Zokugawa
by Nobli

Summary

Set in an Edo era Japanese setting. The newly established Lionheart shogunate faces the end of its long term of peace and industrialization when it is challenged by a fast approaching and threatening army led by clan Big from the west. Our Hero; a daughter of the newly established Hopps clan forms a plan in light of this threat. She is sent to retrieve an old, legendary samurai warrior who may well turn the tides of the oncoming war before it even begins.

-Completed-

Chapter 2 Updated 7/24/2017
Prelude To War

Chapter Summary

Our adventure begins at a war council hosted just off the homestead of clan Hopps land, war hosts are prepared and marched and plans are hatched.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amazing art by Red-Velvet-Panda of the two main characters.
Can't stress how awesome this piece is with the two protagonists from the series.

http://red-velvet-panda.tumblr.com/

Go over and share some love with this great artist that helps bring a visual to this story.

Chapter 1: Prelude To War

Fourteenth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth Year Under The Bogo Shogunate.

October Fourteenth, Fall, 1623. Western Burrows, Kozuke Province.

It was a tense moment, the power of multiple provinces all seated under the large tent. Powerful retainers of lands, daimyos vested in regal kimono fitting of their vast wealths and militant powers. All were barely more than nameless, faceless servants at the two most powerful figures under the canvas roof that day.

"How didn’t we see this coming Bogo?" the harsh, booming voice of the most powerful mammal in Japan; Emperor Leodore Lionheart, a tall and powerful lion. The only creature within their borders with the position and status to speak in such a manner to the Shogun of Japan; Bogo, the very same large water buffalo that had been the reason for his ascendance to the throne some twenty years prior. Nearly two decades since the final end of the long hereditary rule of Emperor Swinton, the long lived line of a pig emperor that no longer served the interests of its people. Lionheart was not the same in any sense, claiming no spiritual connection with the gods yet acting in respect to them more than the prior Swinton empire before it by the end of the era of the Bellwether Shogunate.

"Our spies are still preoccupied with the rumored groups instigating revolt along the northern fiefs." Shogun Bogo replied with a calmer, respectful demeanor despite the impressive display of teeth shown throughout the emperors maw in a displeased grit. An act of anger that was not reserved for the higher families, but was understood in the interests of the discussion. “With winter arriving early this year, we weren't expecting open rebellion from the west. Lionheart-dono,” Bogo ended with a bow, prostrating himself in place of his failures in this singular matter. Judy sat just beside her father, Daimyo Stewart of clan Hopps. A peasantry family until the revolt, where their gamble in supporting the rebellion of Bogo and Lionheart payed off in their current place. Granted dominion over the fertile and rich lands of Kozuke from the clan before them that supported the defense of the Bellwether Shogunate who were suppressed after its fall. They were the first and still only rabbit clan to claim the ranks of nobility in the history of their nation. Looking around it was still common to see expressions of distaste at the presence of her family in that meeting of generations old samurai clans. A glance at her father reminded her to straighten her posture and match his stoic and authoritative expression that matched that of any daimyo there.
"Two weeks, I can have my army in place holding the road on the border of Kozuke." Bogo began eying the map as the deflated emperor collected himself. The subject of their discussion from what Judy had gathered in sparse moments amongst the chaos was visible on the geographical representation of Japan in front of them. The large map sat at the center of the formed square of sitting nobles, denoted the invading force that threatened Bogo and Lionheart. Warlord Big of the same named clan; Daimyo of the far western Aki province had declared war on the Emperor and the Shogun. Allied with clan Fangmeyer; the rich and power tiger clan that ruled Yamashiro in central western Japan. Tertiary forces such as clan Delgato that ruled Tanba, a neighbor of the tiger clan along with dozens of loyal vassals in the large arctic wolf clans of Nagato and Bingo to the far west marched an impressive force of soldiers to the call of war.

"With the ashigaru (foot soldiers) of Kozuke we can hold the road using the natural fortification of the Burrows to repel them. We’ll need the aid of our allies throughout the northern and central regions of Japan but with them we should easily claim victory." Bogo said confidently as he gestured to herself and her father, Stu bowing slightly in respect quickly followed by herself. It was true, however the suddenness of warlord Bigs march was the greatest disadvantage. It left them very little time to prepare for his attack making any allies that replied to their call for war a toss up of if they could arrive in time. The position of Kozuke was a prime piece of land, bolstered by mountains to the north and west of its borders with the south leading directly to Musashi, capital province of their nation with Zootopia; the largest and most impressive city of Japan where Lionheart ruled with the task of handling its interests with the rest of the world. Managing trade with other nations and acting as their nations ambassador. The east was their strongest ally, for whom they were eternal vassals to Shimotsuke; ruled by clan Bogo whose head ruled Japan's internal interests as its military leader as the Shogun of Japan. Given this it was understandable that her home would become the center of the war with the west, the newly minted road connecting the west to their central place in japan being the primary way that warlord Big would march on them along the Nakasendo Highway.

"Archers from Echigo could be here within a week." Bogo continued, the denoted archers of the north central provinces once held legendary status. Clan Bellwether; still ruling Echigo after their defeat from the previous war was spared suppression for their honor in defeat, their promise of aid that was tested time and again in their high taxes and aid in helping fight the remaining loyalists to the fallen empire they once bolstered. Now their aid called in again as a powerful force for the defeat of the encroaching army. Their march to their aid would be along the Nikko Kaido highway, a similar but impressively minted highway that allowed their nation an unfettered access to the whole of japan. The highways that were in place for generations became a staple of Lionhearts first rule to help unify Japan, allowing impressive trade that improved the wealth of so many nations with the ease of access of wheeled carts that transported goods before the farms of the prey nations of the east and central regions of japan with the docks of the western provinces of japan. A true unity for the first time in their history that benefited the two one competing classes of mammals within Japan allowing both to flourish. Judy remembered learning a great deal under the tutelage of Shogun Bogo when she was taken as a Ward after the war, a long lived tradition to prove loyalty. Learning a great deal from the powerful clans teachers about what it meant to be a noble family herself and several siblings became learned and intelligent aspects for their clans. Judy herself aimed to impress herself as equal to the ancient samurai families and excelled in aspects of war and strategy.

"Lord Big managed to march an army of soldiers from as far west as Nagato right under our noses?" The emperor demanded explanation for the failure of the vast network of information normally
affixed to the Shogun of Japan. But Bogos expression told his old friend in the enraged emperor of something worsening. “What else?”

“We received reports from several vassals within Harima, Bizen and Settsu that the current position of lord Bigs host won’t allow them to prepare to march to our aid.” Bogo began reaching his hoof out just beside him. As quiet as to be invisible one of his servants placed a scroll in it as the Shogun offered it directly to the emperor who took it before opening it on top of the map just at his knees. “They all corroborate the same information, Bigs army is well managed. Fresh foreign steels make up their weapons and armor, Impressively forged they also have stockpiled poultry and fish that coincide with their recent influx of salt to preserve their meats for war rations. Their utterly prepared for war or even a siege.” Bogo ended off with a downtrodden expression. The emperor read over the message that Judy readily recognized belonging to the old fox clan of Wilde, ruling samurai family of Harima, a southern-central province of western Japan known for their trade, owning the most impressive docks in all of Japan.

“How large can we estimate their army?”

The whole of the room was both quiet and boisterous as the sat nobles began estimating to themselves and each other in hushed whispers at the combined forces they faced.

“Well, our reports claim he brings with him the resources of Aki, with an estimated six hundred thousand koku. We confirmed that wolves from the tundras of Suo and Nagato join him at about three hundred thousand koku between them.” Snarlov Howlet began, one of the few faces recognized as Judys formal teacher in Bushido and later at his family's prestigious dojo of the Moon Fang style where she was later licensed as a fully fledged samurai. “Also clan Delgato of Tanba and clan Fangmeyer of Yamashiro promise assets to his war effort. Hes gathering their armies as he marches across Mimasaka to consolidate his soldiers in Kyoto before the final march across the Nakasendo. Combined they make up over two million koku, we estimate at least forty thousand samurai and an unknown number of ashigaru” The rooms quiet was gone now as the nobles fumbled to impressive their numbers that paled in comparison to the imposing force. Howlet bowed his head to the Shogun to responded in kind to the loyal retainer of the honorable clan representative. Howlet from Judy's time under his training she had learned was the brother to Daimyo Snarlov; current ruling head of Settsu, a reasonably powerful province that neighbored Harima, both prospering mutually as allied canine regions. Quietly was an understood hierarchy between wolf clans of Japan that went even beyond their political ones, as the western wolf clans were ruled by an Alpha even amongst their Daimyo so too did Snarlov rule surrounding clans as the Alpha of the forest based wolf samurai of western-central Japanese families.

Judy could still remember when Howlet himself put his name on the line to give Judy the chance to train at the Moon Fang Dojo of Settsu, a very secretive school of learning that was priorly reserved only for allied wolf and fox clans and one very loyal panther clan. If not for his history as a skilled warrior and his unmistakable honor Judy would not herself have come as far in the art of kenjutsu as she was now. Judy took the moment of the loud voices clamoring to adjust their military resources thought over the regions numbers. The western central cervine clans lacked financial resources, the
one extremely wealthy clans had large woods that supplied the whole of Japan with wood. At a time they maliciously lorded their lands abilities to cultivate various lumbers over the western provinces whose density of predators relied on rice and fish, the later reliant on fishing boats. It was over two-hundered years ago if she recalled correctly that invasion of the main lands just west across the sea that forced a unity of predators and prey within Japan. Predator families both famished at the expensive costs of wood and rice chose not to slow or infringe on the invaders that lead to the massive loss of land for the prey Shogunate of Bellwether, even losing Kyoto; prior capital of Japan in Yamashiro. Forced to accept the demands put in place by the proud predator clans they were ascended to that of the same level of respect as prey ones of central and eastern Japan.. In trade they were granted fairer prices for rice and wood, the later for the building of vassals to challenge invading fleet, making predator ships the backbone of Japans navy. In respect to their new understanding of one another at the end of that war the Capital of Zootopia was formed at the new seat of power in Musashi as a testament to what the two classes of predator and prey could accomplish together and the old seat of Kyoto was granted to the clan of Fangmeyer now becoming the center of trade throughout Japan.

The down side was now as the visible deer lord's off the right side of the sitting nobles no longer commanded great wealth having no other productions of their lands to trade for. This also meant they lacked a large enough population to supply a steady flow of soldiers to the war effort. This would later be how the Bellwether Shogunate fell, as steadily increased taxes of the western predator provinces that did not match the costs of prey clans instigated the now impressive economy of the predator clans which had boomed at their legendary artisans and trade. The likes of which no longer tolerated unfair prey control, several prey clans also found themselves thriving off the trade caused from the predator clans and sided with them in their rebellion against the unjust Bellwether Shogunate and their puppet Emperor; Swinton.

Three hundred and forty thousand koku (Food stipends, rough form of food based currency.)

Judy estimated their own personal income to be impressive given their status as a first generation of nobles. The Shoguns own province of Shimotsuke commanded an impressive seven hundred thousand koku, both provinces dodging recent droughts that were afflicted across northern provinces. To her right the lord of Shinano an old looking Antelope; Antlerson who bolstered a large open region at the center of Japan maybe forty thousand koku, a modest income the lord commanded.

fourteen thousand samurai. Just over one and a half million koku.

Judy estimated as she sought through her memory of the available lords around their war council. The vast majority of their resources from the Shogun and her own clan's lands. Compared with their enemies estimated two and a half million with substantially more samurai and likely as great a gap in their number of foot soldiers it wasn’t looking like a well chanced war. Judy set her chin into her paw, furrowed brow she looked over the map hoping for something to show itself. Years of study on war and strategy and a talent for it that was almost prodigal from what her teachers told her she hoped in that moment would give her some form of insight. Between the rebellions caused from food shortages in the north and sluggish messengers along the unfinished eastern highways didn’t leave an
impressive chance they could arrive on time. If the archer clans of Bellwether and Salazar would be
the biggest assets given the fortifications along central Japan. History had shown predators
predisposition to closely ranged weapons, no mistake in their natural proclivity for swords had them
relatively unchallenged in that field of combat. Another thing that set Judy's skill with a sword aloft
the otherwise spear or bow based soldiers of the prey provinces. Other clans like the Kenago
wielding rhino and elephant clans of Mutsu would also aid them but again unknown if they would
arrive in time. Central Japanese provinces along the incomplete highway of Tokaido at the south of
central Japan also weren't likely to respond quickly to calls for aid, at the edge of winter and along
the most mountainous portion of Japan they were the least likely to arrive in time-

The bickering grew louder, louder still at the impossible forces they all faced, no one able to offer
any serious solution.

“If I may, my lords.”

But again the loud voices of larger mammals drowned out the smaller rabbit, Bogo and the emperor,
Howlet and her father among the few faces that were quiet in their contemplation as they denoted her
call to attention.

“If I may, my lords!” She stated in as loud a respectful tone would allow. The room began to quiet
finally, Judy noticing the alarmingly heavy stare of the emperor and how disorienting it was at the
tense pressure she realized she just put on herself. Lionheart set his gaze on the militant leader just off
his shoulder.

“This is the rabbit you spoke of before?”

“Yes, ambitious and as skilled a sword-mammal as I have seen.” Bogo offered with a curt nod, an
accepting hum emanating from the emperor as he returned that same cautioning stare at Judy. Judy
felt a small semblance of warming pride cross her countenance at the complimentary words the
Shogun shared in her regard. The emperor motioned broadly across the map, gesturing for her to
continue.

“Alright, what do you advise?”

Judy took to standing on the map, hoping the act was not recognized as any form of disrespect with
her smaller size compared to the larger mammals “A challenge, a duel.” Judy began trying to match
her father's earlier, proud and confident expression. Instantly she regretted it by the swiftly returning
rage in the eyes of that lion Emperor.
“This is what you bring to my war council Bogo?!” Lionheart boomed at his shogun with expressed disdain and clenched serrated teeth all on display. The first predator emperor was a difficult example of social etiquettes that were rarely needed by prey. Such Judy seeing Bogos unwavering stoicism with his sword resting unmoving at his side. She realized her own instinctual move for her sword at the display of danger in front of her and stood again despite the sudden flux of fear she felt. She hoped her action was not witnessed, all eyes still prevalently sitting on the Shogun.

“You told me she was eager to prove herself but this is sheer arrogance.” He continued returning to looking at Judy, anger bearing from his expression as she omitted none of her tact in maintaining as much stoicism as Bogo when she bowed low and respectfully. “Warlord Big did not march upwards of forty thousand predators clad in armor across more than eight provinces to allow a single duel to decide this war.” Lionheart continued, himself not being mistake for the killing machine he was. Even as an emperor now, all could remember that he was not idle in claiming the throne as a general in the rebellion that seated him there. His volume was enough to make her frame shake in response despite her best efforts. Despite his rage Judy had to remind herself that to date no emperor had acted as sympathetically in his soft pawed handling of politics having secured one of the longest lasting peace, in their nation's history. His act of not suppressing the former shogunates clan of Bellwether was a living example of this, demanding so few seppuku (ritual suicide) of his enemies. This act having unified the nation after that bloody war and the whole of Japan benefiting financially at this move. Judys voice was trembling with her forehead to the floor, fearful and quaking as she tried again in a frail attempt to add confidence and volume to her tone.

“What?”

There was still warning in the emperor's tone as she was urged to continue in caution. “I don’t mean to prove myself my lord.” She managed standing back up but with none of her previous confidence.

“Continue… carefully,” Lionheart began in contemplation before looking over to Bogo.

“Judy of clan Hopps,” was the response he found there.

“Judy-san,” he said in a finally calmed tone. Fearing his piercing gaze and its effect on herself she walked the map again near its center.

“With the new roads giving warlord Bigs’ army the chance to approach quickly, it would take him right Kozuke as well as its capital; The Burrows, our Burrows.” She gestured to her familiar home lands, then to her father for emphasis. She looked to her father finding the assuring expression of a parent that helped steel herself as she looked back at the Emperor. “Lord Big won’t allow his army to be stopped in its ambition for a single duel. However the armies he has are a host of the predator
lords of the west. I mean no disrespect when I say this; but predators are protective of their lands.” She said looking up, finally making sure to tow the line carefully at the emperor’s expression. “They’re also respectful of its borders and fiercely honorable.” She proclaimed, gesturing to a few of the predator nobles present. Where the prey lords in the north and center of Japan held large scopes of land, the main of their incomes in farmlands and their respective produce. Predator lands were opposite in this, their natural competitive nature meant more fiercely challenged borders and their incomes came largely from their artisans working metal, building or otherwise. A diverse difference in the two classes cultures as prey could more easily symbiotically thrive where predators held more honor bound understanding of borders. If any part of her speech could be taken as stroking of the powerful leaders edo, it did little more then deflate his earlier temperament. “Lord Big won’t stop his plans for siege of Zootopia castle at your capital Lionheart-dono… but,” she continued carefully, standing taller as she continued. “If challenged to a duel by my father, the Daimyo of Kozuke. He would be honor bound to accept. The duel would dictate his armies right to march across our lands. Even if he wishes to cross, should he ifnore our formal request,” she waved over the map again, casting the western part of the map in her broad gesture. “Support and respect of the very lords that make up his army might very well dissolve instantly at his act of dishonor.” She ended looking proudly back at the emperor. Feeling confident in that moment of summarizing her tactic with her knowledge of their roots. “Hmmm,” the wholly simple but still remarkably impressed tone of the lion emperor echoed from his throat as he looked over her culminating plan with growing interest.

Lionheart smiled with a proud grin as he looked over the map, catching onto what she was saying. She continued at this realization, “Should he agree and lose the duel, he will be forced to take the southern route, which has yet to receive its finished roads.” She trailed a knowing finger down the regions outside the border of her own province. “He'll have to backtrack through eastern Shinano and northern Kai along the mountainous route, without the benefit of roads.” Judy drew a dull, clawed digit over the incomplete southern highway of Tokaido, the path resulted in warlord Big taking the slow mountainous region. His other choice was through Echigo which was unlikely since their armies of archers and walled forts were the most lethal thing to predator vanguards. The rougher untended roads weren’t very forgiving for padded paws over clovine species either.

Lionheart looked back with a grin at Bogo who looked slack jawed in response, “I stand mistaken, a finely assembled student you have Bogo-sama. I should never have doubted you.” He turned back to Judy bowing slightly in respect to which Judy was taken aback for a second before bowing lower in response instinctively. “And I will remember to think more highly of you in the future, given your insights young Hopps.”

“Could that plan work?” A voice emanating somewhere among the assembled council of nobles from the available central provinces.

It took Bogo a moment to collect himself from his stupor. “It… it could, yes your holiness.” He said to Leodore, mulling it over, the rough texture of his cloven hoof carefully resting against his chin. “It would rely heavily on winning the duel. Judy is correct in that he cannot refuse, unless the host of predator lords with him is less respectful of the territory of prey lands. The duel itself is a gamble on the basis of raw skill,” he looked over to the ambitious rabbit herself still standing at the center of the map, seeming to own it in an aura of her own glowing pride. “You’re skilled, one of the best I have
seem. But lord Big will bring with him the most skilled of many provinces. Predator soldiers and Samurai as well as an unknown number of Shinobi (Ninja),” she couldn’t help the instinctual sink in her mood in response.

“Too much relies on this fight, Judy-sama.” He said with a low finality to it. “As skilled as you are, far too many lives rely on the victory for your first real duel.” He said, Judy’s broad smile and tall ears sank as her moment in the lime light seemed to dissipate in front of her. “Master Orsa.” He said, everyone in the room recognizing that name. Word of the legend themselves something impossible to mistake. The female grizzly bear was a vaunted soldier of the very rebellion that placed Lionheart as the new emperor from the previous shogunate. She was a legend that had no fewer than eighteen confirmed victories in duels against the finest samurai of their era.

The number of lives claimed from her front line assaults during the short lived war never counted, but estimates alone made her the most lethal mammal of a generation. “Lord Big will likely use that wolf I heard about, a ‘vicious wandering ronin covered in the blood of their enemies.’ I know close to nothing about them, rumors mostly, but he has been within that region for a while, and if the money is good enough.” Bogo had already long since entered a state of planning.

“The same unknown mammal that killed Ramses, Doug?” Lionheart asked in a calmed tone, confirming it.

The bovine high-lord nodded in response, “the very same. Lord Big has the funds to get someone like that on his side.”

Douglas Ramses. Judy didn’t need much to stoke the memory of the legendary prey samurai, a large ram who specialized, if not religiously, dueled exclusively predator samurai. He had even survived as many as four assassination attempts if rumors were even half accurate. A legend to the prey provinces and a thorn in the side of supposed predator superiority when it came to the art of bushido. Word spread quickly on the outset of his eighth victory over a skilled samurai from Settsu, he was headed to northern Etchu province in north central Japan to challenge master Orsa herself to a duel to the death, finally proving a prey superiority. Only to be bested in a duel en route to her own dojo by some nameless wolf ronin who was simply passing through, a remarkably unbelievable story given the rams growing retinue of feats. Claims to whatever end were unimportant as the ram lost this duel, witness to no fewer than six mammals as the rumors went who corroborated the story of his bloody defeat. Word was that not only had he lost, but lost to breathtaking speed and ferocity, his cleaved frame a fount of gore. Judy couldn’t help but slouch inwardly understanding the need for a more trained paw to challenge those odds. Her skill was beyond contestation as far as the few duels she had sparring but never lethal like the bouts noted by the veterans she imagined. Each time she proved her skill, unquestionably time and again.

“Judy?” She failed to hear.

“Judy?” The second voice asked breaking her from the inward thought and stupor. Turning she recognized her father gesturing with a worried expression. Turning back the questioning gaze of the whole of Lionheart’s present advisors and council on her.
“Sorry... lords, I was lost in thought. Please excuse my thoughtlessness.” She bowed again to which both Bogo and Lionheart answered in kind with their own bows, equally measured of their status over her own.

“I was asking if you would accept the responsibility and honor of taking my request to Orsa yourself.” Lionheart said with the offer of such an important task surprising her further, her mood perked up immediately.

“Of course my emperor, I would be honored,” she bowed respectively. The gesture he used to dismiss the present individuals was unmistakable, the stresses which weighed on the small rabbit just moments earlier offered no protest when she stepped from the map, sidling alongside her father as the two exited the tent.

The sun bore down on them, brighter then she recalled before entering the tent. Tension released after only a few steps with an exasperated sigh, the two walked the distance for a while longer, sitting over near some trees.

“Well that was certainly something. You really dove in there, and the emperor was really impressed! There you go making us rabbits look better and better each day.” Stu said, his ever warming smile in place. Yet her father had earned his place through tact and personable but charmed trade as well as siding and providing for the rebellion shy of two decades prior. Proud as she and many rabbits were he himself believed Judy’s ambitious nature and skill spoke just as strongly to dissipate the stereotypes of them as a ‘species of peasants’ that they fought fervently against.

“The looks on those lords faces when Bogo spoke so highly of you. And the Emperor himself asking you to deliver his message to master Orsa for a duel of your own planning. Just... wow! Jude the dude, you’re giving me plenty proud things to tell your mother when I get home. Course you’re going to have to head right out for Etchu, roads should take you west through Shinano pretty quickly, but the ones straddling Hida won’t be as quick. If you didn’t have a rabbit's speed I would say you would be returning just alongside warlord Bigs’ army on your way back. But, well than you’re the fastest one I’ve ever known, easy peasy.” He embraced his daughter, a left arm across her shoulder bringing her to his side in a hug. He made a gruff noise shaking her a bit “Bear hug!” they both chuckled.

“Alright, I’ll go get some rations and provisions for your travel. I’ll make sure to get it all confirmed and checked up with the Shogun before you head out. Make sure not to make a joke of ya by sending you out without being sure.” He hopped to before her own thoughts could finally catch up with just how much had happened in a short amount of time.

Thinking back on it, life seemed to have moved so rapidly lately. Judy had to admit the situation gave her as best a chance to prove herself as she could hope. Skilled but untested in a true fight, but the emperor and shogun themselves seemed confident in saddling her with the duty of bringing their greatest warrior to field in a duel against the oncoming war party, conflict was likely but in a more prepared fashion.

Once lord Big heads home for the winter, true war will begin in spring.

She thought to herself, still fearing should she get ahead of her own plans. It was a shortcoming she recognized, like the story of the white hare of Inaba counting the shark clan as he used them as a bridge. Like the story, getting ahead of herself lead to as many mistakes as she could fear for. But for now she had a goal, a mission of actual importance and she intended fully to approach it with the same tenacity and ambition she expected of herself.
NaZoWriMo Submission.

Submission Title: Zokugawa

Author Submission Name: Nobli

Forgot to edit this into the primary summary. This was written for the NaZoWriMo event held by ZNN. Written entirely within he month of November, the goal 50,000 words in that single month of free flow writing. I completed just north of 70,000 words however the difficult one I am I spent half that month doing editing because I'm to self conscious to release a chapter without at least an alpha read and an alpha edit. Shout out to Shadow who hosted the event who gave me some links that helpped me with assets and social interactions in an Edo Japanese setting.

Pages 8
Words 4,139
Characters 23,712
Characters excluding spaces 19,615
Message for a Legend

Chapter Summary

Judy takes to relaxing at the beginning of her journey, the calm before the storm so to speak. Her plan and a chance to prove her value to her shogun. Knowing the odds and risks she takes the matter to heart, determination set she makes for the masters dojo. Will she find what she seeks is the only question though.

Chapter 2: Message for a Legend

Fourteenth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Fourteenth, Fall, 1623. Edge of the Burrows, Kozuke.

Other than the capital and caravans not even as far as Kyoto to the west Judy couldn’t recall herself ever having strayed far from the burrows. Training with the shoguns own soldiers within his lands of Shimotsuke was the furthest she had been away from home. Her journey now however -as she looked over the map that depicted her travel route- was much greater in scope.

“The last of the merchants selling koku in the western provinces will give you transport, cutting a good distance of your travels. Once you reach the bear shrines along the highway in Shinano, you’ll know to turn north.” Stu informed her confident in the route he had made several times before whenever business took him in that direction.

An intimidating prospect but an exciting one knowing this was her first real responsibility, a great one given the cost of failure. “Highwaymen are rare lately but keep on your toes. Trust in your ears.” Stu said with a wary quieted tone. Judy rolled her eyes in response. Despite how far he had come and even directly benefited from a predator emperor -the very reason of his families attained nobility- Stu still held to old fears. Judy had known since the recent economic boom that the predator provinces had experienced from foreign trade that highwaymen and robbers practically vanished overnight.

“Daimyo Big is a crafty one. Word has it he wields a pack of ninja at his command, so you be sure to make the trip before his goons catch word alright?” He asked her pointedly. She smiled at how childish he seemed to treat the situation, the mirrored comparison to his speech and how similar it was to one about her simply playing with friends just down the road made her giggle.
“I’ll be fine father. Just a quick run to pick up a master samurai, have her win a duel, end a war.” She laughed Stu warmly smiling before breaking into his own deeply bellowed laugh.

“All right you, serious talk now.” His countenance changed to match his serious tone. They both mulled over the map, the caravan of traders would take her along Nakasendo towards Kyoto. The very end of that path was where lord Big assembled his armies on the former capitals doorstep, their travel would be slow in comparison but once they made march along that same path back towards Zootopia it wouldn’t take them long. Judy would stop two thirds of the way taking a northern route to Orsas Dojo in Echuu. Once she left the cobbled highways, the dirt paths would be slower depending on how they would be maintained.

The decline of Echuu’s incomes meant less mammals along the paths to maintain shrines and footpaths, without signs she could easily get lost along the forked paths that branched into scattered farmsteads within the region. The lord of Echuu; an old grizzly, Judy heard had distant relations to master Orsas own family line. This was where travel was slowest, along the winding roads and without regular supply stations like the highway still did with funding from the Shogun’s own incomes. Judys pack had an assortment of dried vegetables and some rice with a bamboo canteen for water. Stu went into great detail, Judy nodding at each descriptive turn she needed to recall to stay on track. A wrong turn here or there, he showed could add hours to her trip. She was also informed that once lord Big’s army took to the highway that caravans in either direction would cease till this conflict was resolved, meaning no wagons home to shorten the return travel. As any caravans could be seen as spies or suppliers of rations on either side, putting them at risk, most merchants or rest stops would elect instead to wait out the conflict. Since Lionhearts establishment of his shogunate it was the most peaceful the regions had been in hundreds of years but most merchants predated this peace knowing how to handle trade during war.

“Now, the shogun’s spies don’t have a lot on them. But lord Big’s ninja appear to mostly consist of Foxes.”

“Foxes?” Judy asked with a surprised expression turning her head. “Foxes are among the most distinguishable and distrusted mammals around. How and why would they be the comprising force of shinobi?” She asked in honest confusion. The idea just seemed impossible, her father shrugging in response a similar confusion.

“Don’t know, foxes have always been good at that sort thing. But they are very skilled from what we know so don’t take them lightly and keep an eye out for red foxes and arctic foxes primarily.” He nodded knowingly, Judy was sure this wouldn’t dissuade his would be minor prejudices against their species.
“Now’s the time, can’t lose anymore daylight.” Her father hugged her again, poorly mimicking a
growl as he bear hugged her. The horse that lead the caravan of three carts waited aside the road. He
nodded at the two already aware of the importance of what he transported. Originally having no
intentions of taking the highway knowing what was at the other end. But Stu had informed him of
the importance, he quickly agreed at his own risk to help and of course fair pay. Jumping up into the
back of the drawn the cart, it jolted forward the wheels creaked to life against the highway, “Here we
go.” Judy let out a stressed sigh waving at her slowly fading father, he waved back for as long as he
could before his attention was pried from the leaving cart by servants and nobles vying for his say on
whatever matter they needed addressed.

As the distance grew, she noted the changing in the surrounding area that she barely recognized as
her precious burrows. She would cross an assortment of fiefs that were some of the calmest
farmlands in the country given their proximity to highways and the capital. But what she saw in
passing was more mammals of every size than she ever recalled, swords and armor among them
‘War’ the word crossing her mind in a nervous but excited fact.

Fifteenth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.
October Fifteenth, Fall, 1623. Nakasendo Highway, Shinano.

The prattle of the wheels against the cobble road and the beast of burden who hauled it, a horse
seemed unphased at his own hoofed steps adding to the rhythmic noise. Another day or two was
expected, though their speed had been increased given the gravity of the mission that the caravan had
been employed to complete. The quiet had been quickly debilitating to Judy; who was so used to a
loud, uproarious household of claustrophobic bunny culture.

“Have you been west before?” She asked already knowing the answer but expecting its segway into
the much needed conversation with her clovine companion.

He chuckled in a deep booming laugh that was common of a mammal his size. “Maybe hundreds of
times over the years. Watched it change not unlike our roads.” He said almost proudly.

“What's it like?”
“That is kinda hard to answer… impressive?” he said assuredly.

“Its no secret the predator provinces have benefited greatly from their ships. Access to trade in other countries has… improved life in the western provinces.” He said in an awe struck tone.

“How so?”

“Well my father and well even his father before him spoke about how savage the lands predators had were. Shoddy buildings since wood for repairs and building were sparse and expensive. Predators prioritized their ships, food ya know.” He said somberly, she herself hated that history of abuse the predators had suffered. Previous generations of prey lords abusing their lands fertile soils to sell both wood and food to the predator provinces for obscene costs. “I’m sure you heard about the prior poverty, famine, in fighting. I saw some art of back then depicting the battles, bloody wars between neighbors over simple things.” He spoke in a vivid tone. “But then the invasions happened. The emperor had no navy, save for the predators. So prejudice gave way to humility. Shogunate ordered the shipping of wood for predator ships. Predators earned respect with each conflict. Once the war was over they had more ships than needed for fishing. Large ships meant for longer excursions.”

“Trade?” She asked though knowing from her prior studies of the previous centuries.

“Trade.” He confirmed. “Having captured, questioned and even learned some of the foreign languages predator nobles began trading, gained access to weapons, arts, cultures and resources we could never even begin to imagine. Their towns, buildings and citizens all benefited. They gained medicinal knowledges from China, missionaries brought new religions, foreign building methods. They sold copper, silver, gold and the quality work of their smiths and artisans. Famine and in fighting disappeared in a single war.”

Judy knew this story but never had heard it from a mammal that frequented the very mass of the story itself. The once cruel economic system witnessed had turned on its heels. Predators no longer depended on prey farmlands for rice, soy or rich crops or their wood when cheaper and stronger was available across the ocean. Predators lands grew healthy in just a short number of years.

“Kind of inverted, still fewer predators than prey in their provinces. But a lot more than due east. Very different.” He said seeming to think on his own words.

“What do you mean different?”
“Well, things are still awkward between predators and prey out east, very traditional.”

Judy full well knew what that meant, where the western regions saw a change in their culture due to
the influx of foreign interaction, prey regions opposed this adamantly. One such thing was the new
missionaries which brought several beneficial things from the aforementioned medicines to even
religions.

One of greatest to note was the introduction of Buddhism that she just couldn’t wrap her mind
around. The idea of forsaking their traditional gods and ancestors felt wrong to her and very
disrespectful but the way it wove itself into societies to the west was unilateral with their changing
economy.

“Have you heard of Ramses?” She asked the seemingly unrelated question.

“Ramses? Ramses… Ramses…” He mulled over the name for a while gaining a silence as he
thought. “Douglas Ramses? That sword-mammal a while back? What was that five or six years?”

“Yea, you're well traveled, know the world better than me I’d wager. Hear about him, how he
died…” She layed back in the moving cart among the twine bagged shipments that were intended to
camouflage the caravans true motives.

“Yea, actually met the guy once. Can’t say I cared for him much. He went about from village to
village challenging any predator samurai. Killed a lot from what I hear. He was on the road to
challenge Orsa when he lost to a vicious little wolf.”

“Yea seems to be how people hear it. I hear that wolf is likely who warlord Big will call on for the
duel.”

“Yea, appearances can be deceiving.” He spoke with a knowing tone.

“Huh, what do you mean?” She said sitting up peering over the edge of the wagon towards her
companion. Ahead two more wagons another pulled by horse and the one in lead by a large mule.

“Well from what I hear from mammals that witnessed the match. The wolf was smaller than most.
They were also a bit fluffy from what I was told. Guess that makes sense putting on a thick coat for
the winter season. Was early that year I think? Anyway, heard they were a slender unassuming wolf,
sharp muzzle maybe a female?”
Judy mused over the described features. The image had slowly began to form in her head of the expected duel. Two legendary mammals, Orsa the master samurai who fought alongside Bogo and Lionheart to defeat the old Swinton shogunate against this mysterious vicious wolf as she had been described.

“Vicious, I've heard how she fights described like that a couple times now?”

“Hm? Oh yea, the fight with Ramses, from what I was told he didn’t just lose, he was slaughtered. The wolf didn’t fight with any known sword style. Wielded two swords even, clumsy but effective.”

“A ‘fount’ they described it to me. Bloody mess, heard the wolf's fur was stained from the mess a ‘vivid contrast to their eyes’ a guy told me. Once the story gets along the routes it gets really romanticised.”

“Fights that lasted a few blinks get big words like ‘fount’ when most of the time it's just two mammals cleaving each other no different then when we were all savages.” The horse sighed with a shrug. Judy tried to hold her tongue at the prospect, she believed the honorable fights were more mature than savage conflicts.

“I like to think it’s an improvement. Predators don’t consume the defeated like savages, they don’t hunt them down or kill them unaware. Its two honorable mammals deciding the victor on merit of skill and skill alone. Species, religion, class, gender. Doesn’t matter in the end.” She gestured with her hands imagining her own past duels though never to the death as a true duel with the edicts of bushido.

“Yea, guess your right. Don’t mean to offend, just in times like this it feels like a mighty big waste for us all to still be out killing each other.” He said, judy could feel the conversation coming to its end and the quiet rhythm of hoofs and wheels would continue on.

__________________________

Eighteenth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Eighteenth, Fall, 1623. Edge of Grizzlemaw Village, Etchu.
Judy missed the same sounds from days prior, the conversation with the horse companion were gone. She had long since left the caravan at the designated location, hefting her pack as no more inns or food stands dotted the more rural path into Etchu.

She traveled light footed along the routes, having only taken wrong turns a couple of times, despite her mistakes she made good time. The local farmers were very kind and directed her even a short cut here or there to make up for lost time. Night of her fourth day and she made it, the quiet small village of Etchu. Modest, small with barely any modern buildings. Shrines dotted the paths with active mammals out and about, early harvested fields seemed to agree with a fast approaching winter. Nights had begun to grow cold as she traveled, the low lands granting her a noticeable chill.

Entering an inn that straddled the road leading into town, Grizzlemaw she believed the town named, in honor of the generations of bear masters who occupied the dojo at the center of the small valley. Tired steps brought her to the counter of the large building given her size.

“Excuse me.” Judy asked the attending mammal at the front. The brown furred rabbit turned an instinctive smile forming where a tired one was prior “Hm? Oh a patron this late in the season?” She gave judy a quick look over noticing her sword to her side along with her more expensive appearance to her own. “You need a room for the night?” She asked, taking a moment thinking on the late hour it best she approach Orsa in the morning despite the hurry the moon implied itself well past midnight.

With a nod and payment in full the weary rabbit was lead and slumped into a soft welcoming bed, large for her size. Compared with her couple of cold nights in the rough, the warmth offered quickly drew her into a deep sleep.

__________________________

Nineteenth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Nineteenth, Fall, 1623. Orsas Dojo, Grizzlemaw Village, Etchu.

The morning sun crested the hills surrounding the small river bound valley. At the edge of town that same hill housed Orsas dojo, with the fiery orbs rays gleaming from its tiled roof. Likely a decision in its placement Judy nodded affirmingly to herself. Where buildings in town had been made accessible for bears this one had been constructed for them from the ground up in honor of its generations of practiced masters. She approached through the fog offered by the early morning sun, the cold chill competed against the warming of the outer layer of her haori jacket.

“Maybe she’ll let me train here after this is all over.” She wondered, the building had early morning lanterns lit and it was meticulous in its cleanliness. Ears standing tall, the steeply inclined, old looking
cobbled stairs offered no contesting noise, drowned out by a loud curdling stream which paralleled the footpath. An elegant scene in the way the light reflected off the running river and the dew that collected amongst the morning plants. The stream tapered off in the opposite direction as she approached the entrance, accompanying it was an eerie silence.

“Hello?” Judy called into the large building, a beat past with no response.

“Hello, master Orsa, I was sent to speak with you?” She said cradling the emperors envoyed letter in paw, and again no response from either servant or student alike. The building shown signs of recent activity, clearly having been freshly cleaned that morning. All the doors were open and welcoming wafts of soft wind felt passing through the buildings open shoji doors. Judy sat on the oaken porch removing her straw sandals before entering the structure.

It was ominous to her, room by room neatly set, clean and confirmed empty one after the next as she walked the stained wood floors of the hall. Wind chimes, the only thing that broke the simple rhythm of the quieted steps she wook. Until she came to the main room itself, the only closed door in the building. Scents on the other side causing her nose to twitching in response, her approach slowed with a cold nervous understanding. She opened the door, sliding the wood framed paper shoji with some effort given its size intended for a bear master. She stepped in, eyes as focused as the rest of her on the center of the room. So much focus that she failed to hear the quieted steps behind her coming closer.

“Orsas… dead.” She muttered to herself at the cold reality.

Again she failed to notice the sounds behind her as a blackened paw set on her shoulder. Her ears shot up as she noted the claws the paw wielded, autumn colored russet fur ran up from the black being quickly concealed under blackened robes. Even masked the muzzle was unmistakable. ‘Fox’ her senses told her.
Journey’s Path

Chapter Summary

Having spent some four days traveling, Judy finally arrives at her destination. But what she finds is not what she expected. Instead her journey takes a new path, the question is if it will lead to the same destination or a far worse one.

Chapter Notes

Pages 8
Words 3,181
Characters 17,640
Characters excluding spaces 14,539

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: Journey’s Path

*Nineteenth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Nineteenth, Fall, 1623. Orsas Dojo, Grizzlemaw Village, Etchu. Edo era Japan.

“M-” Whatever the masked figure was going to say was cut off as Judy smashed her clenched paw into his muzzle. The sickening impact laid him out flat on his back before Judy could continue her train of thought.

“Aaaagh.” He whined with a congested tone holding his muzzle. Guilt began to sink in at the wincing and rolling figure. The white fabric that covered his muzzle spotting with red and the guilt deepened.

White fabric around his face, clean Dojo. I just punched a fox who was cleaning the Dojo.

Her mind caught up with her realization. Relaxing her unintended instinctual, her thoughts continued to catch up with her.
He's wearing black robes

She turned back to the urn which centered the room. Ashes, Orsas ashes, the room wafting with freshly lit incense.

I just punched a fox in mourning.

Her ears fell heavy turning back to the fox who stood slowly on wobbling legs tilting his head back to stop the bleeding.

“Thas ag no’g on the tee thegn” his congested tone worsened by the blood now likely having filled his nostrils. The second band of fabric around his head and fray of bandages around his eyes.

I just punched a blind fox.

The final deepening guilt at this realization.

“I am sooo sorry. Just surpris-I just was-I didn’t-I am SOOOO sorry.” Judy stammered rapidly between each attempted apology, moving to help the fox steady himself on his two feet. Taking his blindly reaching paw to help him finally get his bearing. He wobbled for a moment placing his arm on her shoulder his other charcoal colored digits encompassing his red stained mask.

“Ig wasg trying” He took a moment to snort and heave the smell of blood present on his breath.

“Didn’t mean to surprise you. Kept trying to talk with you, ask if you wanted some tea. Words still getting out about Orsas passing, few mammals coming by to pay their respects. Aaaaagh.” He groaned with an audible snorting noise again trying to clear the blood and rubbing at his sinuses.

“I am so sorry again.” Judy offered remaining to anchor him in place.

“How about I go get that tea.” He began for the doors.
“I can help-” She began interrupted as he waved dismissively at her offer.

“And get my nose dealt with while you pay your respects.” He gestured at the urn as he staggered off. The empty, quiet halls allowed her to hear his groaning wobbled steps long after he left, eventually her attention returned to the room.

Shaking awkwardly, fiddling between her clasped paws a long sigh of relief focusing on it now. Taking her time with the peaceful silence to kneel offering what little prayer she could for the master samurai. Legend alone was enough to know she had earned her admirations through merit of skill and effort.

Quietly she sat in prayer but this time her focus was fair, even so the fox returned with nearly silent steps. The small tray made the loudest of the available sounds with the fox now maskless small tufts of straw in his nose to hinder the bleeding.

“Let’s try this again. Would you like some tea?” He asked the emphasis showing his growing distaste for formalities. Given her introduction she could hardly fault him. Sitting across now with the mask gone she noted the scarring along his face, even with the fabric over his eyes it was clear his blindness was not given at birth.

“Thank you” weakly offered. “I’m sor-” Again she was stopped by a deft raised hand.

“You have already apologized more than a few times. My curiosity isn’t going to be sated by apologies.” He said having cast off niceties for the most part, again faultless she knew.

“A rabbit, visiting Etchu, nice but simple pattern fabric.” His ears twitched at a moment of silence. “Sword, smelt like uhhh burrows and not tides or sea water.” He smiled snapping his fingers “Clan Hopps.” He concluded confidently as he took a heavy sip of his own steaming cup. Judy sat mouth agape the encroaching silence.

“How did.” She stopped herself “Judy of clan Hopps” She took a moment to think about their short first meeting. The fox having in short order caught her scent in the dojo, felt her kimono when she helped steady him, simple patterns and embroidery, and could hear her sword within its place on her waist when she sat.

“Nick, no clan. No family name.” He offered simply with a finality in his tone. “I know foxes and rabbits don’t get along but I figured we are well past punching each other as a greeting. Unless since I’ve been here our species relations have really devolved?” He laughed a bit. The two species always had a tenuous relation since gaining sentience. Recent events between them left the two still largely tenuous.
“I… thought you were a skilled ninja trying to kill me.”

A another moment and another laugh from the fox filled the empty room. “The whole acting blind thing is a ruse! You caught me.”

“It’s true, longer story then that. Its why i’m here. I Was sent by emperor Lionheart to deliver a request for air to master Orsa.” She said with a matter of factly sort of tone.

Despite the missing windows of his soul his eyebrows below the bandaged seemed to make up for it in his expression. Between them, his ears and a gentle nod the seriousness settled in.

“Huh, guess the timing of her death is bad. Caught ill pretty rapidly, at first we didn’t think anything of it. She always gets slower, bogged and tired just before winter. Hibernation.” He took another drawn sip with a sigh. The tea was warm and welcoming against the cold day but the taste she felt was extremely bitter when she drank from her own. Blaming the blind fox for a poor brew of tea was a shameful prospect she realized.

“But then the fever just hit her like a hammer, once it was clear she wasn’t going to improve even with herbs and prayer she faded quickly.” Judy continued to draw from the warmth offered from the small cup in her paws.

“She hasn’t had any students in a while but aside from the townsfolk I was already sort of the designated mammal to watch over her till the end. Finally passed two or three days ago. Been keeping the dojo clean and offering tea and conversation to anyone coming through to pay their respects. You're the first who responded by putting me on my ass.” He laughed again the air beginning to calm in this regard.

“A coming battle, sorry to say she won’t be attending in person, but in spirit maybe. Bogo-sama still the emperors shogun?” The fox tilted his head questioningly. In her travels she could imagine how slow information may have traveled to some of the less traveled fiefs.

“Yes, she was his first choice for the duel at Kozuke… My-our plan to end the war.”

“War? Enough that the emperor is at threat… Daimyo Big?”
She mused, the fox ronin appearing keen despite his isolation in the mountain regions.

“How did you know that? Word travels pretty slow outside the highway routes?”

“Ehh I don’t have my eyes anymore so I make a habit of knowing everyone and everything going on. Used to be a student of the sword till this.” He gestured to his eyes. “Making use of the head on my shoulders in place. No rumor lord Big was no fan of the prior shogunate, rumors out about his belief that the current shogunates taxes on export and import while reducing prey region taxes shows its bias. In turn the old shrew has the funds and army as well as resources to choose war. Only other mammal with reason or the economy to do so is bellweather.”

_Bellwether?

Judy tilted her head questioningly. Where it was true that clan Bellwether were stout soldiers of the old shogunate. In the recent years they had claimed their loyalties to the new emperor and payed their high taxes to avoid suppression without fail each year.

Eventually the two got into the rhythm and Judy explained the situation in hand and why she was this far from home. Her errand which now proved moot, despite the Dojos isolation Nick proved incredibly insightful and knowledgeable about politics and the surrounding economics. Once they fell into a friendlier atmosphere from the volatile one her actions caused prior, things improved.

“So Orsa was the first choice to fight Bigs elite ronin. Rumor has it, it will be a brightly furred female wolf, extremely skilled.” She said. The prospect of being Bogos second choice herself was one she had thought about several times now. But unproven was a gamble despite her natural skill.

“I’m sure any of Orsas previous students would be honored to fight in her place. But sounds like you don’t have that kind of time to send message and retrieve them.”

“No, I’m most likely the next best bet. Bellwethers host should be in place with archers and Bogos personal soldiers will make up the vast majority of the vanguard. But most are trained with Naginata. That leaves me and a few others.”

Nick got up with a practiced motion. “I’ll go pack.” He said setting his cup down, their long
conversation had eventually left it cooling in place of the warmth it offered at first.

“Pack?” She asked as he began his way for a door. “I’m a blind fox at a dojo with no master, you’ll be headed back in preparation for this battle I suspect. I’m coming with you.” He said simply.

“Who said you could come with me?” She gruffed out his immediate response was a tongue lulled and bellowing laugh. “Who said you had a choice not to take me?” She paused for a moment as he continued.

“You were sent by imperial decree to retrieve Orsa, Orsa is dead. I being her last student though incapable of taking her place in a fight for obvious reasons. Will still respond to the message.”

She waited as he made his way effortlessly through the building, even at a practiced step his sure footedness was admirable, he marched while maintaining the conversation gesturing as he went. Utterly at ease as if he wasn’t sightless.

“I’ll bring Orsas family sword to Bogo, she spoke on length about him and with no family I imagine she would be honored for him to have it. So one way or another sounds like you’re stuck with me fluff-sensei.” Judy fumed at the easy friendly though sarcastically respectful nature he so quickly assumed with her.

“You will refer to me with respect as Hopps.” She said a warning tone. His smirk seemed to call her tone as a bluff.

“You first greeting of me is to strike me when I offer you tea.” She said raising a brow challengingly. “I am required to offer no respect at such a shameful act.” He said simply holding that same smirk that she knew intentionally insulted her. She huffed though knowing it was true, she was out of place to make demands given her own actions however unintended they were.

Nick returned shortly there in, having packed surprisingly quickly. His appearance immediately caught her off guard. The reds and blacks of the head family of Harima though no embroidered haori in place of a thicker winter ready layer.
“You look like a buddhist monk.” She laughed lightly at it. Nick had a large kasa straw hat that covered most of his head and face, she wondered in part why he would need it given he couldn’t see as it was. Darkly colored Kimono with a white layer seen barely at its seams with red hakama themselves. The large staff acting as a walking stick completed the would be transformation. Judy took a moment to to notice his traveling equipment was much heavier than her own. A large merchants pack on his back with a sword straddled along its side, it was massive. Red fabric covered what Judy assumed was his sword on his right waist. How long the weapon was stored given his sightlessness though he did keep the small dagger of a tanto open and ready if it need be.

“Orsas sword?” Judy asked alongside her conclusion to which nick nodded. Given the sword was large enough for most medium large mammals like bears and large bovine it was huge. But the rest seemed unneeded for the trip.

“Why the large pack?”

Nick frowned at this mouth agap for a moment. “Well, I packed up. With master Orsa gone I don’t really have much reason to stay here. Even after delivering the sword to Bogo. I don’t have eyes so I can’t really take up her place as a teacher. Even with my eyes not many would likely come to learn from a fox.” He chuckled weakly, Judy understood the untrusting nature that still formed at the feet of the ‘sly’ canine species.

“Can’t imagine if I lead my own dojo many would come seeking me out either.” Judy added.

Nick shrugged.

“Orsas prized student was a small prey, rabbit or a hare I think.” Nick offered in response. Judy took a moment at that.

“I thought Orsa only took on predator students?”

“Normally yes, story for a different time though.” Nick concluded, Judy thinking over the prospect. Had she known Orsa even entertained the idea she would have asked her for training outright. Nick began taking steps out of the dojo a weird warm smile across his face.

Judy caught up to him taking notice further of the pack on his back.
“So where will you go after this?” A long moment went as Judy fell into step beside him.

“Don’t really know. Life’s been sorta up in the air for a little long for me ya know?” He asked with a shrug. The question was oddly more personal and showed a glimmer of something deeper she realized quickly.

“I was lost in a way, that's why I came too Orsa in the first place. Thing was I didn’t realize I was lost till I arrived. Cryptic I know but I guess us foxes have to be at least a little.”

Odd as it was traveling with a fox, Judy did feel it was a far cry better than the quiet she had gotten used to after the caravan. Rabbits were very community driven and social creatures by nature making her short term of isolation irritable.

“Who will watch over or take over the dojo? It looks maintained but old.” She asked their steps practiced beside him, again Nick appeared unaffected by his lack of sight confidently traversing the paths.

“The townsfolk will maintain and watch over it, maybe send word for one of her previous students to take over if they can be reached. I already told the townsfolk I was leaving soon. Was just luck that I get a companion for my travels.” He looked at her, straight at her. Even without vision the fabric wrapped countenance he had smiled right at her. “So I can’t complain. Might head home too Harima, been a long time.” Judy knew of the place, it was the most fox dense region. Inari was a Kami worshipped for many things from rice growth to fertility but most notably was sword-smiths. Lithe, elegant but cunning and lethal hunters was the perfect icon of a sword and in it the finest swordsmiths were often foxes.

Wilde, clan Wilde more accurately a young house not unlike Hopps own came to power out of sheer skill and effort, admirable in how it reflected her own family's rise to nobility. Where Stu had earned his families place for loyalty and dedication with Lionheart during the rebellion he was granted his land. Seppuku was committed and ordered of many of the previous shogunates most loyal and in place several new lords replaced old. Where Stu Hopps earned this for his family through loyalty, prosperity and in some sense necessity Wilde had through sheer admiration. They formed steel for lords of many powerful Daimyo during the warring years of the twelfth century while invasions threatened the whole of Japan. Their skill even caught the eyes of shogun and even an Emperor. During a war the fine steel was said to have cleaved through an enemy generals own sword ending a battle, clan Wilde saw rise to prominence given this legend. It wasn’t always so for the red fox clan, foreign they married into the artisan class of Harima in the seven hundred and eleventh year. Unheard of but ignored among the peasant class however the skilled metal work quickly overlooked this, skills brought with them from northern europe.
She heard the term used when descriptions of the history of clan Wilde were mentioned. The way their weapons are formed a closely guarded secret, what wasn’t a secret was that the quality of their weapons had no equal.

Steel was described in several ways often the lowest of the still capable was prey steel, forged in prey provinces it often prioritized quantity over quality though in truth prey never seemed to favor the patience needed for good weapons. There was predator steel, the natural born killers learned how to form, forge and edge steel better than the rest and their proclivity for war saw the necessity for improving it. Where predators natural affinity for steel weapons was often competed by preys preference for indirect weapons such as bows, yari or even kanabo.

But on the higher end of the spectrum, recently learned that foreign lands had clean, hard steel that was purer and held its edges well. However in the end there was steel formed from the icons of Inari herself, fox steel. The unique steel was rarely forged save once or twice a year and ordered by the very rich. Judy had seen the pattern in Bogos family sword, beautiful sharp edge, dark hamon, closer inspection showed a weird but equally entrancing wavelike pattern along the steel. It appeared like pitting or scratching of some sort, but with a smooth texture. She recalled Bogos laughter at her would be ‘discovery’ of the pitting as he explained it a sort of maker's mark of the swordsmith.

A fox one of a few she had ever seen let alone had met, trained by Orsa spoke likely of his nobility yet shame hid behind the fact of him omitting his family name, likely the cause of his status as a lowly ronin.

“Are you a ronin?” Judy asked the question as soon as she came to the conclusion.

They had already made it to the edge of town, autumn colors could still be seen all around by the empty trees with leaves everywhere.

“I am.” He offered simply, Judy knew there was far more to it.

Chapter End Notes

Code edit: 12/26/16
Road Least Traveled

Chapter Summary

Judy having come to grips with the failure of her original plan must now return to Kozuke to inform the Shogun of his masters untimely death. Now accompanied by her new travel companion, a washed up clan-less ronin. At first she finds herself annoyed at the agitating and aloof nature of her fox companion. Soon though she finds herself happy for the company and conversation.

Chapter Notes

Pages 9
Words 3,717
Characters 20,779
Characters excluding spaces 17,144

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: Road Least Traveled

The silence had grown between them a couple hours prior after Judy had asked more about Nick, he seemed to steel his expression and quietly recede from his previous personable nature. It wasn’t long into the second hour that a tune could be heard. Nick's ears flat within his straw hat while Judy's own darted, left, right, back but she couldn't place the source till her ears aimed again at Nick. Further inspection though disproved this as nick showed no sign, and the quiet tune sounded further off. She recognized the melody but couldn’t place it from where, the quiet tune was just short enough that it left her unable to catch enough notes to place.

…

Again the tune played quietly. Echoing yet emanating as quietly as it could.

“What?” Judy asked under her breath taking a closer look, this time at the tip of his lips the smallest possible gap and the carefully controlled tune was heard from it.

He stopped with a smile before laughing. “Was wondering when you would catch on, pretty good
“It was so quiet I coulda swore I was hearing things. Swear I know that tune.” She said, the tune was quiet but each time he had carefully gone over it she recognized it, couldn’t recall where from.

“Oh you think you know it?” He asked the challenge obvious in his tone. He then proceeded to curve his lips in such a way. The tune was louder now but incredibly sharp attesting to what skill you could claim of the simple hobby.

They had traveled for a bit, it was as the distance got further from the small isolated village from prior that she noticed Nick's steps grow less confident. 

*Outside his element, his familiar ground*.

Five or more years Nick learned the old village intimately walking its paths, mingling with the villagers, fishing or otherwise it granted him the time he needed to establish a reliable understanding of where to walk.

Again the tune played over, the sharp changes were very unusual to her and lacking in traditional tune.

*Foreign*

Judy shot up at the recollection.

“A geiko (entertainer) singer named… Gazelle! She has performed in Zootopia several times, go catch her shows whenever their nearby!” Judy proclaimed proudly at her recollection of the performance at her family estate at the burrows, having been years prior. When the tall species performed in her town she at first didn’t think anything of it. But when she sang Judy quickly grew enthralled by the tones which were nothing like what she heard before, very unusual. It wasn’t till speaking with siblings later she found out the performer was apparently part of a foreign royal family that had fled after power was seized by her uncle and now lived in exile within their quaint country. From then forward whenever the always smiling singer passed through Kozuke Judy made an effort to catch her performances, fanatical was the title her friends and family eventually gave her when it came to subjects about the tall gazella.
“Huh, glad she did so well. I knew her when we were both younger.” Nick said as if it were the simplest thing in the world. “She was a spanish foreigner that arrived during the rebellion, was young back then like myself when I first met her. Didn’t understand a spit of our languages but I caught on real quick and she was just happy to have someone to talk with.” Judy’s mouth fell.

“You knew her as a kid?!” Judy nearly yelled receiving Nick's own chuckle.

“Yea pretty sure she had a crush on me also. Always following me around the slums of Harima.” He puffed out his chest dramatically. Judy stared him down. “Eh, was probably just that I was the only one she could speak with. Hey I can dream a little right? Romanticize the past in some small measure. Memories are what I have of vibrant images so I tend to embellish them a little.” Judys expression fell recalling that fact. Memories weren’t so important to her as she could see her siblings anytime she wanted, what few she had she recalled with clarity but the value of them would have been greater than anything if it was all she would see again.

“Anyway, I was a bit sour back then, tensions between predators and prey because of the shogunate that Lionheart was rebelling against imposed massive taxes and unjust laws against predators. Hated prey of all kinds.” He spat between his teeth with a seething venom that caused her own ears to fall behind her in disappointment as they walked. “But this young fawn approached this snide pup, despite how rude I was, I was the only one who shared her language. Well the only one for our age I suppose, happens growing up next to a trade harbor I guess. She broke me down over time, she had the cutest little giggle. Told me about how different things were where she was from but had to flee from some sort of persecution thing, internal war it turns out just like the one she fled into.”

Judy enjoyed the performances of the foreign gazelle with an amazing voice. She didn’t know that Gazelle had been around since the old shogunate. The prior laws would have made her performances impossible given the restrictions that were in place back then.

A day Prior

Eighteenth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Eighteenth, Fall, 1623. War Camp outside of Kyoto, Yamashiro. Edo era Japan.

On the border of Omi and yamashiro just outside Kyoto the vast array of tents battered by encroaching winds. Banners of all representing clans held proudly and high within the powerful shrews encampment.
“Orsa?” The low tone of the small but powerful shrew asked. The beast of burden in front of him, a mule, part of Judys false trade caravan.

“Yes lord Big.” The mule was on his knees bowing as low as he could. Where lord Big had been known to pay for loyalty he was also known for cruelly punishing any offenses.

“The rabbit we were escorting was to collect master Orsa, they were sent with a sealed message from the emperor himself.” The mule said urgently with worry present.

“Orsa may be skilled, but not enough to turn the oncoming tide, if foolish emperor Lionheart doesn’t realize that he has already lost.” He gestured for the removal of the nameless mule.

“No! No not for the war, a duel.” Big held great power of respect as the simple gesture he made now halted the presence of the massive polar bear that was beside him. The large white bear adorned in great lengths of patterned robes snorted before relaxing back into place.

“Speak quickly.” Was all he offered to the mule.

“Lionhearts shogun knows your path using the Nakasendo highway takes you through Kozuke territory. Shogun Bogo plans on using his loyal Vassal clan Hopps to challenge your right to cross his lands by duel. Orsa will be their chosen champion.” The mule said still low in a bow prostrating himself carefully.

Bigs took his time slowly. “He intends on using my own carefully planned time against me. Once I hold Zootopias’ walls, prey archers will be useless and won’t approach in the snow. But if he can delay me against that very same early winter turning my advantage against me it will also grant Bogos loyal northern provinces time to arrive. Their archers would destroy us against the southern mountainous paths.” The shrew slowly ran his clawed digits over the fur just under his chin as he thought.

“Yes lord Big.” The Mule nodded. “They intent to force you to the southern pass to buy them more time or the northern pass where the forts holding the mountains of Echigo will be manned by the same clan Bellwether archers with relief soldiers from the shoguns own cavalry.”

He scratched at his chin again walking in circled steps. “Tell the lords were leaving a day early and that they should have all their provisions set immediately.” He looked up at his large polar bear
samurai. “Koslov, call my shinobi. I want a group sent out immediately to slow or if possible kill Orsas party. Send for our skilled ronin as well, it appears their retainer fee will finally see use.” With a bow the bear disappeared before the mule in a haunched terrified expression followed with a small pouch of clanking gold ryu and silver shu coins.

Back in the present

Nineteenth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Nineteenth Fall, 1623. Crossroads between Etchu, Hida and Shinano. Edo era Japan.

Nick’s abrupt stop immediately halted their steadying progress. Nick ‘hmmmd’ to himself the tip of his thumbs claw grazing the scruff of his chin.

“What?” Judy asked in confusion.

“Big is stationed in Kyoto taking the Nakasendo highway through Mino and Shinano right?”

“Huh, uh yea, same road I took by caravan down here.” Judy tilted her head, it was an obvious route and the roads made travel much quicker for merchants.

“Your mission driven caravan originated from Kozuke province and ended up at Kyoto, lord Big is likely stationed at Kyoto and no further caravans or merchants will brave the roads till after Big has either won or lost or sieged in Zootopia for the winter… This includes resupply routes along the highway. So let's head that way.” Nick pointed down a path on their left, the even less tended road lead strongly east. Judy scratched her head again. There he stood identifying the older road appearing untouched for years, the same one their earlier discussion of routes that she almost entirely wrote off.

“Why? We’ll still be ahead of Bigs’ army and the Nakasendo is the fastest route.” Judy shrugged waving onwards. “Come on, let’s stop wasting time.” But behind her Nick hadn't moved.

“I think it would be better to take the old trade routes of Hida to northern Shinano.” He said with a neutral tone.
“How do you figure slick-san?” Judy said, doing her best to sound offensive and difficult the seemingly impassive fox.

“Well, lord Big has plenty of assassins, they will likely travel ahead of his army. He's a thorough shrew. I would wager he already knows you were sent to collect Orsa.” Nick nodded as his hand made its way to the back of his neck where it began scratching lightly. He began down the path he himself recommended. Judy quickly caught up to his steps. For maybe the fourth time she noticed Nicks right ear was aimed at her, even when she was silent she noticed it never stopped aiming her direction.

“And if they catch you on the highway en route they can relay the information back to him. They’ll know and he’ll travel more confidently or even prepare differently. But if we take the back routes which will be just about as fast since no caravan heading back to cut down on travel times. Safer and quieter route for us hmm?” He smirked confidently down at her Judy growing agitated at that annoying smirk she found herself growing to hate rapidly.

“That's awfully perceptive and sly, careful of those fox stereotypes.” She said with a crossed tone. The road was even less pleasant on the her heels, a slight of envy over her companions padded feet. She could feel the occasional rock or jutting root on the new path even through her straw sandals.

“Well not all our stereotypes are bad, I mean clever fox.” He put his hand to his chest before gesturing too Judy. “Uhhhh.”

“Dumb bunny.”

“What!? No I wasn’t gonna say that, just…” He hmmmd at the edge of a word he couldn’t quite find.

“Don’t even say cute, we hate that.” Judy warned.

“Oh? I wasn’t planning on it, why can’t I though?” Nick tilted his head, Judy took the moment to think over the again vibrant autumn colors around. The unkept road having darting signs of plantlife retaking it though hibernation could be seen in the emptying trees and clouded sky.

“Well, our family is the first of any noble house of rabbits. Before that were only seen as a ‘peasant species.’ because of how small, meek and childish we look and how quickly we ‘multiply’ cute just diminishes everything we've accomplished.” Judy scoffed at the idea.
“Hmmm how about sly fox and ambitious bunny? Has a nice ring to it and seems accurate.” Nick smiled at the concept.

“Rabbit.” She corrected.

“Rabbit.” He nodded a few steps continued in silence. “Cute rabbit.” He said smirking definitely.

“What?! No I just told you why you can’t call us that! Its demeaning and condescending.” She huffed Nicks ears seemed the pinnacle of his expression alongside his smirk.

“You said ‘rabbits’ don’t like it because it's demeaning in that it's how others ‘see’ you.” Judy began to catch on. “I can’t really say it based on what I can see. Since I don’t see you fluff-sensei.” His smirk grew at his believed victory. With a furrowed brow Judy huffed audibly again. “So I’m not saying it cause some indescrip visible bunny in front of me. I don’t know your features, short, tall, brown fur, grey fur, black fur, long ears, short, skin tone, features of any kind I don’t know them. I say it cause this ambitious, driven but optimistic and honorable young doe samurai traveled the roads on the eve of war to collect a master for battle. But they now travel astride a fox, her natural enemy. Its cute and I don’t mean that in a condescending way. Its inspiring in a sense, two natural enemies, species not commonly associated with the rolls of honor bound warriors yet here we are traveling to deliver the news of an honorable masters passing.” Nick sighed a breath of relief. Judy was again slack jawed at the intuitive view the fox held and reddened slightly at the compliments he so sincerely and freely delivered.

“Fine, you get a pass… Just this once.” She forfeited this time.

“Thanks fluffs.” He chuckled as Judy shot forward.

“Don’t push your luck!” She began walking at a faster pace. “Hurry up. Night will fall soon, we should cover as much ground as possible.” Nicks response in return was a quick frown and a staggered rush.

“Hey, don’t ditch the blind fox, that's cruel!” The confidence in his steps faltered significantly.

“What you don’t need my help. Heck half the time I don’t even get the feeling you're blind.” Her paranoia on this idea had grown exponentially. The way he seemed to know his surroundings and stepped so surely was a constant source of a proud impression. Nick just looked at a loss a sign of
embarrassment across his face. “What?”

“I need your help.” He offered simply prompting Judy to tilt her head.

“What?” She said again this time though in a more probing tone. She slowed down to take stock of the fox and found an honestly worried expression playing across his muzzle.

“I can’t see, so I rely on the sounds of your steps to know that i’m not turning to far left or right to end up stumbling off the path. You start moving further right and I can hear it so I know the path bends right, same for the left.” He said

_Thats why he walks so close?_

She realized, it was a sensible but simple solution to his situation. Despite his confident appearance she realized just what sense of self reliance he really had lost with his eyes. The realization of just how difficult any form of distanced travel for him would be without a companion. The thought of the very sense she took for granted giving her such a simple thing that he was deprived of had her frown with a nod.

“Right, sorry.” She fell back in step beside him, he noticeably deflated from his worried outward appearance. The silence that ensued lasted only a few more minutes again.

“Fox at the power of a rabbit, really relying on you. At any time you could ditch me and I would be in huge trouble out here… Cute.” He laughed as Judy huffed again. “I know, I only had one free use but I’m using the word on myself this time. We foxes are solitary creatures, very self reliant and here I am right now being lead by the scruff of my neck but my natural prey. Just mean that it’s cute again as a concept.” He dramatically gestured as he continued. “If only my father could see me now! He would keel over from laughter.” He laughed smiling at the prospect, the once agitated rabbit had slowly deflated from his sarcastic tone finding herself smiling as she thought over what it must look like herself.

“Just as long as that words aimed at yourself it flies a grey area.” She made sure to emphasis.

“I do, sorry. Ever since I began studying at Orsa I became a bit more philosophical. I started looking at things a lot differently.”
“How so?”

“Well, I never really had the best outlook on certain species, primarily prey like I already told you before.” He gestured too Judy. “But losing my eyes most mammals became just voices, true some species have their proclivities but by and large they just become more amorphous to me. My company and outlook changed, life moved so fast to me then it suddenly slowed down. Read tons of books or had whatever newest student Orsa had read to me since… Yea.”

“Even this guy from another land stayed there to study bushido. Picked up meditation through the Buddhist teachings.” He listed off the things with a whimsical tone and controlled gestures in front of him as if reliving them. Judy could imagine his time at the Dojo pretty thoroughly by now but still found herself curious about the prior. His detailed understanding of western and eastern economics and even how he so confidently summed up lord Bigs own counter actions to her own further pushed her curiosity.

“I was informed of lord Bigs assassins by my father, I doubt it's a big secret but you spoke as if you knew him.” Nicks expression lost its smile a moment before shrugging.

“I worked for him for a short time.” Judy felt her stomach sink, the thin veiled possibility of any loyalties he had for the shrew played out in her head. She had expected that maybe living in Harima might have granted him knowledge by proxy, not that the ronin who accompanied her had been directly employed by the enemy.

“I was a rambunctious fox with a skill for sword fighting. An ambitious shrew with only a few generations to his family name had plenty of busy work for someone without a name to muddle. As long as a good fight was around the corner I didn’t mind… At first.” He reminisced that same sour expression loosening her own worry. Each time he recalled his past the look of distaste informed her he clearly disliked his prior dealings. “I may not have been the most moral of foxes but I had made a promise to not be what everyone expected of a fox and eventually I realised just how much I was doing the opposite.” Nick stopped in his tracks Judy taking a couple more before looking back.

“Well sounds like you came a long way since then, has to have been years. Mammals can change.” Judy said, she had to at least believe that herself left hand raised to her own cheek the faded scars there a reminder.

“Cold air, nights falling and smells like rain.” He said losing his prior tone in place of a matter of factly one. Judy could feel the humidity changing from her fur and the clouds above were growing more ominous. Their pace had quickened in their search for shelter but they thankfully didn’t have to go far given the mountainous northern regions. Judy already settled with this prospect after leaving the caravan that began her journey. A couple nights of sleeping in the rough had quickly brought the cold reality of her travel and left her less new to it.
Nick had a small umbrella or at least small to some mammals where it was large to their sizes. Alongside some larger trees which overlooked a rock facing small cliffside gave them a decent amount of protection as the rain began. “Good find, just in time fluffs.” Nick said as he set up the umbrella, red in color that blocked the side of the cliff facing away giving them a dry area. But humidity alongside the night air still sent chills that would graze bones. The two had ventured into the beginning drizzle to find enough wood to stave off the frigid night. Nicks assortment of tools surprised her and made her feel ill prepared from her father's expectations of the travel. Where he had sent her with dried foods and water nick had the necessities for most weather. Checking the purse within her sleeve, a couple of gold ryu, silver shu and a hand full of mon coins. It was more than enough she concluded but the issue was the sparsity of rest stops since the highway would go silent for a few days or weeks. In a way Nicks own recommendation for the back roads might take them by farms, some that may still be open to selling supplies she concluded.

Though she had many more questions the same tired sore stretches they both performed seemed to signal the end of the day. Next morning would likely begin with the end of the rain and new questions would arise. Nicks own form falling quickly into sleep further decided this Judy smiling at just how he lacked any fear of her like some might with new traveling companions. Her own instincts to stay awake slowly lost to the warmth of the fire combating the cold, Nicks warm comfortable appearance lulling her to her own sleep shortly after.

Chapter End Notes

Code edit: 12/26/16
Chapter Summary

Stories become one of the staple ways of passing time when hours of walking side by side are required. Her sightless canidae companion has no shortage of stories both worldly and personal. She finds herself quickly warming to the companion, preferable a fox than the solitary path she walked before. But still where one may be, can another?

Chapter Notes

Pages 8  
Words 3,304  
Characters 18,352  
Characters excluding spaces 15,110

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5: Foxes, Friend or Foe?

Twentieth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October twentieth, Fall, 1623. Old merchants path northern Shinano. Edo era Japan.

Drip… Drip… Drip

The slow trickling droplets of water were the first sound she awoke to. The warmth of a fire the first thing she felt. Crackle the second heard echoing inside her head. Steamed vegetables and rice over a fire the first thing she smelt, the feeling of her stomachs rumble as the round of a wooden spoon mixing within the pot of the alluring smell. The haze clearing from her eyes brought the first thing she really saw that mourning, the auburn hued fox smiling.

“Morning carrot-sensei, you sleep like a rock I swear.” He chuckled. “Now I know I’m not doing my kind any favors but you had some veggies and now their in this pot,” he smirked and for the first time she noticed he wasn’t wearing any fabric or bandages around his eyes. The scars were much more visible along his closed lids the scars ran from just above the brows to the end of his chin and the missing fur left no mistake of the shredded nature, the cuts weren't clean but in fact violent and
As long as I get to eat some of it I think I can live with it. I’ll just call it payment instead of theft, hows that sound.” She said surprised at how personable and playful her own tone took.

“Deal!” He said scooping up some of the contents into a small wooden bowl alongside a set of chopsticks handing it to her before dishing his own. Receiving it she noticed a few things within it, the rice and garnishings from his packs and the carrots from her own but mushrooms and a thin layer of sauce she didn’t recognise.

“You were asleep for quite a while after I got up, so I walked for a while to find a nice place to meditate while the sun rose. Got some mushrooms and wild spices while I was at it.” He said proudly and from her first bite she would be lying if she complained with the taste of sauted mushrooms present in every bite.

“You can cook but your tea is horrible, you sure you’re a fox?” She said in a falsely accusatory voice. Not even waiting for the response she let the heat from the warm bowl soak into the fur of her paws as she cozied up to the small fire chasing away the morning chill.

“I know right?! Now how to prove i’m a fox. I’m clever, I could probably be a merchant with my silver tongue.” He set his own chopsticks in his bowl before putting the same paw over his chest dramatically posing alongside a dramatic tone. “Teeth” He tapped a claw against his fang. “Check, Nose” He made a show of sniffing the air. “I smell carrots.” He pointed at his bowl. “Aaaand Carrots.” He pointed at Judy who giggled in response. “Check, ears.” He continued the spectacle of swiveling his ears every which way before folding them back with a frown then forward with a smile. “Check! I’m not so sure, as I can’t see I’ll defer to your knowledge of foxes, Carrot-sensei.” He bowed low in line with his dramatics.

“Hmm, Lets see, you look like a fox. Sharp tongue but your tea is horrible and Inari would frown at it even if you used your blindness as an excuse. You show any skill with tending rice fields?” She asked setting her own bowl down as well putting a finger to her chin pretending deep thought.

“No… Oh no, I’m losing points!” He fell back sitting aside the fire again this time putting an arm over his eyes. “There has to be more, what else lord Carrots tell me I’m not doomed yet!”

“Alright, alright.” Judy had to pause realizing the list that Inari was worshiped for and the dangerous if only embarrassing fact they were worshipped for fertility. Potency she realized was definitely an awkward part of the list. “Can you hold your alcohol.” She asked in turn nick pulled out a small corked gourd like bottle.
“Most definitely.” He smirked.

“I think that will have to be close enough. You pass.”

“Are you sure? Two for four isn’t very good so far.” He continued the dramatic gestures and tone while Judy grew more reserved.

“What about agriculture?” She pointed out.

“Can’t grow well but learned a lot from the fields of western Harima. I can also tend a forge as well.” He sat back up sitting tall puffing out his chest in emulated pride. The fire crackled against a moment of silence as Judy noticed his own expression mouth agape as if about to say something. She laughed inwardly knowing he probably came to the same conclusion she had. “Think your right. I pass as a fox.” With that she assured herself he realized the logical conclusion of their listed off qualities on their represented deity. Steam still rolling from their bowls as they ate in silence.

_________________________

No fewer than six sets of straw sandals covered stepped lightly at the intersection of the dirt path from Mino through Hida leading north into Etchu and east into the northern hemisphere of Shinano. Rain still pattering gently around the group of six foxes of different sizes and colors all of determined expressions lit by the early morning light whose hue was in conflict from the greying clouds and yellow reds accenting against the fall season.

“You have the scent?” The female arctic fox though not the largest spoke with absolute authority. Each of the six boasted short wakizashi on their sashed belts and loose fitting muted colored robes.

“Yea, smells like fox and rabbit. Scent doesn’t seem as washed up. The smell doesn’t have strong signs of trade goods like late season produce. Probably the rabbit were looking for.” The largest of the group a tall red fox spoke while aiming down the eastern bound path.

“What about bear? I smell faint signs of it but it's not as strong as the rabbit. Did the rabbit already collect Orsa or is she still en route to the dojo?” A small tan colored male fennec stated promptly.
“Alright, you three follow the path to Orsas dojo in northern Echu. You two come with me, we’ll find and kill the rabbit quickly. If the rabbit hasn’t collected Orsa yet she dies and Orsa can be left alone so as not to take any risks, shes a master sword mammal after all. If left alone she’ll never know and none of us need to die. If Orsa is absent then catch up with us on this path quickly.” She spoke gesturing the details of the plan as the other five nodded breaking into their groups. Her alongside another red fox and grey fox began down the eastern trail to track the rabbit and fox scents while the fennec, tall red fox and another arctic headed north. “Keep it clean and simple guys, master Big wants this handled quietly. Don’t leave traces and avoid killing anyone who doesn’t need to die, understood?” She said as the two groups increased the distance between each other.

“Yes mam’” They said with trained professionalism.

_________________________

Trying to get going in the morning against tired joints took it's part of determination and the importance of her drive to get her going. Training had its part and pushed her limits but did little to stave off the raw hours of walking that accompanied boredom and growing tension of tired legs. Company helped halt the former boredom in place of stories from places too people. The later tiredness though asked for more sleep, that went unanswered.

“Ok. My turn.” Nick said, their walking speed having picked up slightly once morning gogginess waned.

“Hm?”

“For stories, I've been the one mostly tellin em for going on two days now. Fair's fair.” He stated pointedly.

“Alright, that's fair… Kinda boring compared to you, I haven’t traveled much and prey communities are pretty tame by comparison. Hard to really have much with a couple hundred siblings.” She said boringly trying to think through her life what things were even worth a story compared to her well traveled companion.

“Hundreds? Start with that! I was an only pup.”
“Only… as in the only one?” She asked clearly confused by the prospect.

“Yea, just me, no brothers or sisters, at least when I left home. Were getting off track, it's your turn remember.” He huffed laughably matching her feigned annoyance from yesterday.

“Alright yea, rabbits never really needed Inari when it came to fertility.” She giggled the laugh ending in a tired sigh. “Part of the reason I guess we were seen as a peasant species and why I wanted to prove myself as something other than what's expected of a rabbit. But the Hopps being the first truly noble house of rabbits didn’t stop that stipulation of a large family. Between us and clans like Leaps, Jumps and Skips we make up a large populace.” Nick noticeably broke into a laugh at this point.

“Sheesh, really making sure others know you got strong legs with them names. Any family names not involving your species legs?” His smirk in her direction only seemed to push her offense at the question further.

“Well… There's Springs, Leaps, Jumps, Vaults and of course clan Hopps. You're right!” She couldn’t help the realization at the rabbit families she knew. “Think I even know one called Haunches… Oh that doesn’t help.” She shrugged thinking on the opportunity. “My age and not a single litter, what if i'm not a rabbit!? How to know if I’m really a rabbit I’ll have to defer to your knowledge on rabbits Slick-dono.” She drolled with a sudo mocking tone, trying to match his smirk from before.

“I am a master of all things carrots, Carrots-sensei.” He stuck up his snout. Judy was surprised how easily he fell into funny character and how quickly humor rolled into his expressions. “Clan Hopps so you rule the lands of Kozuke right and its surrounding fiefs?” He asked though the answer was obvious.

“Yes.”

“Alright, are you gifted with herbs or healing?” He asked again expecting the answer to be obvious despite the truth.

“No.” She responded nick raising a brow in response.

“Wow, heck even I know a bit about herbs. You didn’t pick up anything?” She found the dirt path more drawing of her attention than the sightless but judging gaze of the blind fox. “Huh, this is
alarming fluffs, even with long ears.” He reached over grazing the two straight and tall held grey tufts that better described as ears.

“Hey!” She fumed but he responded by tapping her square in the nose as she turned in a huff.

“And a twitchy nose.” It was just then. “And strong legs.” He at least had the intelligence not to make a move on touching her legs. “Your scoring very low on the board. Afraid if you don’t get this last one you can’t be a rabbit.” He hummed claw to his chin in deep thought. “The last one is the most important of a true representative of Inaba. Selflessness. Something like traveling great distances to retrieve a master for war. But being prepared to take on the opponent in their place to protect your lands and your shogunate. Sleeping in the rough not a yard from your natural predator? Yea sounds like you pass as a rabbit fluffs.” Again Nick had found a way to sneak in an intuitive and vivid complement that left her slack jawed and proud.

“Thanks.” She offered failing any more cognizant answer than that a warmth creeping up her ears.

“Don’t thank me for something I didn’t give you, you earned that fact.” He offered simply. “Hey we're getting off track again. We were starting on why you wanted to prove you were something more. A samurai? How did you end up taking on the stringent lifestyle of bushido. I think that would make for a good story while traveling.”

Judy hmmd for a short while thinking on it, it had been a while since she thought about it truly. The goal had just eventually become the both the justification and the means. Determination was the goal and the tool to achieve it. Eventually the memory took to the front of her mind as her left hand fell over the nearly invisible scars on her cheek. Memories in place of the expected ones held in it a fox she met just once. A promise made to herself and to the fox that she could be something more.

“I… I had to. Wanted to prove we rabbits could be more, do more, achieve more. Nothing else made more sense to me than being an honorable warrior.” Her hand fell from the scars thinking on how accurate she was in her statement. Looking up at the auburn furred fox whose furrowed brow held an echoed confusion. “Sorry guess that doesn’t make for a story. Fair’s fair.” She concluded thinking on where to begin again. “A trade pact with the Shogun had us supplying him with grains to stock in case of conflicts. I made a sudden request. I asking that my father request weapons and training to make the first rabbit samurai as part of the trade with the Shogun. First he said no but I spread the word and soon over ten of us were asking. Mulling it over he realized instead of just supplying foot soldiers but legitimate trained elite soldiers held merit. A more familial set of warriors to patrol and protect the Burrows” Judy had slowly become engrossed in the memory tone taking a whimsical air. The fox companion ever present nodding in affirmation.

“At first Bogo didn’t like the prospect of us girls taking on a warriors way, large prey and predators with their warrior, maiden nobility thing.” She shrugged in distaste not even noticing the furrowed
insulted expression Nick hoisted at her flagrant and ignorant insult but she continued uninhibited. “Father and I argued with him on length that it wasn’t the rabbit way to do that. Not that most of my sisters didn’t take to that anyway. But I excelled, me and my oldest brother James from my parents first litter. Earning the respect of the shogun himself once I completed my training was the best day of my life!” A reminiscent breath Nick noticed she almost seemed to be walking in the memory. He chuckled to himself realizing the ease with which she did explained her airheadedness when he first met her. Instinctively he placed his hand against his jaw ghosting the pain of the previous day.

“Quite an honor to be recognized by such a legend.” nick nodded. The noon sun had long since crossed over head. Thankfully the threatening clouds dotted on and off and rarely sprinkled more than a couple times. The large umbrella which sat paralleled Orsas sword on his pack was taken out on these occasions making sure to avoid any lost travel time.

“Yea, taught me how to wield a sword, taught me a little about battle strategy, some about the western provinces and social norms over there a lot still to learn. Even this duel thing is my idea so I just hope it works and that will help rabbits be taken seriously.”

“Your plan? Huh it's a pretty well thought out plan using predators own honor against them. Sly rabbit.” He smiled and she returned it warmly. “Oh, that begs the question where were you licensed as a samurai?” Nick began with a raised brow.

“Oh, I was licensed by the dojo of the Moon Fang of Settsu, didn’t attend but was trained by one of their masters directly.” She proclaimed with a cocky brow.

“Really?! Thats where I was licensed. Didn’t know they took on rabbits students?” Her fox companion asked more than said tilting his head in confusion.

“They don’t normally but with both the Shogun and the lord of Settsu’s own brother vouching for me they were forced to entertain licensing me. Master Howlet had this brilliant idea to use the story of the rabbit on the moon to give them reason to accept my application for status.”

“The rabbit on the moon?” Nick tilted his head humorously in the opposite direction.

“You know? The reason why rabbits are known for their proclivity for herbal medicine. The rabbit on the face of the moon that grinds the elixir of life, the drink of immortality for the gods.” Judy nodded recalling the story in her head. The fox nodded as his recollection of the old story finally came through.
True to coming winter the days felt shorter and the nights were growing colder faster. But still they
made good time, better even than expected. A clear cloudless night closed in both a blessing and a
curse. No threatening rain yet the night grew colder more rapidly without clouds to hold the heat in.
Shelter from the still present frosting winds and a fire staved it off well enough.

“Rice wine?” Nick offered her, where Judy knew not to refuse on respect alone she felt the prospect
of kindly refusing less appealing. Sleepless cold nights caused by the lack of near family took their
toll and the prospect of a warming drink grew more and more appealing as she nodded.

“You got me fluffs, Orsa said I had the best taste and I’m I have no intention of calling her a liar.”
His broad smile continued as she chuckled. When she noticed his expression his brow furrowed into
a falling frown. Deeper it fell as he snorted after his laugher, a confused expression as he sniffed at
the air deeply again. “Smells like, foxes?” He said shrugging as he sniffed at the air again. Judy
slowed only slightly by the drinks caught on faster as the fur from the back of her neck stood on end.

“Get down!” She yelled alongside her screaming instincts as she dove for her companion at the onset
of a shrilling slight sound behind her. She collided with him as a set of three ringing clanks of steel
bounced off the face of the cliff that acted as their shelter. Landing on top of him she quickly got up
righting herself looking blindly into the night. A beat then two as she looked deftly into the darkness
drawing her sword definitely. First one set then two and finally three sets of glowing eyes looked
back disembodied against the darkness.

Three ninja.

She thought to herself training the tip of her sword at each of them affirming the count as they began
to spread into a formation. They moved in a practiced motion of surrounding her from their approach
the road behind them.

Trained and I barely have light from the fire

She listed off the worrying disadvantages in her head as the prospect of death went over again and
again. Defiantly she protested against the depressing thoughts that filled her instincts quelling the
growing urge to flee.

Chapter End Notes

Code edit: 12/26/16
Chapter Summary

Foxes, a known quantity in a rabbits culture. Enemies in the savage, ancient times. Though Judy herself doesn't believe herself weak enough to hold to old rivalries and hatred even she doesn't know quite what to do with them. Now constantly accompanied by one she hardly knows she asks herself the ages old question of her kind "Can they be trusted."

Confronted with reminisced memories flashing through her mind and the situation presented to her she comes to the only conclusion she can.

Chapter Notes

Pages 8
Words 3,551
Characters 19,958
Characters excluding spaces 16,489

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6: Conniving Fox

Her senses were dulled dimly but even faded they spoke loudly of the danger.

Foxes, on the hunt.

Her every nerve told her again, again and again. The three sets of moon shone eyes and glinted swords played against the darkness to far to be detailed by the dim fire whose warmth fell to a chilling realization. Even her own companion moved slow as the intruders a silent dance of slow motions and unoffending measured gestures.

_________________________

Years Ago

Seventh day of Nigatsu, Haru 1618. Fifteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

Cold spring winds still blew from the north west, scents of waking plant-life played against recent memory of snow covered sleeping ones. The cloudless morning sun warmed everything its rays touched, plants rose to greet it with outstretched buds and assorted fauna. Where Judy preferred barefoot like most mammals most still elected geta or straw sandals for the winter or early spring to stave off the cold, especially given their padless paws more susceptible to damps and cold. Another fact was that it was extremely rude to enter someone's estate with dirty paws. This meant either cleaning her feet each time she stepped inside or wearing straw sandals like most had elected given droughts meant water was a commodity.

Newly licensed samurai she walked the paths of her families fief and rented farmlands. Comfortable but still winter heavy kimono plain but warm. A steady sighing breath visible as a shortened cloud illuminated by the same rays. An hour from then if that and it would warm enough not to see her own breath.

“Spring!” She yelled out to no one but the sun she had missed for to long, it felt like that each year. Looking from the top a small hill that divided her family estate from the rest of a neighboring burrow farmlands of the Jumps family. A loyal, proud and prosperous family that payed their taxes and the moniker of respectful. ‘To your face a wide smile and your back a sneer.’ She recalled her father saying, she had patrolled their property always received with friendly smiles and warm greetings, several even thanking her presence. Claiming how her patrol and sword gave a sense of nobility and pride at the few rabbits who still strove for the privilege of nobility.

“Hey Judy!” A kid from a field in the process being planted for the seasons hollered before being reprimanded by his mother who stood just off to the side quickly changing into a bow. “Sorry, I mean Hopps-sama.” The small boy said much more formally causing her to smile broadly before waving and bowing back.

She had to admit to herself, her greedy reason for patrolling their property in part was their proud responses helped justify her sense of accomplishment. Her steps had soon taken her closer to the outcroppings of above ground structures that housed usual utilities for a day's work. Fires to warm and cook early mornings and offer meals and warm drinks for those working out in the field.

“Morning.” Judy offered with a smile to one of the elder daughters not any older than herself passing by. The response was a wide eyed surprise and then a revelation within the working rabbits eyes.

“Perfect timing Hopps-dono, we could use your help!” She said grabbing for the noble rabbits paw before she even had time to react or give voice to her confused concern. “A fox has been causing trouble all morning, yelling and intimidating my father for money!” Accompanied a worried voice.
Judy still being tugged along barely keeping to the hurried pace.

*A fox thug!*

Judy thought to herself, was few extorting predators found along the countryside weren’t often brave enough to approach that far inside the clans borders given their patrols.

As they rounded a corner the number of visible rabbits continued to grow nearing one of the larger structures with fresh smoke billowing from its top, its fire pit in full swing. Gossip was a mainstay of a rabbit community, given their numbers and all ears were readily on the cooking building, voices emanating from within.

“We can discuss this later Grey.” The door slid open to the sight of the patriarch of the Jumps family standing in front of a visibly disgruntled fox, larger than all the other inhabitants of the building. No fewer than six onlookers from the family’s matriarch and assorted chefs and children and her own presence going unnoticed.

“Later, again. You have been saying that for weeks now. I’m out of patience” His voice grew in anger the same as his intimidating countenance. Ruffled auburn fur, the larger red fox showed signs of his fangs among his snarling grit teeth yet the father of the large family stood unfazed. Judy herself impressed as the countenance even sent her adrenaline pumping slightly. “You haven’t payed me since I began.” He bellowed loudly.

“What’s going on here?” Judy asked with an authoritative tone.

“Stay out of this, I’m tired of being yanked around by my tail.” The large fox pointed straight at Judy with a clawed finger without turning to look at the rabbit unlike the father of the Jumps family. His expression took her appearance in before falling.

“Oh thank goodness you’re here! Hopps-dono, you can resolve this.” He ran over to her bowing lowly. The large fox turned taking in her appearance before quickly deflating at the sight of her sword.

“O-oh, I didn’t realize. I didn’t mean to disrespect you.” He bowed lowly as well, further even.

“As if fox, you’ve been trying to hustle me for more money all morning.” The rabbit’s words shot in his direction. To his credit the fox didn’t take to the snide remark but did snarl quietly to himself.
“That is not true. I’ve only requested fair pay for my work.” He said calming his tone from his previous loud and angry one.

“This fox—” Judy said with a disgruntled tone pointing at the accused fox.

“Grey, Gideon ma’am.” He slowly got up, a good look at him showed him a larger slightly more husky form then some of the foxes she had met before.

“Is employed by you?” She asked as everyone settled for the moment.

“Yes, just before the winter season to prepare for late harvest. Kept him on through the winter to help in the kitchen with cooking.” He said plainly.

“And what is this argument about now?” She asked taking on the air of authority she felt sparse a moment ago.

“He has been demanding more money.” The rabbit Judy believed the name was Markus the leader of the Jumps family.

“Not true, I haven’t been paid at all since before the snow. I have only voiced grievances about my pay as it was agreed upon.” The fox chimed in a skittish appearance as he continued to look over Judy, herself not realizing that she had been staring at him with a disgruntled expression, she looked back to Markus.

“I assume you possess ledgers?” Judy asked Markus himself realizing the heavy gaze of the samurai was now upon him instead.

“Of course.” He looked to one of his kids before snapping his fingers a couple of times. Judy took the ensuing silence to look around the room at all the inhabitants with a serious expression. Soon the room reduced to only Gideon, Markus, his wife, two remaining children and Judy herself who paced in place putting on her yet unpracticed appearance of importance. The small child returned with a thick book of papers. Handing it to his father who brought it to a table for the parties to look over. A few pages in and there was the logs of hired mammals, few in rabbit culture as most labor was committed by their personal family, the benefit of their large family sizes. Gideons signature stood beside Markus’ and a number the assumed payment, small at just above two koku annual, ridiculously small she realized but the number did sit signed.
“What? I never signed that!” Gideon claimed mouth agape at the paper.

“You're calling me a liar, your name is signed right there. You claiming it's not your signature? I still have your initial one from when you began fox!” Markus proclaimed as the remaining rabbits besides Judy glared at the larger predator. “And now that an honored representative of our liege lord is here perhaps we can address the missing food.” He addressed in an accusing tone.

“What? Missing—what but?” Gideon noticeably stuttered but Judy looked over the papers to confirm what Markus said, there was gideon's signature and a few pages prior the agreement of his employment, they matched. She looked back with a glare at the fox. He continued to step back shoulders falling, his ears back and fear while Judys left hand made it to the scabbard of her sword.

“I never stole nothing! I wouldn’t!” He said as confidently as his frame allowed.

“Like missing rice flour.” Markus pointed at the offending padded hands of Gideon still covered in said flour.

“What?! You had me baking. Your framing me!” Gideon pointedly snarled at Markus again.

“You’ll come with me, I’ll take the ledger and have this dealt with by my father.” She said with no room for refusal in her voice. The foreboding expression on the fox left no mistake.

*Hes going to run.*

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t do anything wrong! Hes lying!” He moved aside the door and made a run for it. The number of rabbits at the door was easily twenty sets of prying ears from what she could count beginning the chase after the fleeing fox.

“Get him!” One small kid said. “Stop the fox! He's a thief” Judy could hear the voice of Markus echo behind her as she followed. If it was meant to elicit help, in a sense it did just that. Gideon barely made it twenty shaku (foot equivalent) before two larger sons of Markus tackled into the larger predator with more force than needed. Another two added their bodies to the scuffle as Judy came to a stop before the struggling fox. The adrenaline coursing through her left her not winded yet panting breaths at the sudden introduction of the chase.

“You're being detained Grey.” She said victoriously. But the writhing set of bodies didn’t still or
stop. Grunts and small impacts were noticed, the rabbits were punching and kicking at the fox.

“Hey stop.” She said furrowed but they didn’t seem to pay her any mind, more rabbits jumped in even beginning to yell.

“Got him! Teach that thief a lesson!” One of the larger ones voiced. Yelps and winced screeches could be heard from the fox who kept trying to bring his hands to protect his face but having them yanked away. Judy entered the louder scuffle trying to yank bodies away with sufficient force. The first one looked back as he was pulled away with confusion looking at her like she was the one not obeying authority all of a sudden. The second wore that same expression causing a guilty feeling in the pit of her stomach. Further inspection of the accused fox showed his bludgeoned face with blood coming from marks along his face and shoulders. Eyes closed the fox swung freely now to no avail the attack on him continued. Judy now in a frenzied flurry to help the hopeless fox.

A loud gasp emanated from the congregation of rabbits as the foxes latest attempt at self defense finally landed. A clawed swipe connected but not with the intended targets. All the rabbits caught the threatening tension, they hopped away once they realized its cause. Gideon huffed and looked around through bruised lids heaving till he realized the same as them. Three red lines on the samurais cheek. Her sword drew menacingly to the chorus of silence.

“I didn’t mean to, they just kept-I’m sorry!” He yelped out but the glare Judy set him ended all continued discussion including from the rabbits behind them.

“Enough! Stand fox!” She yelled the sword aimed at his chest now. He stood hands at his side so as not to make any visible offense or quick motion. Ears low face kept lower on the dirt he brought up an arm wiping the blood from his mouth, tears forming at the corners of his eyes. He knew his life was over now. “Ledger. Now!” Judys voice left again no mistake as her outstretched hand remained less than a few seconds before a rushing rabbit brought the book over to her hand. “Walk!” She yelled again at the fox who began down the path she had taken that morning toward the Hopps estate.

---

“Its his signature.” Stu said looking over the ledger a second time. “Matches his employment one.” He sat amongst the small set of three rabbits in the room, himself, James and of course Judy sitting encircling the ledger.

“He attacked a noble. Theft and intimidating his employer for more money? Seems pretty cut and dry.” James spoke Judy nodded as well. “Death.” The words a finality in their verdict. Stu nodded
with a soft groan.

“Your blade Judy, it will send a message.” The family patriarch said said lowly, Judy still feeling a sense of grief over the sudden events. She knew he didn’t mean to but her sore cheek with ointment and fresh stitches angered her excessively. And his lying and extorting a rabbit family

Like a fox

She thought. Even still she shrugged.

A couple rooms over Gideon was under guard by a couple of the younger samurai rabbits still in training. Bruised and too tired to even cry any more he had been muttering about being framed for an hour or two now not that he could gauge time well. Meanwhile his fate had been since confirmed and the execution was to occur that same day.

Taking the chance to delay the inevitable Judy walked the porch of her estate left hand resting on her sword nestled on her side. Execution was common but she had never had to complete one herself. She couldn’t allow her sympathy to negate the fact the fox had committed extortion and theft, the evidence against him placed by an established farmer family that held some societal power.

___

Back in the present

Twentieth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October twentieth, Fall, 1623. Camp for a night, northern Shinano. Edo era Japan.

“It's a cold night, have some rice and share the warmth of our fire.” Nick smiled small in his posture as Judy reminisced the memory in place of a conniving fox. Rage boiled within her for a beat then two.

Then she bellowed a war cry before lunging at the first two figures whose silhouette only began to show against the fire's light. Raised sword she slashed at the first figure who blocked, her practiced motions having her dodge the second mammals attack quickly. Her speed was admirable in how quickly it bested even the two combatants. Knelt into a roll she readied herself for a slash. This time
the leftmost assailant had no time to block. Long drawn slash across the tall red foxes torso.

Bottom right waist to upper left shoulder.

She thought as the clean strike connected. She rolled back into the safety the fire's glow offered. The fox felt to his knees coughing as Judy smirked.

“One down two to go.” She proclaimed confidently. The demon stood however as Judys eyes widened. The fox she had struck wasn’t in two like the force of her strike should have left him, no he stood right back up as if never struck. “What?!” She proclaimed in alarm looking over her sword, no blood. Closer inspection she noticed the opposite her blade actually shown chips from the small clashings and even more.

“You're mistaken if you think you can kill a demon so easily.” The shadowed figure of an assassin spoke with a cocky grin showing at the corners of the fit mask. The two still approached in a practiced formation. Nicks ears twitched at the quiet clanking of metal on dirt as Judy moved for another lunge on the opponents met with a loud combative roar.

“No!” Nick reached out at the sounds of the ensuing scuffle, his warnings to late. Judy felt something sharp connect, no weapon as she had trained to block and dodge but a spike or something cut into her foot. And as she steadied herself another two though far more shallow in her other foots straw sandals. Diving into a falling roll she managed to slide back into the radiance and visibility the fire offered, where she knew no traps hid. No practiced movements again as the three canines approached this time with grins as they finally fully illuminated themselves against the light.

“Woah, woah, woah! Let's talk this over.” Nick offered Judy turned to his fearful and lowered expression. He looked defeated, straw hat on and his bandages failing to hide the shape his face took. Slumped slouching and reserved with a tucked tail Judy realized like a scolded canine.

“This doesn’t concern you monk.” The blue eyed arctic fox with feminine features on the right approached as now they had fully encircled them with the rock face and umbrella on its side at their back. Not that Judy thought she could escape now with cut feet. She slowly removed the sharp object from her foot, it clanked covered in a thin layer of blood as she dropped it. Sword still raised threateningly at the two on the left.

“It does.” Nick said stridently claiming his walking stick in his left paw to stand slightly taller, the female one that spoke before readied her weapon at his action. But he lowered his straw hat setting it down just where he had been sitting prior, revealing his fabric covered and heavily scarred face to them. “You're here to kill us?” He asked.
A moment as all three stopped their approaching steps.

“Orders. We mean you no harm. The rabbit is our target.” The arctic fox spoke the other two nodding in response, their leader it appeared.

“Well then your orders indirectly harm me.” He said the three looking at each other. “Are we all not icons of Inari?” He spoke less timid on this the three shinobi coursed at this gripping their weapons. “All of us Inaris chosen mammals?” He continued.

“How so?” The arctic fox lowered her sword slightly. “Blind monk? How do we harm you?” She asked pointing the sword at Judy with a raised brow. “By completing our mission and killing the rabbit?” She looked at Nick who made nearly tripped over the handle of the large umbrella stepping over it with one foot approaching as closely as he could the arctic fox.

“I am blind. I can’t see.” He said as if it was unknown.

“We can see that.” The arctic one said pointedly drawing the tip of her sword towards him as a form of caution on his approach.

“And I travel bound for Kozuke to deliver a sword with my companion.” The blind fox gestured towards the large protected sword adorned on his pack. “At which time I can safely take the highway back to my home of Himeji in Harima. If you kill her I’ll be left to wander the wilderness without a fair ability to find my way. I’ll die with winter on approach or shortage of food. Even if i’m lucky enough to find another estate along the road no guarantee they will help a fox.” He said knowingly. Judy knew this was true but didn’t know what Nick was getting at. Sly as he was she couldn’t imagine him getting them to simply not kill her.

“So I propose an agreement, I smell foxes so I assume you're all foxes right?” He carefully gestured to the arctic fox who nodded with an audible agreement, small as it was. He then began pointing in the general direction of the other two who looked at each other before following suit with a nod and audible ‘hmph’ that stood as their confirmations.

“So I propose that if you kill my source of travel that you take me with you, at least to the highway so I can travel safely. Fail and I will curse you in this life and the next. Inari will know of your dealings, you already guarantee my death.” Betrayal crossed Judy instantly as she realized the implication. Her life was being so easily traded for safe travel. He had no intention of trying to convince them of not killing her but instead his own interests once she was dead. He was using his
species to convince them to help him once she was dead.

“You… You honorless fox!” Judy yelled out feeling tears well up. The silver tongued fox she had grown fond of was ready to set her life as a bargaining chip so easily. Impending death not unlike she had doomed Gideon to years prior. Dread flooded her thoughts as the three foxes looked between each other in deliberation.

Chapter End Notes

Code edit: 12/26/16
A first impression is important to make but then again some times first impressions are a mistake. Judy quickly finds out.

The situation had devolved oddly into the weirdest trade of life she could imagine. But felt hypocritical given how she had judged mammalian life so handily in her past. Judy looked at the predators who deliberated with the slightest of gestures between each other as if she wasn’t even there anymore. If they expected she would go down without a fight she steeled herself, ready to teach them otherwise.

Eventually the arctic fox lowered in temperament and sword looked back at Nick who still looked defeated and weak in his body language waiting patiently for a response. His stance was reserved and fearful, if the leader of the assassins wanted to she could easily cut him down if she suddenly decided. The umbrella between his legs would trip him even if Nick did make a motion to save Judy, the growing dread of the fact he had no intentions to.

“Alright, as our actions would deprive you of your safe travel we realize the effects it would have on you. We will take you back to the Nakasendo. There a caravan can take you to Harima safely.” She nodded. Nick let out a loud sigh of relief his face relaxing.

“Oh thank you.” Even without eyes he looked back at the other two. “All of you.” The other two nodded awkwardly.
“You bastard, you can’t just trade my life, I’ll fight! I won’t die that easily!” Judy roared but the cuts still caused her to wince at the idea of lunging. Nick looked at her and the look sent her blood cold.

Is he smirking at me?

That same cocky confident expression a tool of his charisma she realized, she had been played. Taking one last look at the mammal she would haunt from the next life she noticed he really did look every bit the monk they claimed. Even down to the counting beads in his right paw.

“I’ll pray then.” He said lowering his head as he raised his right paw with the beads in the gap between his thumb and index finger. First he raised it stopping just before the crown of his head, then to his throat in the same way and finally ending at his chest.

“For the rabbit?” The arctic fox asked noting as the blind monk steadied himself with the walking staff in his left hand. It landed the tip landing within the fire. The female leader of the assassins looked back at the fuming rabbit who glared daggers at her disloyal companion.

“Forgive me for my actions. Through them I know I fall further from enlightenment. We are all sentient beings, but until we reach enlightenment please forgive me and these other for what we do.” As finished his simple prayer raised his pointed muzzle. Looking sightless at the arctic fox his posture changed, he stopped slouching. He stood tall Judy realizing he was actually substantially taller than the diminutive thing he looked like seconds before. His hackles rose and his teeth shone gloriously from the fires glint. The arctic fox looked back at him to late to react. He shot his right paw forward grabbing the collar of her dark robe shirt, yanked her forward with his grip using his height to tilt his head back then forward. The gruesome collision of his forehead against hers left an audible crack as her head snapped backwards upon impact. She collapsed instantly like a sack of potatoes, out cold instantly.

“For you.” The cold tone he spoke with as he shot his left foot forward, levering the umbrellas handle between his shins causing its deployed side to roll. As it did reactions began Judy stunned by the sudden change in her auburn companion. The other two moved to ready attacks forward but as they did the umbrella rolled in front of them blocking their views of Judy. Nick walked with knowing purpose as they slashed through the umbrella instead of moving it. Confidently stepping into place he raised his walking staff the end alight from the fire. They moved to block as he swung the lit end, but when they did the impact sent small embers from the charred end into their faces. They snarled at the bright light blinding their night vision and the heat of the small particles burning their faces. Nick followed with the other end colliding with the second foxes head with a second audible crack, down he went like a bolt of fabric folding in from his apparently emptied legs.

The third fox cleared his vision quickly finding his sword paw encased by Nick’s own, he had dropped his staff. And his left hand wrapped to his throat.
“What! Yough!” The fox let out barely as the grip tightened he brought his free hand up to try and remove Nicks hand from his throat. His free hand flailed striking and clawing at Nick’s arm. Just as soon as he realized the futile attempt at trying to slash at a blind foxes eyes it was too late. Nick no longer slouched at all the full of his height proving him more than just a little taller than the assailing foxes, lifting him clean off the ground from his throat, choking gurgling sounds and flailing legs before he went limp and was dropped just as soon as he was sure.

Sudden silence, Judy might have been able to count the seconds of the conflict on a single paw with how quickly it played out, Nick knelt to kick dirt over the burned part of the staff he used as a walking stick.

“What… What?” Was all she managed as her fox companions ears perked up in her direction. “What was that?! You just? I thought you were sacrificing me for safe travel how did you?” She couldn’t get from one thought to the next without the previous taking up a second sense of urgency. Nick just smirked Judy took a moment to realize she was now aiming her katana at him before lowering it in hesitation.

“Nah I like your company more than theirs Carrot-sensei, though she smells nice.” He pointed a thumb in the direction of the first quieted body he had assaulted their would be leader. “Now I need your help at this next part tieing them up.” Judy was again at a loss for words before slowly crawling over to the first one with her sword poised.

“Why tie them up, they were going to kill me?” She felt that same fear and rage boil at the fox leader who levied her life only moments before when she was still conscious.

“I can’t and I won’t allow you.” He spoke coldly grabbing her attention.

“But why?”

“It would be hypocritical of me to implore their sense of good will then abuse it to kill them. I already took advantage of their kindness to save your live. What kind of mammal would I be if I didn’t at least let them survive for that?” He said dissatisfied with the prospect of killing prevalent in his voice. Judy nodded affirmingly, understanding though she still didn’t feel all that safe.

“Ah HA!” She proclaimed looking over the deep cut of the one she had struck earlier. “Chainmail! Sneaky little bastard!” Judy fumed.
“Of course, everyone knows ninjas wear chainmail.” The fox laughed at her while he continued binding one of the others.

_________________________

**Years Before**

*Seventh day of Nigatsu, Haru 1618. Fifteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.*

*February seventh, Spring, 1618. Burrows, Kozuke. Edo era Japan.*

Judy paced the porch for what felt like only minutes were hours had passed. The execution of Gideon would be followed out after midday, the closer it got the more nervous and guilty she felt.

“It's time Judy.” James said, walking out of the open frame of the entrance with two smaller rabbits at off his sides, Gideon in tow at the center of the formed triangle between them. The surroundings quieted as he was forced to his knees just outside off to the side of the garden, arms tied behind his back. “Gideon you're charged with extortion and theft by clan Jumps. You are also charged for savagely attacking a member of the noble clan Hopps. The sentence decided is death to be carried out immediately by Judy of clan Hopps ordered by lord Hopps, Daimyo of Kozuke. Do you have any last words.” James spoke the words as he read from the listed paper on hand. The paper in question was a signed and binding execution papers.

“I didn’t do it, I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry.” He said again, he had several times and his tired voice failed any remaining strength. James nodded to Judy who moved into position as slowly as possible. Her sword drew slowly in her trembling hand. Gentle spring clouds had claimed the afternoon sky threatening to rain. The cold steel of her sword sat at the back of the fox’s neck Judy herself swallowing at her dry throat, silent sobs having drained her and left her feeling ill. She felt something was off, the fox himself seemed sincere yet he couldn’t explain away his own signature. An eerie guilt filled her frame, more than she imagined and feeling worse that she never imagined this sensation when she would be first required to take another mammal’s life.

A small rabbit could be seen down the path running towards them voice out of reach. Judy would later pray to a dozen gods that night at the welcome interruption.

“Wait! Wait!” The small child Judy identified as one of Markus daughters yelled. “Gideon didn’t do it!” She yelled further as Judy stayed her blade the small rabbit ran up to her waving a piece of paper
“You shouldn’t be here for this little one.” Judy knelt for the small rabbit offering a comforting smile. “You don’t have to witness this.” But the small child only puffed up her cheeks at her.

“But Gideon is innocent… Father lied.” She offered the small piece of paper forward Judy taking it in hand, a single glance and her eyes widened.

“Its an employment contract for one Grey, Gideon with the Jumps family.” She handed quoted re-reading again then a third time. As soon as she was sure she handed it to James as she lowered her sword. They quickly retrieved the ledger they still had in their possession, it meant to be returned to the Jumps family later that day. The evidence overwhelming in that it directly conflicted with the one they had in the ledger. Silently the rabbit deliberated between each other before looking at the still kneeling Gideon.

“This one doesn’t match the ledger or the payment signatures.” James clarified.

“And this one she brought is more weathered and used. As if someone looked it over several times.” Judy spoke ominously. “As if they were staring at it for hours. To copy it.” Judy concluded looking over the piece that more matched the textures and wear of the ledger.

“The charges of theft still stand and even just ignoring that he struck a daughter of the lord of this province, you’ll have scars for life Judy.” James spoke adamantly. “We can’t abide a peasant striking a noble mammal.”

“He didn’t mean to, when he fled from the Jumps estate he was being framed. We know that now and he was attacked by workers on lord Jumps field, his own sons. They believed him a thief and a dangerous predators. I won’t charge him for that and I certainly won’t execute him for theft of flour alone.” Amongst their huddle a set of long ears perked and ease dropped.

“He didn’t steal either. Gideon has baked for us dozens of times. A couple of us younger ones really wanted another pot pie, they’re soo good!” The small rabbit spoke again. The huddle of noble rabbits nodded between each other. Judy made her way over removing the bindings from Gideon's wrists.

“Given these evidences and witness testimonials. Grey you are found innocent.” She said warmed at the situation that finally brought light to her worried conscience. “And clan Jumps will be charged for falsifying employment documents, withholding pay, intending to mislead and falsify charges laid
against you. I am also sorry.” Judy knelt beside him feeling horrible for her own part and her own mistakes in this. Gideon didn’t move much at all just breathing a sigh of relief before looking up.

He just stared at her for an awkward moment.

“Is father going to be in trouble?” The small daughter of the offending patriarch asked on the verge of tears.

“Yes.” Judy nodded reaching out for her to approach. “But you told the truth and saved an innocent life. If you didn’t bring the real ledger sheet and explain the claims of theft an innocent life would be the cost. And your father has to be held to account for this. If Gideon chooses to charge him for the assault as well he will be charged for inciting violence.” She put a comforting arm over Gideons shoulder. It took him a moment to mull it over. Judy frowned still noticing the murky tear stained fur under his eyes.

“It wouldn’t help. Nothing would change.” The defeated tone was not what Judy expected.

“You would get justice for being wronged.” She offered confused. In part she felt guilty for her own ignorances and negligence.

*I should have been more attentive, this shouldn’t have been able to even happen.*

She scolded herself inwardly. She recalled her promises, to prove she was more than just some dumb bunny and here her negligence could have cost her conscience. Cold realization if the daughter of the Jumps family had only arrived a short while later after the execution had been finished. Judy would have had that blood on her hands, innocent blood for the rest of her life.

“Still, I came here thinking things were better since Lionhearts shogunate. But, look how easily I was screwed over. No one's gonna hire me even if they heard I was not at fault, cause i’m a fox.” His voice trembled and sounded defeated.

“Well she says you make good pies.” Judy pointed at the small rabbit who nodded in agreement. Gideon smiled at this. Judy wore a shamed expression that the fox looked confused looking at. “It's not nearly enough to make up for what's been done to you.” She said gritting her teeth. “But i’m sure clan Hopps could use another good cook if you're up to the task.” The fox's eyes widened at first with excitement before falling in with his sense of caution.
“Judy I don’t think we’re in need of another cook.” James said flatly from the porch as the fox seemed to nod expecting this. Judy instead glared at her brother knowing it wasn’t true and more than certain their coffers could afford it.

“Fine i’ll pay him from the income from my own lands.” Judy shot with a raised brow knowing no further argument from her brother would hold. His jealousy on the matter as she in fact owned a nice little piece of land of her own in place of a income like he had taken. At first James choice seemed like it made him more but soon Judy's own small plot of land began producing a good amount of koku for her. Sold at increasing costs of food her income quickly shadowed his even dwarfing the incomes of most imperial guards.

“Naturally you’ll be on call a lot so you’ll have a room of your own near the kitchen. You’ll be payed muuuch more of course. But that's just how it's gotta be.” She chuckled at the growing aw in the foxes expression.

“Thank you.” He offered with a growing strength to his voice. James meanwhile only shrugged defeatedly off from the side. Back to them he walked inside shaking his head from side to side a sincere and warm smiling forming when he shredded the execution papers.

_____________________________________________________

Back in the present

Twenty First day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty First, Fall, 1623. Old trade route, Northern Shinano. Edo era Japan.

Judy cleaned the wounds of her feet, only one of the metal spikes placed as traps caught her foot deeply enough to require better care. She was still stunned into a sense of silence as the blind fox carefully prodded her foot causing her to wince. She felt a heat run up her ears in embarrassment while he cleaned the deeper cut the single metal spike trap had inflicted. The pressure applied by his padded paws was soothing as he worked the herbal ointment into the cleaned wound. Applying a clean bolt of linen fabric around her foot.

“How's that feel, too tight?” He asked slowly pressuring the wound and testing its motion. Heat ran up her ears further when he's pressured pads began massaging against the sole of her foot.

“No it's good.” She said almost sedated by the motions. “How did you do that? Blind foxes don’t do
that.” She said pointedly as he set her foot down. The three assailants, tied to one another by their own rope found in their packs. They were beside the cliff the rope also around a tree. The heat the fire still offered slowly crept back against the creeping chill from before.

“What should a blind fox do?” He smirked that same cocky grin.

“You know what I mean.” She rolled her eyes jealous at how easily he managed to fall back into the humours personable nature and dragging her with him. “Blind mammals don’t just casually swindle a set of three assassins and lull them into dropping their guards before bludgeoning them!” She threw her hands up dramatically. Nick shrugged with a pursed lip.

“It is what it is fluff-sama. I’m just gooood.” He rolled the word as he set to simmer a small pot again. In it some water and mushrooms sizzling at the bottom by themselves. “You hungry? I’m still hungry. What say we get some food in us.” He began whistling another tune. Judy huffed shaking her head from side to side. She replayed the moments in her head but they felt insane to think real, like something caused from an alcohol induced sleep. But opening her slowly heavying lids she saw the same three foxes tied up.

*Nick pretended to trade me.*

She began unpacking it within her imagination running the fight back through her head. He had tried to stop her from attacking. Somehow he knew they had set up traps.

*Or he was just smart enough not to attack nocturnal predators in the dark.*

She rolled her eyes at herself behind closed lids, she knew she couldn’t even blame the rice wine for that kind of mistake. Over and over the event played in her mind, her fox companion systematically dissecting the team of killers. Lulled them in with small stature and submissive frame then shattered them with force and dominating will. She recalled how he was shorter than the arctic fox from his lowered posture. Even on his feet and slouched he was just barely shorter than the tall standing arctic fox who was in a combat stance on the tips of her hind paws, only the padded toes. She remembered the honestly intimidating and confident figure he imposed when he stopped pretending, hackles up, teeth bare, neck at its length and raising to his padded feet. He was suddenly an entirely different mammal and he just smashed them like they never even knew what they were doing. Snapped fingers happened in front of her several times before Judy shot forward from a groggy state.
Answered Prayer

Chapter Summary

Recent events leave the duo tired and haggard. Judy feels a growing sense of companionable fellowship with her tired but selfless accompanying fox. A prayer answered in the form of a reprieve from the their recent encounters and thoughts. Relaxation on the eve of conflict.

Chapter Notes

Pages 9
Words 4,180
Characters 23,113
Characters excluding spaces 19,019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8: Answered Prayers

Twenty First day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty First, Fall, 1623. Old trade route, North Central Shinano. Edo era Japan.

Heavy lids refused to open with calm slow breaths. She was slumped over something soft, fur she concluded from the texture in her hands and the heat emanated from it. One by one she took stock of her other senses, smell?

Fox

She concluded surprised how it didn’t seem to offend her. Continuing to list them off, her ears couldn’t move well.

Straw Hat
Her groggy mind continued to catch up with her. Even without being able to lift her ears the sounds played pretty rhythmically… Until they didn’t.

“Agh, damn it…” The voice below her cursed quietly. The once rhythmic steps of padded feet against coarse sounding dirt staggered. She opened her eyes shutting them against the bright light that assaulted her sense of sight.

“Ughhh” She pouted at it. Sitting up with an audible yawn she finally began to remember. *Being carried* which entailed her sitting on his shoulders like a child, *piggyback* the best sociable way to call it despite the offense.

“Welcome back to the living world, hate to immediately bug you sleepy head but. I could use some help here.” He seemed to beg, she dared the bright light of daytime again. Squinting against the unwelcome light, she looked at their path which lead off into some bushes off the side of the road.

“Turn full right.” She chuckled but quickly felt the guilt of realizing she had fallen asleep on top of the foxes head that she originally guided. Guided because said fox lacked the single sense of eyesight.

“Thanks.” He turned a full right back on the path, she continued to gently guide him from atop his shoulders with simple quickly learned gentle tugs or taps on the fur on the back of his head.

“Why am I wearing your massive hat.” She asked her head almost entirely encased in the already large straw hat as it was.

“The clouds threatened to pour with a drizzle earlier.” He began. “And the sun was hurting my eyes.” Another pause as he yawned. “And you kept tossing in your sleep because of the sun.” He said in the lowest tone. Judy further felt embarrassed at this but also thankful for the selflessness of her companion in his actions.

“Uuuuuuuugh, sorry I abandoned you for sleep.” She groaned on length taking another look around. The usual autumn colors assaulted her vision but a fresh layer of leaves had left the canopy of trees reminding her of the cold. Despite this the warm fur under her staved off the cold effectively.

“No problem fluffs, you were tired.” His voice broke off into another heavy yawn by the end. With her guidance again the rhythmic sound of his steps picked up pace slightly. “How’s the leg feel?” Nick asked Judy in response continued to stretch her appendages. As she extended the offending
foot he caught it deftly allowing her to push against his paw helping in her test it though again the physical contact felt awkward to her.

“Feels a lot better already. Let me down, wanna stretch.” She said as he reached up to catch her under her armpits.

“Alley oop!” he announced for the second time of her recent memory hoisting her off his shoulders and down back on the ground, himself kneeling as he set her down. He stayed knelt there.

“Ooooh.” They both groaned in unison, a sigh of pain and relief.

“Shoulders?” Judy asked Nick rubbing furiously at his stiff neck before nodding with a pathetic confirmation, Judy herself allowing her legs to tense against her own weight really felt the tired limbs and their exhausted state. Further inspection showed the incredibly tired frame the fox. “You look really tired Nick.” She said sincerely gauging the foxes exhaustion, reaching over a hand on his shoulder. Nick barely looked up before nodding again. She patted at his shoulder helping him back to his feet. “We should stop, you need some rest.”

“No, we have to be near the cross roads connecting to the Nakasendo highway.” He stretched hoisting himself back up on his two tired limbs. “Lets keep going till we find a rest stop.” He argued, though they both knew most would be possibly abandoned or closed due to knowledge of the approaching army that aimed for the capital. Nonetheless she agreed and their journey continued. Most of the countryside she realized was in large part indistinguishable, she nodded disapprovingly to herself, unable to note the fiefs they crossed as they did.

Several hours later and the end of their third day was approaching rapidly with the falling sun. Two more days and they would arrive with warlord Bigs’ army on their heel if estimates were anything to go by. Judy hoped beyond reason to arrive to the well stocked army of Bogos regime, bolstered by whatever mammals arrive from central and northern provinces. Echigos archers under Daimyo Bellwethers command were the greatest asset against predator armies.

Their pace had dropped off quickly where Judy felt more awake her joints still protested her. She felt the argument of having two more days on foot travel over Nick would work, one glance at him and the pack he had elected to carry and herself for the better part of a day left a whittled, tired frame that she couldn’t justify her own argument. As the sun faded over the horizon the end of their third day since Etchu.
“We should set up shelter for the night, you look dead tired Nick.” She said with a hint of alarm but where he had soldiered on before he readily nodded in agreement this time.

“The umbrella was destroyed so I left it behind. Were going to need serious shelter for once, no tree canopy on the count of the approaching winter.” He stated with a raspy haggard voice. Judy nodded and they prepared to continue the path. Judy began picking up whatever small dry wood she found knowing a fire was the first goal once a strong enough rock facing or overhand of any kind was found. Then something, it almost made Judy cry and she felt so relieved.

“Light! Look!” She yelled out

“What? Where?” He asked looking around. “It's so dark! Judy I think i’m blind!” He managed, looking as if he rolled his eyes behind the fabric that protected them, a self assured smirk and a shake of his head. The sarcastic and dramatic expression caused her to giggle again, she envied his ability to joke even as he looked about ready to drop from the wear and tear.

“Its an…” She stopped looking, confirming against the dark.

“What? What is it. Damn it Judy don’t yank my chain.” He coughed again taking out his small bamboo canteen popping it for a long draw from its contents.

“Nick, it's an inn” She almost seemed to chirp with the sharp sound she made. He felt his wrist viced catching the pace as she pulled him along towards the building excitedly. The prospect of shelter from the approaching rain, a warm night's sleep and decent tea. Once they covered the ground Judy noted it was on the larger side of buildings likely for a large clovine creature, bovine she suspected given the trade routes and rest stops were commonly manned by them.

“Hello?” The large heavy set bubalu said from the opened the door. Female from the appearance and tone. “Oh come in, come in out of the rain.” She smiled warmly at the fox and rabbit who needed no additional permission to avoid the downpour that had began to claim them just moments prior in its cold grasp. “My guess you’ll be wanting to stay the night.” She asked animatedly noting the swords on the two mammals with a knowing tone. “Hear a large army headed by warlord Big is heading to the capital. We are heading out in the morning up to Echigo, several mammals already booked leaving from their posts on the Nakasendo. So one room remaining and it’s going to cooooost.” She thought it over for a quick moment. “Two shu.” She smirked proudly. It was highway robbery at that amount they both realized. Two shu or five hundred copper mon coins. The fox and rabbit looked at each other before glowering back up at the large mammal.
“Fine.” The fox finally said with Judy nodding in agreement. In the end the two decided that fighting over that simple injustice wasn’t worth their time. They had prayed at shrines in passing, they weren’t about to turn away the simple blessing on the count of a couple silver coins. Nick took a single silver coin from his own sleeve as his lagomorph companion did the same offering them to the greedy hoof.

“Husband.” The bovine said towards the counter a moment passing without response. “Husband!” She tried again a little louder but again no response. “FRANK!” She yelled over an even larger bubalus rounded a corner carrying a large crate looking tired but otherwise indifferent.

“Two late night travelers in from the cold.” He nodded looking very bored at the prospect. “Alright, your room is last door, end of the hall and on the left. I’ll be in to bring you some warm blankets soon. Night looks like it's going to be very cold, brrr.” She gesticulated in a dramatic fashion as she made the chilling noise. “We have a natural hot spring in the back.” The large innkeeper wrinkled her nose at the two smaller mammals. “You both reek, look filthy. Can’t have you offending the senses of my other patrons. Go wash up, I’ll have Frank run your kimonos through some cold water..” Judy took the moment to sniff at the inner white layer, she noted it stained lightly with dust and sweat. Nick on her left side, animatedly cringed sniffing at his own.

“Alright, it's just off to the right, just past the counter. You can wash up and head straight to your room or enjoy the springs, healing properties will help your aches and pains if you still have a bit of a distance tomorrow.” The large bovine said in a very mercantile tone, useless given she had already charged the two obscene prices for their stay.

“Really got hustled on the price but. Fluffs, I think at some point I accidently walked us off a cliff while you were sleeping on my shoulders, because this can’t be real.” He said stretching his neck again. The rooms warmth was very welcoming compared to their prior several nights traveled.

“Yea, sorry about that, if I had guided you like I should have we would have survived to die in the cold rain. Well at least our deaths were quick and painless.” She added making a gurgling noise for dramatic effect. Nick in his turn laughed still a note of the tired rasp to his voice. “So how will we decide on who hits up the hot springs first?” Judy tilted her head.

“Oh come on, I haven't slept since the assassins unlike you.” He pointed. Judy nodded surrendering that fact. “Besides, your little bunny modesties really worried about a blind fox?” He raised a brow behind the fabric.

“So, I’m going first. I certainly won’t complain for the company and conversation if you choose to join me.” He shrugged making his way through the inn. Making a dramatic exit of the front of the inn wasn’t what was going to happen as he kept colliding with random objects throughout the room causing Judy to smile smugly taking great effort not to laugh openly at his misfortune. “I can almost
hear your inner monologue fluffs, don’t pick on the handicapped fox. Help me out here.” When he reached a dark paw out for a guiding hand she offered it readily, she noted the smile he wore when she did.

_________________________

Twenty Second day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty Second, Fall, 1623. Old crossroad, Central Shinano. Edo era Japan.

The room that held the hot spring was roofed, likely due to the more elevated region having thick heavy snow throughout the winter season. He appreciated the chance to wash himself beforehand thoroughly, his canine nose deeply offended by his own stench of sweat. Worse he realized, givin it was one of his two remaining senses he trusted with constant focus.

He imagined how awkward he must have looked, once his companion split into the separate washing rooms he found himself hugely disadvantaged again. This was further emphasised in how carefully he approached the water.

Blind fox drowns in midnight hot springs.

He laughed at himself thinking over the possible way his death could be described. Unable to see the springs itself he wasn’t very confident where the section that might fit his size of mammal might be.

His second trusted sense eventually caught the sound to his left his ears perking in that direction.

“Why aren’t you already in?” The rabbit asked with a quizzical tone. Instinctively he tightened the grip around the towel around his waist that protected his modesty.

“Figured I would let you go first and get acquainted with the waters.” He said with a soothing voice.

“Oh, that's very nice-” She paused. “You don’t know where to get in at do you?”

“Nope, definitely not. Would a beautiful bunny help this sorry tod out?” He smiled with a set of wide teeth earning a small chuckle.
“Oh, flattery now?” She said challengingly. “If you want my help you're going to have to do better than that.” She said playfully.

“Come on fluff-sensei, can’t we just enjoy the hotsprings. You don’t want me falling in the wrong side and drowning right?” He said slumping over with a dramatic pursed lip.

“Puppy eyes doesn’t work as well without the eyes. I’ll give you seven out of ten for effort though. You already told me you lived next to some docks, would wager you know how to swim.” He couldn’t see it but deep down he just knew she had a mocking and challenging posture. It goaded him to glower back but he knew it wouldn’t help.

“Very perceptive of you. Fine.” He said clearing his throat and standing tall before putting his arm firmly at his side the other still holding the towel securely. “Judy.” He began in an unguarded tone. “I’ve appreciated your help while we’ve been traveling, I humbly request your continued assistance in guiding this dumb fox.” He said bowing, dramatic in how formal he chose to be, he was met with silence a bit. “Either that or i’ll just have to jump in and flail around till I find the shallow end looking utterly foolish the whole time. Is that what you want from your companion, to humiliate me?” He mocked with a frown.

“Alright, alright. So dramatic, sure you weren’t an actor before picking up a sword. Over this way.” She began walking his ears trained on following her carefully.

“Depends on your definition of acting, ask my friends and they would have said I was a character myself.” He said proudly. Judy took the first step in looking back at the fox, lids locked shut. Still she was cautious as she set aside her towel before lowering into the water quickly.

“There, your turn.” She said deftly as the fox raised a brow. A single finger raised as he made a circular motion with the finger.

“Turn around, stop trying to sneak a peak.” He smirked causing her to blush furiously realizing she had been staring at him much longer than she meant to forgetting that he had to enter the water himself. Nick himself struggled to carefully get into the water, his clawed toes he realized helped him avoid slipping. “Alright, all good.” He proclaimed sitting into the water it reaching up to his chest, he let out a long sigh of relief.

“That good.” She chuckled.
“Better, water feels great. Grizzlemaw has a couple of these but didn’t get to go much in later years. They were a couple miles further north. Towards her last couple years she didn’t have any students I could con into walking me up the mountain to them.” The fox worked through his sore muscles feeling them relax with the heat. “What about you, foot feel better?”

“Yea, don’t have as many of these further south till you get towards the mountainside near zootopia. So don’t get to enjoy these as much.” The rabbit said mimicking the fox as she tested out her limbs against the warm water. What exposed fur he had above the water, a darker colored auburn that was similar to wood in tone. Aside from the color she could make out missing portions of fur, scars she realized observing them.

“So, how many more days travel do we have till Kozuke?” He asked catching her attention again, she hadn’t realized she had been staring again.

“Short side of two I think, we covered a lot of ground. Not counting tonight if we really get moving tomorrow we’ll be at the border of the Kozuke by nightfall. The Burrows where the Shoguns got his army encamped by late morning after that.” She confirmed the numbers over in her head. The inn was a lucky stumble, with their umbrella gone finding shelter from the rain would be a pain, Nicks large straw hat the closest to protection from the elements they had. Also she didn’t like the idea of arriving to present the bad news in dirty clothes and smelling as traveled as she was. She sighed at the idea of having to deliver the bad news to lord Bogo though that part fell somewhat on her companion’s shoulders.

“What you thinking about?” Nick asked relaxed in much the same position she was nestled into the water.

“Just, I know it wasn’t in my control but feels like I failed in some way. This was my plan and I don’t know if Bogo will still go through with it without his old master.” Judy thought it over, lord Big having a large host of battle hardened and well prepared soldiers. She was confident in her abilities but Bogo might be less sure given her lack of experience with actual combat.

“Might be for the best. Are you sure you could take on some of the best of the west provinces? Their a little more inclined to sword fighting with the skill to match.”

“You don’t think I could match skill against your predator samurai in the west?” She shot back a little offended.
“No offense to you, I’m sure you’re good. But I’ve been that path. Dueled in the west, fought, killed. It’s different.” He said as if it was the simplest thing.

“Different how? I beat my instructors regularly. Shogun Bogo was a legend and even he says I’m good.” She glared uselessly at the blind fox.

“I don’t doubt that for a second. And I’m sure you could rightly kick some serious tail. But Big won’t just use any soldier, he’ll use his best. And in a fight for blood it’s an entirely different thing than fighting instructors with boken, without the threat of death it’s a different fight altogether. Just don’t dive into it thinking formal training is the best comparison.” Nick nodded to himself.

To her credit Judy quietly awaited the coming story recognizing the way the fox lead into them by now.

“A little over a decade ago, this wolf was wandering some of the central west provinces challenging people to duels. Think I was thirteen when I fought him.” He rubbed the scruff of his neck.

“Thirteen? Who would challenge a child that young?” Judy scoffed at that.

“He didn’t, when he arrived he set up a notice. Any mammal that wanted to wrote their name on it. I had been training at the Moon Fang dojo and wanted to prove myself. So I scribbled my name and he accepted to the surprise of my family. When his servant, a small squirrel, came to tell me he accepted, father was furious, mother was in tears. My uncle was sent with me to beg and bow and grovel for my life.” Nick shook his head in dismay.

“That’s better than dieing. To young for a duel to the death.” Judy confirmed to herself.

“Yea, I agree with you now, back then not so much. I was foolish and brash and stupid. Did it anyway though. When I got there, my uncle prepared to beg. I refused to forfeit when we arrived instead. Everyone who had gathered the last couple times he had dueled didn’t realize that I was so young, they were surprised. That same wolf though didn’t care, he agreed to let me duel.” He reminisced with a smile. Judy horrified by the prospect, yet here that same fox sat.

“My felt like it was boiling, I didn’t even have a sword just a quarter staff. He was more than twice my size at that age. I was so afraid when I charged at him. Hands shaking, heart pounding in my ears and I just yelled my little battle cry.” Nick began to gesticulate with his arms out in front of him. “He swung his short sword from my left, I blocked but I didn’t stop. I tackled into him with all my
weight. Knocked him over, raised my staff while he was surprised and staggered and brought it down on his head, again and again. It wasn’t graceful, it wasn’t pretty. But he was confident and sure and I was just scared and wanted blood, I got it.” Nick looked forlorn.

“I gave him a quick and painless death but it didn’t feel honorable. I just know that in that moment I was afraid of dieing, it was when I surrendered to that possibility that I was able to kill him. In that moment it allowed me to think clearly and I won because that’s all that mattered in that moment, I wanted to prove that I could, so I did.”

Judy took her time absorbing the idea, she had never had to kill yet, she recalled Bogo saying the same thing that ‘one had to be ready to die if they wanted to be ready to kill’

“So the staff is your main weapon? You sure used it quickly and effectively against those shinobi?”

“No, I got a sword that I trained with after a trip to the capital. I practiced religiously once I was sure it was what I wanted to do. Hand full of years after that first duel and I set out to challenge just like the wolf had, headed west to Bizen, Mimasaka won fights against wolfs, other foxes, leopards, lions, bears and even.” Nick stopped as he realized how telling his story had gotten. “Sorry, losing myself in a memory. What I’m saying fluffs is when that moment comes, trust your instincts and be ready to die. Because if you’re not ready to die then killing is going to be impossible for you. You can’t hesitate against whoever Big would bring, hesitation could cost you everything.”

The words sank into her stomach, she had always imagined the glorious victory. Recalling the moments when she thought she was going to die at the hands of the ninjas she knew she feared death. She felt ashamed, she knew she was better than that, more skilled and capable. Yet when her first real chance showed itself she greatly failed to meet the standard she thought she had set for herself. “Why did you challenge the wolf that young? You were already training but you risked your life, for what?” Judy was askance her face contorted in confusion.

“Think that’ll have to do for tonight fluffs, I’m ready to hit the hay.” He began to get up, auburn fur escaping the water. Judy almost forgot to turn away as he covered himself with a towel, drying away the loose water before disappearing into the room for his clothes. She frowned tilting her head in concern.

Judy followed a couple more minutes absorbing over the conversation and the seeping heat of the water. When she finally made it to their room she was ready to joke about their overly large temporary kimonos when she arrived to find the passed out form of the fox who looked like he had died. The bags under his eyes told the story she knew from before he was in a heavy sleep from the tired day. Two large blankets sat folded at the entrance of the room, one she took the time to cover the fox against the cold night the other for herself. Even with her short amount of sleep earlier in the day it didn’t take long for the same deep sleep to find her.
Mixed Messages

Chapter Summary

A couple more days on foot and the family home of the Burrows just outside the borders of Zootopia in Kozuke. Rested, healed and ready to go again with clear minds Judy finds a great deal more to think on from what she can see and soon finds that her sightless fox companion might be less sightless than she imagined. Soon she finds that companionable might not be the best way to describe her feeling towards that very companion.

Chapter Notes

Pages 8
Words 3,574
Characters 20,140
Characters excluding spaces 16,637

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9: Mixed Messages

It was a slow going morning, Judy didn’t mind getting a full night's rest given she slept a good portion of the previous day. Nick having already been up for a couple of hours by the time she woke up had eaten breakfast and perused some of the wares of the mammals that stayed there. The mammal traders themselves had stayed over the night, several of them were traders and mammals that ran rest stops along the major highway route. They found out from the owners that they were in fact further along their path than they expected not more than a few hundred meters over the next hill was the Nakasendo highway, due east to Kozuke. Judy estimated they would be just short of one more day's travel and unless they outright ran would have to stay one more night just on the borders of the burrows.

“Ready to go fluffs.” Nick asked with a lot more energy to his step. He rattled a few copper coins in his paw with a bag of whatever else he had purchased. Clean kimono and a rested appearance, he stood tall with sharp features and a sly intellect to his appearance.

Handsome.
She smirked to herself before realizing her thoughts, shaking them away she still looked at him unable to match the appearance he had, warm and friendly with the one he told her stories about.

“Yea.” She finally managed at her fox companion. They walked away from the morning gathered groups of mammals waving as they ventured south where the merchants headed north to the western fiefs of Echigo. “What did you buy?” She inquired looking at the small linen bags he held in his right paw just on the opposite side of her.

“Well I was trying to find another umbrella just in case of the rain.” He pointed up at the threatening clouds. The nights had grown substantially colder since she first set out on her journey and the clouds were more and more consistent as it went. “Got some things, predator things.” He listed off dismissively.

“Predator things?” Judy asked curiously leaning over to see at the pack.

“Some eggs, potatoes and soy cheese.” He added positively. “I like rice, but wanted to add a little something for flavor.” Nick smiled, where some spinach, soy or some beans would help she hadn’t seen Nick eat any fish, the low yield food didn’t serve him as well as it had her. She knew predators required a more specific diet that complimented their historical replacement of prey.

As they walked she stretched her foot a couple more times, the cut had healed remarkably quickly and it felt more relaxed since the hot springs. In general she realized most of her body took to the warm waters much better than she expected.

“Alright, let's get a move on then.” She pointed enthusiastically down their path. Nick walked taller than the previous day with an ever present smile. The pack didn’t appear to weigh him as much. True to what the innkeepers had said the cobble stoned path was visible just over the hill. Once they began down it Judy noticed the dramatic change in texture against her feet, similar to when they first broke off on less tended paths the hard surface actually felt substantially less comfortable than the dirt paths with minor vegetation. The highway served for quicker travel and assisted caravans and traders with small wagons. Clovine animals could get forged shoes to lessen the impact on heels.

“Here.” Judy turned to find her fox companion just standing there on the road just beside her as they came to the intersection. In paw he held a pair of straw sandals offering them forward to her. “These will help.” He said wiggling them in front of her. She took them looking over her current set, blood on the bottom of her wounded foot was cut and fraying. She quickly replaced them for the new set which thankfully held together better. “You know the highways were originally planned by emperor Swinton you know. Lionheart copied the idea, which is why they were designed with clovine mammals in mind. Originally the Swinton shogunate and their retainers clan Bellwether were the main benefactors you see.” He informed with a knowing nod.
Judy had known that for the most part, but stamina capable beasts of burden such as horses, mules and other clovine mammals benefited from it to. It also explained why most of the rest stops and stations along the highways were these same animals. They began a slow but slightly more pronounced pace eastbound along the Nakasendo now. Not much had changed since she had rode the caravan west bound at the beginning of her journey. One thing she noticed was that the clouds were more threatening above them more days than not now.

“Nick, what's your family name?” Judy asked just as soon as the question came to mind in their first hour or so along the cobble highway. “We have traveled for quite a bit now but I only know you as Nick.” She offered looking over to him questioningly. Unlike the dirt paths she found she almost never had to direct him as a cause of the unmistakable sensation of the road and his loud sound when stepped.

“I gave up my family name when I became a ronin fluffs, wouldn’t feel right giving it to you till I earn it.” He nodded a single time simply. “When this is over, I’ll head home to Harima and beg on my hands and knees for the forgiveness of my mother and father.” He said with a strong sense of drive in his voice. “Like I told you a couple times I wasn’t the best mammal in my opinion. Dishonorable among the listed reasons, my father and I had different ideas and so I left, intent on proving my skill. In the process I left my family name behind to be just another fox wanderer. I forgot why I wanted to be a sword mammal in the first place.” He walked for a short while more furrowed expression as he mulled over his next words. “Just call me Piberius for my family name. At least until I earn mine back… If.” He corrected. It wasn’t unusual for samurai to lose favor with their lords but to elect to abandon your name for some reason or another was an odd choice to her. Than again she had to acknowledge foxes were a more solitary species while her own were the opposite in that they were very sociable and communal.

“So Piberius-sama, what will you do once you deliver the news of Orsas passing and family sword to the Shogun? Heading straight home to Harima?” She asked genuinely curious. The thought of their ending companionship rooted in her question.

“Dunno, felt like I belonged back at the dojo, that's gone now. I'll probably wait out the winter if your plan goes well. That way the routes and rest stops will be back up, purchase a caravan ride with the last of my coins. Can’t safely walk it on foot in the dead of winter with the rest stops still empty. Then straight on to Himeji. Might travel around after that. Visit my friends if they're still around the usual places.” He mused itching at his chin. Judy couldn’t help but warmly smile at the prospect of having her companion around for the winter. She was sure she could even safely call him her friend now, between them saving each other and him carrying her on his shoulder she felt the word ‘friend’ was justified.

“Like Gazelle?” Judy noted but the fox shrugged instead.
“Maybe, don’t know if she still lives in Harima, been gone for years now.” His expression looked distraught thinking about it. “Huh, wonder if anyone I used to know will still be there? If they will even remember me or want to see me?” Judy matched his somber frown as he seemed to grow more concerned.

“I’m sure they will, you've changed. Look at yourself now, practically a philosopher instead of a samurai. I’m certainly not complaining about the company.” She said sincerely.

_________________________

Twenty Second day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty Second, Fall, 1623. Nakasendo Highway, Western Shinano. Edo era Japan.

The marching line of attending warriors spanned a large amount of the long stretching highway. Shoulder to shoulder several of the mammals were in lines of no fewer than four where smaller mammal soldiers could stand shoulder to shoulder at greater numbers. Equal measured and deliberate pace held in their march. Their armor was clean, their weapons sharp and the well rationed and stocked army was filled with rows of tigers, polar bears some wolves, lions, weasels and more. Lord big was mounted atop the largest of the Polar bears on the shoulder of his trusted vassal in Kozlov.

“The team sent to northern Etchu confirmed it sir, the dojo was empty. The urn, townspeople confirmed was for Orsa, she died a little over a week or two ago from illness. We tracked the scents of the rabbit, they left accompanied by a fox but no bear.” The small fox spoke walking in sync alongside the warlord. The small shrew hummed in thought, a slow methodical motion as he gestured.

“The fox was blind?” Big asked with a nod from the arctic fox. “And still bettered you and two of your ninja?” He asked his voice even as she nodded. “Very disappointing, you failed to kill the rabbit. But at least your presence confirmed what the mule said. They sent for Orsa but once she returns to her shogunate they will find they have no master sword mammal on hand.” The small shrew laughed a deeply unnerving chuckle emanating from him. Seasoned samurai for duels were rare and since Lionhearts rebellion brought about peace few younger soldiers were hardened in battle. Predator provinces in contrast still had small conflicts and had a plethora of ronin who practiced the art of Bushido closely. What few trained and seasoned soldiers the prey provinces had were mostly trained in bow and naginata and would offer less of a challenge in intended duel.

The small shrew tilted his head with a sigh. “Bovine, rhinoceri, elephants and a few of his personal soldiers and guard, mostly prey.”
“Master Big, what about clan Bellwethers archers?” The arctic fox asked. As far as she knew a history of predator armies against prey archers within their forts and castles always ended poorly. He looked at the fox with a neutral even bored expression.

“They aren’t as loyal as the shogun hopes they are. They won’t assist in the defense of Lionhearts shogunate.” Big said confidently. “Have our ronin friend informed of the situation. I want them prepared for a duel when we arrive in Kozuke.” He finished simply. “I have another task for your shinobi. This mission will give you the chance to prove your worth in light of your recent failure.” He said plainly with a finality to his tone waving them away. With a bow she and her shinobi ran off back towards the tail end of the marching formation of the shrews host. “You have been very quiet? Any advice?” The shrew asked of his trusted soldier.

“Why trust the little ronin master Big I believe myself more than capable of killing any of their fighters.” The polar bear spoke with an angry tone matching his almost permanent glaring expression.

“Your good kozlov but they beat even you. I don’t want to risk this on a single fight. I didn’t march this army up here for one fight, I want a quick brutal victory that will send a message to Leodores remaining loyal clans and vassals.”

“Who do you think will be the fighter that protects Lionhearts shogunate? They must know what’s at risk with this duel?” Kozlov asked.

“Bogo is too old, most of his soldiers are to. Several of the younger line of prey were snuffed out because of Leodores rebellion against Swintons shogunate. And our quick deployment stopped him from retrieving any of his loyal vassals in the western provinces where most of his skilled soldiers remained. He might use one of his imperial guards? A couple of younger trained samurai from the wolf clan schools of bushido. Nothing like what we have though.” He nodded, all things pointed rightly in his favor now. “We will have that answer in two days time.”

---

Twenty Second day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

“Glad we bathed and got our clothes cleaned, hate to say it fluffs but you really smelled.” Nick stuck out his tongue and began dramatically waving in front of him at the supposed offending smell.

“Me?! We rabbits even sweaty, smell better than you canines.” She huffed indignantly looking up, she smiled the humourous way their banter had evolved over their trip really allowed the hours to fly by and less stretches of quieted boredom.

“Look at you picking on the blind fox, mean.” He chuckled but couldn’t find the will to argue given his nose.

“Hey you can’t pull that blind card on me every time. Don’t dish it if you can’t take it.” She continued her sudo arrogant demeanour in her pretend indignation. Whap his tail softly smacked her in the face.

“Hey, stop that!” She laughed swatting away his tail. The noon sun shown through the heavy clouds above them.

“Little samurai rabbit afraid of my tail? Shameful.” He swatted at her again. This time she blocked it with her arm.

“Haha, need to do better.” She goaded challengingly. He raised a brow before his tail swept at her legs, when she moved to block it quickly swatted back swiping across her face again. The tickling sensation causing her nose to twitch. His tail went for another swipe this time she caught it deftly. “Gotcha!” She hollered wallowing in her victory. She held on through light tugs for him to recover her tail.

“Drat, my tail captured behind enemy lines.” Nick smirked to himself. Looking at the more subtly colored tail the familiar texture. Softer than she expected it was very soft and full, coarse longer hairs from his winter coat forming.

“The fluff belongs to me now!” She gave a dramatically deep evil like bellowing laugh.

“Alright Carrots-sensei, you win.”

“How long have we been traveling together now? Don’t you think you can finally let that whole ‘punching you in the snout’ thing go by now? Maybe use my actual name?” In truth she had already
gotten used to their playful banter. The nicknames he gave her felt oddly personal and she realized how quickly they grew on her.

“Well yea, Hopps is the samurai rabbit from the Burrows of Kozuke. Fluffs is the air headed bunny who nearly knocked my front teeth out for offering her tea.” He leaned over to the rabbit. “Who still hasn’t let go of my tail.” He whispered. Judy looked down realizing he was right.

“Sorry.” She let go smiling embarrassed.

“Forgiven.” He said swatting the back of her head again. She swatted frantically before glaring. Nick returned an expression of surrender. “Revenge for prolonged incarceration and unwarranted petting.” He mocked Judy's embarrassment deepening.

“I wasn’t petting it, just feeling… it.” She realized too late the weakness of her argument.

“Haha… Fair I guess everyone's curious what it feels like.” He shrugged seeming to look, without eyes at the rabbit.

“What?” Judy finally responded after a beat or two.

“Nothing.” He looked ahead with a neutral expression taking the moment to stretch his shoulders out.

“No, you looked like you were going to say something.” Judy tilted her head with furrowed brows. The moment had descended from the personable playfulness a second ago to an eerie calm.

“Just… Curious.” He said flippantly Judy thought it over a moment before blushing.

“What… My tail feels like?” She asked realizing the obvious parallel given she had unwittingly pet his tail. She felt the heat rise up her ears again.

“More what you feel like.” He said straightly. Her jaw dropped the blush deepening realizing how warm her face felt despite the late fall cold nip of the wind. “Thaaaat came out wrong.” He coughed audibly. “Sorry, didn’t mean… Just ya know. I can’t see and what I ‘see’ is what I feel… With my
“Awkwaaaaard.” Judy chuckled to relieve the built tension Nick following along with said plan but all that amounted to was two awkward laughing mammals walking down the Nakasendo. The two walked amicably in a new formed silence. Clouds over head boomed with thunder roaring over the planes around them.

“Alright!” She said startling the fox beside her.

“Sheesh, give a fox a warning.” He said putting a paw over his heart at the sudden loud outburst. “Alright what? You see something?” His ears moved around looking for a sound.

“For you to see me, decided it's only fair since we're friends.” She smiled warmly as the two stopped at the center of the foot path. His own expression was a contortion of confusion.

“Friends? Rabbit and a fox traveling companions sure. Friends though?” He raised a brow as her own expression fell.

“You don’t think we're friends?” She didn’t want to admit to herself how much that prospect hurt.

“No that's, just wasn’t sure. I'd say we're friends… Right?” He shrugged awkwardly, the rate the two seemed to trade expressions suddenly had her laughing internally.

“Yes.” She bridged the small gap between the two taking the foxes right paw. Before she even thought it through she placed it on her face. He froze up she realized at the suddenness of her actions and she did the same realizing how awkward it was. “This is how you see me right?” she finally said from between his charcoal digits. She rapidly went through a host of different ways to make it less confusing but his paw began to move again.

“I knew it! You are a rabbit!” He proclaimed with a smirk, her own attempted at a glare before smiling. “Ha, can’t find the will to glare at me?” He mocked tracing over her face. Suddenly the mood changed, she didn’t realize how or when exactly. The next thing she knew she heard the clatter of wood when he set down his walking staff. He knelt to her own height and used his second paw to trace her face alongside the other. His claws poked out from their detracted state causing a moment of fear within her. The moment past just as suddenly as it appeared when she realized he was using them at the sharper corners and edges of her face. Her nose began to twitch at the soft smell that she was growing more and more fond of. Just around her nose the claws trace, she even
realized they weren’t at all as sharp as she expected. Her heart beat faster and faster as the simple action grew more and more intimate to her own senses. The in as quick a moment his paws stopped when one of his claws grazing the skin under her fur caught at the edge of one of her scars. Moving them again, his claws barely grazed against her cheek till they found the second then the third line of the scars.

“Oh.” He offered simply nodding. Between the gaps of his padded fingers she could see the contorted expression he wore. “That… Explains why you punched me.” He nodded in understanding before removing his paws.

“Wait!” She yelled out surprising herself when she grabbed his hand returning it to her face. The welcomed gentle warmth it offered returning. She couldn’t find the right words for that moment again lost in that newly welcoming smell before she let his paw go. “Sorry.”

“What are you saying sorry? This whole time I didn’t know. Been giving you grief and calling you little nick names and turns out you had every right to punch me.” Her eyes shot open and unto the defeated frame of her fox companion. He looked similar to that night with the assassins, reserved and defeated though this time sincere in the somber expression.

“No I didn’t. That was just an accident. These were an accident themselves I swear.” She said reassuringly. She didn’t know how that situation had come about. She knew that it was a misunderstanding though. “The fox that caused these didn’t even mean to. It’s a long story, just please believe me that had nothing to do with it.” The stood awkwardly again silent as if gauging the other’s response. Judy felt small under the useless but somehow penetrating gaze of the blind fox. Instead as he stared pointedly at her with his snout his ears eagerly drank up her sincerity. Soon his expression returned to a smile.

“Alright, I believe you. Can I still call you fluffs?” He asked meekly, she rolled her eyes bouncing back to his side as he retrieved his walking staff.

“ Wouldn’t have it any other way Slick.” She enunciated with a cocky tone.

Chapter End Notes

12/26/16
Nearing the end of their journey Judy finds that cold encourages comfort in the form of a welcoming warmth against the approaching winter chill. Growing closer with her fox ronin shes confronted by more memories of auburn fur. Through violet eyes she saw-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Twenty Second day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty Second, Fall, 1623. Nakasendo Highway, Western Kozuke. Edo era Japan.

“We could run?” Nick offered the solution.

“No, we lost a couple hours yesterday, it's about six more hours on foot from here and it's getting cold fast.” Judy said, warning. The two huddled under the lacking protection offered by the large off center tree, its core and branches keeping a sparse amount of the heavy downpour off them.

“We could keep looking for better shelter for the night.” Nick offered his second solution but already frowned knowingly. Between his blindness and Judys lack of nightvision their best bet of moving in the dark was their lantern that failed against the strong gusts.

“Sorry slick no such luck.”
Judy continued to prod a stick into the small fire in front of them. It lined up with the tree just like themselves to keep as much water from it. The rain had hit hard and fast leaving them little time to react as night rolled in. Both were nearly worthless in that condition and they knew they couldn’t make it the last bit of the distance in the dark with the sharp cold the wind brought. Settling in what shelter they could find, a few dry pieces of wood but most was still a little wet. Large rocks surrounding their fire to help protect it from the wind but in the same effect little of its warmth made it to them. They sat shoulder to shoulder Nicks overly sized straw hat providing the largest part of protection from the rain that made its way past the large tree overhead.

Even in the pitch black of that night Judy could tell she was in Kozuke now. The large open planes around them with gentle hills told her that she was in western Kozuke. This turned out to be as much a curse as it was a blessing. Where northern Shinano had difficult to traverse mountainous regions it also had shelter from the wind. The province of Kozuke offered no such reprieve from the cold battering rain and wind.

“Nick you said you see with your hands before. What did you mean by that? I mean I know how like blind people can’t see so you just kinda figure shapes from what you feel. But how do you ‘see’ exactly?” She wondered quoting him from a few hours prior. He appeared to look her over with a nod pursing his lips in thought.

“Well, like I told you before I used to see just fine so I know what a rabbit looks like. Even in Himeji we have a few, not to mention Jack.” He shrugged. “So after I lost my eyes, different mammals uhhh.” He waved his paw forward searching for the word. “I kinda see them with the appearances of the previous mammals I have met before. But if I can touch them I get a more accurate example in my head. It sounds awkward ya know? Just that I have a great sense of hearing and smell but neither help me know what a mammal looks like. So most mammals think it's weird when I ask to ‘touch’ them.” He shrugged dismissively.

They passed a moment again the sound of heavy and cold rain pattering around them even occasional droplets sizzling against the fire that made it past the large overhanging tree. Nicks hat again was the best protection from the rain. The oversized straw hat offered a decent canopy as long as she nestled up against him. She smiled contently as she did and he didn’t appear the least bit put out by her closeness.

“Not that weird to me.” She finally managed mulling it over offering the same dismissive shrug he had.

“Hm?” Nick stated looking over stopping the moment he realized the gestures of his head changed the protections his hat brought with it.

“Touching, ya know. Rabbits are very familial, community driven species. Large family usually
forfeits personal space. Helped raise a few of them myself.” She proudly announced.

“What about servants? Your fathers a pretty wealthy lord, just didn’t want to shell out the koku for servants?” Nick mocked.

“No, just that our family stuck together.” She said lowering her tone realizing the light implication on her own companions history. “And even when I was younger wasn’t uncommon to be part of a fluffe of bodies when sleeping. Cozy even.” She emphasised by nestling into the foxes side further hoping the act would help cut the tension she had caused. “Move your arm so I can steal more of your body warmth mwahaha!” she offered her evil dramatic laugh again. Nick however did follow the request moving his arm back slightly letting her cozy up closer to his side.

“Knew it, just using me for my fur. Am I just a pelt to you?” Nick turned his snout up the patter of rain immediately reminding him to return to the same posture. “I can’t even dramatically turn my snout up at you because of the weather, but the gesture is implied hmph.” This time he more carefully raised his lower lip pursing it.

“Its called a hustle and don’t you forget it.” She laughed heartily at that.

“I’ve been swindled.” He put an arm over his forehead cautioning his posture against the rain this time. “This must be righted if only-” He gasped loudly. “Honorable samurai Hopps, I could use your help with a matter. I met this evil creature named Fluff-sensei, she steals my precious body heat. What should I do?” He asked.

“Hmm.” Judy put a hand to her chin rubbing at it dramatically, deep in thought. She long since gave up wondering why she went into such vivid gesticulations with the blind fox in mind. He always seemed to react to them as she would have expected with a mammal that still saw.

“Well, very strong charges, very. But we have to establish a few things. Is this mammal smaller than you?” She asked as if reading off a list.

“She is.” he affirmed with a nod.

“Well, it’s hard to argue for your body heat with smaller mammals, they sure can use it. What species are they?” She continued the tone causing him to laugh at the odd masculine accent she emulated.
“She's a rabbit, evil little things huh.”

“I won’t speculate sir. Sounds like you're out of luck with a rabbit, just gonna have to share.” She nodded with a victories expression.

“Sharing.” He snorted a short laugh prompting Judy to look at him quizzically, he only shrugged in response before the same usual smirk. “Nothing. You ever been to Harima?” He changed the subject.

“No, don’t think I've ever been further west than-hmm.” She thought about it the region's she had traveled through when she was younger. “Never further than the border between Shinano and Mino. A few siblings and I were sent to protect a trade caravan.” She nodded, the province itself decidedly central as far as the divide between the two noted demographics were. East two or three days from Harima. It was a largely mixed location but its lord was a Boar named Hogger. Like Shinano the region had seen better years since the decline in the value of wood. Though unlike Shinano, Mino had benefited a little more from the economical growth of the western regions.

“Well, don’t know if you would like it. Very industrious, mammals are a lot different from the burrows in Kozuke or Zootopia in Musashi.” Nick nodded.

“You been to the Burrows before?” Judy wondered, she recalled he had traveled a lot but to what extent. The wind howled around them though their combined front against the cold fought it back well, their limbs strongly pulled up against them.

“A couple times as a kid.” Nick said softly. “The first time when I was young, family visited on our way to zootopia.” He made that same face Judy recognized. She equated it to what she witnessed when a sibling had accidentally eaten something that had soured or that they didn’t like in the slightest. Lips curled back and nose scrunched. It lasted only a moment but the number of sharp white teeth that showed each time he made that expression of distaste was a telling reminder of his past he didn’t like.

Lords of all provinces, nobility and vassals often made the trip to Musashi to meet with emperor Lionheart at the capital. It was expected on several occasions and was part of why the emperor built the highways. The idea was to centralize commerce and communication within his nation. This meant that an odd form of commerce was the large number of mammals that the burrows hosted to and from the capital during the summer season. They would pass through and stay either there for the quiet or in Zootopia itself. During said time their lords and important nobility would spend days or weeks discussing several points of interest. Laws, trade, foreign relations and even disputes between conflicting or warring regions could be handled during these events. Regardless though attendance was mandatory.
She recalled one of the years when she was younger during this usual cycle every couple of years something had happened.

_________________________

Many years ago, just after the fall of the prior shogunate

Seventeenth day of Gogatsu, Natsu 1606. Third year under Lionhearts shogunate.


The day had grown loud and exciting as large groups of mammals from the west marched through the city. Proud and dressed to impress, several lords and powerful nobles passing through on their way to meet with the emperor in the capital. Some walked Judy noticed like the wolf lords who refused to be carried out of pride for their pack, unique in how their hierarchy functioned unlike others. Some lords were wheeled by personal carts emblazoned with their provinces ruling colors like the weasels and most large cat species lords. Others like the powerful warlord Big was known to be carried by his loyal polar bear warrior.

“Oh which ones that?” Judy jumped up and down excitedly in the same spot, young and adorned in a brightly colored Kimono she pointed towards the marching lords.

“Hm? Who?” The small does mother asked beside her, taller but still regal her own family's colors of dark blues and browns in her Kimono. Judy continued to point excitedly.

“That one, the fox? Why don’t they ride in a cart?” Judy tilted her head quizzical.

“Oh thats lord Wilde, Daimyo of Harima, lives in Himeji. Their a crafty province and their family boasts the finest swordsmiths you’ll ever find. They have one of the oldest alliances with the wolf clans. He doesn’t ride a caravan as a show of honor and equality with the wolf clans. It was about two hundred years ago their crafters helped win back Japan from the raiders across the ocean.” The rabbit matriarch of the Hopps clan said to her daughter recounting the histories of back then. Harima and Settsu the two noted provinces strong neighbors. As if to demonstrate the fox lord could be seen laughing amicably beside the warlord Wolfard. The wolf himself visibly fighting to constrain his laughter at whatever the fox had told him. “Now run along, go play. Your father is meeting with a few of the nobles who are staying in the Burrows instead of the capital during negotiations.” The mother rabbit patted her daughter encouragingly. Judy smiled warmly darting into the crowds without hesitation.
Cresting the hill that straddled the main road passing through the burrows Judy could already hear loud laughter. The Leaps family farm, a respected and friendly bunch of rabbits that she played with often. Once she could make out the boisterous sound she noticed the usual bunch of rabbits but also offset by two foxes and a wolf child, still larger than the surrounding rabbits but smiling and playing alongside them no differently.

“Can’t catch me!” one of the small rabbits in the field darting around, one of the foxes appeared to be ‘savage’ from the looks of it as he darted around trying to catch them. The game was an old but simple one, whoever was selected to be the ‘savage’ would run around chasing the ‘prey’ till they caught them. Looking over the scene she could see it was only the one fox appeared to be playing, where the other fox a girl, arctic with white fur and yellow eyes and wolf a boy, black fur with brown eyes sat on the side lines appearing incredibly apprehensive. Making her way down the hill the audible giggling and squealing coming from her friends. Broad smile on her face she almost didn’t notice it as the fox tiredly panting, came to a stop seeing her. Before she knew it she was running around just like the rest of them laughing frantically as the fox chased her.

It wasn’t much longer till her luck ran out, she was plucked mid run by the fox over twice her size.

“Caught ya!” He loudly and proudly proclaimed holding her out in front of him towards the other rabbits and the two other predator kids who smiled and laughed. All of the other rabbits finally relaxed breathing heavily not unlike the fox himself. “What now?”

“You eat em.” One of the heaving Leaps rabbits said. The fox turned Judy around to look at her with a furrowed brow.

“Why would I do that?” He whined in a low complaining tone. Judy for the most part was out of breath just like the rest but laughed.

“You're not supposed to actually eat me, it's just a game. You just pretend.” She emphasized by tilting her head down grabbing at his wrist. “Nom, nom, nom!” she made the loud noise while pretending to gnaw on the foxes wrist. He immediately dropped Judy from her captured state.

“Agh! The predator strikes!” The fox giggled, his tongue lolling as he laughed. It was contagious in that soon the whole group was, Judy included. “Alright, you be the ‘savage’ this time. Michael, Suzy, join in!” The fox spoke to the two other mammals whose apprehension seemed to have grown. He waved them on goading till both looked at each other before joining in the fun.

The large group of children played like that for an hour or two growing increasingly tired as they did. Once it was visible they couldn’t maintain that level of energy someone had recommended hide and
hunt instead. The oldest sibling of the Leaps family decided to be the hunter. The game was simple in that everyone had to hide wherever they could find on the large farm plot. As the hunter found a person they ‘fed their pack’ as it was called, in practice whoever you found helped you search until everyone was found.

“One!” The rabbit spoke loudly as the group which had grown to nearly all of the youngest of the leaps family household making the event massive. The announcing voice sent them scattering in all directions everyone searching for a hiding spot.

“Ten!” The voice was much quieter at her growing distance. She avoided a few of the odder shorter crops instead electing for the taller lines of corn. The further she covered the fewer surrounding steps she heard of other hiding rabbits. A small patch of untended fields made way for a large old tree. The large rooted ancient tree had an opening at its base that Judy quickly dove into. Dark and hidden she heaved, her speed having given her a head start from the seeking animals. She couldn’t even see her own hand which she figured helped at the goal of hiding, the light streaming in from the lowering sun the only vision she had.

“They’ll never find me in here.” Judy whispered to herself smirking confidently.

“Us, they’ll never find us.” The second voice in the darkness instantly caused her eyes to widen, she looked back into the blinding blackness the trees consuming shade caused. “Whys your nose twitching like that?” The voice asked, then she saw it. Piercing gold speckled green eyes seeming to glow with visible dilated cores.

“You scared me half to death!” She nearly yelled in her whisper at the disembodied eyes.

“What? How? can’t you-” The eyes rolled. “Sorry, forgot, bunnies can’t see in the dark. Nocturnal thing.” He laughed quietly at her. Judy began relaxing recognizing that it was just the fox she had played with earlier.

“Alright, now shhh.” Judy gesturing placing a finger over her lips as she shushed the fox who appeared to nod if any indicator from the squinted eyes. Once her heart beat had calmed with her breathing she realized she could actually hear the quieted breaths and small movements he made. Every now and again she felt something brush up against he.

“Sorry.” The hushed fox whispered each of his movements bringing it a small noise. “Cramped in here now.” He emphasised Judy realizing that meant her. Inspecting it, it had already been a small enough place for her to hide, how he had got there so quickly and managed to find space was already surprising causing her to giggle at the darkness. “Don’t laugh at me, was lots of space in here
“Says the fox that fits in a rabbit size hiding spot.” Judy laughed.

“Hey!” The fox murmured something about numbers. “I’m only eleven. I’ll be plenty bigger when I’m full grown.” he challenged back. Judy thinking that over for a bit.

“Wow, your gonna be big for a fox. You gonna be a samurai?” She asked curiously.


“Well I’m gonna be a rabbit one?” She said the eyes furrowing at her.

“You're gonna be a samurai? Never heard of a rabbit being one.” He said doubt in his tone.

“I’ll be the first. To prove that I can.” She said adamantly, pride beaming in her voice. Still the eyes looked back her as if gauging her in doubt.

“Haha, rabbits can’t be samurai.” Here comes that line again.

She half expected the usual line or some variant of it.

“Huh, that’ll be pretty cool.” The green eyes said. “That would be soooo cool. I don’t like fighting though. I like books, maybe I’ll be a writer. Father says I’m wise and I could be a philosopher.” He spoke enthusiastically Judy nodding at the admirable goal.

A good amount of time had passed with the two unfound in their hiding place. Two times they counted a rabbit had looked into their hiding place but couldn’t see them, the chances shrunked as the day got darker.

“Games over!” A voice gave off then echoed by others as each of the ‘hunters’ proclaimed it in a way that suggested the remaining ‘hiders’ to come out. As the two exited their hiding place the fox stood again his height more than doubling hers, she noted the sleep frame he had likely helping him
in the small hiding place. The two were among a small amount of winners in the end given how large the searching party had grown to. Another couple of winners had somehow managed to get on the roof.

“Hey did you see where my friends went?” The fox asked mildly worried to one of the seekers. The seeker smiled up at him. “Oh yea, the wolf and other fox. They left earlier after being found. Said to tell you to go back when you lost. Guess they didn’t expect you to hide that well. Good job.” The rabbit awarding victoriously.

“Alright, guess that means I should go. Bye rabbits!” He said waving and smiling before running off towards the town.

“Bye fox!” The two yelled back.

“Oh hey Judy.” The taller boy from the leaps family said. “Moms making some carrot pie, you wanna come over and have some?” He asked excitedly, she nodded.

“I love carrot pie!” She announced loudly. It was long dark by the time she returned home. The streets were abuzz with gossip over the day's events but had grown ominous after dusk.

“There you are Jude the dude!” Her father greeted her at the entrance porch of their main building when she got home, she yawned. “You head right up to bed alright. Busy day tomorrow.” He said, a slight amount of worry in his tone. “Scared us being out that late.”

“Sorry.” She smiled up before he hugged her directing her out and into the family burrow for the night. She had decided on how much she enjoyed her day, a smile plastered across her face remembering the same set of green eyes she couldn’t imagine forgetting.

Later she found out through rapidly spreading rumors that something bad had happened the previous day. Something had happened that wounded her family's relations with western province traders. Something about a noble being attacked was all she heard as the stories were apparently kept quiet and at arm's length. She heard rumors the trader was outraged and demanded unjust reparations.

Chapter End Notes
Emerald Hued, Violet Memories

Chapter Summary

Midnight passes the tired fox, an alarming sound stirs him from the edge of slumber. The night grows colder as he embraces the warmth offered in more ways then one. Soon memories his own show through in his dreams. Half a decade since he lost his eyes and still the sight of his past is as crystal clear as ever. Through emerald eyes he saw-

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11: Emerald Hued, Violet Memories

Back in the present just past midnight

Twenty Third day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty Third, Fall, 1623. Just off the Nakasendo Highway, Western Shinano. Edo era Japan.

Nick yawned quietly again looking at the dying embers of the fire. No dry wood could be found and the rain had slowed to an end. But his optimism faded when instead of the rain cloudless skies replaced it. The humidity that still hung among the flatlands stuck to his fur, the air chilled rapidly without the clouds to keep in whatever heat remained. It was dead dark as his ears perked at a slight humming sound.

“You hear that Judy?” He asked further perking his ears leaning forward slightly as the sound came to a stop with his motions. Seconds turned to minutes at the alarming awareness of the sound. As he relaxed it began again, a buzzing he realized. This time he cautioned his movements.
“You hear it this time?” He whispered but the sound grew louder when he perked his ears to his companion. Against the crook of his arm he noticed, she wasn’t able to respond, deep in sleep. Closer inspection of the noise the cozy, tucked rabbit sleeping against his side was where the noise emanated.

“Just keeping me around for my warmth aintcha.” Nick laughed to himself as the sound emanating from his companion stopped. He moved his arm working her back into the same spot close to his chest where even sleeping she seemed to knowingly seek out the warmth it offered

*Cute*

He dared the word inside his own head when the sleeping companion again nuzzled into his side contentedly. His tail slowly made its way around her left side prompting the purring sound as it did. “Sorry fluffs, can’t help this time. Cute and I mean you.” He smiled warmly thinking on it. “Alright, so myself to, rabbit borrowing a foxes warmth, ‘that’ is pretty cute huh?” He whispered the question to no one, yet the sound answered him all the same.

“Alright, but I’m just gonna have to call in that loan alright, it's starting to get cold.” He noted that though the rain had stopped the winds carried with them a frost, below freezing he knew now as the moisture froze to the tips of his fur. Carefully he leaned forward, Judy still nooked in his left side with his tail on her left. Not the most civil way to sleep he realized since the invention of walls and beds. But as he slowly wound his lithe frame around her forming a circle the warmth emanating from the sleeping rabbit was to welcoming to ignore. His nose finding the edge of his tail that he had left on the rabbit working his snout into the long fur to protect his nose from the frost.

“There we go. Like that honorable Hoppss said Fluffs, gonna have to share.” He said placing his straw hat at the center of the circle he had formed completely the rabbit at its core was now fully enclosed. He felt her move slightly sinking and burrowing into the warm enclosure he had made.

He yawned widely, feeling the warmth still emanating from the heated rocks of the fire pit, still contained the cinders from the dead fire. Slowly he fell into the same deep sleep as his companion.

_____________________________

*Seventeenth day of Gogatsu, Natsu 1606. Third year under Lionhearts shogunate.*

*May Seventeenth, Summer, 1606. Just outside the Burrows, Kozuke. Edo era Japan.*
“Coomoooom.” The young auburn furred tod begged at his traveling companions. A taller black haired wolf pup with brown eyes he knew for years, Michael and a white haired yellow eyed arctic fox named Suzan who he preferred to call Suzy. The two small predator children just rolled their eyes again at the young fox lord.

“No Nick, you have any idea how much trouble we’ll be in if we sneak away?” Michael said to the young fox.

“Yea, we’re here for business, not playing Nick.” Suzan added with an upturned expression.

“Oh don’t be that way, ‘they’ are here for business. We’re just along for the presence. This place is sooo cool. More small mammals in one place than I have ever seen. The burrows have an almost solid rabbit population and look at how they act and dress!” He said gesturing to some of the rabbits along the road watching the marching host of the nobility from the west. They sent mixed looks of wonder and elation at the nice and detailed appearance of the host of nobility of foxes, wolves and other mammals visiting the capital. “I want to see the farms, actual farms. They can actually grow a lot of stuff up here.” He spoke in wonder, he knew a lot of the different unique crops they grew from seeds traded for from europe and asia. He knew because it was his father’s docks that supplied them.

The two friends took to simply rolling their eyes at him.

“Pleeaaasee, come on, when’s the next time we’ll be up here? Two maybe four years?” Nick challenged the two looking at each other at that fact, so young and already the young fox lord had a convincing way about him. “Their rabbits, heck your bigger than most of their fully grown adults Michael. Besides, their close neighbors to Zootopia. Where the Emperor himself is, their not gonna do anything to some visiting nobles, right?” He said with a smile. Both his companions shrugged nodding at that, it was true.

“Rabbits are pretty docile I hear.” Suzan said lowly.

“Not you to!” Michael said at the young kit who shrank under his protests.

“Ha see, dude come ooooooon. You know you want to.” Nick said confidently with a grin. He knew he already lost and fighting it was futile.

“Alright.”
“Yes!” Nick shot up excited with his victory. His immediate attentive posture would have been suspicious had anyone been paying attention from the beginning. “Now!” He whispered to his companions as he slipped into the crowded of rabbits when they neared the entrance of the burrows center which passed by the estate of the Daimyo of Kozuke from what he had heard, the perfect opportunity with the noise and surrounding mammals.

It didn’t take long for the three small boisterous mammals to traverse the small burrows town.

“Woohoo, freedom!” Nick yelled loudly as the made it around the outskirts of the populated rabbit town. Looking back at his companions they looked just as excited as him despite their prior protests. Michael caught sight of the sly young fox’s grin.

“Shut up.” Was all the black furred pup said smiling.

“Didn’t say anything.” nick said indignantly Suzan just giggling at the banter. Soon the road straddled a farm estate, the fields of rice stretching far out in front of them. “Woah look, it's soooo flat, and they can actually grow things here.” Nicks enthusiasm at something so simple was even then mirrored by his companions. He smirked at them while he walked backwards not watching where he was going, karma caught him when he accidently ran into a small rabbit tripping himself in the process, he fell over with an omph.

“Oh sorry, sorry!” He said helping the small girl up, she looked even younger than him. “Sorry again, I’m-

“A fox.” The small rabbit said timidly. Despite his smile and kind demeanor his expression sank at the clear identifying remark the rabbit offered in greeting.

“Yea, that is true, though scruffy or cute is probably what my mother would call me. Or ‘dirty’ if I could escape her for more than an hour.” He said in a goofy tone laughing at himself. Both his companions were more weary than him with worried expressions. But soon the contagious laugh he brought caught on and the small rabbit girl matched it with a small audible giggle.

“You can’t call a rabbit ‘cute’ its rude.” She said timidly.

“Oh, i’m not calling you cute though. Am I allowed to if I’m saying it about myself?” He asked offering a warm smile.
“You’re not like what foxes are supposed to be like.” She said smiling warmly her posture had relaxed. She carried a small stuffed rabbit and soon other rabbits around the field were watching the small interaction.

“Well, what are foxes supposed to be like?” Nick asked a dramatic smile on his face as the small rabbit mirrored it back at him.

“I dunno, shifty, sly, cunning?” Her list began like just that but ended questioningly.

“Well I don’t know ask my friends here, the words they might use to describe me are, uhh.”

“Lazy.” Michael offered.

“Immature.” Suzan interjected.

“Putz, a big putz.” Michael nodded with a philosophical postulation to his appearance.

“Yea, thats the perfect description.” Suzan concurred.

“Suzy! Michael! That's just mean.” The auburn fox sighed at them. But the sound next was laughter, hearty and full surrounding them. Not only the small girl rabbit but several of the surrounding rabbits had congregated into a group of maybe ten as far as a quick one over could manage. Nick didn’t even realize as they had formed the crowd behind the girl he accidently bumped into earlier. “It's like a wolf pack, they stalk together.” Nick whispered behind him.

“We call it a fluffle. Bundle of fluff.” One of the older boy rabbits among the group said, all their ears on end towards the fox and his friends.

“Oh, yea the ears. Can’t sneak nothing past you guys huh.” Nick smiled warmly. “We're just here passing through with our families during the festival in Zootopia, never seen a farm like this before so figured we could check it out.”
"Well, welcome. We’re the Leaps family, I’m Jamey, this is Becky.” The older boy rabbit stepped forward more sociable, confident though Nick wasn’t sure if it was their growing numbers, his age or if Nicks aura of funny had someone won them over as he had with others before. “And Bob, Jerry, Katherine.” The male rabbit went about introducing them one by one. “And this is the Leaps farm, were part of the big Leaps family. Welcome.” He waved over the vast farm which showed well in the sun.

“Thanks, so what do you guys do for fun around here?” Nick asked all the rabbit smiled in unison causing the three predators to step back a moment.

“We play ‘Savage’ a lot. Sorry if it's a little rude, it's old but it's fun.” Jamey said. “It's where one mammal is selected to be the savage predator from ancient times. All others are scared prey that the predator has to chase and catch. All about speed and agility, you up for it?” He asked raising a brow challengingly. Nick never short of a challenge readily agreed.

“You bet!”

“Good, you go first. Gotta catch us.” In that instant they all dispersed in unison in every direction.

“Nah, nah can’t catch me!” Nick was surprised the prior timid Becky said giggling as she jogged around. Nick was for a moment taken aback by the sudden setup of the game. Looking back at his two friends they both shrugged just as bewildered as him.

The goading only took second to win out before the fox took off. But he underestimated them as much as he overestimated himself. Each time he approached them to catch them they bound off, he went easy on them given their sizes but didn’t often feel the need to with how fast they were. The laughing and giggling continued to draw attention as the energetic game that played out caught the eyes of more children and even older rabbits who watched with mixes of warmth and confusion.

Huffing and puffing at the exertion he did notice as more and more leaps rabbits joined from all around. He set his eyes at one that smiled wearing brighter colors. Just as soon as he chased the taller girl she took off just as agile if not more than the others. This rabbit he realized didn’t need him to hold back with how fast and agile she was.

Going all out eventually he caught her, picking her up as he laughed, herself giggling. The end signaled a rest as all the rabbits came to a stop breathing heavily.
“Caught ya!” Nick smiled at the surrounding rabbits and their ensuing cheers and laughter. “What now?” He asked not sure what to do next, they had not told him to that point.

“You eat em.” Jamey said matter of factly. Nick looked at his two friends who looked as confused as him as he looked back at his catch before turning her around to look at her.

“Why would I do that?” He said low confused.

“You’re not supposed to actually eat me, it’s just a game. You just pretend.” The brightly dressed doe smiled before grabbing his arm pulling herself forward. “Nom, nom, nom!” Nicks eyes widened at the large snapping teeth the rabbit had as she bit near his wrists. Dropping her on instinct he quickly gathered himself with a chuckle.

“Agh! The predator strikes!” He broke into a deep bellowing laugh realizing the scenario. Contagious as his laugh ever was the group began laughing with him. “Alright, you be the ‘savage’ this time. Michael, Suzy, join in!” Nick said looking back at his two friends that same knowing smile. He had seen how eager they were to join but unsure. Just like when he got them to escape the march and their strict parents they quickly buckled to his charm.

The game continued, the colorfully dressed rabbit caught Suzy immediately surprising the lithe and cocky arctic fox as the small rabbit pretended to gnaw on her ankle just like she had with Nicks wrist before. Mouth agape surprised Michael laughed openly prompting him as her catch as she pretended to eat his ears. Open laughter as the role of ‘savage’ traded within the group for who knew how long as the group grew in size and exhaustion.

“Alright, this one's called ‘Hide and Hunt’ alright.” Jamey pronounced as Nick noted he was the most sociable of the rabbits. The rules were simple as he explained them, a ‘hunter’ who would gain each mammal they found in their pack of hunters till the game was over either with all the hiding mammals found or win because it got to late or they gave up.

“One!” Jamey spoke loudly covering his eyes. Nick needed no further prompt, this time he was prepared. At first Suzan and Michael followed in his hiding direction along with an uncountable number of rabbits. Long quick legs carried him quickly into the corn fields he noted until an opening. The trees roots caught his attention, small but the dark cramped area was enough for him.

Once inside he felt confident for all of a few seconds of silence before the flurried sounds of burrowing rabbit joined him. He noted the bright colored rabbit had joined him looking out from the darkness. She heaved and huffed smiling.
“They’ll never find me in here.” The confident doe said. Nick raised his brow at that.

“Us, they’ll never find us.” He corrected her in a neutral tone. She shot back in the darkness he winced slightly as she kicked his tail on the opposite side of the small hiding spot. She stared into the darkness sucking in air with her twitching nose. “Whys your nose twitching like that?” He asked confused.

“You scared me half to death!” She whispered in a loud accusatory tone.

“What? How? Can’t you-” Nick rolled his eyes forgetting about his natural night vision. “Sorry, forgot, bunnies can’t see in the dark. Nocturnal thing.” He chuckled as she began relaxing. He noticed she no longer stared at darkness but directly at his eyes. He hadn’t noticed it against the bright clothes her parents dressed her in. Deep violet hues, he had never seen that color of eyes before.

“Alright, now shhh.” She said, himself nodding. He couldn’t forget the game at hand. The rabbit added to the already cramped space, try to make sure no part of him touched the small rabbit which was difficult since she claimed the center of the space. Even with his thin flexible frame it wasn’t easy. Every now and again one of his paws would slip or an effort to move his tail into a more comfortable position.

“Sorry.” He whispered. “Cramped in here now.” He rolled his eyes accusingly at the encroaching rabbit. She didn’t appear to have any concept of personal space as she relaxed in the hiding spot. She looked at him for a moment before laughing at him prompting him to glade uselessly at the blind rabbit. “Don’t laugh at me, was lots of space in here before you wanted to share my hiding place.” He smirked chuckling lightly.

“Says the fox that fits in a rabbit size hiding spot.” He saw her smirk challengingly at him in the darkness.

“Hey!” Nick shot with a whiny tone before counting on his fingers aloud. “I’m only eleven. I’ll be plenty bigger when I’m full grown.” He nodded to himself. He was bigger than most foxes his age.

“Wow, your gonna be big for a fox. You gonna be a samurai?” The rabbit asked Nick tilting his head confused at that. Foxes were mostly merchants and even sailors, what few took up swords were foot soldiers or ronin given their solitary disposition. Noted by him again adjusting to remove contact with the rabbit.
“What? Why?” He chuckled thinking of himself in the roll, it felt very far off to him. His disposition was lacking in seriousness like his father's loyal soldiers.

“Well I’m gonna be a rabbit one?” the rabbit smiled proudly looking at him before she seemed to note his quizzical one.

“You’re gonna be a samurai? Never heard of a rabbit one.” Nick said mulling it over inside his own head. Rabbits had served as foot soldiers several times in the wars he had heard. But nothing noteworthy enough have ever gained their ascension to such nobility from what he heard from his teachers.

“I’ll be the first then. To prove that I can.” She said sternly a grit to her confidence assured him of that. He smiled at that kinda fervor seeing it mirrored how he felt in a lot of ways.

“Huh, that's pretty cool.” He scratched at his chin imagining it, a skilled rabbit warrior with a sword. “That would be sooo cool. I don’t like fighting though. I like books, maybe I’ll be a writer. Father says I’m wise and I could be a philosopher.” He proclaimed. Discussions with his father let him know this was unlikely and he knew that merchants didn't ‘give people what they wanted’ really but sold it to them for profit. He shrugged, in the end it was a goal to benefit people.

The two waited quietly in a new found friendship at each others ambitions. The game eventually ended with a couple of close calls but the rabbit and himself were never found.

“Hey did you see where my friends went?” Nick asked Jamey the organizer of the day's events.

“Oh yea, the wolf and other fox. They left earlier after being found. Said to tell you to go back when you were lost. Guess they didn’t expect you to hide that well. Good job.” he said enthusiastically. He realized the sun was meeting the horizon and soon it would be dark. His friends had already headed back and he had to hurry.

“Alright, guess that means I should go.” Nick began taking another look back. “Bye rabbits!” He smiled waving as he began down the path he took to the farm that day.

“Bye fox!” They both called back to him though his focus was mostly on the rabbit he had befriended in the hiding spot. He had a fun day with the Leaps family on the Leaps farm.
Chapter End Notes

Code edit: 12/26/16
Chapter Summary

Nick's pleasant dreams soon turn into nightmares. What should have been a defining and great day in his past turns into a cruel awakening in his ignorance. He forgot the age old question, "Can foxes be trusted." Is often answered in the same way. His past self is finally explained, the justification for his own prejudices and why he left his pacifist and admirable goals for a life he grew to hate.

Chapter Notes

Pages 7
Words 3,066
Characters 16,942
Characters excluding spaces 13,932

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 12: Violet Hued Promises

The young fox walked the now quieted path he had taken that straddled the farm where a good portion of that day had taken place. He beamed, This place is awesome! He thought to himself taking it all in, from the clean smelling air to the open fields all around. And true to what his friend Gazelle back in Harima had said, prey were pretty cool. True they had been skittish at first but just like she had won him over he had won them over by smiling and generally friendly demeanor.

“Hey fox.” A taller older rabbit said from beside a post that lined the road. Nick lost in his own thoughts didn’t notice the snide tone.

“Hey.” He said in a friendly tone in response. Another rabbit, teenage from their height he noted came up at the post next to the first and another on the left hand side.

“Where you off too?” The first rabbit said in a low tone. This time it having caught his attention, they were still shorter than him, but the dirt and stock of them told him they worked the fields. They presented a more intimidating presence as their numbers quickly grew to six and then seven.
“To the inn we’re staying at while passing through.” He offered feeling the tension of the situation.

“Yea, some rich fox type stinking up our burrows. Why can’t you guys just go through and stay at Zootopia, save us from your stench?” The rabbit scowled.

“Zootopia is usually filled by some of the northern provinces and their entourage.” Nick said solemnly as the noticed the mot of rabbits begin to surround him.

“Hey that's right, even now with a predator emperor he likes prey lords more then you stinky mangy predators.” The rabbit spat. “Never trust a fox, saw you playing with Leaps kids today. What you trying to pull? Convince them that your kind aren’t disgusting savages?” The words continued to sting, his ears lowered with a reserved posture.

“What do you guys want?” Nick said sourly.

“Thought I made that clear, I don’t want you stinking up the place. Worse enough we have to put up with you coming into town. You don’t even have the decency to stay at the inn.” The rabbit spoke with unwarranted hatred he noticed but he wasn’t new to it. It was a lot more indirect in Harima where here the group of glowing rabbits seemed to revel in their uncivil behaviour. He felt alone with the sudden realization of the foreign lands. Where in Himeji he was never more than a short earshot from help if he needed. He felt his own paws shake at the nervous tension.

“I don’t want any trouble, I’m just heading back to the inn now.” He said, but when he tried to walk passed the group a set of them stood in his path.

“Yea, you should have stayed there though. See now you already gone and ruined my day with your stench by not staying there.” The rabbit said smugly as the group laughed threateningly. “So I figure a lesson might help remind you where your kind belongs, under our feet. Just like in the good ol times where you mangy predators came begging for food.” He laughed openly now the auburn fox himself couldn’t believe his ears.

“How dare you, I belong to a noble clan. I won’t let some backwater… Hick! Like you look down at me.” Nick glared at the rabbit who backpedaled for all of two seconds before smirking.

“Oh don’t like the truth? Huh flea riddled mutt.” The rabbit retorted shoving him. His own feet caught under him causing him to fall with an oaf.
“Your kind may pretend at being nobles, heck even the emperor is a predator now. But don’t you forget the shogun is still prey and he holds all the real power. Under our feet just where you belong.” The rabbit mocked as the fox himself felt tears welling up in his eyes. Getting up quickly he moved to get through a small gap in the group of bullies but they closed it as quickly pushing him back again. “Oh, don’t think so mutt.” The rabbit said smirking as he turned over a rock in his grip.

“Alright, let’s get the lesson going!” He encouraged the others when he threw the first projectile. Nick screeched at the first impact feeling it cut at his right arm slightly.

“Hey knock it off!” He yelled but just as soon a second impacted the back of his head. Reaching up and around his head he felt the moist red blood from the slight wound. A cacophony of laughs and snide prejudiced insults welled from the group. Cradling his head in his arms with his tail around him one by one the impacts continued. He cried from within the barely helpful protection of his own arms. His heart beat faster and faster with each painful impact, till he felt himself snap. Tears of sadness were replaced with snarls of rage. “Stop!” He yelled diving forward at the first assailing rabbit. The once cocky laughter was replaced with panic and tear when the auburn mammal pinned him to the ground and began punching him.

“Get off! Damn mutt, that hurts!” The rabbit said through sudden sobs as Nick wailed on him yelling in rage. He grabbed the rabbit left ear yanking it up with the rest of his head before landing another good fist into the rabbits face. Crack! The sickening sound was followed with blood when one of his buck teeth now showed a noticeable chunk missing with blood present.

“Hey you savage, get off him!” One of the other rabbits said tackling into the fox. A furious flurry of swings followed. Each time Nick moved to punch viciously with snarls and barks of rage one of the others would catch him from a blind spot. Moving to respond and retaliate was when the others joined in.

“Cowards!” He snarled to no effect as they kept up their cheap shots. Even with their numbers their kicks and punches hurt as they landed, his ribs, muzzle and arms constantly pulsed with fresh bruises and aches. Eventually he was just outnumbered just beyond his ability to keep to his feet. Knocked over they ganged up on him.

“Stupid fox!”

“Mangy mutt!”

“Savage!” they yelled out in a way that constantly felt self justifying to him.

Fist and foot connected with him, yelling grunting, cursing, swinging to no avail. Every time his
defense strikes connected causing a rabbit to back up another took its place to keep hitting him. He caught one of their hands in his jaw the taste of blood when he bit down to stop the offending fist from striking. Another two caught the back end of his feet's claws another he smashed square in the jaw. Rage and fear continued fuel him when through tears and blood.

“Lord Wilde!” A loud voice yelled on approach. The assailing rabbits looked up in terror. Four large wolf samurai approached with weapons drawn. Several of the rabbits bound off. Ones hurt by Nicks defensive strike and the screaming one whose hand was still in his sharp teeth weren't so lucky. “Grab them! Master Wilde will want them dealt with.” Wolfard helped the young fox up, he recognized the loyal soldier as a skilled samurai of his father's friend lord Snarlov. The three other wolves took hold of four of the rabbits that attacked him including the apparent leader that had started it all. “You alright?” He asked Nick standing defiantly, bruised and cut with blood of his own and the other rabbits covering him. He looked defeated yet refused help while they walked back into town.

“The four rabbits hollered and yelled drawing the attention of onlookers as they passed back through the town, Nick couldn’t find that same awe and beauty in it anymore. This time when he watched the questioning looks of the onlooking rabbits he felt their gazes. Their angry hating expressions while they looked at the blood on him and the four rabbits that fought their captors screaming of it 'not being their fault' or 'The fox started it.' and any other flagrant lie.

“We're taking you to warlord Hopps estate, your father is meeting him discussing trade. The lord's will discuss how this is handled.” Wolfard stated looking over the hurt fox. “Do you want your wounded treated while we deal with this.” He asked. Nick held the same resentful expression as before shaking his head from side to side definitely.

“No, I want to be there when their punishment is decided.” He spoke with ice in his veins. The four rabbits hearing this froze in their places. The threat carried in his tone sent shivers down their spines as they came to the late realization.

The estate was manned by a few rabbit guards who looked on in growing confusion and worry as the wolf samurai approached.

“We're here on order of lord Wilde and Snarlov to return lord Wildes son safely to him. Please request his presence as we found his son assailed by peasants in the north west countryside.” Wolfard said professionally with an air of authority, the rabbit guard nodded before darting inside. A moment, then two, then three.

“They what!?” A loud voice rang from just inside. Nick recognized his own father's voice and feared how much trouble he would be in now. The sliding door of the entrance flung open with the concerned lord running off the porch. Nick looked up at his father tears still welling in his eyes. But
instead of anger he saw furrowed sadness on his father's expression. Wordlessly he broke down into tears running to his father who knelt embracing the sobbing child.

“What happened?” Stu, lord of clan Hopps said from the entrance looking over the confusing scene from his porch with lord Snarlov beside him.

“We were sent to collect master Wildes son, from what we heard, was playing over with some farm children on the far end of town. When we arrived we were horrified to find he had been ganged up on by these vermin.” Wolfard spat, the four rabbits silent till then animated again.

“He started it!” The leader said tears in his own eyes. It had turned out his was the mauled hand caught by Nick earlier, blood from it visible.

“Silence!” Wolfard barked at the rabbit, him and his caught cohorts instantly quieted. “We only caught four of them another three involved fled. Would you like us to hunt them down sir?” Wolfard asked the air of assuredness about him as he asked Stu and his own lord Snarlov. There was no mistake given his nose he would find them.

“Let's take a moment, treat their injuries and collect the offender's parents and have this settled.” Stu nodded fervently.

“Their injuries.” Lord Wilde spoke with Nick still embraced before standing with him in his arms. He turned back to the noble ruler of Kozuke. “Look at my boy.” He spoke with a cold tone. “Look at his injuries. They ganged up and beat him viciously. And you want to treat them?” John scowled. “These… Vermin.” He bared his fangs looking over at the four rabbits who looked terrified at their situation. The whole moment had grown tense at the emotional scene unfolding. “They attacked a lord's son, my son.” He emphasised, tears could be seen in the warlords eyes.

“I will have justice.” He demanded Stu exuded his nervous posture.

“We can’t be hasty, we’ll collect their respective parents and treat their wounds. We’ll have the other assailants identified and then punished fairly.” Stu spoke attempting any authority he had. But the cold glare returned to him was violent and vicious in the clenched teeth he bore freely.

“Fair?” The fox lord seethed. “I come peacefully to your province, to your own village, to discuss continued trade and commerce between our two provinces. I come with friendship and alliance. Ready to put aside old hatreds between our species.” He approached climbing the stairs with his son
in his arms walking over to the patriarch of clan Hopps. “And instead I get my son assaulted in your own fief, a noble, by some low born rabble.” The fox seethed with rage now almost nose to nose with the rabbit lord. The nervous rabbit guards drew their swords in a moment of chaos. Wolfard and his team did the same dropping the four rabbits in tow.

“Woah, weapons DOWN!” Snarlov spoke with authority, Wolfard and the three samurai immediately following command.

“Do the same, lower you swords.” Stu rasped at his guards. They didn’t. “Lower your weapons, NOW!” He yelled, this time they did cautiously and nervously.

“You don’t even have the respect of your guards.” The fox lord spoke eerily. “I won’t find justice here. I am leaving, lord Snarlov, thank you for your mens assistance in this matter.” The fox’s lords expression instantly sank into an honorable one as he bowed at his friend before looking the rabbit lord in the face. “Goodbye lord rabbit.” He spat before leaving. Two of the four wolf samurai there followed the fox lord as he left the estate his son still in his arms. Wolfard and another black wolf remained the guards of Snarlov. The wolf lord in question looking at the rabbit lord a more neutral tone.

“I am afraid that we no longer pursue trade relations with clan Hopps of Kozuke, I take my leave lord Hopps.” He spoke in a more even tone but it swelled with silent seething at the rabbit lord. They left in much the pronounced steps the fox lord had before them. The silence could almost allow for the rapidly beating hearts of the present to be heard.

“Finally, mangy mutts.” Stu heard one of the four accused rabbits say. His immediate glare landed on them.

“Treat their wounds, bind them and arrest them.” Stu said but nothing happened. “Now!” He yelled again as the two present guards followed suit. “You will tell me of the others involved, you will all be punished publicly to the full extent of your crimes.” Stu seethed and his words bore their threat clearly.

“There we go. Hows that feel?” The older arctic fox spoke to Nick. His father had returned to the inn they stayed at with his guards and other entourage. The fox in question was Suzans mother, a herbalist and healer. She treated his wounds with readily made ointments and herbs with bandages. One on his cheek where he had been hit by a small rock before required some stitches. Nick took them all without complaint.

“Thanks.” He smiled warmly at the motherly vixen.
“What were you doing!” His father present in the room said. His voice was a mix of rage and worry. “You should have stayed with us. Or waited and asked for a guard. It's not safe.” He said kneeling before his son who sat there with a somber, down and tired expression.

“I know, I'm sorry. I just thought this place was better than old stories. We had so much fun, I thought they were different.” A new tear followed the line of fur from his tears earlier.

‘Gazelle was wrong’ Nick thought to himself, he had been nothing but nice and friendly. And still even seeing that the rabbits hated him and attacked him just for what he was. She was wrong and he was wrong for believing her. His thoughts returned to the violet eyes that looked back at him. The mutual admiration with the rabbit he befriended that day. ‘To prove that she could.’ The words ran over and over again in his head.

“Father.” Nick said sitting straight trying to exude a strong appearance. He looked up the most serious expression that had ever crossed his face. “I want to be trained as a warrior, I want to be a samurai.” He said adamantly. His father sat back looking over his son with furrowed brows mixed with worry. Nick didn’t know if he could ever prove that a fox could be honest, trustworthy and loyal. But as he thought about it he couldn’t think of a better way to prove it. An honored and respectable warrior, loyal, skilled and lethal. He tried again and again to tell himself that it wasn’t about the anger he felt towards the ignorant prey that goaded, insulted, humiliated and attacked him. But he wasn’t about to start his path of honesty by lying to himself. “I want to be able and ready to stop things like that from happening. Be just and fair and honest. I want to prove I can.” He said looking his father square in the eyes. A beat passed before his father bowed his head affirmatively.

“Alright.” The fox lord smiled warmly. Nick smiled running over and hugging his father again. “It will be no simple task, you will have to work at it, years of practice and it will take great dedication. You’ll need your mother's permission and you know how she dotes on you.” He smiled as his son laughed.

“Yea, thats true. But I can… I will.” His expression turned serious again. His father couldn’t help but laugh to himself how how adorable his small sons attempts at looking serious were.

He went to bed that night with fear and anger waring for control of his goals. But memories crept into his fading consciousness of the violet orbs that held so much determination. How much more sure and strong she seemed in her dreams than him. He felt guilt even jealous of her. He didn’t know if you could ever change things. He didn’t know if he had the strength to but now he knew where to get the strength, he could see it in thous same violet eyes.

I don't know if I can ever prove that a fox can be honest, trustworthy and honorable. I promise to
try, I'm just gonna borrow your determination. At least until I figure it out ok?

He asked to the violet memory, almost a mantra as he fell into the deepening and welcoming embrace of the darkness behind his heavy eyes.

Chapter End Notes

12/26/16
Warmth of Home

Chapter Summary

Judy wakes to a morning from some of the deepest welcoming rest she has of recent memory. Shouldering the great power her achievements have granted her she rarely took the time to see what she lost in her endeavors. Her companion shows her in the simplest way possible, a growing admiration and interest at warmth offered so freely.

Chapter Notes

Pages 8
Words 3,594
Characters 20,332
Characters excluding spaces 16,797

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 13: Warmth of Home

Back in the present, dawn

Twenty Third day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty Third, Fall, 1623. Just off the Nakasendo Highway, Western Shinano. Edo era Japan.

Judy knew she used to be a morning mammal. Her family originated from humble farmers so the early morning rise was deeply ingrained. Even years in nobility she would find her father, Daimyo of Kozuke regularly tending the garden. Where other lords would scoff at him, look down on him or insult him in some manner he did it regardless. ‘Nothing more noble than farming. Nothing about war, its just good old crops to feed my kids.’ She recalled him telling her before when she asked why. He was as humble as any lord she knew and compassionate because of it. When nobility set in it brought with it a change in etiquette that happened slowly as the influence grew.

She remembered back to when waking up early in the morning nearly strangled by the number of siblings she slept alongside in a pile of warmth especially in the winter. But that slowly went away as the expectations of nobility took their toll. When she first became a samurai she was so proud that she didn’t stop to realize what she lost against what she gained. She was given her own room and
selected acres of land instead of a stipend income. That missing feeling of being surrounded by love was gone, each morning she woke up to the empty feeling. Each morning she would test her senses feeling around for the warmth she missed from her childhood, the sense of protection it offered, the love she felt, that cozy piece she lost. She felt growingly alone with each passing year, a part of her family and yet isolated by her accomplishments.

Her smile formed while her senses came back to her. The feeling was gone today and she knew why. Artificial as it was, she felt where her head lay in the darkness, warmth emanated from the kimono wrapped torso as it raised and lowered at a drawn breath. The smell ‘fox’ she readily knew from her previous nap on his shoulders two or three days prior. But it felt like that missing piece every bit and try as she might, the smile wouldn’t leave her. One thing that confused her was that she remembered only leaning against Nick before she fell asleep. Opening her eyes, speckles of light didn’t illuminate her situation. Sitting up she realized the large straw hat was resting on her head.

“Huh?” She felt her sense of awareness growing, she lifted it up off her head. Realization struck along with the freezing morning air. Her breath visible while she looked around, left, right, from all sides the warmth emanated from her companion. She sat up seeing that he had entirely encircled her with his body his nose meeting at his tail completing the enclosure. She smiled down at the gently snoozing canine. A soft fluttering feeling started in her core warming her expression further. The strong urge to burrow back into the welcoming warmth that battled the freezing air fought in her head. A sudden jostle as the auburn body surrounding her began to twitch and move lightly.

“Nick?” She asked waiting for a response but nothing, again he moved and his arms and legs moved with small sudden motions. A look on his face saw his layed out arms fighting for purchase on nothing and his lips twitching into threatening expressions as his eyes moved behind his closed lids. At some point the previous night it appeared he removed the blindfold that protected his eyes. Some dream or nightmare seemed to play just under the surface.

The memory of her own dream from just that night, a day of fun over a decade ago, a fox with gold dotted emerald green eyes. Curiosity played deviously at her thoughts as she leaned in closer on the sleeping fox. She found herself staring shamelessly at her fox companion’s scarred eyelids. Her curiosity continued to worsen. ‘What color are they?’ She asked herself her paw thoughtlessly reaching down. A single soft hand on his eyelids beginning to open it.

Slowly the white of his eyes appeared. she prepared for the reveal. But instead of gold trimmed emerald orbs she was met with red. Nick suddenly contorted and writhed loud yelps echoing as he broke from the formed circle instantly taking away that warm protected feeling. Startled she withdrew her hand at the sight of the flailing, wounded creature. She felt uneasy not knowing how to console the creature she had unwittingly hurt.

He threw his head back cupping his charcoal colored paws over his eyes. He sucked in breaths to heave them back out through clenched snarls of agonizing pain. She saw his claws extended digging
into his face as he writhed on the ground.

“Nick!” She screamed out moving to him while he shifted away writhing. His movements slowed eventually. He steadied himself with panting labored breaths as she caught the first signs of blood. Not much but more than she imagined his claws had barely dug into his face. At the corners of his right eye a small stream of crimson dripped onto the top ruffled layers of his clothes.

“I’m fine.” He whined with a relieved sigh. A pitying sight as he slowly got his bearings still on concentrated breaths. With shaky paws he made his way through his pack finding clean soft cloth and his small pack of water. He began washing water over his shut eyes dabbing and rubbing carefully against his eyes. “Sorry about freaking out like that, one moment I’m deep asleep the other I think I accidently opened my eyes or something.” He breathed evenly.

“Sorry. Just wanted to see what your eyes look like.” Judy said with a voice weaker than she expected. Nick's ears stuck straight up aimed in her direction as his careful ministrations on his eyes stopped. “Sorry, I forgot you told me your eyes were sensitive.” She sat alongside the chilling morning wind waiting for the reprimand that was coming, instead a laugh. She sat indignantly at the smirking fox. “You're bleeding!” She challenged at the seriousness she felt her companion lost of.

“I'm not actually bleeding..” He said trying to smile as he removed the soaked fabric from his face. Locked shut eyes he looked in her direction. “When I lost my eyes, one of the attackers claws caught the corner of my eye.” (His tear duct) He pointed at one of the numbered lines that marred the surface of his face along his muzzle. “I bleed when I cry essentially. I wasn’t crying!” He stated defensively in a sarcastic conviction. “Just the light hurts, makes my eyes water. Just broken fox eyes now, nothing worth your curiosity.” He ended sardonically.

He went back to cleaning out the blood and invading irritants of his eyes. The moment had devolved from the sudden surprise of the morning. Judy took the moment to dust herself off keeping her arms tight against her to brace from the wind. The sun shown a few rays through the clouded sky. Its warmth had faded throughout the week traveled and she doubted even by mid day it would heat up much.

“Let's do breakfast!” Nick's chipper voice broke her train of thought. Turning she noticed Nick had already reapplied a new clean set of fabric wound around his head shielding his eyes with his hat alongside it. He had made his way to setting up a pot and probing at the coals underneath it. “Help me search for some dry wood?” He said sounding like it was unlikely.

“Ok, yea.” She nodded affirmative jumping at a chance to restart the morning from where it was before.
It took about as long as she expected. The rain from the previous night was just a layer of frost and damp hard soil now. Eventually stumbling back into their small encampment she came to the realization how poorly they had selected at night. It offered little to no protection from the wind, an irony that the nocturnal creature, her companion was unable to offer up that usually braggable advantage in that situation.

“So what would you like? Steam some of the last of your vegetables?” He asked ears trained on her as she entered giving him what wood she could find.

“What would ‘I’ like this morning?” She said with a playful tone. “What my vegetables to good for you this morning?”

“You kidding. I got a fresh batch of soy cheese, potatoes and eggs. Don’t want to contaminate your breakfast with mine. Pred breakfast for me!” He said joyously smiling.

“Oh that sounds good to me. Can I have some.”

“...What? Eggs, cheese? Doesn’t my predator diet harm your small prey sensibilities?” He smirked.

“Had eggs and cheese before Nick-sama. The burrows house predators often, so we keep some poultry, eggs, soy on hand.” She challenged. “Some of my siblings have even tried fish, myself included. We are kinda the front door of the capital.”

“Huh, guess that makes sense. Well alright, pred breakfast for the bunny, prepare your palette!” He said setting up some of the logs with her help.

“Yes!” She concluded with him setting the fire which took its time heating some of the wetter logs. She watched and gave a concerted effort to help. He took a thin knife dicing the potatoes. Whatever he was doing was simple. A liberal layer of oil with the thinly diced and shredded potatoes sizzling immediately when thrown in followed by the eggs. Spinach, some salts and herbs followed by the soy cheese.

“Smells good.” She said taking a whiff of it cradling the warm bowl closely. The thin shredded potatoes were crispy offset by the eggs and cheese. The best way she could describe it was ‘hefty’ given how heavy the meal felt in such a small bowl. Minnum She hummed to herself contently.
“That good huh?” He smirked genuinely proud. She nodded making a small sound in the affirmative.

“Alright, we’re in your backyard here. Home much further?” He asked his own steaming bowl cradled close for its warmth.

“We ended up closer than I thought. Were only maybe four hours till the encampment.”

“Huh, alright. Our little journey is almost over.” It wasn’t long before they finished eating. But instead of heading out Nick quickly collected his things before setting down with Orsas sword.

“What are you doing? If we leave now we’ll be there near midday?” She asked looking over as he meticulously removed its soft wrapped fabric.

“Presenting this sword to the shogun, it's seen some mean weather so I figured I would clean it and oil it a bit. Don’t want to risk it rusting.” He said matter of factly, it wasn’t long before she followed to the same, she realized how neglected it was. Looking over the slightly damaged edge. She knew she would need it carefully sharpened when she got the chance.

“Were here!” The grey furred companion bellowed as they crested the hill, sound emanated from the large encampment straddling the Nakasendo. Farmland and burrows dotted the outset. The number of soldiers since she left had grown substantially she concluded looking over the present. They approached, her proud smile sank slightly.

Before her was a large army to be sure, more armored mammals then she had ever seen before. “Gold trimmed bright blues, tusk and trunk. clan Trunkaby. Dark tan and silvers, Clan Rhinowitz.” She continued as she listed off the visible colors and banners. The alarming absence of their strongest counteractive force was the absence of the clans with large archery forces. The banners for the sheep and goat armies were absent.

“What's wrong carrots?”
She didn’t respond, furrowing his brows he prepared to ask again.

“We’re short. Should be more than this.” She said flatly pointing out the banners to herself as she counted in her head. Several were missing including the shogun’s own forces and the additional forces of the emperor’s brother.

The two were eyed a couple times by outpost guards, most eyed the monk like fox but let him pass with his companion a rabbit samurai of the very clan who ruled the very province they stood on. The tent she was at just over a week ago was in front of her, the war tent.

“He’s just inside.” The large rhino guard said with barely a bow to the small rabbit. She turned to her companion nodding.

“Alright Piberius, the sword.” She said professionally. Nick took the moment to take the sword from his back still in his wrapping. He looked much calmer than she expected.

“Shogun-dono?” Judy began as they entered the tent, drawing away the thickly woven fabric of the tents entrance shown the room she began her journey from. A smaller council surrounded the same table though the room grew more cluttered with maps and small tables sprawling. The group turned at her entrance Bogo himself turning at the sound of her voice with a rare smile.

“Hopps-joshi. Finally, we had began to worry you wouldn’t make it before warlord Big.” He walked over proudly kneeling as he looked between the two mammals, Judy with Nick just behind her left shoulder. “Where is my old Master?” He said smiling as he got up. Walking over he peeking out the tent. A motion as he looked left and right before walking back in. “She grab some food before meeting with me? Would be just like her that old glutton before winter.” He laughed to himself turning back to the room looking over the shallow expressions of the rabbit warrior and her companion. Realization dawned as the fox finished drawing back the fabric cover of the old sword. He recognized the deep red cover of the scabbard adorning just near a similar colored hilt.

“What?” He asked quieter, his expression sinking.

“Master Orsa passed away a couple weeks back from illness. Maybe third or fourth day of Jugatsu.” Nick offered bowing with the sword neatly offered forward. “She had no descendents or students she felt deserving. With the stories she told me I believe she would have wanted you to have this.” Nick said holding where he was. Bogo looked between the blind fox and his trusted student who nodded in confirmation before he reached to take the sword. His size matching that of the former master shown in that the weapon matched to his clovine digits. Where the small group of mammals around the table had been decisively going over their strategies a moment ago the air had taken a
much heavier tension. “Out, we’ll discuss plans later. Thank you lords for your time.” Bogo offered with a slight bow his attentions held by the sword while the other mammals left.

Each bowed in order leaving till the last two the fox and rabbit bowed before taking their leave. “Not you two, stay.” He said taking the sword and setting it on the table, he looked them over. “How? She was a strong old bear, should have had another twenty years on her.” He chuckled looking over. “Who were you to her?” He said pointing at the fox.

“Nick, Shogun-dono. I was a student she took in while I was wandering.” He made his way towards the large shogun careful of his steps. “I studied the sword under her till I was assaulted by another student of her dojo. Without my eyes I could no longer practice my swordsmanship properly. She felt in part responsible given it was among her own students that blinded me, she allowed me to stay since I had no where left to go.” He reminisced as he continued describing to the large bovine who listened with a surprising interest. “She was the mammal that encouraged me to study buddhism, find a semblance of peace within my own thoughts.” He nodded drained by the memory.

“We’ll drink in honor her passing. Share stories and discuss what to do next.” He sighed a gruff breath, Nick and Judy both nodded.

Drinking slowly as the stories went from one offered from the view of Bogo about the war that put Leodore on the throne, the brave bear master, stoic and strong. Then Nick would offer one of his own, a contrast offered by years of meditation and solitude of the bear within their dojo who practiced buddhism after the war, seeking balance with their soul. The once stoic bear master seemed to have grown softer and warmer to her students and fellow townsfolk as the years went on.

“Should have seen her on the fields. It wasn’t uncommon for her enemies to simply surrender when they found out it was her forces that faced them. This one battle the Daimyo of Echizen, old Mooseberg surrendered on the outset of a battle and ordered his forces to lay down their weapons when the battle began. He refused to fight given his peaceful history with the bear clans in the past. Lead to the Swinton shogunate forces being decimated that day without his army to flank us.” Bogo laughed remembering the battle. Judy recalled seeing paintings of it, the powerful cavalry was the advantage that the swinton shogunate had that day. Without them they lost most of their vanguard forces, some of their best samurai in a single battle. In a lot of ways she had been taught that it weakened the moral of the old shogunate so much that several lords abandoned empress Swinton’s call for aid. What loyal warlords remained such as the sheep clans, goat clans, horse clans and others were quickly defeated without strong defensive lines. Without the rhinos, elephants or large bovine armies the lethal prey archers Swintonn had were quickly and decisively smashed.

“I remember learning about that one. The way she told it she was so excited for the battle that she almost forgot to look up in her charge. Almost charged head long into the old mooses soldiers who disarmed and knelt beside the flank. She said if it wasn’t for your war horn sounding she wouldn’t
have noticed.” Nick laughed Bogo breaking into a deep bellowing one himself.

“Thats right! When me and Leodore noticed her running head long to stop the flankers we realized she didn’t notice. So I had my lieutenant ring twice to signal her army to retreat. She must have thought that ridiculous and looked up just in time to notice. Could have turned her greatest victory into her greatest embarrassment, all because she refused to look up in her charge! Silly old grizzly.” The alcohol induced laughter met its peak before slowly coming back down.

He looked over at the warrior rabbit who seemed to smile warmly at the stories offering little insight her own. He couldn’t fault her given only he and the fox knew the bear personally. “Judy, you’re my most skilled student.” He began flatly but she sensed he was being honest. “Wish my own boy showed even half as much promise as you.” He snorted out a disatisfied breath. “That never leaves this room.”

“Of Course lord Shogun.” She nodded quickly.

“You’re skilled, but Orsa had no equal. Western warriors are bled and practiced sword mammals. I would choose you in place of Orsa-sensei.” He looked solemn. “But I can’t take that risk. Without Orsa, we already decided. We’ll pull our armies and return to Zootopias walls. Give allies more time to join us and try and hold out against warlord Big.”

“I understand. I agree.” She said though visibly saddened. “I wouldn’t take that risk either. I think I could win against whoever they use. The risk is too great though.” She nodded mulling it over. Bogo knew Orsa in war, no mistaking her abilities where she was still unbled in battle and only had numerous non lethal duels to speak for her experience. “When do we leave?”

“We don’t.” He began emphasis on ‘we’ as he spoke. “I’ll be bringing your father’s army headed by James.” Bogo began as the rabbit warriors jaw dropped. “Wait, just wait.” He began stopping the infuriated rabbit, an angry look on her expression. “I have an important task for you Judy-sama. Your father will be forced to let lord Big cross his lands as they head to Zootopia. You must be here to meet our allies from the west and eastern provinces.” He began as she sobered with that realization. “Once they take the roads I won’t be able to send a messenger. You’ll lead them in my stead and hit warlord Bigs’ army while we hold them at the walls.” He said bowing his head in her direction. It took her a moment to realize the great responsibility.

“I would be honored lord Bogo.”

“Good. Now get back home, your father spends half the time looking out expecting you to arrive as he does helping plan.” Bogo bellowed with a laugh that shook his frame. Looking around his eyes
settled on his recent drinking buddy in the form of the blind fox. “Take this scraggly one with you. Maybe he can help when Bellwethers lazy army finally arrives.” Judy nodded, Nick stumbled to follow out of the tent. Outside she could see the sun crossing over head as noon began. They began down the road towards the inner limits of the Burrows.

Chapter End Notes

12/26/16
Chapter Summary

Arriving to a welcome home, new plans and looming war. A second reprieve before war on the horizon.

...

This chapter underwent a few edits so its mostly, literally fluff at the moment.

Chapter Notes

Pages 7
Words 3,005
Characters 16,534
Characters excluding spaces 13,595

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14: Fluff

“Judy!” The clammer of young rabbits rapidly descended on her startling Nick at their sheer volume. Dozens of young rabbits playing at the limits of the estate made their way over to their sister.

“Well look at all you, you helping father clean up for winter?” She said smiling while she waved an accusing finger around the quickly formed crowd of excited rabbits. Their expressions lowered when they looked behind her at Nick who looked awkward where he stood on the road.

“Who’s the fox?”

“Is he blind?”

“He looks funny, is he a monk?”
“He’s taller than Gideon-niisama!”

“Hes got a sword!?”

The crowd quickly swarmed him. His defensive posture did little to help him before he was swarmed with a yelp of surprise.

“Judy help! I’ve been claimed by the fluffle!” Nick laughed as the small group surrounded him poking and grabbing at his clothes and tail.

“Ok, ok take it easy. This is Piberius from Harima, my traveling companion since Etchu. Yes hes blind so stop picking on him. Don’t mind the way he looks, he’s not a monk?” She said more as a question not entirely sure on what constituted a monk given her very limited experience with them. While she had only heard of her own shinto priests battling unseen evils and demons she wasn’t sure of a buddhist monk.

“And he carries weapons because he’s a fierce warrior trained by the legendary master Orsa.” She said dramatically, they looked from her descriptions to the blind fox. A moment passed before he raised up his paws in a pseudo menacing manner.

“Rawr.” His tone lacked any strength to it as they all broke out into a laugh.

“Now clear a path, we've been on the road for days now. Need to-“

“JUDY!” A louder feminine voice boomed from a few yards ahead at the entrance of the estate. Bonnie the matriarch crossing the open yard quickly to her daughter. “You're finally back, you were gone forever!”

“It was only about a week mom.” Judy shrugged quickly being engulfed in a hug.

“You know I worry, out of the blue run off on an adventure.” The older rabbit said disengaging from the hug while holding her daughter's shoulders.

“I was sent to retrieve a skilled warrior to help with Big’s army approaching.” Judy said nonchalant.
“I know, your father already told me why you had to leave so quickly. That only has me worry for you even more. So how did it go? Did Orsa agree to help?” Bonnie asked smiling before the look on her daughter’s expression caused it to sink.

“She passed away a couple weeks ago, brought her last remaining student to confirm it to the shogun.” She gestured to the fox behind them both who appeared to have trouble managing the large group of young rabbits. “My plan fell through without Master Orsa, the shogun is going to pull his armies back to use Zootopia’s walls till the other loyal clans arrive. He wants me to wait here till the other lords.” Judys expression became proud. “He wants to leave me here to lead his allies when they arrive to hit warlord Big from the back while their under siege, I’ll be heading the relief army.” The rabbit samurai said fiercely and proudly.

“Oh, wow. Finally gonna get your big chance.” Bonnie said with a challenged smile, Judy knew how much her mother worried about her choice in being a warrior. Not unlike how she worried for her other children but she knew Judy was more prone to going another dozen steps to prove herself.

“Is your friend going to stay with us?” Bonnie asked looking back at the fox who looked entirely uncomfortable as he was slowly being forced to kneel by the tugging hands of the small children on his robes.

“I was going to ask father, he studied under Orsa and has great intuition and insight of the western lords.” Judy said confidently. “He used to be a samurai in Himeji.” Judy said quietly as Bonnie nodded solemnly in acknowledgment with their history with the fox province.

“Your father isn’t going to like the idea of a ronin from Harima staying with us.” Bonnie offered with a shrug. “I doubt you’ll have much trouble convincing him though. Let's go inside and get some warm tea, cold out today.

“You're alright if he stays?”

“Of course, Gideon is just a great help. I trust your judgment, if you say he's no danger to your siblings than thats all I need to know.”

“Thank you mother.” Judy said hugging her back again.

“Alright, alright! Leave the fox alone, everyone back to your chores or you’ll be the first to shovel
snow when it finally starts!” Bonnie snapped with her fingers. The whole of the seemingly amorphous mobs ears shot up before scattering.

“Thank you.” Nick offered with a tired air to his voice. Judy hopped to his side, flinching at the sound.

“You alright there Slick?”

“Fine, just not used to so many mammals being that close, can’t distinguish one sound from another, feels like I’m blind a second time.”

“Alright, well let’s get inside. Gonna have to hurt your stereotype as a fox again with some actual warm tea.” She laughed leading him up the porch. His sour expression never leaving his face while he moved with an innate hesitation. She was as oblivious as he meant her to be with his history of the place. Years prior and without his eyes only his memory of the estates porch was there. A time when he was smaller, weaker and less sure of his future.

“No!” Stu said adamantly. “I will not house a ronin from Harima, a fox especially! He could well be a conniving shinobi!” He fumed in the small private room, he sat across from Judy. Between them sat a map of their current understandings of the forces wielded, new plans were jotted with the newest information including what forces were available and which ones still expected soon.

“I traveled with him for several days, we even saved each other from some assassins north along an old trade route of Shinano.” She said so suddenly, she had only told Bogo and had kept that information from her mother so far trying not to worry them.

“You what! Assassins tried to kill you!” The parental daimyo yelled.

“I didn’t want to worry mother or you. We took a back road to try and avoid any in case Big found out and planned on sending any after us or Orsa. They ended up finding us, got my foot cut up a bit but that same fox fought them.”
“Fought them? Didn’t kill them?” Stu asked with a raised brow. Judy felt her own expression betray her.

“He tricked them and knocked them out. It’s a long, complicated story.” She shrugged not sure how to describe it herself. The way he fought still in large part stumped her even now.

“Tricked them? For all I know it's an elaborate con, in it together to find out about our war plans, they’re good at that you know.” Judy's eyes widened in fury thinking how ridiculous his theory sounded.

“Father! You can’t stereotype foxes like that!” She yelled in return. Rumors already held that the noble rabbit clan of Kozuke held poor old grudges against the fox clans of Harima, a cause of trade turmoil with them to this day.

“I-I meant ninjas, shinobi, spies.” He fumbled with his words defensively but Judy failed to fall for that so easily. He had improved she knew but he still held a few old hatreds of a few select species. Noticeably deflated from their verbal scuffle the two relaxed a moment.

“Mom trusts me, I’m asking you to do the same. He has had more than enough chances to kill me as we traveled. He's an intelligent fox, he knows soo much.” She began with a warm smile that formed into a serious expression. “I trust him, I think his knowledge and insight could be instrumental in the coming conflicts. He knows the western provinces and their war tactics like the back of his hand, something that we could really use and you know that.” She pleaded, Stu looked up with furrowed brows as the two stared each other in the eyes for a moment.

“Alright… I’ll trust your judgment, your mother's right. Your intuition has never failed you, certainly a lot smarter than me.” Stu smiled paternally with pride as she returned it warmly.

“Good, he won’t be here very long. He plans to wait out the winter then head west to reconcile with his family and restore his honor as a samurai. Harima are loyal to Lionhearts shogunate father, he's an ally.” She stated squarely as he nodded.

“The whole winter!” He began with a stone furrowed expression. “Absolutely not!” He began with an angry expression as Judy formed her own about to yell in retort “He’ll be taken on as a guard, or a scholar for the children. If he's here for the frozen season he’ll earn his keep! Give him the guest room on the first floor of the western burrow building.”
“No!” Judy crossed her arms defiantly. “You know the first floor guest rooms aren’t solid enough for winter. Their designed for guests in the warmer seasons, their ice cold.” She fought back.

“We don’t have a room made up and I trust your judgment but I still don’t know him enough to offer him a room near my children Judith.” Stu narrowed his gaze. “He will stay on the top floor till I can gauge his character and have a room prepped for him in the warmer lower levels, that is my offer.” He nodded stoically. She watched her father prodding his body language for a weakness, she found several but knew him to be a poor negotiator despite his status. Even given this she knew he would refuse if she moved the exchange anywhere despite the gleaming advantages of her own offer on the matter. A beat till she came up with her own plan and smirked.

“Fine it's settled then. He is a ronin, I’ll hire him. My personal estate produces more than enough koku to afford him. Once his time as a guest here is up he’ll return with me to my estate as a guard on my land.” She stated matter of factly and defiantly. Her father's jaw dropped at the realization. Judy herself hardly ever went there, her place was with her family. She felt decided in that she wouldn’t leave Nick to the elements of that cold approaching winter.

*If that means I have to live away from my family for the season, so be it.*

She concluded with a nod.

“Fine.” Her father sighed defeatedly. “Now onto other matters, the shogun has informed me of his plans, I will go with your brother to Zootopia. He will lead our clan and our ashigaru in the defense of the capital alongside the other lords. He informed me you are to stay here with a simple force to patrol the town and allow Big to pass through unabated. He'll be granted safe passage but will be offered no assistance in his war effort.” Stu said contemplative. “When the shogun's loyal armies arrive from the west and north you’ll lead the relief force to end the siege with a massive counter attack from the flanks of his forces.” He said waving a hand across the map. Judy found this smaller one much more relaxed and easily accessible to her small size than the ones the larger prey and predator lords used at their own war rooms. “I’ll leave in the morning, your mother rules the homestead and Kozuke in my absence. You will be granted command of martial or war decisions in my absence barring any messages if any are managed.”

“Understood.” She nodded respectfully. “I’ll wait a couple days, primarily for any decent cavalry to arrive, additional forces from Echigo are still expected?” She asked given their recent delays.

“Yes, they send constant reply for requests of aid. They inform that rebellions currently have their networks to their soldiers damaged and it has caused their march to slow considerably. They do however still proclaim their loyalties and intend to march a force to aid in the relief should a siege occur.” He said rolling his eyes. Judy found she had to agree, their constant delays due to the outbroken rebellions caused in the prey provinces recently. It was horribly timely but the recent
arrivals of some of the rhino and elephant clans did confirm they had also felt some of the waves from the rebellion. Food shortages caused from recent droughts affected their economies as well causing them to face starvation that left the peasant class of their provinces in turmoil, some even in open rebellion.

“We should hope they still arrive, their archery divisions would greatly help. The enemy army is several of the bear clans, weasel clans, leopard and other large cat clans right?” Judy confirmed as her father nodded. “Some tundra wolf clans as well. They would be highly susceptible to the archers from Echigo and Dewa” Judy said pointing at the provinces that offered the sheep and goat archers that would assist them the most.

“And you will lead with the shogun's authority when they arrive to actually prove their loyalties. Word from western provinces also claim their preparing to march to our aid. Their slightly less inclined since the attacking army are often their neighbors and they don’t wish to cause strife if they can avoid it. The canine clans fervently opposed warlord Big even refusing his requests to march their lands. They march immediately to our aid.” Stu spoke confidently. Despite their history he had to admit that the wolf and fox clans were very loyal when it came to their word.

War planning and discussion of the approaching armies and all went on for a substantial time in the small room of just the two rabbits.

Sliding the thin door aside Judy left down the hall. “How did it go?” She heard the low cool voice of the blind fox as she rounded the corner leading outside.

“You’ll take the guest room atop our burrow for the night. Father doesn’t trust you enough within the burrow itself and none of the other rooms available are fit for a noble.” Judy said somberly.

“That's alright fluffs, thanks for giving it your best shot. Think I might have enough to stay at one of the cheaper inns. I’ll see what I can do from there.” He sounded dejected reaching in his sleeve to count the small sum he had at his disposal left.

“Or, If you're willing I can higher you on to help protect my personal estate if you're willing.” Judy smiled profoundly, the fox's own expression rose with a thankful smile. “Due to the recent threat, my harvest this year wasn’t transported to my rice broker in Zootopia, could use a trained hand in case any thieves roam the countryside.” She lied. Truth was that close to no thefts were made in the burrows farmland. In reality it was just the greed she felt for her companion. She growingly found herself wanting to hear more of his stories, or just hear him in general. His presence was comforting and warm, the very thing she missed most.
“A blind guard? You are a very poor business mammal if that's what you plan.” He smirked. “I think you just like my company, willing to pay me from your own personal coffers to keep me around? Careful, paying a fox to accompany you to your private den. What would mammals think?” He said in a playful tone. Judy for her own part blushed heavily at the implication.

“Thats not-I just-you!” She stammered at a loss for words before thumping her foot against the group rapidly glaring at the fox.

“Wooaah now fluffs, I'm just messing with you. I’m truly honored you would help me out for the season. But I don’t think I could be much help really as a guard. I would really prefer to earn my keep. So I’ll have to decline your offer, I’ll find my own way.” She could tell he wasn’t going to budge on that.

Judy felt her plan slip away but grasped at it as best she could. “What about if you practice and train with me? You were a student of the Moon Fang dojo and Orsas dojo also? I could pay you fairly for further training me?” She said desperately. The fox raised a single brow before putting his left paw to his chin in thought.

“Well, that is true. I do have some secret and legendary knowledge.” He said smirking. “Alright, I guess that helps justify my stay. I’ll agree to that. Well as long as we end up winning this war I guess.” He shrugged.

“Don’t sound so cynical, I’m sure we will.” She said defiantly. She was always the optimistic one between the two. “Now i’m headed over to the large west building to practice with some of my siblings. I feel rusty after over a week on the road. A chance for you to see just how good a sword mammal I am.” Judy said proudly as the two stood back up straight. She noticed his smirk.

“I already know how skilled you are.” Nick offered matter-of-factly. Her own a confused expression.

“Oh, don’t think that little mess up with the assassins told you anything. I’m very skilled, just you wait and see.” She humphed defensively.

“You mistake me carrot-sama. I believe you to be one of the best sword mammals I have ever met. I wouldn’t cross blade with you and expect not to be sent to the afterlife in short order.” He said straightly.

Chapter End Notes
Lessons Learned

Chapter Summary

Judy takes Nick to their clan dojo where they train promising rabbits that will fill the ranks of the new and rare role of samurai among their species. An all new experience to the predator from what he learned of western kenjutsu schools. But where somethings may be better in a light others not so much.

Chapter Notes

Pages 8
Words 3,569
Characters 19,984
Characters excluding spaces 16,489

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 15: Lessons Learned

*Wham!* The third rabbit landed hard against the center of the clean wooden floor. Judy at its center. She could hear the three groaning and whining as they nursed at their newly forming aches. From what Nick had gathered they were an interesting group, husbands of some of her sisters who belonged to the Leaps family.

In the room knelt a large number of rabbits training and learning how to wield a sword. Acting as a training ground where they trained their slow but steady output of guards, the building and its inhabitants didn’t yet have the proficiency to act as a dojo. What rabbits went through that room, if showing enough promise at the discretion of Judy and her most skilled siblings may have been granted the ability to attend a dojo if they held the titles necessary. From what the auburn inquisitive fox himself had gathered that was in part what the male rabbits who wed into the Hopps family aimed to do.

“Allright, you’re improving.” Judy said barely a change in her breath despite beating the three simultaneously with ease. “Now, any of our own want to volunteer to give a better example?” Judy said looking over her own siblings, all of which present were trained but only a few left fully titled warriors. Most prepared to leave with their father to war by the next morning. Ears were lowered, most knew her ability and weren’t eager for the new bruises. Eventually three excited and brave hands rose. “Good, you three. Don’t hold back.” She said setting to her own stance again.
Nick sat along the slightly raised and encircling sides of the large room, his ears trained on the center. Judy had seen him a couple times out of the corner of her vision, he sat focused and aware, with a level of respectability in his demeanor. This sight of him, she felt contradicted the naturally sarcastic and playful attitude she knew him for. Straight neutral face, ears at attention, his senses constantly absorbing his surroundings of all information, she could tell. Her attention back on her three siblings, she had trained alongside them a couple times. Substantially better than the newer ones. The three encircled her as was the most common when facing multiple assailants.

“Ahhh!” The first charged. She felt the wind caused by the slash against her fur as she dove under it and behind him. Her own reply, a slash of her own. The impact was light, just enough to inform him he was out.

“Alright, see what I did there. Always move to avoid being entrapped, I prioritized moving out of the surrounding attackers to get a better vantage.” She said still eyeing down the two remaining opponents. Shoulder to shoulder the remaining two didn’t leave a gap for her to abuse. Instead she stepped around one favoring her right side. The two in reply continued to face her, however with two of them it forced the rightmost rabbit to constantly adjust at their allies shoulder. Judy smirked. This time when she began to side step she lunged at them.

Clack, thwack.

Another rabbit, blocked but to no avail before being hit.

“Alright, I’ve gotten rid of two so far. That time I selected one of them to use to force the other to change angles.” She said looking down the last rabbit, the one on the unfavored side from before. The smallest of the three that had began. “That way they couldn’t attack in unison. Since their both right handed I selected the one on my left, their right. It reduced the number of angles they can respond to my attacks with.” Judy moved forward a pronounced step, the younger brother stepped back in response. He stared at her through squinted eyes, again she stepped forward, he monitored her stance and stepped back. Again she stepped forward again he- Click.

His foot caught on the edge of the training area, he lost for all of a single moment and that was all it took. He looked forward to Judy now resting the tip of her practice sword on his chest.

“Dead.” She said smiling at the younger brother. “You did pretty good keeping an eyes on me, but you can’t forget your surroundings either.” She said, the smaller brother of hers began playing it up. Grabbing at his chest he gurgled pretending to die before gasping a final breath laying on the ground. The rest of the room quickly broke into open laughter, Judy included. “Alright, stop hamming it up.” Judy rolled her eyes before helping the smaller sibling up.
“My turn.” All ears shot up, just off Nick’s shoulder James stood beside the open entrance. “We haven’t sparred for a while, a good chance to see where we stand.” He said with an air of confidence. Theirs was a constant rivalry, one that Judy was thankful for. Between the two of them constantly pushing each other, they constantly improved to better the other.

“You sure you want to lose that badly? I’ll beat you as many times as the lesson is needed.” Judy challenged. James shrugged defiantly a bokken of his own in paw as he took to the center area just standing just across from her.

“You’ll have to prove that as many times as you can. Until you can’t anymore.” James shot back the two smiling challengingly at the other. James was substantially taller than her along with most of his siblings. He wore the colors of clan Hopps unlike the calmer lighter ones the rest wore. Likely she imagined to the fact he was packing up to head with their clan and army to Zootopia the following day.

“Ten copper on Judy.” Nick heard one of the younger siblings say off his left side.

“You kidding? Judy has been gone for nearly two weeks, bound to be a bit rusty. James has been training the whole time, twenty on him.”

“Your on.” The same one said confidently.

The room grew focused on the two, animated discussion over the rivalry. The two bowed lightly never taking their sights off the other, practice bokken at their sides. Held in such a way as to look sheathed they drew their swords holding them at the ready towards the other. All discussion ceased at the serious tone in the air. Then like lightning itself they lunged at each other.

Crack!

The guttural sound of their weapons impacting echoed. The two mirrored each other the two weapons against each other in a heated clash. The two scowled with gritted teeth clenched and shown. Nick all the while focused his ears on them, bereft his sight his attentions remained on the quieted sounds of their steps.

The two simultaneously shoved against the opposing weapon pushing each other back from the other. The strength, speed and above all focus set was a much higher standard than any of the
previous sparring matches witnessed so far. Softly stepping they continued to carefully gauge each other's ranges and speed with simple slashes and lunges that failed to connect. Huffing, grunting, stomping the two constantly challenged each other's pace, the question 'Is this the best you have?' Answered in kind by the others 'Not even close' as they continued in their rivalled competition.

*Clack*

The light sound, James took to pressing his height advantage, outranging his sibling. Simple battle cries and threatening vocal challenges sprang up whenever the two clashed.

“HAAA!” James lunged, Judy parried, sidestepping the brunt of the attack. He was quick enough and she found she was unable to counter his attacks. In part because his reach advantage over her made it difficult without closing that distance. Where she wasn’t pushed to any limit before, now she could feel the sweat, smell its conclusion of their challenge. “That all you got? I know you can do better.” James prodded her, she knew it but still she scowled. She wouldn’t let him mock her openly. She stepped forward embarking into her attack with a roar of her own.

“AAAH!” She slashed, he mocked her further simply smirking as he stepped back out of her range. She persisted with a slash, and another constantly closing the gap he made with his range. She persisted long after he expected her to stop, his smirk replaced with a furrowed countenance. Her last step taken in stride before- *Clak!* The impact just at the base of his wrist. His bokken fell from his sore wrist rasping a couple times against the floor. He rubbed at the sore ache on his paw nursing the swelling pain. Judy smiled with a raised brow, James own expression a squinted appraising one. Slowly it warmed into a concerted, proud smile.

“Alright, alright. You're still the best.” He said with a sarcastic tone.

“And don’t you forget it.” She mocked incredulously. The sound of two copper mon changing hands could deftly be heard between the many hollering and cheering rabbits. Boisterous, Nick concluded the best word he could use to describe their dojo. It was exciting, energetic and nothing like his time at Orsas dojo or the school of the Moon Fang where he first trained. Everyone spoke with each other offering detailed analysis of the fight, dos and don’ts of how it played out. It was an atmosphere he felt very fitting for sword mammal training.

“Good match. Quote the impressive speed, can’t let her get inside your guard.” Nick offered the advice simply with a smile.

“Hey, not taking any tips from the likes of you!” James spat in venom. Nicks ears leveled behind his head at the sudden change in atmosphere.
“James! He’s just trying to offer some advice. He trained in the same style as us, he also trained under master Orsa herself. Show some respect.” Judy commanded the statement with a glare at her brother.

“Maybe he was something at some point, he’s not now and I won’t be mocked by taking ‘advice’ from the likes of him!” James began, walking over he held a pointed aggressive expression at the fox who sat inanimate. “So I don’t wanna hear a peep out of you. Unlike you I back my sword with bite, not bark.” The whole of the rooms eyes set upon them. James seethed in his expression while Nick looked on, still seated, the definition of unconcerted. If anything Judy could tell from his expression it looked almost disappointed.

“Ok.” The word came calmed and simple from that auburn muzzle. “You want me to prove I can still bite and not just bark.” This time the tone was calm, cold and controlled. In a very real way Judy felt a shiver down her spine. Memories of the night with the very real threat of trained assassins flashed across her vision. Controlled in how he meticulously dissected the opponents.

“What?” The tallest rabbit said disbelieving the challenge.

“I said i’m up to the challenge. Let’s spar.” He said standing in a surprisingly single elegant motion. It was entirely unlike what she had seen before in him. His motions were ‘Lumbered, lazy and tired.’ The same words she could best use to describe him played out. He stood in front of the rabbit at his fool intimidating height, no slouching his lithe but predatory frame on full view ‘move’ It spoke simply as he stared ahead to the center of the room. James gawked back as if he still couldn’t believe his eyes. He stepped aside in that same moment Nick walked straight to Judy holding a single paw out and open.

“Nick you don’t.”

“Alright foxy, failed warrior needs a lesson.” James huffed taking to the center of the room. Judys attention on him in that moment before returning to a furrowed look on her fox companion. She looked up at his relaxed, masked figure. With a single nod she offered the wooden sword placing it into his paw.

The room took on a new silence, this one not an air of rivaling anticipation but instead of pity and confusion.

“The fox is blind? What kind of challenge is this?”
“James is gonna mop him!”

“So what if he does? He's fighting a blind opponent. Is he that conceited to need something like that for his ego?”

Words of pity or resentment continued in hushed whispers. A useless act as the room was filled almost entirely of some of the most capable mammals when it came to hearing. Nick fumbled with the wooden sword in paw. Feeling out its weight in one paw then the other, it was small enough that its handle was encompassed entirely in just one of his while it was meant for two of the lagomorph species it was designed around. Over and again he played with it, gauging its mass and length, he noted it was not unlike a wakizashi with a short handle. Settling it in his left paw his stance was wide, low with the weapon far out in front of him horizontal as opposed to vertical like their own starting kenjutsu stances.

Judy tilted her head in confusion as he moved the blade around like him. It was nothing like the kenjutsu arts she had learned at the Moon Fang dojo. Nick was of Harima and most canine species were trained by wolves there but none of them matched what she saw in front of her now.

‘South Paw?’ She asked to herself, she thought back on it, holding his staff in his left paw when he fought the assassins but sometimes he walked with it in his right? Time and again she fought to recall a telling or confirming moment in recent memory but didn’t find one adamant to confirm it for her.

“That's your stance, really?” James mocked with a single raised brow. “One shu says the fox never even touches me.” He challenged in an open tone to the crowd around them. Nick pivoted the wooden sword in his paw the tip never leaving its place out in front of him, instead his arm moved around it as if the tip was levered in place. James approached with a deliberate action his own weapon at the ready. The two wooden instruments of competition lightly touched, Nicks trained ears reprised that moment, the slight click and already his body moved in response. James stepped left, Nick stepped left. James pushed forward, Nick stepped back. Time and again he gauged the fox, the wooden sword was the same length as his own but now it was the opposite of when he fought Judy. Where with her and most of his siblings he out reached them, now played closely to his instructors hired on from the shogun. Like the wolves Nick held a much greater range on the count of his longer arms.

He lunged forward, Nick's response was instantaneous.

*Clack*
The fox simply and effortlessly swatted his stabbing action away. James staggered back into position with grit teeth. There the fox stood, blind still with fabric over his eyes and he could have sworn the fox was watching him. Fuming in silence he watched as the fox began to roam his ears every direction, he turned searching for his opponent in the void. Believing an opening he rushed for another attack.

*Clack*

Again his own bokken was swatted away much how you would swat a fly away. The crowd watched on at the changing tides. They quietly *‘oh’d and ‘aww’d* at the marvel. James could even hear the slight of a few snickering rabbits.

*‘Damn that conniving fox!’* He spat uselessly inside the confines of his own head. He had learned to be content as the second fiddle to his sister’s talent, in the end it was still his family, his species. But this, a fox, their sworn natural enemy opposed him. The insult inflicted against his pride and prestige further by the fact that his opponent was without the natural sense of sight.

Again he lunged, again he was swatted away effortlessly, again he swung, again he was swatted again and again. Again he swung but this time no sound of the meeting of their two weapons. This time he met open air as the fox pivoted out of the way, he dodged but again it was a mockery. The match had turned into an outright game of tag almost. The longer it went the more effortlessly the fox blocked, parried or dodged James advances. The smell of sweat was heavily present in his nostrils now, each movement brought more of the same feeling of sweat against his fur but it was never enough effort.

*“Are you making fun of me fox!”* James yelled through his grit teeth. Nick again pivoted his muzzle in the direction of the sound.

*“No, right now I’m just showing you my bark. Figured it would be a fair warm up to my bite.”* The fox smirked openly now with a challenging brow *‘Is this the best you have?’* It spoke. *‘Not even close!’* James replied not unlike before with the brunt of his speed formed into his lung. The fox moved in such a way that James couldn’t imagine it possible, he moved away while he closed the distance.

*Clak*

The weapons met, swatted away again, this time however James found his footing blocked, tripped by Nick he tumbled against the hardwood thudding from the momentum of his own speed. He could smell the sweat on himself, feel the ache of his lungs gasping for breath. The taste of blood from his
less than attractive landing. Finally the world stopped turning and sight returned from behind closed lids. Red, fur he saw above him, standing there.

“Dead.” Nick said in much the same tone Judy had earlier when practicing with the students before. His bokken rested carefully the tip sitting on James chest with both of Nicks paws rested against the hilt. The crowd of surrounding rabbits Judy herself gawking at the marvel infront of them.

“Impossible!”

“No way!”

“James is one of our best!”

“Wow, talk about being humbled.”

Again the words of pity, mockery, incredulity played against the room and again no shortage of the whispering uselessly in a room full of the most audibly aware mammals possible.

“Nick that was amazing! How did you do that!” Judy beamed running up beside him. He smirked in that same smarmy way.

“Like I said before, you should have seen me in my prime Fluffs.” Nick smiled handing her the bokken. She made her way over to a corner of the room to put away her practice gear.

“Fox!” The voice angrily spat.

“Hm?” Nick turned and for the second time in recent memory found his muzzle impacted with guttural ferocity by a small rabbit. Nick was laid out square on his back again, world without vision turning behind lost lids. The taste of blood a growing presence in his memory. But this was not the only impact, again another fist struck his muzzle. Instinct took over, raising his arms to block the continued onslaught instead a grip found its way around the fabric protecting his eyes.

“I bet you're not even blind, conniving predator!” James yelled angrily at the defenseless fox tearing away the fabric to the sight of massive present scars. Nick yelped openly at the invading rays of
bright light. His eyes squinted behind closed lids, grit teeth and pain.

“James!” Judy yelled tackling into her brother with the strength carried by her raw speed. “The hell is wrong with you!” She yelled sitting on top of him with a very threatening fist raised. James scowled uselessly, poised to say a word but instead Judy gave him an expression he never thought to see. Utter disappointment, tears welling at the corners of her eyes when she snatched the fabric from his paw. Before he knew it, sitting up he saw her consoling the bleeding fox. But hers was not the only disappointing glare. The room was filled with no fewer than a dozen rabbits, arms crossed, poised and looking at him with everything from open disgust to pity. All told the same story in their distaste for him.

“Nick here, your bandages.” She offered the fox cringed holding his throbbing head against the onslaughts of the bright white light.

“No, got blood in my eye again. Need to go wash it out.” He said in a rasped hurt voice. Judy nodded helping him up with careful paws the second of recent memory to Nick. This time however the paws were firmer, more confident and less afraid.

“Alright, let's get some clean water for it.” She said leading him an arm around the mid of his frame as best she could offer. A second small brown furred sibling helped her from his other side.

“Sheesh, that James-san. Kind of an ass.” Nick said through garbled breath snorting down the presence of blood.

“Yea, I've never seen him like that before.”

“That's because James-niisama only practices with rabbits.” The small brown furred rabbit confirmed. Judy mulled it over in her own head. It was true enough but she remembered him training against canine instructors no different than herself, she didn’t sense that same hostility before.

“Maybe you're right Brian. Promise me you won’t be that way though.” Judy said commandingly in a sisterly tone towards the younger brother.

Chapter End Notes

Well that's how far I got folks. NaZoWriMo event hosted by ZNN. Originally this
started out as a writing exercise no longer than 14,000 words. Turns out that a friend I
told the concept of the writing exercise knew of an event called NaNoWriMo, they liked
the concept so challenged me to expand it to fit the premise of the event. Seeing as ZNN
was hosing their own version of the event, the NaZoWriMo event and my story
contained Zootopia characters I elected to have it through them instead. Its been a blast,
but here we are within December now, past the event. I figured its been a fun little
journey so I would share some interesting stats during this excursion.

Chapter 15 Total Words: 52,689
Chapter 15 Total Pages: 120
Chapter 15 Total Characters: 294,986
Chapter 15 Total Characters (excluding spaces): 243,371
15 Chapters published for the event.

Chapter 15, that was as far as I managed, just barely meeting the 50,000 word
prerequisite due to time constraints because of work. That is edit however since I'm a
self conscious moot I refused to publish any unedited chapters.

Event End Words: 70,006
Event End Pages: 161
Event End Characters: 392,330
Event End Character (excluding spaces): 322,744
20 Chapters written, 23 chapters estimated for completion and a large epilogue planned,
even 2 chapters for Zokugawa 2.

These are the final numbers I managed exactly 1 hour and 36 minutes before the even
wrapped up at midnight pacific time December 1st. I figured since the event is over I
would tease some of the titles of the remaining chapters.

Chapter 16: Shadows Amongst Shade
Chapter 17: Ignorance Is Bliss
Chapter 18: Conflict and Corroboration
Chapter 19: Peaceful Resolution
Chapter 20: (Written 2/3, Untitled)
Chapter 21: (Unwritten,Untitled)
Chapter 22: (Unwritten, Untitled)
Chapter 23: (Unwritten, Untitled)
Zokugawa 1, Epilogue: (Unwritten, Untitled)
Zokugawa 2, Chapter 1: Denial
Zokugawa 2, Chapter 2: Anger

Now, you may have noticed Zokugawa 2, is in there. That's because i already had the
plot of the event series plotted out and felt so inspired in the early days of the event that I
in fact wrote Chapter 1 and 2 of the series second Arc. This was before increased shifts
and hours at work along with a few things draining my time. Before all that my
estimates showed I would have finished Zokugawa 1 and even gotten a great deal into
Zokugawa 2. In the end I barely managed the edit versions of just enough chapters and
words to meet the quota on the deadline. Anyway, with it completed and the challenge
met I'll probably move back into the silent annals of my writing exercises, which were
originally never meant for public consumption, their intention entirely for the purpose of
maintaining a creative mind. Hope you all enjoyed this simple story and who knows
maybe I'll see you lot somewhere down the road. Best wishes and have fun - Nobli
Shadows Amongst Shade

Chapter Summary

The past catches up with the present, the two reminisce over their mutual memories of the events that marred their mutual past. Coy and distant as Nick again avoids acknowledging his past as a shadow hovers over his unrecognized friend in more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

Ehhh, seems most people aren’t catching my notes at the end of the events on chapter 15, that was set to be the end of my efforts due to the end of the event. But had more than a couple encouraging messages and excited readers so figured I would look through my remaining chapters. 16 it appears needed no serious edits so, enjoy.

Pages 7
Words 3,185
Characters 17,658
Characters excluding spaces 14,531

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 16: Shadows Amongst Shade

“Its cozy.” Nick said sarcastically, even now with just a little wind he could feel the draft of the room.

“Sorry, father doesn’t trust you much yet. Wants you to use the upper guest room.” Judy told him, he had a rough layout as best she could describe since he could never see a map. From what he had been told the building that sat atop their dug and constructed burrow was mostly for show. Their large family had natural insulation and heat venting as a byproduct of their tunnels. The upper building could more easily accommodate larger noble guests that housed during their stay. The downside to this is that the upper structure didn’t need to be built well since it was only used during the attending events in summer.

“Well at least it’s a step up from sleeping on the dirt. Remind me why I didn’t stay at that cozy dojo and just become the new master?” Nick challenged as Judy laughed fakely.
“Because it was lonely and no one would want to train with a blind fox master.” She said.

“Ouch, way to dig that dagger in there.” He said with faux insult pretending with a dagger to jab into his chest sticking out his tongue faking his death dramatically.

“Don’t be so dramatic, just quoting you.” She smiled.

“Oh yea, good point.” He shrugged walking the area. Judy had figured out that he liked to walk every step of available space. She had seen how he almost formed the area inside his own head. Once he walked around for a few minutes he stepped as if he wasn’t blind at all. A couple rounds quietly she watched him gauge the area and everything within it, barren he quickly noticed before setting his oaken pack and staff down with a huff. “Home sweet home.” He said sardonically.

“It's just temporary, once everyone knows you a bit more and father trusts you, you’ll get a room down below in the burrows.” Her expression was sad knowing how cold it really likely was. A couple giggles could be heard through the literally paper thin walls as a couple of smaller rabbits took off when their presence was noticed. Judy watched Nick’s ears swivel from place to place.

“Yes a fox in the burrows, i’m sure. Like your brother, any of them trusting me, It's a bad joke carrots.” Nick scoffed shaking his head. Cold reality in his memories of the burrows from years before settled.

“Hey don’t be a jerk like James. Gideon is a fox and he lives in the burrows with us.” Judy challenged smiling to herself. Nick’s own expression softened at this. “He’s the best cook and unlike you he has more fox points for knowing how to make a good cup of tea.” Judy said pivoting on her foot as she humphed at the fox sitting amiably in the corner.

“Oh really. Noble clan Hopps has a fox servant, that is a juicy rumor.”

“What?! No he's not a servant. He's a respected member of this house and works for clan Hopps proudly!” He rolled his eyes uselessly behind the bandaged lids.

“That's still a servant fluffs’ He sighed.

“Oh, my apologize fluffs. Didn’t mean to offend, just can’t believe such a far fetched story given the burrows history of treatment of foxes.” he said accusingly though somewhat sarcastically. The
silence fell for a beat then another. The longer it stretched the more Nick felt out of place. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean that—”

“I know our two species haven’t gotten along really well. Seems really tense and I don’t understand it really.” Judy began seeing her fox companions confused expression.

“You don’t know why?”

“No, I know years ago when I was really young something happened.” The small rabbit noble put a digit to her chin with a contemplative expression. “It was during the summer, several noble clans from the west crossed leagues, passing through on their way to pay respects to the new emperor and discuss commerce and trade in Zootopia. But it was kept really quiet. Since that day tensions are always high. Trade with the burrows from the western provinces seemed to cease overnight.” Her voice sank quieting.

“Pft.” Nick spat. “They never even told people what happened?” Nick shook his head with the same look of distaste she recognized on him.

“I heard from some of the inn keepers that saw some older boys from the Jumps family being taken to my father's castle estate by some wolves that were part of the nobles staying in the burrows for the commute. They said how the three young boys had been attacked by them, the eldest boys hand was even mauled beyond recognition.” Judy mirrored the blind foxes expression. Nick’s jaw tensed against its own teeth, clenching expectantly.

“Go on, what else did the town people say?” He said in an angered tone.

“One said that they were taken within the grounds they couldn’t see anything else. I heard that they were punished for assaulting a superior, the wolves did carry swords, so assaulting a samurai is a grievous crime. But they were big wolves, what damage could the boys really have done?” Judy shrugged. “They were lucky father was nice enough to only brand them for what they did instead of execution. Still seems harsh if you ask me.” Judy shrugged dismissively.

“Harsh? Did the innkeepers mention any other mammals heading up to lord Hopps castle?” Nick appeared to be nearly fuming at this point Judy realized. Regardless she thought a moment.

“One said that they saw a small pup with them.” Judy conceded the recollection.
“Not just ‘some pup’ that was the one the Jumps boys assaulted. Not a wolf with a sword. Just a kid.” Nick noticeably bit at his lip in agitation. “And there was six of them, they all waited till he was alone then they attacked him for no reason.”

“Nick I didn’t mean-”

“The small tod was just out playing in a small rural village that had been described as peaceful and calm since the new shogunate. An amiable friendly clan had taken up control of the fief, all is great in the world. That small star eyed fox, just went out to play with some rabbits over at the Leaps farm down the road. On his way home he gets attacked by a rabble of rabbits.” Nick spat with venom. Judy mulled the story over, she never pieced it together, the story told from the inns miles down the road she didn’t realize it was the same fox.

“That wasn’t just any kid they decided to beat up, throw rocks at that cut his head open either. No it was lord Wildes son. His only son.” Even without eyes Judy almost felt his vision bore into her. “And your father, he didn’t want to punish the rabbit children, if it wasn’t for lord Snarlov and lord Wildes guards the boys may have killed the kid, small fox who just wanted to play a game of tag or hide and seek.” Nick had taken to standing and pacing from place to place within the small confined room as he fumed at a retelling of the story. Judy to her own baffled realization just sat in place mortified at the revelation.

“Lord Wilde was in a meeting with his friend Lord Snarlov who represented several wolf clans and your father Hopps-Dono.” Nick seethed the honorific as it came out his closed teeth. “Brought the boys and the still bloody and battered son of Daimyo Wilde before your father…” Nick just sighed wincing at the blood tears that drained from beneath his bandages. “It wounded relations between two of the most powerful western lords and the Hopps clan.” Nick took a chance to sit. “... Sorry. Just that story always sorta pisses me off when I think back on it. Would you mind leaving me to my sulking. I promise I’ll be in a better mood in the morning.” He took the chance to look sightless in her direction and offer a warm expression. Judy noticed the smile was weak and drained though.

“Nick, I’m sorry I never heard that part of the story before. I didn’t know, the fox he-” Nick stopped her raising an open paw in gesture.

“I know, you shouldn’t apologize. I didn’t mean to snap at you like that, you weren't at fault. Heck even I think things were blown out of proportion, cutting trade ties that could have benefited both? Eh, that's not what I would have done.” Nick shrugged his smile warming into a genuine one.

“How did you know so much about the story? Did you know the young lord?” Judy asked probing the tall red fox for information regarding that friend she never saw again.
“Yea, used to know him a long time ago.” Nick tilted his head not sure how to tell his own story removed from it. “He and I grew apart, probably because of that very day. He grew cold, distant and angry. He wanted to return, he even made a friend or two while he was there. After the attack and everything though that all changed.” The fox had managed to remove the fabric from around his eyes, squinted eyes shown the blood from his tears had gotten into his left eye. “Anyway, its getting late and now I gotta clean this out before I get to sleep so… I promise i’ll be in a better mood tomorrow, less depressing.” He attempted another weak and fake smile. Judy was quickly becoming better at reading the practiced expressions of the blind ronin.

“Alright, tomorrow then.” She said taking the cue to leave. Throughout the events of the day time had flown past very quickly. Exiting the room in silence the paper thin walls did little to weaken the sound on the other side of the sliding door. She could hear the fox sigh as fresh water was heard, likely what he was using to clean out his eye. Walking towards the larger descending tunnels into the burrow Judy mulled over the story.

Once inside her own room, large thanks to her title and rank she recalled the green eyed fox from her memory. That day she had played alongside him no different than any other child, shared stories, ambitions and dreams. Heck that fox was the first she told about wanting to become a samurai that didn’t laugh at her, even encouraged her. Guilt set in, finally the full story of what happened to that boy. Each few years she expected to see that fox friend again and finally she knew why she never had. Eyeing her own mat of a bed she couldn’t help but think it unwelcoming and cold. She had strived to become a samurai and all that entailed and she had come to embrace the humility that granted her. The things she had before she achieved her dream were taken for granted. Now even among her own siblings, the way they looked at her like she had elevated herself above them. She couldn’t help but feel her dream had caused that rift between her and them. Crossing the nearly empty room she made her way to her dresser, first she made to putting away her tanto and katana, the two together her daisho. A permanent sign of her accomplishment, trained under the shogun himself and licensed at a very prestigious dojo.

Continuing to dress down for the night she removed the obi sash that still showed weathering and tatter from her journey. Her haori, in the colors of her clan removed next, hakama and hakamashita (shirt) next before putting on a clean solid white juban (under kimono) and similarly colored yukata, the additional layer to help stave off the cold. Setting down to sleep not knowing which thoughts would haunt her. The army that approached seeking to end what peace had been established across Japan. Her actions to help aid and end the conflict when warlord Big crossed for a siege on Zootopia. The dreams she most feared the ones with the same set of green orbs that lacked a silhouette against the shadows of that old oak. In them she feared they would judge her ignorance that years had granted her.

The dark and cold of night fell over the burrows in more ways than one. Fields quieted of their
labors earlier and earlier as the season passed into the later of fall. The roads had long since silenced and barely a few lanterns were still glowing against the night, just how they liked it.

Two sets of eyes shown with the reflected glare of the lanterns pathetic flicker of a small swaying flame.

“How many guards?” The white furred arctic fox said from the shadows granted by an outcrop between two convening buildings. Blue eyes met the yellows of her taller red fox subordinate.

“We count twelve open grounds guards, haven’t seen any enter or leave the main building so we don’t know how many guards inside. Mostly rabbits, a couple goats, a sheep. One wolf guar.” He said from behind his mask, the second figure of two. The shadows matched the dark color clad of the shinobi that embraced them.

“Oh, rumors are true. The rabbits have been ambitious training in martial arts, exciting. The wolf is our greatest concern. Keep down wind and avoid his sense of smell.” The arctic fox grinned behind black fabric.

“Foxes sneaking into a burrow to snuff out the head of a loyal rabbit clan. Almost sounds cliche if you ask me.” The tall red fox lieutenant said earning a small laugh in response.

“True, remember were meant to keep this quiet. Get in, kill lord Hopps and leave.” The red fox nodded in the affirmative. The plan as she knew it was not to cause a scene and make it impossible for them to leave. The plan in effect was meant to destabilize the hierarchical structure of the large family before their army arrived. She knew the small shrew to plan things so in depth, his inter knowledge on things was horrifying at times. He didn’t plan to kill the clan, he planned to beat them and demand subservience within his new shogunate. Suffering defeat he would avoid suppressing them similar to how Leodore had not suppressed clan Bellwether to keep the north stable after he took power. She smirked to herself as she rounded the next corner as two short guards next to a gate house came into view. “Clever little shrew.” She said to herself.

The first of two rabbit yawned with his two large buck teeth on display. The two guards clad in heavy garb against the cold. They stood just beside the gate that permitted entrance to the Hopps castle, equipped with a katana at their waists with yari spear in hand.
“I’m tired already.” He said, drawling as he whined.

“Come on, our shift just started. Did you get any sleep?” The second guard said shifting in his place to brace against the wind. Both rabbits put their backs to the wall which was between them and the frigid air. “Brrr, gonna be a cold one this year.”

“You said it, wish we could have got more rain this season. You see the harvest this year?” The first said to the second.

“Yea, another drought another poor harvest. Still better than up north from what I hear. Least some of our grains are a little more resilient. Up north their having big trouble growing rice.” He said nestling his arms around himself in the cold. The moon was squarely overhead giving off a layer of light though not much in between bouts of clouds, along with the lanterns illuminating the area around them slightly.

*Smack!* 

The two nearly flew out of their own skin looking over to their right. A small flat piece of wood in the distance shimmied by the wind fell over with audible distress. It began rattling slightly from where it sat on the ground.

“Scary.” The arctic fox said.

“Yea, had me-” The rabbits eyes shot wide open turning to his left, neutral dilated nocturnal eyes stared back at him. The second guard witnessed the fox use its large frame to suddenly grapple his friend before two clawed arms embraced him in the same fate. The two rabbits struggled fighting their larger captors for all of a few moments.

“Alright, guards are down, don’t kill them. If the wind turns I won’t want the wolf inside to catch the scent.” The shinobis leader said as the tall fox nodded. They moved the two unconscious guards into the shadow cast by the walls arch.

“Not even gonna let me savor my catch.” The taller one whispered with a chuckle.
“Haha, let's move.” She said as the two checked their surroundings making their way through the tended grounds of the estate. They came to a stop just outside the entrance of the main building that housed the entrance. The taller fox gesticulated a series of hand movements in place of words. ‘Guard, that way, rotation, hold, 5’ She nodded as they watched and waited in silence. Sure enough just shy of five minutes passed before a tall grey haired wolf rotated from the left side of the building with a paper lantern in hand protecting it from the wind. He stopped at the entrance looking out squinting in their direction. A beat than two before he left. A single hand wave and she knew that meant time to move. They ascended the stairs onto the porchway of the entrance, the door slid open with a quick look inside and just as quickly the two assassins entered sliding it behind them.

Continued looks and silent steps the inside of the structure was pitch black.

“No guards inside?” She whispered to her companion.

“Its an underground structure, could be guards underfoot as we get deeper into the compound.” He said as she nodded. They began down a large strongly built hallway that was large enough to accommodate even a rhino, they concluded it lead to stairs that would descend into the main structure.

“Wait! Light.” She whispered, light wobbled from side to side just ahead of them. A grey furred rabbit ascended from the entrance of the very stairs they hunted. The small rabbit had a blanket wrapped around themselves with their lantern in hand stretched out in front of them.

“Nick-sama?” It whispered along the hallway in their direction. She squinted against the darkness ears perked to a sound. They both quietly drew their wakizashi. The rabbit more suspiciously peered into the darkness. Wind battered against the building with the quiet pattering of rain that was beginning. A second stronger gust further accented with the loud audible wracking of the wood frames of the poorly built structure. The rabbit shrugged, their breath escaping in the form of a visible cloud in front of them.

Chapter End Notes

Code edit: 12/26/16
Read the massive post chapter notes, I may copy and past them throughout the remaining chapters to encourage reader interaction to get the best understanding of what you guys may want next. Either way this is one of my favorite chapters that I have written so far and is likely the best chapter leading up to the finally of Zokugawa, the next couple are slightly fluffy to fill in time gaps, enjoy and see you in the next post chapter authors notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 17: Ignorance Is Bliss

Judy shot awake with the sound of her door rattling loudly, she heaved worried breaths looking at the now silent door. Wiping an arm across the sweat that formed against her brow the cold air made itself known. She quickly grabbed the quilt and wrapped herself in its second warm layer. Whatever caused the sound it woke her from her troubled sleep, though she still hadn’t decided if that was for the better or not yet.

Standing up taking the quilt on instinct, afraid of losing its comforting warmth in place of the felt draft. Stumbling in the dark eventually she found what she was after.

Her newly lit candle lantern peeked from the open door before her head followed suit. She felt another strong gust of air wash over her, her teeth chattering against it as it did. Her lantern’s light danced at the edge of going out, all the light she had and her now closest friend in the form of her closely guarded quilt she ventured into the cavern. The rest of the halls were blanketed in darkness but there was no mistaking the draft that came from the ascending stairs on her right. Furrowing her brows looking up she couldn’t make out the top in the dark, she began to ascend the stairs.

Struggling but refusing to leave the warmth of the quilt she finally got to the top confirming her suspicion. The large entrance was still wide open, the large wooden door, but further inspection no culprit to cause the draft.
“Nick?” She asked the darkness holding the lantern forward in a failed attempt to cast the light into the dark structure in front of her. Wind and rain battered the building she could even smell the frost hewn air passing through the poorly insulated building. She felt the shiver wake through her protesting muscles. Eventually with a shrug she shut the large wooden door behind her, it creaked at her effort but closing it would help the warmth of the lower levels stay there. Guilt remembering the same cold she avoided with a passion was what her father doomed her friend to.

She didn’t realize that she didn’t close the large door from the other side like she told herself she intended to. Without reconciliation her steps carried her uncontested through the vagrant building. Her destination she knew, the only in use guest room. Again she tried to reconcile her actions but couldn’t find a way to convince herself her reasons were anything less.

*He's probably sleeping, I shouldn’t bother him*

“Nick?” she whispered again scolding herself internally. But she did not move, ears waiting patiently for confirmation. ‘Ther! She heard the ruffling of fabric and the protest of a tired body.

“Ughhh… Fluffs?” The fox on the other side groaned ending with a yawn that had a sharp almost pup like scree at its end. She couldn’t help but giggle at the sound that emanated from the gruff creature on the other side of the separating shoji door.

“Hey, don’t laugh at the tired fox.” He groaned again but she heard the whispered chuckle. “Either its really early or i’m even blinder than before. What time did you wake me up?” He asked, she could hear him stumbling around before she could hear a dragging sound. With a thump she heard him sit on the other side of the thin door from her.

“Sorry, someone left the entrance to the lower levels open letting in a draft. As if it's not cold enough for you.”

“Remind me to scowl at your father for putting me in this frozen guest room. Sheesh he really does hate foxes.” Nick said with an agitated sight.

“Nick he really doesn’t hate foxes. He’s moved forward a lot, he strictly prohibits the mistreatment of predator species in his lands. He only has you up here for a limited time.” Judy said with a warm smile. She did truly believe that her father wasn’t mistreating him for his species and it showed in her voice. An affirmed hum could be heard from him on the other side of the door.
“Alright.” He drawled a huff before continuing. “If you say so, I believe you.” He said but the tone didn’t say the same.

“I am sorry for lord Wildes son. I never knew the full story, wish it never happened for a lot of reasons.” She said sardonically.

“A lot of reasons?

“Yea, it was wrong of them to attack him. Traumatic for a kid, that wasn’t fair to him. He only wanted to be a kid and they attacked him just for being born a different species.” Judy huffed before a pause and the fox laughed. “What are you laughing about?” She sulked uselessly dramatically gesturing despite even though the fox was blind there was also a divider.

“Nothing sorry, just funny is all. Ya know I kinda get where they were coming from.”

“What?! Where they were coming from. The boys from the Jumps family were in the wrong.”

“I know, I know. I’m not defending them. I’m just saying I kinda get it, centuries of blood feuds don’t vanish over a couple of generations. A predator emperor is sorta a new thing, everyones warming to it.”

“Their not though that’s the other thing. After that incident relations between prey and predator lords and merchants got worse. It wasn’t just clan Hopps, several northern provinces suffered.” Judy felt herself sink recalling the recent upheavals and rebellions in the north.

“They did?” Nick sounded confused.

“Yes, the droughts hitting them hard.”

“Yea but what’s that got to do with a fox being attacked in the Burrows of Kozuke?”

“Well look at our crops, their not all rice ya know.” Judy began the trail of thought.
“Yes, seen grains, cabbage, potatoes and lots more.”

“Well yea, that’s because of seeds we got from traders. Kozuke was one of the first provinces to plant foreign crops.” Judy said pointedly with pride, she almost giggled at the sound of the fox nodding within what she believed to be the hood of his own embraced quilt. Looking at herself she guessed this mirrored herself.

“Well because of that situation rumors spread every which way. Western traders in general stopped trading with the north, we encouraged them to follow our example with crops that handle the harsher weather better. It was tough enough to convince them against tradition of mostly rice.”

“Well yea, rice is kinda the staple. It’s the standard of currency.” Nick stated matter of factly. Judy knew that was true, their system and economy was built around that defining fact. It was an old but simple system to understand. The more food you produced the richer your lands were literally and metaphorically. This was a mainstay especially since western provinces had difficulty growing things and instead took to fishing and their artisans.

“Yea, but without crops that survived the harsher droughts we’ve been having causing famine. They have had to lower taxes multiple times and even then several lords are having trouble feeding their people. All because some jerks attacked a fox.” Judy concluded thinking on how bad the stories up north were. “We have taken on refugees a couple times now and each time they looked horrible. Starved, sick and worked to the bone.” Judy said with a raspy voice fighting back the presence of tears.

“Huh, never knew it caused all that. Just thought it was only fox and wolf nobles that barred trade.” Nick scratched at the scruff of his neck. His own quilt set in knowing some of the harsh words he had about the northern provinces in the past. He promised to bring that up to his father when he returned to Harima if his father even saw him after he abandoned them for so many years. They both sulked mutually on their thoughts with their revelations of the events as they failed to see them. A mutual and silent guilt at their ignorances for one another’s species and predicaments.

Nick slowly slid the door aside surprising Judy for a moment as he smirked against the soft light the lantern cast out.

“So why are you up here at this hour?” Nick raised a quizzical eyebrow. “After you closed the door to keep the draft out of the burrows?” Judy still hadn’t answered that question herself with the number of thoughts running through her head. The only things she knew for sure was that she hated how cold her bed was. The memory of both times she slept surrounded by auburn fur, once awkwardly on his head and once to abate the rain and cold not more than a few leagues from where they were now. That same comfortable warmth that her fox companion offered up so freely and willingly. The smell she realized hadn’t caused her any distress or even smelt foul in any way from
the stories she had heard. It wasn’t uncomfortable she realized as she blushed, just the opposite, that sleeping even while traveling with the fox even in the rough was some of her soundest sleep in years.

“I uhhh.” She didn’t know what to say and her thoughts continued to betray her with a visual representation in the reddening of her ears. She first thanked the fact the blind roning couldn’t witness her embarrassment and in the same breath felt guilty for being glad in any measure at his misfortune.

“Now I know you want to trade stories with me but couldn’t you have waited till the sun was up. Or am I just that charming?” And there it was that same easy expression, that easy way out of that awkward moment offered by his suave countenance and confident playful smirk. “Anyway, why did you head outside?” Nick asked through his smile as Judy quirked her head to the side.

“Outside? I came up the stairs, closed the door and came right over to talk to you.” In that moment another simple wave of wind battered the building. Cracks and small openings in the building allowed the draft to sneak in, Judy brought up her quilt to fend against the cold again. Nick just smirked doing the same but as he breathed in through his nose his expression sank from its smile. Judy didn’t have time to react, the charcoal paws reached out grabbing her. Nick had yanked her through the small opening of the door and brought her to his chest in a single motion rolling the two further into the room.

“Nick-” He put a paw to her mouth cutting her off, it took her a moment to realize that amongst the rolling she was now laying on her back with the accompanying fox on his hands and knees over her. His own warming blanket lost in the tumble she could see he wasn’t wearing any upper kimono, just his hakama. It was dark but still what light bled through the thin paper walls from her left behind lantern set the foxes fur in a soft glow. Her breath caught with the gaining speed of her rapidly jumping heart beat.

Nick softly began a shushing noise further accenting the intimate setting as he removed his paw from her mouth. Judy felt a fleeting cold realizing that somewhere during his roll she lost the quilt that kept her warm before. Still the cold against her simple yukata was fading with a warming blush. Time and again her lips tripped to form words in the situation, her eyes locked on the figure above her, neutral expression with his ears darting every direction scanning she realized for any surrounding sounds. She gawked open her hitched breath picked up a nervous pace when he began to lean his muzzle down to her in a slow practiced pace. In that moment she couldn’t bring herself to form any words or protest his unorthodox actions as sudden and surprising as they were. In that moment when he was so close that she could feel the warmth cascading in waves off him, heaved breaths entered and escaped when she closed her mouth, attempts to quell that awkward feeling in her gut backfired. Silently he tilted his muzzle upwards towards her attent ears.

“Nick what are you-” Her voice came as a troubled and indecisive whisper, her mind lost in that moment.
“I smell them, the shinobi we encountered on the trail from some two days back.” He said cautiously. And like that, the moment that played itself in her head not even seconds before was gone.

“Wait-what?” She questioned her tired mind slowly catching up with her. “My weapons are downstairs.” Her body was quick to react as she started rotating underneath the fox who had taken to sniffing at the air slowly with his ears still moving from one direction to the other. As quickly as she had began towards the small door, the lantern left on the other side still the only semblance of illumination within the surrounding area.

“No! They might be waiting.” Nick said in an eerily hushed voice, he moved silently to his pack. “If you open that burrow door they might move in to attack. They are ninja, political murder is kinda their thing. Their probably after your father deeper in the burrow” He said Judy nodding in reply. “Take one of mine.” In that same moment he removing the mysterious sealed weapon he had with him the entire time they traveled. She assumed safely from their shape and the care he took they were his weapons but finally confirmed as he undid the knot holding the fabric in place. Pulling it back quietly even against the soft illumination offered from the lantern shown a clean red finished saya scabbard, the handle was similarly red with intricate brass or gold inlays beneath it. “Here.” He gestured handely outstretching it for her. “Might be a bit big, but right now it will have to do.” She took it gingerly, the weight wasn’t as bad as she expected.

“Thanks.” She said meekly, her heart though still beating rapidly had changed considerably from just moments before. Her mind fought against her but shifted to the situation at hand. “What about the guards how did they-” Nick shook his head his response a dark implication. “How many?”

“That vixen leader for sure, the other smells familiar. Might have been one of the others, I only smell two?” Nick tilted his head with a furrowed expression. “Two seems a little ill prepared.” Nick confirmed the same feeling the rabbit warrior had. “What should we do?” He said not beyond the subletest whisper.

“We can’t let them get into the burrow. Lets fight them up here, try and make some noise to get the guards attention.” She said confidently, the situation had given her an escape for the complicated series of emotions she was feeling towards her companion. She looked over his face and thought back only a bit earlier, she felt embarrassed that she had so grossly misinterpreted his actions. But something in her still told her that wasn’t entirely the truth, she had slowly watched his nature and personality towards her change over the course of their traveling together.

“Alright, make a scene? Think that’s something a sly fox like myself can do.” He said with that same cocky grin that even without his eyes she kept feeling the urge to smile in response.
“They have night vision though, they’ll have the upper hand.” She said making her way over to Nick's lantern, it wasn’t a surprise that he hadn’t used it, still set beside where he was sleeping. It took a moment to ignite it, Nick constantly in an aware state, her own ears mimicking his in their constant scan of their surroundings. Once it was lit she removed its covering to allow the flame to proceed uninhibited to light up as much of the area as possible.

“Alright drama fox, that's your que.”

“We know you're here! Both of you, not very sneaky!” Nick called out loudly, the wind and rain outside would be a challenge. Their primary goal was to make sure the ninja didn’t go downstairs, no telling what their goal or plan might be. Stop them from that was their first goal, second would be difficult but getting the outside guards attention would help them outnumber them rapidly. That was assuming the outside guards weren't all killed by a larger force Judy realized. A force that agile, able to kill all the guards quietly without setting off a loud call to arms she realized was very unlikely.

Back to back her ears perked, horror caught her as the small lantern just outside the shoji was put out just barely the sound of the output breath as the doors slid open. Two shadows covered in black fabrics entered with steps as silent as falling snow and just as chilling.

“Got your attention have I? Nice to meet you again.” Nick said with his trademark confidence oozing. This time unlike their last encounter he made no effort to diminish his appearance or size. The second figure alongside the arctic fox stood at about his same height if only an inch or two shorter. But the lethality in their drawn dark trimmed short swords was telling this time.

“Not gonna trick us this time blind monk.” The opposing red fox spat sarcastically with agitated venom.

“You either Rabbit-joshi.” The white furred arctic vixen said with less venom, in its place a soft air of respect which surprised her.

“For the record, I really am blind.” Nick said with a smirk and a raised brow.

The two patrolled in a stepping pattern that appeared practiced, Judy felt afraid. She knew she could likely hold against one maybe both. Nick beside her she couldn’t speak in confidence. She had been thoroughly impressed before but either modesty or a blunt analytical mind Nick constantly spoke of his shortcoming in real combat since the loss of his eyes.
“Guards!” Nick yelled out prompting the two shadow like figures into action. Judy readily drew the sword, it rang into action. Even as she drew it, the ring of the weapon sung in a way she couldn’t believe. As it clashed with the arctic foxes short sword with remarkable force as she swung it.

Out of the corner of her vision, her fox companion had taken on the challenge of competing with the other red fox. Where he resembled the size of his opponent Judy still paled in size to the, if smaller arctic fox. Where he stepped back with each swing of the opposing fox the clack of the enemies steel on his staff telling of the successful blocks. Judys own breath hitched as each swing the enemy fox placed against her felt powerful and deadly unlike her practice sessions. The arctic foxes glare never left her eyes, she realized a mirror of fear in them, she could feel her own heart pound with each time the two swords met or swished at open air from their closely timed dodge. Even with an impact she had to worry, only the thin layer of her yukata being between her opponent’s weapon and her life. Where she knew these ninja to wear chain armor underneath their concealing black fabrics.

“That all you got, I’m unimpressed. Guards! Hurry intruders!” Nick bellowed with a smile still trying to force his voice up an octave to draw attention. The goading seemed to work as the opposing fox seemed to try and wail at him instead of cut him. His rage fueled his onslaught but made for an uncareful swing as he chipped away at the hardened wood and lacquered staff. Its damage over years had shown itself and would show itself further with each swing.

Chapter End Notes

Meh, as a few of you I have messaged know I was intent on discontinuing this writing project. Figured now would be a good time to lay out the whole story.

I've written for a while now, several years in fact but I mostly have done it as a way to keep my creative juices flowing. So what I'll often do is create a challenge for myself that I call "Writing exercises" long story short their a series of suddenly created difficulties that I have to overcome within a creative setting. Now I in fact "NEVER" write these with the intention of them being publicly visible. I in fact write them, proof read them then delete them, their intention was and remains exclusively to keep creative juices flowing, so their never being intended for public viewing made the act of deleting them a simple solution to saving space and immediately moving on to the next one.

Thus was the base of Zokugawa, the concept; Take Zootopia characters and over world and drop them into an edo Japanese setting. The challenge was taking sociologies, politics and economies and adapt them around a mammalian sentient evolutionary equivalent (The AU) it in part was inspired by the Easter egg art of Judy and Nick as samurai seen within big hero 6. The short hand concept was originally set to be no greater than maybe 14,000 words in length, a short story. However upon hearing the story concept in broad a friend challenged me to use the concept for the NaNoWriMo event. I at first figured, "Nah, I never write for it to be visible." But figured the writting concept is all about it being a challenge so I gave it a shot.

Seeing as the story used Zootopia characters and I had visited the ZNN site more than a couple times I figured "What the hay!" and submitted the project for their NaZoWriMo
equivalent and joined their discord. Got some help in resources for setting up the world from Shadow on discord and continued the process of writing it.

P.S. AAAAAAnd it deleted 2,000 words of info that was down here -_- damn it. Long story short, I want you guys who enjoy the series to use the comments to vote what you want me to do next after I end Zokugawa, one way or another.

1. Zokugwa Runoffs (Follow Nick before he was blinded as well as two other characters to be revealed in chapter 23-25. Estimated 10,000-25,000 words. M Rating.)

2. Zokugawa 2 (Follow the events 2 years after Zokugawa, not restricted by the NSFW setting of the NaZoWriMo, this one will be darker more mature and more in line with Edo Era Japan. The Rating will be a strong M, soft E. Themes of gore and violence will be common place. Estimated 50,000-80,000 words. M-E Rating.)

3. Legend of Ro'hk (Follow the post Savage Era of Ro'hk, an ancient and powerful Bear who settles the first alliance with Prey species that forms the foundation of societies. This story forms the base of canon of ALL stories I write involving Zootopia characters. Estimated 10,000-50,000 words. M rating)

4. Unknown M Rating Story (Can't spoil it, a psychological Zootopia story that follows Judy after the ominous loss of her partner Nick. Deals with subjects of loss, moral judgment and depression. 75,000-150,000 words. M Rating.)

5. Unknown E Rating Story (Can't spoil it, a distant future AU following an elite anti terrorist group lead by one "Hopps" as they battle the ever changing world. This is a cross fandom AU and is a very hard M rating with E rating content scattered throughout. 100,000-200,000 words estimated. M-E Rating.)

Code edit: 12/26/16
Chapter Summary

The conflict at the Hopps estate quickly reaches its crescendo. Lethality is established and mistakes were made, apologies offered and a war host marches. The new unwilling residence make their goals known and half truth's revealed.

Chapter Notes

Pages 7
Words 3,057
Characters 17,143
Characters excluding spaces 14,151

This chapter, like most so far since the end time of the event is being dropped a bit early. Again I ask readers and commenters to read the end notes of this chapter to keep up with plans on this still undecided story and its possible outcomes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 18: Conflict and Contention

“Hurry! Kill them, we can’t deal with the guards, we have to hurry.” The arctic fox yelled to her companion. Judy noticed the snarling agitation in her eyes behind her mask.

“Yes ma’am.” The unknown red male fox said behind his own snarling expression hidden by that same style of mask. Still the four competed in their fight, Judy was surprised with each slash. Her sword itself seemed to compete with the shinobis to deadly effect. Where her enemies sword clunk with a dull sound on impact the red themed one in her own paws sang with each impact. It was oddly rhythmic and encouraged her, the longer her fight went on the less she minded it.

“Come on, better hurry, guards will be here any second. GUARDS!” Nick bellowed louder than ever. His opponent snarled openly this time at Nick who mocked him in retort, again he reached back unabated swinging forward with a sickening impact against the wood of his staff. Another time he retracted his unskilled swing and connected this time as he retracted again Nick swung forward impacting him against his muzzle sending him to the ground in pain.
“Why you conniving shit.” He sneered, his mask taken aside by the impact blood could be seen dripping freely from his nose.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Nick shown his cocky smirk taking to his simple stance again. Judy couldn’t help but be impressed how he had managed to put his opponent in that state so quickly. But her own situation demanded her attention, the deadly mesh of swung swords echoed around her. This time as she parried her opponent she took advantage slashing forward, extending her legs putting power behind the swing. It connected across their torso, uselessly or so Judy had thought. This time unlike her fight with them in the forest she thought the chainmail would protect the arctic fox. The brightly furred arctic fox huffed at the impact sinking to her knees. Her hand over her stomach, she removed it slowly in disbelief, fresh blood stained her white furred paw. Judy looked down at the singing sword in her hand, sure enough blood stained it to her surprise. She looked up to find the arctic fox fit with a pale and fearful expression looking back at her then the sword in her paw.

“We have to leave now.” The arctic fox told her subordinate, the two took to their feet, swords at the draw and ready as they backed towards the door they had entered only a short time prior. Where the arctic one looked fearful the red fox looked exclusively angry.

“Leaving so soon? You just got here, what kind of host would I be if I didn’t offer some tea or some rice wine first?” Nick mocked, the opposing red fox snarled. Judy beside him as they followed the shadows in a slow chase the two fleeing, walking backwards with swords at the ready in case either of their opponents engaged their duels. The smell of the fresh blood soaked into the white furred ones attire. They for a second time had grossly underestimated their opponents despite their careful planning and execution of their mission.

Upon opening the door the wind and rain coming in offered no chill against both Judy and Nick who followed with purpose.

“Halt!” The arctic fox looked back, her fears at the worst seeing some eights guards yari drawn with a wolf in the center of them with a yari spear drawn.

Loud steps in front of them just off each shoulder Judy and Nick were backed by rabbit samurai with katanas drawn, surrounding the two assassins now.

“Surrender!” James said coming up beside his sister sword drawn at the ready.

“Damn rabbit ears.” The red fox said smiling at the end of his statement, he began to raise his sword to his own throat knowing his mission was failed. Judys eyes widened at the obvious implication, the
arctic fox grabbed it forcing him to pause.

“No.” She said to his surprise.

“We failed.” He said with a furrowed expression at his commanding mammal lowering his sword. In doing so she dropped both swords on the ground removing her mask to match her companions.

“We surrender. We will comply and will not resist being taken into custody by clan Hopps.” She said in a practiced tone. One paw was over the still bleeding wound on her stomach the other up and empty showing its unthreatening state. Seconds passed with a series of confused expressions. The red fox looked dissatisfied but followed her example. Both Nick and the wolf outside the doors lowered their weapons slightly drawing the attention of the rest.

“Take them into custody.” The wolf said with an air of authority. A couple of the rabbits surrounding him looked at him in confusion but eventually complied.

__________________________________________________________________________

*Past Midnight, very early morning*

Twenty Fourth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.


“Judy!?” Bonnie the family matriarch said at the entrance of the burrow stairs. Eyeing her daughter she quickly ran over to her, embracing the rabbit warrior in strong motherly hug that contrasted to her age she realized.

‘*So embarrassing.*’ Judy thought though she knew she would never actually be able to deny her mother, that same familial closeness she felt content in. The sun slowly peeked at some point during the commotion of that night. The two captured foxes had been checked for weapons, the arctic one treated for a surprising cut underneath her chainmail then taken to a holding cell in a southern building within the estate.

“Mother I’m fine, just a couple of assassins. Easy.” She smiled, they had quickly moved to the guest room since the incident. Within the room was just a smaller subset of the avidly surprised rabbit household, Stu apparently had slept through some of the commotion, a byproduct of the number of
“You were attacked by assassins… What were you thinking!” She said looking over her daughter. Judy couldn’t help smiling looking over the room her own father next to James who seemed to be stationed next to Nick, his own expression she monitored looked not the least bit nervous like the rest in the room. “You're cut!” Bonnie said in an almost livid tone. She watched Nick’s ears tilt in her direction followed quickly by the rest of his head turning in concern. Judy followed her mother’s sight to a spatter of blood just near her stomach. Her own eyes opened in panic, she had heard stories of mammals in combat being so absorbed in the fight they couldn't tell when they had been wounded. Prodding at the area and eyeing the spatter she quickly dismissed this realizing its appearance.

“No mother that's not my blood, that's theirs.” She whispered to her mother reassuringly. “Not my blood Pieberious-sama, got that arctic one better than I thought.” She said playfully as if the whole situation was simple. Nicks face raised a bit, the concern melting as he let out a held breath of relief.

“Thank the gods, you two did well.” Stu said sighing as he paced. “Why did they send assassins here into the Burrow?” He said setting a paw on his chin.

“We’ll have Ryan interrogate them and find out.” James said sternly standing at attention, he was like the standard of a soldier now as Stu turned nodding at his son.

“Probably to kill you.” Nick shrugged dismissively as he sat on his matted bed. Eyes trained on him from all present in the room.

“What? Why?” Stu stuttered as Nick raised a confused brow before sighing. He popped open a small bottle, rice wine Judy recognized as he began to pour himself a drink.

“Well you're the lord of this region, if they successfully killed you it would destabilize the fiefs.” Nick paused to drink the first small of his drink. He relaxed a bit into his sitting position stretching.

“Thats right!” Judy began as the eyes darted to her. “That way lord Big could march Kozuke without permission. Because one or two days wouldn’t be enough time for a lord to be established that he has to seek permission.” Judy concluded clapping her hands together. Nick smiled pointing at her.

“Correct! Would work for him, they were the same assassins. So lord Big probably knows you planned to challenge him to a duel of honor.” Nick said pouring another drink in a second cup.
offering it to Stu. The rabbit looked confused a moment before looking over to his wife and daughter who looked about as confused before shrugging with Judy nodding. He took it drinking it quickly the warming feeling against his shot nerves. Nick chuckled pouring himself another before downing it similarly.

“Would save all of the trouble, sneaky shrew.” James said still standing in place at the corner of the room.

“Still, if you two hadn’t stopped them I might not be here right now. Pieberious-san, Judy.” Stu said each one separated as he faced one then the other bowing lightly.

“Looks like it might be ruined, we’ll need to get you a clean set.” Bonnie said looking over Judys clothes. Looking over her own sleeping attire, her mother fretting over it. Stu nodded in agreement before looking his daughter over then back at the fox. The fox in turn wore no upper clothes with only his pair of Hakama pants on.

“That begs the question, why were you up here at this time of night with just your yukata on? Its very cold.” Stu said with a slight accusatory tone.

“I had my blanket with me. Came up to close the burrow entrance, someone left it open causing a draft. Closed it then went to check if Nick was managing any sleep with how cold nights are getting.” Judy said though she was maybe the only one that caught the tone her father had used. She tried and hoped she succeeded at masking her expression and holding back her blush.

“What about you, don’t you have something warm to wear to sleep?” Stu said directly at the fox his tone more audibly accusing in its way catching both James and Bonnies attention as they looked from Stu to the fox who drank another cup full.

“Hm?” Nick began before padding his chest with a chuckle. “Oh yea, I don’t have anything to sleep in, forgot to grab anything before setting off to travel to your lovely province. So slept just in these trying to avoid making the rest of my clothes smell badly.” He shrugged simply.

“But it's very cold up here.” Stu began.

“Yea, don’t forget this is where you decided to put me. This very nice ‘guest’ room.” Nick said looking up at the patriarch, the sightless expression was as accusing as the foxes voice. The room grew quickly quiet.
“Yea, I apologize.” Stu bowe, shamed at his willful disrespect. “I just don’t trust mammals that easily, regardless I should have had better accommodations prepared. I’m sorry about that, I’ll have a clean set of kimonos for you, the least I can do for you after what you’ve done for me and my family. Thank you for protecting me, my family and my daughter.” Stu said in an emotional voice.

“Can’t believe I missed out on that fight.” James broke through the tension of the room. “Great work Judy, saw that arctic fox. Got her good, and that big one had taken quite a hit.” James said looking at Nick. “Good work.” He offered genuinely with a soften expression. Nick seemed to catch this nodding with a smile in place at the respect offered.

“Thanks.” The fox said softly. Judy looked down realizing Nicks sword was still in her paw. The new light offered let her look closely at it, still blood on the blade. It had connected with chainmail but unlike her own katana back in the woods it met the challenge and on her inspection it didn’t appear phased, marked or in any way harmed from the encounter.

“Gotta give some credit to the sword. This thing cut through her chainmail so easily.” Judy said as James crossed the room looking at it.

“Your sword?” James said back at Nick with a curious expression, he nodded. “May I?” Nick looked worried Judy noticed before he nodded once quickly in confirmation. Judy gave it to her sibling who took it inspecting it a moment. The sharp blade glistened as he turned it over in his paw before coming to stop just as he inspected above the guard. “Huh never seen this makers mark before? Whoever they are, very good blade.” James nodded walking it back over to Nick.

“Hm?” Stu said as James began to hand over the sword taking a look at it, his eyes widened in regard. “I know that makers mark. When I was meeting with the emperor he showed me his sword. Its clan Wilde’s signature.” Stus mouth dropped almost as he looked from it to the fox then back at the sword. “That's the mark of clan Wilde.” Stu said Judy herself feeling the surprise.

“Clan Wilde as in the ruling clan of Harima?” James said in awe whistling as he impressed the sword again. “I heard since they gained nobility they don’t forge weapons anymore since it's seen as a task below a lords station. This must be an older sword then.” James said handing over the sword, Nick sightless took a couple grasps at the open air before grabbing it carefully. He carefully wiped the blood from it before sheathing it as if intent on the moment of silence.

“How did you get something like that? Must have cost a pretty stipend?” Stu said with a suspicious brow.
“Used to work for lord Wilde.” Nick said not exactly lying though not the whole truth.

“Quite a gift, why would you leave them then?” James asked.

“Honor demands I don’t tell you. But I plan to return some day, I promise clan Hopps my loyalty but I don’t belong here. I will return and bow before the lord of Harima and request to return to my position there.” Nick said proudly even surprising himself at the solid ground his voice took when he proclaimed that. He hadn’t thought about returning home in possibly a decade now he realized. The room grew silent for a while as the busying number of mammals around could still be heard scurrying about just outside the paper walls. Stu eventually sighed his expression looking to his son.

“Alright, well barring the unusual settings of last night we still have a schedule to meet.” Stu smiled looking at Judy. “The rest of our army finished preparing last night so we head out just as soon as possible. James get your armor and weapons ready, we begin the march for Zootopia.” Stu nodded at his son who bowed back in response.

“Yes father.” He said bowing again before leaving the room with him in tow.

“Oh, have to see my babies off.” Bonnie said following after them, soon Nick and Judy following as well.

_________________________

Early morning

Twenty Fourth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty Fourth, Fall, 1623. The Burrows along the Nakasendo, Kozuke. Edo era Japan.

The army itself was not much, several thousand strong mostly comprised of foot soldiers, but a few skilled samurai were among the rabbit lords ranks as they lined up on the highway leading to Zootopia. Stu the clan's own ruling patriarch stood proudly in his own armor beside James, they lead onwards followed by their lieutenants and other ranking nobles.

“Tell me how it looks, should I put on an impressed expression, how tall is the average soldier so I know I’m not looking to far up or down.” Nick caught a quick elbow from his rabbit companion though she couldn’t help chuckling in response.
“Their very respectable I’ll have you know, they look ready to fight for our lands and our shogunate.” Judy said proudly to which her fox companion nodded respectfully.

“Alright fluffs, I’ll take your word for it then.” He smile aiming to look out over the crowd. He hadn’t worn anything over his eyes that day but still wore the straw hat to protect from the sun's rays.

“Oh Judy.” Bonnie said beside her. “Your father didn’t have time to show you properly but he has a present for you. She said smiling before leading the two along to the smithy a few streets down. Their walk paralleled the army that marched in line shoulder to shoulder, their thinner species allowed as many as nearly ten to comfortably march but still it wound down the road a distance. Judy estimated they had a fighting force of maybe ten thousand or more given their lands did manage to sustain a decent population supported by a decent yearly production of koku (food stipend.)

“Here it is.” Bonnie said cheerfully, “Best the smithy has made to date.” She proclaimed proudly as Judy noted a set of armor on a stand in front of her. “Your father had it made custom just for you.”

A loss for words Judy looked over the colors, unlike most of the soldiers whose armor and kimonos shown the color of their province and their clan the set contrasted it. It held the earthy colors in the padded fabric beneath the lacquered plates which held a dark violet finish instead nearly black, she could imagine it contrasting against the grey of her fur nicely. Its design was far more intricate and completed than the set she had seen James buy himself a couple years prior in pride. War had not been threatened so she didn’t feel it was necessary like him as wrong as she ended up being.

“Wow.” Was all she managed as she walked circles around it inspecting it. The mask around the helm was also visored, a crescent moon sat atop the helm, a simple but respectable reminder to her licensed kenjutsu and a distinction of her skill.

Chapter End Notes

18th chapter of the 20 written for the November NaZoWriMo event of ZNN has had its final edits completed, that leaves only 2 more of the only 20 chapters that were written. The remaining 3 are still undecided till the event fully ends. Till then I ask anyone reading that feels like they enjoyed it enough to throw their voice into what I might do next. Where Zokugawa itself may end several commenters made themselves known that they would enjoy a sequel to this story. One unhindered by the event, non the less you can voice what you think or what you would like to see.

1. Zokugwa Runoffs (Follow Nick before he was blinded as well as two other characters to be revealed in chapter 21. Estimated 10,000-25,000 words. M Rating.)
2. Zokugawa 2 (Follow the events 2 years after Zokugawa, not restricted by the NSFW setting of the NaZoWriMo, this one will be darker more mature and more in line with Edo Era Japan. The Rating will be a solid M. Themes of gore and violence will be common place. Estimated 50,000-80,000 words. M-E Rating.)

3. Legend of Ro'hk (Follow the post Savage Era of Ro'hk, an ancient and powerful Bear who settles the first alliance with Prey species that forms the foundation of societies. This story forms the base of canon of ALL stories I write involving Zootopia characters. Estimated 10,000-50,000 words. M rating)

4. M Rating Story (Can't spoil it, a psychological Zootopia story that follows Judy after the ominous loss of her partner Nick. Deals with subjects of loss, moral judgment and depression. 75,000-150,000 words. M Rating. In some ways this story acts as a modest spiritual successor to "The Thin Blue Line" based on my inspirations from it.)

5. Unknown E Rating Story (Can't spoil it, a distant future AU following an elite anti terrorist group lead by one "Hopps" as they battle the ever changing world. This is a cross fandom AU and is a very hard M rating with E rating content scattered throughout. 100,000-200,000 words estimated. M-E Rating.)

Would love to hear what you think of the story or what future options remain. Where I may not finish this story itself that doesn't mean I won't write Zokugawa 2, the main reason being is that Zokugawa the first one had time constraints and restrictions due to its rating for the event. Zokugawa 2 has had more time to ferment into a nicer story in my head and I hope to write it accordingly.

Code edit:12/26/16
Chapter Summary

Conflicts resolved and the plot thickens but a slow day is offered in place of recollections, Judy doesn't mind the company and quickly finds a different perspective on the cultures to the west. War still looms over the horizon and the finale is soon on its approach, nervous tensions flow and two unbeknownst friends of violet and emerald hues visit a spot precious to both of them, an old oak where once one had learned to let fears go and the other learned to fear again. Instead warmth is felt, emanating, though its source is fleeting.

Chapter Notes

Pages 9
Words 3,439
Characters 19,162
Characters excluding spaces 15,816

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 19: Peaceful Resolution

“Soooo, you were here to kill Lord Hopps?” Nick asked at the two restrained assassins who were relieved of their dark fabrics in place of simple uncomfortable linens.

“Yes.” The arctic fox said simply. Her companion had taken on as neutral and passive an expression he could, it still looked agitated and angry.

“You realize you are admitting you intended murder, correct?” Nick again was a little confused at how open and forward the would be leader was being. “You know you can lie if you want?”

“I know, what reason is there though? You know we definitely weren’t here for any nice reason. We kill for a living. No need to hide from that fact.” The arctic one said simply again.

“And you were working for warlord Big, he instructed you to do this?”
“Correct.” Her subordinate finally broke his passive shell snarling at her.

“What are you doing, don’t help them.” He said angrily fighting against his restraints in an aggressive way.

“Oh calm down.” She rolled her eyes unphased at her companions open, aggressive showing of teeth. Judy wasn’t sure how they would act but this was nothing like what she expected. They barely talked and the arctic fox had said they would only speak with a canine. This left Nick among what few guards and soldiers that also could claim the same already left with her father to prepare for the war. “I only intend to help the clan. Master Big is a fool.” She shrugged. Judy looked over to Nick who lent his head in her direction mirroring her own furrowed confusion. “Listen, I surrendered. I have information to trade for our lives. Simple as that, it’s the offer on the table.” Nicks ears twitched while she spoke, a controlled and forcefully neutral tone, something felt off to him.

“What can you offer?” Judy asked incredulously.

“A lot, everything even. See I know the names of lord Bigs closest allies. His battle plans, why he’s attacking the shogunate now instead of in spring or summer or earlier fall. Even where he got his war assets and his secret informants within the current shogunate.” She said again as if it was the simplest thing in the world. Again her companion battled his restraints snapping his jaws in her direction violently and yet again she didn’t so much as hesitate in any example of worry.

“You bitch, you can’t betray our lord like that!” He bellowed, one of the rabbit guards present beside him moved forward to hit him before being waved down by Judy. The angry expression the guard had she understood. After their surrender she had found out he was one of the two that had been incapacitated by the shinobi. She knew she would have to scold them later for being beaten on guard duty so easily but at the same time they had successfully snuck past several guards on the premise showing their skill in avoiding detection.

“I can, you’ve seen what he does lately. He uses us more like disposable thugs than anything. He doesn’t show our clan any respect despite our loyalty for years. Look at all the work we do for him.” The arctic fox snarled in retort this seemed to noticeably deflate the red fox. Again Nick felt something in her tone but couldn’t place it. “Look, what do I call you?” She asked.

“Just call me Piberius.” Nick said plainly keeping his own expression and tones neutral.

“Alright, Piberius-sama. I’m willing to work to that end, information for our freedom and safety.”
The arctic fox said simply though Nick could still tell something was off he didn’t find her tone missing in sincerity. It was a long discussion but some information, most of which they already knew was at least confirmed by the arctic fox her, companion still dissatisfied throughout the encounter appeared to grow quieter as it went along.

“Do you trust them?” Judy asked as they patrolled some of the roads of Kozuke, where she had grown more comfortable she noticed he had grown more out of place. She jotted this up to again him having to relearn the paths around him.

“Oddly enough I do, maybe its partiality to foxes but I don’t think she’s lying to me.” Nick began.

“Ohh, sure it's not because she’s a pretty vixen ehh?” Judy nudged awkwardly at her companion trying to lighten the mood. He smiled back at her in response.

“Oh she's pretty? Can’t tell myself you know, assumed from the voice but didn’t want to make things awkward hitting on a prisoner.” He chuckled but Judy felt a fleeting feeling in place instead of the relief she expected. “No but in all truth she's not my type.” He shrugged.

“Pretty, smart and dangerous vixen not your type? Like your women ugly, dumb and easy going?” She jabbed challengingly. To her surprise he looked down at her in a furrowed brow.

“No, taken vixens aren’t my thing.” He said simply enough.

“Taken? By that red fox beside her you think?” Judy did think that was possible given their oddly close personalities.

“No. Not a chance.”

“What? But they looked so close.”

“Probably known each other for years but their not together.” Nick said it so simply and with such assurance that it further accent what little she knew about their species. “A tod would never snap at his vixen let alone over matters of loyalty with a lord. Foxes mate for life you know but if a foxes lord passes their loyalty can change but their ‘one and only’ never changes.”
“Oh ‘his’ vixen huh?” Judy prodded. “So trophy vixens for your species?” She smiled to herself rolling her eyes. She never fully understood the species that had that way of life. Rabbits never quite had anything similar till recently where the social influence of more powerful noble families quietly pushed her sisters into more ladylike rolls.

“Not even, you go in there and tell that vixen she's a trophy to her mate.” Nick chuckled weekly. Judy in turn had to nod at that fact, the vixen was far from anyones property in that way.

“So how do you know she's taken then if not that other fox?”

“Just a vibe. Just take my word for it, something we foxes know innately about each other. Besides if anything it would be the males of our species that are the trophies.” He said with a yawn.

“What?”

“Yea, in our species, it's the females that choose their mates.” The direction they walked was one Judy knew took them past the Jumps family farm. The family had faced a good amount of controversy over the years, well earned as far as she knew.

“Huh, that's progressive.”

“Yea, shoulda seen how well that subservient crap was received by our species. Though I tell you they take full advantage of that concept in the winter. Hold festivals at the end of fall, great food and massive events that I’m probably missing right now.” He said sounding expectantly disappointed. He had taken to gesticulating openly and confidently as if seeing the scenes in front of him.

“The beginning of winter is a weird time to hold a festival.”

“Not for foxes, its our time of the year in Harima. Its when our women take to wearing their nicest kimonos and strut their stuff and our men fall over themselves chasing tail.” He laughed warmly, it was a rare scene for her. The way he smiled was entirely different, familiar and foreign all the same. “My best friend Suzy was one such vixen.” Nick shook his head with a smirk while he reminisced. “Anyway, what about you fluff-sensei. What type does this rabbit kensei (skilled sword mammal) go for?” He raised a brow as they walked around a bend that took them by some accompanying trees near the property.
“None.” Judy shrugged.

“What? Come on, don’t give me that.”

“Well I can’t really have a type it turns out.”

“Hm? How can you not have a type?” He said genuinely confused.

“Well, we’re not only the first noble clan of rabbits you know. My father is also a Daimyo, so were up there really.” Judy shrugged as Nick put a paw to his chin thinking on it.

“Yea, what’s your provinces income? Maybe two hundred thousand koku?”

“Three hundred and fifty thousand thank you very much. Fathers done a lot to improve our fields and produce.” She said proudly at the income they had managed. “So ya see, would be tough enough if a handsome buck did pursue me. Think most of my sisters took to the lady like lifestyle just because it's easier to actually find a buck. My father has taken to accepting from skilled and proud farmer families. No me I decided to become a trained samurai, demanding both honor and respect. Even won a competition the shogun held a couple years back.”

“Oh I think I heard about that one, wasn’t able to make it cause.” Nick pointed at his eyes before shrugging. “Heard the victor won, what was it one hundred koku?”

“One hundred ryu annual, food prices were rising at the time. I turned around and bought some land from my father. Own my own little quaint farm of about eighty acres a few miles north.” She said proudly. “Grow rice, apples, blueberries, wheat grain and others. Had a few of my fields irrigated by the water wheel near by to help with the drought seasons.” Nick whistled impressively as he nodded.

“Oh humble bunny turns out is wealthy huh. Trying to really just hit my pride as a samurai huh? You still got your eyes, rank and respect oh and now you drop the bombshell that you're making what 110 koku annually?”

“I sell most of it keeping a small stock for myself, the blueberries sell really well so after paying the farmers, artisans and the rest I end up with.” She began to count on her fingers. “145 Koku. Sells for 1.8 to 2.2 ryu each. Haven’t shipped for this season to my rice holder in Kyoto for obvious reasons. But so far I’m looking at just shy of 280 ryu” She concluded proudly. She looked up to see Nicks
“Show Off.” He crossed his arms defiantly as he dramatically pouted.

“Ahh, don’t be like that Slick-sama.” She giggled. “I’m sure a ronin like you would fetch a good price, speaking of which I would be happy to pay you for your services helping with the war effort you know. What kind of price did you command before you abandoned your clan?” Judy realized to late how harsh that statement was when she said it.

“Abandoned.” He seemed to mull over the word with a distaste. “I like to think i left somewhat amicably.” He lied to himself as best he could, he could still see the expression on his father and mothers faces. The memory broke his heart all over again realizing that abandoned was just the right word for what he did to them. “I don’t remember really.” He said with a lower expression, the weight of his sad countenance Judy felt almost as a bubble around him. Several minutes passed in a silence that she felt to guilty to break. Their kimonos were accompanied with additional layers against the cold morning as it slowly became the afternoon. Their stop Judy eventually realized was just outside the Leaps family burrow that straddled their farms, the empty, cold fields from a long since completed harvest.

“Hopps-dono!” A feminine voice said aside the road. Judy looked at the elderly matriarch of the Leaps family who made her way over. From the looks of lines it appeared she was drying clothes despite the cold. Several of, likely her children, continued their task without her.

“Didn’t expect you today, last I heard you were still gone on your journey.” The motherly figure bowed respectfully smiling warmly. Her expression sank when she saw the fox and the sword on his belt. “Oh my apologies, didn’t mean to act so informal my lord.” She bowed even lower than before. Nick raised a single paw dismissively.

“I’m only a guest of clan Hopps for the season, please don’t feel put out by my company. I won’t have my presence affecting you.” He said simply as she stood back up straight with a caution. Where several noble families took the cast system seriously others didn’t making for some unusual situations when it came to their social interactions.

“I did travel a bit to complete an important task, returned just yesterday and got a few things squared away. How’s the family? Jamey still doing well?” Judy began warmly missing Nicks ears perk.

“Oh they’re all well, harvest was a little poorer than last year but still doing well. Jamey can’t complete another trade expedition for the winter due to the rebellions in the north and from what I hear the west has its own issues right now.” The motherly figure nodded rapidly. Her own attire
wasn’t a good indicator of her family's wealth where the Leaps family enjoyed a decent farmland and patronage from clan Hopps for their loyalty and many years of harvest.

“Missus I noticed a few of your children training at the Hopps estate Dojo.” Nick began as she nodded, a moment passed in silence that quickly grew awkward. Judy noticed it before looking between the two.

“Oh, I forgot. Katherine-sama. This is Piberius, he's from Harima and he's blind.” Judy nodded in his direction.

“Oh!” Nick quickly lifted the straw hat from his face to reveal his scarred eyes. “Sorry, I forget most of the time.” He chuckled.

“Oh, sorry I didn’t notice before. Nice to meet you Piberius-dono. Um yes I have a few children training there thanks to clan Hopps granting them that honor.” She said warmly nodding at Judy who looked flustered for the most part.

“Ah, I noticed they were all boys. Your family hasn’t requested any of your daughters be trained to wield a sword?” Nick asked a knot catching in his throat at the answer. Memories of a Leaps family daughter with sharp violet eyes with ambitions of a warrior's path.

“Ummm, no. None of my daughters seem interested in becoming warriors, none that I have heard.” She said that same warming tone she seemed to have emanating from her very being.

“Ah alright, just curious given I saw a few within clan Hopps themselves.” Nick nodded lying about his motives. “You mind if I take a break, my feet are are killing me.” Nick laughed at himself smiling.

“Sure, want to come inside?”

“I appreciate that but think I’ll just sit out here and enjoy the air.” He nodded respectfully. The conversation had soon tapered before it was just him and Judy again, making their way beside the road they quickly sat down. Where Judy just relaxed a bit Nick took up a more stout and straight posture with his legs crossed.

“What are you doing?” Judy asked tilting her head as she saw him the same set of counting beads
she had seen on a couple sparse occasions.

“Meditating, you can join me if you want.” He said softly and simply as he began to breath in and out in controlled, rhythmic fashion.

“Oh I’m not a buddhist. My family worships the kami.”

“And?”

“And what?” She sat up slightly looking at him confused.

“What does that have to do with meditation?” He said it like it was the simplest thing in the world.

“That I worship different gods.” She said but the statement sounded wrong to her as she said it. On several occasions she had witnessed that same fox companion praying to the shrines of her own kami as they traveled no differently than herself. “Wait don’t you also worship the kami?” He seemed to laugh even harder at this.

“And you think the two are mutually exclusive?”

“Aren’t they?” She said simply confused at this.

“If you choose them to be, Orsa taught me to meditate, told me that prayer was for the spiritual world around you and meditation was for your own spirit. Looking outwards and looking inwards.” He said accentuating with a drawn out breath, hearing the relief in his breath itself was oddly mesmerizing.

“Oh… What do I do?”

“Just sit try and keep your back straight, not all species can. Can sit criss cross like me if you want. Close your eyes, concentrate on your breathing, slowly in.” He took a long breath in. “Then out.” He said as he did. “In.” Another breath in. “And out.” Another breath out. Judy followed his instructions sitting in place. “Imagine breathing good calming air in and the good entering as you breath and imagine the bad, like stress and worries leaving you as you breath out. Some mammals find that
humming helps them harmonize with their spirits.”

“Not you?”

“No, the quiet helps calm me.” He said simply, it wasn’t long before she followed his instructions that she hadn’t realized her breaths matched his in and out in a motion. At first she felt ridiculous and awkward but like he instructed she breathed out that feeling and in came a crisp, cold, focused breath. The rhythm kept up in a companionable silence. Seconds or minutes passed, several times she opened her eyes to look at her companion noting that he seemed more like a statue than a living creature. Eventually, the fifth time or more that same awkward feeling faded away. She embraced the darkness just behind her lids.

This must be what he sees.

She began eyes useless against the closed lids.

What he hears. What he feels.

The sounds of the soft but cold wind wafted around her. The rustling empty branches of the present oak not far off further into the empty field. She could hear some of the farmer families children playing where they had been doing work before. Contentment eventually encompassed her, even a foot away she could feel the small barrier the fox offered against the wind, heat emanating outwards from him. She didn’t even realize her own breath now matched his practiced ones. They filled and emptied to the pleasant smells coming alongside that of burning wood.

Oh, Katherine-sama is making pies again.

Judy lost herself in thought, a simple thing. She wasn’t sure if the relaxed state she was in was like what she had heard ‘meditation’ was like but she knew she was quickly growing to like it.

“You sound like you're having fun there fluffs.” She heard a chuckle off to her side yet couldn’t bring herself to open her eyes.

“What?”
“Your purring.” He said simply.

“What? No i’m not.” She said defiantly. A couple moments passed till she fell back into the same, warm and content feeling she had before. This time she realized her teeth began to ground against each other.

‘Damn, he was right.’ She scolded herself hearing the sincere chuckle just beside her. She couldn’t help smiling and laughing herself.

“Shut up.” She said still laughing.

“Hey nothing wrong with it, actually very common while meditating for the species that can. Just didn’t know rabbits could before.” He assured softly.

The day had passed as a series of small events, they had walked the area again. Several of the farms and buildings were emptied, foot soldiers taken to fill the ranks of the army that would fight against lord Bigs’ own force. The shinobi offered little insight but again Nick assured there was something more and for the time they should remain detained as opposed to executed since they had failed to offer anything enough to earn a stay of execution. By the time night fell Judy sat in her bed as opposed to laying in it, a clean yukata for her from a wide array available from her sisters since her own was still set with a blood stain. Her new set of armor sat on the other side of her room. Nothing around her was a part of her attention though.

“Breath in.” She said to herself. “Then out.” She said each time with a growing confidence. Slowly eventually she learned to let go of her thoughts as they drifted in and out from behind her closed lids, a warm content feeling emanated within her core. A smile crept to the exterior of her expression as she welcomed the simple sensation.

I think I could grow to enjoy this.

Chapter End Notes

We're nearing our end here guys, chapter 19 of the 20 written and now officially edited. However I will go ahead and reveal that I have in fact not only decided to finish up Zokugawa but in fact have it fully written all the way up to chapter 25. I'll be working on editing it up a little while I move on to starting up Zokugawa 2.

I hope you enjoy the last few final chapters which, with any will power I will release
regularly but not so often that it deprives me of the time I need to write out Zokugawa 2 in a timely manor. To some of you readers you'll note that poor spelling or grammar occurs quite often, that just me, not good at that stuff. But I'm alright with that, this one was written without that in mind, a quick event with a short time to write. However, with any luck and a bit of effort Zokugawa 2 will be cleaner and with more effort I intend to write it with fewer errors or plot holes since I'll hopefully have more time to write it out properly. Guess you guys officially won me over, talk to you in the next notes, woosh!

P.S. Going back over old chapters I recently realized that AO3 appears to have been consistently deleting my italics, meaning that distinguishing sounds, internal monologue etc may have been more difficult this entire time V-V lovely coding that right there is. Sorry about that, if anyone has any idea how I can fix that without having to cross check nearly 70k words worth? Anyway, sorry about that, know it must be costing a great deal of understanding of the contexts within the sorry and I'll try to fix that in any future chapters.

Code edit: 12/26/16
Chapter Summary

A morning of simple entertainments as best as the last few moments of a quiet day could be. Nicks personality is shown further with her brother that takes a quick liking to him and her own effect on him becomes more visible. All good things come to an end as the opposing army finally arrives and Judy faces the crisis of the truth of what they face.

Chapter Notes

Pages 8
Words 3,310
Characters 18,628
Characters excluding spaces 15,418

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 20: No Rest for the Wicked

Morning

Twenty Fifth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.


“Hey Piberius-sama you awake yet?” Judy asked through the paper shoji, after her father had left she managed a warmer room within the burrow. After what the fox companion had done for them she doubted her father would protest. It was a welcome warmth compared to the colder top floor guest room. Though she realized in the morning it came with it an increased urge to bother him while he was trying to sleep or immediately go over to talk with him after she woke up. She found herself constantly wanting to talk to him or in general spend more time with him.

“I’m up. Morning Fluff-sensei.” He said in an awake tone from the other side of the door.

“Alright, we're looking for my brother Brian, hasn’t come up for breakfast yet.” Judy said before a long silence started then she heard a giggle on the other side.
“Mine.” Nick said and the giggle grew louder. Judy opened the door to find Nick facing away from her, shushing.

“What’s going on in here?” She asked in a playful tone earning a giggle from the amorphous blob that was Nick slouched over something. Judy walked around the figure but it moved to keep her at its back till she increased her pace. And there she saw her brown haired twelve year old brother smiling as wide as he could facing outwards from an encompassing grip that was Nick. He hissed playfully at her.

“Mine!”

“What? That’s my brother, you can’t just have him.” Judy said placing her paws on her hips with a smile of her own.

“You have like a thousand of them. I want one! Greedy bunny.” He moved to rotate away from her again all the while Brian continued to giggle amicably, a constant sound of the situation. “Brian, you are now a fox. We are brothers!” This seemed to be what it took as Judy now mimicked her smaller brothers loud open laughter. “Don’t laugh! This is very serious business!” Even Nick it appeared began to laugh openly before letting go of the small brown furred rabbit who almost seemed too busy laughing to realize.

“So what’s all that about?” Judy said behind tear filled eyes from her laughter.

“Dunno, woke up, it was quiet, to quiet. Eventually heard something, began to hunt for the offending sound. One giggle here and there and what do ya know, turns out I was being stalked by a rabbit. Don’t think my status as a fox could survive the shame of that afront. So I began the chase for the stealthy fluffball.”

“He caught me!” Brian said loudly hopping in place.

“My honor as a predator restored!” The fox proclaimed with a sarcastic, proud expression while both the present rabbits began to laugh at his dramatic antics. Despite the slow morning things had eventually gotten underway, Nick and Judy had taken to their apparent routine, several of her siblings had already noticed in that he followed her intently. She had firmly informed several of her siblings and even several townsfolk that the foxes blindness caused him to rely heavily on whoever accompanied him. Brian was from what she could tell the second rabbit to prove this. Finally seeing it second hand she saw just how intent his ears really were on whoever he walked with. She watched
as one of the foxes ears constantly monitored her younger brother while they walked. The other
could and did readily agitate at even the slightest sound around him.

“See, its how he makes up for his sightlessness.” Judy confirmed to her mother who had taken to
monitoring the fox, from the group of her sisters that surrounded her she assumed it had become an
almost hobby. She remembered back to when they had taken to employing Gideon and how it was
unlikely to find him without a group of about a dozen rabbits monitoring him with mixed levels of
interest or distaste.

“No its different.” Bonnie said with a curious but knowing expression.

“What do you mean?”

“No, mother's right.” Another slightly taller white haired sister of hers said, Thes she concluded.
“See the ears?” She said pointing. The foxes own ears in question had taken on a pattern of gauging
the surroundings while the small brown rabbit that held his attentions continued to uselessly point to
indicate towards things, constantly forgetting the useless gestures to the blind fox.

“Yea, I noticed that to.” Bonnie nodded as several of the group followed in their confirmation.

“Yea, he's listening to Brian's steps. That's how he knows where he is in a room. Isn’t that what I
said?” Judy shrugged at her seemingly unattent family. One of the foxes ears had taken to darting
back in their direction before shifting to other surrounding noises, there was no shortage with the size
of her family.

“No that's the thing Judy, when he's walking with you both of his ears remain on you.” She said with
a devious expression that sent a confusing feeling to the grey furred warriors gut.

“Really?” Judy questioned and as if to further her growing embarrassment one of the foxes ears rest
in her direction again even from across the room and with the constant surrounding noises. A couple
of her sisters and her mother took to giggling at the gesture.

“Really.” Thes affirmed.

“Huh.” Was all that Judy offered but again, that same ear just as quickly faced in her direction again
and like before her mother and sisters smiled furthering her embarrassment. The living space was a
lively and loud place, Nicks single ear rested on Brian while the other seemed to constantly be on the
move of all the surrounding siblings and present rabbits as many as twenty or thirty in the early
morning. Judys eyes narrowed into a furrowed with a slight hmm. Slowly she cupped her hands to
her mouth forming a cone and whispered. “Piberius-sama.” It was a useless sound just outside her
immediate vicinity. Her mother and sisters watching her curiously before sure enough across the
room not one but both of his ears fell in her direction. His whole head shifted, sightless, searching out
the sound before resting in her direction. Judy felt her jaw drop for a moment in surprise and for
maybe the fifth or sixth time her mother and sisters laughed at her.

“Judy-sama” The air was shattered as one of the remaining guards ran up to the estate yelling and
heaving from his recent exertion. “They're here!” The room grew silent, all banter and conversation
ceased as everyone turned to watch the rabbit who ended all semblance of peace. The timing was
only slightly later than the scout had said.

It hadn’t taken long at all when the grey furred warrior broke into a full on sprint, west bound to a
hill that crested the valley. The valley of the burrows held at its north and south large, sharp and
imposing mountains that made Kozuke and the burrows itself the straightest path to the capital of
Zootopia. And as she topped the hill she saw it, the realization hit her hard. She felt the tremble
throughout her body. The initial numbers she heard of roughly forty thousand trained warriors was
finally put into perspective. Clean armor with colors and banners perfectly lined up representing the
over a dozen clans lead by clan Bigs’ war host.

They were different from what she had seen in the Shoguns’ army. They marched in practiced
unison, she could see the shrews own army at the front raised deep blue and white banners with
dozens of huge polar bears at its helm followed by wolves and even snow leopards. Daimyo
Fangmeyer leading the right shoulder of the massive tiger army and Delgato the left shoulder ranks
filled with lionesses and a few ornately armored males with manes. The sheer size of it put what she
had seen of her own shogunate’s army to shame by at least double or more.

The voice inside her head screamed at her each time she tried to convince herself of the possibility of
victory.

*Their armor?*

She looked, each well plated on top of chainmail then thick layers of linen, even arrows wouldn’t
stop that vanguard she concluded.

*Their weapons?*
She looked over the larger mammals who wielded large yari and naginata. Steel she saw in place of cheaper iron, each showed no sign of rust or wear.

*Experience?*

The wolf clans of the far western tundra regions were known for being one of the most skilled and experienced forces within the whole of their nation. Due in large part to their constant threat of invading forces and pirates that attempted to interfere with their trade routes. The warring region had no lack of skilled and experienced fighters.

“Judy!” The name played out behind her but her horrified gaze set on the approaching army. “Judy!” It rang out again as the panting breaths of her younger brother Brian said approaching.

“Fluff-sensei?” She recognized the second voice, the worried tone of the fox ronin.

“Woah…” Brians own simple response to what he saw as he and Nick followed closely by several other rabbits of the Hopps family and even some towns folk. Some gasped, some their mouths agape and silent but all equal in what they saw, all but one.

“Must be quite the sight huh?” Nick said ending in a frail chuckle, even without sight it was obvious the situation hit him from the air around him. “That bad?”

“Worse.” Judy said swallowing the dry feeling in her throat the wind hitting the cold nervous sweat that accumulated on her brow. “Nick, there is no way. Were going to be annihilated.” She said feeling tears begin to form. Before the first tear could fall she felt something grasp at her shoulder, turning to see the charcoal hued paw she followed it to a smirk on that same fox.

“Hey now, let me be the cynic ok. You're supposed to be the optimistic one remember?” He said patting her on the shoulder. “How does that story of the white hare of Inaba go again?”

“What?” Judy asked behind watered eyes.

“The story of the Inaba. The white hare, how does that story go?” He said with a raised brow and a cocky grin. “Wait till you count all your sharks. Patience.” He said simply. Judy nodded trying to calm herself, she knew she couldn’t afford to lose herself in the moment. The plan was simple, allow the assaulting army to pass through their lands and lead a relief force from the back.
**Can they survive that long though?**

Judy asked herself nervously looking over the army, even with the walls and their archers, the army she witnessed marching along their empty roads. She realized wouldn’t likely be slowed in their invasion. Their numbers alone could storm the city of Zootopia and take the shogunate before a relief force could even be managed.

______________________________

**Late Morning**

_Twenty Fifth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate._

_October Twenty Fifth, Fall, 1623. Western Plains, just outside The Burrows, Kozuke. Edo era Japan._

“Welcome lords. I am Judy of clan Hopps, ruling clan of Kozuke.” Judy said stiffly managing a barely respectful tone. In front of her marched just the lords of the mentioned army. Some two weeks ago she had first heard of their approach and now they stood in front of her, backed by the largest lethal mass of soldiers she had ever singularly witnessed. It shied in comparison to the one that took the swinton shogunate down, in fact several of the lords not standing across were part of that very same army, now in place their intentions to take the young Lionheart shogunate.

“I’m sure young rabbit.” Warlord Big said atop the shoulder of his polar bear subordinate. Aside from him she recognized Daimyo Fangmeyer, an older tiger who ruled Yamashiro from Kyoto, the prior seat of power of their lands. Daimyo Delgato who ruled Tanaba, several others including three wolf lords that ruled the colder western provinces of Nagato, IWami and Suo if she recalled correctly. What caught her eye though was the smaller female wolf off to the far left. Scard in multiple places, light fur but with a slight build. Proud but vicious in appearance with the most stern of expressions.

_The Ronin. Warlord Bigs’ champion._

Judy concluded from the way the mammal seemed to own the air around them with a distance afforded to her unlike several of the other warriors present.

“I will speak with your clans ruling leader.” Big said simply, a tired bored essence to his tone, even for his size Judy felt the warmth of her blood’s aggravation chill. Beside her she could tell her mother
had a similar experience, Nick himself seemed oddly unfazed. One of the tigers expressions fell on
the fox before forming into a hating useless showing of teeth. Judy wasn’t entirely surprised given
the histories of the feline and canine species throughout the western provinces.

“Hes not present, he has been summoned to the capital along with the shogunates own armies to
prepare for war, I assume that is why you're here?” Judy felt her confidence grow at the factly tone
she used, cocky not unlike her companions that she had slowly learned from. The expressions of the
very lords in front of her all looked sour and confused.

“Yet you stand in front of me, with a sword?” Big motioned to the rabbit well below him from his
raised height.

“Of course, a small number of willing must remain to maintain order and law while this apparent
conflict is resolved. Only farmers and children remain.” Judy nodded simply. Lord Bigs own eyes
squinted threateningly in her direction.

“You do understand your clans open opposition of my shogunate will have them suppressed,
correct?” The shrew had a sharp point to his tone that the nervous rabbit had to fight back.

“You're not the shogunate yet.” Judy began pointedly with a smirk. “And yes, my clan is fully
prepared for the consequences should you and your army take the capital and seat it's throne.” Judy
gestured at the lord's in front of her. “Till then we heed our emperor Lionheart until such a time that
he is not just that.” Delgato bore fangs with an angry expression, the lion violent in his appearance.
Judy prided herself in that her stance was as cold as the wind now was, not unlike she had seen
Bogo at the onset of this very threat.

“I will be the new emperor soon rabbit, know your place!” The lion roared openly.

“Enough Delgato.” Big said with the calmest tone, the lion lord shrank into himself nodding.

Puppet emperor.

“As such, we have clear instructions to allow you to march the lands of Kozuke to continue your
campaign, the farmers and guards here will not in any way halt your advance.” Their responses were
further confused expressions, Judy having seen their looks several times as she spoke, something was
off she realized. Straight on the most devilish and maybe even most predatory expression she had
ever witnessed adorned that same shrew.
“No need, we will face your champion with our own.” Big said simply, the lord's around him nodded respectfully. Judys own expression tilted now taking on the confused ones she had just witnessed.

“What?” She began simply.

“A duel, we received notice from your liege lord of Kozuke. A messenger in the night, challenged for our right to march your lands and for the ruling clan of Kozuke to not interfere with our march for the capital.” The shrew said, the same evil smirk across his expression.

“Even though Prey do not hold the same values as us, we have honored the request.” One of the wolf's said with a respecting bow, the others followed suit.

“We sent no such notice.” Judy said in a meeker tone. The predator lords furrowed their expressions before that same wolf lord stepped forward, at first she was frightened but the wolf simply extended his paw. In it she realized a piece of paper, he drew it into open view.

“A sealed message from the ruling lord of the clan Hopps. It reads that we have the right to step on his land and face no hostility from his clan or their loyal vassals if we accept an honorable duel, a champion of our choosing to represent our side and one from your own side.” The wolf said handing the note to her. She took it gingerly looking over it.

A forgery.

She noticed almost instantly, it was to much like her father's own hand writing but just off enough for her to know. The seal, all of it looked formal and would readily pass she realized. She felt her blood run thinner again at the implication. All their soldiers had left Kozuke including Bogos own finest soldiers, and her own father would no longer be present to deny the letter. Her mouth came agap looking up, the wide grin of the shrew had grown from ear to ear, she now know what the look of a mammal on the hunt was.

This was all planned.

She looked back at her mother who looked just as confused then Nick his own furrowed brow. She recalled how the shrew had been known for his cunning.
“You look confused young rabbit noble? Did the Daimyo Hopps-dono not inform you of this challenge?” The shrew said kindly, with a tone so sweet Judy knew it poisoned and mocking. “We arrived to accept this challenge and will honor its outcome.” The shrew continued. “I was informed our opponent would be the honorable Orsa-sama. I don’t see her here, she has time to prepare, noon would be a good time I think.” The shrew said in that same sickly sweet mocking tone.

“Orsa passed away some two weeks ago.”

“Oh, very sad news, she was an honorable warrior and the definition of skill.” The shrew continued his acting, each time she caught his expression solitary and alone that same evil looking smile. “Well then, what noble warrior will you chose in their place.” The shrew smiled with a furrowed brow. Judy’s own breath caught in her throat, the choice was never in their own paws. They had been led around by the scruffs of their necks the whole time.

“I’ll accept the challenge.” Judy said defiantly, the same predator lords looked on with amused expressions. ‘A rabbit vs a skilled predator.’ She could almost hear their mocking tones behind their amused expressions. She would prove them all wrong, as she had a dozen times before, she would show them.

“You got this.” Nick offered affirmatively just off her left shoulder. “Licensed at the Moon Fang dojo, I’ve witnessed your footwork. No mammal trained in the northern predator provinces stands a chance against you.” He said, she smiled back at him, useless as it seemed a warm smile and an encouraging nod of his own.

“Very well, then let us not waste any more of the day then. I call my own warrior.” The readily hurried tone of the shrew began. He raised his paw to his right, the left from where Judy stood, all eyes set on the slightly smaller female wolf with that same telling and lethal air of lethality. “My vicious ronin.” The shrew openly said with confidence. “Who has no equal.”

Chapter End Notes

And there it is readers, the full extent of what I wrote in November, all remaining chapters were not written in november and were the ones you requested to be completed. Hope you enjoy, its been fun and draining but just 5 of my favorite chapters to come, no more slow fluff people, the army has arrived and blood will be shed. I have began on Zokugawa 2 however its going slower than expected, I might have to work on a few other things to make sure I don't drain on it but I assure you that its on its way.

I have also decided on making 1 chapter drops of the options everyone didn't vote on so
you can see what you chose against, you may be surprised, anyway hope you enjoy and see you in the end notes of the next chapter or in the comments section.

Code edit: 12/26/16
Fearful Fit

Chapter Summary

The onset of the finale, Judy comes face to face with the sword-mammal she is set to fight. With her own skill and the confidence of thous around her she settles into the idea of winning the war in one fell swoop, instead she quickly comes to the realization that things are not what they seem. With this new information even the once stoic and care free ronin Nick shows a rare bout of infectious fear.

Chapter Notes

P.S.

Pages 7
Words 3,156
Characters 17,618
Characters excluding spaces 14,526

I originally didn't intend to drop any of chapters 21-25 since they were the ones officially written after the event (NaZoWriMo) and didn't intend to drop them until that event officially finished. I failed to finish writing anything substantive since my last post so figured I had to drop something and this chapter has a fun little cliffhanger on the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 21: Fearful Fit

All eyes rested on that singular, slight statured wolf. The one, Judy concluded that lord Big had hired for just such occasions. The grey rabbit looked over her opponent with a challenging gaze. She measured her, strong features and a knowing stance with numerous scars.

A seasoned fighter

She knew looking them over with a concerted effort to assess them. Then suddenly she realized her entire assessments were useless. What experience she suspected she had training under a wolf instructor, licensed in kenjutsu from a canine master, all useless. The female wolf bowed stepping aside.
“Ironic.” The small shrew began, his expression continued as he gestured the introduction of his seasoned fighter. *Clak, clak, clak.* The sound of their wooden geta sandals clicked against the stone broached path. She hadn’t noticed him before, amongst the tall predator lords she knew why she never noticed the small prey warrior. Only slightly brighter grey fur than her own but with contrasting black stripes along his ears and cheeks. The hare held none of the same hostility or scars of the female wolf, Judy tilted her head in confusion. “A war of predators on the line of two prey samurai.” The evil expression on the shrew appeared. “Savage-san.” Judy found herself confused. This whole time having heard the stories of the slight in stature wolf with bright fur. But even now she couldn’t imagine any mammal being so wrong as to mistake a hare for a wolf. An odd sense of respect in the fellow prey whose family not unlike her own must have fought fervently to prove themselves of nobility.

The hare stood, utterly indifferent, calm, cold but still the presence of lethality existed in both their air of confidence and the horrified look on the auburn fox companion. It spoke volumes in that she had never seen him actually look afraid, worried maybe but this time with furrowed brows and a disbelieving, gapped, incredulous muzzle.

“Very well, we’ll hold the duel when the sun reaches its highest point near noon.” One of the wolf lords said. In as quick a moment the predator lords all bowed, Judy nearly stunted in the surprise almost failed to reply with her own. The predator lords walked down to their imposing army which had taken up a small of camp tents not unlike Bogos only a couple days prior. Judy steeled herself for what was to come.

___________________________________________

One hour before the finale

*Twenty Fifth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.*

*October Twenty Fifth, Fall, 1623. Hopps Estate, Judy’s Room, Kozuke. Edo era Japan.*

“You can’t fight him.” Nick said, the only words he spoke since his inflection atop the hill. She felt what resolve she had begin to melt away. Looking over at him that same worried expression from before.

“What? Why? You're the one that said I can do this.” She said with an insulted tone in disbelief at that same fox.

“This is different, that's not just some ronin. That's Savage, the one I told you about? The only
student to ever license at the Ro’hk dojo under Orsa. I was there while he trained under her, there is a reason he was her only student.” Judy saw that concerned expression and willed against hope that her own expression didn’t mirror it.

“You're overreacting Piberius-sama.” She said with a chuckle, but the rasp of her own voice failed her, in it revealing her growing fear. The moment that stood just outside her experiences for years finally arrived at her feet and now, she feared it wholey. The stakes were too high she realized.

“I’m not... Judy.” He said softly with a finality to his statement. She turned in place caught at the utterly personal tone he took on. For the first time she couldn’t feel any semblance of humor or sarcasm from the creature that stood in front of her. “Let me fight him.”

“What?! No!” She began feeling the mutual fear for one another in that moment. Situations like that had grown more and more common since their first meeting but even now Judy couldn’t reconcile her feelings. “Nick, that's suicide.”

“It is.” Two words, in how utterly serious they were, were telling. What they told her she knew she didn’t like.

“What?”

“I know him Judy, he is on a different level. Your really good, I can tell from when we fought the assassins and when you practiced with your siblings. Your like thunder, imposing, powerful and no mistake in the wake of your actions.” He paused, Judy always found a warmth in the way he complimented her, then the worst of it. “But Jack is like lightning, unpredictable and strikes so fast that he will have begun and ended before you can even realize he has struck. If you fight him, you will die.” Her eyes widened at the sheer finality of his statement, spoken with an unyielding confidence. “Listen, this is an opportunity for your clan and for you. I’ll take your place, when I lose.” No hesitation at the mention of the cost of his life, Judy couldn’t believe the sheer acceptance of death in front of her. “Your clan won’t be suppressed if you honor the duel, I’m just a no name ronin, nothing lost”

“Nick thats-”

“But you, you can continue to prove your species of their noble virtues, their values and their strengths and inspire more to aim for more. You can’t do that if you die, let me face him,” He pleaded, she ignored.
“No.”

A beat passed, the fox looked disheveled and incredulous. “Don’t make this difficult Judy, there is more value in you surviving then me.” His expression she noticed was rapidly changing from a concerned and worried one into an angry one.

“That's if I lose Nick, I don’t plan to.”

“What!? No, didn’t you hear me? I heard him train for over three years, I know what he's capable of fluff, don’t be arrogant.” He stood with his back straighter emphasising his height in a threatening manner she realized scowling uselessly at the auburn creature in front of her.

“Says you, I worked for years to prove I can, how would it look if after all of that I just let a blind fox die for me.” Judy had nearly taken on a yelling tone now. The fox continued to impose himself in a threatening way, Judy was having none of it, nearly standing toe to toe with him now.

“It's not about how you look, it's about what you can do, that's what Orsa taught me, a dead mammal is an example a living one ‘MAKES’ examples. I won’t let you throw that away.” He said with a finality as he stood back up and walked confidently to the door. Judy half expected him to do something foolish, like run out and attempt to fight in her place.

Nope

She quickly realized as he about faced right in front of her door. “Are you serious? You’re going to stand in my way? Literally?” She mocked at his childish antics, his expression gave away no such weakness as his walking staff clicked in his left paw on the ground with reasonable force. ‘A challenge’ she recognized, they were about to fight.

“Nick, are you joking?” She said shaking her head from side to side standing squarely in place. Wearing her new armor, no loose pieces of fabric in place of plates, thick linen and chainmail covered her, her katana resting bound by her obi belt at her side.

“I’ll do what I have to.” He offered simply, his tone, his posture and everything about him reminded her of the time he sat with her siblings in their makeshift dojo, utterly calm, absorbing and astute. She scowled moving for the door.
“I don’t have time for this, I have a duel—“

_Tack_, the end of the staff stopped her forward motion instantly. It rested against the hard plate of her chest armor, defiantly she glowered at the fox moving it aside. “Nick this isn’t funny, move aside.” But a single simple gesture and again the staff rested against the plate stopping her from moving forward, in fact the opposite as he used it to gently push her backwards.

“Then move me fluff-sensei.” For the first time in a long time his tone held malice in it, a cold insulting tone.

“I’m not going to fight you.” she spat back.

“Then you won’t be leaving. Not until you agree to let me fight in your place.” She thumped her foot against the ground before moving forward again.

“That is not going to happen.” This time she almost expected the staff to stop her way as she neared the shoji, it did not. Just inches before the door however her foot was caught. Before the chance to even trip was possible she felt herself plucked from the very ground and thrown back further into the room. Her instincts instantly righted her before she could land unceremoniously. Looking up with an expression of her own anger growing. Nick just remained silent, the grey warriors own rage had finally boiled over. A flurry ensued, each time Judy would make for the door, the imposing and intuitive guardian obstructed her path, the challenge growing more furious as it went. A dozen attempts, a dozen times she was back in the center of the room. “Move!”

“No!” He barked back, the two slowly brought to panting states at the exerted effort to hinder the other. This was the last straw, Judy drew her sword the simple hollow sound of its draw echoing with the seriousness of its implication. She stood into a stance, Nick’s ears stood implicitly.

“Move.” Again she asked.

“No.” The only possible response.

“AGH!” She screamed, slashing, the aim never fatal, its collision tracked and true clicking against the handle of his own weapon. “Let me do this!” She pleaded, every ounce of determination in her voice matched only by the fox's own weighed fears. But quickly Nick came to realize that Judy, when determined was nothing like James. Another impact but this time she hooked around the fox's own staff tearing it out of his grip using his own mode of pushing her back. “Ha! Now enough!” She
bellowed recovering from her staggered victory. But her confident, determined look instantly faded. Nick again stood at the door, neutral with both ears trained on her as he rolled up the sleeves of his kimono. Picturesque of a statue, cold and stout in their stance. Her teeth clenched again in boiling rage, this time however she lost it. She swung with abandon at the condescending and opposing figure, he went to block to no effect.

*Crack!*

The staff in her paws came into contact first with his arm, but more force was in place then just that. The next impact was the side of his head, collapsing the tall fox to the floor. What light teased from the other sides of his closed lids was gone in an instant as his body crumbled with a thud against the floor. It was only a single moment but it was enough to get the point across when Judy dropped the assailing weapon from a shaking grip, heaved, shallow, raspy breaths racking her lungs as she looked down at the crippled fox.

“This isn’t your fight Nick.” She said simply, tears welling at the corners of her eyes. She knew more force than was needed was applied but her rage mixed with her fear in a moment and both were delivered in the sickening impact.

Nick groaned where he lay on the ground cradling his bleary head. If he wasn’t so wrought with emotions he assured himself some joke about *‘Rabbits’* and *‘Hitting Foxes in the head unnecessarily hard’* Would have been said. “Judy, it’s-” The shoji opened and shut to the only sense he had available to him, the sound of fleeting, hastened steps exemplified in his solitary sense. He had cursed his sightless handicap more times then he could have ever hoped to count. “Stupid rabbits and their propensity for throwing themselves into open fires.” Nick winced sitting forward, his resolve to sit up was met with his ever present and omnipotent headache compounded. He knew he was being stupid but didn’t have the calm peace of mind he usually boasted when overcoming an obstacle.

“Allright, breath in… and out.” He said almost mocking himself at the nervous rate of the beating in his chest. He could tell himself a hundred times that he didn’t know why he was so adamant about protecting that rabbit and a hundred times he knew he would be lying. *‘How do I stop her? How do I save her?’* He thought over and over in the usual lonely darkness inside his own head.

It wasn’t the first time he realized that same darkness lacked the same cold distance he knew it for, for so many years. No, now instead it held a radiance in the form of a voice, soft fur, the image in his head of the same face he traced only a couple days ago played through his head. But each time as he recalled its qualities, instead violet eyes looked back from the abyss behind closed lids. Each moment replayed itself from the course of his life over the last several days. Each moment one before the next, from the night huddled and warm, the reprieve and discussion at the hot springs, the assassins. The last event he recalled mirrored his own, the day he met that same fluffy rabbit who similar to the pain in his jaw now, had laid him out with a clenched paw, later apologizing before describing her situation and her mission.
A single solitary goal, set out by lord Hopps the shogun and even the emperor himself, a delivery of a single message… Cold realization washed over him and in that moment he was out the door in a panicked pace.

The finale

Twenty Fifth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty Fifth, Fall, 1623. Field straddling The Burrows and Bigs’ Camp, Kozuke. Edo era Japan.

It was a formal event Judy realized as she passed that same hill from earlier that morning. Small banners marked it and now the lords she had met from before encircled the single place where the duel was set to take place. It was a more private matter she noted and a respectful one as no guards were present anymore unlike before, a quiet agreement that this was a very serious but honored moment.

“Welcome Hopps-san.” One of the wolf lords bowed over to her as she approached. It was different from what she expected, the whole of the situation was more respectful then she had expected, even on opposite ends of the conflict she was thankful for the honorable demeanor and bowed back. The hare, she quickly noticed stood in place as unassuming as the first time she had seen him. His expression was the same, if she hadn’t known better she would have thought him a fixture of that hill or a shrine ornament given the history of the white hare of Inaba was strongly worshipped there. One thing about his appearance though instantly drew her appraising confusion.

“What’s your armor?”

“I don’t wear any.” A single, cold and emotionless sentence and that same fear that she attempted to quell from Nick found its way into her stomach. A nervous acidic taste felt in her breath and beating heart, his tone wasn’t condescending yet couldn’t be taken any other way. Again her eyes found the shrew, he, being the only exception to the observation of guards in the form of his polar bear soldier. An effect of his mode of travel more than an act of distrust she readily hoped. The look on his face though was that same sharp toothed grin.

“You’re not fighting me seriously?” Judy scowled.
“Don’t think of it like that Hopps-san, I simply don’t have any armor. Please don’t take it as any form of disrespect, I apologize if that is the way it appears.” Jack said simply with a breath that sounded not unlike a sigh. She couldn’t help but feel further insulted despite what he said.

“You should have told me you didn’t have any armor. I wouldn’t have worn mine.” Judy challenged in retort unable to hide her angry tone. But still the hare looked back lazily. His colors told her that he wasn’t with Big as anything more than a mercenary given he lacked the same colors of any of the banners. In fact his colors spoke of the Inaba province, a living embodiment of the legend itself. Judy could only hope that he paralleled the legends with his arrogance and only hoped in this case she was the finally shark of his count. Judy took off the helm she had, dropping it on the cold dirt just beside the small temporary fighting ring.

“No, please Hopps, if you feel right in your armor, keep it. Just because I don’t have armor doesn’t mean you shouldn’t wear yours. Approach this duel in whatever way keeps you in your prime.” The hare said the only showing of a seriousness in his countenance. Judy looked the expression over a moment, measuring it for sincerity before nodding in response.

“Alright.”

“Good.” The shrew said. “I’m a busy mammal, so let’s not stand on ceremony, let’s get this over with.” The shrew seemed to mock further. Judys own mother looked annoyed at the open disrespect but seemed to act under the same fearful fit that Judy herself felt in her gut. So instead she nodded entering the imposed ring, across from the ronin that she would face. The two faced each other, her own determined expression met the cold indifference of his own as they knelt on the ground. The proximity did nothing for her nervousness and even noon that day was incredibly cold. Clouds threatened and she found herself able to see her breaths constantly as she took them and released them.

“Relax.” Judy looked back from her breaths to the hare, he sat there calmly. From her peripherals she could see the clouds emanating from each of her own breaths. But several moments till she saw his own. Hers were fast and fickle while his matched his appearance, calm and slow. She realized how in each of her panicked breaths her outward attempt at a stoic or angry expression was betrayed by her nervous need for air.

“Begin.” And it was on, the two bowed low, one to the other, swords at their sides respectively. They stood with the hollow sound of drawn steel from their resting places. And with that, lightning met thunder as determination met indifference.

Chapter End Notes
Surprise! Chapter 21! It all finally comes to a head, the reveal that's been hinted for 20 chapters. I wasn't planning on releasing any of chapter 21-25 (which are completed) until the NaNoWriMo is over, however I haven't been able to complete "There Was A Fox" chapter 2 and I can't really release the whole prologue idea till this chapter revealed the first character that whole thing is about. So here it is and sorry its late as it is, I'll try to get chapter 2 of "There Was A Fox" up soon if I can.
When Thunder Met Lightning

Chapter Summary

The two prey clash as the blind ronin frantically searches for the one thing that staves his recent fears. The final closing moments of life are met by the combatants and as a fleeting commodity, its value is observed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 22: When Thunder Met Lightning

A mistake, she knew that's what this was. She watched as those same blue eyes looked calmly back at her, they mocked her in their serenity. Those same slow, calming breaths that contrasting her own heaved, short ones. Seconds? Minutes? She didn’t know how long they had already been fighting, a flurry of determination and practiced honed skill.

But when she looked over his sword adorned in a fresh layer of blood, the source of the fresh ache in her left side. Her paw returned from its resting place on her stomach, matching in red tinge to that of his sword.

Fear welled within her again while rage bore her expression, no matter how she told herself otherwise, Nick was right. Where she was thunder, loud but benevolent but those cold, calm, ice blue eyes that looked back; They belonged to lightning, quicker but with no mistake to their violent potential, malevolent in their conflicts costs.

“I can’t lose.” She said barely more than a whisper toward the hare.

“But you will.” His response.

As the finale reaches its peak

Twenty Fifth day of Jugatsu, Aki 1623. Nineteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.

October Twenty Fifth, Fall, 1623. Hopps Estate, Nick’s Guest room, Kozuke. Edo era Japan.
“Where is it!” Nick bellowed uselessly in an all out panic. He strove to never letting his lack of sight stop him from seeing, he worked towards that every day. But will alone couldn’t accomplish that, the truth was he was handicapped and he knew it. That didn’t stop him from staunchly searching for the elusive piece of parchment. Drawer after drawer he checked his large travel pack; small confines of paper, a couple that tricked him his own sealed letters that he had never sent. Thankfully the worn texture helped him realize they were the wrong ones after checking over them worrisomely.

“Damn it, where is it!” He yelled throwing the pack with a loud thud across the room coming to its stop on the mats. He crawled feeling every square measure of the floor thoroughly. Minutes it took him but again he found nothing that would relieve his worried mind. Panic wrought through him again thinking that maybe he had lost it somewhere at any point while he walked around Kozuke, he would never be able to find it. And within the quiet count in his mind he knew time had passed at an alarming rate. His claws played against his face barely avoiding the effort needed to cut his flesh open from agitation.

“What are you looking for?” The voice asked. Nick's ears shot up toward the young sounding rabbit, a beat passed during his recollection.

“Brian-sama.”

“Piberious-niisan.” The rabbit responded.

“Sorry, hearing me make such a fus, you shouldn’t have to witness that.” Nick relaxed into himself.

“Are you alright?” The small brown rabbit asked.

“Hm?”

“Heard you and Judy fighting earlier. Friends don’t fight.” The small rabbit concluded somberly.

“Yea, sorry about that. Your sister made a mistake and I was trying to stop her.” He said in a raspy tone. “She's fighting right now.” Nick said trying to express the seriousness in his tone.
“I know, Judy always fights. She can win.” The rabbit said confidently.

“No Brian, that’s just it. This isn’t a fight she’s ready to win. Her opponent was trained by my old master. He’s on a different level.”

“You don’t think Judy-neechan will win?” The sad tone began, Nick realized the small brother knew what that outcome meant.

“Yea, unfortunately not. I was trying to convince her to let me fight in her place.” Nick said playing it out in his head again. It wasn’t much of a plan, dieing for a friend. He smirked to himself at how strongly he used that word ‘friend.’ He thought, both fitting and not strong enough an expression.

“Aw…” The small rabbit sounded sader. “Could you beat him?” Nick heard the rabbit step further into the room and kneel in front of him, following him with his ears as he did. The rabbits steps told him of the nervous tension the small child now held.

“No.” Was all he could honestly offer.

“Then why did you want to fight in Judy's place?” And there it was, the same question out of a voice other than the one in his head. He thought on it more than he cared to admit but still didn’t know. Nick wasn’t nearly friendly to the idea of dying as he had been years prior yet here he was knowingly and willingly ready to give up his life in place of her own. He reminisced back to his less pleasant time wandering throughout the northern part of the western provinces. Eager to meet death honorably but never able to. Violet eyed memories reminded him of both the promise he made and the one he failed. When he had nothing to die for he was invincible and now, crippled and weakened with a purpose he sought it out with a renewed fervor.

“Because she has a lot more to offer than myself, the world could use more like her.”

“Could the world use more like you?” The rabbit readily shot back. Nick couldn’t help but smile at that idea.

“No, the world would be much better off without this fox. I made a lot of mistakes in my past.” Nick said with a sigh, sinking uselessly into his own small bubble of discomfort.

“Oh, that doesn’t sound very nice. I like you and Judy, I would prefer a world with both of you.
Besides its mistakes that make a mammal. You seem nice now.” The rabbit added chipperly. Nick laughed openly at that one.

“Maybe now, but I didn’t used to be, I was mean and angry and dangerous.”

“You don’t look angry or mean or dangerous, you're even smiling. Seems like you came a long way.” The rabbit said proudly.

“Yea, guess I ended up on the right path eventually, took me longer than I had hoped. Your a smart little scholar.” Nick said reaching over and ruffling the fur on top of the small rabbits head.

“Scholar? Is that like a philosopher?” The small rabbit asked.

“Almost, its a bit different. Kinda like the difference between being wise and intelligent. Scholar is like being smart, like you.” Nick said smiling.

“So that means being wise is like being a philosopher. Does that mean you're a philosopher Nick? Cause Judy kept saying you were wise and insightful when she was talking to father.” And like that Nick felt shattered.

“She said that?” He asked a simple ‘Mhm’ offered by the small rabbit. “Huh, well I'll be. That's uh… hmmm.” Nick couldn’t reconcile the word with the memory. It was foreboding but still it warmed his troubled mind

“So you still didn’t tell me, what were you looking for?” The slightly somber Hopps son asked. Nick felt the defeated weight on his own shoulders.

“Oh, you see I was looking for a message I had received a while back, very important.” He said shrugging. “Lost it recently, cursed to not have the eyes to find what I lost.” Nick laughed amicably to himself.

“Oh, this?” The rabbit said, the ruffling of paper. Nick's furrowed expression when he reached forward. The paper was newer and lacked the fade of his own.
“Where did you get this?”

“In the guest room upstairs. Mother had a few of us clean it up from your guys fight with the ninjas. Found it, that's why I came to your room this morning. I knew it was yours but you were sleeping. Then when you woke up and caught me I forgot. Sorry.” He said as he let go of the small paper, Nick’s breath caught, it was the very thing he was looking for. “So what is it?” The rabbit asked with a confused tone.

“It’s an opportunity to make things right by an old friend. Can you take me to where Judy is dueling?” Nick asked.

“Mother doesn’t want any of us younger ones to watch the fight. Since it's not a friendly sparring match.” The rabbit shrugged.

“Please Brian-niisama, I know she would understand.” Nick begged in a panic. The rabbit sounded conflicted.

“Alright, if I get in trouble though it’s your fault.” The rabbit concluded to which Nick readily agreed. The auburn fox's own pace made no mistake of their hurry. Straw sandals on and the fox having grabbed the fabric pack that contained his daisho (weapons) and they were gone just as quickly down a dirt path, Nick in a careful run, trailing the sound of the youthful rabbit. Each step was a concerted gamble to maintain his pace. Without his sight he had only a split moment to gauge the rabbits own steps ahead of his and adjust his own to make as best of the time. Soft steps on soft earth and Nick matched pace, hard steps across harder ground and Nick still matched pace. But not all of the distance was so simple, gravel and small cobble steps would crop up in their path. Nick’s steps carried him true, a sign he took it that the world around him, the gods and his own soul agreed with him for once. In place of doubt he had a determination that he liked to think mirrored his own memory of the living embodiment of it.

Judys vision had begun to go in and out of focus with exertion and with heaved breaths. The armor had stopped the brunt of so many of the hare warriors attacks. But not entirely, her body ached with the nearly panting breaths she took. Muscles tensed in open conflict with themselves, each time their weapon had clashed it was like hitting a rock with the force he managed. Far more than his frame eluded to. Now that same armor that had protected her throughout the duel felt heavy and slowed her every move with a sort of crushing grip. But worse off was his speed. Where Judy was known for her own, his was matched by the intuition of a warrior that she couldn’t comprehend. She had to fear the recourse of his blade long before she moved her own. He had constantly taken advantage of every mistake she made and even when she didn’t he capitalized on her shortcomings.
Judy looked over again, not unlike the times before it he stood confidently, cold, soft blue and indifferent eyes looked back. Where his breaths were only slightly more haggard and his expression slightly more furrowed now, still she felt it held a disappointed countenance. Even in her imagination she felt it condescending, the rage it induced. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes, ‘Not good enough.’ She thought angrily to herself. All those years, each time a compliment reached her, when she won a friendly duel and yet there her enemy stood, untouched. Like Nick told her she realized ‘A different level.’ She concluded inside her own head.

“AHHHH!” She roared defiantly in an open sprint. Every ounce of her drive in the practiced slash. Jack simply lowered himself, a diminutive stance as his size was not accurately represented in the low motion. Her sword came down as his came up and in that moment it was over. Even through the chainmail she felt it, entirely unlike the previous wounds. Falling forward with the loud thud of her knees meeting the cold dirt. The amount of force was surprising, it met between the plates and seemed to ignore the chainmail between them. The pain she felt, ‘Like being struck by a goat and cut by a physician’ all in the same moment. Placing a paw over the wound she looked it over, it wasn’t hindered by her clothes like her last couple wounds, no Judy knew this one had ended the fight. The blood that appeared on her retracted paw was a deep, dark color and poured openly over the plates of her armor. Her breaths slowed a knowing relaxation in that moment.

It’s over.

She heard the voice within her own head, oddly serene in that realization. The gentle ‘tak’ of the steps the hare took.

“Hurry up and end this Savage-chan, you have been drawing this fight out for far too long!” The shrew mocked openly at the hare. The hare pausing in place to openly scowl at the rodent with an intent malice. Left paw over the large wound Judy moved to raise the sword in her right, Jack had deftly catching it with his foot pressing it back against the ground.

“I am sorry.” The hare said, Judy looking up through blurring vision, tears she noted. A sympathetic look now adorned that same cold expression, pity she realized. He must have realized her disappointment in that moment as he nodded affirmingly a stone form back on his expression. “You fought honorably, die well.” The coppery taste of blood felt on her tongue, the cold feeling all around her, even the heat of her own draining blood unable to stave the chill she began to experience. This time though she wasn’t afraid like before, her breaths slowed losing that nervous tension they had before. She fought her face into a proud determined expression before nodding to the ronin, she was ready. Judy watched as he began to clean his blade of the slight trails of blood it had, it was a nice weapon, clean despite their combat with few nics or any major damage.

‘A clean death’ She resolved sitting up with an amount of effort. “Agh.” She groaned softly trying to
maintain an air of respectability in her final moments. Clearing the tears from her eyes she couldn’t bring herself to look back at her mother fearing the horror she would find there, she remained in place looking out into nothing holding her expression.

‘To prove I can.’ The promise in her own tone, spoken to those same green silhouettes that followed her memory all this time. She liked to think she had accomplished her goal, what it cost her she knew she shouldn’t regret, but she did. Despite her success she never felt colder and more alone than in the very moment that would cement her species worth. Jack moved around her side, her weapon freed but no longer gripped. Looking around at the grey tinge around her the approaching winter had absorbed all signs of vibrant colors, in that her final moments were denied of the swaths of color seen throughout spring. In and out she felt her breaths slow in pace, darkness fell on her from behind closed lids. Silence, not unlike in the primitive era just before a predator's strike, eerie in that all animals grew quiet, an irony in that moment it was that interactions of two prey that instigated such a moment. Still, in that single pause in time, warmth was found in that void behind her eyes, vast but not truly empty, it radiated from the core of her chest a familiar feeling she had grown comforted, content and at home in its embrace. A smile adorned her face despite it all, she felt it last before she felt nothing anymore.

Chapter End Notes

From now on I figured I would save all author notes till the end points to held the leeway from the summary into the story. I think at this point with the event still not officially over over 45 days since its "End" I'm a little tired of waiting. Instead I'm just going to continue to post chapters of this story till it ends. This ones shorter but I like to think chapters 21-25 which were all written post event are much smoother and better written and I hope that shows. Hope you all enjoyed and continue to enjoy them as they end, however some bad news is that I just haven't been in the mood to write as much lately so I haven't managed much of the leeway writing into Zokugawa 2, sorry to say but a delay in that is VERY likely and once I get around to it, it will be written slower but hopefully with more skill than the earliest ones seen here since they won't be as limited on time as the NaZoWriMo ones. Anyway, I'm rambling again, I'll see you all around in the next little notes.
Chapter Summary

In times of war little time is afforded to grieve or honor the dead and the sight of it is quelled by adrenaline, duty and honor. What about when war is merely a threat on the shoulders of a single rabbit's life. And what if this same experience is intent to the sightless, experiencing the mute travesty of death with only the senses of sound and touch. Death is inevitable as the end finally makes itself known.

Chapter Co-Authored by Aseka (Huge thanks as this chapter was really bad before edits and concepts help by her.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 23: Thunders’ Final Roar

Nick ran faster than he had since he lost the use of his eyes. Brian, even surefooted and spry was still challenged by the fervor in his steps. He could only hope he was fast enough and that the frantic speed he took would suffice.

“I see them!” Brian announced, a relief came readily from the auburn fox's own stressed lungs. That same rabbit's quieted steps came to a stop at their destination. Instantly the fur on the back of Nick’s neck stood on end, his attuned senses picking up on the eerie silence. A slight gasp the fox recognized on his right from the Hopps clan's own matriarch. Denied his sight, what came next chilled the very blood that ran through him.

‘Thud!’

The sound, a body clad in armor. Lacking of any remaining conscious thought, he was at least denied the fearfully gruesome sight.

“Judy!” Bonnie rasped. Nick felt the tense expulsion of air from his lungs, both craving and fearing new chestfuls of the unsatisfying breaths. The whole of the field had quieted to silence in what few moments fell heavily over the pulsing sound of his own sputtering heartbeat. Blackness consumed his sight but his imagination sent him trembling as he moved forward under now clumsy and
unconfident steps. The moment granted his senses a greedy intake, from the cold air around him to the chilling ground under his bare feet, a product of the rash haste he took to arrive there, forgoing his sandals. ‘It wasn’t quick enough.’ he concluded over the somber moment he pushed forward towards the origin of that fateful fall. After what felt like an eternity in his darkened world his foot caught something nearly tripping him. His step caught the now formless figure of the rabbit warrior without resistance or motion. Kneeling slowly he reached for the still form, cold, not unlike the ground and air that embraced the figure in that silent moment. Carefully, with haggard, prodding movements of his hands he gauged her figure, noting cuts across the body with blood whose temperature ran from cold to slightly warmer fresher wounds less acquainted to the cold autumn around it. Eventually his prized sense ran up the forms plated arms and torso till finally her head was recognized between his paws, a single digit passing over her lips, searching for breath.

“Nick?” The single, mutable sound, barely audible. The heat her exhaled sigh offered against the gently placed palm that now carefully cradled the rabbits weary head.

“She's still alive! Bring a physician quickly!” the fox bellowed carefully moving the rabbit further into his protective hold.

“Nick, what are you-” Her response was mild and painful but held a thankful edge to it.

“What are you doing?! You honorless mutt! Stay out of this.” The shrew off the side of his senses spat with a rage. Slowly the narrow focus of his hearing started at expanding to the new clutter of noises around him. “Savage, finish her.” Nick now took in the quiet presence of the other warriors breaths, unable to take in the glare the victorious warrior offered the shrew warlord.

“Stand aside Nick, let her die with honor.” The striped warrior said somberly but adamantly. A silent respect between the two prior scholars of Orsas dojo. Both idle in their recognition of the other.

“No, this fight is over.” Nick spoke back with a returning confidence as he struggled through his sleeves before offering up the same unsealed note that he rested so much on. Jack took the now blood stained parchment with a curious countenance.

“What's going on? Finish this Jack!” The furious rodent bellowed but the hare's own actions breathed of defiance as he slowly looked over the paper.

Judy for her own part remained in place, uncertain but still trusting in the charcoal hued paws that cradled her, the warmth she had felt from being in such close proximity to the fox filling her again. She reveled in whatever moments afforded in that comforting aura.
“And this is?” The hare asked absently.

“It is the message for this very duel, sent to the Ro’hk dojo. A request for Master Orsa to stand for Daimyo Hopps to represent his province and fiefs against the invading army.” Nick spoke with an affirmation.

“The parchment means nothing, Orsa is dead and Hopps own daughter has already accepted the challenge!” The shrew spat with a growing rage.

“Wrong.” Nick challenged at the shrew before looking over to the other lords whose voices had grown accusatory in quieted observing whispers. “The message was addressed to Orsa from clan Hopps own ruling patriarch. It holds supreme authority over this matter. And I was the last remaining student of Orsas dojo before her passing. As such, I alone reserve the right to accept this invitation. Savage can attest to that fact, you cannot refuse my right.” Nick said straightly.

Despite the pain radiating through the whole of her defeated form, “Nick, No” Judy said, her voice barely a whimper in her exhaustion as she tried to pry herself from his embrace, a useless act in her body’s condition.

“What? You?” The shrew pointed accusing. The shrew fumed inside his own form, an embodiment of rage at the act of defiance and interference of his plans.

“He’s right.” The scarred wolf noble said stoutly, all eyes present shot to her instead. “When we arrived to accept the duel it was clear the Hopps daughter was unaware of a set fight, she accepted unknowing that a champion was already accepted. Her father’s authority is what this duel is about, his right of passage in the Kozuke province that were after. We would shame ourselves to not accept.” The wolf said plainly. “I assume the message bears his seal, bring it here Savage.” And the hare did readily.

Fear wracked the small rabbit warriors frame with whatever energy was left for her to muster. “Nick, stop, you don’t have to die for us. This is our fight.” She protested with weak attempts to lash at the auburn fox that held her. Tears hazed at the edge of her vision, her act of selfless sacrifice, an act her own taken so easily by that fox’s quick wit.

It only took moments for that wolf lord to check its seal against their own, the very one that Big had forged to make this moment happen, his own con used against him. His grit teeth bore at the smirking expression of the fox who looked his direction with a sightless but piercing gaze.
“Take her!” Nick said now, his tone leaving no semblance of opening for contestation, Bonnie and Brian both moved to her quickly, pressing and catering her wounds, the natural proclivity for the healing arts in the lagomorphic species a welcome coincidence. Still the rabbit warrior fought with every ounce of fervor, gripping at the now stained robes of the ronin that now readily traded his life for her own.

“No!” Her voice barely broke an audible range as her mother and brother managed to get a strong hold of her wounded frame. She fought uselessly and weakly as she was pulled to the side of the field. Conscious thought faded in and out as the lack of blood competed for her waking moments. She fought against fear that if she closed her eyes, to live or die that auburn fox would no longer remain the living world.

“Fine, you will die in her place, blind mutt.” The shrew said through snarling teeth. His own side of that conflicts witnesses formed a silence as their sights set on him, a growing distaste in the expressions of his allied lords.

“I understand.” Nick said calmly, accepting. Where Judy had been removed from the circle it soon came down to just two again. The blind Auburn fox facing the hare, not unlike years past. “You ready, Jack?” The fox asked.

“This won’t be like our first duel Nick.” Jack said with a furrowed expression, a nodded confirmation in the foxes reply.

Some 6 years earlier

February Third of Junigatsu, Aki 1617. Thirteenth year under Lionhearts shogunate.


An audible groan escaped when for the fifth time the striped hare struck the hard dirt. “Gah,” he groaned at the sore pain and forming bruises, sword idly held in his right paw as he looked up at the encroaching foliage.

“And again the ‘Hare of Inaba’ falls!” The large tiger mocked openly. “Face it runt, you shouldn’t be here! Leave while you still have your life!” Fangmeyer, the second son and heir of the powerful and influential tiger clan that ruled Yamashiro from Kyoto.

The centerpiece of Jack's attention was the threatening green orbs that looked down at him framed in dark red fur, a warning behind their stare. The opposing fox warrior held in a deceptively idle grasp a red trimmed blade, adorned with the Wilde family mark on its base, as though expecting his
opponent to fold. But as each time he clashed against it before, Jack stood, the lesson refused each
time it was taught.

“You really don’t get it, do you? You will leave.” Nick spoke with casual venom that hit Jack not
unlike the furious beats of his own heart, palpitating in his chest with untamed thuds. The fox had
who had swatted his best efforts with so little of his own. But again the hare stood, against the
painful ache of his body, paled by the weak strain in his chest. “You are thunder fighting lightning.”
The fox scowled. “You will trail me in each movement and you will roar as thunder does, thunder
always roars, lightning strikes.” And true to his word the red blur struck Jack again, again the
heavy beat impact tumbled the hare back a fresh impact against his chest, blunt and non-lethal but
clear in its warning ‘Stay down.’ it said, Jack stood again.

“Just finish him off Fox-dono.” The tiger chided between bouts of laughter. The warrior canid
turned about with a deathly glare.

“Do you want to take his place and duel me?” Nick warned, the tiger seemed to readily grimace.

“Orsa has already accepted me as a student.” The tiger said softly, beside him both his servant and
his bodyguard, neither offering any merit to the fox. Outwardly a stern and confident expression,
only a couple weeks prior the same situation was in place with the tiger challenging Nick at the steps
of the dojo, only to be quickly bested with still healing cuts and bruises as a lessoned reminder.

“I am here... To seek Master Orsa’s tutelage.” The rasped breaths Jack held when Nick turned
back to him. The hare’s left paw over the center of his chest, gauging the staggering pain just under
its surface. Not born a natural warrior ‘a weak heart.’ That's what he was told of his affliction, but
life measured against him with a newfound drive to achieve more than he ever could. Through
pained squinted eyes he hoped to convey his fervor and strength of will to the fox, instead of respect
he found rage.

“Stupid rodent, you're not listening. I said you will leave, either with your own two feet or by my
sword.” Nick threatened and Jack felt no mistake in his glare as he approached with his weapon
drawn. Gritting his flat teeth he raised his sword in defense for the approaching impact.

“Piberius-san!” The loud bellowing voice instantly paused all present at the front of the dojo.
Fangmeyer shrank in on his own mocking appearance and Jack felt the roar of the large predator in
his very bones. Orsa stood at the steps of her dojo, only Nick remained in place sword raised, ready
to impact the small painfully heaving hare. “What are you doing?” She scowled openly at the group
of smaller mammals, where Jack felt fear strike at his core from the expression of the Master, Nick
only turned with his annoyed expression well in place.

“Just keeping the rabble out of your presence, master.” The fox spoke with a squinted arrogance
that was met by the large grizzly bears own look of dissatisfaction.

“This is my dojo and I alone will decide to accept or deny a student. Stand down.” She spoke as the
two challenging predators stared at each other for a long static moment. That moment was marred
in a charged silence before that same fox shrugged dismissively before stepping aside.

The two once oppositional species faced off against each other, two students of the Ro’hk
kenjutsu school. The two at odds and opposite ends of the spectrum, crossing paths when their lives
met adversity and ambition. Nonetheless, Jack knew what was at stake, the war held a strong cost as
he measured his new opponent. The expression on the fox was somber where it had once seemed to
Jack to be perpetually smug, the tables now turned. Where once the fox stood an unstoppable object and Jack the handicapped warrior now Nick stood hindered, a shadow of his former potential against the lethally honed hare of Inaba.

“Nick-sama, why would you make the decision to fight me?” Jack asked with a furrowed brow and incredulous expression.

“Because, I should Jack.” And that was all he offered, neutral in tone but with more visible emotion than he had ever witnessed from the auburn samurai.

“And you're willing to die?”

“Yes.” The fox replied readily. His own failures in life on the cusp of his rapidly passing thoughts, he felt a serenity in his sacrifices and thought over the many wrongs he managed over his years wandering, now a rare opportunity to help placate the scales even if only a single life was his final merit. Kozuke, which had scorned him and yet he never felt more strongly in the defense of anything in his life. If Kozuke fell, if Judy fell, the same ambition of those violet hues in his memory would fall as well and fade away. “My life's a small price to pay.” Nick accentuated by unbinding the fabric that clasped his sword. The first time he had drawn it since the loss of his eyes. New sight set with new goals and a renewed fervor for life. The red huen blade in his right paw, his breaths taken and emptied through his nose matching Jack's own, slow, calculated and each marked by a small bout of steam against the cold air. The hare monitored the fox across from him, his ears trained seeming agitated at any offered sound between them, a disatisfied look on his expression.

Where Jack had watched the fox take a sword from the fabric cover which protected and hid the weapon before, he drew a second form of steel from the hollow of another sheath. The second sword resting in his left, dark with a black wrapped handle.

Judy was still fighting for consciousness just off the side of the combating area, relieved of pieces of her armor in place of bandages. It was worse off she noticed as most of her white and greys were now firmly crimson in tinge. She could still feel her mother and sibling mulling over her wounds with painful prodding and tightly wound linens. The scene in front of her ‘Two swords!’ The first thing her mind caught as the fox displayed both weapons, one in each paw brandished in a careful test of their weights. The bits and pieces of rumors played out in her mind in that moment. From the slight build to the sharp features and blood stained fur. ‘Not blood stained, just auburn.’ Her mind concluded, one among many hints finally making sense. Fluffy not because of winter but instead a foxes natural dense fur, the timelines added up. Darkness hazed again at the edge of her barely conscious mind.

The skilled fox almost never attended training or practice, cocky and arrogant Orsa had told Jack, the rabbit never knowing why the proud bear had kept such a student on, Nick seemingly with no intent
Jack himself had found Orsa’s ability to move incredibly adept and with a surprising dexterity despite her figure. She taught and trained of the variance of mammals to their particular skills and weaknesses. “Kimonos are made to fit the mammal not the other way around, so why do we fit the mammal to the kenjutsu?” She said several times, each a variance on that base concept.

It was an odd concept he concluded, the idea of sword fighting he thought was simple, where styles existed he had thought them relatively universal after all, he thought ‘Only so many ways to slash another mammal, up, down.’ He shrugged, thought it was true his home province of Inaba had little in the way of warriors to speak of or skilled sword mammals to learn from. But Orsa taught differently he noted with each session from his earliest moments at that dojo.

“Hurry up Savage! Kill him, you’re wasting time!” The shrew bellowed taking Jack from his thoughts and back on his opponent, the blind fox taking an open stance both swords out and in front of him just apart from one another, a large opening Jack’s own instincts told him thoroughly.

He moved to attack efficiently, a clean death he offered the auburn fox. Painless and swift was the plan when he moved forward into his swift set assault. The fox clearly intending on putting up resistance to his fate, Nick’s face was exposed and the hare could see clearly the mammal’s eyes closed and marred like memory told him, not that he needed any greater confirmation given his past. Jack was one of the few mammals that had witnessed the event that had left the canid’s eyes in such disrepair. A clash as his swords met metal resistance and Jack’s eyes furrowed in surprise to the closed set that opposed him. The predator lords looked on in surprise while a hopeful unrest flowed through the rabbit clan, intent on bolstering the fox now fighting for their cause. While currently preoccupied with the warrior Jack had just fought, on the brink of death, the auburn foxes prowess did not surprise them.

“You still fight?” Jack asked incredulous, their two connecting swords still pushing back against one another, as if gauging the strength of the other. The contest broke apart with a slash from the free sword in Nick’s other paw, Jack leaping back out of its path.

“As much as I can.” He eluded uselessly. Nick was concerned, he knew even in his prime with his vision intact Jack could offer a challenge, if not outright win. But the fox wasn’t in his prime, a gripping certainty that even worn down by the fight with Judy, the hare would be the eventual winner in this contest. Pride, perhaps, pushing the fox to offer even this much resistance to his fate. His ears followed the hare of Inaba as he trailed a circle around him. Each step he followed fit to his stance, it was a pale comparison of what prowess he’d had before but it allowed him his singular advantage. ‘Tak’ the hares geta sandals landed with a pronounced effort in just such a way- ‘Clash!’ the two forms of steel met in open screech, neither gave way to the other, both well crafted.

AGGHG!” The loud tortured scream of a mammal woke Jack from a deep slumber, a beating too
fast and nervous in his chest. He had arrived to the offending sound in horror, taking in the blood adorning the room and the grim pained whimpering of that same fox. What was left of the front of Nick’s face being delicately tended by Orsa. Later, once the fox had been numbed by herbs, and sent to a fitful sleep, Jack was told the fox had been ambushed by Fangmeyer and his servants, tortured and brutally assaulted while he slept. Orsa had arrived too late to stop them only affording enough forthwith to catch one of the offending, Fangmeyer’s bodyguard who she promptly tore to shreds with her literal bear hands in vengeance of her student.

Jack had later learned the tiger Lord’s son had held an unspoken vendetta against the fox, jealousy driving his actions. The wounds, a result of the tiger lord tearing across Nick’s face with both clawed paws, had blinded the gifted sword mammal for life. With no skilled healer in Etchu, the fox suffered several days, infection quickly setting in furthering his poor state and worsening the wounds past healing. Eventually he grew as stable and healthy as his new condition allowed. Even amongst foxes known for their solitary disposition, the once proud auburn warrior grew distant and forlorn. It took no time for the hare to set aside his former animosities for the fox, first out of pity, but then eventual friendship. The two grew close in the companionable years that followed. Arrogance and rage bled slowly away from the fox as he came to the eventual acceptance of his new condition in life. Jack had learned more of the past behind that once cocky warrior, even as his training with Orsa had changed him, settling his heart problem with her teachings, meditations and honed his skills and instincts to the razor sharp edge not unlike a sword.

“How? You lost your eyes, what? Six years ago?” Jack said through grit teeth as the two bouts of steel pushed against the other again and like before Nicks free sword swung and Jack leapt back. What advantage Nick had he knew would dwindle the longer the fight went on, Jack was no fool.

“Because I have to.” Was all Nick offered in response. Each strike Jack delivered, the fox blocked, never making the first strike but denied his eyes, unable to properly counter the brightly furred hare. Again, and again they clashed, longer than the shrew watching would have liked, but the fight was a spectacle as the two gauged and seemingly drew from each other one hit after the other. Their strikes building to speeds with instinct and intuition none of them could ever claim to possess, lightning met thunder and thunder met lightning.

Chapter End Notes

Ha just messing with ya, no dead Judy... Instead next chapter you will have dead Nick MWHWAHAHAHA!

This chapter has been delayed and faced deletion and I would have reattempted it due to huge mechanical and writing errors. Again big shout out to Aseka who essentially co wrote this chapter with huge helpful edits and concepts that helped the flow. It wouldn't be far off to say how this chapters original state was just downright horrible. Thanks to her edits and help it turned out a lot better instead of facing the deletion key.

Anyway ON TO THE NEXT ONE and I'll see peeps in the comments section and the next author notes.
Winter's Embrace

Chapter Summary

The finale is a costly thing, two warriors clash and blood stains the chilled ground as winter is not the coldest revelation in that ending day of autumn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 24: Winter’s Embrace

The two were among the backdrops least equipped soldiers, not clad in the armours of steel, iron and woods laminated in colors representative of their clans and company. The two smaller mammals, neither the fox nor the hare seemed in the least bit hindered in their motions lacking any hesitation in light of that prevalent fact. Practiced bouts of precise sword work present in each gesture. When Jack slashed, Nick moved to block, parry or dodge, there was no mistaking the lethality should the blade connect. Likewise when Nick lunged with his second sword to counter, Jack would move out of the way or pivot his sword to block again, there was no mistaking its own deadly capabilities. Instincts dictated their speed, as fast as they read the conflict was the speed the fight flowed. Each time Jack moved, Nick moved in unison to counteract him in honed motions lacking of any depreciation that time was expected to afford the red hue warrior in his sightless world.

Judy winced from where she lay reclined against her mother, her paws in place to reduce the open bleeding. Several times she had witnessed Nick beat the odds that anyone would be right to think not in his favor. He had made up for the weakness in his sight by tricking his enemy or playing them against themselves.

‘The assassins on the trade route?’ She would begin.

‘He tricked them, he felt out the situation and used it against them.’ She readily recalled.

‘James? Nick used his own rage against him, it made the buck predictable.’ And similarly when they fought the assassins for the second time in the clan Hopps burrow.

Now she witnessed him again, making up for his shortcomings, gauging his opponent. An advantage afforded to him in that he claimed witness to the hare’s own training in whatever his senses could
absorb.

“Impressive, Nick-sama.” The hare goaded, a smirk forming on his expression. The two seemed to have switched places in regards to her own fight. Where the hare seemed indifferent and cold in fighting her, he gave no similar vacant expression to Nick who he willfully offered a companionable, even brotherly nature to their conflict. The two clashed in single moments amongst many that were accented by attent, silent onlookers. Each time as they did was a rapid flurry of movements that challenged the speed of a witnesses eye. No longer being in the fight herself she could tell a few thing about the two combatants. The first being that neither fought with any style she had ever seen before.

The hare, for the most part was the least variant, the way he held his motions had similar stances to kenjutsu she had witnessed from warriors in the northern most regions of the western provinces feline sword arts. But he introduced each stance and attack entirely differently, he didn’t stand in place, instead lowering himself to the ground just before every lightning quick attack. His legs were a powerful source of his strikes, he dedicated to each attack with immense effect using the full extension of his lagomorphic legs to project himself forward in maddening dashes.

Her auburn companion though was entirely different, true to his blindness she imagined would change any stance he used to have. Her time watching him fight James dispelled any theory of ineffectiveness, in that his stance was practiced and natural. Now as she watched him she gained an insight, the fox contrasted the hare perfectly where the hare committed to a strike Nick never did the same. Two swords seemingly unpracticed and clumsy yet they always struck true when he moved to parry or block or even lash at the hare. The most prominent part was his tail, where most species she saw laid their tails low for fear of them being damaged Nick’s own tail was out and moved about him fluidly and freely. A counter balance she noticed in that his stance could shift seamlessly allowing him to saunter in and out of the opposing blades range, it was nearly impossible to tell where or how he would move.

“Always a spectacle.” Jack offered in a respectful tone, a smile adorned despite the lethality of their encounter.

“Being ready to die doesn’t mean I have any intentions of actually passing to the next world.” The fox retorted, the hare in turn nodded. ‘I wouldn’t have it any other way.’ Jack was glad at least, their time together after the foxes blindness brought a small bond between them, where the hare felt disrespect before he found that the fox simply had a distrust of prey mammals, specifically from the prey provinces. Once the fox had found out that Jack originated from Inaba, dense in predator and prey species the fox had warmed to him, in this, their moment of a deathly conflict he could feel no condescension from the fox. “Why do you serve Big? You always seemed like you had a more noble soul then that?” Nick began, his breaths despite their conflict, slow and practiced through his snout. A curious expression along his maw that slowly formed with each intake.
“Same reason as you I guess, because I should.” Jack retorted, again they clashed in a blinding flash, neither able to overcome the others fortitude. Where Jack was sure he could counter Nick if he attacked and end the fight instantly in the same way that Jack found he couldn’t readily bypass Nick's own alert defenses.

“Oh, ‘because you should’ huh?” Nick seemed to scoff at the notion. “That's not the same fervor I witnessed when you first arrived at the foot falls of Orsas Dojo, no. As I recall it you were intent on changing your play bunny lifestyle.” The fox smirked as the two steeled nerves clashed like the weapons they wielded. Nicks nose continued to play at the air, cold as autumn leaving the scents strong, prevalent and unabated. Each time he thought he had it the conflict tore his focus from him, mocking the peak of his memory while threatening the limits of his abilities should he fail to narrow his focus on the threatening opponent sword that demanded his attentions. Regardless the scent played on his instincts.

“You always were a surprising judge of character Nick, why do you think I’m here?” The hare smirked uselessly at the blind fox, instead he relied on his voice to carry the challenging tone he meant. Nick was only offered the smallest chance in advance of one of the hares attacks, each time the air displaced by the practiced slashes informed him how close the attacks were to his armorless pelt. Nick was secluded to the notes of sound the hares wooden sandals made on the ground acting as welcome precursors to the subtle onslaughts.

The fox payed no reply as another block and another counter attack that rushed the now empty air where the hare had been. He could hear the calculated steps at the edge of his range slowly walking a circle around him. Each step followed the fox and he himself adjusted.

“You’re going to be on the defensive this whole fight aren’t you? You impress me with how well you can block but you won’t be able to beat me from a strictly defensive stance Nick.” The hare stated in what seemed a mocking tone, Nick knew it better for its challenging, demanding, pleading. The hare wanted a challenge but also didn’t wish the fox dead, yet had no choice in the matter. Nick knew that it was merely a matter of time before the hare- “You’re listening for my steps?” The hare let out a drab sigh.

Nick felt the tension his muscles took against the small preys revelations, his senses picked up the sound of the wooden sandals clacking against the ground in their discarded states. A mocking laughter bellowed from the shrews own forces again as Nicks ears perked eagerly to no available sound. Seconds passed as he wrought his senses against the eerie darkened silence. The fox sighed a breath before the most subtle of sounds played to his left.

In an instant he reacted to the slash with his own two blades. “Gah!” He bellowed, ‘Too slow.’ a knowing realization to the fresh cut that adorned his left paw, his second sword clattering to the ground beside him. In one fell swoop his advantages were taken away from him.
“Yesss!” The small warlord hissed from the sidelines with a giddiness. Nicks ears perked to the sound of the hare patrolling around him again, nervously taking in the quieter tones of the soft footfalls on the earth. His wounded hand coming to his face as it slowly unbound the fabric which protected his missing sense from its painful incarceration. A frustrating last ditch effort as he looked up behind closed lids, painful rays breaking the barrier of damaged eyes in shadowed forms. Several of the sidelined mammals more intently took in the foxes deformed face for the damages it noted with thick scars across the whole of the once handsome foxes features.

“Are you ready to die Nick?” The hare asked from in front of the fox with blade drawn in parallel with the canids chest.

“I’m ready to die, for them, for her.” The fox said gesturing in the noted direction through haggard, thickly throated heaves of breath that revealed the nature of his limits against his prior stoicism.

And again the two clashed, relieved a second sword, Nick found each attack of the Hare unchallenged when he had no reply in the form of a countering second slash. A quieted remnant of his sightless vision as Jacks silhouette played against his lids like a shadow puppet show. The form was barely a vestige of use to the fox but astride his hearing left him a close enough example to counter with as much fervor as he managed.

Judy watched in perplexed moments of consciousness as the fight proceed in the grey tones of the threatening sky, the two bouting combatants exemplified speed in their most profound avatars. As she willed against the other side of consciousness in fading moments she felt either death or slumber claiming her before she fought herself back to the moments in that field. She concentrated away from her sense of smell which vividly held the stench of blood that sent her nose twitching as typical a scared rabbit would. Colors felt more vivid and dulled at the same time as the reds of the auburn warrior that fought for her family, for Lionhearts empire, fighting in her place, the reds as vivid as were the blues of the hare’s own eyes. Red became more prominent as the clash continued. Lines of highlighted life giving blood dotted the silhouette of the fox as cut by cut the hare was marking him with steel. The fox yipped and hollered, howled and groaned against the bloodletting that found him. She imagined against reason for as many times as the digits she wielded that green hues played at the closed forms of the foxes scarred lids, red drawing from just under his eyes in bloody tears.

“Well at this rate you're going to Nick and I take no pleasure in it.” The hare stated between his own growing exhaustion, the form of the bleeding colleague in front of him. Redressed his limits the hare moved for another attack, this time as the fox miraculously blocked for the uncountable time that conflict he pivoted in just such a way and with the flick of his sword the fox was forced to snarl at the ensuing pain as he slashed at his leg. The fox fell to his knees as the fight neared its end.

Judy coughed useless admonishments to the fox from the sidelines, scolding and worry mixed into
their tone in unmeasurable ways. Nick breathed in steady forms of air, each more greedy than the prior as if they were his last selfish consumption from that world taken to the next. Revelation met him in that final lethal moment as the hare moved for one last attack and Nick moved to block, his tired paw failed him as the slash formed instead into a pointed finale.

The steel severed flesh as easily as could be imagined of the fine weapon as onlookers watched the end, they saw it took in the form of the fox impaled by the now red marred weapon. Nick dropped his remaining sword taking to gripping the rending weapon that now met off his left stomach, its path staining the auburn fibers of his pelt with the precious little blood that remained him to that plain of existence.

“Let go Nick, so I can end this painlessly.” The hare stated from his own haggard breaths as he tried multiple times to pull the sword from the fox’s stomach. An offering that at any other moment would have been a welcome thing.

“Her?” The fox said through pained, wincing, whispered breath. The hare’s own furrowed expression meeting the sightless gaze that somehow pierced his own neutral frustration.

“What?” The hare requested in a eerie confirmation.

“You’re fighting for her?” The fox played again at the smell that so closely confided in him from the proximity to the hare, the smell that had eluded his curiosities for the last day.

“Nick, please let this end.” The hare seemed almost to beg in a respectful tone.

“The two we captured, the fox shinobi?” And the hitch the hares breathes took confirmed it to him. “That’s why you fight for warlord Big isn’t it? I get it now.” The fox chuckled lightly alongside his offending tone, still holding the now loose grips of the hare that expelled his blood from the open wound the sword remained from.

“She was captured?” The hare said in worried tones. “Is she still-”

“Alive? Yes, incarcerated for attempted assassination of the clan Hopps Patriarch.” The careful, whispering tone the fox took calming the hares sudden bout of fear. “Lord Big didn’t tell you she didn’t return from her mission?” The fox rasped, Jack taking the moment to look over to the offending shrew in that moment who adorned a whimsical, maniacal, even proud expression at the sight of the heavily bleeding fox that he had just moments from death.
“No.” The hare spoke plainly through his own growing frustration.

“From what she told me, her clan is honor bound to warlord Big and you’re bound to her. Makes this an awkward situation doesn’t it.” The fox chuckled again before a single jolt from the hares paws tightened causing the sword present in his gut to remind him of its imminent protrusion.

“Don’t test me Nick!” Jack barked quietly through grit teeth with the threat present. Nick chose to carefully check his words against his silver tongue, though he questioned that statement at the present metallic taste of blood that replaced his idea of silver.

“Just tell me, Big has you because of her right?” The fox carefully holding the sword in place in case of another reprising annoyance of the hare not that in his present state he felt he could actually stop him.

“Yes, if I give him this victory he’ll march on Zootopia with ease and he’ll-”

“Allow you to be with her?” Nick chuckled again with a cold fear that the hare would take it insultingly. “Go ahead and look at him, do you really think he would do that? And even if he did, if you win.” The fox began taking in another painful breath. “An honor bound victory, he’ll march for Zootopia with clan Hopps peacefully standing down. Thing is, assassination attempts will still stand and Big will only denounce that they were sent by him. They will be executed promptly.” Even without eyes Nick could feel the waves of emotion emanate off the hare, rage and fear prevalent among them as he again adjusted the sword that presently held the fox’s own life on a thread.

“You wouldn’t!” He threatened with another twist causing an agonizing groan from the fox. “How do I even know you’re telling the truth? You could be lying to me to gain a victory?” The hare narrowed his vision with a growing tension on the grip of the lethally placed sword.

Nick rasped his paws against the hares in a frail scared attempted to stop the swords slow painful motion. “You smell like her, how else would I know?” The sword continued to slowly move in a painful flourish. “I talked to her and her companion. She has a pale fur and blue eyes.” Nick groaned in pain as the hare slowly stopped his torturing actions.

“Yes! Finish this savage!” The screw beamed again with figures such as lord Fangmeyers son encouraging the same end.
“You’re not lying?” The hares worry was prevalent as he spoke. The grey furred rabbit warrior just off the side of the field winced alongside the same expressions of her mother and brother as they witnessed the fox being openly tortured as he fought to stop the hare from killing him slowly and painfully. “You caught her?”

“Yea, we really did.” The fox took in another breath as the sword settled again.

“You… You can stop them?” The hare pleaded.

“I think I could convince them to let the assassins go. We stopped them from doing anything that can’t be forgiven. I think it’s a much better outcome than the alternative.” The fox winced at the sharp edge that still held a knowing pain throughout his lower stomach, the hares sights set on the happy expressions the noted mammals wore at the hare. Jack taking the moment to witness the cruel, torturous way he was holding that moment in, his actions meaning no painless death to the fox he at a time considered his friend.

“I have your word?” the begging tone barely a whisper from the hare. With a single nod from the fox, invisible in its sleight of motion. “Alright.” The hare confirmed in reply. “So what do I have-”

Nick summoned every last bit of strength that his frame could muster and locked both of the hare’s own paws to his sword within his left grasp and with his right clenched charcoal fist jabbed it into the prey warriors chest. An expulsion of air leaving his lungs with the attack. Again and again Nicks coiled fist collided with the smaller combatants frame, his body unable to recoil by the impact with the foxes own grip holding him in place, a pause came as the two heaved in bouts of air from their exertions.

Even with fear and pain beginning to wrack at his chest, the dangerous, familiar suffering of his heart beating unsynced made itself continuously known. Trust was a sparse commodity in his recent few years but the fox, though witty, spoke in simple truths that he could see. No semblance of respect for the shrew and his antics or the warmongering company he maintained. Jack not unlike the fox himself though did not boast honor in their years that saw them rise to warriors without equal which helped him bare each hit the fox incurred on his frame. Whatever lively show or sacrifice had to be made he knew he was ready to make.

“No! Savage, what are you doing!” First the maddened reply of the shrew as the downtrodden expressions of both the lion clan and tiger clans respective leading figures. Violent impacts resonated with each successive attack for several moments. Each hit was loud and caused the hare to heave, cough and flinch from the growing pain till eventually he stopped moving altogether. That pause was met with the visibly haggard and damaged form of the hare falling to the ground, the fox having let him leased him from his grip before falling to his knees with slowing breaths. Big knew something had to have been up, the hare’s own abilities clearly showed his advantage and the duel had been
decided. Yet there the fox remained where the hare was laying utterly defeated from the sudden and immediate turn about of the fight. The lengths he went to over the years to prepare for his march on the lionheart empire all brought down in a single moment. He openly fumed from the polar bears paw that he stood atop. Nick knelt in place matching his pain with troubled breaths aching with each intake.

“It appears to be over.” The wolf noble again took all attentions. Several moments of attent silence were again offered as the fields onlookers looked over the combatants with an almost expectant change in the prominent outcome in front of them.

“No, Savage clearly had the victory. He lost on purpose!” The small mammal spat venomously behind grit, sharp teeth.

“He was your own representative in this fight lord Big, the mistake would still lie with you.” The wolf spoke with a clear and concise honor that made no mistake of its finality. “The wolf clans will respect the outcome of this duel and will honor their agreement with lord Hopps, my army will not cross Kozuke.” The wolf bowed at the present matriarch in Bonnie who looked as awestruck as the situation earned, bowing her head as best she could with her daughter still demanding utmost attentions in her wounded state. One by one the other present wolf lords representing such a large number of the soldiers within the shrews own war host followed suit, the prevalent sense of duty in their actions making themselves known.

“What!? No, this can’t be!” Delgato said from off the left shoulder of the shrews polar bear guard, yet his tone held no authority to the wolf lords who already made their way back down the hills towards their encamped army, the lion uselessly looked to the shrew then the last vestige of militant power in warlord Fangmeyer. “Between our three armies we still wield enough to march Kozuke and take Zootopia.” Delgato assured to which the shrew readily agreed, soon the whole of the remaining lords sat on the most powerful asset in that tiger lord. He took a slow glance over the field, the prior champion of Kozuke in place bleeding and the fox who knelt the field in slowing breaths and even the hare that remained motionless compared to the threatening winds. As he did a most fearful sight caught their attentions first when a single flake of snow settled the hard cold dirt. One by one it was accompanied by its siblings of frost that made winter's first appearance unmistakable.

“My army will honor the duel, we will not march your lands Lady Hopps.” The gruff tiger followed after the wolf lords with a curt bow before taking his leave. Delgato and the shrew the final remaining members of that field took their turns in following the tiger lord though failing to offer their own respects before they did so.

“Father you can’t be serious, it's snowing!” The tiger lord's own son spat with annoyance as he fell into footfalls behind his father. “We still have the armies, the supplies to beat out the shogun's own forces and take Zootopia.”
“We do, but ruling as cowards is not our way. If we refused to honor a duel in such a way we would earn no honor or respect against the lords we would rule.” The tiger spoke with a booming authority that stilled the only slightly smaller offspring of the proud lord. “And I suspect that our own alliance with the Bellweather clan would barely stand, without the wolf lords she would doubtlessly march for Zootopia in its weakened state.” The tiger lord continued as their walk had already long since taken them from the hearing range of the Hopps witnesses.

“He's right, Bellweather can’t be trusted and taking Zootopia without the wolf lords and their armies would mean all we did was reduce the number of enemies she would have to crush to rule.” the shrew spoke from the paw of the polar bear. “And with the snow fall we won’t be able to take the southern pass.” They all sighed in agreement, their plan had been flawless in that moment, meticulously arranged save for the closing moments of a single duel.

Judy watched through tired eyes, the blunt of her bleeding finally brought to a slower pace by field dressed linens. “We won?” Judy spoke barely through a wonder struck confusion.

“We won.” Bonnie confirmed with a motherly tone. The rabbit warriors own expression twisted as she mulled over the field again greeted not by one but two motionless warriors.

“Nick?” She spoke as clearly with concern as her tone could manage. The auburn ronin himself caught in his own moment of calming existentialism, blood drained from him openly as a statuesque state set to his frame, fear that any motion would agitate the afflicting sword that still transfixed his lower left side. He was surprised to find that it lacked the cold touch that he imagined steel should in winter. The snow that he failed to see but still felt and even smelled in the air about him also failed to offer its own cold presence as darkness further concluded behind its closed lids. “Nick?” Again the voice he heard in faded tones not unlike the consciousness he knew to be fleeting. “Nick?!” Again this time it spoke with more worry.

“Hey Fluff-sensei.” He held the mute volume of his own voice with as much of a cocky expression and chuckle as he could. “Looks like things went pretty well huh?” The fox spoke with a growing tiredness in his countenance.

“They did huh? You still showing off slick?” The rabbit warrior chided with as best a useless smile offered to the blind canid. As usual his own smile retorted.

“Nah, not any more today… Just tired.” He chuckled lightly.
“Well don’t go passing out just yet, gotta make sure your still alive to get doted on by all your fans after this achievement.” She offered a gruff laugh all her own as she attempted to sit up but both her brother and her mother’s hands moved to slow and stop her dangerous motions. The foxes smile slowly fell into a neutral expression as he instead only offered a barely visible nod and tired grunt in reply. “Bogo will probably want to hear more stories about Orsa from you.” She did her best to stave off the growing fear of silence offered in that moment. But the motions the fox offered in each reply grew fewer and earned greater fret till his motionlessness was staved only one last time when the fox fell over from his knelt state and mirrored his opponent in his stillness, layer by layer the snow veiled the two bodies that adorned the field.

Chapter End Notes

Pages 9
Words 4,502
Characters 25,345
Characters excluding spaces 20,910

Sorry this one took so long peeps, re wrote it twice due to feeling that it is in several ways the conclusion. I had to make sure that it delivered on the things that have been hinted at for so long. The whole sneaky thing about Skye and Jack, their comrodary and their history conveyed in their fight and mutual respect. Chapter 25 I'll try to release earlier than my usual time line to make up for it, however due to it being planned to drop at the same time as Zokugawa 2, chapter 1 may be delayed to accomplish this. So the next time I'll see you in the comments section will be when part two releases!
Snow Day

Chapter Summary

The finale subsides and the calm after the storm finally arrives. Quiet contemplation and contentment are found in these moments of silence. Words are said which speak volumes but they pale in comparison to words held in fear of the strength of their confession.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 25: Snow Day

Judy moved slowly, deliberately trying to find a comfortable position to lay in, in her current bed at the rooms center. The area quietly vacant of any sound save for the occasional boisterous noises of her younger siblings padding around in the halls just outside the rooms door. Each time she moved to get comfortable her wounds reminded her the mistakes she made. Each time she surrendered to the discomfort of the position she lay in, an attempt to succumb to the exhaustion. An irony given how much death and unconsciousness to claim her waking moments when life wasn’t as assured as now. The exact opposite was a reality, every moment in that quiet room she endeavored for sleep and the passage of time it offered, the subtle hope that every second away from that day’s tenuous outcome the better. But instead her mind was fully awake and charged with every event, recalling and recounting every vivid moment to memory in greater and greater details. From her own frail attempts and arrogance in her own skill over her enemy to the auburn ronin who took that sacrifice to its ultimate conclusion willingly. Her face contorted into a disappointed countenance as she admonished herself.

‘I should have done better, I could have.’ She thought gruffly with a childish annoyance at her emotionally driven tirades. She took in another long drawn breath, wincing instinctively as the act
caused the wounds on her stomach to wince with pain at the motion. Another grumbling sigh and she let her thoughts carry her through the day again. She relived the memory of that duel’s finality in growing disbelief. Each time she recalled it the fight went differently within her own head, a byproduct, she assured herself of the now hazy state the ointments, scented smokes and healing concoctions she took that her mother assured her would aid in her healing.

Judy kept prodding him for answers to seemingly worthless or annoying questions in the hopes he would remain responsive, proof that he hadn’t made that final leap, the very same one she attempted to make only a short while before him. Fear was a difficult sensation in her current state, but bit by bit it grew in tense layers as the fox grew increasingly motionless in each of his replies until curt nods and garbled grunts weren’t even offered.

The rabbit warriors contorted expression held as she attempted at the recent memories, she couldn’t remember everything in perfect detail, bouts of lost consciousness, she suspected the culprit. But still a few details reminded her of the moments of thought she experienced then.

It was the longest silence of recent memory among so many moments that her short life had so far culminated. The still, unmoving warrior failed to respond to her again and again as she called his name.

“Nick?” Her growing insistence leaving less and less time for the fox to respond before she attempted his name as a question again and then again in short order. The white flakes of early winter, before a welcome idea in how they would ensure warlord Bigs host would be unable to continue their invading march for the capital, the same dots of snow now embraced the auburn warriors pelt. They failed to melt against the ronins usually warm aura, the very one that she had reveled in, in the sparse number of times she experienced it. Instead the white speckles resembled the pale complexion on the ronins muzzle. Exposed, closed, lidded eyes and the scars that covered them, his ears and even his nose and lips showing a pale, cold expression of a smile that faded into a tired line.

Then her fears came to fruition as the fox lacked even the energy to stay in his knelt frame, falling to his side still with the sword passing through his stomach in a sickening image. The expulsion of air from his muzzle was slow and as foreboding as the death she witnessed in the elderly who passed quietly to the next world where they were honored and prayed for as they took their place among their gods to watch over them. Judy felt greedy though in her gutteral scream when that moment met her this time she did not pray for a safe passage but instead prayed that death did not stake the warrior that day.

She shivered at the cold air that kept sweeping through the room, both a welcome and alarming reminder to the winter just outside. While she was being treated for her injuries it wasn’t uncommon to hear several of her younger siblings cheering and celebrating their lands victory by playing outside in the thin layers of sleet. The snow took to the ground surprisingly quickly, a sign of just how cold
and early it was. This helped in knowing it would deter the warring army from taking to the southern pass for the capital. Couriers had already been dispatched with sealed messages about the day's surprising events. From warlord Bigs fraudulent forgery to their response and its subsequent end, the actions of the traitorous shrew earning charge after charge against Lionhearts empire. Another gust of wind finding its way through the burrow ripped her from her thoughts as the draft chilled the small lucid rabbit the moment it swept through the room. She shivered in place under the thin blanket at the offending cold ending with the clacking of her protesting teeth.

A tired mumble caught her attention, she stopped squirming and her ears shot up towards the sound. The voice was as raspy as her own but tired and drooled in a low, pained tone. Slowly she fought with the restrictions the bandages along the fur of her neck caused to look over the likewise patched auburn ronin lying just a couple steps away.

“Finally… Awake?” Judy croaked, scowling at the sound of her own voice scraping against her dried throat when she spoke. “Had-” She gulped uselessly for whatever saliva would help the parched feeling when she talked. “Us all worried.” She stared at the fox as his chest slowly rose and fell with careful breaths. The fox's paws slowly fought against the blanket that was set on him, prodding at a couple of the bandages across his stomach with a winced hiss at the pain.

“You sure… I’m not dead?” The gruff canid noticeably cringed, gulping like she had against his own dry throat, eventually he managed to offer a tired smirk to help placate his reply.

“Don’t be a big baby. Mother told me your wounds were even less severe than mine, just goes to show how much tougher I am.” The rabbit openly chided, slowly the fox's own head turned and tilted to her own direction.

“Oh come on, I had a sword through my gut. You sure I’m the blind one here?” And there it was, that same unassuming and carefree attitude that the fronin, even as close to the next life as herself only a few hours before, offered in place of the seriousness of the situation. It was comforting, warm in how personable and open it always felt.

“It only went through your side. Are you sure Savage is a hare and not a vicious fox eating predator of some sort? Because from what Mother tells me he was closer to skinning you with the swords placement then he was to fatally stabbing you.” She mocked with with a growing smirk as she chuckled, Nick followed the small bellow with his own, the two ending in winced, painful groans and shallow intakes of air. She plied the moment for all the playful banter the ronin offered in place of the stressful truth of how closely the two walked with death.

“Just wanted me for my fur huh? Guess you and Jack had that in common. First sign of cold weather and what do you two do? Go straight for the foxes fur.” Nick said with dramatic faux offense, he flourished his paws up in front of him as if to accentuate the scene he drolled out. Judy for her own
part laughed at the parallel, smiling at the end result. “Where is Savage?” He asked after a pause in a more serious tone.

“He’s alive, hes receiving care in the cells, we thought you had killed him?” Judy began in confusion.

“Yea, that was the plan.” Nick spoke plainly.

“The plan?” The rabbit questioned, lacking the perspective the other onlookers had during the final moments of the duel in how suspect the end was.

“Yea, you remember how I said something was off about that shinobi-the female one?” Nick ended with a cough that quickly turned violent with heaves at its end. Judy allowed it to settle with another pang of worry, another beat of silence to assure that no greater damages made themselves known on the figure of the fox beside her. The two were the only ones in the large infirmary room, recovering at the leisure and skill of her mother, herbalists and physicians.

“What about her?” Judys ears began to mirror the auburn ronin's own, intent on the only other sound in that room being the other mammal beside them.

“While I was fighting savage I caught the smell of something, I couldn’t place it. It was actually a little embarrassing how long it took. Eventually though, I realized he smelled a little like the vixen in the cell and I noticed she smelled a little like Jack, sly hare garnering the attentions of such a lethal vixen.” He said in a low, accusatory tone that emulated the way children confided secrets. Innocent and simple as she herself was, her own wit did manage to eventually catch on to what he was implying.

“No.” She started in a confused tone. “No way? Really?” She oddly warmed to the prospect of the two different mammals, it didn’t take her long after that to figure out the plan. “He threw the match... For her?” He nodded.

“Romantic huh?” Nick continued with a smirk.

“But he was bound by honor? He would-”

“Give that up to save her?” Nick cut her off, mulling it over inside his head as he adjusted to try and
get comfortable despite his injuries, essentially copying her own attempts to find a comfortable position. “Wouldn’t you?” The foxes tone grew quizzical and serious in equally conservative measures.

“I-I don’t know.” She said honestly, her whole life was spent proving that a rabbit could enter the world of nobility and all the duties that entailed, including holding honor in the utmost regard. Her companion in that room held a look that even without eyes left a guilty moment in the way it took her in. His response though was worse still when he drolled out a simple non committed nod.

“Guess that’s fair, you have a lot at risk.” The fox spoke neutrally in a way that felt more painful than she expected. It left an awkward silence, where before she was alone in that silence with Nick still unconscious, now it hurt in that it felt intentional when the two failed to renew the conversation. “Can I make a request?”

“Hmm?” Judys brows furrowed. “Nick, you travelled across Japan for my clan and Lionhearts empire, you fought assassins for us twice and risked your life for-” Her eyes shot wide open realizing the quiet parallel. She cursed herself for the innocuous meaning his previous statement held ‘ Wouldn’t you?’ The question asked in just such a way. The dishonored ronin himself in Savages place had fought for her clan, for her. In a own brash response she accidently admonished the fox’s own actions without thinking.

“I would like clan Hopps to release the shinobi and Savage and be cleared of their charges.” The ronin spoke curtly and respectfully, devoid of the personability there was before, Judy noticed instantly how much she missed it.

“The two assassins admitted openly of their crimes against clan Hopps at the bequest of warlord Big. And Savage was part of the open rebellion against Lionhearts empire I can’t just-I can’t-” Judy began in an authoritative tone. She stopped the moment she caught the growingly worsening expression on the fox’s face. She couldn’t place how the sightless eyes he held bore into her until she realized her own guilt looked back at her through it. She felt the weight of honor weighing against her shoulders. “I’ll have them released immediately.” Her response was immediate and even surprised herself as she watched for a beat… Then two as Nick barely nodded in agreement, the makings of a silently thankful smile crossing the edges of his muzzle again, relaxing her own disappointment in herself.

“Thank you, Judy.” He warmed, resigning to look uselessly back up into the nothingness of the large rooms supporting structures. Where Judy was greeted with the wooden structure of the burrows infirmary room she knew the foxes world to resemble a contemplative void. Another bout of loud children could be heard passed the door cheering and clamoring through the echoing halls that caused another chilling draft to make its way through the large room. Judy brought her own covers up to stave off the cold when another bout of silence between the two settled in. Her mind was left to wonder for the first time since her journey began where she didn’t have to worry about assassins or
approaching war, instead just whatever sat at the edge of her mind.

“Two swords?” Judy asked, at the forefront of her recent memory was the fox’s own unique style of kenjutsu.

“Hmm?” He mulled turning back to her, his ears now having left her direction.

“When I was first going to Orsas shrine, it was to find a champion to compete against warlord Bigs own representative in a duel. It was suspected he was going to choose a ronin that had been heard of dueling along the northern part of the western provinces who wielded two swords. Was that you?” The rabbit began working the rumors and imagination of the story in her head.

“Yea, I spent a few years roaming, fighting, killing, thought I already told you the broad story of it?” The fox shrugged.

“Not about fighting Douglas, I had heard it was a female wolf?” The rabbit chided with a smirk.

“Bah, stupid rumors will never get the whole story right, and each subsequent time it's told its left to the machinations of the next to hear it.” The fox laughed amicably. He was tall as far as his species went, she noted. In place her memory retooled the images through her head of the fateful day of the legendary prey samurai Ramses. In place of the wolf noble that headed part of Bigs army was now the auburn fur and charcoal paws of her ronin companion, standing in that rams path. She could see what he meant about the aggrandizing nature of a mammal left to their own creative retelling. But her memory served her well as she imagined the fox drawing against the large mammal and cutting him down with his own unique dual weaponed style.

“So you killed Ramses?” She asked pointedly.

“Who?” He quirked a raised brow denoting his confusion.

“A ram samurai that toured the western provinces to prove prey samurai could reach their level. He was a legend further east and in the northern provinces. Was told that you slew him.” She waited as he sighed, delving into his own thoughts with a concerted expression.

“Oh yea him, I killed him.” It was the simplest droll the fox offered in place of the explanation she wanted.

“There isn’t much to say. We crossed paths, he was rude, he challenged me to a duel and then I killed him and kept walking.” He shrugged. “I haven’t given him any more thought than any of the others I’ve fought over the years. Not the wolves I dueled in the Izumo, not the tiger I dueled in Yamashiro, the polar bear I fought I think on the road from Harima to Mimasaka.” The fox seemed to shrug at each memory he passed over as he recounted the broad duels and fights with distaste.

“It sounds like you’ve given them a lot of thought, recalling them and where?” The rabbit asked with a cadence in her prodding question.

“I have recently, just that I know why I fought them but I don’t know why I didn’t. I look back on them sometimes and realize that I didn’t need to…” Nick sighed, again denoting his dissatisfaction. “Just some babbling inflection, don’t mind me.” The fox laughed and as if to cue another bout of laughing children could be heard massing the halls and another wave of cold when they could be heard passing the large doors that made up the exit and entrance of the burrow. “I would rather be in the here and now.” He beamed happily despite his pained tone. Judy felt her teeth chatter again when the wave of uninhibited air crept through the layers of blankets. ‘Inflection.’ She mulled the word over in her head. She nodded in agreement at the prospect of happier thoughts in that moment given that tensions were finally allowed to melt away, ironically as winter made its presence known. ‘A snow day.’ she smiled at the concept given her family’s history as farmers and how the winter meant a break from labors.

“Agh!” Her attention shot up to her companion, the fox was sitting up holding his offending side with a snarl.

“Nick lay back down! You’re going to reopen your wounds you stupid fox.” She shook her head back and forth at the ronin.

“Apologies Fluff-sensei.” The fox mocked before contorting against protesting wounds again as he sat further up on his knees and began to drag the whole of his own sleeping arrangement. Inch by inch with pained motions she watched him quietly close the small gap the two held before he let it fall in place just beside her own.

“What are you doing?”

“Just following orders.” The fox smiled laying back down on the mat that now rested just beside her.
own. Nick made a show of stretching his body out carefully in its length, he began encircling her within his frame. She stammered a selection of incomplete and inaudible words and sounds while a failed tinge attempted to make its way into her exposed and attentive ears. Whatever warming effect the failed blush would have had was instead replaced by the bristling course fur on the warriors arms and his tail when it came to a rest along her opposing side offering part of the surrounding warmth.

“Nick I don’t think this is appropriate.” She finally stammered out.

“I thought you said it was a rabbit thing?” The fox contrived in an explanation. “And besides, I have to obey the verdict of a rabbit I traveled with to Kozuke. She made it very clear when it came to cold rabbits; ‘just gonna have to share’ I would be remiss as a guest to not obey the noble rabbits ascribed etiquettes.” He challenged earning silent contemplation from the rabbit who began to smile.

“Sly fox.” Her smile widened. “Using my own words against me.” Judy sighed contentedly from within that forming circle of warmth. Nick in much the same condition as herself seemed to continue to emanate that same radiant warmth even then. She couldn’t lie in that her body took to the available aura with a greedy intake of the protection it offered from the cold, her muscles relaxing into the available frame. “Still don’t think it would be appropriate being seen like this.” She whispered more closely but sounding already resigned to the warming effect.

“You’re a clever rabbit, just tell them it's a fox thing.” The same fox let out a similar content sigh of his own as his padded paws pulled her carefully further into the space under his neck, laying his muzzle over the top of the rabbits head.

“You’re going to ruin your bindings like that, your wounds will heal slowly.” The rabbit spoke in growingly quieter tones.

“Don’t have anywhere else to be.” She heard the tone of his voice vibrate through his neck as it laid across the top of her own head. She turned her head into the core of warmth that she carefully worked further into, her paw slowly, nervously taking to the small crest of fur offered at the neck of the fabric. Her nose twitched at the prevalent smells of ointments and smoke in the cream fur undertoned by the earthy smell of his fur, her lids fell heavier with each exhausted blink, slowly her expression matched the exhaustion she felt, the silence of the rooms surroundings drifted her into a gentle sleep. The fox quietly trailing patterns with his claws in the rabbit's fur at the back of her head, he followed her into the world of slumber, coerced into sleep by the lightly offered grinding sound the rabbit's teeth began to make.
Huh, first writing project I have ever actually written to its end and what a blast everyone has been every step of the way. I think the story ended up well even though I think certain chapters early on weren't up to a same standard. I haven't finished chapter 1 of the second arc so it sadly won't drop in the same day like I previously intended so hang in there for me. Hope you enjoyed the ride and hope you enjoy the second arc where the questions formed will finally be answered and these gentle sparks of a slow burn will find themselves either smothered or marred into an inferno, I'll see you in the ashes of either.

Also the amazing art that was done for this fic by Red-Velvet_Panda has been added to the first chapter is also added to this final chapter for the subscribed users who are viewing the final chapter. Take a look as I'm sure if you liked this story you'll love the arts way of conveying the two characters as much as I do. Visit her page and share, follow and all the jazzy stuff that Tumblr does http://red-velvet-panda.tumblr.com/

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!