below.

"Hey there, Leo. Having fun?"

He was fully awake in an instant, bouncing up with a wide exclaim; the gaudy mannerisms were the same as Judy remembered. "Nickolas, dear...! Come, join us! To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Business, I'm afraid; you know this past week has been rather... hectic."

"Oh, it's always business with you, isn't it!" Leo fondly scolded him, releasing a deep laughter that shook even the lioness on his lap. "But surely, business could wait a moment, could it not?" He aimed his wide, toothy smile to the female, moving a clawed finger to stroke her chin. She purred to the contact. "It'd be such a terrible waste to let it distract us from... all this beauty gathered here- wouldn't you say?"

The fox simply shook his head with a patient smile, nodding to the street behind him. "A word, if I
"There are vixens here as well, you know." Leo shot with a saucy leer.

Nick kept on smiling.

The lion huffed in surrender. "Fine, fine- off you go now, my little darlin'!" He gave the lioness's rump a light smack, prompting her on her feet. "We'll continue this later." He got on his feet and stretched, carelessly tossing the jug at the table next to him with a deep yawn that almost made it into a roar. "I myself am terribly busy at the moment, as you can surely tell, but there's always time for- oh."

He had just noticed the pair of grey ears popping up from behind the fox; now he stared at the mammal they belonged to, eyes wide and unblinking. "And we're joined by your lovely rabbit friend, I see."

"Indeed we are." Nick stepped aside, revealing the rest of the friend in question. "Although "partner" would likely be more accurate."

"Partner...!" The word seemed to fascinate him. He leaned down past Nick to the bunny's height until their noses almost touched, staring down at her with elated interest. "How delightfully uncommon!"

"Well, whatever the case, this is a chance to offer my apologies!" He proffered a paw, almost bigger than Judy herself, and held it open before the small mammal. "I admit I was less than civil when we first met, my dear lady; but do try to understand, I was merely caught up in the moment. So, no hard feelings?" he asked her pleasantly, cooing the words through a broad, friendly smile. Too broad.

Nick scowled at the back of the lion's mane, entirely displeased. These long, sharp teeth that had first greeted Judy back on that wooden stage, when she was convinced she was to reach her sudden, brutal end, were now very openly displayed inches away from her face. The very sight of the lion alone could have potentially been enough to make her uncomfortable or even revivify some of that trauma, but this went beyond indelicate; he was purposely trying to intimidate her just for the fun of it, employing his size, his teeth and those disconcertingly excited brown eyes that always seemed just a little too wide for comfort.

Nick was furious; not only at the lion, but also himself for failing to anticipate this childish impertinence and letting Judy accompany him there. He rarely ever yelled at folk, but now he drew a deep breath, preparing to lash out at Leodore and put an end to his insensitive provocations before they could get to the bunny.

Looking back to it later, he felt stupid over the thought.

"Oh no, not at all!"

The air never got to leave the fox's lungs; it remained trapped behind an open mouth as he saw Judy's tiny paw reach out and firmly grab one of the lion's fingers. "It was an honest mistake to make, Mr. Lionheart; and in retrospect, it did make for a thrilling experience. None that I mind."

She smiled back at him, cheerful eyes of clear purple steadily fixed on his own and flat teeth casually displayed before the deadly yellowed fangs, as if she were exchanging pleasantries with an old acquaintance; a courtly gesture which, given the circumstances, was also brazenly haughty in the bunny's own, distinctive fashion. "Name's Hopps, by the way; Judith Laverne Hopps, ranger
lieutenant of the Burrows province. I expect I'll be visiting your turf regularly, Mr. Lionheart, so I'd hate to have bad blood between us."

She had remained impeccably stoic, not once reeling away from the large predator. Her nose was kept perfectly still and her ears had not even quivered.

Leodore's only response was a subtle twitch on one of his goggled eyes. Both smiles held, meeting above a protracted pawshake.

Then Judy winced to the force of a loud snort.

Leo suddenly retrieved his paw and turned to the fox, lips slumping in annoyance. "I don't like her." he growled before starting into the crowd with heavy stomps, crudely pushing mammals aside as he made for the relative quiet of the street.

Nick burst into laughter, loud enough to be heard over the buzz of the inebriated predators. "Aw, c'mon Leo! Don't mind her! I think you're very scary, man! Honest!" He wasn't sure if Leo had heard his raillery over the clamor, but if the faraway snarl that reached the vulpine's ears was any indication, he probably had.

Judy stared after the lion's enormous back, thinking back to the fickle nature he had demonstrated back in the Garden, when again she had seen him switching between emotions in the blink of an eye. "Now there's a moody character..." she mumbled to Nick, cocking a brow.

"Life's a performance to him, lieutenant." he explained merrily, grunting as he tried to open them a path through the dense crowd. "He's just affronted you wouldn't play along, is all."

"Yeah, I think I can live with that."

The mordant remark had him briefly twisting to look at her as they squeezed past what appeared to be the especially furry behinds of a male tiger, and Judy wondered if she didn't imagine that feint glimmer in his eye, remotely akin to pride. In any case, a matching smirk had crept on her lips by the time they escaped the cluster of half-naked felines and spotted Leodore crossing over to the opposite side of the street.

He casually snatched a bottle of sour wine from the paws of a robust young panther as he passed him by. The panther turned to object but, immediately recognizing the tall back of the gypsy now in possession of his alcohol, he simply lowered his head and shied away without a word.

Leo took a hearty swig and smacked his tongue to the tart aftertaste, then slumped on a rock bench facing the row of awnings and waited for the duo to walk up to him.

"So, Nickolas..." he sighed as they finally reached him. "Business it is! How can this old lion help you today, my friend?"

True to her thorough and analytical nature, Judy had taken the time to classify the many enticing grins of Nickolas Wilde and their respective uses. As such, she was quick to recognize the one he now put on as "compelling bashfulness #2"; complete with the fumbling fingers and tail lowered to hang just over the dirt.

Her brow shot up. That's a potent one.

"Y-yeah, um... You know I'd really hate to inconvenience you any more than I already have, Leo." chuckled the fox, eyes giving a nervous flicker that must have taken much practice to perfect. "I mean, you've already been a great help in combing the Zone, after all. But you see, new things have
come up and— well, I just didn't know who else to turn to. Who else I could trust, you know?"

Leodore graced him with a smile of knowing smug, in many ways identical to his usual one; a wide mouth-full of long, pointy teeth in full display, emitting inordinate delight as he leaned down from his seat and brought their faces closer.

"Nickolas, dear- I think one performer is more than enough here." he crooned with just a dip of sarcasm. "Save the charm for your crafty swindles and get to the point."

For a second Nick only blinked at the tall feline; then his eyes settled and his smile grew sharper. "It's the one thing you're halfway decent at, bud. I just figured you'd appreciate the effort."

Leo snorted. "I thought you meant to ask for my help?"

"Gotta entertain ya first! Isn't that how it works?"

The lion's fangs split for another roaring laugh to gush forth, paw smacking against his knee. "You sure know me well, you wily fox! I swear, Nickolas, if only you would loosen up a bit…!"

"One of us is more than enough, Leodore. Your words." the fox responded, laughing along.

Judy observed the two with keen interest, pinning the exact moment Nick's tone shifted to its natural state; when all else failed, he could always count on "acerbic wit" to carry him through the day. The fact that he would make the switch so early in the game, however, was surprising; either Leo was more perceptive than he let on or there was a set pattern in all their interactions.

In any case, she found the exchange between the savvy vulpine and the erratic thespian riveting; a veritable goldmine of utile hints on how to read into the first and handle the latter. She wouldn't let herself miss a second of it.

"Jokes aside, though, I do need your help, buddy." Nick resumed as their laughter dwindled. "Do you have any people currently working at the Market?"

Leo ran a paw through the coarse tufts of hair sticking out from his mane. "The Central Market…? Perhaps. What's it to you?"

"I need someone to keep an eye on the cathedral. Report on the sheep entering and leaving within the day."

The lion scoffed, giving him an incredulous look. "Sheep…? Nickolas, please tell me you're not still going on about this ludicrous theory! You've based your entire search on the ramblings of a madwoman!"

"That madwoman is one of your own, isn't she?"

Leo turned to the bunny to find her fixing him with an icy gaze; Mary Otterton was likely the only predator outside of Nick's group that she had taken a liking to, debatable cogency notwithstanding.

"Precisely! So why would you take her word so seriously, then?"

Nick's head gave a wistful shake. "It's all we have to go on right now, Leo. Besides, we've reason to believe she knew what she was talking about."

Leo puckered his lips in thought. "The cathedral, huh…? And you believe you will find your missing folk there?"
"And yours as well." Judy cut in once more. "If we're right about this then in all likelihood the sheep would have abducted many of the local gypsies too."

"Mm…? Oh, that'd be swell; although I don't see why these evil sheep you speak of would ever go through the trouble. My people do a fine job of vanishing on their own, given time."

"Uh, right." Nick hurriedly spoke up; he could smell trouble brewing. "So anyway, do you have-"

"You really don't care, do you?"

Judy took a step forward, eyeing the lion in disbelief. "Your people can regularly go missing, probably die without anyone ever knowing and you wouldn't bat an eye?"

For the first time since she'd met him, Leo's eyes narrowed. "You said it yourself, my sweet lady. They regularly go missing on their own. That's just what they do, that's the life they live. Who am I to judge or restrict them?"

"I thought you were their king."

"Aye, I'm their king!"

This time Judy had anticipated the sudden roar, so she didn't flinch away when it came. "And their entertainer! I'm only here to put smiles on their faces, rabbit, not act the role of an overprotective mother! They're free to do with themselves as they please, and I let them do so without hovering over their heads all the time; that's how things work in our Garden! Otherwise we'd be no different than the uppity, self-righteous fucks running this shit of a nation!"

Judy's eyes grew colder. "That's some convenient kingship you've got there, Leodore."

"Okay, enough!" Nick stepped in between the two, paws aloft and a reprimanding scowl stretching his features. "Quit it, both of you! We're here to discuss business, not have a cultural showdown! Leo, settle the fuck down! Hopps, stop talking."

Leodore's paw tightly clutched his knee. "You know I'm not easy to stir up, Nickolas, but I won't have a ranger insult me in my own home!"

The fox aimed both paws to the lion, trying to placate him. "Leodore, please. She's just not from around here, she meant no offence."

"That's right, I didn't." Nick hissed at the bunny to shut up but she ignored him, taking another step closer and looking up to the glaring lion with newfound composure. "I'm just trying to understand why he is rummaging through the entire city to find his friends while you lay here whoring and drinking without a care in the world. Aren't you supposed to protect your subjects, Leodore?"

Now increasingly desperate, Nick tried to raise his voice again but it was muffled by the lion's response; a response that came heavy yet unexpectedly self-possessed. "Maybe. Maybe I'm in the wrong here, love. Maybe I am a terrible, irresponsible ruler; but what's that got to do with you, hmm?"

He leaned forth to stare the bunny down. "Where does a bloody ranger, of all mammals, get off telling us how we should run ourselves? Why would one of you filthy green caps march all the way down here to preach at me as if you suddenly decided to care for our people's well-being?"

The answer rolled off her tongue like an easy breath. "But I do care, Leodore."
Leo expected to laugh, but he somehow didn't. "… You care for us, little ranger. Really."

Judy had cooled off completely; suddenly, she knew exactly what she wanted to say. "Yes, because I'm not the kind of ranger you're accustomed to, Leodore. I'm the real thing."

That, he did laugh to. "Oh, are you now!"

"Yes, I am." Her voice rang soft, yet firm enough to hold his attention. "And as a real ranger, I'm well aware that my vows cover every single mammal in Animalia, be it prey or predator. Such is our oath."

"I don't approve of this, mind you!" she added, gesturing to the awnings behind her and the vulgar practices unfolding underneath. "I don't approve of any of this, or of you, for that matter; but that's beside the point. Under normal circumstances, I would certainly come after you for all of your countless transgressions, but that is only because I am sworn to uphold justice; and while justice could mean punishing you, it must also involve protecting you."

"That's why I partnered up with him." She paused to motion towards the fox standing at her side, listening in silence. "Or did you think I agreed to help him because I didn't hate his guts? Because I did, Leodore. After what happened in your precious Garden, I most certainly did; but my duty compelled me, and it still does. It compels me to care, even if the locals seem to have forgotten all about their oath, stupidly caught up in this petty war you've started among yourselves."

"Rangers aren't meant to wage wars, Leodore. We were never meant to be anyone's enemy, believe it or not. Our purpose is merely to uphold order, not unilaterally hunt down and victimize predators. Your people have been a strong disruptive element in the capital for generations and I see that this might have led our local branches astray, but you would do well not to lump me in with them. That's not how we do things in the Burrows."

Leo cocked his large head to the side, looking the bridling bunny up and down until his eyes rested on the unwavering conviction in her own. She actually believes it.

Oh, my sweet, sweet country bun.

"… So I'm to assume there's no such war were you come from, eh lass?"

"No, of course not."

He nodded. "Hmm! Intriguing…! And how do your chompers fare, then?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but suddenly faltered. "I- Well… We don't, uh-" Her gaze slowly drifted downwards, brows furrowing. "… We don't have many predators in the east."

Leo's entire presence had always been vociferous, emphasized in both speech and mannerisms, conditioned to garner attention in every situation; yet when Judy raised her eyes again she was greeted with the least flamboyant smile he had ever worn, toothy as always but now just a touch bitter.

"Well then, love… sounds to me like your kin has simply won their war already."

Judy opened her mouth again, but this time she came out empty.

Leo sighed and shook his head, turning back to Nick. "See, my friend? That is exactly why I don't enjoy dreary conversations!"
It took the fox a second to shake off the numbness that had come over him, and another yet to conceal his surprise; he had never, in over ten years of visiting the capital, seen Leodore Lionheart respond to anyone so calmly.

He eventually managed a shrug. "Well, you still gotta have them occasionally, Leo. Can't always avoid them."

"Not with you around, I cannot!" Leo chuckled; then his eyes flickered back to the bunny that now stood silent, looking pensive and unbalanced. His smile regained some of its mischief. "I'm sorry if I was too upfront, my dear, but I couldn't help myself; such big words, from such a small mammal…"

Judy loured and was about to offer a response she would probably not be happy with, but was given pause by the weight of a padded paw gently resting on her shoulder.

"Her actions more than live up to them, Leo."

Now Leodore was the one frowning at the fox, displeased to be denied another assault. "Do they, now?"

"Certainly."

Leo grunted and looked away, taking another swig from his bottle. "I suppose that does warrant some leniency on my end."

Judy's ears cant towards the lion. "Wait- didn't you say there were some just a minute ago?"

"He said maybe." Nick corrected her with a straight face. "Which is exactly what he had to say to hear more about our situation." Leo smiled and nodded to the fox, acknowledging his words. "Still, gypsies aren't the only ones down here; are they, Leo?"

The lion toyed with the bottle in his paws. "No, they aren't; and I do happen to know of a few chompers who've scored a job up there recently, but- well, I'm in no position to demand anything of them. They've no affiliation with us and don't even frequent Happytown, for whatever reason. Peculiar folk!"

Nick hummed. "I don't suppose I could ask you to, uh… persuade them, on our behalf…?"

Leo shook his head. "They're just a small, abject group of Zone nobodies, Nickolas. They've done nothing to antagonize us. I can't go around threatening random mammals in our own streets like some kind of tasteless bully; I've a reputation to preserve, you understand…"

"Yeah, I suppose I do. That's fine, bud." Nick smiled once again, thick tail confidently swaying in the air behind him. "Just point me in their direction. I'll take care of the rest."

The lion smiled back. "I'm sure you will, Nickolas! Well, last I heard they were holed up in your friend's inn, that sloth. That was almost a week ago, however, and I don't know for how long they could afford it; it's really quite a pricey one."
The fox's eyes lit up and his smile grew, visibly pleased at the news. "Ah, excellent…! That should simplify things. And who are we looking at, exactly?"

"I don't know any of their names, I'm afraid. Never cared to remember. They were led by some tiger, if I recall correctly, and have somehow scored themselves an illustrious job in one of the Plaza's laboratories; a glassmaker or wood carver or something of the like. I don't know if the laboratory is close enough to the cathedral for your purposes, of course, but you can find that out yourself. Just go and ask them."

"Yes, I believe we will."

"Right- so then, if that'll be all…" Leo got on his feet with a grunt of exertion, suddenly feeling the effects of his numerous drinks. "I am expected by a buxom young lioness, and I've kept the poor girl waiting long enough."

"Why yes, of course. Thanks for your time, Leodore." Fox and bunny stepped aside to make him way. "Have fun, you sorry excuse of a king!"

"I most certainly will, my humdrum vulpine friend!" the lion shot back with a sonorous laugh. "Best of luck in your endeavors!"

And with that he tottered back to the shade of the awning, carried by long, shaky steps and merrily waving the now half-empty bottle in his paw.

The duo also took off, entering a small alley that would lead them back to the district's outer rim. A couple of minutes later, as they moved around a large puddle of mud that blocked an entire side street, Nick finally noticed that the bunny was being abnormally silent, staring down at the dirt with an impervious expression.

"Why so morose, lieutenant?" he asked her. "Lionfart didn't get to ya, did he?"

She cast him a swift glance, then aimed her eyes back at the road ahead. "Mm…? Oh, oh no. Of course not."

She could still feel his warmth lingering on her shoulder.

"I'm just thinking."

"What about?"

"… How much is a night at the Rabid Drinker?"

"Wha- lieutenant!"

Nick jibbed to a sudden stop, smiling at her in astonishment. "You're not thinking of staying the night, are you?"

She shrugged without pausing, still refusing to meet his eyes. "Sun's almost down, and it's such a long walk back to Rockwood; besides, the inn is as far from the river's stench as one can get in the Zone, right?"

He resumed walking and caught up with her, still smirking. "Hmm… Then I presume you're willing to put up with Flash, right?"

That one caught her unprepared. "Oh…! Oh, right! Um-" She finally turned to face him with
reluctance in her eyes. "Will, uh… Will he be the one serving us, or…?"

His shoulders shook by a quiet chuckle. "Nah, don't worry. He's got staff working the upper floors; skunks and weasels and the like, quick folk all of them. It's a shame you're this negative towards him, though." he added. "I'm sure you'd like him if you just spoke with him a bit."

"Mph. If I can summon the patience for it…" she retorted, breathing a sigh of relief. "He's really comfortable around predators, isn't he?"

"Well, of course; his success is built solely on the local chompers. Gypsies and simple preds alike visit his inn all the time, since he doesn't discriminate like the rest, and he offers the best to be found around these parts in terms of quality. Plus, he's always willing to cover- uh, for… Hm!" Nick was quick to curb his tongue, but the speedy recovery was pointless; in his momentum he had accidentally spoken a word too many. "Yeah… You get it."

It was Judy's turn to chuckle. "Relax, Slick! I'll be willing to connive so long as he offers me a sizeable discount." she ribbed.

"Oh, don't be daft! You're with me, you won't have to pay a thing. Stay as long as you like."

This earned the fox a beaming smile. "Well, well! Looks like I made partners with the right fox!"

Nick didn't respond; he just allowed his gaze to turn remotely teasing. Her eyes narrowed at him. "… What?"

"You like it here!" he singsonged, shoving his goofy grin into her face.

Judy scoffed, pushing a paw against his mug while fighting a grin of her own. "I don't like it here." She clarified, hiking a thumb towards the slums that lay behind them. "The only ones I truly like are your guys, to be honest, but there's no way I could sleep next to the waters."

"I see." he snickered, retreating. "And you certainly didn't like Leo; but that's understandable."

She bit her lip. "Yeah… No, I mean- I see why you would call him "charismatic", in a sense, but… well, he's just-"

"Ease up, fluff. I don't like him either."

She shot him an incredulous look. "You seemed quite fond of him for the most part, though. Was that all an act?"

He pondered for a second. "Well… yeah, just- not exactly."

"I'm friends with every repugnant miscreant on this side of the fences, or at least everyone worth knowing. Doesn't mean I enjoy them, though, not really; and I doubt Leo enjoys me either. But we rely on each other a lot, so we try to make our interactions as pleasant as possible, seeing as we can't avoid them. However convincing it may look… yeah, in the end it's just another shared act."

She slowly nodded in understanding, humming. "… I can see why you two wouldn't get along, actually."

"Really? How so?"

She shrugged. "You care. He doesn't."

He held her gaze for a moment, then pensively lowered his eyes to the road. "… Hm. I wonder."
"What do you mean?"

Nick belated his answer, clearly uncertain. "He... *does* care, I think; just not in a way you or I can understand."

"My, oh my! How very *cryptic!*" she quipped in playful sneer.

"Well, sorry to disappoint you, fluff." he retorted with a dramatic sigh. "I don't have *all* the answers, believe it not."

"... That's comforting to know, actually."

"Heh!"

The feint curve on Judy's lips was easy to miss, and it did escape the fox as he craned his head to scan the countless identical byways spread before them, taking some time to identify which of the narrow paths would guide them straight through the dense, shadowy labyrinth of decrepit homes and back to Happytown's outskirts. He felt a tinge of regret at the time, knowing he was about to reach the conclusion of a historical event: the first ever tour around Zootopia's most nefarious hub of villainy to be given to an upright little bunny from the far country; and one poised enough to consider the whole experience recreation, to boot.

The bunny in question followed his lead back to the avenue where she had spotted the dancing gazelle earlier that day; there was virtually no movement left on the street, cockfighting pits and unmanned meat booths alike now quiet and abandoned under the rapidly expiring sunlight. The world's happiest town was slowly drifting off to sleep.

"By the way, "fluff" is off the table as well." she tossed like an absent afterthought as they crossed the eerily empty avenue, making for the familiar alley that would lead them back to the Zone.

Nick's tongue gave a loud click. "There's just no pleasing you, is there?"

__Knock, knock.__

Silence; and in the silence she quietly prayed to be left alone, to be allowed a moment's rest after an exhausting day of monitoring the work of hundreds of mammals, rushing to clean up after inept simpletons and handing out appropriate punishments to said dullards, all with the added pressure of a sudden deadline weighing down on her, rapidly coiling around her nape like the clutches of a metaphorical noose. She now had to be fast as well as thorough, and delivering on both ends had proven as taxing as one would have expected.

The sow wasn't being overdramatic; she was positively drained, in desperate need of a good, long rest.

__Knock. Knock.__

She heaved a weary sigh, face miserably sinking into her hooves. *No quarter for the righteous, huh?* "Come in."

The door across her desk creaked open and in came her last visitor for the day: a ram with a characteristically short build and large horns, looking at her with dour, sober eyes as he shut the heavy door behind him and started towards her.
The office he had just entered was wide and spacey, stone walls coated by thick arrases of deep purple draping all the way down to the floor, which itself was covered by a crimson rug that muffled his hooves as he slowly approached the sow's desk. It was a chamber clearly meant for animals of their physical stature, yet the ceiling was so tall that it escaped the light of both the fireplace and the bright candles illuminating the space below, enabling the pig to continue her work well into the night; a show of awe-inspiring grandeur, indicative of the resident's influential position.

But more impressive still was the sight past the back of her chair, where an enormous wall of glass stood in place of stone, akin to a massive window. It was partly stained in colorful patterns at the sides but plain and transparent in the middle, granting an impressive view of the world's grandest city dressed in her nightly gown; shadowy shapes of buildings big and small stretched into the far distance, laid out below the room that served as a unique vantage point over Zootopia's large expanse. Numerous tiny lights flickered randomly into the darkness wherever mammals were still awake, likely enjoying themselves one way or another or simply caught up in their pressing responsibilities.

The sow was definitely among the latter; saggy eyes of hazy blue and lifeless shoulders slumping over the heaps of scrolls scattered all over her desk were testament enough to that, and the ram was taken aback by the heavy air surrounding her as he came to a stop just a few feet away. They took a second to regard one another.

His face never held anything but the strict rigor he applied to both himself and others, his superiors included, yet beneath it his heart now sympathized with the poor sow. It was no secret that the two rarely got along, but such genuine diligence certainly deserved his praise; not to mention, he knew what it was like to be constantly plagued by the incompetence of those around you, beset upon by countless blunders in need of rectifying. That, at least, they had in common.

His head curtly tilted towards her; a simple show of respect, hollow yet requisite. "Madam."

A tired smile creased her lips. "Samuel."

He straightened his already rigid posture to give his words that extra air of formality. "I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, madam."

A slow, indolent blink was all Swinton offered in response.

He cleared his throat. "I simply wished to express my gratitude."

This raised a neat eyebrow. "Your gratitude, Samuel?"

"That is correct, madam. Thank you for granting my wish and sending my sister away."

She fell back on her chair with a hanging smirk. "I wanted her away from the city, so I sent her as far away as I could. Simple as that."

"Indeed; but we both know there were… other options available." he stated vaguely, giving her a meaningful stare. "Word has it that no one's heard from Jesse in the last couple of days."

She steadily held his gaze. "Hm… He must have hidden himself pretty well, then."

His eyes faintly narrowed; he knew the ram named Jesse well enough to be aware of his frivolous tendencies, and the steady, icy gaze of the pig left him no doubt that she was too.

No liabilities allowed.
"… I'm surprised you didn't turn to me."

"I expected you to be in a more emotional state than I prefer on my agents. I was about to reach a decision regarding your sister's case as well, after all; I didn't want you… conflicted."

He considered her words for a moment; indeed, if he had caught wind of such a drastic response taking place he never would have taken his eyes off his sister. Luckily, the sow had managed to avoid any potential friction.

"What of Walter? And Marcus?"

"Walter is safe with his own, just like your sister will be. We've been monitoring Marcus and the man seems compliant enough so far, almost to a fault; but I'd keep you on standby on that end, just to be certain."

"Mm, I see."

They allowed the soft crackling of the fading flames to fill the space between them for a few long seconds. When it became clear the pig wouldn't break the silence, Samuel cleared his throat a second time.

"And… I was wondering if I were to be punished myself."

Swinton looked confused for a moment; then understanding came, and with it a coarse chuckle. "Rufus, I presume…? Samuel dear, you attacked him now precisely because you knew I wouldn't have the time to punish you. Any penalizing I could hastily put together would be sure to result in a proper mess; and I can't be dealing with any more messes at the moment." She paused to give him a courtly, almost warm smile. "You are cautious like that; it's one of the things I like about you, that make you such a valuable asset to the cause. And the cause must always be put above petty squabbles between our ranks, don't you think?"

Samuel was almost tempted to smile back. "That mentality honors you, madam."

She reclined further back, eyeing him in thought. "… You know, Samuel… We've certainly had our differences, you and I. I've had to look the other way on more than one occasion and I know you often found my decisions objectionable, but for what it's worth I was glad to have you around. You were one of the few dependable mammals I had under my command."

Suspicion flashed across the ram's face, but he decided that the pig was far too spent to fake such a convincing tone; he guessed that her impending relief from authority and all the tremendous stress it entailed must have put her in a sentimental mood. His expression softened, ever so slightly.

"The same goes for you, madam. You've been very thorough during these last few years. We've had to deal with our fair share of morons, yet you've managed to keep this ship afloat for as long as was necessary, and I understand that was no easy task. Personal feelings aside, I do appreciate your contribution."

This birthed another heavy chuckle. "Samuel, please. You'll make me blush."

Samuel liked to think himself a practical mammal, and hearing them waste words on vapid pleasantries served as his cue to wish her goodnight and excuse himself; but just as he was about to open his mouth he saw the smile she was wearing, that stable curve of red resting below her short snout, gradually slump and her head wobble back into her hooves, and he got the impression that there was more than fatigue eating away at her.
There was concern hidden underneath; and any worries that bothered his superior were likely to be his as well.

"… Madam? Is everything alright?"

He was assured of his reading by the shade that passed over the sow's eyes as she aimed them into the smoldering remains of the fire, lips obscured behind her dainty hooves. "… Nothing's alright, dear."

He took a step closer, eyeing her attentively. "What are you worried about?"

As per his bad habits, he was being far too simple and direct considering their respective ranks, but Swinton didn't seem to mind; there was no need for pretenses when they were alone like this.

"Bunnies and chompers, my dear Samuel." she sighed with a deepening frown. "Bunnies and chompers."

His eyes narrowed further. "Did she make another move today?"

To his surprise, she chuckled again. "Not that bunny; but their kind is really becoming quite bothersome as of late, isn't it?"

She got on her feet and stretched with a silent groan as the ram processed her cryptic answer; then it dawned on him.

"News from the north?"

Swinton confirmed his guess with a nod. "Why do you think we've been instructed to speed things up as we have?" she asked him somberly. "Savage and his degenerates are becoming stronger by the day, it seems. The majority of the northerners appear to support them, or at least don't actively challenge them as they ought; some have even been reported to provision them, or shelter predators heading north to join their forces." Her snout crinkled back on reflex, and if Samuel had better hearing he would have caught the near inaudible oink that escaped her, a clear sign of quiet frustration.

"This entire abominable movement should have been nipped at the bud ears ago, yet we've stupidly allowed it to grow enough to demand the attention of our entire army. We let it escalate into an all-out war, for God's sakes!"

A second oink came, louder than the first, and she was quick to cup her snout in embarrassment but Samuel paid it no mind. "We have to learn from our past mistakes, Samuel." she continued more calmly when her fidgety snout had settled down again. "We have to be quicker this time around. We have to nip this bud before it can blossom and strangle us all in our sleep."

Her last words were nuanced by a resolve that quickly faltered, allowing for the dread beneath it to resurface and take over her expression once again. "… Chompers I can understand, Samuel. I would expect it, even; but prey? Prey, rising to kill one another over chompers…? And all it took was a crazy rabbit with a loud mouth, Samuel; that's all it took for hell to break loose in the north. That's all it took to spread such disarray, to drive our own people so completely mad- can you comprehend it?"

"Because for the life of me, I cannot. Just knowing that something like this is happening elsewhere, that it is even possible, it's-" The pig abjectly shook her head, looking away from him with a shudder. "… It's a dark world we live in, dear. We can't afford to lower our guard for even a second."
She remained with her back turned to him, expecting a comment. All she got instead was a prolonged silence, followed by the sound of hooves clopping against the rug as the wordless ram stepped past her and made for the wall of glass, gazing out at the heavy darkness stretching over the city below them; then he turned to her, raising both arms towards the glass in a wide gesture that enveloped Zootopia in its magnificent entirety.

"Aye, it's a dark world out there, madam; but that's why we're here, is it not?"

Swinton nearly recoiled in shock because, for the first time in memory, Samuel was actually smiling.

His small, dark eyes, typically harboring nothing but the imperturbable, disengaged professionalism that defined every aspect of his psyche, were now ablaze with a raw, uninhibited passion that almost left the sow intimidated. Only the ones who had witnessed the ram's work in the field first-hand were familiar with that peculiar, incongruous spark and the varying effects it had on the people around him; his sister, for example, would often times call it unsettling and turn away in disgust, yet for the few who truly shared in his absolute dedication it was nothing short of enticing. Encouraging, even.

*Inspiring.*

The spark had already captivated Swinton in the brief second it took for him to continue.

"It's okay for darkness to frighten you, madam. Darkness is scary, I agree; but even so, we must struggle against it, to push it back and safeguard our precious light. That's what our cause is all about, in the end. That's what we've been working towards all these years- and look now!"

She followed his gaze past the glass, and the ram's smile grew. "All of our hard work, every sacrifice we've each made- it will all soon pay off. Do you see it…?"

Her eyes found focus at the far edge of the horizon, where the black sky was just beginning to turn to a deep azure, heralding the arrival of a new day. In a few more hours the city would wake and life would resume, as it did on every busy, colorful morning.

"Darkness may still loom, madam," the ram whispered into her ear, voice thick with a fervent zeal that slithered into her bosom and became her own. "but light too is not far from sight."

"Dawn is finally upon us."

Judy found that her second visit to the *Rabid Drinker* both affirmed and contested her initial impressions of the establishment.

It was, for example, certainly much more luxurious than any other found in the Zone, and of course Happytown, which explained its popularity even among the local prey that frequented its ground floor. They sought its homely ambience and the superior quality of its food and ale, enough so to warrant putting up with the slow server that worked the bar there.

Most of them, however, just like Judy some four days ago, had no idea that the ground floor was essentially a front meant to obscure the true nature of the storeyed inn.

Seeing Flash lug himself across the spacey room as he took and prepared their orders, they dared not imagine how excruciatingly slow their service would be if they had taken to the upper floors instead, so no one had actually climbed the stairs next to the bar to spy them out. If they had, they would have been led to a couple of consecutive floors consisting of nothing but corridors with numbered
rooms, neatly kept and eerily quiet; it was there that Judy would be spending the night.

Another purpose of those storeys, however, was to muffle the noise coming from the last two floors as much as possible; for it was there that the true core clientele of the Rabid Drinker were offered their service.

Nick had guided her not to the entrance at the front of the inn, but rather a set of long, narrow stairs kept out of sight in a shady byway at the backside of the building, where even the most daring of prey was unlikely to ever wander to. These stairs made for a trying climb but led them straight to the upper floors and the many predators gathered there, eating and drinking in spacy rooms largely identical to the inconspicuous one at the ground floor, if much more hectic. Judy spotted a few among them with the typifying cheap iron rings jiggling on their ears, but the majority of the patrons there weren't gypsies; only perhaps unusually accustomed to them, freely sharing drinks and laughs with the ones present where most would actively try to avoid their ilk.

Small, agile servers, also of the predator variety, were rushing to and fro with their little aprons comically fluttering as they went, tending to the fireplace and the unruly animals of their floor in place of the languid owner whose only real job was to sell the act of an innocent, prey-friendly inn and allow his real customers to offer their patronage in peace. These customers did seem to enjoy themselves but, having seen the way their kind conducted themselves in the streets of Happytown, Judy could tell that they had toned down their excitement to help Flash preserve his crafty illusion and keep him and themselves out of the spotlight.

Just as Nick had insinuated, this business thrived on the interplay between the sloth and the local predators, both of whom conscientiously looked out for one another to their mutual benefit.

Arranging for Judy's accommodation was done swiftly. A skunk server on the highest floor warmly greeted the fox and immediately promised to prepare his partner the nicest room available, laughing in Nick's face when the latter asked about the price; Judy's eyes were already rolling above a smirk when his wink reached her a second after the skunk had looked away. He then ordered the two of them dinner and began inquiring about the group of predators who were purportedly lodged there.

They were immediately pointed towards a table near the fireplace where six mammals, including a tall tiger and two spectacled bears, were enjoying one of the richest meals the Rabid Drinker had to offer; working in one of the Plaza's esteemed laboratories apparently paid handsomely, especially compared to what predators in the city were used to. They accosted the group and, after overcoming the inevitable surge of suspicion that followed the appearance of a decorous fox accompanied by a bunny ranger, they learnt that the laboratory was indeed located conveniently close to the cathedral; next was the task of convincing the group to spy on their behalf.

Monetary recompense was offered right off the bat, of course, but the tiger in charge didn't show much interest; they were making enough as they were and he saw no point in taking any extra risks for the added revenue. It was at this point that Judy's able ears caught the familiar sound of a fox gently clearing his throat, so she took a step back, grabbed a carrot and observed the scene that followed.

The predators held on to indifference at first, then grew slightly annoyed at Nick's persistence. Ten minutes later, however, their quiet snarling had given way to attentive nods and exclamations of dismay as the fox eloquently explained his predicament; or at least chosen parts of it, colored with an appropriate range of emotions and accentuated by animated gesticulating.

He sounded miserable when he first spoke of his missing comrades, eliciting as much sympathy as possible from the strangers seated before him; then his tone subtly switched to reserved, helpless fury as he turned their attention to the sheep that had –most certainly- abducted them, no doubt making
use of their esteemed position as prey to further oppress the poor, powerless chompers with assured impunity.

The snarls had by then resumed, so Nick moved on to the next step: his voice grew to a heated chant, ostensibly fueled by a righteous indignation that steadily resonated not only with the group he was addressing, but the ones surrounding them as well. The fox had begun in whispers yet now he was suddenly standing onto their table, roaring out incensing questions that rang as provocations, riling up the small crowd around his feet as they yelled their defiant answers back at him.

Yes, they were chompers; and they were fed up with being treated like shit by the uppity prey of the world! They were chompers, and indeed life had always been an unfair struggle to survive in a city where the flat-teeth were dominant! They were chompers, and being constantly hunted by the blasted green-caps truly was enough of a plight without the rest of them having to join in!

Yes. Yes, they were chompers, and their kin had once again suffered a great injustice at the hands of prey; so yes, it was high time they did something about it.

The bunny's eyes traced the periphery of their sockets a second time. Yes, these poor, impressionable folk were chompers; and, like so many before them, the veritable wordsmith of a fox had just played them like a fiddle.

Nick sealed the deal when he offered to pay for all the drinks their table ordered, to "thank them for their understanding and their willingness to assist a fellow pred". He settled among them and raised the first cup, calling for the entire room to join him.

Judy quietly watched from the sidelines, munching at the end of her carrot as she observed the now laughing fox with a pensive gaze. This whole display had simply confirmed what she had long figured out about him.

He could evidently pass off as an unremarkable and mundane individual no one would spare a second thought or glance, like he had done back at that brothel in Rockwood, or exude such overwhelming suaveness that a room full of naturally boisterous and characteristically boorish predators hung from his faintly smirking lips; and changing between the two personas only took him as much time as he needed to decide which would benefit him the most. With the flip of a switch, he was the person he needed to be.

It was disgustingly smarmy once you were made aware of it; and, as much as Judy didn't want to admit it, it was also more impressive each time she bore witness to it.

As she watched the men and women of the room sway to his words, cheer to his toasts and pat his back in honest gestures of assured solidarity, she thought about how big a mistake everyone always made about him; the same mistake she herself had made when she had first met him, back in that common room in the Zone's headquarters. The mistake of stealing apprehensive glances at the ends of his pointy teeth, while in fact they were the least dangerous thing about him.

For someone as perceptive as her -or perhaps someone who had also been tricked by the fox in the past- it was clear as day that it was not the contents of his mouth that posed a threat, but rather the way he presented them. It was all in the typical smug grin and all its innumerable variations, the subtle twists at the corners of his mouth, his ability to make himself look elated, fearful, saddened or surprised with such astonishing ease.

The fetching glances, always furtive yet somehow always noticed, never failing to bait the other's curiosity, to charm them, to pull them further in until he's gotten what he wanted from them. It was the same as what she had seen him do to Ethan Burgh just the day before, or to her even before that;
and each time it was seen through to resounding success.

Judy had learnt by then that nothing was spontaneous, that everything she saw on those vulpine features was exactly what the fox wanted others to see, what he had elected to show at the given time, and for all the progress she had made thus far she still had a way to go before she had fully deciphered him. She could attest from personal experience that fighting a bulky, well-trained rhino was a breeze compared to holding a conversation with Nickolas Wilde.

Perhaps that was the reason behind the guilty pleasure she drew in doing so; Judith Laverne Hopps had always loved a good challenge, after all, and so was inwardly glad for the fox that provided her with just that.

She had initially settled down in a corner to enjoy her carrot and the jolly celebrations Nick had incited, but as those celebrations drew out into the later hours she felt her mood gradually dull. Perhaps it was the rowdy atmosphere of the room that didn't agree with her after the full day she'd had, or maybe her ears were just a bit too sensitive for the vociferous mishmash of brutes that occupied it; or, most likely, she had suddenly become all too aware that she was, as far as she could tell, the only prey to be found among the cheery predators, and certainly the only one with a feathered cap and a glossy brown vest. The thought left her glum and in sudden need of privacy.

She thought to sneak away to her room and tuck herself in for the night, seeing as Nick was still busy socializing, but eventually opted for another alternative: a windowed, twin-paneled door positioned right next to the very stairs they had used to access the building, facing east and leading to what appeared to be a balcony. The door had been kept shut, likely to keep too much of the room's noise from escaping into the night, so the bunny whisked it open a mere few inches, slipped out and shut it behind her as swiftly as possible; the voices of the people inside were instantly muffled, and in the relative quiet that ensued Judy realized that they had been giving her a headache.

She took a moment to inspect her new surroundings. The Rabid Drinker's gable roof shape cut into the flat surface she was now standing on at about the half pint, making it more of a terrace than a balcony. The rim was framed by sturdy bars only slightly taller than herself, and there was hay scattered about, likely meant to serve as a makeshift bed for the patrons wishing accommodation but too poor or drunk to be given a proper room.

The height the terrace stood at and the lack of any similarly tall buildings in the vicinity left the location exposed to a chilly but gentle autumn wind, so mild that it couldn't even blow much of the hay away. Regardless, that same wind now made Judy glad for the purple scarf tightly wrapped around her neck and the tight fit of her cap keeping it steady on her head.

She walked up to the bars and gazed into the distance, seeing what she could make out in the heavy dark preceding the morning. Her attention was first drawn to the starry sky above, and when her eyes tired of the beautiful glitters on the black font she lowered them to the north, realizing that the inn was evidently tall enough to allow a glance into the city past the multiple fences restricting its predators.

She was gratified to meet some more faraway lights there, giving their feint glows into the darkness; even when Zootopia was fast asleep, she never truly stopped breathing. Judy's lips curved to the thought.

At the same time, however, there was one glow easily discernible from the rest. It was by far the largest, and from its heightened position Judy concluded it must have been a single large window located somewhere on the upper floors of the cathedral. The sight provided yet another explanation for her dour mood.
Because despite the carefree day she had spent—which admittedly, she had desperately needed—there was still the reality of her inauspicious investigation to deal with come the morning. Following Jasmine’s trail had taken a lot of time and energy, yet all it had yielded was the abstract, intuitive belief that the grand cathedral would be somehow related to the abducting sheep; and that entire case was in turn only connected to her own primary assignment through more vague, instinctive correlations, dots arbitrarily connected for lack of a better alternative.

Things were looking bleak. It was true that she had found some unexpected relief in the city's lowest slumps, but none of it brought her closer to the fulfillment of her duties. There was too much work to be done still, too many things to look into, too many loose variables to consider; and while her partnership with Nick had initially revived her hopes for the investigation it was now plainly obvious that neither had a concrete plan on how to proceed past that point. They could only lean on these random predators and that Duke weasel and hope that one of them comes out with something useful, all while praying that her supposed colleagues in the city don't impede their progress any more than they already had.

Judy Hopps held every secret to the healthy—or at least efficient—approach of occupational blocks such as this. Her responses ranged from stubborn anger to excitement to obsessively thorough cogitation, but in the end she always came through, finding the appropriate way to tackle each situation and eventually overcome the obstacles in her path; that was precisely what the red feather on her cap stood for.

Indeed, Judy Hopps was used to always having an answer, and now she was faced with that condition’s single drawback; she had no idea how to handle this unfamiliar feeling of helplessness, this sudden wave of melancholy that washed over her and had her leaning against the terrace bars, quietly brooding over her shortage of options with a heart mired in gloom.

Zootopia, too, was supposed to be a challenge, and it had certainly delivered; enough so to make even the resolute bunny wonder, for the briefest of moments, if she may had finally bitten off more than she could chew.

Judy was pulled out of her somber musings when the sounds of the boisterous predators inside suddenly blared; the door had been opened, then shut again almost immediately. She raised an ear towards her back, picking on the nimble footfalls of a mammal not much larger than herself as they approached her.

"That doesn't look like a party face you got there, rabbit!" Nick's endlessly jocular voice was as unmistakable as his gait, and Judy didn’t need to face him to see him grinning in that particular, cocky manner of his. "Everything alright?"

She gave a silent chuckle, not averting her eyes from the vague shape of the shadowy city. "Just a tad spent, Nick. I longed for some quiet."

"Must be hard to get with those ears you've got on you."

"Heh."

He stepped to her side and regarded her, head cocking sideways. "Mm… Well, if you're looking to relax, then I think I've got just what you need!" She turned to see him holing out a small, wooden cup, offering it to her. "Here."

She blinked at it. "Oh…! Oh, uh- thank you, Nick, but I don't-"

"No, of course not!" The sharp smile widened as he cut her off, playful and knowing. "Not when
you're on duty tomorrow; hence this."

He shook the cup lightly in her face, so she reluctantly took it into her paws and instantly felt its warmth bleeding into her fingers. She clutched it tighter, only then noticing the thin trail of steam rising over it, and brought her face closer for a whiff; a pungent scent of diluted spices invaded her nostrils, drawing a spontaneous moan of pleasure that gratified the fox who had handed her the beverage.

"So the Rabid Drinker serves tea as well? I never would have guessed."

"The cheap kind, mind you; but enough to warm up a little bunny on a chilly night like this, I think."

This time he drew out a genuine smile. Judy nodded in appreciation and raised the cup to her lips; then her paws suddenly froze, holding it inches away from her face. She tensely eyed the warm liquid, then turned back to the fox in a brusque motion.

It took him a second to construe her narrowed gaze as suspicion.

"Oh, for- here!"

Nick snatched the cup away with an indignant groan and, after brashly holding it up for the bunny to see, threw his head back and gulped down a hearty mouthful without hesitation.

Almost immediately he broke into a violent coughing fit, shoulders jerking nonstop as he hurriedly handed the cup back to her, hissing and hacking through the paw covering his mouth.

"Augh- ack! Hot, hot, hot!"

Judy took the cup with a loud snort, graceless yet endearing in its spontaneity, followed by a similar laugh as the fox began drawing rapid breaths in an attempt to cool his seared mouth. She was still reeling in laughter when he composed himself again, pouting in silence until the numbness on his tongue withdrew.

"Dumb fox." she tossed amidst her giggles, failing to acknowledge the uncut fondness of her tone.

"That's appropriately atypical, since I'm partnered with such a sly bunny." he responded likewise, wiping his teary eyes.

A smile still danced on the bunny's lips as she averted her eyes and took a small sip, relishing the warmth that flowed down her throat and settled in her chest. She traced the leftover wetness on her lips with her tongue, allowing herself another quiet moan.

She felt somewhat better now.

"You look sober enough, all things considered." she commented. "I didn't think you the kind to hold your liquor so well."

"Ah, but I don't need to!" he merrily exclaimed. "Get them in the right mood and no one'll notice whether you're actually chugging it down or not, they're too focused on their own drinks by that point. I tend to avoid alcohol myself, you see; getting piss-out drunk might be a universal practice, but one should abstain to make the most of it."

This cheeky, knowledgeable tone he so often employed had a similar feel to his grins; it seemed to Judy like she was supposed to find them vexing, but somehow ended up enjoying them all the same.
"Mm-hmm; and you certainly made the most of it back there, eh Slick?" she replied in kind, head tilting towards the door.

"Well! It did cost me quite a bit; do you have any idea how much ale it takes to get a bear drunk? Let alone two of them...! Luckily, Flash is always willing to give me a sizable discount, God bless him."

Judy hummed again and raised the cup to blow its contents cool. "How did you two get so friendly with each other, anyway?"

"Oh, I happened to run into him back when he was first starting out and convinced him to hire me as entertainment for his patrons."

She paused mid-sip and mirrored him, recoiling in shock. "Wha- entertainment?!"

"Well, yeah." he sighed. "I didn't have the connections I do now, so I couldn't exactly be picky when it came to work. In any case, Flash, as a true man of culture, absolutely loves my humor; so much so that he asked me to keep coming by even after I quit. Ah!" He suddenly spun towards her with an excited smile. "By the way, I haven't told you the one with the camel yet, have I?"

He frowned upon finally noticing the mirth in the bunny's eyes, as well as her muffled snorting. "... What?"

She took a moment to produce a few more stifled chuckles. "You... you worked here as a jester?"

Judy clutched her guts in another powerful laughing fit that threatened to spill her tea, shooting delighted howls into the night as she staggered under the dignified glower of the fox.

"I prefer the term comedian, actually-"

His words backfired as Judy's fit grew stronger, but watching her failed attempts to mitigate her cackling diffused whatever offence he might have actually taken. He rolled his eyes with a receptive smile and a huff, waiting for her to collect herself.

"I don't know why you're so surprised, Carrots." he remarked once she had finally bedded down her laughter and was left panting, grey ears draping over her flushed cheeks. "I'm a very funny guy!"

"Pft- oh, you most certainly are!"

Her chuckles, now weak and drained, resumed for a full second before she realized she was supposed to glare at him.

"Aaah, your defenses are down, lieutenant! That one almost got through!" Nick chortled triumphantly before she could reprimand him. "Admit it; it's growing on ya!"

She wasn't sure what her eyes were doing then, but she hoped they had kept glaring. "In case you've forgotten, we have a deal still in effect, Nickolas." she ground out.

"Which covers our partnership, yes- but we're not working right now, are we? It's still your day off!"

Her next smile was one she could have easily fought against and won, but she found that she didn't want to.

"I swear, Nick," she sighed, "every time you're this close to getting on my good side..."

"Oh, save it, bunny!" he snickered in childish tease. "You know you love me!"
"Hah! Do I know that…?" They eyed each other for a long second until Judy felt her buckteeth once again displayed without her leave. "… Eh, yeah. I guess you do have your moments."

Satisfied, Nick lifted his head and gazed into the surrounding darkness, hoping that she couldn't see his chest puffing underneath his tunic. There it is again.

So validating.

"That means a lot coming from you."

Judy blinked at him, almost as surprised at his words as himself. "Don't be getting mushy on me now, Slick!" she chuckled. "I got more than enough praise from you back in the slums anyway. My ego's sated."

The fox once again twisted his neck to look at the capped doe standing next to him, elbow propped against the bars and paw holding the steaming cup of tea he had offered her, as well as the casual smile sitting under her brilliant eyes. The vivid purple of those irises was beginning to feel pleasantly familiar, distinct through the unique blend of resolve and compassion that he knew them to harbor; equanimity and empathy alike were present there, coexisting in harmony and imparting a comforting warmth that at times made her gaze difficult to meet.

And suddenly, he realized that he had not said enough.

He aimed his eyes to the road stretching through the shadows below their feet, letting his eternal smile wane until it had flattened into little more than a thin line. When he spoke again the constant wit in his tone was absent, supplanted by something neither of them could quite place. "In all seriousness though… thank you."

"When I first met you the plan was to use you to get past the Zone without much trouble with the authorities and then just keep you from interfering with my search as much as possible while we were out. I was supposed to get a key out of you, Hopps; and what I got instead was a real partner."

"You're a good ranger, Hopps. You're smart, diligent, tough, have good instincts and, most importantly, you're taking this seriously. Honestly, I had thought I'd be carrying the team, while actually I'm the one struggling to keep up out there!"

He paused for a second, slowly nodding in affirmation to his own words. "Things were looking pretty bleak for me before you came along, Hopps; but with you on board I'm confident that we'll have found my folk in no time!"

The grin reappeared, this time in a form Judy had not yet encountered. Her first impression was that this too was a very potent one, whatever it portrayed. "So, yeah… thank you, bunny. I'm glad to be working with ya!"

"…"

She numbly held his gaze for a few seconds, then decided it was a good time to look away for another long, drawn out sip. She swallowed thickly, smacked her tongue and sighed before opening her mouth again, eyes persistently glued to an undefined spot somewhere on the Zone's fences.

"… Didn't I just tell you I got enough praise?"

His smile switched back to default. "Ah- well, excuse me then."

A small gust of wind struck the terrace, running through their clothes and fur. Nick allowed his tail to
softly flutter in the air while Judy stilled her ears to keep the cap safely pinned between them. Her eyes absently followed the little tufts of hay that were blown off the terrace as they danced and whirled in their slow, gradual descent.

There were new thoughts quietly whirling in her head as well.

"… Hey, Nick?"

"Mm?"

She focused back on his face. "We're besties now, right?"

He stared at her for a moment before throwing his head back in laughter. "I am truly flattered, lieutenant…! You'd probably have to duel Finnick for the title, though; poor guy simply *adores* me!" Then, noticing that she wasn't laughing along, he quieted down and cocked a brow at her. "What's on your mind, Hopps?"

"I just- there's something I've been meaning to ask for a while now."

He settled further against the bars and cupped his cheek, reposed and attentive. "Shoot."

Judy gave him a tentative look. "… You're no gypsy."

It was phrased as a statement, and it took him by surprise.

"I most certainly am! We've been over this already, lieutenant."

Judy shook her head. "No, Nick; they're gypsies." she replied, hiking a thumb to the still audible laughter coming through the door at their back. "Or like them, at least. Otterton is a gypsy, Lionfart and his people are gypsies. You and your folk are something else entirely."

He ran a paw over his chin and neck, articulating an answer. "We're… different, sure, but that doesn't mean anything! Look, you can think of us as some well-connected, morally uninhibited businessmen if it pleases you."

She gave him a blank, incredulous stare. "Businessmen."

"Yup! Just merchants and smugglers; that's all there is to us, honestly."

"And jugglers also?"

She shuffled a step closer to him, not allowing him to escape her scrutinizing gaze. "And lettered mammals? Alcohol abstaining gypsies, street savvy book collectors and probably a ton of other things I've yet to notice? Those are quite a few unusual traits you've got there, Slick."

He responded with yet another easy grin; part of his trusty "smugness" series, which boasted over a dozen varieties. "Well! Sounds like someone's a little impressed, eh?"

"Perplexed, more like; because despite my limited experience with gypsies, I am positive they're not supposed to be… all that."

"But they *could*, if need be." he pointed out. "A gypsy must be well-versed in many fields in order to survive, lieutenant. Adaptivity is perhaps our most defining quality."

"Yet only you and your group seem to stand out among the rest like tar on snow." she retorted. "The locals outnumber you thirty to one and yet you're the only intellectuals I've come across around these
parts."

Nick took his chance to guffaw. "*Intellectuals,* she says; didn't you meet Finnick?"

It was a good attempt, but the bunny wouldn't let him. "Answer the question, Nickolas."

He blew his cheeks. "I don't know what to tell you, lieutenant! We're just better than most, I suppose; and with the locals being a trifle more boorish than average as they are, the comparison favors us significantly."

"… No, no." Judy shook her head, equal parts skeptical and stubborn. "There's more to you guys, Nick. Something about you is… off. Uncommon. And frankly, all those prevarications of yours only make me more curious."

A mental groan echoed in Nick's mind; she was being even more persistent than usual. "Is that really a priority right now, lieutenant?"

"What kind of question is that, Slick?" She took a step back and splayed her arms in a wide gesture. "Look at us!"

"I'm standing here all relaxed and well-fed, sipping warm tea under the stars with my new bestie. I have no priorities at the moment!"

Her antics and the sight of such a foxy smirk drawn on a bunny's lip ultimately won him over. His shoulders shook by a soft chuckle as he smiled at his feet, acknowledging defeat; then he raised his eyes back to his headstrong partner. "Okay, fine. I give. What is it you're asking me, exactly?"

She let her arms drop and moved closer again, preserving the jovial smirk to give her impeding questioning a casual, less forcefully tone. "Just… everything. What is your story, Nick? Recite me the wondrous tale of Wilde and Co!"

He looked to the sky with a hum and a sigh, scratching his temple in thought. "Okay- let's see how I can make this sound interesting…"

"We were all of us born in the north, where gypsies roam somewhat more freely. Our little community was simply one among many, and it struggled to get by just like the rest; but things just got too tough after a point, so we broke apart and our members scattered. There were a few of us who stayed together, however, and lacking a better option we decided to pursue this wild idea we've had since we were kits."

"The north doesn't have much to offer anyone, honestly, but our kin stays because it is considered safer for us there; but how safe is it really, when it can't provide its people with a decent living? Not safe enough, we figured; so the north simply wouldn't do."

"We thought to ourselves: "We're *gypsies,* dammit! We shouldn't expect safety anywhere, so there's no point in avoiding risks!" And thus, we put together the little caravan you saw earlier today – though it was much more modest back in the day- and ventured south to see what we could make of ourselves."

"The first few years were pretty hard, to be honest. We didn't really know what we were doing, had no experience trading or just dealing with southerners in general, and we mostly got by on petty thievery alone."

"Then things started getting a little better. We got the routes down, began making the right acquaintances, some of us found ourselves picking up a wide range of useful skills working in the
country -as you so eloquently pointed out- and of course our productive thievery grew less and less petty with each passing year."

"Our gamble begun paying off, you see; a mere six summers after we first left our home we had become the most prosperous gypsies that side of Softstream, and that naturally attracted more people. We noticed the group growing rapidly, meaning we would need higher profits to sustain it, which in turn meant that we had to go further into the country each time; and that eventually led us to Zootopia, and… well, the rest is history."

"You allow strangers to join you?" Judy suddenly asked.

"Well, not strangers, per se… There are gypsies from some of the places we visit that ask to be brought along, and if we deem them useful and trustworthy enough we take them with us when we leave. Simple as that."

"… I see."

A quick look at Judy's face was enough to tell the fox that she was not yet satisfied, so he quickly resumed.

"We've been travelling for, uh- just over twenty years now, I think, and we've been visiting the capital for about ten. We were still almost kits when we set out, about half as many as you saw, and we thought ourselves proper adventurers back then, but over time we evolved into real businessmen. Now we stick to our established routes and try to keep the income steady while seizing any opportunities that might come our way."

"It ain't always as easy as we'd like, admittedly; but it's also quite fun most of the time! No year so far has been the same as the previous one, and finding ways to balance our actual business and the illicit activities we take on the side really keep our paws full."

"We're kinda like land pirates, in a way! Filling our pockets while having a real blast out on the road, it's… it's a good life. It really is."

"And what do you do with all the money you make?"

He shrugged. "Apart from food, clothing and shelter in the winter, we spend it on merchandise, or on the wagons, of course; repairs or even new purchases, if need be. Mine, for example, is custom made to hold a desk and a bookcase; my old one was way too unstable for any of these, and not exactly snug. Might as well have worked in a bloody cart."

Nick expected her to shoot another inquiry right away, but to his surprise she just lowered her eyes and took another sip, seemingly processing his story. He allowed her a moment with her thoughts and took the time to brace himself for her next question, which he considered inevitable.

Instead, the bunny quietly raised her head a few seconds later, casting him a dreamy look. "Land pirates, huh…" she drawled. "… That sounds nice."

"So? Is your boundless curiosity finally sated, then?" came his benevolent mock.

Judy shook her head. "Oh no, not by a long shot; but I'm not so discourteous as to probe any further than I already have. Not to mention that stupid oath… Oh well!" Her shoulders shot high and she beamed up at him, implicitly thanking him for indulging her regardless. "With any luck I'll figure the rest on my own, given time. And if not- well, I think I'll manage either way!"

For all her vivacious mannerisms, Nick didn't fail to notice the suggestion creeping behind her
words; she still suspected he was lying or at least not divulging the entire truth, but seeing as she had
decided to end the topic herself despite her lasting skepticism he chose to let it rest without offering
any more comments.

Both their heads turned to the sky as they let a comfortable silence settle between them, undisturbed
by the remote buzz of the ongoing revel behind the closed door. They were left gazing at the faraway
twinkles in the sky, donning smiles discreet and content.

And surprisingly enough, the one faking that mutual smile was Judy.

Because Nick truly hadn't told her everything –he never told anyone everything, she knew- but he
did say that they hailed from the north. He and his group, veritable mavericks among the gypsies
they claimed to belong to, were northerners travelling deep into the south, all the way to Zootopia,
the heart of Animalia's great nation.

Which wouldn't have seemed as suspicious to the bunny had she not phrased it in that particular way,
or had there not been an ongoing rebellion in the north for the past decade. Distant as it seemed to
Zootopia or even her own homeland in the east, Animalia was currently struggling with war; and in
war there were always, aside from all the soldiers and officers, spies.

Sly, evasive, versatile informants, adept in subterfuge and deceit; and the slyest mammal she had ever
known was currently leaning on the railings beside her, idly grinning to the stars above.

It was all speculation and scattered thought, of course, and Judy would readily cast it aside in favor
of the task at hand, not letting it gain further substance in her mind; but at that moment, when it was
still freshly conceived and unsettling, she wondered what she would do if it were ever proven true. If
her new partner turned out to be an agent working against the very nation she had sworn to serve and
protect, would it not be her duty to arrest him at once, regardless of oaths broken and smuggling
sheep let loose? Wouldn't she be forced to turn him and his companions in the instant those
suspicions were confirmed?

That thought, she realized, was the one that distressed her the most.

And thus the bunny was glad to be bound both by honor and courtesy not to pry, knowing that until
substantial evidence came to light she would have to prioritize her own case and not bother with the
safety of the entire nation. For the time being, at least, she could convince herself to connive, forget
that inkling of hers and not turn against her ambiguous partner, the criminal fox with the sharp grins
and the sharper tongue; her competent ally, her infuriating companion, the deepest bond she had
formed in the grand city of Zootopia.

Judy shuffled on the verge of the terrace, purging all such thoughts from her mind. The night was
sweet, the cool breeze tenderly brushing against the short fur of her ears and the countless specs of
light sprinkled throughout the shadowy forms of Zootopia's skyline shining like an imperfect
reflection of the bright spots pinned against the cloudless sky of black. She settled in place and
clutched her cup, letting her paws drain it for its warmth.

She too was now allowing that rare, serene moment to become another shared memory which both
bunny and fox would think back to fondly. The two remained as they were, calm and contented with
the brief stillness of an otherwise hectic world.

And dawn was coming.

-Chapter 5 End-
I can only assume you've read each of these parts separately, but if you haven't-
I'm so sorry.

But, I mean- they do say that it's good when the thing writes itself, don't they? Well, the
Tale most certainly sets off to do just that sometimes; and far be it from little ol' me to
stop the engine when it's rolling.

In other news, I am beginning to form a more solid idea on how the plot will develop
and eventually conclude in the coming chapters. If my -very- rough estimations are to be
trusted, then with chapter 5 we should be standing at about the midpoint mark, give or
take.
You would not believe how excited I got typing that out just now.

This has once again been extremely fun to write, and I'm glad I was able to put it out
before the vacations cued in; that being said, I am very unsure about the way I handled
this chapter's presentation, so any feedback will as always be greatly appreciated.

Thank you, and stay well!
Who'd Ever Heard (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

With a dancer, a fence, a prelate and a spy
along with two separate tales of egregious maltreatment

Chapter Notes

Before we get on with the chapter, I'd like to give a huge shoutout to the slick devils
over at Zootopia News Network.

We've seen this fandom grow exponentially since even before the movie aired back in
2016, but ZNN was equally quick to establish itself as its optimal content-sharing
platform straight from the get-go. Being featured there feels absolutely amazing; in fact,
I refuse to use any exclamation marks here lest anyone figures out how embarrassingly
excited I am over this.

Keep doing your thing, Andy & Co. We're all rooting for you wonderful furballs.

And an even greater thank you goes out to the very Cimar of Turalis/WildeHopps,
whose contribution as proofreader and editor proved invaluable throughout the making
of this chapter. Not only did his assistance tremendously facilitate the tedious editing
process, it also improved on the end result in ways I had not anticipated. He even
managed to check my compulsive need to shoehorn semi-colons into every other
sentence.

Truly a miracle worker.

I am certain you all know of him, but in the off chance that you don't, please do yourself
a favor and check out his numerous widely acclaimed works; they are so for good
reason.

And so, without further ado- Chapter 6!
(or half of it anyway)

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Oh, c'mon…! What the hell's taking him so long?!!"

The sloth tardily raised his eyes from the cup he was wiping to the capped bunny seated cross-legged
on the tall chair before him, head resting in one of her small paws with the other spread on the bar
between them. Fingers tapped restlessly against the glossy varnish; but for once the languid
innkeeper was not the cause of her impatience.

"Are you sure he's woken up, Flash?" Judy huffed, sinking further into her open palm.
"Yeah… he just… takes… his time… in… the mornings."

"Doing what?!"

A grin laggardly spread on the sloth's face. "Why… combing… his… precious… tail… of course…!"

She blinked at him once, limp ears slowly perking; then her head fell back in uproarious laughter, merging with his own sluggish giggles. *Adam knew what he was talking about…!*

"Oh, well- can't rush perfection!" she quipped with a blithe shrug, still chuckling along; yet inwardly she was glad that Nick hadn't been there to hear that, even as a joke.

Judy's gloom of the night prior had all but vanished by the time she opened her eyes to the wooden ceiling of her spacy room, two doors down from where her vulpine partner was lodged. It was a late morning for both, nearing noon, but she could expect no better; it had been almost dawn when they had finally decided to tuck in, so late that even the predators reveling on the highest floor had given in to inebriety and dispersed to their respective sleeping quarters, meaning either some of the guest chambers adjacent to her own or the very room they had spent the night feasting in, sloppily collapsed upon its numerous tables amidst foul puddles of booze and vomit.

The bunny could feel the corridor shake to their collective snoring as she staggered out of her room and made for the stairs, absently noting how vital each of the inn's multiple storeys were to its soundproofing.

That careful design had evidently paid off, for when she got to the ground floor she was greeted by two small groups of prey mammals calmly enjoying their breakfast over pleasant chatter, blissfully oblivious of the affairs transpiring in the floors above; indeed, even her own sensitive ears were unable to catch any remote echo she would not have passed over as immaterial, had she not known better. The *Rabid Drinker*'s facade was a fastidious one, and the success it enjoyed was a result of that.

The unlikely mastermind behind this propitious scheme, the owner posing as the sole, indolent server of the *Drinker's* ground floor, offered her a welcoming smile and a hearty breakfast as soon as he spotted her coming down the stairs. Judy happily accepted both, noticing the numerous different vegetables already lined up on his side of the counter. All he had to do was throw some of them in a small bowl and hand it over, so ten minutes later the bunny was already munching down bits of peas and spinach, making small talk with her server and finding that, if one was willing to ignore his slow pace, he did actually make for some stimulating conversation.

The first thing she learned pertained to the local predatory clientele, excluding those typically occupying the upper storeys. The ones who weren't in on the establishment's true raison d'être belonged to the lowest standing in the Zone –namely, the ones who did not partake in any of the district's booming illegal activity- and it was them that would unsuspectingly visit its ground floor for a plate of decent food every now and then. There were none to be found there in the mornings, however, for each such predator had a job to get to, either in some nearby shop or past the brick fences separating them from the rest of Zootopia; that also explained why Judy could only spot flat teeth in the dining area to her right, chewing through green meals similar to her own.

That being said, Flash told her that the first predators of the day would start showing up as noon approached, and that was perhaps why the other patrons soon began taking off one by one, leaving the ranger and the innkeeper alone to converse more freely.

Flash took the opportunity to express his concerns to the bunny. The sloth was always eager to assist...
his gypsy friend any way he could, but revealing the clandestine intricacies of his business to outside prey, let alone a ranger official like herself, was something he had been understandably chary to agree to. Judy put him at ease, assuring him of the oath that bound her to secrecy.

"Besides," she added brightly, "far be it from me to strike at the Rabid Drinker! Your inn is a much needed touch of quality around these parts, Flash."

A few minutes later, when Judy suddenly found herself going through another fresh bowl of the most succulent verdure available at the inn, she discovered that sloths were as susceptible to flattery as the next mammal.

Their conversation had just shifted to Nick and his past with Flash—the bunny was delighted to confirm her partner's history as a jester and had already begun coming up with more ways to tease him over it- when their privacy was suddenly interrupted with the arrival of a new patron, forcing them to break off their jovial colloquy. One of Judy's ears rose to the soft creak of the entrance behind her as it swung open; then it stiffened attentively as Judy caught the echo of a distinctive, familiar speech. She twisted upon her seat to face the newcomer just as they noticed her back, jibbing momentarily.

They both recognized each other in an instant.

"Dearie…!"

Mirroring the fond smile behind the newcomer's scruffy whiskers, Judy promptly hopped off her chair as the female otter darted towards her, reaching her and looping both arms around her to trap her in a tight hug. "Fancy seein' ya here, dearie!" Mary Otterton cried out in delight, failing to acknowledge her heavy earrings banging against the ranger's head in her momentum.

A hint of discomfort briefly danced on Judy's lips as she received the gypsy's aggressive affections. She nervously hugged the elderly mammal back, praying against all hope that the lice she spotted leaping off the latter's shoulder was a figment of her imagination.

"Indeed! It's good to see you again, Ms. Otterton." she responded, softly patting the otter's back. "I trust you're doing well?"

"Aye! My mind's at ease, dearie; word has it you and Nicky's lookin' for Emmett together now, right?" Mary pulled away an inch, flashing her with a wide, yellowed smile, eyes sparkling with anticipation. "That's great! So, have ya found anything yet? Do ya know what happened to 'im?"

Once again, the unchecked hopefulness of her tone caused Judy a light pang of guilt; Otterton himself hadn't occupied her mind in a long while. "We… well, honestly, it has been a- a challenging search so far, Ms. Otterton. Oh, but we're definitely making progress, though!" she hurriedly added, seeing Mary's expression instantly switch to disappointment. "We think we may have stumbled upon a lead recently. We're looking into it right now, and we believe it could prove promising."

The otter slowly nodded, earrings jingling as her smile gradually resumed. "Ah- well, with you two workin' on it, t'is only a matter of time! Yah?"

Judy smiled back even as she felt her chest grow heavier; as many "think"s and "may"s as she might employ, she couldn't seem to temper the pure yet tragically unfounded optimism of the small gypsy.

The plain truth of the matter was that things didn't bode well for any of the missing predators. Nick was aware of that and had resolved to stick through this investigation regardless, betting on the off chance that he would be able to bring his folk back with him alive and well by the end. Ms. Otterton,
on the other hand, appeared to naively consider her husband's safe return an absolute certainty, refusing to even acknowledge the dreadful and much more probable alternative.

She was a distraught, hapless spouse desperately clinging onto hope, and the thought of swiping that hope away was as afflictive to Judy as the knowledge that doing so was, in all likelihood, inevitable.

As such, Judy's first instinct was to steer their conversation in another direction. "So, you take your breakfast at the Drinker as well, Ms. Otterton?" she asked, gently breaking their embrace.

Mary gave her a puzzled look. "Lunch, dearie! Sun's already high up!"

"A-ah… right, of course." said the bunny with an awkward chuckle; she was not used to feeling like a loafer. "It's quite the pricey crib, though. Are you sure you can afford it?"

"Oh, we ain't got to worry 'bout coin here, dearie!" she replied with a dismissive wave. "Little Flash 'oer here don't charge us null, long as we don't swing by 'fore noon." She accompanied her words with an appreciative nod towards the mammal in question, which he returned in kind with the expected time lag. Then Mary noticed the bunny's perplexed frown.

"We, Mrs. Otterton?"

"Oh…! Oh, 's right!" The otter beamed at her and grabbed her paw anew, excitedly pulling her towards the entrance. "Suppose you ain't met her yet, eh? Come, come!"

Offering no resistance, Judy allowed herself to be dragged with only a bemused simper curling her lips. It turned to surprise not a step after as she finally took notice of the mammal that had entered behind the otter now standing at the door, patiently waiting for the latter to conclude her genial greetings.

Her too, the bunny recognized immediately.

"This 'ere's the bunny ranger I told ya about! The one lookin' for my Emmett!" Mary enthused as they reached her friend, not concerning herself with the mild shock lining Judy's face as she beheld the latest guest to the tavern. Mary turned back to the bunny, giving her a light nudge. "C'mon, dearie! Say hi!"

Judy shook her head and forced her ears back up, trying to regain her composure. "Uh- um, right!" She cleared her throat, offering a paw to the taller animal. "Greetings! I'm Judith Laverne Hopps, ranger lieutenant from the Burrows province." she chimed, choosing to drown her daze in formality. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, miss…?"

The horned mammal responded with a delicate chuckle that would have normally affronted the bunny. She stooped over and took the protracted paw into one of her hooves. "Gazelle, honey." she cooed. "Just Gazelle. An' the pleasure's all mine; Mary here wouldn't stop goin' on and on about ya."

Judy mirrored the ungulate's smile, noting the unstrained warmth in her tone. "Is that so?"

"Well, 'course! Judy 'ere ain't like the rest of 'em caps, Gazelle! She takes kindly to us chompers, she does!"

"I just condemn injustice, is all," the bunny modestly retorted. "And I am sworn to battle it despite the circumstances."

"Well, honey, that diligence does ye honor." Gazelle straightened her back and brought a dainty hoof to her chin. She cast the bunny a thoughtful glance, the faint curve on her lips unflagging. "…
Pardon me, ma'am, but I believe I might have spotted ya down in Happytown yesterday? Can't imagine there'd be many capped bunnies runnin' around down there."

Judy blinked at her; she hadn't thought Gazelle could afford to look at the crowd amidst her wild dancing, let alone spot a mammal as small as herself in it. "Yes, indeed! I happened across your dance there, miss Gazelle; it was truly enchanting."

Gazelle's smile grew an iota broader. "Bless ya, honey, but I ain't no miss. Please, call me Gazelle."

Marry clapped her paws together with a squeal, visibly elated to have them getting along as such. "Say, won't you join us for lunch, dearie?"

"I'm afraid I cannot, Ms. Otterton. There's much work to be done today, and we're running late as it is. I'm just waiting for Nick to come down."

"Ah- so Nicky's here as well! That's great...! Well, dearie, wait for 'im with us, then! You go get the booth, Gazelle." Mary added, turning to the ungulate. "Imma go say hello to Flash."

And with that she turned tail and made for the bar where the sloth was waiting to greet her with a languid smile, leaving the two newly acquainted females to themselves.

Gazelle guided them straight to a booth at the left corner closest to the entrance, which she referred to as "their booth", took a seat and prompted the bunny to do the same. Judy complied, hopping onto the cushioned seat across of her and placing her cap beside her. The height of that specific booth had her head just barely sticking over the top of the table, but enough so to be able to mirror the gazelle somewhat comfortably. They allowed their gazes to meet above a shared smile, making use of the brief silence that ensued to measure each other up.

Gazelle was, by all accounts, an arresting female. Tall and slender even among her kind, boasting a pair of long, robust legs and a shapely figure that spoke of an accomplished dancer. The twin horns crowning her head were similarly long and thin, bending into a smooth curve all the way to their pointy ends. She had eyes of light brown, clear and iridescent, one of them covered by the single fringe of pale blond hair that shaded part of her face; that distinctly light color wasn't anywhere else on her body, as far as Judy could tell, so she deduced that the ungulate was using a tint of some sort. There was also a kind of crimson pigment pronouncing her lips, in a shade faint enough to miss under the wrong light.

Her raiment too stood out to Judy, who had begun noticing that for a mammal with such an unmistakable presence she came off surprisingly humble and unassuming; in many ways the polar opposite of the Garden's flamboyant lion, which was a contrast the bunny found most agreeable. She was dressed in thin layers of plain, creamy rags of the poorest quality, clearly inspired by the local gypsies' common outfit minus the telling grime that typified their lot. It came together with the long shawl draped around her upper half, held in place by her arms to keep her bust modestly covered.

Seated before her wrapped in these maidenly garbs, Gazelle looked as serene as she had passionate during her dance the day prior, and both of these vastly disparate facets left a lasting impression on the bunny.

Judy couldn't help but compare her to the other curvaceous females she had encountered back in Happytown's southern slums, the garishly attractive women shamelessly parading their nakedness and emitting flagrant cries of pleasure, and she instantly found them all lacking. The belle currently facing her instead managed to complement her physical allures with an engaging disposition, adding genuine charm to her comely features; a truly refined beauty, surrounded by an air of dignified maturity that set her apart from the predators she consorted with like a diamond in the mud.
This especially held true when one compared her to Mary Otterton, the jittery, unsightly mess of a mammal that had accompanied her to the inn. Judy was reminded of her first meeting with Nick, whose qualities had also made him and the otter an unlikely duo to behold back then. In fact, she thought that, apart from the flat teeth residing past her lips, the sultry dancer could have easily passed as one of the fox's crew—

Were it not for the pair of thin iron chains hanging from her ears, gently waving along every small movement of her head; the only piece of jewelry adorning her body, discreet like the rest of her attire yet serving as a clear indication of her allegiance.

Judy's brows furrowed in reserved bewilderment. *Who'd ever heard of prey gypsies?*

"You've got wonderful eyes, honey." Gazelle crooned out of the blue, catching her by surprise.

Judy found that her earnest smile was impossible not to return. "Aw, thank you." she giggled. "And your hair is gorgeous! I love the color."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries to loosen each other's tongue. It was Flash Mary was talking to, after all, so she was bound to take a while. Might as well fill the time with conversation.

Gazelle had evidently thought the same. "So- the Burrows, eh?" she asked, leaning in with polite interest.

"Yes, that's right."

The ungulate arched a brow. "Yer a long way from home, honey."

"Yeah, seriously! I was giving chase to a wrongdoer from back home and they ended up fleeing all the way to the capital, so… here I am."

"And they somehow led ya to the *Rabid Drinker* as well, eh?"

"Well, they led me to *Slick*, and then he led me here." she elucidated with a chuckle. "And I'm glad he did, honestly. It's a nice place, even with… you know." She let the words hang, using an ear to subtly point towards the ceiling.

Gazelle chuckled back. "I'm glad to hear that, honey. Not many caps would see it that way."

Judy suddenly felt an inexplicable hint of unease brewing in her chest. Gazelle was batting eyes at her sweetly, the shadow of her latest chuckle still lingering on her lips, yet the bunny got the sense of something incongruous woven into her tone. She couldn't quite place its meaning, though, so it was quickly shrugged off.

"You girls must be real friendly with Flash, huh?" Judy asked jauntily. "Mary mentioned that he doesn't charge you for the food."

"Ah, yes. Flash and I know each other pretty well." Gazelle's eyes flickered to the sloth still conversing with the jolly otter at the bar. "He puts together these events every now and then, see? Closes down the ground floor and arranges for music at the top; an' when he does, he sometimes calls me over to sing."

Judy found that easy to believe. Gazelle's voice was wondrously melodious despite her heavy southern accent, seamlessly alternating between consonant tunes that engrossed the listener to a uniquely placating effect. Listening to her sing would be nothing short of captivating.
She had been using the same uncouth speech as the rest of the local gypsies, but while theirs was brassy, rushed and boorish, hers bore a collected softness that made even its crude mannerism comforting and endearing; a sort of simple, understated elegance that rang almost motherly to the rabbit's ears. She thought that last impression fit her perfectly, although she couldn't have been more than a few years older than herself; her insistence on calling her "honey", not unlike the elderly otter she accompanied, also served to amplify that sentiment.

"Mary tells me you've been real nice to her, honey." Gazelle spoke up again, forcing her out of her musings. "Even takin' over the search for Emmett… That's noble of ya."

Judy shuffled on her seat. "Yeah… to be completely honest with you, miss- Gazelle, I saw some connection between my case and the missing predators. That's how I came to work with Slick, too." she confessed sheepishly. "So… not entirely all that selfless, I suppose."

Gazelle's long neck recoiled slightly. "Truly? Preds have been disappearin' since as long as I can remember, honey- although…" She paused, lips puckering in thought. "… I guess it's been happenin' somewhat more often as of late."

Judy's ears tensed to that, canting forward towards the ungulate. She sat up with renewed interest. "As in? Since when?"

Gazelle blinked at the bunny, taken aback by her reaction. "Oh, I… I couldn't say. I've just been hearin' folk talking 'bout it some more, but that don't mean much; as I said, things have always been this way. It ain't that odd."

Judy sat back with a low hum, deflating; but she made a mental note to look into this some more once she got the chance. Gut feelings were all she really had to go on, after all.

"In any case, Ms. Otterton's a mammal I'm truly glad to help." Judy continued, glimpsing over her shoulder at the elderly mammal with fondness in her eyes. "Predators here can be fairly… overwhelming, but she alone is nothing but sweet, the poor thing."

She turned back to the gazelle with a blooming smile, but it quivered as she met the taller mammal's gaze; the mirthful spark in it was gone, its welcoming brown suddenly clouded over.

"… Do ya know?"

Judy threw an ear to the side. "About what?" Gazelle subtly nodded back towards the otter, adding to her confusion. "You… mean Emmett? Yeah, uh- of course!"

"… So I guess you don't."

"Huh?"

As Judy's puzzlement peaked, so did the shift in Gazelle's stance. She averted her eyes for a moment, pensively staring at a spot on the table before aiming them back to the bunny. She regarded her briefly.

"… Forgive me, honey. I can usually tell when a woman's given birth, but it's my first time seein' a bunny. Are you a mother?"

Judy had expected a number of questions from the placid gazelle with the courtly manners. This wasn't one of them.

It took her a second to realize her jaw had plummeted, and another yet before she actually began
producing sounds.

"A- am I… Ugh, no, no, I- I haven't, um… I've been too, uh, too busy, for- for that." she eventually stammered through an awkward chuckle, shrinking into her seat. Her ears folded back to obscure their pinkish sear and her gaze darted across the room, resting everywhere but on Gazelle's face.

The latter merely gave a calm nod, waiting for the flustered bunny to recompose herself in polite silence. Then she spoke again.

"Me neither; but she was."

Now the melancholy in her tone was prominent. Judy saw her head tilt faintly towards Mary once again and her heart instantly sank. Was.

Her nose gave a single twitch before she forced it still. "… What happened?"

"They had a son, she and Emmett." Gazelle began, crystalline voice growing heavy. "Good lad, I'm told, but too reckless. Ended up getting involved with the wrong people, too far away from his own turf, and… one night he just never made it back."

Judy's nose broke free again.

"… After that, she and Emmett, they- they decided to try again. But she was too old by then, and it was…" She heaved a quiet sigh, horned head shaking miserably. "… She lost it early on. I hear it nearly killed her."

"That's probably when she snapped."

Judy's ears drooped so far that they seemed to pull the rest of her along, all the way down until the small rabbit had wilted upon her seat; a subliminal attempt to relate to a pain that she knew was worlds beyond her scope of understanding. She numbly stared back at the gazelle's dismal visage, then slowly looked over to where Mary was still happily conversing with the sloth, her sparse, yellowed teeth showing in a pure smile of unmindful joy.

An iron hand twisted her guts hard enough to leave her squeamish.

"She's not well, honey." Gazelle went on broodingly, reclaiming her attention. "At times she thinks her son's still alive. On others, she forgets 'im entirely; but she always remembers Emmett. And he's so tender, so patient with her…! I do what I can for her, but… she needs her man back, honey. Soon."

They locked eyes again and Gazelle's gentle smile returned. "I'm glad you came along, honey. It's good that somebody's finally searching for 'im seriously."

The tangible gratitude in her whisper threw Judy off even further. Clearly at a loss for words, the bunny eventually settled for a curt nod and a stiff, shaky smile which she hoped was at least somewhat passable. Gazelle, ever tactful, averted her eyes to listlessly scan the empty room, allowing her some time to take everything in and recuperate.

Judy was the next one to speak up when she felt ready. "She- hm!" Her voice broke and she swallowed thickly, clearing her throat before resuming. "She looks a bit calmer now than when I last saw her… must be a good day."

"She feels… comfortable around me, I guess." Gazelle replied in a somber tone. "I sing to her sometimes; plus, like you said, the local gypsies can be a- a bit of a handful, at times, but they don't
bother her when she's with me."

It took a bunny's acute hearing to pick on the asperity of her voice amidst the countless subtle nuances she colored it with; as tranquil as she might be, she was clearly very protective when it came to the elderly otter.

Judy's lips curved into an askew smile. *How can this woman not be a mother?*

"You know, Nick was also pretty good at mitigating her fits; although he told me he had no connection to her."

Much to the rabbit's surprise, Gazelle's response came in the form of a scoff. "Yeah, ol' Slick has a way of manipulating people, for better or worse. In this case it's for the better."

Judy shot her an inquisitive look. "I get the impression you're not very fond of him, Gazelle."

"Oh no, I do like 'im and his folk!" she exclaimed, defensively enough for Judy to doubt her statement. "He's just a bit more… wily than all the locals I'm used to, I guess."

"You don't trust him, then?"

"I trust his ability to get what he wants." Gazelle responded with a wry smile; then she dithered a second before adding: "… Don't tell 'im I said this, but I'm almost glad his people went missing too. It's what got 'im involved in this story in the first place; and if he got you involved, honey, then I'm sure he knows what he's doin'."

Judy looked to her paws with a coy chuckle, continuously impressed by the ungulate's ability to weave compliments into their conversation.

They didn't speak for a while afterwards. Gazelle craned her neck to spy at the bar once more, smiling as Flash's comically sluggard giggle reached their booth; then she turned back to the bunny, expecting them to share a snigger over the sound.

Instead, she found the smaller mammal still frowning at her fumbling paws, as if struggling with indecision.

"… Gazelle?"

Her voice rang idle, skeptical. "Yes, honey?"

Judy's eyes rose to meet hers. "I gather you and Ms. Otterton must have known each other for a while now, huh?"

Gazelle cocked a brow in question, giving her a dubious smile. "... Yes? Some seven years now, I reckon."

"… I see."

And with that terse, nondescript response and a suchlike nod, Judy simply blinked away, offering no further comments; but inwardly she was biting down a string of additional questions as they came bubbling up her throat, begging to be released.

*What is your story?*

*How is it that you're here?*
How on earth does a kindly Gazelle like yourself get so deeply involved with the gypsies?

These thoughts had been nibbling at her mind ever since she first spotted her dancing in the streets of Happytown, and just minutes earlier when she was still reeling in shock after unexpectedly meeting her at the Drinker they were the first ones to return to her in force, vehemently urging her to voice them as soon as she could utter again. It had taken all her willpower not to give in right away, and again now to stop this line of questioning in its tracks. Nick's allusions had led her to believe that these inquiries were more personal than what she'd consider appropriate.

Still, she was satisfied with herself, considering her fervid curiosity artfully concealed; but that was only because she wasn't looking towards Gazelle, where she'd find herself pierced by an incisive gaze and a knowing smile.

She would have likely ascribed them to a perceptive mother's intuition.

"I used to be a prostitute, y'know."

Judy's eyes froze on a random spot on the wall, wide and unblinking. For a long moment she was completely motionless save for the long grey ears quivering above her head, stiff with surprise for the umpteenth time that day. She gulped dryly, neck slowly twisting to meet Gazelle's patient gaze.

She had managed not to ask, but the sharp performer had apparently decided to indulge her regardless.

"O- oh?"

"Yes, until about… a little over ten years ago." she went on calm and unabashed, ignoring the bunny's newest discomfort. "The brothels here in the Zone make sure to take good care of their- their staff, so to speak. It's a good business, really; there's always high demand here because predators aren't allowed in most brothels in the rest of the city. Not as customers, at least."

"But I never enjoyed it." she added with a light scowl. "I mean, it kept me alive well enough, but the men there were always so…” She paused to smirk at Judy, who was still struggling to get her bearings in regards to the subject at hand. "It's hard to explain."

"My brothel was a pricey one, see? The men there were usually posh prey who wanted to keep their nightly exploits a secret, so they came all the way to the Zone, far from their homes. Always eager, always getting to the point, always quick to leave."

"And they did it all with no emotion, you know? Not that I was any different, of course; I was simply making a living. But still, they were all just so- so shallow about it. Cold. And if they ever bothered to speak to me, it was mostly to put me down, because even though I was sharing a bed with them, I was so very much beneath them."

"… I never quite liked prey men, honey."

Now gradually finding new footing, Judy was beginning to notice that the more Gazelle was absorbed in her reminiscing the more she unconsciously abandoned parts of her raw accent. This told her that it was artificial, likely developed by the years she'd spent at the Garden in the company of inarticulate gypsies.

"… Then one night, this tiger comes in." she continued. "I had never gotten a predator before -like I said, it was hard for them to put away enough coin for my brothel- so I remember I was rather nervous."
"And I was right to be."

She pulled back and her tone shifted. Judy recognized the hue of her voice, the same that had briefly put her off when the two had first sat down. Curiosity overcame any lingering awkwardness as she leaned closer, giving Gazelle her undivided attention.

"This one had lost his younger brother some nights before, after a few rangers caught them opening up a house in Rockwood." she explained. "My tiger had been with him, but he had managed to get away; his brother, however, was caught by one of the rangers. A rhino."

Her frown deepened, forming a thin wrinkle between her eyes. "The ranger headbutted him against a wall and broke his leg; then he sped up and headbutted him again. He was shouting his surrender when the rest of the caps caught up."

"… He went quiet a minute later."

Judy was still.

From the attentive furrow of her brows to the forward stoop of her torso, every single inch of her body failed to react to Gazelle’s words. The first perceptible hint of numbness only came when she felt her limp ears draping over her back.

Then, finally, she blinked.

… *Wait.*

*No-*

"He had lost his mother to prey as well." Gazelle went on evenly before the rabbit could register her own thoughts. "Lynched down by Softstream when he was a kit. Drowned by some gnu."

"… He didn't take his brother's death very well."

"He came into my room wanting to kill prey, and I could tell as soon as I saw him, and I was terrified like I had never been before. I tried to scream, but he jumped on me right away, muffling me with a big, clawed paw –I swear it felt like knives digging into my cheek- and he bared his fangs and he was growling, and I was so sure I'd die."

"… then he stopped."

Her eyes lost focus, absorbed into the memories that hid beneath their lustrous gleam. A frown took shape over them, slow and uncertain, portraying the lingering confusion of that old, frightful haze. "I- I think he saw how terrified I was. I believe he took pity on me for a second."

"And then he just started crying."

She paused and cast a solemn look back at the wide-eyed bunny who could form no thoughts because her brain was mush.

"I was paralyzed, honey. I watched him get off me, sit at the corner of the bed and break down, sobbing with his face in his paws like a little kit."

"My first thought when I could move again was to run to the door and call the guards to deal with him; but when I got there and looked over my shoulder, I saw that he hadn't gone after me. He was still just sitting there, looking so- so small, so hurt. So... *broken.*"
Gazelle's voice had now dropped to a tense whisper. "He had just tried to kill me, honey. He would have, had I not happened to look so weak, had I been faster to react, to call for help; but I went back to that bed, sat down next to him and let him bawl and tell me his tale."

"… We didn't sleep together that night."

"I left the brothel the next day. Threw all my stuff in a sheaf and made for the Garden, where I had heard only predators lived, because I never wanted to see prey again." She sat up and crossed her arms, eyes now sparkling with the same harsh resolve they must have harbored back then. "For all I knew, prey lived their happy, safe lives somewhere pretty, jigging their way through the days and squashing chompers with every step, never sparing them a second glance."

"Prey didn't need my comfort. Prey didn't deserve my comfort; only tigers did. Only predators. And frankly, honey, I kind of wished to be seen as a predator myself."

Gazelle's eyes lidded to a slit, woeful and bitter, as they met the wide, sheeny purple of the ones looking up at her from below. "I cannot describe to you, honey… how ashamed I am to be prey."

Silence decisively reasserted itself between them. There were still hints of muffled snoring reaching the room from the floors above, a lively palaver ongoing near the bar—as lively as palaver with a sloth could be—and myriads of inconsequential sounds poking in from the street outside. Yet all these noises simply bounced off their booth; at least that's how it felt to the roundly shaken bunny who was left staring in the general direction of her companion with eyes of glass, feeling nothing but the short fur bristling at her nape. She was only then beginning to guide her turbid thoughts towards a series of acknowledgements.

First was disbelief. A powerful surge of denial rose, as if by instinct, to contest these notions that confused and appalled her to the core of her being; and it held strong for a time, assuring her of the fallacy of it all, standing as a solid barrier between herself and this immense wave of disgust that threatened to wash over her.

It kept the repugnant notions at bay. It kept her safe; so of course, the first had to be disbelief.

Then the second one came, and Judy found her incredulity fading as the memories Gazelle had just shared began coming together with her own, every connection made chipping away at her precious denial, shaking it at its foundations. There was something about a rhino ruthlessly striking an incapacitated tiger and an ox crudely shoving away a tiny, frail old otter that was begging for his help. Something about a hurt, inconsolable tiger helplessly sobbing at the edge of a bed and a resentful mob chanting their fierce hatred at a bunny ranger, asking for her demise.

Something about a beaver, a boar, a hippo, a panda speaking of untrustworthy predators. Dangerous predators, wicked, vile and undeserving of any lenience or pity. Something about a wallaby scoffing his contempt in the face of a fox she had taken a deep liking to. Something about abject predators apprehensively shuffling away from a tiny rabbit simply because of the feathered cap resting between her ears, the symbol of a threat they had long learnt to steer clear of.

Something about suspicious glances as they made their way down a street, about flat-toothed mouths contorting in fear and disgust and uninhibited hostility as they glimpsed at the mammal at her side long before he could do or say anything to justify these sentiments.
Something about that same mammal, the remarkably equable vulpine she would soon come to call her partner suddenly kneeling before her, overcome by emotion. She remembered the way his fangs had frightened her as he pushed his face into hers, the way his imperturbable gaze had been set aflame, taking her aback, prompting her to listen, to reconsider, to accept.

And she remembered his low voice, the smoothest she had ever heard, bearing formidable tension as he spoke to her, his words communicating their meaning through tone alone. She remembered that meaning, this tangible vibe of bitterness and desperate aggression and plea, for that was precisely what had tempered her ire and ultimately led to her oath; yet the words themselves she had somehow never paused to consider.

But she did so now despite herself, for these same words came back to haunt her ears, echoing hollow and loud and unrelenting, as unforgiving as they had been when he was growling them against her twitching nose.

*Rangers are given credit for killing chompers, motive notwithstanding.*

The second thing Judy acknowledged was "something wrong", and the mental barrier she had unwittingly erected came down with a thunderous crash, leaving her bare and exposed to the horrors that lay beyond.

She believed it. Every word; worse yet, it was a truth that seemed to fall neatly into place like she had known it all along, like the picture was spread before her eyes long before the ungulate had pointed it out, forcing her to look upon its turpitude in all its atrocious might.

Her third and final acknowledgement came in a flash, a natural, unavoidable consequence of her previous ones, mercilessly tearing down intrinsic worldviews that had stood for as long as the bunny could remember.

She was righteous. She was just, a venerable warrior dedicating her life to a fair and noble cause, faultlessly conscionable in the fulfillment of the sacred duties entrusted upon her in the name of peace and order; a long series of turgid words liable to stoke the arrogance of the countless supercilious rangers across the nation who thoughtlessly flaunted them, but when it came to the sole rabbit within their ranks there was no vanity to them.

For all the pride it rightly engendered, this conviction wasn't something to be bumptiously paraded, not a thought worthy of granting her any amount of petty self-satisfaction; it was simply true.

Because she fought for justice.

Because she was a ranger.

Because the scum she so restlessly pursued were in the wrong, and she and her refulgent order were in the right and that was the indisputable truth-

Until it wasn't. Until the ground disappeared from under her feet, leaving her infirm and discomposed, stranded in the forbidding void lurking underneath.

She caught a slight movement from across the booth. Gazelle had moved her eyes to the set of stairs at the opposite end of the room, following the mammal that was now descending them. Judy's lifeless ears recognized the sound of silk as Nick affably greeted the two mammals at the bar. Their conversation was reaching its end.

"You said you were a lieutenant, correct?"
Gazelle’s gaze shifted back to the doe to find her shriveled, nose once again giving a weak, unremitting twitch. Her violet eyes were blurry, left unblinking for an impossible amount of time, and a near imperceptible tremor had her lower lip quivering over the edge of her joined buckteeth.

Seeing her like this, the ungulate couldn’t help a soft, apologetic smile which Judy should have found confusing given the context. But she didn’t; somehow, she understood it perfectly. She saw in it a discreet, non-hostile form of contempt, the only kind the benevolent mammal before her could possibly harbor; and it was meant for her.

Her, the brilliant ranger lieutenant, the star of her region, the pride of her hometown, Judith Laverne Hopps herself; and she received this mellow sentiment, so reminiscent of pity, from the ragamuffin gazelle who used to work as a whore, dressed in gypsy fashion and lived by dancing for, and possibly pleasuring, lowlife predators in the notorious hellhole that was Zootopia's Chomper Garden.

"You look like a nice person, honey," she began in little more than a sorry whisper, flawlessly measured yet thick with that mysteriously unsettling tone which Judy had just managed to construe, "so I hope you won't misunderstand me, but…"

"Would you please keep your distance?"

Liberty District had oftentimes been described as "radiant" when viewed in the light of day.

The term was likely used in a literal sense, for the pristine white marble of its numerous palatial mansions truly seemed to emit a dazzling, almost eerie glow under the burning sun; a property which, as many of its affluent residents liked to think, further brought out the resplendent ambience of the streets and added to the awe they inspired to the visitor. It was—in their own words—a heavenly sight to behold.

That impression was given further substance by the streets themselves. They were paved with finely cut stone, making them ideally comfortable for a leisurely walk, and gratuitously wide throughout their length so as to avoid any kind of traffic no matter the time of day; and indeed, despite the abundance of carriers going to and fro with their posh clients riding on their backs, there was always ample space along the streets' breadth for even the largest of strollers.

Not that there were ever too many mammals in the district, of course; on the contrary, it saw the least traffic in the entire city. This wasn’t due to a legal restriction of some sort or even the extravagant price lists of the local establishments, but rather a question of belonging; for even in the grand city of Zootopia, few were the mammals who felt like they belonged in these sumptuous streets, able to saunter through them unaffected by the overbearing splendor they embodied. Instead, the vast majority found it easier to regard the district in its entirety with envious resentment and thus tended to avoid it. For their part, the locals took joy in this silent arrangement as it kept their illustrious district mostly clean of the staining presence that was the average commoner.

With lowborn prey being shunned as such, the locals’ views on predators need not be stated; the children who were too young to have ever left the district had never seen a single pointy tooth in their lives.

So it was that a general sense of unrest permeated Liberty's northwestern wing near the entrance to the Royal Garden, for every passerby that day spotted a glaringly jarring element in this most orderly of districts, one so fundamentally disruptive to their precious routine that many contemplated notifying the local rangers. Namely, a fox; a russet-furred male fox garbed in the cheapest clothing, casually leaning against the stone fence enclosing one of the district's mansions, arms crossed over his chest and full tail languidly swimming in the air behind him.
Considering that his sight offended every single prey mammal that crossed that part of the district, Nickolas Wilde looked infuriatingly at ease that late autumn morning.

Riders and carriers alike stared at the reposed predator in disdain and bewilderment as they passed him by, but their hostility seemed to fly right over his head, rendered null by a disarming indifference that kept him stoic and unperturbed, his own eyes fixed on a particular establishment across the street. He appeared oblivious to the narrowed gazes resting upon him from every direction, but he truly wasn't. It was simply that his indifference was wholly genuine.

Much like the rest of the Zootopians, he didn't like the haughty residents of Liberty one bit, to the point where their enmity towards him felt almost gratifying. There was, however, the fact that a chomper could never, no matter how surreptitiously they might carry themselves, go by unnoticed in those wide, elegant streets; and that alone was cause enough for him to feel uncomfortable there. With attention gathered on him like such he was half the mammal, stripped of the low profile through which most of his opportunities typically arose.

So it was that he had agreed to leave most of their work in the district to his capable partner. Granted, she wasn't one to go by unnoticed herself, not there or anywhere else, but at least she was more likely to strike potential adversaries as an oddity rather than a threat.

From his experience, that impression typically came shortly after.

The Duke had put in some real work during their brief escapade in Happytown. When they visited him the day after the weasel had provided them with a list containing most of the mammals who had worked with Gavin, the bear from Nick's group who had first vanished from his job at a booth in northern Avenue nearly a month ago, including their current whereabouts. They spent the rest of the day tracking down the mammals on the list, some of whom had found new employment as far away as Rockwood, and commenced their questioning regarding Gavin and any suspicious sheep he might have consorted with prior to his disappearance.

Both ranger and gypsy were glad to resume their investigation, but at the same time recognized that their elected course of action was an inauspicious one. Nick's notes on Gavin's illicit affairs with the sheep described the wooly criminals as exceedingly cautious, fastidious when it came to preserving their anonymity; they had always been furtive in approaching him and kept their faces well hidden, to the point that the bear couldn't tell whether he was dealing with a large team or a mere couple of individuals. In other words, the chances of them having been noticed by his coworkers were tragically slim.

Furthermore, and likely in another act of precaution from the sheep's part, they had been asking for minute amounts of the merchandise Gavin was handling on a daily basis. Just one or two crates among hundreds could be easily purloined without anyone taking notice, and as Gavin had disappeared less than a week into his systematic larceny, the missing goods never had a chance to pile up. The owner of the booth had sold out and left the city without ever finding out about them.

And sure enough, their first questioning got off to a disappointing start. The rhino they had accosted told them that, as far as anyone could tell, Gavin had vanished completely out of the blue, simply not showing up to work one day, and the ensuing investigation was focused solely on the fugitive predator who had failed to meet his curfew. At no point had suspicious sheep or stolen crates come into the picture.

After another week went by with no sign of Gavin, the rangers concluded that he must have perished in some dispute between chompers gone sour –for how would a living bear possibly go by unnoticed north of the Zone for so long?- so they abandoned the search and went on to invest their precious time elsewhere. The booth's owner hired himself a beefy replacement and things went straight back
to normal.

Heavily dispirited, they were preparing to round up their questioning when the rhino spoke up once more, taking them by surprise with an offhand question of his own. More specifically, he told them: "Wait- you two ain't together with that squirrel, are ya?"

Nick and Judy shared a glance to that, each seeing their befuddlement reflected on the other's face; then they eagerly pushed the rhino for an explanation.

"A few days after the rangers left, this squirrel showed up at the booth." said the rhino with a shrug. "We hadn't seen him before, 'least I hadn't. He asked us all about the bear, if we had any idea what had happened to him and all that, but none of us knew a thing so we told him to take it up with the rangers who had been looking into it. He just muttered something nasty and cleared off right after that. Ain't seen him since." He paused to give a loud snort, horned nose scrunching in distaste. "Don't want to, either; uppity little fuck, he seemed."

This squirrel was a new, thoroughly confounding parameter to the bunny and fox duo, one they couldn't make sense of right away. Most other mammals on their list also recalled him, so they chose to stay on his description which was, by consensus, that of a shady-looking, fidgety, unusually plump for his species and ritzy mammal; a visibly well-off individual straight out of the fancy Liberty District, which was conveniently close to the booth Gavin used to work at. It also happened to be the one district in all of Zootopia where sheep were commonly abound, so it fit with their premise well enough.

And so, after short deliberation, they settled on Liberty as their next stopping point, where they'd sniff around for a local squirrel with some strain on his belt and a disagreeable conduct who may possibly frequent the southern districts as opposed to most of his upstanding neighbors. The mysterious rodent's interest in Gavin betrayed some involvement they could only surmise to, being that he was never mentioned in Nick's notes, but he would hopefully be able to set them on the sheep's trail. That was, of course, if they actually managed to track the guy down; but by that point they had long resigned themselves to the idea that no inch of progress on this case would be achieved via promising means.

Yet progress was, unexpectedly, made with an unhoped-for stroke of luck. Having learnt not to expect much in the form of help from her colleagues in the city, Judy was pleasantly surprised to have them prove useful for once; or at least their thorough filing system did. A quick run through the documents of Liberty's headquarters yielded a half dozen scrolls containing reports on rodent-sized outlaws known to be active in the district, one of which happened to fit the squirrel's description to a tee. Bingo.

The squirrel's name was Filbert Corn. The available reports on him were strikingly plain, filled mostly with trifle offenses that had seldom warranted a hard pursuit, but that appeared to be due to his own mindfulness more than anything. He had oftentimes been connected to cases of tax noncompliance by local innkeepers, where the latter were found guilty of procuring the food they served from clandestine sources. Filbert had been suspected of being one such provider, but nothing had ever been proven so he was ultimately cleared of all charges.

Nick, who had naturally not been allowed into the headquarters to read the reports himself, was delighted to hear of all this from Judy. "A fence, lieutenant!" he had exclaimed right away, rapt in the thrill of sudden clarity. "He's a fence for stolen goods around these parts; and a damn good one too, if he can keep himself out of the cells for so long. I'd bet half my bushy tail that he was buying the crates off the sheep! It must have been a good deal on him, that's why he went asking about Gavin as soon as the caps cleared out; he was looking to continue business!"
Knowing full well how unwilling her partner was to compromise his beloved tail, Judy decided that his theory held water. This small breakthrough lifted both their spirits, at least for the short time it took for them to realize that Filbert had not been seen in his residence, or anywhere else for that matter, since a couple of weeks ago, which coincided with the time he had visited Gavin’s booth. They figured that the bear’s sudden disappearance must have put the squirrel on edge and caused him to go into hiding for a time, laying low until he was sure the whole thing had blown over. It was the kind of wariness that had kept him out of trouble for so long, after all.

Standing in the middle of Liberty’s wide streets after an entire day’s worth of fruitless searching, the two investigators had mirrored each other with a shared groan, taking a moment to gnash their teeth in justified exasperation. Then they quickly pulled themselves together and began planning their next move because, as Judy had phrased it: "By Marie, we will find that damn squirrel if we have to tear down all of Liberty!"

Nick had found this burst of stubbornness refreshing after the two days she’d spent visibly withdrawn, lacking her characteristic exuberance and prone to long silences that would draw out endlessly if he didn’t take it upon himself to break them. Happytown, it would seem, had done his partner more harm than good.

Despite all that she had managed to work her investigative magic once again, consistently narrowing down the search all by herself, her vulpine partner debilitated as he was in those parts of town, until three days later she had led them to the enormous, single-storeyed inn he was currently facing; the only one in all of Zootopia catering exclusively to elephants, where the richest of the pachyderms could enjoy a comfortable stay conveniently close to the beauty of the Royal Garden. That conclusion had naturally come with some degree of guesswork from her part but, as was often the case with the astute doe and her sharp instincts, Nick was inclined to put his faith in her.

Certain that a predator’s presence would only impede her progress, he had chosen to stay put and keep an eye out from across the street when she went in to question the innkeeper; and there he was now, stifling yawn after yawn as he patiently waited for his bunny to exit through the inn’s gigantic doors, struggling to convince himself that he had not been entirely useless in their search or the elusive Filbert Corn.

He honestly couldn't wait to finally leave that blasted district behind them.

An armadillo suddenly rode past him on a skinny zebra, his neatly polished armor reflecting a sunbeam straight into the fox's sensitive eyes. He looked away with a quiet snarl—which the armadillo noticed and immediately spurred his ride to a gallop-, blinking rapidly to clear his vision before squinting back towards the establishment that had been holding his attention.

Which was not the colossal structure Judy had entered, as one might expect, but rather the far smaller building cozily nestled at its side; a tavern built for mammals of his approximate stature, meaning it was nearly lost to the eye in the shade of the adjacent inn. Nevertheless, it was one of the most popular ones in all of Liberty by virtue of their distinguished cook, widely considered the best one in all of Zootopia. Nick wasn’t sure if he remembered their species correctly—it had to be a relatively small one for them to work there- but he was certain of their supposed specialty: pies.

Quality pies of all sorts and fillings; such as, let's say, blueberry.

The more Judy had kept him waiting the more he found himself losing focus, his thoughts inevitably drifting to the juicy blueberry goodness that was purportedly served in that small tavern. He hadn't had blueberry pie since he was a kit, back when his mother had laboriously managed to put together a couple of slices for him, bless her paws, but he could still recall the taste and texture of what had stuck with him as his all-time favorite dish; and this famed cook, with his superior ingredients and
culinary artistry, was sure to produce even greater results.

He somehow failed to notice the effect these gluttonous thoughts of his had on the passerbies, all of whom would twist their neck as they went to keep the shady vulpine safely in their sights. A chomper in Liberty was disconcerting enough as it were, but the sight of one constantly licking his lips from the side of the road with such a ravenous look in his eyes was downright terrifying to most.

He was forced to abandon his mouth-watering reveries as Judy finally reemerged from the elephant inn's doors. He smacked his tongue and swallowed, shifting his gaze to the capped bunny as she began towards him; twice she almost bumped into larger prey hurrying away from the fox in patent alarm as she crossed the street, but she eventually made it to his side in one piece, looking only mildly troubled.

Nick's pointy ears folded at her sight. "Oh, no." he sighed as she wordlessly came to a stop. "That's not a good face, lieutenant. What happened?"

"Our innkeeper claims ignorance." she sighed back with a shake of her head. "Never heard of any Filbert Corn, and certainly never seen him."

Nick hummed. "So he's not gonna cooperate willingly, then. He must be deeply involved with the guy, if he's been harboring him all this time."

"That, or my assumptions were simply wrong."

Nick didn't answer right away, instead taking a second to regard her more closely. He was unaware of the mental record she kept of his numerous grins but had developed a similar methodology for reading into her expressions as well, involving mainly the energetic movements of her ears. Now he found them still, lowered but rigid, while her eyes were half-lidded and distant, lacking focus.

Judy was deep in thought, but not the least bit dejected; and as much as he despised her need to pull into herself while cogitating, this was as positive a sign as she could give.

"… But you don't believe that, do you?" he tossed back in an incisive tone, tacitly prompting her to speak her mind.

Her eyes rested on his for a moment; and sure enough, there were gears silently turning behind them. "… What do you make of this?"

"This, being…?"

She crossed her arms and turned back towards the inn, nodding at a spot near the entrance. "It's strange." she remarked. "I've seen lizard livestock cooped outside most establishments down at the Zone, but I didn't think any folk in Liberty would share these dietary preferences; especially at an inn known for housing only elephants."

He followed her gaze to the inn's entrance and scanned it for a moment before finally spotting what she was referring to. Indeed, there was a tiny wooden cage there which he hadn't noticed, so small that he had to squint anew to see it clearly all the way from across the wide street; and trapped inside it was an even smaller blur of green shuffling around, which he also recognized once his eyes found proper focus.

Another hum escaped his lips. "Oh, this particular breed isn't meant for consumption, lieutenant." he mumbled to his partner, noting the yellow shade at the back of the lizard's head; then he faced her, letting a faint smirk communicate his praise. "What you're looking at there is a typical mount-lizard. But you knew that already."
Judy made sure to keep her expression solemn –Nick knew by then how much she liked to play humble- but her eyes seemed to smile right back at him, alight with satisfaction. "Still, I doubt an elephant could ride one of those…”

Nick cackled to that. "Wouldn't that be a sight to behold…!"

"… But a squirrel just might," she continued. "In fact, I'd say this lizard is the perfect size for a rodent; and judging from our descriptions of him, Filbert doesn't strike me as the kind of mammal who'd enjoy walking to places."

Judy waited for the fox to respond, but received only silence. She turned her head to find him staring, the sharp grin on his face flashing her with a mouthful of sardonic amusement. She eyed him guardedly. "… What?"

"Oh gee, Nick!" he mocked in a high-pitched drawl, batting his eyes at the bunny. "What if my assumptions were wrong, Nick! What do you think of that lizard, Nick! Why Nick, I don't suppose you think I was right all along now, do you Nick?" He only stopped when he heard her snigger, settling back against the stone fence with a chuckle of his own. "That's exactly how you sound, lieutenant."

"Oh, shut up, stupid." she retorted, eyes rolling above her twitching nose. "I just wanted to get your angle on all this!"

"Well in any case, you were indeed correct! You've hit the nail on the head yet again!" he exclaimed in exaggerated admiration that had her biting her lip still. "Truly, you are a peerless investigator, miss Hopps. There's just no equal."

"Okay- okay, well… thank you, Nickolas, but there's no need for such-aggrandizement." Judy managed through a snort, trying to kill the bashful simper steadily crawling up her muzzle. His antics had caught her off guard. "This isn't what I-"

"Ah, did I misconstrue…? My bad, then; but I suppose I don't have your flawless intuition though, do I?"

"Oh my God."

That did the trick; she looked away to try and stifle what had grown into a full-blown spastic giggle, a paw raised to her eyes and ears dropping to obscure the red of her cheeks. Nick held off any additional comments, choosing instead to savor the coy titters of the bunny with a deep sense of accomplishment welling in his chest; it had been too long since he'd last drawn a good laugh out of her.

He also noted that his partner was unexpectedly weak against compliments, and put that information away for future use.

"So- you done teasing me now, mister Wilde?" Judy asked after finally bedding down her laughter, giving him a smile not quite as wry as she would have liked. "Had your fill yet?"

"Are you done bragging, lieutenant?"

"I wasn't-okay, no." She shook her head hard, resisting the urge to keep playing along, and shot him an austere look. "Seriously, Nick, we've got to focus here!"

"What's left for us to focus on?" he asked her lightly. "We pretty much know our squirrel's in there,
"Yes, but that was only half the work." Judy fixed her gaze back at the inn and the erect stance of her ears signaled Nick that playtime was officially over. "The innkeeper's left that lizard out in plain sight for everyone to see. Either both him and Filbert are insultingly incompetent, or they're confident that the squirrel won't be found either way."

"Maybe they aren't too worried." Nick suggested, following her gaze. "There's no wide-scale search underway, after all. It's only us."

"And neither of us goes by unnoticed around these parts, Nick." she pointed out. "Chances are they've heard of the fox and rabbit going around asking about him; in fact, considering how cautious Filbert's known to be, I'd be shocked if he hadn't."

Nick rubbed his chin, slightly cross at the bunny's accurate observation. Useless, useless.

"… Fair point. So I'm guessing you didn't ask the innkeep about the lizard then, huh?"

"No, I didn't want to alarm him any further; he'd probably just gush out some lie we wouldn't be able to refute anyway."

The fox nodded his assent. "Mm, good thinking. Alright, then, lieutenant; you've been in there." he said evenly, narrowed eyes now pinned on the frontage of the massive inn. "What are we looking at?"

Judy was glad for the neutrality of his tone; he could joke around and goad her for hours on end, but when that stolid calm overcame him she knew she could count on him to deliver.

"Single floor, naturally; elephants and storeys don't go well together." she began. "There's a huge dining area by the bar and a total of four rooms behind it, each holding up to two patrons. Three are currently occupied. There were five elephants eating there, six with the owner."

Nick threw an ear to the side. "Only four rooms in the entire inn?"

"Space is an issue for them, I imagine." she shrugged. "No matter how big a building it may be."

A guttural sound of concern rumbled in his throat. "And big it is, I'm afraid. There must be literally hundreds of excellent hiding spots for such a small mammal to hole up in; and if he's as careful as we expect him to be… No wonder they're so relaxed. We'd need an entire team to turn the whole place upside down, and I doubt our little off-record investigation on a guy who's not even currently wanted would warrant such drastic measures. Not without hard evidence, at least."

"Indeed; but I don't think we'll need to go that far."

A pregnant statement, if Nick ever heard one. He cast the bunny a searching glance. "Sounds to me like you've contrived a plan already, lieutenant."

"Mm… sort of." Judy slowly mirrored him, a faint curve dancing at the corners of her lips. "And I think you're gonna like it."

His brow shot up. "I'm all ears."

"Well, I was thinking- the guy clearly knows his way around local procedures, right? We'd have a hard time getting to him via conventional means; but we happen to have something very unconventional at our disposal, Nick. Something no ranger has ever had before." The curve
suddenly bloomed into a roguish smile, the kind that seemed both out of place and strangely appropriate sitting under her feathered cap. She took a step closer, bumping his chest with the back of her paw. "You, Slick."

He blinked at her. "Me."

"Yes, you." she repeated, grin widening. "See, the locals, Filbert included, aren't at all accustomed to predators and their unique talents. You, for example, are supposedly a natural-born hunter." She moved her paw to lightly tap at his snout. "So hunt."

Apprehension dawned on his face, stretching his mouth into the toothiest smile Judy had ever seen on him; yet another new variety for her to classify. After some brief consideration, she settled on "delight".

"I do like that." he purred against her pointed finger. "But I don't think me and my trusty nose would get far in there, even with a lieutenant's authority. You bring in a chomper to sniff around against the owner's wishes and it's sure to cause a proper scene; we'd have maybe a few good minutes before he calls your colleagues on us."

"A few minutes might do fine, actually." she replied, lowering her arm. "I don't think Filbert would hide in any of the back rooms; it's quiet in there, a guest could potentially hear him scurrying about and start asking questions. So it should be enough if you cover just the front, try to catch a whiff around the bar and dining area." Judy concluded, stepping back with expectant eyes. "Do you think you can manage that?"

Nick brought a fist to his mouth and glanced from the bunny to the inn, contemplating. "... This place is sure to smell heavy of elephant." he muttered aloud to no one in particular. "A squirrel's scent would stick out; unless he's on higher ground, the ceiling... But even so, I should pick a trail, at least. If he's come down at all those past two weeks..."

His voice gradually faded to a whisper, words slurring into one another until Judy could no longer make them out; she simply waited to hear his assessment of her plan. She had devised it with little sense of how a canid's nose functioned, so it was up to her partner to take every element into account and decide whether this stunt was worth trying out; and if against her hopes it wasn't, they'd have to spend even more precious time in Liberty working out a different approach.

Her ears perked with anticipation a few moments later when Nick finally dropped his arm and focused back on her, having reached a decision.

"I should be able to pull it off." he declared, earning him a beaming, bucktoothed smile. "Like you said, I doubt they'd have taken precautions against that; but there's no telling just how strong the scent will be. I need you to make sure I'm not stopped right away, and if I have to get as far as the dining tables... well, it might end up getting messy with the local rangers after all, whether we find him or not."

"Aw, when has that ever stopped us!" she enthused with a lively hop, setting off towards the inn and motioning him to follow. "C'mon, let's go...! Oh, or do you need some time to prepare first?"

"Oh, I've had plenty of time already, believe me. Lead the way!" He followed after her with a smirk, enjoying her overt excitement as they began across the street; his presence appeared to clear open a path for them as they went. "I've had enough of being dead weight in this fucking place anyway. Time to justify that fictitious pay of mine!"

Judy jibbed to his quip, turning to him with a chiding scowl. "You're not dead weight, Nick! Don't
be foolish!"

"Well, I sure as hell haven't been much of an asset lately either." he grumbled back with a click of the tongue. "But don't you worry about my self-esteem, lieutenant; it'll take more than that to temper it, I assure you." he jested anew as they clambered up the oversized steps to the inn's entrance. "Plus, I'm giving it a good boost today, once I sniff out our little felon of a squirrel."

"That's the spirit!"

Each panel of the inn's doors literally towered above the two of them, but luckily one had been left slightly ajar, just the way Judy had found it when she had first entered. Now she paused before the wide crack and turned to mirror Nick with a firm, sober gaze that portrayed unfaltering professionalism.

"Alright… game face, on." she announced in her distinctive tone of composed efficiency.

He grinned to that. "Mm…! That's a potent one!"

One of his paws rose as he spoke, padded palm facing the sky, and the bunny understood right away. She struck down on the open palm with force, invigorated by the satisfying slap it produced on contact; then, failing to notice Nick wince and clench his stinging paw behind her, she gave each of her limbs a good shake and exhaled deeply, readying herself for the task at hand. Finally, she puffed up her chest and crossed into the enormous inn with a resolute gait and her fox in tow.

The street outside became a little calmer.

The interior of the inn was just as Judy had described it; an overall standard layout only with everything that comprised it, from furniture and decoration to the staff and patrons, drastically enlarged to elephantine proportions.

There were a few great tables positioned in the dining area to their right where five neatly dressed pachyderms were engaging in lighthearted chatter over a late breakfast. At the wall behind them was an empty fireplace, about twice the size of Nick's cubical wagon, and on its hearth lay a couple of hefty tree trunks quietly waiting for the chill of the afternoon to be lit aflame; the result would have qualified as a destructive wildfire in the country, but here it would merely serve to bestow the inn a nice, homely ambience in the day's later hours.

The space at their left was mostly bare in comparison, holding only two sets of the largest armed chairs either of them had ever seen, richly cushioned and with a thick crimson rug covering the floor beneath their feet; a clear emphasis on superfluous comfort and vapid grandeur, as befit an acclaimed establishment of Liberty District. The wall at their back, much like the entirety of the inn's interior, was teeming with framed paintings big and small, most depicting relaxing pieces of scenery for the paying customer to gaze at and admire.

Lastly, facing the entrance was another twin-paneled door leading to the guest rooms, and right next to it an enormous wooden counter with a grey male elephant standing behind it. He looked to be in his early forties and was immaculately dressed, wrapped in a clean, wrinkleless black vest worn over a white shirt of the most expensive fabric, sleeves pulled up over his thick elbows. His proboscis was notably long and slender in contrast with the rest of his build, allowing for nimble and precise handling that would have been impossible to his blunt front feet; at the moment he was using it to wipe a large cup he had just finished cleaning, sliding a dry rag in and out of its bowl with a mechanical ease that portrayed his experience in the business.
Looking down at his work and with no creak or movement from the door to signal their arrival, the elephant failed to notice the two smaller newcomers as they entered his inn, which the latter viewed as an act of providence. They immediately looked to each other, communicating their tacit understanding of the plan with a shared nod. Judy began her slow advance towards the bar as quietly as she could, meaning to stall having to call out and announce herself, while Nick traced the wall leftwards all the way to the far corner of the room, safely distanced from both the occupied tables and the distracted innkeeper. There he assumed a stooping posture and put his nose to work.

Judy took a moment to glimpse at him whilst dragging her feet, noting how well his red fur blended in with the thick carpet; it could very well be her excess optimism talking, but these small consecutive strokes of luck made their chancy endeavor feel more and more promising. He was walking on two legs still, bent to a near ninety degrees to keep his long snout close enough to the floor, and Judy barely managed to make out the faint snuffling he produced as air was greedily sucked into his nostrils. He progressed along the rich carpet in a hasty meander, making sure not a single hint of a scent would escape his nasal inspection.

Focused and committed, just as she liked him to be; meaning that she needn't concern herself with his part and could focus solely on her own.

It took several seconds before the innkeeper finally took notice of the bunny laggardly approaching his bar, blinking at her in mild surprise. Judy instantly abandoned her sluggish mosey and built a normal pace, stepping lightly to the right as she walked to guide his gaze away from the fox secretly sniffing at his rug. She reached the counter and looked up to the frowning elephant with a polite, formal smile. "Hello once again, sir." she greeted. "Please excuse my persistence, but I'd like us to go over everything one more time, make sure neither of us forgot to mention anything. Would that be okay with you?"

The look he shot her next gave away that it wasn't. "Ma'am, I already told you all there was to tell." His voice, gruff and deep by nature, was further charged with a tint of annoyance as he addressed the tiny ranger. "Now would you mind? I've a business to run, and you're disturbing my customers."

"Your customers don't even know I'm here, sir." she replied, motioning to the elephants at the tables and the sustained buzz of their calm, indistinct speech. "And they don't need to. We'll be done in a jiffy, I assure you."

Between the new smile she slung at him and the red feather sitting on her cap, the innkeeper found himself with little ground to protest. His trunk fluttered to a disgruntled huff as he eventually obliged, setting his rag aside and propping both arms against the bar, leaning forth to properly face the rabbit. "Alright, then." he sighed. "Let's get this over with."

Her eyes found his and locked them in a keen stare, claiming their undivided attention; yet another mute ploy to keep them off her partner, masqueraded as advertent questioning. She stood upright, paws tied behind her back and an apposite touch of authority in her tone when she next spoke.

"Thank you, sir. Now, as I mentioned earlier, the mammal I'm looking for goes by the name Filbert Corn-"

"Never heard of him."

"-a local squirrel recurrently suspected of receiving stolen goods-"

"I don't associate with any squirrels whatsoever."

"-and bootlegging them to numerous inns and taverns around the district. My search strongly
indicates that he may have recently visited your establishment."

"Might want to review your search then, ma'am."

Judy's ears gave a quiver of irritation. "I do wish you'd be more cooperative, sir. To our mutual benefit."

"And I wish you'd stop pestering me with baseless accusations, lieutenant ma'am."

"No one's accusing you of anything, sir." she sighed, finding her comity challenged in the face of the elephant's unsavory demeanor. "I am just trying to do my job here. No need for aggression, if you please."

"So that line about our "mutual benefit" was supposed to be reassuring, or what?" he sneered with a jerk of his trunk.

"You mistook me, sir. I meant that you, as a law abiding civilian, would naturally benefit from the apprehension of a known criminal; especially one whose transgressions revolve around your line of work."

The innkeeper's frown tensed into a plain scowl. "See, ma'am- that, too, rings a bit too much like an accusation. And I do not," he intoned, leaning further down until he could reach the bunny with his long trunk, "appreciate being accused in my own business; not without adequate cause. So unless you got any, I'll have to ask you to leave the premises. I've said all I had to say."

Judy held his minatory gaze in silence for a second. The black tips of her ears connected high above her head, her nose was stuck in a nervous spasm and her foot gave four audible taps before she could will it still. She gave the elephant another smile, so patently forced that it might as well have been a furious glare; the tiny ranger looked about ready to explode and aggravate the situation into an all-out argument against her better judgement.

But inwardly she was giddy with delight; the innkeeper was clearly set on antagonizing her, which further diminished the chance of him noticing Nick. The latter had already moved past the four chairs and would have soon covered the entirety of the rug before proceeding to the tall counter, and the elephant at its other side was still completely oblivious to his presence. She hadn't dared hope for such positive development.

Antagonizing it is, then.

"… Your frustration is understandable, sir." she said eventually, taking extra care to make herself sound nettled. "You have answered all my previous questions, after all, so let's try something we have not yet touched on."

"And what would that be?"

Some of the strain wore off her smile. "I couldn't help but notice the creature you have cooped up outside the entrance. Care to explain?"

Once again his trunk jerked to a mild fidget. Judy didn't miss it. "… Why, of course. That's my pet."

She didn't answer right away, letting a blank stare speak for itself. "Your pet."

"Yeah, that's right." he confirmed, chin rising in a haughty bridle. "Purchased it a couple of weeks ago from a booth down in St. Marie's Plaza. Is that a problem?"
"Oh no, not at all! Only… could I ask you what his name is?"

Another fidget. "I fail to see how that is pertinent, ma'am."

"Just innocent curiosity, sir; I've never owned a lizard myself." she replied with a light chuckle. "So, what have you named the little guy?"

"… I haven't named him." he said curtly. "Saw no reason to; not that many lizards around here, as I'm sure you've noticed."

*Improvisation isn't his strong point, Judy thought. Nick would have given me a name and a story to go with it.*

Still, the aim of her question lay elsewhere. She allowed her smile to flatten and a reserved strictness shone in her eye. "Sir, the lizard outside is a female."

Judy had no idea if it were true, of course, but what mattered was that neither did the elephant. The blunt statement visibly threw him off, causing his long trunk to twirl anew. "Funny how you wouldn't correct me there…" remarked the bunny, adding to his bewilderment.

"Well, I never cared to know its bloody gender, ma'am!" the innkeeper lashed, raising his voice; this attracted a couple of glances from his patrons, but they were incurious and short-lived. "I just wanted a lizard as decoration for the shop, but I decided against it so now I keep the damn thing outside, that's all there is to it!"

"Easy now, sir." Judy spoke placidly, lips curving into another friendly smile with patently unfriendly intent creeping underneath. "We don't want to upset the customers, remember?"

The elephant grimaced like he had just swallowed something very sour. He glanced at the tables and cleared his throat, making an effort to compose himself and relax his unruly trunk. He glared at the doe and leaned back down, lowering his voice to what accounted as his species' equivalent of a hiss.

"You were trying to *bait* me." he accused. "And you still claim you're not suspicious of me?"

"I'm only as suspicious as the situation dictates, sir." she replied matter-of-factly. "I wasn't when I first entered your inn; now, however, considering how unwilling you are to assist my investigation…"

She allowed her voice to trail off, her unspoken words conveying an abstract threat that she knew the innkeeper would want to avoid. Her gaze, avidly emotive in its neutrality, was held by the enormous mammal for a time, lips pulling back and the skin between his eyes wrinkling in disdain. He shut his eyes for a second, letting a deep breath course through his trunk until it was released in a gust that almost blew the bunny away.

"Very well, lieutenant ma'am." he said eventually, raising his head. "Wouldn't want to give you the wrong impression. I've nothing to hide, so ask away."

Judy staggered to her feet and set her cap straight, noting the shift in the elephant's tone; still clearly vexed but now somewhat collected, ready to conjure satisfactory and innocuous answers to her upcoming questions. Just as well; that too would require his focus, and with the corner of her eye she could see Nick already closing in to the near edge of the carpet with his nose tirelessly glued to the soft material. If she could divert the owner's attention for five minutes or so longer the fox would manage to reach her position at the center of the bar without being noticed.

There was no avoiding a confrontation after that, of course, but by then he would have covered
nearly half of the candidate area; the latter half would simply have to be checked throughout the 
mayhem that would doubtlessly ensue. She would try to contain the owner and possibly stall the 
arrival of her local colleagues who, judging from her experience, would most likely side with the 
local entrepreneur and have her and her partner removed, possibly even arrested.

It was a realization long overdue, but Judy suddenly found herself contemplating the trouble they’d 
be in if her assumptions truly were wrong and Filbert Corn was nowhere to be found in that 
reputable establishment.

She didn't allow for any of that meddlesome anxiety to show when she opened her mouth again. "I'm 
glad to hear that, sir. Now, then… the squirrel."

"Right; this notorious… um…” The elephant faltered, eyes narrowing in thought. "Phil- Phillip, uh-"

"Filbert." Judy firmly corrected him, scanning his face with an intent look in her eyes. "Filbert Corn. 
Thirty seven of age, plump, with expensive taste in clothing. He was last spotted visiting a vegetable 
booth in northern Avenue some two weeks ago."

"… Uh-huh. I see." The innkeeper puckered his lips at her, blinking innocently. A still moment went 
by in quiet. "… Well…"

"Well, sir, I'd like you to tell me anything that you may know about him."

"But we've already established that I don't know anything about him, ma'am." he responded in a tone 
of subdued exasperation. "That's why I find this questioning to be so pointlessly tiresome in the first 
place. I've told you that I know nothing, so what exactly-"

"He is a squirrel, sir." Judy cut him off. "Small, however fat. I reckon he could have snuck in 
without your noticing. Could we explore that possibility?"

He guffawed loudly to that. "If the guy managed to sneak into my inn and go by completely 
unnoticed for the past two weeks, ma'am, I'd say he's earned his amnesty!"

His jest was obviously meant to draw some reaction, but the bunny didn't respond; on the contrary, 
her expressionless stare killed the elephant's chuckle before it could even begin. "Yes, indeed. It is 
rather unlikely."

He didn't miss the trenchant allusion sprinkled in her words. He smacked his tongue with displease, 
face once again contorting into a deep scowl; this lieutenant was constantly teetering between 
reassuring and threatening, and by that point this inconsistent fickleness irked him more than 
anything.

He wasn't aware, but every ranger the world over tried for unbalance in a questioned party, one way 
or the other.

"Okay then." he grunted. "As you've certainly put together, there's been no squirrels hiding in my 
liquor stash that I'm aware of. So how exactly are we to "explore the possibility", ma'am?"

"Well, a thorough search should do the trick." she tossed casually. "I'm sure you'll have no 
objections, sir?"

He stirred. "I do, actually. A "thorough search", as you say, would surely make my customers 
uncomfortable. I can't allow that."

"I fear it cannot be avoided at this point, sir." Judy offered with an apologetic smile. "I understand
your concerns, but this regards a ranger investigation, so… I must ask you to kindly comply."

The elephant’s trunk jerked once more as he shot her a spiteful glare. "Is this common practice in the east, ma’am? Harming local businesses on a whim?" He paused and cocked a brow at her before adding: "And come to think of it, how is a b- a Burrows ranger here in my inn, harassing me over some obscure local outlaw? Were you really sent halfway across the country just to catch this measly little squirrel?"

Judy didn’t dare look to her left, but she allowed an ear to cant sideways in a discreet motion, masking it as an unconscious reaction to the elephant’s words. The incredibly light shuffling she caught coming from the edge of the rug told her that Nick was making his last run across its width. *Just a couple more minutes, Jude.*

"That is not relevant at the time, sir." she replied dryly, pursing her lips. "My duties in the capital are what led me to the pursuit of mister Corn. That’s all you need to know; and I am not out to harass anybody. As I told you, sir, I’m only trying to do my job here."

"Well then, your job directly impedes my own, ma’am."

Both mammals lay silent for a second, their reciprocal challenge issued through gaze alone. "And I regret that deeply, sir." the bunny said eventually. "But now we must ask ourselves: whose job here is considered official state business?"

This unprofessional pettiness was wholly deliberate at the time; her goal was to poke the guy, to peeve him, to force a reaction that would keep him occupied for just a second longer. And as far as she could tell, it had worked; his features tensed further, his scowl deepened and the long trunk hanging over his mouth resumed its spastic dance, just as Judy had anticipated.

But then the elephant did something she couldn’t have accounted for.

He scoffed.

The scoff had his large head suddenly turning away from Judy, whipping to the right in a perfunctory motion; then his eyes flickered towards the near corner of the carpet where he thought he spotted a faint rustle that wasn't supposed to be there. A second later he made out what appeared to be a slithering speck of darkish red wrapped in light green, ill-defined in the font of crimson but undoubtedly present.

So it was that he never saw the bunny wince. *Here we go.*

The innkeeper recoiled whole with a blaring toot, eyes widening in shock. "What the-"

Nick’s head jolted upwards, ears stiff with alarm. He saw the giant mammal behind the counter gawking his way, looking positively stupefied, and his partner standing with a paw to her face, lips pulled to a silent hiss. He understood immediately.

So much for subtlety.

He dropped back down in a hurry and resumed his sniffing, tracing the final inches of the rug with his snout before guiding it over to the corner of the bar. He was already going up and down its exterior, all the way from the floor to as far as a fox’s height would allow, when the elephant’s sputter began producing intelligible sounds.

"Is- is that a… a fox…? Wha- what the *hell* is it-"
"Calm down, sir." Judy cut him off, raising her paws. "There's no cause for alarm. The tod is with me."

The elephant turned back to the ranger, looking her up and down with the same stunned look he had shot her partner. "With you?!

"Yes, that is correct." she confirmed in a placating drawl. "He's my- an asset I'm employing for the purposes of this investigation. Please, pay him no mind."

Her words sent his trunk into another uncontrollable fit. For a second it was all he could do to blink at her in utter confusion. "An a-you've brought a chomper here?! In my inn?!

The chatter from the tables had by then subsided, replaced by low murmurs and curious looks aimed at the bar, but the lack of scandalized gasps told Judy that the patrons were yet to identify the cause of the innkeeper's outburst.

"I found it expedient, sir." she replied. "We were just discussing how a squirrel could have furtively snuck into the premises, weren't we? Well I figured, since you didn't wish to cause too much of an uproar, a single mammal with an excellent nose could see the job through much more discreetly; and I was right!" she added brightly, smiling up at the aghast pachyderm. "You yourself didn't even notice him, much less your customers! So, if you'd just lower your voice and give us a few more minutes, I'm sure my associate will-"

"Y-your associate…?" he stammered, clearly at a loss for words. "Wha- what even…. Who'd ever heard of rangers employing chompers, dammit?!

"Ah, well- who'd ever heard of bunnies outside of the Burrows, am I right?" she quipped, stubbornly rejecting his indignation with casual levity. "In any case, let us return to the matter at hand. So, if a rodent were to be hiding somewhere within the building, where do you suppose they-"

"Oooh, no! I don't think so, lieutenant ma'am!"

The elephant shook his head vehemently and forced his trunk still, glancing towards the vulpine with aversion in his eyes before looking back to the doe. "You," he began, voice trembling with anger, "are stark. Raving. Mad, bunny. You think you can just go and sneak a fucking chomper in here, I-this crosses every goddamn line! You are harassing me, and I will not stand for it!" He straightened his back in a peremptory manner, pointing to the exit with the flat end of his foot. "Out, both of you. Right now! I want you out of my inn this instant!"

His shout carried the intransigent hue of a mammal whose patience had dried out, but it was not the focus of Judy's attention. One of her ears caught the perturbed exclaims that came from the patrons' side, some of whom had finally spotted the crouching red figure that belonged to Nick, while the other nibbled at the constant sniffing he emitted whilst running his nose against the bar, growing progressively stronger as he approached.

"I'm afraid this won't do, sir." Judy narrowed her eyes to a menacing slit, opting for a harsher tone; it was clear that more level-headed responses weren't gonna cut it anymore. "There's refusal to cooperate, then there's obstruction of a ranger's duties. Is your personal bias against predators really worth such trouble?"

"You are the only one getting trouble out of all this, rabbit!" he retorted. "I don't know what kind of sick ideas your order encourages in the east, but this is Zootopia! Our rangers know to protect us from the critters, not invite them into our businesses! This is preposterous; I'll see that you lose your feather!"
Judy felt her confidence fizzle out. His threats held merit and she knew it; that's why it had been so paramount that they avoided getting the local rangers involved in the first place. Now, however, she saw that the elephant was more forceful on the subject than she had expected, even exacerbating the situation in front of his patrons; either she had vastly underestimated the prejudice of local prey or she had provoked the man too far during their prior exchange. Either way, a gross miscalculation on her part; one that could cost them dearly if the elephant truly sent for the rangers right away, before Nick could even go through the counter.

And then, just when a tinge of panic had begun working its way up her bosom, a new thought occurred to her: maybe the cause of this acute reaction lay somewhere else entirely. Maybe there was something other than anger riding the cadence of the innkeeper's voice.

She was certain that Filbert Corn was hidden somewhere within the gigantic structure, and while that was enough to explain the elephant's alarm it did not justify such frenzied urgency; he still had ample time to summon the local rangers before Nick could scour through the whole inn. Unless…

"Make him stop, dammit!"

Nick had sensed the danger and responded by redoubling his efforts, head moving frantically up and down as he progressed towards the bunny with a steady pace. Judy saw that the elephant was looking at him now, and a swift glance at the enormous mammal's convulsing expression corroborated her latest impression.

Perhaps there was no need to cover the entire room after all.

"I apologize for the inconvenience, sir, I really do." Her tone had inexplicably softened once again. "It's just that I must conduct a search here, one way or another. I have an oath to uphold above all."

"I'm not against you upholding any oath, bunny; I just demand that you take this chomper out of my shop- I told you to cut that out!"

His last command was aimed at Nick himself; it was the first time he had addressed the fox directly. There were audible complaints echoing from the elephants in the background, but Judy payed them no mind; she was entirely focused on monitoring the innkeeper's voice, trying to assess it, to judge if the slight waver was truly there or if she had just imagined it. She was strongly leaning towards the former.

"You say that, but I don't have much of a choice here, sir. He's the one doing the searching."

"Can't you have rangers do it instead?!!"

She arched a brow at him. "You would permit a thorough search if I were to bring my colleagues, then?"

"Well- yes, whatever!" he exclaimed, cringing at the fox now below him. "If you absolutely must then bring in some proper, flat toothed mammals for Marie's sake; just get the blasted cur out of my inn…! Are you deaf, fox?!

Judy's ears gave a light quiver. He had been so adamant in rejecting the notion just a minute ago; what could have triggered such an abrupt change of heart?

Flat toothed mammals, he had said.

Mammals with inferior noses.
"Mm, I see. That would complicate things for me, though." Judy drawled, eagerly observing the ever growing disquiet on the elephant's face. "I've brought him all the way up to Liberty, after all, and I can't very well leave him alone in the street; people get… anxious. Listen, sir, could we perhaps-

"Okay, that's it!"

She was cut off by the elephant's grunt as he suddenly stooped over his counter, long trunk whipping down towards Nick who was by then just close enough for him to reach.

This development caught Judy off guard. She had not anticipated that he'd resort to physical force - that was what rangers were for, after all- but him doing so could only evince great panic; and she would have appreciated how positive a sign that was if it weren't for the immediate prospect of her partner getting squashed into two dimensions.

"Hey- hey!"

She was too slow to dash forth and protect the fox in whatever way she would, but her cry alerted him just before the dreaded strike could land. It didn't actually carry much momentum, just enough to swat him away without causing serious injury, but Nick didn't have the time to assess that. He also didn't possess the reflexes to dodge it, and he knew that all too well. So, lacking any other options, he instinctively settled on doing what he did best.

He improvised.

His fanged jaws snapped at the extended trunk at the last moment, forcing the innkeeper to collect it with a sharp gasp. The fox tossed in a growl for good measure, making sure to forestall any subsequent attempts before hurriedly resuming his work at the bar.

A fraught silence followed Nick's short but effective display, filled only with his own incessant snuffling.

Sniff, sniff.

Rangers, and by extension their cooperators, were entitled to the occasional use of violence, and Nick's little demonstration was among the mildest Judy had seen in her active years; truly, it was an intimidation device more than anything. If he were prey it wouldn't have even been noteworthy.

But it was different for a predator in Liberty, and especially when the act concerned the owner of an upstanding establishment within the district; not to mention her own terrible standing with the city's rangers. Chances were that her vouching for him in case this matter was reported would only make things worse for the gypsy. For both of them.

It was infuriating to contemplate, considering that the absolute worst a fox could manage against an elephant was an uncomfortably deep scratch while each of the pachyderms could potentially flatten such small animals during an absentminded saunter.

Judy's mind raced. The patrons were too far, Nick was too small and their vision was partly blocked by the mass of the bar, so they likely didn't understand what had just transpired; they only seemed dissuaded from further complaints by all the yelling, adhering to the local principle of avoiding unnecessary trouble. Whatever mess the innkeeper had gotten himself in, it was up to him alone to sort it out. They had no reason to interfere.

She breathed a sigh of relief; any repercussions they would have to face hinged solely on the elephant in question, and if all went well they would have more than enough leverage to shut him up. For now he was still recovering from his fright, a foot brought to his chest and his near-afflicted trunk
yet again waving around with a mind of its own.

Nick's sniffing was what seemed to ultimately pull him out of his trance.

"... He attacked me." His voice rang coarse to the bunny's ears, coming through rapid bursts of uneven breathing. "You- you saw it. He attacked me."

"I'm afraid I cannot attest to that." Judy declared. "You're the one who made the first move, and he didn't even touch you- and by the way, I would advise against another such attempt, sir." she added severely, cutting off his response. "Whatever name you decide to call him he is still my associate, and I bear the feather. You will not be excused twice."

He opened his mouth, closed it and opened it again, but all that came out was a short, throaty sputter; and all the while Nick's snuffling went on, unabated, inexorable.

Sniff, sniff.

"Ma'am, I will not say it again." he eventually managed, meeting the rabbit's piercing gaze. "I demand that you leave my property this instant, or I will be forced to report this to your order."

"Go right ahead then, sir. You've every right." Judy's eyes remained fixed on his own, clear and unblinking. "In the meantime, my asset and I will proceed with our search. That should be fine with you; I mean, we won't be finding anything either way, so you should get your way by the end of all this. Correct?"

Sniff.

"... You don't understand how damaging this is to my business, bunny. You cannot do this to me!"

His tone was harsh again. Hostile, aggrieved; almost convincing.

"I cannot do this to innocent civilians, no; but you have been far too intent on hampering my associate's progress, sir, and you appear inordinately stressed for whatever reason. Frankly, one cannot help but wonder..."

Nick was now only a few meters away. Sniff. Sniff.

The elephant leaned back down and brought their faces closer, trying, and failing, to intimidate the mammal that was small enough to fit in his pocket. "This is my reason, ma'am!" he raged, trunk pointing over to the fox. "And it's a damn good one, too! Not to mention all your continuous slandering!"

Sniff.

Judy hummed. "You do seem rather shaken, sir."

Sniff, sniff-

"Lieutenant, are you even listen-"

Snort.

Both heads, one tiny and one huge, simultaneously whipped towards the fox to find him frozen, ears flagged and neck recoiled as if he had just received an invisible hit. He was squinting to a faint new stimulus that may or may not have been there, snout pulling back ripples as the signal traveled through.
Cautiously he brought the tip of his snout back to a high spot on the towering counter. His sensitive nose, wet and tender, gently felt the brown wood as it ran circles over it, looking to retrace the weak scent that had thrown him off. He found it impeccably smooth and pleasant to the touch, a result of excellent woodwork on material that was ideal for the craft; likely birch or walnut wood, as far as he could tell.

In any case, it had no business smelling of acorns.

_Snort._

Judy witnessed his pointy ears perk and his rich tail, slightly bristled for some time now, commence a subtle yet energetic wag. His snout firmly anchored on a point at the counter then began marking a sure line upon its glossy surface without a hint of hesitation, guided solely by the rush of primal excitement that had suddenly washed over him.

Judy took in his sight and, before she could even make proper sense of it, heard a deep _gulp_ as it escaped the stooping elephant across of her.

And that was all it took. Just like that her confidence was reignited in force, flaring up in a feral sensation not unlike the one she had just recognized in her partner. This unequalled satisfaction was familiar to her as the ultimate payoff to all her hard work, the fulfilling, intoxicating triumph of a job well done. She couldn't have known, but it was similar to the feeling that compelled the lion to roar and the wolf to howl at the full moon, a lingering remnant of the thrill that would surge through the predators of old as they bit down on their bested prey.

And truly, when she turned her scintillating eyes back to the innkeeper the latter thought that she looked more predator than the fox frantically sniffing at the base of his counter. Her lips had curled up ever so slightly, and as the elephant saw the protruding tips of her buckteeth he couldn't help picturing them closing around his neck.

"W-what? What's with that look, bunny?" He was shooting for defiance, but his voice betrayed him. "What is a-

_Toc._

This time the elephant didn't even bother to look; he just averted his eyes with a hard wince, letting his trunk go haywire. Judy, contrarily, looked to her partner and saw that he had moved his snout away from the counter and was now pressing an ear against it, facing her way. He was holding a bent finger in the air, ready to land a second jab against the flat wood.

Their eyes locked as he knocked again, this time with more force.

_Toc, toc._

They arched a brow at each other. _Hollow._

Triumph thrilled through Judy's body anew, fixing her ears in a frisky salute; yet her expression didn't change as she slowly turned back towards the elephant, smirk unabated and brow still aloft. She regarded him without a word, silently requesting explanation.

The elephant wanted to oblige, but his mouth felt excruciatingly dry all of a sudden. He swallowed thickly, sniffled and cleared his throat before speaking; and all the while Judy kept the twin violet spears pointed directly at him.

"Likely termites." he finally managed to squeeze out. "Nothing serious."
A second brow rose to meet the first, giving the bunny a mockingly horrified visage. "Termite…!" she exclaimed, mouthing the word with exaggerated revulsion. "Why, I don't think that's something to be passed over, my dear sir! You ought to look into it…! Actually—please, allow us."

"Huh?"

A new wave of confused alarm flashed across the innkeeper's face but Judy barely acknowledged it; she simply cast the fox a glance rife with meaning and a curt nod, certain that he would catch on.

And she was right. Nick gave the bunny his most impish grin—because wasn't she just lovely when she acted mean—and nodded back his comprehension, slowly raising an empty paw to the air. He held it still for a second and then suddenly whipped his sleeve with a sharp flick of the wrist, producing one of his small throwing daggers; to the unsuspecting onlooker it would have seemed as if he had conjured it out of thin air. He took a moment to savor the elephant's bedazzlement before spinning the knife into a reverse grip, ready to stab at the hollow spot on the counter.

Judy had seen his little demonstration coming and was expecting to roll her eyes, but instead found her thin smirk growing; the gypsy was feeling especially showy that day, but she could hardly blame him. There was no denying that he had earned it.

"Hey—no, wait just a—"

Ignoring the innkeeper's complaints, Nick brought his paw down with a swift motion, putting in just enough force to test out the counter's resistance. He met almost none; the thin blade ran through the plank-thick wood with ease, and all three mammals heard a startled squeak echo from behind it.

The elephant's voice died out. The enormous mammal shrunk from behind the counter, eyes lowered to the floor and trunk wilting miserably, just as a third rush transformed Judy's smirk into a full, broad smile.

Nick too seemed overcome with childish glee, tail wagging anew as he twisted and pulled at the blade, cutting out chunks of wood until he had made a hole large enough for his paw to slide in; then the knife disappeared back into his sleeve and he went on expanding the opening with his bare fingers. Timber snapped and splinters flew as he worked, and a few seconds later his entire head could fit through with ease.

He peeked into what appeared to be a luxury chamber carved into the counter, equipped with a miniature bed, a couple of armed chairs, a table and even a little carpet spread over its base for added comfort. There were a few tiny candles burning on the table, and on a chair right next to them sat the chubbiest squirrel he had ever seen, swirly tail visibly bristled and shock lining his features.

Nick thought it appropriate to give the slippery rodent his grandest, toothiest smile. "Hi~"

The fox's head disappeared before the squirrel could muster a response, replaced by that of a female bunny. She looked every bit as elated as the vulpine, but at least made an effort to moderate her smile.

Judy glanced into the tiny chamber and, after verifying that Filbert Corn was every bit as fat as his descriptions claimed and had no obvious escape route, pulled back to shoot the elephant one last pointed jape. "Well!" she exclaimed. "That's one big termite you've got here, sir! Real comfy-looking, too."

She saw his lips move but no sound reached her ears. There would be no more antagonizing to be seen from him.
Satisfied, Judy turned back to the squirrel in the hole. "Filbert Corn, I presume…? It's a pleasure to finally meet you, sir. We've been looking all over for you." She reached into the opening as she spoke, grunting as her feet left the ground, but finally managed to get a firm hold of the smaller mammal while he was still too dazed to offer any resistance.

"Hey!" Filbert squeaked as he was pulled out of his hiding place, secure in the bunny's iron grip. "I- I have rights!"

"You most certainly do, mister Corn; and we'll be having a thorough discussion over them somewhere more private." Judy turned back to the elephant. "I trust you can provide, sir…? If possible, I'd like to avoid having to report your little pest issue, if that's alright with you."

The pachyderm meekly raised his eyes with a shaky frown, unsure if he had understood right. "…T-then… You're saying that…"

"I'm saying that you still have a chance to be cooperative here, sir; and I see no reason to bring trouble upon cooperative civilians."

He stared at her numbly for a time, absorbing the reality of the unhoped-for recourse he had just been offered; then, naturally, he decided he would jump on it with everything he had. The vexing bunny had just earned herself the world's most servile elephant.

"So- I believe you had an empty room available?"

"I- uh… certainly, yes! Y-yes!" The elephant gulped and began nodding rapidly, limp trunk lashing at his black vest. He moved out of the counter on stiff legs and pushed the doors to the back rooms open. "Right this way, please. Lieutenant ma'am."

"Good. And as for you, mister Corn…" Judy held the squirming rodent before her eyes, forcing him to face her. "We have a few questions for you, and I strongly advise that you answer them to the best of your ability. Depending on how well you choose to cooperate, you may still walk out of this a free mammal."

He wasn't given a chance to respond as his captor immediately stepped after the elephant, jibbing only to glance at the fox behind them. "Nick, I think we ought to do something about them," she said, motioning to the tables and the deeply concerned mammals sitting there, murmuring their displeasure. "Think you can handle it?"

"Oh, I don't know, lieutenant…" he sighed abjectly, avoiding her eyes. "I've just been feeling so… ineffective as of late, you know?"

This time Judy did roll her eyes, but still couldn't help a half-smile. For someone who had been calling themselves dead weight not twenty minutes ago, the gypsy was entirely too pleased with himself. Oh, well- she did owe him a session of teasing praise anyway.

"Excellent work today, Slick dearest." she cooed in a syrupy voice. "You're just the best, sweetheart. An absolute gem."

Nick dropped the act with a wide grin –"excess smugness #4"- and gave a theatrical bow. "Well, if the boss believes in me that much, I'm sure I can manage." He straightened his back, tossing the bunny a sly wink. "Go on ahead, lieutenant. I'll wrap things up here and join you in a second."

She did as he said and passed through the open door with a snorting laugh while he turned around and walked up to the dining area under the rancorous gazes of the seated patrons; some of them apprehensive, some appalled but all undeniably hostile. He stood before them and audibly cleared his
throat, raising both paws to hush their mumbling.

"Ladies and gentlemammals, we would like to apologize for the disturbance," he began in a clear voice, seizing their attention. "There was a small misunderstanding, but everything has been settled now. No cause for alarm, we will be leaving you to your peace."

He paused and let his words sink for a second, during which more heavy glares rested on him, less concerned now but still endlessly suspicious. Undeterred, the fox opened his mouth to add one more conclusive declaration.

"The owner asked me to inform you that desserts today are on the house, as compensation for your inconvenience. He will be with you in a minute to take your orders."

That got through to them; this inn was the only one of its kind in the entire city, and its prices were accordingly extravagant. The glares were gradually replaced with nonchalant shrugs and dismissive scoffs, which Nick took as his cue to bow and shuffle away from the tables.

"Please, enjoy the rest of your meal."

And with that he turned tail and hastily made for the guest rooms, meaning to join his bunny in questioning Filbert and inform the innkeeper whose trunk had nearly smacked him of his newly acquired, ungainful workload.

-Chapter 6 Continues-

Chapter End Notes

Yes, chapter 6 does continue- not right now, though.

Not to complain, but life has been rather... challenging, these past few months. Or rather, busy; which is by no means a bad thing in itself, but it did inevitably shave off of my writing time quite a bit. And sadly, this state of affairs is looking to continue well into the summer.

So, when I realized that the Tale had gone through two whole months of inactivity, during which I had barely managed to put together the first half of the next chapter, I decided it would have to be a good enough installment by itself. Studies will keep me engaged for the better part of the coming month, so it was either this or another two months of dead silence. I opted for the former.

This story is always on the back of my mind -even when it shouldn't be, I fear- and as I've stated before, writing may just be the single most cathartic practice in the world. So, rest assured: contretemps might slow down the Tale's progress from time to time, but will never halt it completely.

I hope I'll be able to bring you the second half of this chapter soon. Until then-

Stay well!
Who'd Ever Heard (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

With a dancer, a fence, a prelate and a spy
along with two separate tales of egregious maltreatment

Chapter Notes

Hi. Yes. I'm still alive, evidently.

So- this little hiatus might have drawn out a bit longer than initially planned. A full year now, to be exact.

My sincere apologies if you were kept waiting all this time, dear reader. It was never my intention; but a creative stump, coupled with a few ongoing obligations than I was not quite equipped to handle at the time, had a most adverse effect on any and all literary pursuits of mine. The text for this upload was put together through sporadic bits of writing (and extensive sessions of rewriting, those were fun) that took place between mid-summer of last year and now.

I spent the year prior deeply engrossed in writing and relished every second of it, which is a feeling I've since sorely missed. Hopefully I can recapture some of it in the year to come so there won't be any breaks quite as long as this one.

But anyway- the second part of chapter 6 is finally here (there'll also be a third one, by the way, the damn thing's turning out much longer than even I had anticipated), and that is all that matters. I'd like to give many special thanks to Cimar of Turalis/Wildehopp for once again providing me with his stellar proofreading services, without which this upload would never have arrived; and if it did, it surely wouldn't be half as good as it is now.

Thank you all for your patience and sustained interest throughout this last year. I hope this upload was worth it.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nickolas Wilde was faced with a particularly obnoxious problem.

This was, of course, something of an understatement. In truth he was beset upon by a veritable avalanche of worries constantly looming over him like a dark cloud, each of which would have brought a less composed mammal to distress long ago; but not him. Be it the inexorable concern for his missing comrades, a constant anxiety for his crew's perturbed schedule or the persistent craving for a blueberry pie he could not afford, Nick had resolved to take it all in stride.

It wasn't the first time those small shoulders had had to bear such immoderate weight, after all, and
they had long learnt to do so stoically; for what good had ever come of excess worry? It was nothing but an unwelcome distraction to an already troubled mind, the gypsy knew, pointless and inconvenient. Much better to focus on the task at hand, invest himself solely in the struggle to overcome his every adversity rather than testily fret over it like a pouty kit. It was just the sort of sagacious practicality he prided himself on, the same that had been keeping his crew afloat over the past couple of decades.

Anyone who'd ever known the fox could attest to it: nothing ever gets to Slick Nick. His friends would often chant the words in mirthful banter, the knavish cutthroats he consorted with took them as assurance that he'd keep a level head throughout their shady business, and the impressionable profligates of Chomper Garden, upon seeing this weedy little vulpine deal with one certain volatile lion on equal grounds, would look to each other in awe and think them true.

For years Nick had tried to live up to his reputation, assiduously upholding this poised, imperturbable mien that worked so damn well for a vagabond gypsy, until one day he found that he no longer had to try at all. Slick Nick, once merely the handle he went by in the disreputable circles of the world, had gradually bled into Nickolas Wilde until they were one the same. He could be a hundred different foxes if the need arose, but when all masks dropped he had to be calm, suave, and impervious. He had to be Slick.

But being Slick presented him with an unexpected quandary, it would seem, as being Slick meant that nothing did ever get to him. That was the whole point. So when, on occasion, the impossible occurred and a nuisance actually managed to get under his skin, the crafty vulpine found that he was exceptionally bad at dealing with it.

And there was certainly something crawling under his skin on that chilly autumn noon as he was making his way down one of Zootopia's many riparian thoroughfares, a sturdy mass of paved stone built in a slight bridge-like arch to facilitate movement over and across the myriads smaller brooks branching off of Softstream's main body. This particular one saw much traffic during the midday rush, being one of the major roads connecting Liberty District to the north and St. Marie's Plaza to the south, and that day was no exception; hundreds of busy-looking mammals of all shapes and sizes were hurriedly flocking towards the Central Market to catch the day's fares, imbuing the street with a lively sense of activity.

Predators in the vicinity of the Plaza were nothing to bat an eye at, as it was where most of them found work that side of the Zone's fences. As such, none of the mammals traversing the street thought to spare the fox a second glance; but if any of them had they would have surely noticed the reserved annoyance etched onto his visage, evident in the faint purse of his lips and the thin wrinkle forming between his brows. And if, perchance, they had decided to jib for a quick listen they would have likely heard, apart from the soft swoosh of the calm waters running beneath their feet, the exasperated huffs escaping his nose or the recurrent clicking of his tongue as he went.

The object of Nick's frustration was a female figure currently walking some paces ahead of him, one of the few among the sea of pedestrians to be even smaller than his own. A set of long gray ears that should be perking on either side of her green cap instead hung in a limp curve above her forehead, dark tips quivering to the motions of a flat, heavy gait. The figure trudged on in devout silence, listless and withdrawn, seemingly unaware of the thoughtful gaze pinned to the back of her skull.

Judy was back to brooding again; and for reasons he could not quite place, the sight irritated her vulpine companion to no end.

Their questioning of Filbert Corn earlier that day had supplied a wealth of information, enough to make up for the time and energy that had gone into tracking him down; a most welcome jot of
progress after their recent streak of cascading dead ends. He had initially appeared set on paltering around their inquiries, ever unwilling to compromise himself and the network he had so laboriously set up over the years; but eventually thought better of it, in no small part due to the very mammals that had pushed him into this corner.

The squirrel had at one point placed both paws upon his bursting belly and carefully studied the unlikely duo, considering an obvious truth: these two were strikingly unorthodox in every possible sense of the word, proper mavericks through and through and with a clear penchant for unconventional methods. He could only theorize as to what had led a foreign ranger -a bunny ranger- to collaborate with a chomper, of all mammals, but whatever their story, these two just couldn't have it well with the local caps. As such, when they vowed not to pursue him or his clandestine affairs any further if he only abided by their questioning, the little outlaw was inclined to trust their word.

The first thing they got out of him was a confirmation of Nick's guess: Filbert had indeed been trafficking the stolen goods from Gavin's booth into the northern district. By his account, a small group of sheep he had never met before, quite obviously the same secretive lot described by the bear, had furtively accosted him out of the blue with an offer of partnership. The precious crates would be snuck into Liberty free of the district's exorbitant tax rates and then distributed among local inns and taverns through the fence's long-standing connections; an overall simple and straightforward arrangement, as underhanded transactions in Liberty's uptight community went.

Yet under normal circumstances, Filbert would not have taken the deal. Flagrant profiteer such as he was, the squirrel ultimately valued prudence above all else, and in this case prudence dictated that he keep away from the unknown ungulates who felt entirely too shady for comfort, even by his standards.

"And, I mean- who'd ever heard of sheep breaking bad, you know?" he pondered aloud to the two investigators, to which they merely sighed in unison and prompted him to continue.

The thing was, Filbert claimed, that going by a standard "risk versus reward" approach, the sheep's offer was impossible to turn down in the sense that it was extremely lucrative. He had asked to evaluate the goods himself and found them of above decent quality, just the kind that would be served in the posh establishments that comprised his clientele, yet the price set by the sheep was nominal. Each batch would bring in minute quantities, of course, but procurement was typically the most hazardous part of the job; to have another party go through all the hassle only to then sell him the stuff for a fraction of their actual worth was just too good to be true.

He recalled wondering if all that wool had seeped into those rookies' brains, but in any case, this wasn't a deal he could pass on lightly. Being the seasoned veteran that he was, he made sure to probe into their operation a bit further before he felt safe enough to get himself involved, which in turn explained how he knew of Gavin and his role in all this, as well as where to look for him after the sheep had made scarce and left him hanging.

"One day halfway through the season the crates just stopped flowing in. No warning, no explanation or nothing!" Filbert squeaked in an aggrieved tone, face turning sour. "I couldn't seem to get ahold of the sheep afterwards either, so I figured they'd run into some trouble and hightailed. Not that it worried me, really, I had my failsafes, but… hell, you don't get deals like these every day, right? So next I tried that bear who'd been supplying them the goods, thinking we could resume business on our own; except this one had vanished as well! Rangers had a whole investigation on him and everything!"

He crossed his arms and reclined on his puffy tail, shaking his head. "That's about all I needed to see. Didn't know what the hell had gone down, but I knew I wanted no part in it. Thought I'd lay low for
a time, just in case, but then just as I was beginning to relax I got wind of a funny looking duo who'd been prancing around Liberty asking about me. And, well..." He paused, eying the duo in question with a disgruntled scowl. "Here you are."

Nick and Judy shared a glance upon mention of the sheep's price, which was indeed astoundingly low. They had both gone over Nick's notes over a dozen times by then and couldn't miss the fact that Gavin's documented remuneration for slipping them the crates far exceeded the amounts paid by Filbert; meaning that, for the short time that this three party deal had been in effect, the sheep alone were operating at a loss.

This new information served to corroborate their long-established premise: the mysterious sheep, whoever they were, were never interested in coin. Only predators. This entire operation was likely mere pretext to get closer to Gavin and eventually abduct him, same as they had done with Jasmine, Otterton and who knows how many more. All they needed was someone to quietly dispose of the incriminating merchandise they acquired in the process, who they found rather conveniently in the accomplished fence that was Filbert Corn. Then, after they'd gotten what they were after, they had promptly retreated back into the shadows, presumably moving on to their next fanged victim.

As disconcerting a revelation as this was, it at least meant that they were on the right track. They tried to take heart in that thought as Filbert rounded up his narration, pushing him for additional details on his interactions with the sheep in hopes of picking up their trail where he himself couldn't. Then, roughly an hour after the scene they'd so irreverently caused at the elephant inn, they finally exited the premises under the enervated gaze of its innkeeper. The pachyderm watched their small frames disappear behind the door's massive panels with a numb sense of relief, then guided his quivering trunk to pour himself a drink before moving to deal with the aftermath of their invasion.

Filbert had at one point mentioned a spot in southernmost Liberty where his exchanges with the sheep typically went down, so Nick and Judy decided they'd head there next in search of clues. They arrived at a small, sequestered parcel of open ground, a sort of miniature plaza tightly jammed behind the courtyards of two adjacent mansions. Connecting it to the main street was a lone, narrow byway which was the closest thing Liberty had to an alley; a most jarring element in the district's urban view, which was however easy to overlook amidst the overbearing splendor that surrounded it.

There were actually a number of such areas sprinkled all throughout the district's southern edge, and the locals had Softstream to blame for that. The river's sinuous course through Zootopia had it embracing a huge chunk of Liberty, thus acting as a natural border between it and the rest of the city but also hampering construction along its banks. The soil there didn't allow for the sturdy foundations required for Liberty's heavy structures, so certain spots were begrudgingly left bare save for the neat paving that was applied to at least make them feel part of the prestigious district.

Yet Filbert and his wooly copartners had gotten much use out of the place during their short arrangement. The stolen goods, always paid for in advance the day before, would be delivered there at some point during the night for the squirrel to collect come the morning, which he did well before the sun had risen and Liberty's affluent residents had left their cozy beds.

The sheep never divulged exactly how they managed to get the crates past the rangers standing guard at the district's entrances, but the answer was fairly obvious to both the squirrel and the two investigators. They were ferried there.

It made sense. This small, secluded corner looking into Softstream's tranquil waters could very well function as a wharf for anyone looking to moor and unload, and a light craft could, conceivably, float past the guards under cover of darkness, if its passengers were quiet enough. Furthermore, the river followed a course from east to southwest, passing through Farmer's Avenue before reaching the
exchange point. It was entirely plausible that the sheep, or perhaps a hired accomplice, would wait out the daylight somewhere in the Avenue before taking to the waters, letting the stream slowly guide the merchandise all the way to pristine Liberty without anyone taking notice.

Nick ran the scenario through his head and was impressed, not so much with the plan itself—which was admittedly a good one- but mostly with how flawless its execution would have to be. The sheep must have been painstakingly fastidious during the transport, as a single misstep could have compromised their entire operation and themselves along with it. Despite Filbert’s impressions, these guys were anything but rookies.

The thought left a pit in the fox's stomach.

"So they must have used... what, a raft of sorts? A small boat?"

Judy had spent some time absently gazing into the glistening waters after they'd gotten there, lost in her own musings, and Nick knew not to disturb her. She would break the silence herself once she was ready to exchange thoughts, as she had just done.

"Or a skiff, yes; but a raft seems more likely."

"How so?"

"Apart from light, they'd need something inconspicuous," he explained, trailing a paw along the riverbank. "They did this run several times, meaning they had the craft transported back to the Avenue during the day, and doing so with a small boat or a skiff would surely draw attention. A raft, on the other hand, can be little more than three wooden planks nailed together in a hurry; I could think of a hundred different ways to get one past the checkpoints without rousing suspicion."

She hummed. "And I don't suppose they could have just ridden it back upstream, huh?"

"Perhaps, if it was built with the right specifications; but even then they'd have to paddle up the rougher parts, which is noisy work. Too risky for their style."

The bunny arched a brow at his erudite tone. "... Well, that was... surprisingly informed." she noted sportively. "Know your sailing, do you Slick?"

"We've been over this, lieutenant." Nick sighed, feigning vexation for a moment before flashing her a sharp, toothy grin. "I know my everything."

Judy couldn't help a soft chuckle. She wondered at which point the gypsy's barefaced vanity had become so endearing. "Right... well in that case, let me pick your brains a bit, mister know-it-all."

"Go right ahead, ma'am."

She aimed her eyes back at Softstream and the mirth in them faded, smile slowly flattening. "This raft you're picturing- do you think it could carry something a little heavier than crates?"

He followed her gaze, arms crossing over his chest. "Heavier, as in...?"

"A bear, for example."

Hearing no response, Judy looked over to the fox to find him also staring into the crystalline waters, features void of any discernible emotion. A week ago she might have felt the need to repeat herself; now, however, she could just about notice how the fluid motions of his tail had frozen mid-air, or the spark silently dancing behind the green of his eyes.
"… Of course." he finally breathed out, to himself more than anyone. "For how could sheep-how could anyone smuggle an adult bear out of the district, even if subdued…? But if they had these means, the river and their craft, and knew how to use them to get around unnoticed, then-" He paused a second and the spark brightened. "… Of course."

Judy nodded. "So, is it possible?"

He had to clear his throat before answering. "Uh, yes. Supposedly. I mean, it's a wide river, it could hold a larger craft just as well, but… if it were big enough for Gavin, plus all the muscle they'd need just to move him around, then forget carrying it back to the Avenue; they'd be hard-pressed just finding a place to hide it. The guy's big-boned, even among his kind."

"… What if they had one such place, though?"

Nick's ear gave a twitch, having caught the shift in her tone. He recognized that particular hue, that low cadence of tense disquiet mixed with a flinty, almost obdurate resolve, as well as the subject it related to.

His face darkened as he turned to Judy for confirmation, but she was already looking away; away from the little wharf at the edge of Liberty District and the meandering waters grazing its flank, past the curving point where the city's elaborate maze swallowed the grand river whole, obscuring it from their sight. Her gaze soared high, gliding over Zootopia's rich skyline before finally resting among the fleecy clouds languidly drifting across a font of pale blue, as well as the hulking mass of aged marble rising towards them from the ground below.

Judy would never forget the first time she laid eyes on the grand cathedral and the unparalleled wonder that had washed over her at the time. She recalled marveling at the sheer size of it, gaping at the imposing might of its construction, feeling unnerved and diminutive under the massive shadow it cast upon the city. Absurdly huge, she had thought, akin to a tall hill carved into the shape of a church rather than an actual building. Impossibly old, with all the unmistakable signs of antiquity worn into its broad exterior by centuries' worth of winds and rain, as if history itself was staring down at the rabbit through the eyes of the gargoyles hunching over the wide windows of colorful stained glass.

In an age where piety had long since waned, this colossal structure alone was still capable of commanding a form of godly reverence. Judy had experienced this effect in full force when she had first stood before it wide-eyed, instinctually wondering if it were truly possible for hoof and paw to create such staggering magnificence.

But the numbing awe of that day had by now ebbed, giving way to a leaden sense of foreboding. There was something patently ominous in the way the cathedral's form towered in the distance like a giant figure overlooking all of Zootopia, held privy to the city's darkest secrets, yet tauntingly reticent. The two partners fell into a warped silence, letting the sound of the coursing river fill the air between them as they contemplated the enormous church, sizing themselves against the abstract threat emanating from its walls.

"Built right on top of Softstream's bifurcation point," Nick eventually spoke up, his leveled voice drawing the both of them back to reality, "and big enough to hide a thousand rafts and boats." His eyes lowered to the bunny who had turned around to meet them. "How very pat, eh?"

"It's all just speculation, mind you," Judy pointed out somewhat reservedly. Nick had worked out that the bunny was so accustomed to having her thoughts and ideas spurned out of hand that his positive reception would often throw her off. "It's not like we have any solid indications to support it, but-"
"At this point, lieutenant, I trust your gut more than I do my nose." He cut her off with a smirk, tapping at his snout. "And you've seen the little bugger in action!"

The diffidence on her face melted to a coy simper. "What do you propose we do, then?"

"Only one thing to do, really. We've informants to check up on in the Plaza and no other leads to speak of, so…" He trailed off, jutting his chin in the direction of the cathedral.

Judy hummed, nodding her assent. "And I'd also like to have a word with the clergy there while we're at it, see if there's anything I can do to push that bloody permit. The wait's getting ridiculous."

And so the duo had made for the closest route south, only too glad to finally be leaving Liberty District and its suffocating pretentiousness behind them. The dense crowd they joined on the way added to that sentiment, its snafu clamor serving as a blissful reminder that there was still life outside of the swanky coop of marble they had spent the last couple of days in, simple, modest and disorderly as life should be.

Nick especially found that he could breathe a little easier now, even as he had to step around the deadly stomps of mindless hippos, or bumped into oncoming deer who quickly brushed him off in their hurry and moved along. Though perhaps this was precisely what he found so gratifying: here he was just a small fox lost in a sea of boisterous mammals, a minute and unexceptional presence naturally blending in with the rest of the mold. At long last the gypsy was back in his element and he relished every second of it, airily striding south with a confident grin plastered on his mug.

It was not until about halfway through the road that he realized something was off, and even then it took him a while to pin it down. There were no curious questions shot his way, no inquiries on trivia regarding the city or the river or the cathedral; no witty exchanges or snappy teases, no giggles or chortles or soft half-smiles given spontaneously despite oneself. Somehow, under the near deafening hubbub of the crowd they waded through on their way to the Plaza, there seemed to be only a protracted silence.

Somewhere along the road Judy had deflated again, lapsing straight back into that dour, lethargic state she had been living in since their lighthearted excursion to Happytown four days prior. Her ears had gone near-limp, the distinctive spring in her step was notably absent- even her little fluff of a tail looked like it would have hung, had it the anatomy for it.

And Slick Nick, for all his fabled sangfroid, suddenly realized that he could not stomach the sight a second longer.

They kept a steady pace going south, a downcast Judy taking the front with her increasingly incensed fox following close behind, trying to decide how to best handle this new complication she presented him with; and all the while the cathedral's frame loomed large in the sky before them, growing wider still as the two troubled mammals approached its heavy gates, determined to peer into its tight-held secrets.

"So, lieutenant…"

"Mm?"

Judy offered an idle hum in acknowledgment of Nick's words, but not much besides. He had just closed the distance between them and opened with a clear call for her attention, but she barely seemed to notice; her head was kept low, the dark tips of her ears still bobbing up and down above a set of distrait eyes.
Nick's lips pulled back around the edges, and he just then settled on an approach.

"… Gazelle, huh?" he said rather tersely.

A mite blunt, perhaps, but certainly effective. Judy's whole body jerked stiff and the two black spots shot high above her cap, resting on either side of the red feather which adorned it. She blinked at the ground a couple of times, visibly nonplussed, before finally turning to the fox at her side.

"I… H-how did-"

"Four days now you've been sulking nonstop, lieutenant; ever since I found you sitting in a booth across of that damn gazelle, ears to the ground, looking like you've had the soul sucked out of you." he gushed firmly, cutting off her sputter. "Doesn't take a genius."

Surprise lingered on Judy's face for another second; then her ears wilted fully, this time draping over her chest as her head hung anew, and she went back to staring at the road without a word.

Nick let out a deep sigh. "This is all my fault," he declared abjectly, shaking his head. "I had meant to keep you two apart, but it completely slipped my mind that she visits the Drinker at noon. If only I'd been a little faster…"

She scoffed bitterly to that. "What? Were you afraid I'd hear too much, Slick?"

"No, I was afraid you'd overreact to what you'd hear, as you have!" he countered, earning him a second scoff. He regarded her sunken posture, then switched his frown for a mischievous grin. "Oh, come now, lieutenant!" he exclaimed with a playful nudge. "Snap out of it already! I need you back in hopping mood; having to be the upbeat one is positively exhausting!"

But levity fared no better than sternness, it would seem, for Judy remained decidedly glum. This only steeled Nick's resolve; if he could rile her with such ease, then dammit, he could cheer her up as well.

He opened his mouth once more, a fresh quip sitting ready at the edge of his tongue, but it never made it out.

"So you knew?"

His brow rose at the question. "…Yeah? Like I said, lieutenant, you were being fairly obvio-"

"You knew about Gazelle? About her story, about-" She dithered. "… about the tiger?"

"… I did, yes. Everyone knows down south; it's quite the popular tale."

She cast him a sideways glance before looking away again, and Nick could swear her shoulders sagged another inch. Then, to his surprise, they shook by a wan chuckle. "You must have been truly desperate when you turned to me, huh?"

"When I abducted you, you mean," he corrected. "And yes, I rather was; what brought this on, though?"

Judy's tongue gave a loud click. "C'mon, Nick. Don't play fool with me."

"You think I hate rangers? Is that it?"

"I'd be legitimately surprised if you told me you didn't- and I wouldn't believe you for a second."
He snorted. "Well, shucks. You're gonna have to swallow it, Hopps, because I really don't."

Her head finally rose towards him, slowly and arduously, as if struggling to pull the weight of her lifeless ears. She eyed the fox miserably, lips slanting at the corners, and when she spoke her voice came weak and brittle.

"How can you possibly not…?"

An acute discomfort stirred within Nick's chest, and before he realized he was the one averting his eyes, as if flinching away from the bunny's afflicted countenance. He stared at the teeming road ahead for a second, suddenly at a loss over the unwonted sentiment; then instinct kicked in, and he heard himself reply.

"Easy. I'm a reasonable fox with half a working brain, who can tell his allies from his foes- unlike some others I could name." The studied neutrality in his tone was a conditioned reflex he valued greatly, and now it allowed him to swiftly regain his footing; yet still he refused to meet Judy's gaze. "You of all mammals should know that generalizations are for simpletons, lieutenant. Do you think me a simpleton?"

Judy set off to answer but the words broke into an exanimate sigh before they could pass her lips. Nick figured she must have lowered her eyes then, but couldn't know for certain without turning to check. What he did know, however, was that her unmerited despondence was beginning to irk him afresh, which was just as well; irritation he could understand, uncomfortable as it was.

"By Adam's claw, Hopps…!" he groaned. "If I knew this would become such a huge deal, I would have told you the tale myself! Better than to hear it from that stupid dancer, in any case; I bet you she blew things way out of proportion."

Judy didn't doubt that. She was sure Nick would have given her a succinct, dispassionate account of the event if he wished to make light of it, and knowing him, it would have probably worked. But she didn't comment on it at the time; there was another implication in his words that she decided to narrow in on.

"You don't think too highly of her, do you?" she asked, cocking a brow at him.

"Not any more than I do Leo, or most of the other gypsies," he replied with a shrug. "No reason to."

"… Really, now."

He caught her squint with the corner of his eye. "What?"

"Well, that's just… a little surprising."

The fox barked out a laugh. "Hah…! Thought I'd be drooling over those swaying hips like the rest of them, did ya?" he asked in tease, twisting his neck to mirror her anew; he felt much safer doing so with a grin back on his lips.

"No, you goof." The gamesome edge in her rebuke gave her partner hope, but it was short lived. "It's just- there's all of two sodding prey mammals in this entire city who are sympathetic to your kind, and you're at odds with one of them?" Her eyes found his, equal parts wary and searching. "Admittedly, it's kinda weird."

"I'm not at odds with her, lieutenant. I just-"

Her intent look gave him pause. He blew his cheeks and looked away once more, taking a moment
to articulate his response.

A carrier moose rushed by them with an impatient snort, clearly annoyed by the heavy traffic hindering his gallop and the small family of porcupines riding on his back, the couple noisily arguing over the shrill cries of their young pups. The moose crudely shouldered his way through the crowd and disappeared into the forming scrum ahead, where the street abruptly narrowed as it curved into its final turn. St. Marie's Plaza was just around the corner.

"... Look, Hopps." Nick resumed with a straight face and a matching tone, gazing after the long-vanished carrier. "There's two kinds of mammals in this world. Hateful preds, scornful prey; and I don't really care much for either. Gazelle just happens to be a hateful prey, which doesn't really set her apart in my book."

"..."

Judy said nothing at first. Her eyes drifted off the fox and back to the cobbled street, pensively studying the cracks in the old pavework. She mechanically reached for one of her flaccid ears and began to toy with it absentmindedly as she walked, twirling it around her fingers as if it were a braid.

"... Hateful, huh?"

"Well, yeah," Nick said matter-of-factly, checking his pace. They had arrived at the corner and were about to step into the shifting wall of animals standing between them and their destination. "I mean, I get that she came down on you back at the Drinker, didn't she?"

He was busy minding the crowd as he spoke, and so failed to notice the way Judy's fingers tightened around her ear. Her eyes dimmed and she swallowed thickly, buckteeth biting down her lip until it hurt, but the words still somehow managed to escape her.

"... Perhaps she was right to," she mumbled under her breath, and beside her Nick missed a stride.

His reaction was atypically slow. His eyes slowly turned to the bunny, wide under a set of furrowed brows, followed by the rest of his head. His first thought was that he must had misheard, but one look at her dismal features quickly told him otherwise. For a second the glib fox was left staring at her from the side without expression, numb ears to tail and completely speechless, as if unsure how to conduct himself now that Slick had taken an unexpected leave.

Then came a flash of seething rage, so intense that he did not think to wonder from where it could have sprung, and his tongue moved all on its own.

"The hell she was!" he roared, startling her. "What on earth are you on about, you dumb bunny?!"

Whatever answer Judy was planning to give was cut short as a giraffe’s hoof came down from above and landed between the two, forcing them out of each other's sight. Nick snarled in annoyance and craned his neck, but to no avail; the dense cluster of mammals had already swallowed the rabbit whole, and all he could see were the dozens of fur-covered tails and limbs dangling at his height as countless pedestrians over ten times his size vied for passage into the Plaza, growling and whinnying and cursing all throughout. Locating Judy in this mess would be impossible.

With another snarl Nick decided to make for the other side and confront her there, trusting that she'd manage to avoid getting stomped flat along the way; they were both fairly experienced in that regard. His small stature actually proved useful as he moved through the littlest gaps in the crowd, slinking between the legs of horses and lions, past beavers and boars far too plump to follow the same path.

He progressed considerably faster than most, and a few minutes later he felt the squeezing pressure
around him relent. A female rhino in front of him breathed an audible sigh of relief as she escaped the claustrophobic jam and stepped out of view, revealing the sight beyond.

The Central Market was a churning field of animals engaged in a frenzy of activity under the meridian sun. Booths and carts were set up in messy rows all throughout the open square, each of them fully manned and busy, and the air was filled with the clangor of barter, a buzzy cacophony of touting merchants and haggling customers. Roaming among them were numerous street performers, peddlers, magicians and other charlatans of the like, purveyors of spectacle, low miracles and deceit making their own ruckus as they plied their humble trade.

In short, Zootopia's center was, as always, bustling with life; and gazing down on all that life was the grand cathedral, towering rigid and imperial at the Plaza's northern end. There were about twenty main arterial roads pouring into the Plaza from all over the city, and the one Nick and Judy took had led them conveniently close to the cathedral's base, so it wouldn't take them long to reach its open gates. But the fox didn't spare the enormous church a single glance, fervently scanning around him for a feather of red perched atop a light green cap. He spotted it a moment later.

"Ah, there you are!" Judy exclaimed as he approached her, running a paw over her ruffled vest. "Let's get going. There's no telling how long it will take with the clergy, and I doubt they'd take kindly to you anyway, so I'm thinking we should split up. You go find our informants- do you remember where their laboratory was supposed to be?"

After all the time she'd spent mired in gloom, this abrupt shift in attitude was far too conspicuous. Nick assumed it was his outburst that had jolted her back to her senses, and now she thought to change the subject. But he wouldn't let her.

"Hold on a fucking minute!" he growled, pushing into her face. "We're not just moving past that one, Hopps! What did you mean?"

Judy dropped the act with a sigh. She stepped past the fox and motioned him to follow, moving to trace the edge of the Plaza's square so as to avoid the worst of the traffic. "Nick, now's not really a good time, okay…? We have work to do."

"It is the perfect time, actually!" he gave back, rushing after the bunny to keep himself in her sights. "You can't just drop this bullshit on me and expect me to let it slide! You're out here busting your tail on the daily trying to find her nutty friend's husband, so tell me, how exactly she was 'right to', Hopps?!"

Judy's expression instantly hardened. "Don't call her that!" she chided, remembering Mary Otterton and her own heartrending tragedy. This only made her sadder. "And Gazelle did thank me, if you must know."

"Did she, now…! What a magnanimous soul!" Nick sneered. "And was that before or after she told you off?"

"No, I- she didn't... look, what's the big deal, anyway?" she asked defensively, shifting under his glare. "Why are you so mad?"

He blinked. "I- because it's stupid, that's why!" His bellow drew a few eyes on them, but he paid no mind. "It's moronic...! And I can understand moronic from illiterate Zootopian gypsies or stuck-up slum dancers, but I've come to expect better of my partner!"

For all his dander, Nick was inwardly glad for the bunny's response, the most animated one he had gotten from her thus far. *Hell, I should have just yelled at her from the beginning.*
"I'm not so sure it's that moronic..." Judy said broodingly, looking away.

"And that, too, is in itself moronic."

She snorted. "It's not like you to be so absolute, Nick."

"I am absolute because I know I'm right."

Judy cast her eyes to the side, at the long line of technicians' laboratories framing the Plaza's square. They were moving fast towards the cathedral now and every carpenter, chandler and glassmaker they passed could be the one employing the predators they had enlisted all those days ago in the Drinker, but she didn't bother to point it out; Nick was clearly intent on having this conversation there and then, and it would just come off as her prevaricating again.

"I'm not attacking you here, lieutenant," the fox continued when she failed to answer. "I'm just trying to wrap my head around your reasoning, but it's proving a real struggle. So please, just help me out, yeah? Walk me through it.

"I mean- I knew Gazelle's story would get you down, because... well, because that's just how you are. I figured you'd get sad and mopey -angry, maybe- but this? Getting so depressed over a decade-old tale that you'd end up somehow blaming yourself...?" He shook his head. "Emotional as your kind may be, lieutenant, this just doesn't make sense to me."

He was speaking different now. His tone was measured with that soft, comforting tinge it bore whenever he put the moves on someone, yet firm and attentive in a disconcertingly compelling way, and she could tell his eyes would be the same if she only turned to meet them. After a long road full of highs and lows, Nick had finally hit his stride.

The bunny let out an indignant sigh. "You don't get it."

"No, I really don't. See, we've been working this case together for a solid week now, and the worst I've seen you do was knock the lights out of a thieving lama and scare a conniving elephant shitless! Both had it coming, and neither was a predator! So explain to me again, how exactly does the murder of some random tiger years ago weigh on your conscience, Hopps?"

"It doesn't," she said unconvincingly, frowning at her feet. "It just... got me thinking, is all."

She could feel Nick's eyes still piercing the side of her skull. It was moment before he spoke again.

"... Remember what you told Lionfart back in the slums? It'd be wrong to lump you in together with the locals."

"And remember what he told me?" she countered with sudden force, taking him aback.

"Lieutenant."

"Yes, Nick. You're right. I'm not like that," Judy went on, cutting him off. "I've never discriminated against predators, never used my position to hurt them. I didn't get to, because-" She faltered. "... because my kin has won their war already."

Nick screwed up his face. "This is obtuse, lieutenant," he remarked pointedly. "You yourself have nothing to answer for."

Judy stirred a moment as if to respond but her mouth remained shut, eyes glued to the cathedral ahead. They had been walking under its massive shade for some time now and were about to reach
the steps, at the top of which she could spot a slew of mammals garbed in darkish brown cloaks congregating about the entrance, busily scurrying to and fro; lowly members of the clergy, most of them notably wooly under their pulled cowls.

Nick followed her gaze and his frown deepened. There truly was work to be done, but he decided he wouldn't let her leave without getting one last word in.

"There are assholes everywhere, lieutenant," he began solemnly. "Among rangers and gypsies alike; but there are also decent mammals to be found in both fronts. Case in point-" He began to gesture between the two of them, bunny and fox, but held his paw as it circled back towards him. He grinned. "Well, I suppose 'slightly less vicious than average' would befit me more... but you? You are a genuinely good mammal, Hopps," he added, grin forming into a simple, toothless smile. "Don't let others' misdoings get you down."

It was this rare smile that drew Judy's eyes back to him. She scanned his face in silence for a time, and Nick thought she would stay quiet like that until they separated. Instead, she surprised him yet again with a smile of her own.

"Heh...! You're giving yourself too much credit, foxie."

He shot her a dubious look. "Myself? How so?"

"You may be a felon down to the bone, Wilde," she replied knowingly, "but you have integrity. The way few mammals have it, be it predator or prey- and this comes from the bunny you nearly tricked into an early grave!"

"... Integrity."

he mocked, testing the word against his tongue. "Sounds alien to my ears!"

"Shame. It really does fit you well. Oddly well."

Nick looked closely at her unflinching visage and his smile began to waver. "... You're not joking?"

He looked every bit as flummoxed as he sounded. That alone would have been enough to chirk her up. "What made you think I was?"

Her question was met with raised brows and a flat stare. "Let's see... chomper," he began, counting down fingers. "Swindler. Gypsy. Smuggler."

"All discrediting traits, yes; just as being a ranger is considered reputable."

Nick's lips parted as if by habit, but this he had no answer to.

"If the shape of your teeth determined your morality, the world would be a much simpler place, Nick," Judy went on somberly, facing away. "Same for abiding the law, to an extent- if even its enforcers can be such monsters..."

She allowed her voice to trail off. The fox was alarmed to see her slipping back into the sullens, but before he could say anything to try and prevent it, a small hooded figure bumped into him from behind. It was a female marmot dressed in the clergy's plain cloak, clearly in a hurry as she didn't so much as jib for a quick apology; she just made up the cathedral's worn steps as fast as her short legs would allow. These steps were as ancient as the church itself and were originally built in one moderate size to accommodate the less diverse citizens of that time, but progress had since caught up; now there were over ten sets of different sized steps carved contiguously across their width, ranging from mouse-sized at one end to elephant-sized at the other.
The duo came to a stop at the set the marmot had used, one of the smaller ones, which would also serve a bunny's legs best.

"And all that somehow makes me a good guy, then? A proper chomper saint?" Nick asked as they stood gazing up the long flight of stairs, voice dipped in sarcasm. He was out of time, and a jape was about the best he could manage.

Luckily, it worked. Judy's face brightened up again, and he wondered if his words had finally gotten through to her. "St. Slick the Righteous," she said orotundly, tossing him a sidelong smirk. "Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Hmph! Trying to besmirch my reputation, are we?"

Nick's gripe was undercut by the mirthful glint in his eyes. To his delight, Judy loosed a full, hearty laugh. "Fine, fine- we can forget I ever said anything if it bothers you that much. Just know that you ain't fooling this rabbit, bucko!"

She beamed at him and shuffled closer, playfully striking his chest with the back of her paw. "You can keep flashing those grins and showing off those fancy knife tricks all you want; you're still a softie through and through!"

He guffawed. "Said the prude miss 'justice' herself!"

"Oh, I'm not a softie, Nick." Judy climbed up the first couple of steps, and for a moment her face was lost to view. "I'm… just an idiot."

Nick's ear gave a twitch. "Huh?"

She paused and turned around, mirroring him with that same unstrained smile. "Alright, now… back to work!" she declared, as if the brief flatness in her tone was never there. "You can find the laboratory on your own, right?"

"... Sure." Nick distantly recalled her forbidding him from ever leaving her sight while in the city, but the memory was quickly cast aside. It felt forever ago to the both of them. "I'll go talk to our guys, you see to your permit, and we'll meet back here when we're both done."

"Sounds like a plan!"

And with those final words of valediction, Judy bid him farewell and began ascending towards the entrance on bouncy feet, overtly enlivened by their jovial exchange.

Nick had shown her a pleased smile before she turned away, but it waned as soon as she wasn't looking. The gypsy's face was an inscrutable mask as he stared at his partner's back, entirely blank save for the faint ripple forming between his brows. Even that was gone a second later when he opened his mouth again, calling out to her one last time.

"And Hopps?"

She jibed and glanced over her shoulder. "Mm?"

Their eyes locked.

"Seriously… drop the frown. It's a jarring look on you."

Judy simply chuckled and waved him away before proceeding up the marble steps, her brisk gait and
perky ears meant to allay her partner's worry, to assure him that he had helped assuage this guilt which he could not understand; because for all his goodwill, he truly didn't get it.

He couldn't grasp what this meant for her, neither the extent of her idiocy nor what she actually had to answer for. That was for her alone to take stock of as she steadily climbed towards the colossal wooden gates, ready to cross into the last standing bastion of piousness and finally confront the notoriously benevolent creatures lurking behind its walls.

Naturally, the grand cathedral was not built in a single day.

It had started out as a small oaken chapel modestly nestled beside the coursing river, raised at a time when Zootopia was still little more than an exiguous, freshly founded village. There were no castles or palaces back then, no sprawling plazas at its center or great thick walls embracing it on all sides; just a motley ensemble of wary and suspicious mammals, separated by species, yet brought together by a shared hope for security in each other's company.

But there was one mammal among those early Zootopians that was neither suspicious nor wary. The elk nun who would eventually come to be revered as the benign St. Marie, hailed as the progenitor of Animalia's most fundamental principles, took it upon herself to reconcile the many clashing religions of each species which were the cause of much strife among the village folk. She and her handful of followers built the chapel to house every deity without distinction, serving as a temple where Zootopians could gather and practice their disparate faiths together in peace, none held to higher esteem than the other. The Zootopian dream of harmonious unity was born among shabby carts and journey-worn tents, there at the banks of Sofstream that the founding mammals chose to make their home; and St. Marie's chapel was where it first became a reality.

A stone church was erected around the chapel in Marie's honor shortly after her passing, built bigger and stronger to last the test of time. The church would see numerous expansions over the years as new species arrived in Zootopia, bringing along their beliefs and deities to be represented in the city's temple, gradually shaping it into a veritable monument to the cultural diversity that their budding nation would come to exemplify.

Construction of the cathedral's finalized form was well underway by the time Zootopian armies first marched against Happytown, and a succession of pious monarchs would see it to completion over the following century, aided in part by the predatory slave workforce their many conquests had acquired them. Some have put forth that it was built in such gigantic proportions in an act of forethought, meant to account for the additional species the ever growing Animalia would encounter in the future, but a more likely explanation is that it was sanctioned at the height of Zootopia's might, when rulers and commoners alike were marked by an unchecked propensity for excessive grandeur. The city itself was thriving like none before it and its prosperity reflected on the country that was steadily taking form around it, so it felt only appropriate that its cathedral should be equally as exceptional.

Judy didn't need to refer to Bogo's scrolls for any of that information. The grand cathedral was Animalia's prized jewel, and every kit across the land knew its story by heart. It was a fascinating tale after all, one as much of noble ideals as of supercilious arrogance- though the latter was rarely ever acknowledged by the locals, most of whom thought it unfit to tarnish their cherished temple with such admissions. In any case, the sense of awe that overcame the ranger as she finally entered through its lofty threshold was wholly genuine.

She had a job to do, though, so presently it was shaken off; the times called for lieutenant Hopps' professional efficiency, not the gaping wonder of a clueless country doe. She straightened her back and blinked her eyes into focus, ears twisting sharply atop her head as she took in her new
The first thing she noted was that the interior was not comprised of a single enormous space as she would have initially guessed, but was instead divided into a number of separate areas. The one she found herself in after walking through the gates was still ludicrously massive by bunny standards, of course; an oblong rectangular room lined with thick pillars of marble on each side, roughly twice the size of the elephant inn she and Nick had stormed earlier that day. Yet in the scale of the entire building it would be considered little more than a short entryway. The thought alone was mind-numbing.

Facing her was an open arch built into the wall opposite of the gates, only slightly smaller than the main entrance, presumably leading to the innermost areas of the cathedral. Heavy vapors of incense wafted out from the tall opening, but Judy couldn't see much of the area beyond due to a dazzling light that made everything past the arch glow a pure, brilliant white. The bunny had spent a good part of each day in Zootopia glaring at the cathedral from afar and knew for a fact that its uppermost floors were walled almost entirely by glassed windows, so she quickly put together that this mirage must have been conjured by the overlapping sunbeams showering down on the arch from all directions.

The hall she was currently standing in had no windows of its own, but at that time of day the sun pouring in from the wide open gates was more than enough to illuminate its length. It shone upon a stream of hooded figures moving between the gates and the arch in an orderly fashion, filling the air with the echo of their combined footfalls. Most were clad in the typical darkish brown cloak of the common clergy, but Judy spotted a numbered few dressed in lighter shades, each indicative of their rank: there were light browns and yellows for deacons and chaplains respectively, purples and lilacs for the rectors and parsons, and even a portly ibex with the creamy robes of an archdeacon languidly swanning towards the exit with a saintly bearing, followed closely by half a score of young disciples.

Judy followed the ibex's entourage with her eyes as they made their way to the exit, examining them with a leery frown. The disciples, much like the majority of the hooded animals traversing the room, all appeared to be sheep. By that point she had more or less visited every corner of the city at least once, but nowhere else had she encountered their kind in such overwhelming numbers. The cathedral was as much wool as it was marble.

Judy's paws balled into fists as she watched the group step through the open gates and vanish into the sunlight. Then she went back to quietly observing their hundreds of confreres still moving about the entryway with a vigilant eye, outwardly calm but on the highest alert.

That said, the ones actually sworn to the cloth, irrespective of rank, collectively made up only about a third of the total people in the room. There were a fair few visitors sprinkled amongst them, of course, staid citizens looking to offer their monthly tithe or engage in prayer to a figure of their choosing, but most of the mammals in common attire appeared to be cathedral workers.

Judy was not clear on the current number of active clergy members or their exact duties. She knew they were responsible for conducting various seasonal rites and guiding citizens in their prayer when called upon, but these were all considered purely ceremonial. Nowadays the clergy fashioned themselves as public servants first and foremost, a secular order of scholarly mammals in service to Zootopia and faithful keepers of its long tradition. They were in charge of the cathedral's library, where they had been dutifully documenting Animalia's history since the time of its founding, were heavily involved in numerous aspects of the city's social life, and many of their highest ranking members held considerable sway over the nation's political matters.

But of course, efficient management of such a large and influential organization also entailed some
degree of dull, menial work- which was where the cathedral workers came in. These were common
citizens employed under the clergy to deal with all the tedium of everyday practicalities, charged with
various errands ranging from accounting and guarding duties to cleaning and even carrier services for
some of the higher ranking clerics.

Evidently, admitting visitors and providing directions were also among the workers' appointed
chores, for there were a dozen of them positioned along the right side of the entryway past the row of
pillars, seated in neat cubicles carved inside the thick wall, with glossy-clean wooden counters
standing between them and visitors lining to address them. The mammals occupying these booths
were all of the smaller varieties, and the reason was fairly obvious: carving an alcove big enough to
fit an elephant would potentially compromise the wall's stability, which was a risk best avoided.
Besides, there was nothing keeping these larger animals from standing in line with the other citizens,
and a hare or an antelope could answer their questions just as well.

This layout was starkly reminiscent of a ranger headquarters' common room, with the workers
operating the booths acting as the clergy's equivalent to coordinators. As such, Judy knew exactly
where to begin.

She approached one of the booths and stood in line for a reasonable ten minutes before she stood
face to face with the worker behind the counter, a characteristically tall male goat with long, spindly
limbs and, curiously, a bandaged snout. Ignoring his odd appearance, the bunny walked up to him
with a polite smile and a terse greeting, then went on to explain her situation and ask what the
procedure would be to have her application for a permit looked into and hopefully expedited.

Judy made a point of being pleasant, firm and to the point while addressing the ungulate, but her
civility was met with a protracted, ill-mannered stare. After leaving the Burrows she had grown used
to always being the bunny in the room no one could help but at least glance at, and her ranger getup
certainly didn't help, but most had the basic courtesy to at least try and conceal their bewilderment
when spoken to. This goat, on the other paw, had kept goggling at her in the rudest manner as if he
were looking at a ghost, to the point that it made her uncomfortable. The guy was a total lout.

Eventually, and after far too long an awkward silence, he stammered out in a nasally voice that he
would have to take this up with his higher ups and asked the ranger to stand aside and wait. He
called over one of his nearby coworkers, a brown-furred hare with the speedy build of a messenger,
and whispered curtly into his ear before sending him off.

Half an hour later the messenger had yet to return and Judy was left leaning against one of the room's
massive pillars with arms crossed over her chest, foot tapping irately against the floor as she tried to
ignore the prickling sensation of the goat's eyes still locked on her from behind his counter.

Her own eyes drifted to the endless stream of cloaked figures crossing the entryway and there they
stayed, listlessly observing them to pass the time. The bunny entertained herself by imagining each of
these priestly figures as her villain, the diabolical mastermind behind all the abductions that have
been troubling her for the better part of the past week- and, hopefully, the crop thefts she was
supposed to be looking into as well.

Then her mind veered in another direction, and the tapping of her foot gradually slowed to a halt.

While most of them were indeed sheep, they were by no means the only species to wear the cloth.
Their ranks were filled with animals big and small, goats and hares and alpacas and all sorts of larger
rodents scurrying about, and coupled with their many workers they comprised a sight every bit as
diverse as the crowd filling up the Central Market- save only for the fact that there was noticeably not
a single pointy tooth to be seen amongst them. This was hardly surprising, of course, but that was just it: it was hardly surprising.
Judy found herself wondering about the last time a predator had set foot inside this glorious vestibule. Had it been the slave who placed the final slab of marble into the floor back in the days of its construction, right before they were sent back to Happytown and the underground dungeons that would later come to house the infamous Chomper Garden…? Or perhaps it was a revolutionary under Adam the Kingsbane who took the chance to explore the magnificent wonder of a building while their comrades sacked the palace and put the old monarchy to the sword.

As she tried to picture the ragtag denizens of Happytown mingling with the clergy and the workers, her thoughts began to take on a specific pattern, and before long it was foxes, tigers and gazelles that occupied her reveries.

The clergy's robes would fit Gazelle like a glove, she reckoned. The dancer's plain clothes back in the Drinker had the same humble quality to them, and she would have certainly looked the part with her serene, unassuming comportment. Judy decided that the creamy robes of the ibex from earlier would suit her best, and in that same moment the image took a clear form in her mind.

Nick was trickier, mainly because he had to be in green, similar to the roughspun tunics he always wore, else the robes wouldn't match his eyes. Still, St. Slick the Righteous eventually appeared before her in those robes of green tailored specifically for him, and the more virtuous an expression she tried to give him, the more the vulpine looked like he was up to no good. It almost made her smile.

All her contemplations gradually dissolved into a vision of those two gypsies, the fox and the gazelle, standing side by side despite the mutual disfavor they had both expressed. Gazelle, wearing that motherly smile of hers, as warm and accepting as Judy remembered it under the obdurate harshness hidden beneath her gentle features; and Nick with that characteristically suave and mellow bearing, his elusive integrity just barely showing past the playful mischief of that familiar smirk.

These phantoms knew her better than their real counterparts ever would. Their gaze pierced right through the feather and the uniform and the big, violet eyes that so often gave pause, all the way to the furthest recesses of her heart; and there they saw her for who she truly was, with her every thought and sentiment, all her strengths and her failings, her grandest accomplishments and deepest shames alike laid bare before their still gaze.

And the doe wondered to herself: what sort of judgement would each of these unlikely saints pass upon her if she were to make them speak…?

"U-um… Excuse me…"

Judy's ears shot up to the shrill, feminine voice that suddenly came from behind her, breaking her out of her trance. She turned around with a start, like someone abruptly woken from an especially vivid dream, and faced the mammal to whom it belonged.

Her nose gave a single, hard twitch.

Wooly.

It was a short, wooly ewe dressed in a lowly nun's black habit, the puffy white of her fleece clashing strongly with the color of her raiment. She was looking at her with an expression of dim and mild agreeableness, wearing a tentative smile that betrayed an incredibly reserved disposition, further accentuated by the pair of dainty hooves nervously wringing together over her chest.

The ewe's smile wavered as she noticed the alarm on Judy's face, mistaking it for plain surprise. It looked like she had struggled just to work up the courage and approach the ranger, and now the
latter's reaction had left her even more flustered.

"Ah...! I'm sorry, I- I didn't mean to sneak up on you!"

It took the bunny a second to gather her wits. "Oh no, not at all!" she exclaimed, smiling blithely at the skittish-looking nun. There were more sheep in the place than Judy cared to count, and she couldn't indiscriminately suspect every single one of them. Not openly, at least. "I was just a bit out of it for a second there, and you took me by surprise. No need to apologize."

"Ah, well... good! I'm glad."

The ewe nodded contently and didn't add anything else, allowing for a brief silence to settle between them. Then she noticed Judy's ears tilting in question above a polite stare, and it struck her that she was the one who had accosted the bunny and had yet to explain her business.

"Oh! Oh right, um- hah!" She gave an embarrassed chuckle and paused to clear her throat. Her small hooves were rubbing against each other so fast now that Judy expected them to start smoking at any moment. "I was- I just saw you standing here all by yourself, and... well, do you need... I mean, is there anything I could help you with?" she asked finally, mashing words all the way through.

Judy shook her head. "Thank you, Sister, but I don't believe you can. I already spoke to one of your workers and was told to wait, so..." She shrugged, forcing a weary smile. "Here I am. Waiting."

She glanced over to the goat as she spoke and caught him staring again, much to her vexation; even the civilians he was supposed to be attending to seemed fed up by this point, grumbling their irritation over the inexcusably distracted ungulate sitting behind the counter. Judy would expect him to have collected himself somewhat by then, but on the contrary, he looked every bit as flabbergasted as when he had first caught her sight, if not more so. Weird.

The nun followed her gaze past the line of disgruntled mammals and immediately threw her head back in apprehension. "Oh... Rufus, huh?" she said with an awkward chuckle. "Yes, he can be a tad, um... tactless, at times, but his heart's in the right place. I pray he didn't do anything to offend you?"

For a second Judy was tempted to answer truthfully, but she resisted the urge. She never would have made it into her order had she repined at every little discourtesy she was subjected to, after all; and God knew these had never been in short supply.

"No, no... nothing out of the ordinary."

The bunny pursed her lips, berating herself. She wished that had come out more nonchalant and less resigned.

The ewe must have picked up on it as well. "You, uh... you must get a lot of comments, huh?" she remarked cautiously, measuring her with sympathetic eyes.

The depleted sigh she got in response was an answer in itself.

Another quivery smile from the ewe. "Well, it's just... our workers here aren't really accustomed to... um..."

"... Bunnies?" Judy suggested evenly, cocking a brow.

"Rangers...! See, uh- not many rangers come by here, ma'am; or at least not as rangers. You know, in uniform and all."

"M-hmm... and I suppose bunny rangers are rarer still, eh?"

The ewe gulped, shuffling in place. "W-well..."

Judy spared her with a soft laugh, head hanging in apology. Her conversations lately comprised mainly of pointed japes and witty rejoinders, and the habit wasn't easy to shake off on the spot; but this poor nun had neither Slick's glibness nor his flippant attitude, so she had no business torturing her like this.

"Relax, Sister," she chuckled. "There's no problem, honestly. It's only natural; you can't put a feathered cap on a bunny and expect people not to stare!"

The ewe giggled along, visibly relieved with this show of good humor. "That goes for me too, I suppose," she said. "Except I took it a step further and actually walked up to you- not to mention startling you..." she added, shaking her head ruefully. "I'm not much good at this, I'm afraid..."

"Nonsense! You were just trying to be helpful, Sister- and I assure you, it is much appreciated."

The ewe's hooves promptly resumed their anxious wringing. "That's... not entirely true."

Judy blinked at her. "It isn't?"

"No, see... I was just-" She paused and cleared her throat to preempt another stammering fit. "I was... curious, in all honesty. I mean..." She paused again, eyeing the bunny with a hesitant frown. "It is true, then...? You really are a ranger- and a lieutenant, no less...?"

Judy didn't have the heart to point out how her incredulity could be taken as offensive, not even as a joke. She was perhaps the most high-strung person the ranger had ever met, and almost annoyingly polite; hearing that would probably cause the ewe a nervous breakdown.

"That, I am," is what the bunny replied instead. "Anointed lieutenant of the Burrows branch, as you could surely tell."

"... That's amazing."

The uncut admiration in her tone was disarming. Judy couldn't help a modest smile. "You're too kind, Sister."

"No, truly! For a mammal as small as we, to succeed at such a dangerous vocation..." She trailed off and shook her head, as if at a loss for words. "You are beyond amazing, ma'am."

Judy found that to be a curious statement, however flattering; you would not often hear a sheep comparing sizes with a bunny. This led her to consider the nun's appearance a bit more closely.

To call her small would be an understatement; by her species' standards she was downright elfin, not an inch taller than the average rabbit and with a frail, delicate build that had her swimming inside her loose-fitting robes. Judy wondered if she belonged to some sort of pygmy breed, but if so, there couldn't be many of her kind still around; some of her scrappiest siblings back home could have wrestled the nun down with little to no effort.

Conversely, her eyes were strikingly large given her small stature. Their irises were of the palest green, many shades lighter than Nick's, and together with the shaky, inhibited smile that constantly occupied her lips, they seemed to take up most of her wool-framed visage.

The fleece at the top of her head alone was untrimmed, left to grow into a clean, bouffant mass of
wool that must have been the ewe's attempt at a hairstyle- and, in all likelihood, an effort to compensate for some of her missing height. It worked for her surprisingly well, Judy thought, albeit in an endearingly comical manner that was surely inadvertent: the small lump of wool would bobble endlessly to the myriads jerky motions her head made as she talked, gesturing with her entire body like she just couldn't keep still. She was nothing if not a nervous speaker.

That same quality was present in the cadence of her voice. It was a brittle and unstable sound constantly alternating between volumes at bursts, and would often crack into curt, high-pitched bleats in the middle of a sentence, which she instinctively tried to cover with short fits of embarrassed giggling. Her speech alone was enough to bring to mind a jittery mess of a mammal, and at the same time bring the listener a syrupy smile just imagining what its rambling owner would look like; and sure enough, the image that would pop into their head would be that of a clumsy, peaceable and terribly self-conscious pushover, a tiny bundle of sweetness and timidity wrapped in puffy wool and plain black cloth.

Annoyingly enough, the first word to cross Judy's mind was "cute".

"And you as well, Sister," she told the ewe with a slight bow of the head. "I've met my fair share of miscreants and troublemakers, so I can appreciate a proper, kindly mammal such as you. All of you, actually," she added, gesturing around to the stream of hooded figures traversing the vestibule. "Just as my order's ordinance is to safeguard our community, yours is to guide and keep it orderly and functional. Each indispensable in its own right, wouldn't you say?"

It seemed like the right thing to say to a clergywoman.

"Yes, indeed! To each their duty."

"Precisely."

"And, um… speaking of duties, lieutenant ma'am, I… would it be too out of line for me to wonder what yours here is? I mean, if- if you're from the Burrows branch, as you say, then how come you're here in the capital? Were you dispatched to assist the local forces, or something of the like?"

Again, Judy had to consider her words carefully. What could she afford to be openly discussing about her investigation in this place thronged with the animals she so strongly suspected?

For the time being, she chose to chuckle at the ewe's once again hesitant tone, and the slight wobble of her hair-fleece. "Now, now, Sister! I told you there's no need to be this cautious with me. We of the feather aren't soldiers- only the next worst thing." She chuckled again to let her know that last part was a joke. "As for my mission… I arrived in Zootopia roughly ten days ago, in pursuit of a criminal from my hometown. Been searching for him throughout the city ever since, to very little success, and now I was hoping for a permit to scour the cathedral grounds as well. He's believed to be a rather well-connected crop thief, a smuggler-" she dithered a second, then added: "… and a ram, as it happens."

No sense hiding that much, she thought. That'd be more a sign of suspicion than anything.

"Oh…!" Surprise showed on the nun's face, and for a moment she began nodding rapidly. Then the full implication sank in, and for the first time her expression darkened. Her hooves found one another and once again commenced their wringing, more awkward now than ever. "… Oh.

"So, erm… suppose this is the reason for your visit then, ma'am…?" she asked warily. "You think this- this ram of yours may have taken refuge here, among the clerics?"
"Honestly…? No, I do not." Judy shook her head in despondence. "Like I said, my progress here-well, it hasn't really been what I hoped for. To be frank, it's exactly null," she admitted with a wan chuckle. "I've looked literally everywhere else, all the way from Liberty down to the Zone, and not a single whiff of my perpetrator. I'm at a bit of a loss at this point, so it's all I can do to just… look." She shrugged. "Might be he's snuck in and mingled with the rest of your kind here; might be he hasn't. But seeing as I have no leads to follow anyway, I thought I might as well. Plus, I hadn't had a chance to visit the cathedral yet, so…"

She gave the ewe a thin smile of embarrassment. "I know I'm not sounding like the most capable investigator right now, but believe me, Sister, I regret that more than anyone."

The ewe waved a hoof at that. "Oh, please, dear; I'm the last mammal you should be apologizing to!" She gave a little wince at this unmindful slip of familiarity, but Judy didn't mind; the nun might have been a decade or so older than her, for all her youthful vivacity, and the bunny wished nothing more at the time than to have her finally relax around her.

"Why's that, Sister?"

She began guiltily toeing the ground. "Well, I… I'm currently shirking some duties of my own, I'm ashamed to admit."

Judy threw an ear to the side. "You… are?"

"Yes, see… I've actually been away from the capital until recently, and… suffice to say, work has piled up a bit in my absence." She loosed another one of her curt, tittery bleats. "These last few days have been especially taxing, and I felt like I needed a small break."

The bunny made a neutral sound, ear still atilt.

"Say, ma'am," the ewe went on, "while I'm here, would you like me to show you around a bit, perhaps? I- I was thinking I'd take a walk to unwind anyways, until someone sends for me; and the place is just so gosh darn big, you'd do well to have a guide with you if you plan to go sightseeing."

Judy's instincts stirred at the invitation from a sheep, no matter how sweet-looking they might be. She had to keep her eyes from narrowing.

"I appreciate the offer, Sister, but I'm afraid I cannot," she replied, perhaps a bit more formally than intended. "I did come here for work, after all, and I was told to wait. I couldn't just up and leave like that, you understand." The ewe hummed, nodding as if to acknowledge Judy's concerns, and then promptly flashed the bunny one more bright, buoyant smile. "Ah, yes. Right. Well then, lieutenant ma'am, let me see if I can take care of that for you!"

And with that she suddenly turned tail and began walking away from the pillar and towards the lined mammals on short, rapid strides before Judy could react, making straight for the goat with the bandaged snout. Surprised, the ranger was left blinking after her small, scuttling form for a short time before reluctantly stepping after her, wondering what she could have in mind.

For a nun was hardly in a position to push bureaucratic procedures such as the issuing of ranger permits. They just didn't hold that kind of authority- or any kind of authority, really. Their ranks were comprised of volunteers from the citizenry, females who were either too zealously pious or saw little prospect for themselves in the world outside the cathedral and thus opted to dedicate their lives to the cloth, if only to make them a bit easier. Only the most capable few among them were actually literate.
Their order was initially established in honor of St. Marie, who had herself operated as a nun back in her day, but in modern times it offered very few chances for personal advancement and its members, such as they were, were rarely deserving of them in the first place. A nun did outrank a simple cathedral worker, but just barely.

Belatedly Judy thought to call after the kindly nun and stop her before she got herself into trouble on her account, but she was too late; the ewe was already addressing the goat behind the counter in her typical, chirrupy tone.

And their exchange went nothing like Judy would have expected.

"Greetings, Rufus dear!" she began, cheerful as a mammal could be. "I was just speaking with the lieutenant here, and she informed me of her situation. I understand there's a pending application for a search permit, yes…? Well, I happen to be free at the moment, and I was thinking I'd use the time to show the lieutenant around, so why don't you leave this whole permit business to me, hmm? No need to bother yourself with that on such a busy day." She cocked her head over to the line behind her as she spoke, failing to stress how the goat was to blame for its ever growing length.

Rufus opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again and released a series of throaty sputters, eyes rapidly moving between the nun and the approaching ranger with a patent sense of unease. Eventually he gulped and gathered himself enough to actually respond.

"But- but madam, I-I thought I'd…" His eyes flickered towards Judy, then back to the ewe in an instant. "I've actually sent for Samuel to- to come handle this-"

"Samuel…!" the ewe exclaimed. "Why, don't be silly now, dear…! Samuel's sure to be up to his neck in work at this hour! No wonder the poor thing's been kept waiting here so long…!" She took a step forward and reached up to the counter to give Rufus's hoof a reassuring pat. "You send word to him that he won't be needed. I'll take care of this, and don't you worry."

"But- but madam, she's…" Rufus shook his horned head desperately, as if searching for the right words to voice his protest. "She's just a simple lieutenant, madam…! I mean-I mean, surely you oughtn't-"

"Mind your manners now, dear!" The nun cut him off in tempered reproach, her tone the closest it could possibly get to being stern; and even then she couldn't help a kind of awkward, bleatish giggle. "I'm sure she's a stellar officer in her own right. In fact, did you know she reached the city all the way from the Burrows giving chase to a single criminal…? Such tenacity would serve us all well, I'd say; me, certainly!"

She turned around to flash Judy a quick smile, but all the latter could do was stare back at her with a deep frown, perplexed to no end. The goat's manner of address was far more respectful than what a nun was normally due, she thought, as was his obvious consternation at her offer to show the ranger around. Judy couldn't make heads or tails of it; was there perhaps some history at play between these two…?

"And- I… uh, what if- well, what if anyone comes looking for you, madam?" Rufus sighed out with the air of someone making their last, hopeless stand.

"Oh, just ask them to wait here with you, dear. We're just going for a quick stroll around the inner sanctums and then we'll be straight back. We won't be long, I assure you."

Rufus glanced stiffly between the two small females, his bandaged face wrought with an inexplicable worry, as if afraid something bad was about to happen for which he could be held responsible, but at
the same time lacked any power to oppose it. He blinked at them several times, swallowed hard, drew one final deep sigh and then slowly, tentatively, helplessly, he finally nodded his assent.

"I... yes. Very well, madam. As you wish."

"Splendid!" Satisfied, the ewe brought her hooves together and turned around, facing the baffled rabbit at her heel. "Well then, ma'am- shall we?"

And with that she scuttled on past Judy, motioning the latter to walk beside her as she made for the radiant arch leading into the deeper areas of the cathedral. But Judy, still struggling to make sense of it all, didn't move after her right away, and when she did follow, her narrowed gaze never left the nun's back. There were so many questions sitting at the edge of her tongue, but she felt that she was missing something very basic, something obvious and important that everyone but herself was privy to. So before asking, she tried to think.

Madam, the goat had called her, as was customary for female dignitaries of the clergy- but certainly not nuns. And besides him and his unjustifiable deference, there were also the civilians at his booth- hadn't the ewe cut their line to speak with him...? Yet Judy's able ears had caught no complaints from them; on the contrary, their low grumbling had subsided as soon as they approached- as soon as the ewe approached. They had all fallen silent the second they caught her sight, save for a few hushed gasps and some whispers Judy had paid no mind to; whispers colored with excitement, she now realized, sharp murmurs of spontaneous wonderment.

Of admiration.

Judy finally opened her mouth to address these observations, but just as she did there came another; and it was by far the most stunning one of all, and at the same time the most elucidative.

For as the ewe led the way towards the arch they had ended up closer to the center of the hall, mingling with the many robed figures walking up and down its length. All around them now were numerous priests and clerics, ministers of all species and ranks, the same ones that Judy had been observing since she had first entered through the cathedral's gates; and each of them, without fault, would nod or bow or tilt their head towards the little ewe as they crossed paths with her. More gasps escaped the lowly brown-robés, while the brighter ones would abandon their air of serene detachment to offer her an appreciative smile.

And all of these the ewe acknowledged with a simple, unhesitant nod, as casual as a ranger chief chancing upon their off-duty officers on a busy street.

Judy froze.

A flash of understanding, a sudden clarity that blew every question away, leaving behind a certainty as profound as her prior puzzlement, though one she could not quite explain. She just instantly knew that she was right; and at the same time, she could hardly well believe it.

The ewe, who had been jabbering on about who-knows-what, took a few seconds to realize that the bunny was no longer walking behind her and instead stood completely still in the middle of the large hall, staring at her numbly, face pale with shock under the grey of her fur. She turned around, eyeing the stupefied doe with a look of mild concern.

"Ma'am..? Is everything al-"

"You're Dawn Bellwether."
They were left standing there, facing each other, the steady current of cloaked mammals pouring past the two still figures like a river of cloth seamlessly flowing around a couple of small rocks. The bunny made no sound, and neither did the ewe; but the quiet smile she wore, half-gracious, half-embarrassed, was all the confirmation Judy could have ever needed.

And for a moment, the stalwart doe felt the ground give way under her feet.

Just as nuns were not highly regarded among the clergy, so too their leading figure, the High Prioress of the grand cathedral, had never been considered too illustrious a title; that is, until it came to be held by Dawn Bellwether. Hers was a name known throughout all of Animalia, and for good reason.

She had first risen to prominence through her exceptional charity work right there in the capital. She had shown remarkable drive and industriousness in the field, far more so than what was expected of a young initiate such as herself. It was under her initiative that the first common meals for the city's poor in over a century were sanctioned on the clergy's expense, as well as the repurposing of expropriated property as public shelters during winter. This quickly earned her a reputation as a benefactor of the destitute and the underprivileged, and with it the deep-seated love and admiration of the Zootopian people.

These first successes led to her being noticed by the heads of the clergy who, seeking to utilize her popularity with the common folk, would begin assigning her various tasks of increasingly greater importance, both inside and beyond the capital; and as Sister Bellwether amassed more and more accomplishments under her belt, her following grew rapidly in proportion. Citizens and clergy alike eventually came to acknowledge the humble charm, the honest passion and the bright, diligent mind that she exhibited at every turn, and before long animals from all over the country would speak of her as a godsent, a living saint of old born long after the end of her era.

By the time her predecessor in the order passed on, Dawn Bellwether was already openly being compared to St. Marie herself, and despite her young age there were none who would dispute her claim to the vacant title. She was ordained High Prioress with the greatest honors, and during the two decades that had passed since, her contributions to the nation had been every bit as grand as her earliest endeavors.

To the clergy, this Prioress epitomized their highest ideals, inspiring selflessness and compassion to all those around her; to the country and its people she represented the greatest blessing of them all: a mammal in power with a genuine care for the needs of the commoner; and to the city of Zootopia and her prideful citizens she was regarded as their very own local legend, a resplendent bulwark of kindness in an age of moral decay, a real modern day hero justly beloved by one and all.

Such was the prestige of the saintly figure known to the world as Dawn Bellwether; and there she stood now in the flesh, having appeared before Judy out of the blue with her plain, loose-fitting robes and her silly hairdo and her nervous stammering and her docile manner, and the poor bunny found her image difficult to reconcile with the inherent greatness that was associated with her person, even as far away as her hometown.

This was actually the first thing she commented on, once she trusted herself to speak again.

"B-but…” Judy swallowed hard, head still spinning, and raised a trembling paw to point at the nun's unadorned, ordinary black habit. "But your…! I mean, you're not- not in any…"

"Oh, yes, there is a headpiece I was supposed to wear, but… well, it doesn't really feel… um, appropriate, I suppose," Dawn chuckled, ever bashful, ever unassuming. "These are the robes I was given when I first joined, the ones I've worn all throughout my service. They need not change."
Judy would argue that it was very much appropriate, as well as a great deal less confusing- but she was in no mind to do so at the time. This was all still entirely too much to take in. She was left stuttering for some time, thoroughly dazed, until finally something solid took from amidst her confusion: a vague memory, a dated piece of information which proved pertinent enough to anchor her back to reality. She held onto it and tried to put her thoughts in order, slowly regaining some semblance of composure; and all the while Dawn Bellwether kept on smiling, patiently waiting for the flustered ranger to be coherent again.

"But, you-" Judy cleared her throat and started over. "But madam, I- I mean, in the Burrows, word had reached us that you were away to the north, heading a- a missionary…. expedition…" She trailed off towards the end, realizing that the ewe herself had alluded to that not ten minutes ago. *Been away from the capital until recently…*

Dawn's lips quivered at that, eyes drifting downwards. "Indeed, ma'am. You're not wrong. I did spend the last two years in the north, trying to mend the divisions that plague the local populace, but… alas, I could do little to keep the tensions from escalating, in the end. Hostilities had grown rampant all over the land, and I was forced to end the mission earlier than planned. My retinue and I arrived back in Zootopia just a few days ago." There was regret in her voice, and a strain in the sorry smile she managed in front of the doe. "I fear I was too late- or perhaps I went about it the wrong way… and hence, Animalia is now at war with itself."

"That's… no one's blaming you for that, madam. You did all anyone could," Judy offered, now gradually coming back to her senses. "But, madam, why… I- this was all such- such a misunderstanding on my part, and I beg your forgiveness, but… cheese and crackers, madam, why didn't you correct me?!"

Now Dawn's smile turned shy and her hooves met in front of her torso, ready to commence their habitual rubbing. "Well… I did not mind actually, ma'am," she mumbled. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I love all my brothers and sisters here in the cathedral; but honestly, their affections can be… a little overbearing, at times. It felt good to have someone refer to me as Sister again… and come to think of it, I never did sign up to relinquish that title!"

"So if you'd like, feel free to call me that, ma'am- or better yet, simply Dawn. Just none of that stately "madam" business, if you will… I was hoping we could be more like friends, you and I."

"That- I… madam, I- I wouldn't dare…!"

The ewe let out a sigh, which comically pitched into yet another high bleat. "So it would seem, dear. But I do wish you would."

Judy thought on it for a second, looking her up and down with a pensive frown. "… Well, in that case… S-Sister…" she began, testing the word against her tongue. It actually came rather naturally, if she didn't stop to think about who it was she was addressing. "If we were to really become friends, you'd have to stop calling me "ma'am" as well." She extended a paw towards the sheep, and for a moment it felt like she was back on familiar ground. This gave her confidence. "Judith Laverne Hopps, ranger lieutenant of the Burrows province… as we discussed earlier, I believe."

Delighted to hear the ranger quip, Dawn took the proffered paw into both hooves and shook it heartily with what felt a lot like gratitude. "Wonderful!" she exclaimed with a wide smile, which Judy managed to return this time, albeit somewhat reservedly. "It is a pleasure to officially meet you, Judy… Judith?"

"Judy is just fine, Sister," she assured her with a soft chuckle. "And the pleasure is all mine."
"Right… so then, Judy!" Dawn began as she released the bunny, still beaming at her. "With proper introductions finally out of the way, what do you say we move on now, hmm? I fear I'm a tad pressed for time, and there's ever so much I'd like to show you…! You said you've never visited the cathedral before, yes?"

"Ah… yes, but before that, Sister… you, um, mentioned that you'd see to my search permit, correct?" said Judy, ears perking up with hope. Prioress Bellwether was one of, if not the most influential mammal in the entire cathedral. She could not have asked for a better connection. *Truly a godsend.*

"What say you we discuss it as we go, dear?" Dawn stepped to the side and motioned towards the arch, her benignant look leaving the bunny little option.

"Yes, of course," Judy smiled. "Please, lead the way."

Despite her small feet, Dawn managed to walk surprisingly fast with her curt, restless steps—the sharp tapping of her hooves on the marble floor was distinct among the rest, for anyone with the ears to notice- and Judy had no problem keeping up. Even so, it took the two a solid five minutes before they reached the inner arch, massive as the hall was, and even as they were about to step through it, Judy couldn't tell what lay beyond the dazzling light washing down on it from above. All she knew was that the smell of incense grew thicker the closer they got to the opening, and there was now a tincture of something subtler mixed within it as well; something vaguely familiar and inexplicably comforting, much like the scent of open country around the Burrows which she had so dearly missed since leaving home. This peculiar resemblance gave her pause.

The ewe vanished into the radiant glow of the tall arch, and Judy found that she had to shade her eyes as she followed after her, blinded by the brilliance. She took a couple more steps like this, still unable to look up, then a third one-

*Crunch.*

The stable echo of her footfalls suddenly gave way to a light crunching noise, and at the same time she felt the ground under her feet turn softer. Through half-lid eyes lowered to the floor she noticed that the white hue of the veiny marble was gone, replaced instead by a warm, vibrant green sticking out from between her toes.

*Grass…?*

Blinking rapidly through the piercing brightness, she finally raised her head to examine this new curiosity.

Judy Hopps had seen plenty this past week. She recalled how the stony might of Rockwood castle had overwhelmed her that first night in the capital, how helplessly intimidated she had felt the first time she stepped into the crowded St. Marie's Plaza the day after, as well as how both the sumptuous luxury of Liberty District and the near impressive destitution permeating the ramshackle Happytown had taken her aback and put her off her game- to say nothing of her unforgettable misadventure in Leodore's Chomper Garden. In light of all these experiences, she had learnt to expect the unexpected when it came to Zootopia, this city of extremes, and resolved to no longer allow herself to be surprised at the seemingly endless wonders it could present her with.

But even in the city of extremes, nothing could possibly compare to *this.*

The green under her feet was indeed there and it stretched on and on, all the way to the point where it met the massive wall of marble framing it on the far side. The entrance hall had tricked her; the
main body of the cathedral really was comprised of one single room, a massive nave containing an artificial garden laid with countless blades of grass, with batches of colorful flowers interspersed in their midst. Thick rays of colored sunlight dusted gently upon the garden through the stained glass on the highest floors, bestowing upon it a serene, almost eerie glow similar to the one surrounding its entrance. Even the soft buzz of the bees languidly drifting between the nectary buds seemed to impart a sense of solemnity, making one fearful to speak too loud lest they disturbed this Eden’s blissful calm.

At either side of the garden were more pointed arches identical to the one they had just stepped through, each seemingly leading into a separate area of its own. Judy spotted about a dozen sets from where she stood, and there could very well be a dozen more further in; and each corresponding room would likely be as big as the entrance hall, judging by the distance between each of the entrances.

Enormous pillars interjected between each set, with every other one supporting a spiral staircase that went up around it, leading to the upper floors. Judy could clearly make out at least two but there were certainly more, and from what she could see there were yet more arches on each floor, albeit somewhat smaller. The space directly above the grass was left open for light to shine through, with only a number of narrow bridge-like vaults connecting the opposite sides of each floor. To anyone gazing up at them from below, these structures seemed to come together like so many threads haphazardly knit into one giant, solid web of chaotic symmetry, casting just enough shade on the garden below to better define the descending sunbeams piercing through their formation. It was clear from the size of these vault-bridges, as well as the staircases, that the higher levels were not designed to be accessed by mammals heavier than a hippo or a moose or a small ox.

And finally, tracing with her eyes the sets of giant pillars as they reached ever upwards through the translucent light, past the complex network of strait vaults all the way to the very highest level, Judy looked to the indistinct source of the rays, half expecting to find a tiny sun of a dozen colors strapped to the ceiling at their other end. What she saw was not too far from that.

The marble flared into stained glass near the point where the walls met the firmament, as Judy already knew, and it was through this seamless line of windows that the garden below was granted its natural lighting. But more wondrous still—perhaps more wondrous than anything Judy had ever laid eyes on—was the firmament itself.

It was in the shape of a dome, she realized; one massive, hollow dome spanning the entirety of the grassy expanse below, largely obscured to outside onlookers by the sheer height of the overall construction. It too was comprised of sheets of stained glass, except these ones had some reflective property infused into their material—more akin to colored mirrors, she would later think—and arranged in such a carefully considered angle that the dome managed to trap incoming sunlight and contain it rather than letting it through. Each ray that fell upon one sheet was reflected into another, again and again, bouncing between them endlessly in what resulted in a dazzling but wholly self-contained disk of the purest light under the exact center of the dome, with beams in every color of the spectrum randomly shooting out from the formation to gently light upon the corners of the firmament and the very top of the pillars, but never anywhere below. The windows framing the top floor could be covered up and the garden would fall into complete darkness, but still the firmament alone would be kept ablaze, its bright disk still burning like a daytime star casting shattered rainbows all over the temple’s celestial crown.

* A sky, Judy thought, so numbly that it didn't even register. *It's a real, proper sky... indoors.*

So this was the celebrated grand cathedral, then: a lush, sprawling field of grass as its floor and the most beautiful sky for a ceiling, all enclosed within mighty walls of pristine marble.
"Breathtaking" simply didn't do it justice.

Judy would have searched for the words to properly describe it, if she could muster any thought at all; but for now it was all she could do to gape and shrink before this vast and serene world of brilliance, positively dumb with wonder, doing her best not to give in to the dizzying sensation of vertigo that had her reeling in place. She stood there, speechless, ears flat against her back as she gazed up at the full majesty of the great nave, focusing on nothing but taking in everything.

She couldn't know how long she stayed like this. It could have been a minute, or ten, or half an hour; but eventually her brain rebooted, and she found that she could blink again. She lowered her head slowly, hesitant to avert her eyes from the firmament as if it were some glorious illusion that might just vanish as soon as she wasn't looking. Dawn was still there with her, standing a few feet away as if to allow her some much-needed space, facing her with a patient, knowing smile and waiting for the shock to pass like she'd seen it a thousand times before. She seemed as calm and grounded as Judy was disoriented.

"… How…?" the bunny croaked out in a hoarse voice.

"Faith," Dawn answered simply, as if that one word explained everything.

Judy swallowed hard and shook her head. "If… If faith can do this-" she began, motioning widely across the enormous room, "-then perhaps we were wrong to relinquish it."

"Oh, but we didn't relinquish it, dear!" said the ewe, stepping closer. "We simply chose to believe in something different. Something more tangible, but not at all weaker."

"And what would that be, Sister?"

"Us, Judy." Dawn took another step forward, bringing them face to face. "Mammals. The ones who built all of this in the first place: this cathedral, the city around it, and the entire country beyond. Simple, mortal folk like you and me." She paused for a deep sigh, turning to contemplate the ethereal garden stretching out before their feet. "That's what we believe in now, dear: a united mammalkind, and the untold miracles it is capable of."

"… Huh…"

Judy followed her gaze, only then noticing the presence of numerous other animals deeper into the nave. Their faraway frames were indeed easy to miss at first glance in the great vastness of the room, but a closer look revealed several dozens of them, both cloaked members of the priesthood and simple cathedral workers spread all over the edges of the great room, attending the greenery or crossing the vault-bridges overhead. More still were pouring in through the arch of the entrance hall at her back, only to quietly scatter towards their appointed sanctums or private offices under an air of orderly haste, not once uttering a single word. They each went about their business like this in complete silence, most likely out of respect for the serenity of this heavenly place. Judy even strained for any sound apart from the buzzing of bees or the light crunching of grass under hoof, but all that reached her was a distant echo of harmonious chanting as it gently wafted down from somewhere far above; a practicing choir, just faintly audible even to her own sensitive ears. Given its monstrous size and the number of animals within it, the cathedral's main area struck the ranger as eerily quiet. Almost too much so for comfort.

"… Gotta say, I'd never considered it that way, Sister!" she said finally, her friendly tone drawing Dawn's eyes to a broad, bucktoothed smile. Her reservations, whatever they were, were best kept to herself. "It's such a beautiful thought… this cathedral being a monument to our own agency more
than anything. I think I rather like it!"

"Yes… yes, that's exactly right!" Dawn enthused. "Granted, it wasn't its original purpose, but it is good for an institution such as ours to be keeping with the times."

"But of course." Judy nodded. "I'm sure that resonates a lot better with the modern citizen, eh?"

"Yes, I do believe so."

There was a still moment between them, neither finding anything to add until Dawn spoke up again, transitioning them into a new subject. "So, Judy!" she exclaimed. "You appear to be handling yourself better than most, I dare say. Think you're ready for your tour around the inner sanctums?"

"I… think I can manage, yeah." In truth, the bunny still felt a little shaken, but was confident she could keep going. She only had to avoid looking up. "The inner sanctums, you said," she went on. "Would those be these arches here…? How many are there, exactly?" she asked, pointing to the series of said arches stretching along either side of the garden.

"Two hundred and thirty seven in total, if I'm not mistaken," the ewe replied, chucking at the look of shock on Judy's face. "They are all housed down here and on the first couple of floors, below the dignitary offices on the upper levels. It was a good idea to utilize a few of the storeys, surely, though perforce that limits accessibility to the smaller species."

"I don't see how else they would fit, even here…! And are they all as big as they look, Sister?"

"Why don't you come see for yourself?" Dawn suggested merrily, taking the first step deeper into the garden while gesturing at the bunny to follow.

"I don't think there's enough time in the world, frankly; and you said you didn't have much to begin with," Judy pointed out as she obliged, quickly catching up to her wooly guide.

"Yes, that is true… so let's just walk along then, and you can have a look into each as we pass them by. Few have anything particularly special about their décor, anyway; it's their histories that most fascinate me!"

And so, bunny and sheep moseyed on to the right side of the garden and started along its edge, tracing the series of arches under Dawn's eager lead. It was clear the ewe had not exaggerated her enthusiasm in the slightest; she would hardly pause for breath as she spoke, dispensing an endless stream of trivia on the specific religion housed in each sanctum they passed, their origins, mythos and the cultures that had spawned them. At times she would catch herself rambling and apologize in that particularly bashful manner of hers, only to unfailingly repeat the exact same process all over again at the next sanctum; but Judy didn't really mind, even if she was difficult to keep up with at times. If anything, the ranger was amused by the Prioress's unworldly zest and the way her hair-fleece bobbed to every short, restless step she took as she explained, eyes sparkling with the excitement of a young kit introducing an adult friend to their favorite hobby. Judy could barely keep herself from smiling.

That said, she only showed an appropriate level of polite interest at first, nodding attentively at the sheep's verbiage while waiting for an opportunity to bring up the topic of her permit. However, as per her inquisitive nature, it wasn't long before she found herself getting into Dawn's narrations for real, growing genuinely invested and even volunteering a few questions of her own here and there. The cathedral, and everything relating to it, had understandably piqued her interest.

Which was fortuitous, really, considering how overwhelmed the bunny still felt. Between the otherworldly ambience of the nave itself, its immense sense of scale, the flickery shades cast down
by the spectre-like forms crossing the vault-bridges overhead and the brilliant disk quietly burning away amidst the lurid medley of colors that was the church's firmament, this little tour felt very much like walking through a dream. Without something tangible to hold her attention, Judy would have likely lost herself again somewhere along the way.

The arches on the ground floor were built wide enough to hold an elephant's full frame, so it took the two small mammals several strides to get from one end to the other, giving Judy ample time to examine their interior. She was proven right about the size of the sanctums, each being about as big as the vestibule they had left behind, with tall, windowless walls illuminated by large chandeliers and rows of wooden seats in all sizes looking towards a flat, sheep-proportioned altar of plain marble near the far end of the room. Resting upon each altar was a whole array of miscellaneous peculiarities: ritualistic staffs with strange markings etched over their surface, threadbare articles of dated clothing weaved with ornate baubles and designs that had long lost their luster, carved masks displaying powerfully exaggerated grimaces and a great number of small figurines and statues of either wood, stone or, shockingly, even ivory. For all their variety, the items on every altar always shared a common theme, making it clear that they belonged together as relics of the represented faith.

Most of these sanctums had no mammals inside, but some were actually occupied. There was the odd worker sweeping floors, dusting altars and replenishing the incense candles that had burnt out near the corners, occasionally accompanied by brown-robed members of the clergy, as well as a handful of visitors kneeling before a select few altars, which Judy guessed were the most popular ones still retaining a number of followers from among the citizenry. There was even a sermon taking place in the deepest end of one such sanctum, attended by no more than a dozen faithfuls of about as many species and performed by an elderly swine clad in the lighter robes of a deacon.

There was one sanctum in particular some twenty arches into their walk that drew Judy's attention, causing her to jib for a closer look. There on its altar she saw numerous wooden figurines of a wide-winged bird of a kind she did not recognize, each painted a different shade of patchy, long-faded blue. Standing behind the altar were what appeared to be a set of entire logs, obviously too big to be placed among the figurines, their surface covered by yet more crude carvings depicting the hairy, horned, flat-nosed faces of bison stacked on top of one another, facing towards the entrance. It was these totems that had caught Judy's eye, and especially the carving at their very top, which was instead in the shape of that same unfamiliar bird and also painted in varying hues of aged blue. She paused and inquired about it to her guide.

"Ah, yes! This is one of my favorites!" Dawn exclaimed, hooves clapping together in excitement. "And one of the more exotic ones, too. See, the western bovines used to worship a kind of eagle that was native to their lands, a huge, scary monster of a bird. It's even said that it would sweep down on unsuspecting calves, lift them clean off the ground with its talons and carry them off to its nest to eat!"

Judy let out a whistle. "And do these stories hold merit? Are the things really that big?"

"Well, the whole, uh… calf-lifting part is most likely just a boogieman story to discipline their young," Dawn admitted. "All these cultures had a version of it, believe it or not."

The bunny nodded, suppressing a faint pang of guilt. Of course she believed it; in the Burrows, the boogieman was traditionally a big, bad fox.

"But I've heard tale of some phenomenally large birds flying high in the western skies, by brothers who have travelled that far," Dawn continued. "Not quite large enough for a bison, perhaps, but by their description they could likely handle a small enough goat… or a sheep, for that matter," she added with meaning, winking at the ranger. "You know, these old wisdoms, ridiculous as they may
seem sometimes, are generally based on reality."

Judy forced herself to smile. "R-right."

"Anyway, the bovines believed that these eagles were agents of a great sky spirit sent to watch over and judge them from above. Those who lived their lives with grace and virtue were deemed worthy and taken into the spirit's embrace after death, to forever soar the skies as one of its many trusted eagles." She paused and they both looked towards one of the totem poles and the sculpture of the great azure bird perched atop of it, spreading its massive wings protectively over the bison below while also glaring down at them in strict, eternal judgement.

"It's so romantic," Dawn commented with a sigh. "They adored freedom above all else, and rued how they were fated to walk the ground while other creatures took to the heavens right before their eyes. I imagine they must have been jealous… but the righteous got their just reward. They were set free, in the end."

Judy hummed. "I'd love to see one of those eagles up close, if I ever get the chance. For an entire civilization of big, bulky bison to have been worshipping a bird, of all things, it must be really something."

"Oh, it's hardly the strangest idea you'll come across here, dear," Dawn stated knowingly as they resumed walking. "I've heard of all manner of things being deified: the wind, the sun and moon, the vegetation—there's even a sanctum somewhere on the upper levels dedicated to the worship of lizards."

Judy recoiled, facing the ewe with an incredulous smile. "Lizards!"

"Yes, indeed!" Dawn confirmed with a straight face. "We're not sure exactly what species the religion belonged to—it's just that old- but apparently its followers held that long ago, way before the advent of us mammals, the world belonged to some kind of giant lizards who would stalk the land until they mysteriously disappeared, leaving behind only their smaller cousins we know today and thus allowing other species to thrive and evolve."

"I see…! How, uh… how quaint," Judy said neutrally, trying her best not to laugh.

They went on like this for a while, discussing many more of the sanctums they passed as they moved deeper and deeper into the nave that seemed to go on forever. Judy found conversation with her affable guide quite pleasant, and the religions she was introduced to along the way each more interesting than the last; but even so, as time went by and their walk kept drawing out at length despite Dawn's claims of a tight schedule, the bunny began to feel a little restless. It had been well over an hour now since she had first climbed the cathedral's steps, and Nick was probably already waiting for her outside. This was taking longer than expected.

She had barely finished the thought when Dawn took a sudden turn to the left, stepping away from the line of arches and into the soft grass, beckoning her to follow. Judy frowned at her for a moment, confused, until she saw exactly where it was that the ewe was headed. She obliged without further question.

Even from as far back as the entrance, Judy had taken notice of a distant, greyish object sticking out somewhere in the middle of the garden, but could not make out exactly what it was. The object grew larger and more defined the closer they got, and now, having arrived at the halfway point of the great nave, she could finally see it for what it was: an old, truly ancient statue of plain chiseled stone in the shape of a female elk. A nun's veil was pulled over her hornless head but her features were laid bare, and despite the numerous cracks of time running up her muzzle and across her cheeks, their gentle
warmth still radiated a perfect, singular sense of compassion that only the visage of a saint could hold. Her hooves were raised in a wide, welcoming gesture that encompassed all, kindly urging them to approach and share in the peace and serenity her life and works had achieved.

The all-loving St. Marie herself had appeared to happily receive the little bunny ranger into her home.

The statue stood over fifteen feet tall, effectively dwarving the two small females as they ambled to its base. They paused there to examine it in silence, and looking up at it from that upward angle Judy noticed that, being at the very center of the nave, it was positioned directly beneath the dome and the incandescent disk that rested within its cavity. Even now, after all this time spent inside the cathedral, she could not escape a powerful surge of awe at the realization that this mechanical marvel that had bedazzled her so was really only meant to produce one giant, splendid halo suitable for the temple's revered saint. At its feet lay the freshly nipped blossoms of dozens of flowers, most likely originating from the garden itself, offered to the saint as tokens of respect and currently besieged by an active group of loud, irreverent bees.

"… Magnificent," Judy breathed out, finally thinking to raise a paw and pull off her cap in a much-belated gesture of reverence. "But why stone…?"

"This exact statue was built shortly after her death, along with the church erected at that time," Dawn explained. "The artisan was purportedly a close personal friend of hers, and stayed faithful to her real image." She slowly raised a hoof to the base of the statue, caressing it with such tender care as if it were made of the most delicate porcelain. "The rendition of someone who lived to know and love her… the closest we'll ever get to the real thing."

Immediately Judy's ears prickled, having caught an abrupt shift in the cadence of the sheep's voice. Indeed, for the first time ever there was no shakiness to it, none of its usual kinks or its curt, random bleats; on the contrary, it had come out low and uncharacteristically level, enough so to be outright jarring.

She glanced at the ewe to catch her still staring up at the face of the statue, completely transfixed, green eyes alight with intense, fawning adoration. Her lips had parted ever so slightly, edges curving into a soft, beatific smile the likes of which Judy had never seen on an animal before, portraying such complete and unfaltering devotion that it was almost intimidating to behold. It was so profound a sentiment that Judy got the instinctive urge to look away out of respect, as if by witnessing it she was intruding on something personal and sacred, something not meant to be shared with one such as her who could not truly empathize.

The moment passed as quickly as it came. Dawn collected her hoof and blinked away from the statue, releasing a quiet sigh as if she had been holding her breath. She then turned to say something to Judy, but paused upon noticing the curious look the rabbit was giving her.

"You must really admire her, huh, Sister?" Judy noted, arching a brow.

Dawn's reaction was as one would have expected: a shy chuckle, an awkward shuffle, and the requisite rubbing of her small, dainty hooves. Just like that, she was back to normal.

"It's- well… I mean, who doesn't?" she stammered. "Though- yes, I suppose you could say she's a… a personal hero of mine." She glanced back at the statue as she spoke, and again her face seemed to light up momentarily. "...You know, most of us never stop to consider this, but in her time, Marie too followed a religion of her own, same as everyone else in Zootopia."

"That so…?" said the ranger. "Well, yeah- I suppose she was a nun of some kind, after all."
"Precisely. And the thing is, her faith was a strict one, even by that age's standards. It explicitly forbade the worship, or even the acknowledgement of any foreign deities, and even advocated aggressive proselytism. Its followers must have arguably been among the biggest troublemakers of the early town."

Judy frowned at the smiling statue. "That… doesn't sound like her."

"No, it doesn't," Dawn agreed, and again some incongruous tincture of stability had worked itself into her voice. "Because she went against it. She saw the problem with the faith she was raised in, the faith she had devoted her entire life to, and knowingly, willfully, went completely against it in order to create— all of this." She raised both arms as she spoke, indicating the nave, the cathedral, the city and virtually everything beyond.

"Do you understand what this must have meant for her, Judy?" the ewe continued. "It meant damnation in the eyes of her god. Her actions constituted the grossest sin imaginable to her culture, and were to be met with eternal punishment once she departed this world. That was what she believed, you see.

"And yet, she did what she did all the same. She resolved to commit that sin, and was prepared to face the consequences. Far more than simply giving up her life— in her mind, Marie made the conscious choice to doom her very soul, all in pursuit of unity; the same precious, sacred unity upon which all of Animalia was ultimately founded. The reason you and I get to stand here now, alive and safe in the presence of countless others many times our size, surrounded by all this hallowed splendor that we built together with them.

"… This is the ultimate act of selflessness," Dawn concluded, eyes trailing from the elk back to the bunny who turned to meet them. "One could not possibly sacrifice anything further, or hope to achieve more than she did— and that's certainly worth admiring, I'd say."

"… Mm…"

They shared a brief smile before twisting their heads in unison to contemplate the stone saint one last time, each lost in her own thoughts. The buzz of the insects busily floating about the statue's feet were near deafening in the silence that followed, drowning out any other hints of ambient noise that might have reached them there, at the very core of Zootopia's grand cathedral. Judy mechanically scanned the air for any lingering sounds of the choir from earlier, but failed to detect any and figured their practice must have already ended.

You didn't have it easy either, did you? The bunny thought as she stared up at the smiling elk, her entire culture's prime paragon of virtue. You had your own struggles to deal with. Your own battles to fight.

And so do I.

"… Mad- I mean, Sister," she began, turning to face the ewe with a thin, hesitant smile. "I am very thankful for your taking the time to give me this tour, honestly. It's been truly grand. But, much as I hate being pushy… don't you think it's time we discussed the issue of my permit?" Her tone and manner were kept impeccably courteous, almost to excess; but there was no second-guessing the meaning firmness in her gaze.

Dawn blinked at her once, then returned the smile. "But yes, of course- oh my, we've been at this for so long now, haven't we! So sorry, dear, but I just lost track of time…!"

"Oh, please do not apologize, Sister! Like I said, this has been most pleasant," Judy hurriedly assured
"Still- you came here for work, not recreation," Dawn responded, head shaking in self-deprecation. Her hair-fleece kept wiggling for a solid second afterward. "I shouldn't have allowed myself to get carried away like this… but you are correct, of course, Lieutenant." She straightened her back and exhaled sharply, attempting a straight, businesslike air. "So- let us talk work now then, shall we?"

Judy moved to mimic her stance, ears erect and shoulders squared, and instantly felt a reassuring calm wash over her, like all her senses had simultaneously shifted into perfect focus. After all the time she had spent so decidedly out of her element, continually mystified by everything she saw, amazed at every single turn and feeling overall adrift, she relished that familiar state of incisive clarity and the comforting sense of efficiency it brought with it. Lieutenant Hopps was back on duty, and she was every inch the bunny for the job.

"Yes, please. Let us."

Dawn went quiet for a moment, considering how best to initiate the subject. "… Right. Before we start, could you elaborate a bit on your case, Judy?" she asked her. "You mentioned it was a ram you are looking for. Do you have a name, a description?"

"Not a name, unfortunately, no; he was reportedly very secretive, even around his associates. We don't know his exact age either, but based on the descriptions extracted by said associates, he's likely between thirty to forty, with an average build."

"His associates?" Dawn echoed. "He… were they a large group, if I might ask?"

"Yes, quite. The ram was leading a huge criminal ring in the Burrows that had been active for the last decade or so, being a major headache to us all. My branch only recently managed to crack down on them and disband the ring, but the ram alone managed to escape and made straight for the capital. I must have arrived here shortly after him, but haven't been able to find any clues whatsoever to his whereabouts; yet his sketch hangs in every ranger outpost in the city, so he couldn't have snuck out undetected. I trust the locals to deliver that much, at least." That last sentence came out in a grumble, and she instantly regretted it; far too unprofessional for Lieutenant Hopps, justified as it may have been.

"You- uh… pardon me, but I recall you said they were stealing… crops?" asked Dawn, as if fearing she might have misheard. "As in… vegetables, and… all that?"

"Primarily, yes," Judy confirmed, then smiled at the funny look the ewe was giving her. "You should know, Sister, that us Burrows folk get very sensitive when it comes to our produce."

"A- ah…! I, heh- I see." Dawn gave a brief laugh at that, then promptly resumed her questioning. "You, um… don't sound too satisfied with our local rangers..."

Judy released an exasperated sigh that may as well have been a snort. "I'm most certainly not. They haven't been too accommodating in my time here, truth be told- ah, except for the Zone chief, of course. He alone has been great, bless his soul."

"Aah- Walter Tusk!" the ewe exclaimed with a fond smile. "Yes, he's a real diligent fellow, that one. Hardy and capable as they come, if- if a bit, uh… rough around the edges," she added, voice cracking into a giggle. "Were you assigned to his sector?"

"If only," the bunny sighed anew. "No, I've been placed under Rockwood's jurisdiction."

"Mm… so I see." Dawn's lack of comments was a statement in itself. "Surely though, you must have
been assigned a partner upon arrival, yes? Where might they be?"

"I… don't have one right now, actually."

The nun blinked at her in surprise, brows furrowing. "That's… odd. This is definitely not standard procedure. They should at the very least have given you someone to show you around, assist in your investigation… you shouldn't have let that slide, dear."

"Oh no, they did, actually, on the very first day," Judy clarified. "And only for the first day. I dismissed him afterwards, on account of him being, uh… not exactly the ripest corn on the stalk, so to speak."

"And you've operated on your own ever since?!" Dawn asked with a look of mild shock. " Stranger in a strange town- in this strange town…? No offence, dear, but this seems rather imprudent of you. How did you ever manage?"

"Well, I-"

It was at that moment that Judy was struck with a sudden inspiration. She cleared her throat to mask the pause and give herself a couple of seconds to decide on how to word her next few statements.

"Well, I haven't exactly been alone, per say…"

Dawn's brow shot up. "Oh?"

"Yes, see… On my first day here I happened upon someone I deemed competent enough, and hired him to assist me. An asset of sorts, let's say." She paused again and her eyes drifted away from the ewe, as if in guilt or embarrassment. "And it's… it's actually an, um… a fox."

She had originally planned to make no mention of Nick but ended up changing her mind on the spot, not least because she figured that they had made a spectacle of themselves all throughout the city during their investigation so far. The Prioress would surely hear of him if she only asked around, and she didn't want her to find out she had purposely withheld anything during their conversation, especially something as noteworthy as her vulpine companion.

But more importantly, this was an excellent chance for her to test the waters a bit.

Dawn did not react initially. She only blinked at her several times before offering a simple, nondescript response. "O-oh…! Is that so…?"

"Indeed," Judy nodded, still visibly uncomfortable at the admission. "He is known as something of a problem-solver down in the Zone, you see, and I thought he could prove useful if kept on a tight leash. I was proven right, for the most part. Of course, you understand why I couldn't bring him along in here…"

"I… well, y-yeah…"

"I wasn't glad for it, mind you!" Judy went on defensively. "I'd much prefer to not constantly have to keep an eye on some shifty pred while trying to do my job, and the bloody cur hasn't been making it easy for me, either- if, uh, you'll excuse my language… But he's as shrewd as they come, being of his ilk, and certainly likes the money, likewise. Still…" She trailed off and shook her head, long ears flopping about abjectly. "It's been… uncomfortable. Out in the field, trust is paramount, even more so perhaps than individual ability; and in that regard, working with a fox has certainly been… suboptimal, as you can imagine."
"Has he given you reason to distrust him, then?" Dawn asked all of a sudden.

Judy eyed her dubiously. "A reason…? He's a fox, Sister," she intoned with an awkward simper, as if pointing out the obvious. "Who'd ever heard of a trustworthy fox…?"

Again Dawn's reply didn't come right away. She regarded the bunny in silence for a moment, and Judy, who was discreetly alert to every minor twitch on the nun's face, found her expression to be thoroughly inscrutable.

Until suddenly it wasn't, and she revealed an awkward grimace of her own.

"I… do understand your concern, yes," she said reluctantly, drawling out the words. "Distrust towards predators is woven in our history, after all. Our very nature.

"But I cannot, in good conscience, condone it."

She paused to give Judy a shaky smile, exuding the discomfort of an overly aggregable guardian forced to leniently admonish a misbehaving youngster. "And again, dear, I completely understand where you're coming from," she continued, "but in times such as ours, I think it is neither proper nor expedient for a member of our clergy—or indeed your own order- to openly endorse and propagate such divisive views… if you don't mind my saying."

She eyed Judy warily, as if anticipating some sort of kickback following her mild reproach. It never came. The bunny merely blinked at her a couple of times, wearing a plain expression of numb, yielding embarrassment, looking positively shamefaced; but all the while the gears in her head kept quietly spinning, examining, pondering. Assessing.

Good answer.

Perfect, really.

"… I- yes, you- you are right, of course…" Judy finally stammered out in a fluster, eyes to the floor and ears limp against her back, taking care to look as contrite as she thought appropriate. "I- I didn't mean to imply… I- it's just, back in the Burrows, we're not… predators aren't really..."

"It's quite alright, dear," Dawn cut her off with an air of gracious clemency. "I know how it is. You're not to blame; it's only instinct."

"Y-yeah… plus, I'm not exactly used to having so many predators around, least of all working with one," Judy added, ears slowly picking up. "My first visit to the Zone was… quite the cultural shock."

"Mm, yes. I imagine," the ewe chuckled, then paused and brought a hoof to her chin, pensively looking the ranger up and down. "… And yet, you did end up collaborating with one," she went on. "You went and hired a fox to assist you despite your evident discomfort, all because you believed he could be of some help in your investigation…" A soft smile showed from behind her hoof. "You seem to me like a truly dedicated officer, Lieutenant Hopps; the kind to spare no effort in completing their assignment. The Burrows should count itself lucky to have you."

Judy was thankful for this opportune praise; now she could afford to stop feigning guilt. "Thank you, Sister," she replied with a slight bow and a coy smile. "I try my best, though that may not always be enough."

"Well, this diligence of yours makes me want to help you all the more, dear. However-"
Judy's nose gave a faint twitch, ears stiffening above her head. *Here we go.*

"- I fear that might not be so easy after all."

"Oh…? How come?" the bunny asked in a neutral tone.

Dawn began fumbling with the points of her hooves. "W-well… if I recall, you said that you didn't have any- any *actual leads* placing your ram in the cathedral, yes?"

A shadow passed over Judy's features. *I see.*

"No, none," she confirmed with just a touch of despondence. "But there's simply nowhere else left to look within the city, and seeing as there's so many sheep among your ranks:"

"But nothing concrete. No solid evidence to support that hypothesis… correct?"

Judy loured a bit despite herself. "Yes indeed- but I hardly see the harm in allowing me to extend my investigation inside the temple, Sister."

"And I agree with you, dear!" Dawn assured her, hoof moving to her chest. "I agree, and I'd love to help…! B-but… it's not only up to me, unfortunately." She turned around and began pacing up and down a short distance before St. Marie's statue wearing a troubled frown, her motions traced by Judy's large, unblinking eyes. "I mean, my position *would*, in theory, allow me to- to pull a few strings, a-and pretermit some formalities to get your permit through a little faster… but that would put me in quite the awkward spot, dear.

"Your application isn't the only one currently in abeyance, you see. Far from it- there have been over twenty more filed this past month alone, according to our logs, and I'm certain there are more yet still pending from further back…! There is always some ranger or another who requests access to the cathedral, and these requests are often neither as serious nor as pressing as your local colleagues make them out to be."

"I dare say that mine is, though," Judy interjected evenly. "Both serious and pressing."

"I'm sure it is, Judy dear; which is why it *will* pass ,eventually, through the standard procedure. Heck, you might just find your permit waiting for you on the morrow for all we know, or the day after…!"

"… or the day after that, or next week, and so on and so forth," Judy added pointedly, tone calm but passably trenchant.

Dawn ceased her pacing and mirrored the bunny with sympathetic eyes. "I-I understand your impatience, but… can you just imagine how it would look if the High Prioress personally enjoined that a whole slew of older permits be passed over in favor of yours?" She shook her head at the thought. "Showing such preferential treatment to a foreign ranger, working a foreign case… it would be sure to raise many eyebrows, dear, both in the Council, the clergy and your order. It's not something I can put forth lightly, much as I wish to."

Dawn clearly meant to add something more, but nothing came to her besides a shrug and a sad, deeply apologetic look. Judy held her gaze for a time, then simply hung her head with a deflated sigh, deflating.

"So… there's really nothing that can be done then, huh…?"

"… W-well… that's not exactly true, dear."
Judy lifted an ear from her hunching position. "It isn't…?"

"Yes, I mean- I cannot explicitly force the immediate issuing of your permit, no… but that doesn't mean I won't assist you any way I can!"

In a sudden burst of determination, as if emboldened by her own words, the sheep closed the distance between them and took Judy's paw into her hooves, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I may not be able to resolve your issue like you hoped, but remember: you've always got a friend at the cathedral, Judy. And I bet I can still be an exceptionally useful friend, if you'll let me prove it to you.

"I'll procure a few copies of that sketch you mentioned and have my followers keep an eye out for your smuggler. I'll be sure to inform you at the slightest hint of suspicious behavior within these walls… and of course, if anything comes up that would increase the strength of your application, come to me straight away and I'll personally ensure the permit is issued within the day. I can do that much, at least."

The excitable little ewe gushed out all those promises with nary a breath, overtaken by this newfound resolve to assist her coney friend any way she could. Her hair-fleece was left dancing comically atop her head after she was done, hooves still tightly clenched around the paw of the startled ranger; but the purity of her smile was as always compelling, and so it wasn't long before Judy returned it with interest, flashing a bright set of buckteeth at this sweet, kindhearted nun who had been nothing but accommodating during her first visit in the grand cathedral.

"I could ask for no more," Judy said finally, placing her free paw over the closed pair of hooves and squeezing back. She and Dawn locked eyes for a moment, as if meaning to communicate the gesture's shared sense of camaraderie through gaze alone. "I don't know how to ever thank you for this- for all of this… Dawn."

The ewe was the first of the two to blink, taken aback by the mention of her name; and then the brightness of her smile resumed tenfold. "Do not mention it, dear," she cooed. "After all… us little guys need to, stick together, right?"

And so, with one final bleat and playful wink, Dawn released Judy's paw and stepped away. The two small mammals were left standing there in silence for some time, basking in the aftermath of their warm exchange, sharing a content smile under the loving gaze of the great stone saint extending her chipped arms over them like a protective mother.

Dawn would be the one to finally break the silence.

"… Right! Uh… h-hm!" She swallowed hard and cleared her throat, then tried again. "S-so… this has been most enjoyable, dear, but we do ought to be getting back. I told Rufus we'd be quick, and it's been well near an hour; the poor thing must've bitten halfway through his hooves by now!"

"It certainly was," Judy assented, setting the now crumbled cap back on her head. "But… yes, I do believe it's time we got going. I told Rufus we'd be quick, and it's been well near an hour; the poor thing must've bitten halfway through his hooves by now!"

"Would you care to lead the way, Madam High Prioress?"

Dawn shook her head at the grinning bunny in mock reproach as she stepped forward to take the lead. "Oh, so it's one step forward and two steps back with you, is it?" she griped, and the two shared a laugh before starting back towards the entrance hall.

They were much faster now that they didn't pause at every arch, keeping a steady pace as they walked in a straight line through the middle of the garden, passing through countless alternations of thin shadows cast down by the vault-bridges overhead and bits of colored sunlight that managed to
reach the ground, painting air and grass alike in its bright, vibrant tints. They spoke very little on the way back, surrendering themselves to the eerie quiescence of the nave like the many cloaked mammals still present within it, walking the edges of its garden, climbing its staircases or crossing its vaults with almost no sound but the occasional flutter of their long, loose-hanging robes. Coupled with the ever-present scent of incense permeating the air and Marie's grand halo still pinned against the center of the firmament like a giant eye constantly peering down on them through a fissured sky, Judy thought for the umpteenth time that every single aspect of this ineffable place was the stuff of fairy tales: endlessly majestic and strikingly outlandish, enough so to feel like it didn't quite belong there, in this secular world of mortal mammals.

She was relieved to hear the first distant noises reaching them from the vestibule ahead, the relative clamor of overlapping footfalls and faint, indistinct speech that entered through the pointed arch at the end of the garden, carrying with it that soothing, earthy tang of reality.

-Chapter 6 Continues-

Chapter End Notes

These things just keep getting bigger and bigger with each upload, don't they? I thought I had settled on roughly 20,000 words per part, but this one stretched out to almost 25,000.

I expect the third one to be significantly shorter, but if my previous estimations are anything to go by, it might just wind up crossing the 30,000 barrier for all I know. Who can even say at this point, honestly.

Guess we'll have to wait and see.

Until next time!

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