Our Subtle War

by HerAld_90

Summary

Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde want to make the world a better place. Through serial killers, psychopathic terrorists, crime lords, covert organizations, through doubt and pain, through love and loss, this quest will lead them ever on and on.

A rewrite/remake of the unfinished Better World trilogy.

Notes

First, I would like to offer apologies to everyone waiting for the third part of the Better World trilogy. A multitude of things happened to keep it from happening as originally planned. The first draft wasn't working right, then I took a break to try writing a horror fic for Halloween (that didn't work out), then I stopped to focus on National Novel Writing Month in November. Started over from scratch in December, but again, it just wasn't working. Too many characters, too many dangling plot threads, too many new plot elements to introduce in what's supposed to be the final part, and most of all, I just couldn't settle on a satisfactory endgame for the big bad, a plot that previous stories were supposed to be leading up to.

So, after some serious thought and discussion with some writer friends, I decided to start over at square one. A Better Life, A Better Legacy, and what I had of A Better World, rewritten and revised into a single, hopefully cohesive epic narrative. Some changes have been minor,
such as correcting the species of certain characters. Others have been deeper, scenes cut out or new scenes to better set up the latter half of the story.

I hope those of you who read and enjoyed my previous two stories and were looking forward to the final installment will understand, and be able to enjoy this new effort for what it is. To new readers, welcome to Our Subtle War.
An Oncoming Storm

The Molotov cocktail hit the Happy Town sign with all the force young Winona Hite could muster. The glass shattered in the same instant the alcohol and gasoline mixture ignited, a fireball that set the wood and metal entranceway to the predator-only block ablaze. Paint blackened, visages of smiling predators twisting, disappearing into the acrid black smoke and embers rising into the evening sky.

The white liger watched the spreading fire a moment longer, the heat close to unbearable in her heavy duster and scarf, before turning to face the crowd of uncollared predators gathered behind where she stood upon a wrecked police cruiser. A few faces she knew, but so many more, hundreds more, that she didn’t. A lesser mammal might have balked at the waiting horde, at the weight of the scavenged collar key in her pocket. She resolved to be a greater mammal.

“No more Happy Towns!”

A deafening clamor rose up at this proclamation, howls and roars and snarls and cackles that echoed across the city blocks all around them. Winona let it go on, looking around to the surrounding buildings, relishing the gazes of frightened prey mammals watching the proceedings from behind the safety of locked doors and barred windows. She had no interest in hurting them, but if they wanted to work themselves into a lather over nothing…

“No more!” She let the two words quiet the crowd, waiting until she had their total attention once more. Then she held aloft her collar, the bane of 18 years of her life. “No more collars!”

The shouts of excitement here rose higher, louder, shaking the city. A snap from behind Winona, the crunch of wood giving way, and the Happy Town sign collapsed beneath the ever-hungering flames. A shower of hot sparks peppered her back. She ignored it, basking in the sight before her.

Before the excitement of the crowd had a chance to start dying down again, Winona knelt down and grabbed the riot shield she’d taken from the police cruiser after dragging the antelope officer out. Standing to her full height once more, she slammed her collar against the shield like a drum. “No more collars! No more hateful police! No more unfair, speciesist government! NO MORE! WE WILL MARCH TO CITY HALL, TO THE SAN DINGO POLICE DEPARTMENT, AND WE WILL TELL THEM NO MORE!”

The clamor of before didn’t hold a candle to what came next, every predator and even the handful of prey that had joined the crowd taking up the chant of NO MORE.

Past the assembled mammals, Winona Hite spied the sudden flashing of red and blue lights, police cruisers gathering up several blocks down. Snarling, she hopped off the wrecked cruiser, dropping her collar to be forgotten as she hefted up the riot shield. Lions and bears parted before her, a trio of Arctic foxes practically bowing as she passed. A few others began noticing the assembling police response and added their snarls to hers. Fangs were bared. Claws unsheathed. Someone offered a baseball bat to Winona, which she declined after a thoughtful moment. “I’ve had shields like this one bashed against my head enough to know what they can do, friend.”

This got a rumble of approval from those mammals close enough to hear, and Winona continued on through the crowd. She reached the other side just as a crackle and buzz of a megaphone turning on caught their ears. “THIS IS THE SAN DINGO CHIEF OF POLICE! THIS IS AN UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY! YOU WILL REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE AS CERTIFIED POLICE OFFICERS RETRIEVE AND REATTACH YOUR COLLARS! AFTERWARDS YOU WILL DISPERSE BACK TO YOUR HOMES! THAT IS AN ORDER!”
Winona Hite huffed and spat on the ground. Hefting the riot shield up into a ready position, she started marching forward toward the growing wall of police officers in riot gear, prey mammals cowering behind shields and batons. The rumble of a hundreds of paws marching behind and around her brought a grin to the liger’s muzzle. “Here comes trouble.”

Many decades later…

Five beers and two platters of cheese-drenched nachos, and Nick Wilde knew he was in trouble.

The night began simple and safe enough. He and Judy had come in from their patrols through the Rainforest District to clock out and catch dinner together, only to find half the ZPD waiting in the lobby for them. Turned out, to Nick’s surprise, that day had marked the 5th-year anniversary of his joining the Zootopia Police Department.

"Not that I particularly care," said Chief Bogo, the cape buffalo going about the "celebration" with all the grim fortitude he would have used when approaching a hostage situation. “However, Clawhauser was squeeing all day while you were gone and it was making the hardened criminals uncomfortable. I had to do something. Don't get used to it."

"It" had involved a cake the size of a pool table with the heartwarming message "Here's to 5 years of not getting lethally shot" written on it in thick butter frosting, as well as... well, even as kind a soul as Judy hesitated to call it a speech, but Bogo had certainly said a few words just so they all knew who exactly had written out the cake's message.

"When I first met Nick, he was unlike any fox I’d met before. Brave, loyal, clever. Oh, how I wanted to strangle him where he stood. But I didn’t, and Officer Hopps managed to find the missing mammals. So there we go. Have a good night everyone, get out of the way for the night shift."

"A real inspiration, that guy," said Nick, before getting whisked off by Judy, Clawhauser, and a few other officers for what they promised to be a real celebration.

The location of that "real celebration": Mc'Shammy's, one of the few bar & grills Nick had never gone to in his days as a conman, mostly for its heavy cop patronage. The insides were seedy and smoke-dimmed, the walls covered in a mix of old band posters and traffic signs. The pangolin manning the bar looked halfway to death's door, while the pool table looked like someone had attempted to make it into an actual pool at some point in the distant past. But the beer was free (paid for by Officer McHorn), the food was plentiful (accounting for Clawhauser's appetite), and Judy's paw grabbing his as they entered was soft and warm and made his stomach pull a perfect swan dive, so it was easy enough for Nick to go into this situation with a smile.

That smile was much harder to maintain 3 hours, five beers, and two platters of cheese-drenched nachos later. Wedged between Wolford and Delgato at a corner table, a half-awake Judy at some point having taken up residence in his lap and McHorn and Francine rooting Clawhauser on at the other side of the table in some sort of eldritch nacho-eating dare, Nick had little choice but to regret his recent dietary decisions and listen as the wolf and lion threw out increasingly embarrassing (and oft preposterous) stories of their own cases with the fox of the hour.

"Hey Wilde, you remember that time over in the Canal District, with the three little piggy jewel thieves and that exotic camel assassin? Who knew it was so hard to get the stench of sewer water out of your fur?"

"Yeah," said Nick, face flushing at the memories and Judy's giggles. "How could I ever forget that
"That's nothing," said Delgato, slamming another finished beer bottle to the table and signaling for the waitress. Words starting to slur, the burly lion threw an arm around Nick's shoulders and hugged him tight. "This guy here... this smug little jerk... God bless this smug little jerk. It was uh... two, yeah, two and a half years ago, it was. Hopps, you were out sick that week, I remember because you didn't go home to rest and get better until you threw up all over the interrogation room and Chief Bogo himself drove you back to your apartment. Anyway!" He paused long enough to accept his new beer from the doe waitress with a smile and wink that Nick could only scoff at, before continuing, "Anyway, two years ago, Tundratown, cold as one of the Chief's glares. Standard breaking and entering, or so it seems at first. A toy store that maybe said no to one of those protection rackets that pops up every few months when they think Mr. Big won't notice them."

"And Mr. Big always notices them," said Francine, chiming in as she stood up from the table. "Off the record, but sometimes I gotta bless that little shrew. This place is too quiet. I'm heading to the jukebox and I'm not taking suggestions."

Delgato continued his story to the sweet tunes of Led Sheeppelin's Immigrant Song. "So while I'm inside picking through to see what's been stolen and taking the owner's statement, old Wilde here's outside keeping an eye out for anyone looking like they're trying to see how their handiwork's being treated. 10 minutes there and a herd of kids, polar bear cubs and arctic foxes and all that, come over looking like it's the first day of Christmas break—"

"It was the first day of Christmas break," Nick chimed him, a paw stroking over Judy's head. "Bunch of kids hearing their favorite store got trashed and worried sick for the owner."

Delgato nodded. "Mr. Bartleby, that was the guy's name. Creaky little antelope, not the kind of guy you'd expect in Tundratown. Anyway, this soft-hearted little jerk here, he listens to the worries and whimpers of that gaggle of kids for what can't be more than five minutes before he goes into the store, shoves a fat $100 into Bartleby's hooves, and comes out with that year's hottest-selling toy, one for each of the little munchkins."

"Aww!" McHorn reached over the table and, gentle as a rhino could be, gave Nick's shoulder a playful shove that still made the wood wall behind him creak. "Never took you for such a softy, Wilde."

"What can I say," said Nick, contemplating trying to finish the half-full bottle in front of him before deciding he likes his liver in one piece, "I have a soft spot for kids."

"I can attest to that," said Judy, popping up on the other side of Wolford with a cheeky grin that belied the pair of fox-sized beers she herself had drunk. Nick started at the sight of her and looked down, having not even noticed her leaving his lap. "You guys want a softy, you should see him whenever family visits. You'd think all my little sisters and nieces and nephews and cousins were his own, the way he dotes on them."

A chorus of laughter rang around the table, and Nick decided that sixth beer was worth finishing after all.

"You know, Nick," said Clawhauser through a mouthful of chips, “I'm surprised you haven't thought about settling down and having some kids of your own. The big 4-0 isn't that far away and those lady-killing looks aren't gonna last forever.”

Despite a heavily muscled and inebriated wolf sitting between them, Nick could still feel Judy’s flinch at this statement. Keeping a better grasp of his mask even with the alcohol coursing through
him, Nick shrugged and made an “ehhh” gesture with one paw. “Do I like kids? Yes, yes I do. Do I think I’d be anything resembling a good parent worthy of kids? No, no I don’t. Also yes, thank you for the reminder of my ever-encroaching mortality, dear Benji.”

The tubby cheetah had the decency to blush, though it seemed Wolford’s drinks had finally gotten to him as he gave Nick a punch to the shoulder that somehow seemed so much harder than McHorn’s. “Oi, quit it with that bloody defeatist talk, Wilde! Being a dad’s easy! Just do as your dad did, like I do! My darling Alexis is turning out alright!”

Judy’s voice came next, flat and unamused, not an ounce of the beer she had consumed that evening. “Your Alexis likes to blow up trashcans with firecrackers and once went riding through Little Rodentia on a unicycle.”

“Exactly, lass! And how many other kids her age do you know that can make firecrackers and ride a unicycle half as well, eh?”

Nick drained the last of the bottle and signaled for another, feeling all the while Judy’s gaze on him growing more alarmed, her voice when she spoke (not over him, not past him, only for him) growing cold now, starting to fill with that police sergeant’s harshness he can’t help but feel chills at. “Wolford, I mean it. Drop it. Nick, come on, I think you’ve probably had enough to drink—”

Maybe it was his guzzling down the entire bottle of beer down in one throat-burning go, maybe it was the rapid TAP-TAP-TAPPING of his extended nails against the wood of the table that Nick couldn’t get a hold of, maybe it was the bristling fur he decided not to get a hold of, but some of the others around the table seemed to start catching on that something was wrong with the whole topic. McHorn and Francine exchanged LOOKS, the kind cops in Zootopia always did at the first inkling that a predator might start causing trouble. Wolford and Delgato looked utterly taken aback as they stopped squeezing the fox between them, while Judy’s nose, despite whatever efforts to progressivism she aspired to, began twitching like the rabbit she was.

“Uh, Nick?” asked Clawhauser, food before him forgotten as he reached across the table to place his paw on the fox’s. “Is everything okay? Look, we’re really sorry if this is a sensitive topic, we didn’t know… I mean you hardly ever talk about… Judy! Has an amazing family, and you and Judy so we thought—”

“My father.” The words came easy and calm from decades of playing the con. “What do I remember about my father? Let me think… Corduroy slacks. The spiffiest little ties you ever did see. A dusty clothing store that always seemed too empty. Orange, heh, orange-flavored root beer, if you can believe they ever made such a thing. My mom always hated how it made his breath smell, but honestly, I thought his cologne was worse. And let me think…”

“Nick…”

Nick ignored Judy’s pleading tone, grabbing a bottle off the table even though he knew it to be empty. “Let me think… and yeah, the thing I remember most clearly about my old man; the back of that rotten scoundrel’s jacket as he walked out the front door one June day, saying he was going to the store, and never coming back. Yeah, just doing what my dad did… probably not the best advice.”

The table sat in silence from the story, none of the other mammals there quite able to meet Nick’s eyes. Minutes passed until Nick felt less angry and more stupid for everything he said. Sliding off his seat between his wolf and lion compatriots, he slunk under the table to the other side and gave a half-hearted wave over his shoulder. “Well, guess uh… guess I’ll be seeing you guys tomorrow. Take care, don’t drink any more than I would, thanks for the… for the wild time.”
A few similarly-weak farewells followed Nick across the bar and out the front door into a crispy Tundratown night. There he waited on the sidewalk, watching snow as far as the eye could see glisten in light of a hundred neon signs, the only sign of life out on that cold, lonesome street.

The door creaked open behind Nick and Judy joined him outside, passing him his winter coat he’d left behind in his haste, her own already wrapped tight around her. He took it without a word, imagining for a bizarre moment as he slipped it on that the ZPD emblazoned on the back of the dark blue coat had transformed into a bulls-eye. He could not come up with where the thought had come from and quickly discarded it. They were in Tundratown, Mr. Big’s land. Trouble didn’t happen to cops here that they didn’t go snooping for.

“I’m sorry, Nick. I shouldn’t have let them get going that far.”

Nick shrugged, slipping one paw into a pocket, letting the other hang free as he started down the street to the nearest bus station. “It’s cool, Carrots. You heard Ben. I hardly ever talk about myself.”

Judy slipped her paw into his as they walked, fingers entwining to return his needy squeeze. “You do with me.”

Nick rolled his eyes as they turned a corner, instinct driving him to pull the rabbit closer against him at the sight of a dark alley ahead to their left. “Yeah, but you’re you. What, are you supposed to go blabbing to them about my deepest secrets or something?”

“Sure!” Judy smiled, a little wildly, a little drunkenly. “The girls in the precinct loved hearing all about International Women’s Day!”

Nick stumbled, and not only from the snow and the six (seven?) bottles of beer starting to work their magic. Cheeks feeling like they were ready to burst into flame, he turned a theatrically affronted look Judy’s way. “You didn’t!”

They passed the alleyway. Nothing happened.

“Nope,” she said, grinning in such a way that Nick couldn’t help but grin back. “But I had you there for a moment, didn’t I? Hehe, hah, what, what’s the word I’m looking for? A… bustle? A trustle?”

Nick rolled his eyes, but kept smiling. “It’s called a hustle, sweet—”

The frozen gale swept up the street from behind them, driving claws of cold into their backs and the howls of the damned through their ears. A half-formed comment about the weather died on Nick’s lips as a scent carried along by the gale invaded his nose, bringing him to a halt. He barely noticed when Judy stopped walking a moment later and looked back at him. “Nick? You’re not going to lose your dinner all over the sidewalk, are you? The cheap beer getting to you?”

He didn’t answer, not until another gale, another blast of that curdling stench, sent every hair on Nick’s body on end. He turned back behind them, taking a deep sniff and nearly gagging. He looked at once to the alleyway. “Oh damn it.”

Judy returned to his side, one paw clutching the radio at her belt, the other pulling her stun gun from its holster. “What do you smell?”

“Blood.” Nick swallowed, throat suddenly dry, beer and nachos threatening to come back up, before his paws found wit enough to reach for his own stun gun. “Lots of it.”

Judy let him and his night vision take the lead. Nick started walking back toward the alleyway, weapon drawn and eyes focused on that stretch of black in the sheer white of the ice buildings and
fallen snow. Three feet off and they saw the slowly growing pool of blood edge out of the alley, stark red against the surrounding white. Nick’s stomach fell at the sight of it. He turned to his partner and already Judy was on the radio, reporting their location and the possible crime with a forced calm the conman of Nick’s earlier years would have killed to possess.

Shuddering at the poor choice of words his inner thoughts had given him, Nick started again for the alleyway entrance. “Hello? This is Officers Nicholas Wilde and Judy Hopps, ZPD. Is there someone hurt in there? Please, respond if you can!”

No answer came. Nick looked over his shoulder at Judy. “Carrots, you got a flashlight?” She answered with her phone’s flashlight tool. “Ow! Carrots, watch where you aim that! Night vision, right here!”

As he rubbed the spots from his eyes, the beam of light turned down the alley past him. They saw a mottled green dumpster, walls plastered with graffiti and posters for performers long gone, a fire escape, a short pyramid of cardboard boxes and blankets that might have been some hobo’s winter home, a red spaghetti-string purse—

No, thought Nick with a start. Not red but tan, colored in blood.

Judy turned the beam of her phone deeper into the alley, and there they saw it. Judy letting out a scream, Nick barely making it back to the sidewalk and out of the crime scene before emptying his stomach. Even out there, in the fresh air and the lights of neon signs and flashing of approaching cop cars, the image of the alley remained seared into his mind, threatening with every breath to bring up more burning stomach juices. Even as he looked up to the approaching forms of Officers Grizzoli and Johnson, he saw the nightmare.

A woman, some kind of antelope, propped up against several bags of trash like a puppet with its strings cut. Her black winter coat and scarf had been drenched in blood, so much blood, more than any antelope’s body should have contained, all of it pouring down from—

Nick retched again, narrowly avoiding Johnson’s legs. The slim lion danced back and out of the way, face a war between disgust and concern. “Jesus, Wilde, the hell’s gotten into you?”

Several seconds of catching his breath, before Nick managed to stand up and look back to the alley. Judy still stood there at the entrance, arms hanging at her sides and ears down. A splotch of grey and white against the red and black.

“No face. She has… she has no face.”
The night still sent bone-deep chills through her body. The shadows of the surrounding buildings still lurked with dread and the promise of danger. The buzz of the earlier alcohol had settled into a gurgling ache deep in the pit of her stomach, bringing with it the promise of a skull-splitting headache if she had to linger for much longer in the lights of the countless cruisers filling that frozen stretch of road. Despite all this, to her personal pride, Officer Judy Hopps still perked to attention at the welcome sight of the cape buffalo rumbling in her direction. “Chief Bogo, sir!” She jumped from where she and Nick sat at the edge of the sidewalk and saluted. “Sir, you are a sight for… for sore eyes.”

Bogo returned her salute, looking only a moment to the fox beside her before turning back to her. “Officer Hopps, Wilde. Surprised you’re still here. From Officers Johnson and Grizzoli’s descriptions of the scene, I expected the two of you to have left at first opportunity.”

“This isn’t our first homicide, sir,” said Judy, thanking whatever deity was looking out for her that night that the tremble in her paws hadn’t made it to her voice. She didn’t think she could pass it off as being from the cold. “However we might have… initially been affected, Officer Wilde and I are here and ready to work.”

Beside her, Nick let off a yawn too long to be real. “Yeah, what she said.”

Bogo huffed and, motioning for them to follow, started for the alleyway, now taped off with yellow police warnings and surrounded by a near-army of forensics officers. “You’ve dealt with homicide before, yes, but this… this might be something far worse.”

“I know, whispered Nick, so low that even Judy barely heard him. She glanced at him, confused, only for him to shake his head and mouth that he’d tell her later.

Past the police tape and car-mounted search lights, the alleyway had been thoroughly searched and categorized. Numbered placards sat next to every item of interest, ferrets scurrying to and fro for photos from every angle. At the far end of the alley a jackal in a white coat sat kneeling next to the body, blocking sight of the antelope’s skinless face with the great bulk of his body, to Judy’s silent relief. By now the blood coating so much of the alley had frozen.

“What a horrible night to die,” spoke the jackal aloud as they approached, a gloved paw stroking up one of the antelope’s horns in a manner that made Judy queasy. “The cold and the darkness. Enough of that already in the grave. Shouldn’t have to suffer it while heart still beats and blood still courses. A dreadful night to die.”

“Doctor Beltz,” said Bogo, stopping a pace behind the jackal. “You are familiar with Hopps and Wilde. They were first on the scene and will be heading this investigation. What can you tell us so far?”

“Not much,” said Beltz, his back letting out an alarming crack as he stood. Judy forced herself not to turn away as that bloody, faceless head came back into view, nothing left but muscle tissue and bone. “Not much at all.” The jackal spent a moment brushing at the dirtied knees of his pants before continuing. “Not until I can get her back to the lab, to my proper equipment. Death was probably exsanguination from a clean slash across the victim’s throat, hit all the right arteries for a clean, quick kill.”

“Because a sloppy amateur would be too damned lucky for us.” Nick shifted from foot to foot, paws
tucked tight into the pockets of his jacket. Judy could relate. “Any sign of a struggle?”

Beltz shook his head. “Not enough to indicate there was a fight. I expect the victim was caught by surprise, dragged into the alley as she passed it and here done away with.” After signaling to two attendants, a pig and a pangolin, to come take the body away, he gave Judy and Nick a smile with too many teeth. “But then, that’s your job to figure that part out.”

Nick grumbled and hunched deeper into his jacket. Judy took the barb in stride, moving just enough to let the attendants pass her with their stretcher and body bag. “The, uh… the face, then… removed after death had occurred?”

“Oh, certainly,” said Beltz, sliding his gloves off with clear relish and tossing them to a third attendant, a ram. “A knife of some kind. Come see me tomorrow and I’ll tell you everything you might ever want to know. Blade length, straight or curved, serrated or not, take your pick.

“For now, however.” He slid past the trio of police officers, Nick grimacing as his toes got trampled. “I have places to be and bodies to dig around in. Later, Chief.”

“What a lovely man,” said Nick’s mouth as they turned to watch him leave.

“What a skunk’s butt,” said Nick’s tail, lashing the snow in agitation.

“You heard the man,” said Bogo. “Get to sleep, both of you. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

“Sir.” Judy followed the cape buffalo out of the alley, returning the nods of other officers on the scene. “Sir, shouldn’t we stay here if Officer Wilde and I are heading up the investigation?”

Not even looking back at her, he said “We’re all but done here anyway, Hopps. Grizzoli and Johnson can finish up here and you can get their findings at their desks in the morning.”

“Sir—”

Bogo whirled on Nick, some of the late hour and gruesome crime finally cracking through his stone exterior. Nick backed off a step, but otherwise held his ground remarkably well in Judy’s eyes. “Sir, the murder, the missing face, this… I don’t want to think about it, but could this be…”

To Judy’s surprise, something softened in Bogo’s eyes. He huffed, not answering until he’d clambered into his cruiser and rolled his window down to speak clearly to them. “After all these years, it doesn’t seem likely. But then, even a copycat is more than I ever want happening to my city. You hear me, Wilde?”

Nick nodded, eyes narrow. “I hear you, sir.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Try not to find any more dead bodies on the way to the bus, won’t you?”

Judy waited until the window was rolled back up and the cruiser was pulling away before looking back at her partner. The fox looked for all the world like they had just been handed their first homicide all over again. She entwined her fingers with his and gave his paw a squeeze. “Nick?”

He blinked, looked first at her and then all around, as if just coming back to himself. The cold street seemed to offer him no answer he wanted. “It’s freaking cold out here. “Come on, before we miss the bus. Again.”

“Nick—”
Judy kept quiet all the walk to the bus stop and the wait there for the bus and all the way home on the bus, sitting next to Nick with his arm over her shoulders and the blessed warmth of the bus’s lights a heavenly relief after the neon and shadows of half an hour before. She kept quiet all through the shambling climb up the Grand Pangolin Arms stairs to her apartment floor, where even Bucky and Pronk had fallen into a blissfully quiet slumber.

1:36 AM, Judy’s internal clock howled at her as she stood at her apartment door for half a minute, fumbling for the right key. The adrenaline of finding a dead body had worn off somewhere on the bus, leaving only aching muscle memory and the longing for a soft bed and warm sheets.

Finally, the lock clicked and the door creaked open. Judy stuffed the keys back into her jacket and shuffled in, ears barely twitching as Nick followed behind and kicked the door shut with a slam.

“HEY! KEEP IT DOWN OVER THERE! SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO SLEEP!”

“SHUT UP! THEY HAD LONG DAY AND AREN’T THINKING RIGHT!”

“YOU SHUT UP!”

“NO, YOU SHUT UP!”

Judy tuned the quarrying couple out as she shrugged off her jacket and scarf, happy to leave the clothing where it fell until the morning. Yawning, she half-walked, half-tumbled over to her bed and slumped face-first onto it. Sleep beckoned to her like the mythical Sirens.

“Charming as always,” said Nick, flumping onto the bed beside her. “Such lovely voices… to fall asleep to…”

Despite every inch of her body telling her not to, Judy grunted and punched the fox’s shoulder. “No sleep until explanation. You promised.”

Nick groaned. The bed creaked as he rolled over onto his back, sending Judy tumbling against him. His arm held her tight, his heartbeat to her ears sounding worried, erratic. “It’s a bad story, Hopps.”

“I can take it, Wilde.”

“I mean it, Judy. This is really… really bad stuff.”

I believe you. Now spill.”

A sigh. The bed creaked again as Nick dragged the topmost blanket over them. "It was before your time, literally. I was 7, and, for about three or four months that year, there was a long series of murders. Brutal murders. The kind little kids on the playground can't help but talk about like the latest generic slasher movie."

Judy snuggled closer against the warmth of Nick's side, feeling some of the queasiness from before return. "And these killings... the victims all had their faces removed?"

"Yeah," said Nick. He almost sounded nostalgic. "That was the part that had schoolyards buzzing for weeks afterward. Well, that and the killer never being caught."

Judy perked her ears at this, almost bringing herself to sit up. "They were never caught!? No!"
"Yeah!" Nick said back, mimicking her shock. "One day, after nearly a killing a week for four months, they just... stopped. Nobody knew why. Or at least, nobody a 7-year-old fox from Happytown knew."

"And now it's all happening again. Or I mean, might be happening again," she added after seeing the look Nick gave her. "Might. One homicide, no matter how... unique... isn't a time to jump to conclusions. And 30 years is a long time for any mammal species to wait between ki... between kills."

She felt Nick nod to this, the bottom of his chin brushing across the top of her head. "Right. And Original Flavor or copycat, there's at least one more killer loose in my city than I'm happy with."

"Listen to you," she mumbled between yawns, eyelids starting to lose the battle to stay open. "Sounding like... a real... responsible adult..."

He chuckled then, that light, honest laugh she adored, and pulled the blanket up higher. "You might... yawn... be to blame for that. Love you, Carrots."

"Love you too..."

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The basics of the murder were on every newspaper, news radio station, TV, and social site Nick cared to lay eyes on during the short bus ride to work the next morning. Fellow passengers discussed it in their seats. The street-side barista down the street from the station went into wild gesticulations on it with every customer to visit the porcupine’s cart. Even the ever-dependable street “artists” had gotten into the act, one side of city hall covered in a spray-painted image of a featureless stalker, a bloody knife clenched in one paw.

“Oh, that is just disgusting!” Passing mammals startled and looked over at them as they crossed the road for ZPD headquarters. Nick was surprised the fuming rabbit didn’t march over to help wash away the vandalism herself. “There’s a life that’s gone that… that WASN’T 24 hours ago! It’s a murder and a crime, not some artistic inspiration!”

“Let it go, Carrots. Some people deal with fear and stress in the weirdest ways.” Reaching the station entrance, Nick put on enough of a speed burst to reach the door first and hold it open for her. “Macabre as it is, the mural’s hurting nobody. Surrounding cameras surely caught everything, the idiot or idiots responsible will be brought in, and it will be forgotten in a week."

“Right,” said Judy, not slowing as she marched into the ZPD lobby. “Because there’s gotta be some justice in the world.”

Nick rolled his eyes as he followed after his partner to the front desk, where for once the fat, lovable Clawhauser was giving more attention to fielding calls and giving reassurances to worried civilians than whatever sugar-filled cereal had caught his fancy that month. “Justice would be giving up the obvious information leak to Chief Buffalo Butt.”

The look Judy sent him over her shoulder would give Bogo a run for his money. “Nick! Clawhauser is too sweet for that!”

“What? Reporters just don’t find this stuff out so fast without some kind of in with the people in charge. One of these days, those loose lips are gonna—”

An elbow to the gut convinced Nick to tighten his own lips, just as Clawhauser caught sight of them and perked up. “Nick! Judy! You two can’t do anything without getting into some kind of trouble,
“Afraid not,” said Nick, sliding on his conman’s smile as he leaned his weight against the countertop. “Say now, my favorite cheetah in the whole wide world, you wouldn’t happen to have any spare donuts back there, would you? We barely stopped for coffee on the way here.”

“Oh, sure thing, buddy!” Clawhauser ducked beneath the front desk for a moment, missing Judy’s eye roll and Nick’s answering shrug, before popping back up with a half-full box of chocolate-sprinkled. “Here, they’re just from this morning. It, uh, it’s been a little too crazy in here to really eat them.”

Nick grabbed three, tossing one to Judy before downsing half of one of his in one bite. “Mmph, dependable as ever, Benji my man.”

“Aww, thanks. And uh, you probably forgot, what with finding a dead body and all, but I’m really sorry for how awkward things got at your party last night. I really—”

A raised paw stopped the oncoming spiel. “Never even thought to hold it against you. Just keep on being you, man.”

“Ben, is the chief in the bullpen?” Judy had finished her donut while the pair talked and now hopped from foot to foot, the perfect picture of being ready to tackle the day. “Last night he said he wanted to see us ASAP in the morning.”

“Oh yeah!” The cheetah jerked a thumb over his shoulder, not toward the bullpen, but to the stairs to the building’s second level. “He’s up in his office, actually. Poor guy doesn’t look like he didn’t sleep a wink last night. Kept up by the mayor, probably.”

“No worries,” said Nick, smiling. “I think I can help with that.”

Chief Bogo looked tired. This was what Nick first noticed as he and Judy marched single file into the water buffalo’s office and closed the door at his command. More tired, certainly, than Nick recalled ever seeing him during the Night Howler case so many years ago. Dark circles sagged beneath his eyes, a slump to his shoulders and the distinct odor on his breath of coffee spiked with energy drink. With the lights dimmed and the curtains closed on his window behind him, Nick wouldn’t have been surprised if the cape buffalo fell from his chair at any moment.

“Hopps, Wilde, good, you’re here. Take a seat.”

Nick and Judy took the same chair, small enough to share it comfortably. Before sitting, Nick held out the chocolate-coated confection he’d grabbed minutes before. “Donut, sir? It’s got extra sprinkles!”

Bogo stared at the offered treat for a moment, while Judy groaned and facepalmed. After a second, the cape buffalo snorted and snatched the donut from Nick, devouring it with hardly a moment spent to chew. The fox stared as he sat, wondering how lucky he was to still have all his fingers. “Uh… happy to help, sir.”

“Shut it, Wilde.” Chief Bogo leaned back in his chair, eyes closing as he rubbed his temples. “I’ve got a three-hour nap scheduled soon, I want to get this over with. Hopps,” he said, making the rabbit jump where she sat. “Are you aware of the possible ramifications of what you and Wilde found last night?”
She nodded. “Nick filled me in on the serial killings a few decades ago, yes. I also might have
looked up some old news articles about them on the bus ride here. I... don’t know what to say,
honestly.”

“Hmph.” Bogo sat straighter in his chair, levelling them with a tired yet sturdy gaze. “For now, I
want you both treating this just like any other case. No need giving those media vultures any more
validation than they already have. Do your research, follow your leads, talk with Beltz down in the
labs when you get the chance. Am I clear, officers?”

“Crystal, sir.”

Judy’s following salute was so respectful, so confident in the face of Bogo’s exhaustion and the
media’s seeming bloodthirstiness, Nick couldn’t bring himself to make any snarky comment. And so
he stood and saluted as well. “You can always count on us, sir.”

Bogo grumbled something that made Judy’s cheeks flush, before motioning for them to leave. Nick
took the cue for what it was and left, waiting until his partner had closed the door behind them before
letting his grin break through. “You know, five years into this job and I think he’s finally starting to
like me.”

Judy rolled her eyes and shook her head, gesturing for him to follow her to the elevators. “Come on,
Slick, let’s not keep the good doctor waiting.”

That took the grin off Nick’s face, his shoulders falling as he followed his partner. “Right, wouldn’t
want that.”

***

Nick hated the ZPD labs. Hated it second only to visiting Records in the building’s sub-basement. If
asked why, he’d struggle to give a thoroughly justifiable answer. The sterile white rooms of plastic,
metal, and glass were never as cold as winters in Zootopia could get. No strange or especially harsh
stenches lingered. Aside from Doctor Beltz, the lab techs exemplified perfect professional
friendliness.

Judy had put it best one late night, halfway through some grainy B-movie featuring rubber monsters
and flaxen-coated vixens. "There's no angle down there for you, ya dumb fox. The atmosphere
doesn't allow it."

The so-called "atmosphere", as Judy had named it, was one of controlled tension, verging on
exhaustion, that morning as Nick and Judy exited the elevator to a rush of cold (not freezing, never
quite freezing) air and the hustle and bustle of mammals doing the more in-depth forensic work.
Moving through the close quarters, the pair found the object of their search far to the back of the labs,
in one of the more private examination rooms.

"Dr. Beltz," started Judy, taking the lead as she so easily did, Nick in that instance more than happy
to let her. "How'd your night go, sir?"

The honey-colored jackal looked up from the sheeted body he'd been examining as they entered and,
at the sight of them, sighed. "Good morning, Hopps, Wilde. I assume you're here for the antelope?"

"Indeed we are, sir."

The jackal made a noise somewhere deep in his throat that set Nick on edge. Hopping down from his
stool, Beltz motioned for a trio of ferrets waiting in the corner to come over and deal with the body
on his desk. As they pushed the gurney pass the pair of cops one of them shot Judy what a generous
soul might have called a sultry smile. Judy's response, leaning into Nick's side and wrapping her paw in his, sent the attempted suitor grumbling away. Maybe, Nick thought with a smirk, coming down to the labs wasn't so bad that day.

"If I could have your attention," spoke Beltz in what was not quite a growl, causing both Nick and Judy to flinch and straighten up. Huffing and rolling his eyes, Beltz stalked over to a row of freezers built into the far wall from the sliding glass doors. "So unprofessional... anyway, yes, I believe I was able to get more than a few juicy details from your body last night. If you could come over here…”

As the pair made their way over, Beltz unlocked and slid open a freezer, revealing the chilled remains of their antelope victim, cleaned and covered by a thin gauze sheet; even the head, to Nick's relief.

Then the jackal lowered the sheet, revealing the victim’s head in all its skinned glory, and Nick was suddenly very glad he’d had no breakfast more substantial than a donut, as the urge to vomit came on strong.

“As you can see,” said Beltz, seeming completely unmoved by the bloody horror staring up at them as he began pressing against the exposed tissues with a pair of tweezers. “I'd applaud the killer’s skill with a knife, were it not put to such ghastly uses. Clean cuts along the muscle lines, leaving little damage to the underlying meat. No nicks against bone where it could be helped, and the eyes are remarkably intact.”

Grabbing a scalpel from a nearby tray, the doctor used one of the antelope’s horns to tilt her head to the left, allowing him to draw the scalpel along her right jawline, where the skin started back up again. “I believe this is where the killer started his or her work, making quick slices with his tip before working in deeper to—”

“Doctor,” spoke Judy, voice trembling to Nick’s alarm. Her face, too, looked an interesting shade of green through her fur. “Maybe… maybe we can manage the case fine without the… glowing tribute to barbarism.”

If Beltz felt any displeasure at his observations being so firmly dismissed, Nick couldn’t read it in the jackal’s eyes as he pulled the sheet back over the body’s head and slid the table back into the freezer. “Yes, well, I suppose there are more pertinent details to go over. Such as the murder weapon, to start with.”

Nick blinked at this, exchanging a look with a similarly-surprised Judy. “No offense, but I kind of figured all that talk last night was hyperbol—ow!”

Beltz acted as if his heavy tread hadn’t come anywhere close to Nick’s toes as he shuffled over to another corner of the examination room. “Hyperbole kills, fox. Which puts more bodies on tables and leaves me over-worked. I deal only in truth.”

“You mean death,” said Nick as he followed after the jackal, earning him another elbow to the gut from Judy.

“Death, as much as we might like to ignore it, is the truest truth. There’s certainly no lying in it.” Picking up a chart from a counter, Beltz turned to face them. “Let’s see here. The killer used a fine tool for his work. 7-inch-blade, less than a pound in weight, mostly a straight edge, but with a curve to a point toward the end. Possessed of a small crossguard as well, I suspect.”

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Judy spoke the disbelief that Nick felt. “That’s… quite specific. I can sorta imagine the other stuff, but how’d you figure the weapon having a crossguard?”
Beltz set the chart down, moving now to open a case sitting on the counter. “Something like that affects the way a knife can be held. The wrist has to accommodate for it, especially for the more detailed, work. Here, I took the liberty of making an approximation with the lab’s 3D printer.”

Nick caught the thrown weapon, making a mental note to have Judy tell Bogo about his chief medical examiner’s penchant for workplace safety violations, before joining his partner in looking over the faux-murder weapon. “Hmm, yep, that’s a knife. And what a lovely shade of off-white plastic, too.”

“Ceramic,” said Judy, taking the knife from Nick and bouncing it in her palm. The weapon looked comically over-sized in her paws. “Seven inches… that narrows things down some. Can’t imagine a mammal as big as a lion or small as a fennec fox going for something like this.”

“Unless they were relying on that kind of assumption to keep them out of the spotlight.” Nick took the knife back from her and tested it in his own palm. Even for him, though, the weapon seemed a little on the large side. “Still, subterfuge like that still has to answer to plain, ol’ practicality.”

“If there’s nothing else,” said Beltz, drawing their attention back to him, “perhaps you could be on your way? There is, after all, a HOMICIDE investigation waiting for you upstairs.”

“Right! Come on, Nick. Let’s get to those reports Johnson and Grizzoli made!”

“Right behind you, Carrots.” Following the eager rabbit to the door, eager himself to get back to the relative warmth and freshness of the air upstairs, Nick gave a parting wave and smirk over his shoulder. “Later, Doc. We should do this again sometime.”

And then, lower, low enough that only Judy and the returning ferrets could hear him, “Sometime a long, long time from now.”

***

Sitting at their shared desk on the station’s second floor, near the building’s front windows where they could look out on the snow-blanketed square beyond and its countless pedestrians, Nick and Judy read through the reports left for them by Johnson and Grizzoli. Or at least, Judy poured over them, Nick leaning back in his chair to better listen and form his own thoughts.

“A thorough search of the victim’s purse found a wallet and driver’s license. Honey Germaine, a waitress at the Palm Hotel in Sahara Square.”

“Ritzy place. Too secure for me and Finnick to ever run any cons in. What’s an antelope like that doing in Tundratown?”

Judy glanced further down the page. “Looks like she had an elk boyfriend living over there. Michael Erentil.”

“Boyfriend might have found her flirting with someone at work, got jealous, and killed her. Or, she refused someone at work because she has a boyfriend, got followed most of the way home, and got murdered in revenge.”

“Something to look into later. Right now, the crime scene. A few vague footprints not belonging to us or the victim were found in the alley, but the constant snow had rendered it impossible to estimate the person’s exact size or species. On-scene forensics estimated the time of death somewhere between 11 and 11:10 that night. That’s… only a few minutes before we found her, at best.”

Nick thought back to his and Judy’s walk down that street and winced. “We were practically right
there when it happened. Nobody else was walking the streets, though. That fire escape we saw in the alley?"

The sound of rustling paper and a quick country curse. “Johnson found disturbed snow near the top…”

A minute of silence passed. Nick sat up in his chair to see Judy, his Judy, the best little bunny in the world, slumped in her seat and staring down at the desk with tear-glazed eyes. Recognizing the look at once after all their years of working together, he rolled his chair over and dragged her over onto it from hers, holding her close and wrapping his tail around them. “Don’t let it get to you. It’s not going to help Miss Germaine any, or you.”

“I know…” she used his tail to wipe away the tears from her face, an act Nick had long since resigned himself to tolerating. “It’s just… it never gets any easier, you know?”

“I know, I know…” Nick rubbed the back of her neck, practiced fingers doing their best to work away the tension. “I’d be worried if it ever did start getting easier for either of us. Bunnies, so emotional.”

The third blow to his gut that day, this time committed via fist rather than elbow, was accompanied by the wet, throaty chuckle Nick had been hoping for. “There we go,” he said, unfurling his tail and edging away in the name of feigned professionalism. “There’s the bunny I love.”

Judy blushed and glanced around the offices, but the few other officers to be seen there were all busy on their computers or taking phone calls and paid the pair little mind. “Niiick…”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Leave it at home.” Stretching, Nick hopped off his chair and began sliding on his jacket. “If there’s nothing else major in the report, I guess this is where the legwork starts. Quick trip to Palm Hotel to ask about any problems she might’ve been having, to start? Then say I give this boyfriend a visit while you shop around, see who might have sold a knife like that recently?”

Judy skimmed through the remaining pages of the report, nodded, and after jumping back over to her chair, joined Nick in putting on her jacket. “Add in you casing the victim’s house out to see if she might have had any problems leading up to this and that sounds like a plan.”

***

“No, not at all. We never had any complaints from OR about Miss Germaine.”

The Palm Hotel was Zootopia’s most expansive, elegant, illustrious entertainment complex, even ignoring the plethora of casinos and restaurants crowded around it. Fine marbles of green and gold, gilt-edged bannisters and elevators, plush carpet that mice could get lost in, glimmering chandeliers, intricate fountains and pools, and non-stop classical compositions floating through the air were only the most instantly noticeable bits of finery giving the hotel its reputation. It was the kind of place a ZPD officer could waste a year’s salary spending the night at.

The backrooms and offices of the security staff were all a far cry from the public gaudiness, nothing but utilitarian granite and fluorescent lighting. Desks and chairs were plain wood, broad and straight-backed. Computer systems were old but well-maintained, reliable and harder to hack.

The stallion behind the head of security’s desk, Maxwell Graves, fit in perfectly with his surroundings, old and burly and ash-grey, helpful as far as courtesy to the police required and no farther.

“You’re sure of that?” asked Judy, leading since the horse had shown an immediate dislike toward
her fox partner. “It wouldn’t have necessarily been anything big. Even someone being exceptionally nice could have been cause for concern.”

The horse started to respond, then quickly stopped, brows creasing as if something suddenly occurring to him. “Maybe, I think… it wasn’t a complaint from anyone, but a few months back I seem to remember something on the security camera, a mammal walking ‘round with a video camera. Now, we get mammals recording the hotel all the time, it comes with being one of Zootopia’s premiere tourist attractions. After about a half an hour, though, we suddenly realize this guy’s been following one of our staff around the whole time.”

“Honey Germaine?” ventured Judy.

Graves nodded. “Exactly! We didn’t want to cause too much of a scene in the hotel lobby, so we just discretely sent down one of our security guards to start ‘chatting’ with Miss Germaine. The mammal seemed to take the hint and left, and we never saw him in any of the hotel’s facilities again.

“Did you tell Miss Germaine what had happened?”

“Mhm, had our guard escort her to a backroom once the guy was gone to show her the cameras. I can’t recall if she recognized the mammal…”

Judy bit her lip and forced her breathing to stay calm. This seemed too good to be breaking the case so soon into it. “Do you happen to still have that security footage, sir?”

Her hesitation was proven worthwhile as Graves sighed and shook his head. “Sorry, but no. This was only a month before the first attack of that mammal the media took to calling the Highway Hacker. Much of our data was lost, and naturally our recovery efforts were focused more on financial information than security footage.”

Judy nodded, knowing the case only second-hand. The hacks had left Precinct 1’s experts stumped, and two weeks before had been passed off to Precinct 2 in Tundratown. “That is completely understandable, sir.” She glanced at the wall on the clock and saw it half-past twelve, making her grimace at how time flew. “I think that should be all for now. Thank you for your time.”

“Of course,” said the horse, standing to see them out. “Good luck with your investigation, officers.”

They waited until they were outside in the cloud-softened sunlight before saying anything, Nick loosing a long-suffering sigh as they walked to their parked police cruiser. “Well that was a bust. Of all the rotten luck with that hacker.”

“Yeah,” said Judy, keeping her pace slow as she looked around the avenue encircling the Palm Hotel, the countless mammals going about from one casino or restaurant to the next, laughing and talking as they enjoyed Sahara Square’s immunity to the winter months. All the tourists and seeming-tourists with their cameras. She supposed it would be easy enough to not notice someone recording you, if you didn’t know what or who to look for.

“So what do you say, Fluff?” Nick popped the driver-side door open and climbed in, Judy taking the passenger-side for once. “Want to hit up one of these fancy joints for lunch before continuing on? I know an aardwolf waiter at that seafood place over there who’ll give us free tea for our entire meal.”

Judy smiled at the offer but shook her head. “Just drive-thru, please, then drop me off a train station. It’s already midday, and we have no idea how long the rest of our stops are going to take.”

Nick shrugged, waited for a taxi to pass, then pulled out into the street. “Not sure what you’re worried about, Carrots. How many knife shops can there be in Zootopia?”
"Thirty shops, Nick! THIRTY! Of all the rotten summer—"

The screech and thunder of the cross-Zootopia train coming to a stop in the Meadowlands station drowned out Judy's long-practiced storm of Bunnyburrow swears to her own ears. Nick's response, however, came through her smartphone loud and clear. "Golly, Judes. You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

Judy bit back another choice swear for the sake of those crowding around her on the platform. She danced her way through the blind legs of fellow commuters, barely managing to snag a seat before the doors closed and the train jerked back into motion. She basked a moment in the train car’s warmth after the frigid winds of the Meadowlands, before returning her mind to the task at hand. "Don't test me, Wilde. Not after the day I've just had."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry." His voice came softer over the phone, warm and comforting like a favorite brand of caramel. "Start from the beginning. You said thirty knife shops?"

"Knife and gun, yeah. Thirty-five, counting a few hardware and fishing supply stores I got pointed in the direction of." She glanced left and right, checking that nobody was eavesdropping; obviously, at any rate. "Why so many? What would mammals even use big knives like this for? Extreme Darts?"

A chuckle over the line, and then, "Gator hunting, mostly. Those biters used to be a major menace over in the Marshlands and Canal District, though nowadays its mostly sport. And for some jobs, bear claws and lion jaws just don’t cut it. Pardon the pun. Heh, ol’ Finnick and I used to make quite the killing selling ‘authentic alligator skin’ vests and belts, before we decided to move to ventures where losing a limb wasn't a daily risk. Well, less of a daily risk, anyway."

Judy couldn’t stop herself from asking “Right, but it wasn’t really alligator skin, right?”

“Of course not,” said Nick. There came a moment’s pause. “It was crocodile.”

Judy laughed. On the outside it was a quick little giggle, befitting an officer in uniform heading back to the station after a long, trying day. On the inside, however, she guffawed, roared, and very nearly literally bust a gut. Something about the banal absurdity of it, the plain matter-of-factness with which Nick presented it as just another of his conman ventures, struck a nerve somewhere in Judy she’d never realized had been there. If she ever found the courage to show her partner off in Bunnyburrow, this was a story she knew her father had to hear.

“Excuse me, officer?”

Returning her attention to the wider world, Judy found a smartly-dressed snow leopard standing in front of her, a soft, if slightly stressed, smile on her face. A fluffy cub in a pink hoodie stood next to her, barely old enough to stand on his own while holding her hand. “Oh! Hello, ma’am, is there a problem?”

“No, no, it’s no problem at all!” Judy switched her phone to her off-hand and took one of the snow leopard cub’s hands in her lead hand, to the mother’s clear relief. “We’ll be right here when
"Oh, thank you so much, officer! I won’t be long, I promise! You be a good boy now, Thomas, Mommy will be right back!"

With a quick ruffle of the boy's head, the snow leopard turned and rushed off down the length of the train car. Judy watched her go for a moment, before returning her attention to her phone. "Well that was sweet."

"There you are, Carrots. I was starting to worry."

"Sorry," she said, giving the cub a smile that he tentatively returned. "Just performing my civic duty, watching a kid while the mom takes care of some business. But anyway, heading back with the stores being mostly a bust. Most I got was one elephant old-timer recognizing the knife as something military issue, but not much else. Please tell me checking on the boyfriend and the victim’s house turned up something?"

“That army thing might be something to pursue… no, I’ve got nothing. The boyfriend had been holed up in his house all day. Apparently, he only found out about the murder through FurBook. Cried the whole time I was there."

Judy pulled the cub closer as an antelope in a heavy coat stalked past. “And it wasn’t an act?”

“Hey, who do you think you’re talking to? And besides, the plethora of wrecked electronics around the house would make for a very expensive con. No, I think the guy’s clean. In for a rough life going ahead, but clean.”

“Wow, plethora. Have you been using that word-a-day calendar I got you after all?”

“Sure, makes a great toaster for my coffee mug.”

“Hah hah.” The clock inside Judy’s head ticked over. She began bouncing a foot against the seat, gaze switching between the train car aisle and the cub, who seemed preoccupied with trying to touch his tongue between his eyes. “Careful there, short stuff. I had a brother who managed that and got stuck.”

The cub yanked his tongue back into his mouth and looked at her in horror. Feeling somewhat guilty now, Judy set her phone down long enough to fish around in her jacket pockets for a pen and notepad for him to amuse himself with, picking her phone back up while absently watching the cub start making little drawings. “And the victim’s apartment?”

“About as useless a trip as the boyfriend. Lot of booze in the fridge, some probably-legal pills in the bathroom, some cute yoga pants I think I’d look absolutely dashing in. A quick mention of the camera guy at the hotel in the diary I swear was open when I got there, but nothing else.”

Judy’s leg picked up its pace as she craned her neck to see down the train car. “Did you bring that up to the boyfriend, by the way?”

“Yeah. He seemed surprised and angry to hear about it.”

“You don’t say…”

“Hey, Carrots, you sound distracted. Everything okay over there?”

“I’m… not sure. I’ll call you back.”
Judy hit END on the call and slid the smartphone back into her pants pocket, before hopping down off her seat. She looked to the cub, putting on the voice and smile she’d use for her own child siblings. “Hey there, little guy! Let’s go find your mom, okay?”

“Okay, Miss Police Officer.”

She took the offered pen and notepad back, then took a firm hold of the cub’s paw. Judy wound her way toward the restroom she thought she’d seen the snow leopard heading for. Approaching, she noticed a cheetah standing outside it, knocking with increasing frustration at the door.

“Come on, lady, you’ve been in there for hours! This ain’t some private relaxation chamber, other people have gotta—what the!?”

Judy saw it at nearly the same moment the rapidly back-pedaling cheetah did, and already her free hand was going for the radio strapped to her bulletproof vest.

A growing pool of blood seeped from beneath the restroom door, staining red all it touched.

***

“Horror rocked the city of Zootopia again last night, upon the discovery of yet another grizzly murder.

“Mrs. Adelaide Charmer, a snow leopard, was found brutally murdered in the private restroom of a cross-Zootopia train as it made its rounds. This comes only one day after the murder of Miss Honey Germaine, an antelope. Both victims were found with their faces removed, reminding many of the brutal Wendigo serial killings some 30 years ago.”

“Coincidentally, both recent murders were discovered by ZPD star Judy Hopps, who viewers will remember for her solving of the Night Howler—”

Chief Bogo sent cracks through the TV as he slammed his fist into the power button, leaving the bullpen silent once more. The eyes of every officer in the room watched the battered machine as Clawhauser wheeled it out, or on the silently-seething cape buffalo at his podium, or else on the bunny sitting stone-still at her usual place at the front of the room, her own eyes forward and paws clasped in front of her. Self-loathing radiated from her. Beside her Nick clenched his hands tight in his lap, or else risk grabbing hers in front of everyone.

Finally, Chief Bogo looked up, drawing all eyes to him as he scanned the room. “That makes it two murders. Two murders in as many days. Absolutely unacceptable.”

Chairs creaked throughout the room. Nick noticed Judy slump lower into her chair and barely restrained himself from growling.

BANG.

Judy shot back to full attention, while elsewhere several officers flinched. Bogo’s stand shuddered from the impact of his fist. “Murders like this do not just happen in our city! Not on any of our watches! Assignments! Hopps, Wilde, considering the similarity of the crimes, assume we are dealing with a copycat of the Wendigo Killer. Get down to Records and dig something up!

“Fangmeyer, Fangmeyer, get down to Beltz and see if there’s anything new to be gleaned from the second victim. Officers Francine, Delgato, Johnson, talk with the husband, see if she might’ve
known she was in danger, if she had any enemies, if she ever stiffed a waiter of a single God-damned penny. The rest of you, same assignments as yesterday, so get to work!”

A chorus of shouts, howls, and roars rang out through the room, Nick joining in for once when he noticed Judy remaining silent. Afterward he waited until the larger mammals had walked past before jumping from his chair, frowning as she remained sitting and staring at nothing. “Carrots? Judy?”

She flinched in her seat and looked over at him, the added height of the chair bringing them about equal for once. “What? I, oh, yeah, right…” She hopped down, giving him a trembling smile. “The… the Records, right?”

Nick nodded slowly, worry gnawing away at him as his partner turned and headed for the door. He glanced over at Bogo still at the stand as Nick followed after her, the chief giving him the briefest, tiniest of nods. Permission, then. That was new, but Nick wasn’t going about to complain.

He waited until they were in the stairwell and relatively secluded from the rest of the station before stopping the rabbit with a paw on her shoulder and spinning her around to face him.

“Nick, what are you—”

He pulled her against him, arms and tail encircling her smaller body as he hugged her for all he was worth. “It wasn’t your fault, Judy.”

“Stop it, I’m fi—”

He hugged her tighter, trying to get her to understand. “It wasn’t your fault, Judy.”

“Stop it, Nick, please, just… just…”

She began trembling in his hold and he pressed his face down into the top of her head, rubbing between her ears as a paw caressed her back. “It wasn’t your fault, Judy.”

She pushed him away then, glaring, her strength surprising for her size. “You don’t know that! You weren’t there! You didn’t have to see the body, fresh and still bleeding, with your own eyes and have to remain calm while everybody around you panicked! You didn’t have to guard the crime scene by yourself for the two and a half minutes it took for the train to reach its next stop! You didn’t have to comfort a cub sobbing for his mother for half an hour until the father managed to show up, all while enduring the endless cameras of vultures want, want… wanting to get a pic of the hero cop’s f-fa-failure for their blog, or news report, or j-j-just their own p-private collection! You… you don’t know…”

Judy initiated the embrace this time, lunging to wrap her arms around Nick’s waist and bury her head into his chest. Once more he wrapped his arms and tail around her, saying nothing as she sobbed against him, making no promises that it would all be better.

The tears eventually ran dry, leaving the rabbit gasping for breath, almost laughing. Reluctantly, Nick unwrapped his tail from her and, leaving his paws on her shoulders, shifted until they stood an arm’s length away. He looked her up and down, not quite happy with what he saw, but it would have to do. “Feeling better?”

She nodded after a moment, looking almost embarrassed. “I kinda feel like I shouldn’t, though. Nothing’s really changed.”

“True,” he said, moving to have one arm over her shoulders as he began guiding them down the stairs to Records. “But you know, all else being equal, let’s try to keep the attitude that’ll best help
catch the killer, yeah? At work, anyway. Off hours and you can use my toned chest to dry your tears all you need.”

She let out a laugh, a fragile sound, and nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Let’s get a move on, then. There’s work to do.”

***

Nick hated visiting Records, though not to quite the same extent as he hated visiting the ZPD CSI labs a floor below. The dusty, often musty smell of the place played havoc with his sensitive fox senses, hammering his mind with the scent of old wood, old wax, and old paper stretching back untold decades.

Nick and Judy found themselves a secluded table in a side room far in the back of the place, and there began working their way through the Wendigo case files the porcupine assistant had retrieved for them.

“Let’s see here. ‘The Wendigo killings lasted from mid-May to late-July, the summer of 1986,’” read off Nick from an official summary report as he paced the length of the room, Judy at the table beside him sorting through grainy photos of long-gone crime scenes and forgotten victims. ‘Hm… ‘In total, 11 deaths were investigated, ranging across a wide spectrum of mammals, with no clear connection or motive to be discovered by investigating detectives. The locations of the crimes were equally varied, from back alleys to hotel suites, leaving little doubt to the murderer’s possible reach.’ Well, nothing about the killings reaching as far as Bunnyburrow, at least.”

“No something I even want to consider, Wilde.”

A rustle of turning pages and a cough. “Right, sorry. ‘The identity and species of the murderer, named the Wendigo Killer by the media, were never discovered, but from the general size of his victims and the method behind what would become his signature, experts have estimated him to most likely have been a medium to large predator.’ Hmph. What a dainty little lamb can’t use a knife?”

No snarky comment at Bellwether’s expense came. Nick stopped his pacing and looked over to the table, where Judy looked decidedly green in the face. “Carrots?”

Judy swallowed and closed her eyes, sliding a series of photos down the table toward Nick. “I don’t think the killer had quite the same technique 30 years ago…”

Nick lifted an eyebrow, trudged over to give the photos a look, and immediately knew that he would not be having lunch that day. The 11 photos, taken by the coroner of those days in the harsh, artificial light of the labs, showed each of the 11 original victims on the slab, ranging from a high school-aged cheetah to a lion greyed with age. Each also showed that the faces had not been sliced off with near-surgical precision, but rather chewed off. Messily.

“Well,” said Judy, as Nick shuffled through the photos. “There’s… there’s one difference at least between the old and new killings. Evidence this is a copycat and not the original?”

“Or just a sign the original’s gotten smart,” said Nick. “A tool like a knife makes up for an older body. Modern fur and DNA identification methods make saliva from chewing like this… too…”

Nick’s thoughts stumbled to a stop as he came upon a photo of a red fox on the examination table. Mid-30s, he guessed from the general physique, tall and lanky for a fox male, the fur a noticeably bright shade of red, the tail tipped with black. “I don’t… remember any fox victims mentioned in the news…”
A low growl left Judy. “Stupid Zootopian speciesism… Nick? You okay there?”

It was impossible. Completely impossible, something to be dismissed out of hand as a matter of course. Yet even so, Nick found himself stuffing the photo of the fox victim into his pants pocket rather than back with the rest as he turned to set them back on the table. “Yeah, I’m, I’m fine. Is there anything else to go through down here? Medical reports, eyewitness testimonies, maybe a lucky fortune cookie?”

Judy sighed and looked back to the mounds of papers. “All of that and more. We could be here all day and night if we don’t start doing this smart. What’s most important of all this? What helps whether we’re dealing with a copycat or the original Wendigo Killer?”

“Who do we know who we could reliably pay to read all this for us?”

Judy shot Nick a glare. He shrugged. “Right, not one of my best, sorry. They can’t all be—”

Judy’s phone began ringing, sending Nick’s mouth shut with a click. Giving him one last look, Judy drew her phone from its pocket and answered. “Hey Clawhauser, what’ve you got?”

Nick watched as Judy’s face performed several fascinating gymnastic feats in the span of several seconds. After the call, she sat there in silence for several seconds, staring off at nothing with the most disbelieving look on her face. Nick might’ve found it funny, if he knew what caused such a reaction. “Uh… Judy? What was the call?”

She jerked into motion suddenly, hurriedly shoving papers and photos back into their boxes. “Get all this stuff packed back up, Nick! We can look at it at home on our own time!”

Eyebrow raised, Nick joined the rabbit at the table. “Ben had good news, then. That’s a change of pace. What, did Wolford or Francine come back with a lead?”

The smile she turned to give him threatened to split her face in half. “Even better. We’ve got ourselves a witness!”

***

Nick tried not to stare. He tried harder than he’d tried at anything before in his life, with the possible exception of trying (and failing) to beat Judy’s CQC scores in the police academy. The clouded leopard sitting across the generic meeting room’s table from him and Judy, alternately fiddling with the strings of his hoodie and the box in his lap as if they were his most solid friends in the world, was probably nervous enough without having police officers staring. Yet, Nick couldn’t help but ponder the significance of nearly two-thirds of the witness’s head being a gnarled mess, a patchwork of scar tissue and off-white fur from below his chin to a mangled right ear, all centered around a right eye as cloudy-grey as the storm brewing outside. A far cry from the sparkling green of his left eye.

“It’s okay if you want to stare,” the clouded leopard said with a bit of a smile, making Nick flush as he realized he’d been doing just that. “I’ve had people staring most of my life. It really doesn’t bother me, anymore.”

“We’re very sorry,” said Judy, echoing Nick’s thoughts. “It, um, it’s not insensitive if we ask…”

“We were very sorry,” said the clouded leopard, easy as answering a question about the weather. “Those Marshlands gators can be killers if you’re careless.”

“Right…” Nick shared a look with Judy, cleared his throat, and flipped open a book for taking notes. “Well, you said you believe you saw the killer last night, Mr…”
“Oh! Uh, Monahan. Taylor Monahan.” Again came that little smile, embarrassed almost as he lifted the box from his lap and set it on the table. “And well, not me personally, but my camera.”

Unasked, Nick pulled the box over to him and opened it, revealing what looked even at a glance to be a high-end piece of video recording equipment. “Woof. I don’t think even a month’s salary could get me one of these.”

Taylor nodded. “Took most of my savings, but it was worth it. Able to record nearly 12 hours at a time with instant playback, night vision said to be as good as a fox’s, infrared, and sound capturing that can keep a mouse’s whispers as easy as an elephant’s…” He paused, the unmarred side of his face blushing at the looks Nick and Judy were giving him. “Sorry, I… I get long-winded about this stuff. Been into filmmaking since before I enlisted.”

Something told Nick to file that away for later. As he continued fiddling with the camera, trying to get it to turn on, Judy kept the questioning going. “So, what were you doing out and about that late into the evening with your camera, Mr. Monahan?”

“Filming,” he replied, taking the camera back with a smile. With the press of a few buttons the attached screen on the camera’s side lit up, showing a placid river, its banks covered in snow turned brown from the trodding of many mammals. High above the river ran a bridge for the cross-Zootopia trains. “You know those dumb political commercials you see every election with people smiling or looking sad, beautiful shots of cities, junk like that? My website has tons of it for sale. Dumb work, but it pays the bills.”

“Amen to paying the bills,” said Nick, taking the offered camera back. Leaning over so Judy could watch as easily as him, Nick hit the clearly marked PLAY button.

At first, they saw nothing out of the ordinary. The late evening sun glinted off the water, birds called in the distance, a rhino couple went trundling past with a stroller. It was a sight Nick could easily imagine playing as some mayoral hopeful decried the economy.

Then, as the sun dimmed further, a red and grey cargo boat entered the frame from upriver, heading at a leisurely pace toward the bridge. Nick’s eyes narrowed as the train whistle sounded a few seconds later, the edge of it coming into view as it sped along the tracks. Just as the boat began to pass under the bridge, a dark figure clearly dropped from the train into the nearby waters, the current video ending just as the figure appeared to start climbing onto the boat.

“I'm sorry I didn’t get anything clearer, Monahan said after a moment’s silence. “I honestly didn’t think anything of it beyond maybe some poor mammal not wanting to pay the full ticket price. But then the news this morning, about the murder—”

“You did fine, Mr. Monahan,” said Judy, voice warm and smile shining. Nick thought she looked ready to vibrate through her chair. “This is more than we ever could have helped for.”

“You did fine, Mr. Monahan,” said Judy, voice warm and smile shining. Nick thought she looked ready to vibrate through her chair. “This is more than we ever could have helped for.”

“Right,” said Nick, eyeing the cargo boat in the frozen image and already trying to think of who could have a ship like that. “What she said. Um, I hope you don’t mind if we keep hold of this for…” He gave the camera a quick shake. “At least until we get the video off of it?”

Monahan grimaced, but shook his head. “If it’s for the case… I’ll get it back once this is all over though, right?”

“Most certainly,” said Judy, while Nick made a show of testing the camera’s weight like he’d seen many a buyer do. The rabbit hopped from her chair and went to the clouded leopard’s side. “I’ll show you out, Mr. Monahan. Please, be aware we may call you back in at any time for further
questioning, so try not to make any plans outside of Zootopia if you can help it. Nick,” she said, turning to him just as he returned the recording equipment back to its box. “If you could get that to Wolford, maybe?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Nick hopping from his chair, box in his arms. As he landed an idea struck him, the kind of inspiration or urge that got him through many a failing con. “Hey, Officer Hopps, what say after this we give our biggest friend a visit?”

***

“I don’t like this, Carrots.”

Keeping her eyes on the road, hard enough to see as it was through the Tundratown snow storm, Judy raised an eyebrow at her partner’s sudden worry. “What do you mean, ‘don’t like this’? Visiting Mr. Big was your idea.”

Sitting in the police cruiser’s passenger seat, Nick took time off from watching poor mammals braving the fitful bursts of snow and howling winds outside to roll his eyes. “Not about Mr. Big. Though yeah, I don’t think a day will come I’m not at least a little uncomfortable visiting the most powerful crime boss in Tundratown. Almost being killed by him tends to do that to a reasonable person.”

“Which explains why I’m not nervous?”

Nick shot her a quick smirk that never reached his eyes. “No, but then, you’re not a normal mammal. No, what’s bugging me is Monahan. It just seems so… convenient. I’d have aborted a con at the first sight of this kind of good fortune.”

The cruiser shuddered over a wind-formed bank of snow in the road. Judy turned onto a smaller pathway, a dark and towering structure slowly emerging out of the haze far ahead of them. “Police work isn’t a con, Nick. Sometimes, lucky breaks just happen. Just look at our first case. What were the chances of you being the last known person to have seen Mr. Otterton? What were the chances of both of you being familiar with Mr. Big? Heck, what were the chances of Mayor Lionheart meeting with his doctor right as we were there to record it?”

“And on the flipside to that,” said Nick, turning to look at his partner, “what are the chances of Mayor Bellwether just happening to be in the natural history museum as we were making our escape through it to the ZPD? That’s right, no chances at all, because she’d been called ahead of time and was waiting for us in one last-ditch effort to trick us. So no, color me suspicious of Monahan just showing up out of the blue.”

A tall stone and metal fence emerged from the storm ahead of them. A towering, heavily built polar bear in a heavy coat waited for them at an arching gateway, waving them through with hardly a glance. Judy gave him a wave and a smile anyway before returning to business. “But why? Say he’s associated with the killer, knew what was going to go down yesterday evening. Why record it and bring it to the police?”

Try as he might, Nick couldn’t think of an answer he felt satisfied enough with to give Judy. Sighing, he turned back to watching the snow through the window. The rest of the car ride passed in silence as they drove to the circular front of Mr. Big’s mansion. They found another polar bear waiting there for them as they parked and climbed out. Nick smiled at the sight of a familiar face. “Raymond! Good to see you, old buddy! How’s the missus treating ya?”

The polar bear rolled his eyes and turned to the mansion’s front door, the towering oak doors big
enough to comfortably fit an elephant through. “Come. Boss waits for you in kitchen. Came just in time to try fresh batch of winter cannoli.”

A dozen half-eaten faces flashed before Nick’s eyes, causing him to share a grimace with Judy. “We’ll, uh, we’ll see how that goes. This case we’re on is a… a pretty gruesome one.”

They followed the polar bear through the house, Nick for once paying little attention to the armed guards lurking in discreet corners and signs of illicit business hastily hidden away from visiting police eyes, contenting himself with watching Judy’s usual awe at the filthy rich trappings to distract from the heavier thoughts of the day. Oil paintings, ancient books, and furniture of the highest craftsmanship never seemed to get old to the rabbit.

They found Mr. Big in the mansion kitchen as Raymond had promised, sitting in his customary chair next to microwaves and toasters and drinking via bendy straw from a polar bear-sized mug of the most delicious-smelling hot chocolate Nick had ever smelled. He might have started drooling, were the guards to either side of the kitchen island not liable to clean up the floor with his face.

“Ahh, Judy, my child. It is a pleasure to see you as always.” He and the bunny exchanged kisses to the cheek, before he turned and gave a less than overjoyed look to Nick. “And Nicky, you seem to still be in one piece. Hmm. I hope you have been treating the godmother to my granddaughter well.”

Nick’s throat suddenly felt all too dry as every eye turned to him. “Well, uh, as well as I possibly can, sir. With the exception of that uh, ultimate act of care, if you know what I mean.”

“Hmm, yes.” The tiny Arctic shrew swiveled his chair to look back to Judy. “And what brings Zootopia’s star police officers to my abode on this, a day of most deplorable weather? I certainly hope you do not believe me to be in any way connected to that evil Wendigo business.”

Judy blanched, eyes widening as if a gun had been pointed at her. “Oh, no! Not at all, never! That is absolutely the farthest from anything we’d ever suspect!”

“Remember to breathe, Judy.”

The growl from Raymond behind him, Nick thought, was worth it as Judy followed his advice. She took a deep breath before pulling a photo from a pocket and showing it to the crime boss. “This is an image from a recording an eyewitness made, seemingly by accident, of who we believe to be the killer escaping the train after yesterday’s murder.”

“Yes, I see. A Mr. Taylor Monahan?”

Judy blinked, looking as surprised as Nick felt. “How…?”

The shrew chuckled and sipped from his hot chocolate. “He is very good at what he does. I have made use of his services on multiple occasions. The boys, they always need some motivational video or whatever. Pfeh.”

“Ah.” Judy seemed to take a moment to find her train of thought again. “Anyway, we were hoping that maybe you might know who that boat belongs to? We ran a quick search through the ZPD computer archives before coming here, but it doesn’t seem to have a record. No markings we’re familiar with either. We entered a request to the shipping associations over in the Canal District, but, well, you know how they can be, heh…”

Though several times his size, Mr. Big took the photo into his paws and stared for near on a minute at the image of the distant cargo boat. “Hmm… yes… yes, I believe I can answer your question, though I’m unsure how useful you will find it.”
“And why would that be?” asked Nick, taking a step forward and lifting an eyebrow, ignoring Raymond’s warning growl. As far back as he could remember in his associations with the crime boss, Nick couldn’t remember the shrew ever showing such worry.

If Mr. Big was bothered by Nick’s question, he did not show it as he handed the photo back to Judy. “The boat belongs to Miss Winona Hite, a powerful and dangerous woman. Head of HiteTech Industries and the private police organization H.A.W.K. She has no personal business within Zootopia herself, but within certain circles she is known to lend out her services and support. All technically legal, as far as I’ve ever heard, and I can’t imagine what she could possibly be doing involved in such crude murders. Not her style.”

“So it’s more likely being used by someone else right now.” Mr. Big nodded at Judy’s thought. She stepped back, smiling again as she gave a little bow. “This has been most helpful, sir. Thank you very much for your assistance.”

“Always my pleasure to help you, Miss Hopps, and to continue to uphold my reputation as an upstanding Zootopian citizen, heh.”

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Back on the downtown side of Zootopia, Nick and Judy discussed their next move over a late lunch of veggie burgers and fries.

“So I texted the boat details to Clawhauser. That should speed up getting a look at it some. Also sent in a request for a background check on Monahan, as per your suspicions.”

Nick nodded as he emptied a packet of ketchup onto his burger. “Oh sweet, I wasn’t sure you cared.”

“Not at first, no.” Judy paused as she ate a handful of fries, washing down with a slurp of soda. “But then he ends up being known by Mr. Big? Like you said, awfully convenient.”

“That’s my girl.” Nick started emptying a second packet onto his burger. “I’ll make a proper big city cynic out of your yet.” The bundle of napkins tossed at his face for this remark went uncommented on as he took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. “Anyway, while you were off doing that, I called to check in with Delgato and the others.”

Judy paused mid-sip, ears up. “Anything case-breaking?”

Nick ate his last fry before answering, taking the time to think. “Maybe. The wolf boys got nothing new from Beltz, but Francine and crew got one juicy detail from Mr. Charmer. Sounds like they’d been dealing with a stalker for a while.”

Judy missed her mouth with the fry, leaving a long line of red trailing up her cheek as she stared at him. Nick laughed and reached over, rubbing the ketchup away with a thumb. “Yeah, I think I made the same face. Seems a week or so ago they found a camera set in a tree in their front yard, giving a perfect view of both the front door and a window looking in on the kid’s bedroom.”

Judy shuddered, her appetite seeming to leave her as she tossed the rest of her food back into the bag. “Just like Germaine and her stalker at the Palm Hotel. Did they file a report on the camera?”

“They’re looking into it right now.” Nick made a show of dabbing at his lips with a napkin, garnering a chuckle from his partner, before shoving his trash into the bag as well. “Which all leaves one question. With everyone working on everything else, what do we do?”
Sighing, Judy jerked her thumb to the backseat, where sat the boxes containing all the records for the original Wendigo murders. “There’s still a lot of that to go through. My place or yours?”

Nick made a show of considering his options, even though there was really only one. “Well, since I doubt we could even fit all that paperwork in your little shoebox…”
A Deadly Encounter

“Name: Fabian Lope.
“Species: sable antelope.
“Age: 24.
“Gender: male.
“Profession: radio DJ and graduate student at Zootopia Tech.

“Found mauled to death in a Grand Rapids Casino restroom, May 17th, 1986. The first victim of what would become known as the Wendigo Killer.”

“Name: Anna Pratorious.
“Species: leopard.
“Age: 49.
“Gender: female.
“Profession: private chef for Mayor Pango.

“Found mauled to death in back storeroom of victim’s favored grocery retailer, Merry Munchings, on May 25th, 1986. The second victim of the Wendigo Killer.”

“Name: Peter Wolfwood.
“Species: timber wolf.
“Age: 17.
“Gender: male.
“Profession: student at Meadowlands High School, quarterback for Meadowland Marauders.

“Found mauled to death beneath the bleachers of the high school’s pawball field, June 1st, 1986. The third victim of the Wendigo Killer.”

“Name: Melinda Cattage.
“Species: cheetah.
“Gender: female.
“Profession: singer for the Zootopia Harmonics.

“Found mauled to death in her Rainforest District home, June 8th, 1986. The fourth victim of the Wendigo Killer.”
“Name: John Doe.
“Species: red fox.
“Age: 30.
“Gender: male.
“Profession: unknown.


“Name: George Savage.
“Species: lion.
“Age: 64.
“Gender: male.
“Profession: retired.

“Found mauled to death on personal yacht a quarter-mile out into the Bay, June 22th, 1986. The sixth victim of the Wendigo Killer.”

"Name: Elsa Shrewder.
“Species: yak.
“Age: 34.
“Gender: Male to Female trans.

“Found mauled to death in the park surrounding Little Rodentia, June 29th, 1986. The seventh victim of the Wendigo Killer.”

“Name: Maurice Llama’rche.
“Species: llama.
“Age: 16.
“Gender: female.
“Profession: student at Sahara High.

“Found mauled to death in Sahara High locker room, July 5th, 1986. The eighth victim of the Wendigo Killer.”

“Name: Miles MacReady.
“Species: black bear.
“Age: 29.

“Gender: male.

“Profession: police officer for ZPD Precinct 1.

“Found mauled to death in Canal District warehouse, July 12th, 1986. The ninth victim of the Wendigo Killer.”

“Names: Lin and Hinata Lee

"Species: panda.


"Professions: owners and operators of Crescent Express.

"Found mauled to death inside restaurant kitchen July 19th, 1986. The tenth and eleventh victims of the Wendigo Killer. Blood found on their paws suggest the couple injured their attacker in the struggle.”

Judy stared at the papers a moment more, hoping the needed answers would materialize if she did so long enough. When they didn’t, she sighed and tossed the papers onto the table Nick had dragged over to his bed and flopped backward, letting the layers and layers of blankets envelope her in the rich scent of her partner. “I’ve read through those five times and if there’s any connection between the victims, it’s not one a sane mind can make.”

Down the bed from her, Nick slammed his own stack of papers onto the desk. “Nothing that matters, at any rate. Maybe the school-aged victims met at parties, maybe a lot of them frequented the Chinese restaurant, maybe the ZPD officer had arrested some of them. Nothing that can be substantiated this long afterward. Damn it!”

Judy flinched at the swear and looked over at her partner. The sight of her fox hunched over the table with his head in his paws, ears back and eyes clenched shut, hurt like a broken bone. “It’s going to be okay, Nick. We’ve never failed a case yet!”

“First time for everything,” he muttered, dragging his paws up and over his face to the back of his head. He stared at the movie poster-plastered wall across the room from him for a moment, eyes flicking to spots unseen. Then he suddenly shoved the table away from the bed and hopped off to the floor, grabbing the ceramic replica knife from the nightstand at the foot of the bed. “Yo Carrots, dance with me a moment, won’t you?”

Every natural instinct in Judy’s body screamed at her not to obey the frustrated, knife-wielding fox. She pushed that all aside and stood up, moving to stand three feet from Nick and facing toward him. “What is this, some kind of crime scene re-enactment?”

In answer, Nick crossed the distance between them in two long strides, knife raised. Judy forced down the fighting response drilled into her at the police academy and let him grab her by the shoulder, pulling her until their fronts pressed together and the knife edge danced across her throat, tickling through the fur. It made her shiver. “Nick?”

At her voice he frowned and spun her around, paw moving from her shoulder to cover her mouth. “He came at them from behind, easier to keep them calling for help. But…” The knife pressed against her throat again, tangibly uneasy now, uncertain. “Judy, you saw the second victim better
Judy grimaced beneath the paw covering her mouth. Closing her eyes, she steadied herself as she thought back to that moment on the train, forcing the restroom door open to the sight of the snow leopard slumped in a corner. Her eyes glassy and staring into nothing, the viscous red of the exposed muscle and bone, the slash across the throat, like a second mouth, a lopsided frown.

Reaching up, Judy took hold of Nick’s paw and carefully angled the knife over, directing the tip further to her chin, the crossguard pressing into her throat. Not easy, with how much taller the fox was to her. Once she was done she let go and gave a thumbs-up.

“Shorter than the snow leopard,” said Nick, to which Judy nodded. “Probably not as heavily built, either. Not too much smaller though, or else he—”

“Oh she,” said Judy, pulling his paw off her mouth.

“Or she,” agreed Nick, “wouldn’t have been strong enough to hold the leopard in place long enough to do the deed. A wolf, maybe…”

Judy rolled her eyes. “Do you mind letting go of me, Shetlock Holmes?”

Silence, the fox above her still, tense. Suddenly nervous, Judy reached up to pry the knife from her throat. The moment she managed to get it out of his paw and toss it to the table, both of Nick’s arms wrapped around her belly and chest, keeping her close. Now Judy’s bunny instincts were shrieking, her heart thundering in her chest as she fought to keep her breathing calm and steady. “Nick, seriously, this isn’t the time for—”

“Carrots?”

Immediately, Judy stopped trying to pull away, instincts quieting at the sound of the familiar nickname, spoken not in a predator’s voice, but in a scared little kit’s. “Nick?”

Several seconds passed before something wet dropped onto Judy’s head, followed by a sniffle. “You trust me, right? You trust me for this case, and this killer, and just to be in your life, right?”

Oh.

Squirming in the fox’s hold, Judy turned herself around to face him once more. She looked up into her partner’s green eyes and wished she could tear away all the pain that this case, or the original Wendigo Killer case, or those thoughtless family comments from days earlier, had somehow caused him. “With my life, Nick. Always.”

The kiss that followed was wet and breathless, shooting fireworks through Judy from the tips of her ears to the bottoms of her paws. Her only regret was that the buzzing of her phone getting a text interrupted the moment only a few seconds in.

“Delgato here. Clawhauser found the mystery boat. Sending directions to the shipping warehouse and attached pier now. Meet you down there with Francine.”

***

The snow had stopped by the time Judy pulled their cruiser into the gravel parking lot of Ratterson’s Shipping & Travel, stacks of corrugated shipping containers and pyramids of rusting drum barrels groaning in the wind behind a chain-link fence. If anything, though, the world felt colder, the air dry and rough beneath that cloudy sky. Nick’s mother, in his youth, called it the kind of cold that stole
the breath away. The kind of cold that cut through even the heaviest coats. The kind of cold that felt like death.

BANG.

Nick flinched as the sound of the cruiser doors slamming shut rang through the air like gunshots. Pulling his jacket tighter, he followed Judy to where Officers Delgato and Francine stood by the chain-link gate into the compound, in heated discussion with a nick-eared ferret. From the twitching of Judy’s ears, Nick guessed the exchange was none-too-friendly.

“Hi!” shouted Judy once she got within what Nick deemed proper civil discourse distance, the other two officers looking visibly relieved as the ferret turned his attention to her. “Officer Hopps here, this is my partner, Officer Wilde. My fellow officers have explained our reason for being here, yes?”

The ferret squinted at her, the coat and multiple scarves he wore seeming to do little against the cold as he shivered and coughed. “Yeah, they told me, and I’m t-telling you what I t-told them back. All my boat’s just been sitting there at the pier all week, collecting rust. So unless one of you’s carrying a warrant, we ain’t continuing this conversation.”

Nick rolled his eyes at this tough-guy act, thinking back to his old hustling days and glad he could boast that he at least never had to rely on the old “Where’s your warrant?” defense. Too weak, too many loopholes, loopholes he and Judy knew all about.

A sudden gale whipped their collective coats and scarves into a frenzy, setting Nick into a growl. Tired of being exposed out there in the cold and figuring the shipping containers would at least provide some wind blockage, he cleared his throat and stepped even with Judy, sharing a look with her. After two seconds she sighed and nodded. A glance at Delgato and Francine showed the lion and elephant suddenly busy on their smartphones, the sounds of the latest Furbook fad blaring out.

“Hey, what are you cops playing a—”

Nick stepped into the ferret’s personal space, cutting him off with a toothy smile. “You know, I have a very, very BIG friend who might be interested in acquiring some property around here. He would probably be a little peeved if he found out the ferret he had to buy the place from said no to his favorite cops in the world. He’s not BIG on personal slights, if you get my meaning.”

“You mean—”

“All I’m saying,” Nick said, stepping back and keeping up that smile, “is that cops like us, as you so helpfully pointed out, need warrants to go some places, and there are mammals who don’t need warrants. It’s a common hazard every business owner needs to be aware of that I, as a wholesome police officer, feel you have not been properly warned of.”

By the end of the speech, everyone there knew the ferret would have been shivering even had it been a blazing summer day. With a panicky little laugh he began digging through his coat’s pockets for the gate keys. “No, no, uh, upon second thought, it has occurred to me that I’ve really got no reason to withhold a simple search of a boat from such upstanding, uh, cops as you four. P-please, just give me a moment and—”

Not moving half a foot, Francine reached over and shoved the gate open, metal screeching against metal and chips of rust scattering.

“—and, er, right. Please, follow me then, officers.”

Grinning at a job well done, Nick let himself fall back to the rear of small group as it started through
the storage yard, arms up and behind his head. Beside him Judy sighed, though it didn’t take rabbit ears to hear her amusement. “You enjoy playing that card too much, Nick, she whispered. “One of these days someone is going to actually call you on it, and then where will you be?”

“At your side,” was the easy response, “fighting our way out like the daring ZPD partners we are.”

“Hm.” She nodded and quickened her pace, closing the gap that had grown between them and the others and forcing him to do likewise. “Yeah, good answer.”

Up ahead, the ferret began talking about the boat in response to some unheard question from Francine. “The boat’s been here three, going on four months now. One of those old-fashioned fishing trawlers, the kind you’d see in some 70s shark movie. Practically scrap, probably sold off as some money laundering thing. Not that I know. I keep my nose clean, don’t care about none of that. Some guy, a big cat, he rents it out every couple of days, no cargo or anything on it when he leaves or comes back. None that I ever see anyway, and appearances aside, I run a tight ship here. Pun intended. Anyway, I figure he takes it over to the Marshlands for gator hunting.”

Nick looked to Judy and found her looking at him. There it was, another connection to that deadly sport.

“Seems like an odd choice of boat for navigating the Marshlands,” said Francine.

“Not the oddest I’ve seen used,” said the ferret with a shrug. “Old scrap or not, it’s touch scrap. You lose more idiot hunters from bad equipment and lack of sense than anything else. Ah, here we are.”

They’d rounded a corner in the maze of shipping containers, bringing them out onto the business’ private piers. Half a dozen yards ahead, the boat they came for floated alone and… Nick wouldn’t exactly call it proud, but it was there. More rust and rot than metal and wood, its sails stripped down in favor of heavily added-on-to engines in the rear, Nick thought the tug looked as likely to explode as to turn on.

“What a piece of junk,” said Delgato, jerking Nick away from similar thoughts with his unexpected closeness. Does that thing even start?”

“Well if it didn’t,” said the ferret, huffing as he pulled ahead of them, eyes on the boat, “it wouldn’t have been in whatever crime or junk you people think it was. What are you even wanting to come see it for anyway?”

“Physical evidence,” said Judy, distractedly. Nick frowned to see her ears twitching, turning every direction. “This mammal fell far. Must have knocked something loose.”

“Maybe a tooth,” Nick chimed in, to nobody’s amusement. He frowned at the overall atmosphere, a sense of foreboding hitting him as they came within a few yards of the boat, something picking at his hustler’s sense for danger. To his left walked Judy, fully alert, nose twitching as a paw gravitated to the tranquilizer gun holstered on her hip. Ahead walked Francine and the ferret manager, in conversation again as the elephant helped the smaller mammal up onto the deck of the boat. In-between walked—

—no, thought Nick, in-between stalked Delgato, the lion tense, eyes roving everywhere as his steps slowed. Slowed and edged, ever so slightly, to position Francine between him and the boat.

Suddenly Judy shot to full attention, turning and tackling him to the splintered and ice-cracked pier. “Everybody dow—”

BOOM.
The shipping boat disappeared in a flash of blinding fire, the ferret going with it, Francine bellowing as fire and shrapnel downed her, the shockwave of the explosion knocking Delgato off his feet. A shard of wood planted into the ground an inch from pinning Nick’s right ear to the ground. It felt like winter had turned, for several terrible seconds, into the heart of a Sahara Square summer.

Then Judy was rolling off of him and back to her feet, radio already to her mouth as she ran from the pier. “Dispatch, this is Officer Hopps! 10-00 and dead civilian! Ratterson’s Shipping & Travel, right at the piers! Suspect is fleeing and I am in pursuit!”

Suspect?

Still dazed and reeling, Nick forced himself onto his hands and knees in time to see a figure disappear into the maze of shipping containers and drum barrels, Judy a few yards behind. “Aw, cripes! Hopps, wait!”

Fighting through his aching body, Nick stood and began following, first hobbling, then running. Glancing back at the crime scene, he saw Delgato also getting to his feet. “Check on Francine and wait for the ambulance!”

Nick only barely saw the large lion nod before entering the cargo field and losing all sight of him, Francine’s distressingly-motionless body, and the still-burning wreck of what had minutes before been their best lead. The entire world beyond the shipyard disappeared, leaving only metal walls three to four times Nick’s size all around, the crunch of multiple feet kicking up snow and gravel, the echoes of Judy’s calls for the suspect to stop, and Nick’s own unsteady breathing.

Making a turn, Nick saw a bunny ear disappearing around a stack of barrels. Past that, Judy’s shadow against a rust-encrusted old ship hull moaning in the wind. Nick ran to it, turned, so only more barrels to one side and wooden crates to the other. He ran down that makeshift corridor until it split into an intersection. No sign of which way his partner had gone.

“Hopps!”

The crash of falling barrels echoed down the left-hand path in answer. Nick drew his stun gun and ran down it, ears perked for the slightest sound. “Judy, where the Hell are—”

He skid to a halt at the corner, catching sight of a heavy-coated figure pointing a gun right at him before he dove back behind the wall of wood crates. A bullet shattered the corner of a crate near his head, splinters peppering the arm he’d raised just in time to shield his eyes. A second bullet tore through near his leg, sending gravel spraying and Nick backpedaling until he fell onto his rear. He grappled for the radio hooked to his belt. “Dispatch, we’ve got shots fired! Suspect is armed! I’ve lost contact with Officer Hopps! I could use some blasted backup right about now!”

Whatever Clawhauser said in response, it was lost to Nick as a cold, iron voice rose up from just around the corner. “Never took you for a coward, Wilde. Should have, I suppose. You are just a fox, after all.”

Nick dropped the radio, scrambling back to his feet and leveling his stun gun at the corner with both paws. “Drop your weapon and come out with your paws up!”

“Of course,” continued the voice, perhaps a foot or two away, “your father went out about the same, so perhaps it’s a family thing?”

Nick paused, brow furrowing as he edged closer to the corner. “What… what do you mean by that?”

“You should know,” came the voice again, rich with mirth. “You kept the photo, didn’t you? Why
did you keep the photo of the fox victim, unless… but it just seemed too perfect, didn’t it? Poor old Nick Wilde, too scared to find out what happened to his daddy.”

Nick shook his head, teeth clenched to aching, hands trembling around his gun, thumb flicking it to maximum voltage. The photo, still in his pocket, burned. It couldn’t be. It couldn’t. It—

“James, that was his name, right? James Wilde?” The voice let out a mirthless chuckle. “Oh, he was a screamer. Not like you. Maybe your bunny partner will be more fun…”

A veil of blood and fire fell over the world and Nick’s veins SCREAMED over it. He snarled and leapt around the corner, caught sight of a figure turning a corner five yards ahead, and ran after him, no thought for safety, no fear, nothing but anger and hate and the promise of pain and revenge and justice and—

Around the corner, a figure, blurred by speed and tears, a weapon leveled at Nick. He squeezed off a shot with his stun gun first. In the instant before impact the raging veil lifted and Nick registered Judy’s terrified face. Then there came an ear-splitting ZAP, a short-lived scream as electricity visibly coursed over Judy’s body, and then the THUMP of her falling lifeless to the ground.

Nick dropped the used stun gun, further pursuit forgotten as he fell to his motionless partner’s side. "Oh God! Oh God, oh God, Judy!” She made no sound, gave no sign of hearing him, glassy gaze up to the gray sky. Nick choked back a sob and ripped first the still-smoking stun gun barbs from the bunny's gut, then her bulletproof vest from her chest, cursing all the while at whatever had blown her coat open. An ear to her chest gave him no heartbeat, a finger to her neck only a weak and failing pulse.

"Noooo, God damn it, Judy, stay with me!"

Nick's paws shook as he pressed them to Judy's chest, putting his full weight behind each compression and terrified he'd hear a breaking rib. "Five... Ten... Fifteen... Twenty... Twenty-five..."

After thirty compressions he pinched her nose and sealed his lips against hers. He gave a breath, watched her chest rise with it, then gave another breath and started again on the compressions.

"Five... Ten... Fifteen... Twenty... Twenty-five..."

Another thirty compressions, another two breaths for her, and then a third set, until his arms felt like jelly and his ears rang. He'd just started leaning over to breathe for her a third time when her chest rose on its own, then fell, a breath like a sigh leaving her.

“Judy!”

“Nick,” she mumbled back, gaze drifting for a moment before finding him. Her lips turned up into a weak smile. “Foxes… so emotional…”

Nick laughed, then cried, body-wracking sobs that left his muscles aching, because it wasn’t funny, not at all. He grabbed her into a hug, mindful of her bruised chest. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m s-s-so sorry…”

“Shh… it’s okay… it’s okay…”

Officers arriving to the scene found the pair this way two minutes later, two partners broken by a foe they had yet to meet.

***
“The Waterfront was a scene of massive horror earlier today, gunfire and explosions reported coming from Ratterson’s Shipping & Travel.

“Following what is being reported as a police encounter with the resurgent Wendigo Killer, Sergeants Judy Hopps and Francine Franco were rushed to Zootopia General. The owner and manager of the shipping company, Richard, Ratterson, was also killed. While the state of Officer Hopps is unknown, Officer Franco is in Intensive Care. We at Zootopia News wish both of them a speedy recovery.

“In other news, another victim of the Wendigo Killer has been identified. At 8:31 this evening, Mr. Inigo Lupine, star quarterback of the Sahara Sailors, was found dead in his home by his husband, Charles Lupine. This makes the third such victim in as many days.

“In light of these recent events, some are calling into question the ZPD’s ability to maintain law and order within the city, wondering if perhaps it is time for Zootopia to follow the example of other cities, such as San Dingo, and their use of the private enforcement initiative H.A.W.K. Mayor Swinton, however, has gone on record with her continuing support for Chief Bogo and his officers.

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“—and if you think I’m going to keep supporting you and your ragtag bunch of idiots without some sign of progress, then your brain’s as dull as your horns!”

Nick flinched where he sat in the corner of the police chief’s office, looking from the put-upon cape buffalo behind the desk to the pig in a yellow dress and red jacket pacing in front of it. That had been the third insult toward Bogo’s intelligence in the last five minutes. Nick wasn’t sure if he found her unending inventiveness or Bogo’s ability to weather it more impressive.

“Mayor Swinton, please—”

Swinton stopped and whirled to jab a sharp-hoofed finger at Bogo. “Don’t ‘Mayor Swinton’ me, buffalo butt! Do you have any idea how awful this situation looks… on me!? Or how worse it will look if it gets out that Zootopia’s favorite cop was downed by Zootopia’s SECOND-favorite cop!? Next year is an election year, Bogo, I do not need this!”

There she went, thought Nick, seeing Bogo’s features turn from placating to glaring. Insult him all you want, but don’t ever disregard the safety of the city in front of him. “Mayor Swinton,” the cape buffalo growled, making the pig actually back away a step. “I appreciate the concern for your political career, but right now two of my best officers are in the hospital. Don’t think for a moment I will consider ELECTIONS a better motivation to stop this killer than that.”

Swinton, to her credit, rallied herself swiftly, taking only a moment to clear her throat and straighten her jacket. “Of course, yes, absolutely. What matters is the… public safety. Just know that City Hall is expecting results fast, Bogo, and I am the voice MOST on the ZPD’s side. I can’t promise if—”

A knocking came from the door, and at a call to enter Yara Elloway, Mayor Swinton’s cheetah assistant, poked her head in. “Ma’am? Your meeting with HiteTech Industries to finalize that Nocturnal District land purchase is in half an hour.”

“Oh God,” groaned Swinton, rubbing between her eyes. “At least that’s still going smoothly. I’m coming, I’m coming.”

A final look at Bogo, followed by a sneer at Nick, and the pig strode out of the police chief’s office as if heading to war, leaving only the two ZPD officers. Once the door was closed, Bogo turned his
glare on Nick, who flinched back from it as if struck. Not saying a word, he gestured to the chair across from him in front of the desk, Nick hurriedly moving from his position in the corner to sit in it.

“Now then. Wilde.” Bogo’s voice was subtle acid. “Mayor Swinton is wanting for someone to crucify in all this. Can you tell me any reason why I shouldn’t tear that badge off your chest right this instant and throw you out on the street?”

Out on the street. Out of the ZPD. Out to the vultures.

Nick looked at his police badge. The metal was worn now, scratched and dented, the lettering somewhat faded. Yet Nick could still remember the way the badge gleamed in the summer sun as it was pinned on at his graduation. As Judy pinned it on, his partner and friend, the rabbit he loved and had nearly robbed the world of.

Sighing, Nick removed the badge and tossed it onto Bogo’s desk. The clatter of its landing deafened with a sense of finality.

Bogo stared at the abandoned badge as if it were some kind of scandalizing photograph, before looking back up at Nick. He spoke now with concern as well as anger. “What’s the meaning of this, Wilde?”

Nick shrugged, turning his gaze to his lap. Stuffing his paws in his pockets, he felt the forgotten autopsy photo of the fox victim—of his father—and clenched it tight. “I am emotionally compromised, sir. I’d… I’d rather walk out with my head up, if it’s all the same.”

Silence. Nick glanced up, found his gaze caught by Bogo’s, unable to look away as the police chief spoke. “This isn’t only about your partner, is it, Wilde? What’s gotten under your skin that makes you think I’d just let you walk away like the coward fox you pretend to be?”

Nick almost groaned. All hope of getting out of the building and back home without having to spill his guts out to his (former?) boss of all people, fled before the unyielding glare levelled at him. Sighing, he drew the crumpled photograph from his pocket and tossed it as he did his badge. This time Bogo caught it, spreading it out on the desk and looking it over. “Chief, you think there’s ever a good time to discover your father didn’t just walk out when you were a child? You think there’s ever a better person to tell you this than a murderer?”

Chief Bogo’s face grew pale, fists tightening where they rested on the desk. It was the most horror Nick had ever seen his boss express, and it left him stunned as Bogo stood up. In the darkened office, towering over Nick, he seemed a terrible figure. “Three-week suspension. Half-pay. Leave your weapons and tools with Clawhauser at the front desk.”

“Sir, I—”

“I know your intent was to quit,” said Chief Bogo, trampling over Nick’s attempted objection as easily as he might have trampled over Nick himself. “But I will not have it. Every cop in every precinct eventually has a case that breaks them a little. I can hardly blame you for getting a worse one than most.”

Nick drew back into his seat as Chief Bogo stomped around to his side of the desk, shoving his badge and his father’s photo into his face as if they were a forgotten lunch developing a particularly foul mold. “Now get out of my sight, Wilde.”

It was funny, Nick thought, how your hands could be shaking and you not even realize it until you tried grabbing something. Throat dry, he pocketed the photo and badge, standing and giving his boss
a quick salute before turning and walking, not running, out the door.

Outside the ZPD headquarters, Nick found the air throat-achingly cold, a fresh snowfall gusting at an angle from ragged cloud cover, the full moon the brightest thing to be seen no matter the direction one looked. Few walked the darkened streets alongside Nick, three murders enough to send all but the bravest, the dumbest, or the most desperate indoors. What vehicles were to be seen on the streets passed by like ghosts in the night, solemn and silent.

Hiking his collar up against the wind, Nick started down the street, feeling no reason to hurry to his home, alone. And like all who walked through that area, as he walked he found his eyes drawn to the developing mural on the side of city hall. With every murder, the unseen vandalizers grew more detailed and macabre in their work of art. The faceless figure towered now over scribbings of prostrate mammals, his antlers with an improbable number of wicked tines, the knife in one hand changed to an axe, the other hand holding aloft a crude heart.

“But that’s not right,” Nick found himself saying, stopping half a dozen yards from the mural. “The killer removes the face, not the heart…”

“I don’t know, maybe it’s supposed to represent the city’s heart.”

Nick turned to his left, a snarky comeback to Judy’s insight half-formed on his lips. But nobody was there, and certainly no Judy. She was back at the hospital still, and would be at least a few days. No more playful banter between them.

Ears folding back, Nick lowered his head and started trudging through ankle-deep drifts of snow for the bus stop once more. He paid little heed to the motorcycle idling near the Natural History Museum some yards off, its wolf rider watching him go with professional interest.
Progress On All Fronts

When Judy awoke, it was to a shallow, uncertain breathing she took a moment to recognize as her own. Better than the day before, when she had been brought in, and hopefully, worse than it would be tomorrow.

The ceiling, when she opened her eyes, wasn't the same pristine but dull white she had gone to sleep staring up at. A quick glance around told her she'd been moved from Intensive Care to a general hospital room while she slept. It was hard to see much of it past the sea of flowers and Get Well Soon cards, but she could make out the pair of older bunnies resting in a chair right up next to her bed to her right well enough. "Mom, Dad."

The two jumped at her voice, taking a moment to orient themselves before focusing on her. Then they were both up there in the hospital bed with her, voices a blur of blessings and prayers and proclamations of worry for her. Judy kept up with their competing voices as best she could as she hugged them back. Mom, Dad, I'm-I love you, what-of course I was-my job—"

"Ahem."

The hugging fest broke, Bonnie and Stu pulling back as Judy turned to the otter doctor standing at the door, amused but patient as he scribbled something on his clipboard. "Well, that answers questions concerning patient awareness, at any rate."

"Sorry, doctor," said Bonnie, Stu nodding beside her. "We were only, I mean, we've been waiting since morning—"

"Morning?" Judy looked from her parents to her doctor and back again. A feeling of having slept too long, of having missed something important, filled her. "What time is it?"

"2:45 in the PM," said the doctor, Fallwell, according to his nametag as he trotted over to the free side of Judy's bed and began checking her vitals. "We thought it best for you to sleep as much of this off as possible. You had a very close call there, you know."

"Yeah," said Judy, looking down to her hands in her lap as she remembered the look of utter hate on Nick's face as he shot her. She turned to her parents to distract herself from it. "I'm really sorry for scaring both of you like this. All these years trying to show you I could handle this job, and then this happens..."

"It's okay, Bun-bun," said Bonnie, reaching out to take one of Judy's hands. "What matters is that you're here and safe. Your father and I came to terms with the danger a long time ago."

Judy smiled at hearing this, squeezing her mother's hand tight as she could. Then she looked around as someone's absence became noticeable. "I'm surprised... has Nick been by yet?" She hadn't seen him since arriving at the hospital.

Bonnie and Stu shared a Look, Judy's father being the one to speak this time. "We haven't seen the fox all day. Nobody we've talked to has. He won't answer his phone, either, and we've lost track of the number of times we've called. Your boss, Bogo, said he'd been suspended."

Judy jerked in shock at this, getting a disapproving look from Fallwell as he checked and recorded her pulse. She ignored the look, barely restraining herself from jumping out of that hospital bed in search of her dumb fox. "Oh no... he must be blaming himself so much right now..."
"But... isn't he, though? From what we've heard, he—"

"Didn't do it on purpose," Judy supplied, glaring down her parents from objecting. "I don't know why it happened, but I can't... I can't believe it wasn't an accident. I trust... I mean, I WANT to trust him still."

"But WHY, Bun-bun? Why? A friend doesn't just not visit a friend in the hospital!"

Judy tried to speak, tried to answer, but the words to express what she and Nick were wouldn't come. Clacking her mouth shut, she let go of her mother's hand and turned to Doctor Fallwell. "When's the earliest I can leave? I need to find my partner."

The otter finished scribbling his final findings down before looking up at her. "Well, assuming we can avoid any undue stress during your stay, the earliest you can reasonably leave—"

"No," said Judy, stopping him. "The EARLIEST I can leave."

He stared at her a moment before looking away, lips moving as he seemed to run some calculations to himself. "If you took the right heart medicine with you... perhaps tomorrow noon..."

"Judy!" Her mother trembled, either in fear or outrage. "You can't possibly put yourself back out there like this!"

"Your mother's right," said Stu, sounding firmer than his thoroughly wrung hat implied. "Not for some friend who wouldn't even visit... Jude?"

Judy blinked, raising a hand to wipe away her tears as she smiled. She knew her parents probably had some suspicions, the way Nick almost always hung around whenever they visited, but this wasn't how she imagined it happening at all. "That's, um, that's the thing, Dad. We're not friends."

"Expected a lot from ya, Nick, but I never expected to find you at the bottom of a bottle."

Nick didn't look up as Wolford sat to his right at the bar counter, ignoring him thoroughly as he signaled for another round.

"I'll have one of what he's having, and the bill while you're at it."

"You're gonna regret doing that," said Nick, running a claw along the rim of one of the many glasses littering the countertop in front of him. "What I'm having is strong and plentiful, and not for the light of wallet. Thankfully, though, I don't have many worries for the future. That requires a future."

The badger bartender set two glasses of a reddish amber drink down in front of the fox and wolf. Wolford chuckled as he picked up his glass, admiring the light through the contents. "You sound like me from my teenage emo phase. This must be the good stuff."

"She's sleeping over with a friend," replied the wolf. He downed his whole glass in one gulp, shuddering as he slammed the glass down next to the bill. "I was wrong. That's the real good stuff."

"Told ya you'd... you'd..." Things blurred for Nick for a moment, swaying in his seat as Wolford
paid and helped him stand up. A blink took them outside, Nick nearly vomiting from whiplash. Savannah Central was misty with rain that night, empty with the mammals driven in by the latest murder. "Regret it. All regrets, like... tears in the rain... That was my dad's favorite movie. I'd not thought about that in years, but it all comes back now. It'd be better not to remember, I think..."

They made their slow way down the block to where Wolford's sensible blue Prius waited, the wolf filling the rain and air with friendly chatter. "It's a bad night to be drinking, lad. The rain'll give ye a nasty headache, my mum always said. Best wait for dry weather, and with a friend. I visited Judy earlier, she seemed fine. Already itching to get out of the hospital, of course. I think her parents were by earlier, but she didn't want to——"

Nick stopped them under a awning for a clothing store, preferring at least to stay dry as he threw his life away. Especially with the company he saw parking behind the wolf. "Wolford... buddy... pal... I don't give a shit. Not about you, not about the weather, not about that dumb cottontail, and ESPECIALLY not about anything anyone might think about me, or my dad, or any of that... that doesn't matter, anymore. What difference does it make anyway, that my dad was murdered and not just flown the coop? He's still gone, yeah?"

"Yeah," said Wolford, joviality gone from his voice so thoroughly it made Nick blink and take a step back. "Yeah, sure he's still gone. But, I figure it'd make all the difference in the world to my Alexis if she could say her mom didn't want to leave, that she would've stayed if she could. But she didn't, and Alexis can't say that, so if you could kindly not act like nobody in the world knows what you're going through, that'd be great."

The rain fell around them, an all-encompassing scent that washed the world clean to Nick's nose. A truck rumbled past, splashing Nick's feet and the backs of Wolford's legs, but even once Nick had finished swearing and kicking the water off best he could, the wolf remained looking sad and wet at him. And Nick found he couldn't look his fellow officer in the eyes. "I just... I always thought he just didn't want me..."

Wolford nodded, wrapping an arm around Nick's shoulders and resuming leading him to the wolf's car. Nick gave no further resistance, head down and eyes watching their feet splash through the rainwater. Waves hit waves, consuming or cancelling or repelling, aimless any way.

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"Everything’s going beautifully, ma’am. The killings continue unopposed and they’re fracturing under the stress. Your moving in should be easy with just a few more."

"Good work, Mr. Blue. And the other?"

"He’s too unstable to be more than a gun to aim at troublemakers, at best."

"Disappointing, but expected. Continue as you have been. Oh, and, a warning. I’ve received word that Savage is almost done with his vacation. Do be done before he returns."

"It shall be done, Miss White."

***

BBRRRRRRR... BBRRRRRRR... BBRRRRRRR...

Nick groaned as he was hauled kicking and screaming back to consciousness, head ringing harder than his phone ever could. He twisted within the sweltering cocoon his blankets had formed during the night, wiggling and grunting before finally getting his head above water and taking a deep,
gasping breath.

BBRRRRRR... BBRRRRRR... BBRRRRRR...

More grunting, more pulling and twisting, and Nick managed to get an arm free from the blanketsturned-boa constrictor. Eyes still sealed shut, he grooped about his nightstand, finding first an emptied beer bottle, then a case of (legal?) pills, then another bottle, before finally finding his smartphone.

BBRRRRRR... BBRRRRRR... BBRRRRRR...

With the greatest of effort, Nick cracked open his eyelids as one cracks the seals to a long-lost Egyptian tomb and stared at the number calling. In his current state he found himself unable to recall if it was a number he knew intimately or had never seen in his life, and so, answered. "Hell... Hello?"

"Nick, it's Judy!"

Nick wished it wasn't too late to go back to drowning in his sheets. "Oh... Judy... Hey..."

"Oh gosh, Nick, you sound awful. Are you sick? Have you been drinking?"

His neck gave a pop as he looked around. The thin, wispy light streaming through the blinds near his bed was enough to make out the copious bottles and chip bags strewn about the bedroom floor, testaments to his last few days. The clock on the nightstand glared 7:15 at him. "No. No I haven’t. What are you calling for, Hopps?"

A pause on the other end of the line. Nick could imagine the rabbit staring off at nothing with wide eyes, nose twitching at the use of her last name.

Finally, “I’m calling because there’s still a job to do. I know Ratterson’s was a disaster, but—”

“Shut it, Hopps.” It hurt to talk with such hostility to his partner, his friend, but hearing her voice hurt Nick far worse, worse in how relieved it made him felt. Better, he thought, to cut that off at the source.

“Nick?”

“You should be home in Bunnyburrow, recovering from your dumbass partner nearly killing you! Don’t call me again, don’t think about me, don’t think about the case, just… just don’t!”

“Ni—"

Nick jabbed the END CALL button. When another call came only seconds later he snarled, hit IGNORE, and threw the phone across the room. The thunk of it hitting the wood of his bedroom door gave him no relief.

A minute of silence passed as Nick stared up at a ceiling blurred by tears and remembered how Judy bought him that phone for his first birthday as a cop. Then he heard the front door to his apartment unlock, followed by soft footfalls coming up the hall to his bedroom, and he groaned. “She has a key… right…"

Small knuckles rapped against the bedroom door. “Nick, are you okay in there? If you’re not decent, say something, because I’m coming in.”

Despite himself, Nick rolled into a sitting position, letting the blankets fall by the wayside. A look
downward told him that he at least still had his pants on, which surely counted as “decent” in any halfway-modern civilization.

But then the door was open and there was no more time for thinking because there she was, Judy, dressed in her civilian flannel and denim and looking tired, short of breath, but alive and there and okay.

He watched as she took in the room, the empty bottles, the phone, before looking up at him, her nose twitching. They stared at each other for maybe hours, maybe minutes. It was impossible for Nick to tell in that sea of grey and violet. He broke first eventually, ears folding back and eyes going to his hands in his lap. “I’m sorry, Judy. I, I am so, so sorry. You deserve someone better than me.”

“That’s to be decided,” she said, making Nick flinch. He heard her take a step deeper into the room. “How did it happen, Nick? We were trained how to proceed in situations like that, so how…?”

Nick didn’t know how to answer. The photo of his father was lost somewhere there in his apartment, crumpled away and no help to him as it had been with Bogo. Nick could only look up at Judy again, looking away just as quickly to the clock on his bedside table, reading 2:19 PM. “The killer taunted me, he… my dad, he didn’t just… walk out on us. He was a victim…”

“The fox,” he heard Judy say, soft and miserable. He nodded, wiping away the tears and ignoring the sound of her nearing footsteps. “Nick. Look at me.”

He didn’t, not at first, not until she grabbed his chin and forced his head to turn her way. Judy glared his way, eyes full of pain and care. He did not have too clear a look for long, though, his breath catching as her hand left his chin and her lips found his, soft and chaste and breathless. His arms went around her on instinct as hers went around his neck, a growl leaving him as he deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue past her lips to taste hungrily at her own. She moaned in answer, a hand stroking down his back, the other up one of his ears, and Nick found it hard to think of anything other than the rabbit in his lap, the machinegun fire of her heart, the warmth—

They broke for breath. Nick shook, looking down at the rabbit in his arms and seeing her for the miracle that she was. Judy met his gaze, smiling as a hand brushed up and down his back. Without words, Nick knew they’d be okay.

***

One enthusiastically shared shower later, the pair sat around the coffee table in Nick’s living room, Nick dressed in his regular Pawaiian shirt and garish red tie as they looked over the old case files they still had. As Judy spread out and organized the files on the table, Nick propped a whiteboard on the nearby couch and scribbled at the top a single question.

“What do we know?”

“We know that there are no discernable connections between the victims,” said Judy, watching Nick write this down in shorthand. “The four killed so far have all lived in different areas of Zootopia, held different jobs, moved in different social circles, different species, everything.”

“We know,” said Nick, moving to a different area of the whiteboard, “that each victim has died the same way; a slash to the throat. Afterward, each victim had their face carefully carved from their face by an unidentified knife, not sold in any specialty knife stores in Zootopia.” He paused, frowned, looked over his shoulder at Judy. “What other ways are there to get a knife, beside buying it?”

Judy set the last file out and shrugged. “Steal it, find it, be given it. I’m pretty sure a soldier doesn’t
have to go out and buy his own knife and gun, after all.”

This spurred a memory in Nick, a vision of a clouded leopard, horribly disfigured. Turning to the 
whiteboard, he began writing again. “We know that the only known footage of the killer came from 
a civilian, Taylor Monahan. I remember he made a comment implying former military service. That 
video also, I might add, led us to the boat and that frankly incredible nightmare at Ratterson’s.”

Judy joined him at the whiteboard, taking the marker to put down her own thoughts. “A camera was 
also found near the home of the second victim, while the first victim was suspiciously followed 
around by a mammal with a camera while at work. You think he might be our guy?”

Looking over what they’d written, Nick’s frown deepened. “I don’t know. Connected, maybe, but 
what’s the motive? And why give us the camera?”

Judy started writing on the board again. “Alibi? Set up the camera on a tripod, then claim he’s 
holding it while he actually commits his crime? Unless we actually searched his belongings and 
found a tripod, it’d be hard to dispute without proof.”

“Yeah… yeah, it would be.” Nick rubbed at his eyes, the headache of before returning. “Coffee. I 
need coffee. You want to tell me whatever had you so excited on the phone while I make us some?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” she said as she set the marker down and went back to the table and its 
files. “Last night, after hearing about the latest murder, I realized a connection between the old 
Wendigo murders and these new murders.”

“Really!?” This perked Nick up at once, a spring entering his step as he loaded the coffee machine in 
the corner kitchen and hit the ON button. As it worked its brewing magic he joined her at the table, 
looking over her shoulder at the files. “What gave it away?”

In answer, Judy pointed to the files for the first four original Wendigo murders. “Once is nothing, 
twice is a coincidence, three times is a pattern, four is overkill. First murder, an antelope; second 
murder, a leopard; third murder, a wolf; fourth murder, a cheetah.” She looked up at him, face set in 
a grim smile. “The four killings so far in this new Wendigo spree—”

“An antelope, a leopard, a wolf, and while you were in the hospital and I was in a bar, a cheetah…” 
Nick suddenly felt like the world’s biggest idiot. “The new killing spree is following the order of the 
original murders…”

“Only a lot faster,” said Judy as the coffee machine beeped its readiness. “Instead of once every 
week, we have one a day. Whoever our copycat killer is, he or she seriously wants to outdo the 
original. And Nick, I’m sorry, but,” and here her hand found his, “Whatever they said to rile you up 
at Ratterson’s, I’m almost certain we’re dealing with a copycat here. It’s the best explanation for the 
escalation we’re seeing.”

“I know, Nick said, the words like ash in his mouth. He gave her hand a squeeze before letting go 
and standing, keeping himself physically busy with getting out the coffee. “All this just raises a 
question, though. A question and a very, very bad possibility.”

The apartment seemed to physically cool as Judy reached the same conclusion Nick had. “How 
would they know about your father without someone in the ZPD…”

Coming back over with two mugs of coffee, each loaded down with enough cream and sugar to give 
Clawhauser pause, Nick sat down on the couch and handed Judy hers, taking a deep drink of his 
before asking the question fresh on his mind. “Carrots, how well do you know Delgato?”
“So, let me get this straight.” Chief Bogo’s voice crackled through Judy’s smartphone speakers, her ears twitching as the cape buffalo performed a rousing impression of an Arctic glacier. “You and Wilde, who I for some reason need to remind you is under suspension, believe that Sergeant Delgato, one of my most trusted and dependable officers, who has served the ZPD nearly as long as I have, is in some way connected to the Wendigo Killer? This is what you called me to say?”

Sitting on Nick’s too-large couch and eyeing his too-large mug of coffee, Judy wished the fox was the one who lost the round of Rock, Paper, Scissors that decided which of them would call Bogo. “Ahem, well, ‘believe’ is such a strong word when you say it like that. We merely think that, based on all we know and how he acted at the shipping yard, Officer Delgato… possibly… knows more than he’s letting on?” She hadn’t meant to end that as a question. She really hadn’t.

Over the line, Bogo sighed. “Hopps, your dedication to your work is as impressive as always, and in light of your injury and the stresses you and your partner have been through, I have chosen to ignore the serious accusations you are throwing around. Delgato is a police officer I would trust with my life, and have before, on several occasions. With Francine hospitalized, he’s the only officer I trust to assume lead on this investigation, and you’d do well to remember that.”

Judy shrunk down into the couch as her boss spoke, grimacing at that final reprimand. Yet as confident as Bogo was, she couldn’t shake her certainty concerning Nick’s suspicions. The target of their suspicions being their replacement in the official investigation sent her stomach roiling.

“Howps, you still there?”

Looking over at the files they’d taken from Records, Judy bit her lip and came to a split-second decision. “Yes, I am. Sorry. If you’re… if you’re sure about that, sir. And if Delgato’s leading things, I better bring the files Nick and I borrowed back to the station. He’ll need them more than us.”

“If you’re certain you’re up for that, Hopps.”

“Absolutely, sir,” Judy said, looking up to Nick’s bedroom door as he stepped out, sliding his phone back into a pants pocket. “I’ll be down there in half an hour.” She ended the call, and then to Nick said “Well that went about as well as we expected. Please tell me you had better luck on your end.”

“Hey, my end doesn’t need luck.” Nick plopped down next to her and dragged a paw across his face. “Finnick’s never heard of Taylor Monahan in any capacity beyond the guy’s footage service, but he said he’ll try to have something dug up by the afternoon. That’s assuming he even has anything to be dug up and we’re not just being a pair of overworked paranoids like Bogo said would always happen.”

“Finnick’s a resourceful little fox. He’ll find something, I’m sure of it.” Placing one hand on Nick’s knee, Judy picked up his coffee with the other and held it up to him. She waited until he took it with a sigh before continuing. “By the afternoon, you said? Okay. That gives us a few hours to get our own work done and hopefully have something to give ourselves.”

Draining the rest of the mug in one long slurp, Nick gave his head a shake before looking back at her. “Whatever you have in mind, do you think you can handle it yourself? I’ve got places to be, people to see.”

Judy looked at the waiting files, taking a moment to mentally figure the number of boxes it would take to carry them all before nodding. “Yeah, I can manage. You have a lead you want to follow up on?”
He stood, setting his mug down as he did. “It’s a big city with a lot of foxes. I think I can drop that by at least one.”

Judy nodded, understanding that Nick meant his mom. But then, at the reminder about parents she froze, grimacing as she remembered her other bit of news after the previous Wendigo Killer excitement. “Um, before you go, there’s something I need to tell you concerning my parents…”

“Oh yeah,” said Nick, finishing the last of his coffee. “Wolford said they’d come by, but that you… didn’t want to…” He lowered his mug to the table, frowning. “What happened?”

She wrung her hands, trying to find the right wording for what she needed to say. “I told them what we are. Annd… they’re not… outraged, b-but they needed… time, a little. It’s okay.”

“Oh… Judy…” Nick pulled against him, Judy blushing as he kissed the top of her head. “I should’ve been there…”

“You had enough on your plate,” said Judy, returning his hug a moment before stepping away and looking up. “We both still do. Right now, let’s just focus on the Wendigo Killer, okay?”

He looked like he wanted to argue, but to her relief he only sighed and nodded. “Okay.”

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Chief Bogo sat in his office, chin sitting on his knuckles, gaze to the map of Zootopia adorning his office wall.

In some regard, he had nothing but respect for Officers Hopps and Wilde. Long gone were the days when he felt the temptation to doubt them and their abilities as cops for what they were. They had too many solved cases, stopped crimes, and saved citizens between them for that. And yet, to accuse any of their fellow officers of corruption of any sort seemed a leap even for the wild deductions they seemed to specialize in. Bogo knew Delgato, had known him since their days walking the beat, had trusted that lion’s paws to stem the bleeding from more than a few bullet wounds, and vice-versa. Bogo had been there for the lion at his wedding and at his divorce, through the worst and best of his life. Delgato was a good man.

And yet, Bogo’s years as a cop whispered to him, echoing Hopps’ concerns. And yet, how had the new Wendigo Killer have known officers had found the boat so fast and set it up to explode on them? And yet, how had the killer known of Wilde’s connection to the original killer’s victims? And yet, how did the killer so handily avoid notice from every possibly street camera?

And yet, and yet, and yet… how, without help somewhere within ZPD ranks?

A knock came from the door, followed by it opening and the lion in question popped his head in. "You wanted to see me, Chief Bogo, sir?"

Bogo nodded toward one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Close the door behind you." He watched Delgato do as instructed, watching for any sign of... he wasn’t sure what, most likely nothing, but there was always that chance...

"Officer Hopps called me just now with the most interesting theory," said Bogo, once he thought he’d waited long enough. "She’s noticed that these new murders are following the species pattern of the original murders, meaning that the next victim will likely be a fox."

Delgato sighed and shook his head, smirking. "That poor workaholic. Just doesn't know when to quit. But yes, McHorn reached the same conclusion. We were planning to increase patrols in more
fox-heavy neighborhoods, have Clawhauser write up an announcement to send to city news networks, perhaps even call for a curfew. Until the danger's passed."

"All reasonable moves," said Bogo, shuffling through the papers on his desk. He stopped on one at random and gave every appearance of closely reading it. "You should also like to know that Francine woke up this morning and seems to be in the clear."

Delgato's ears perked and what Bogo swore was a genuine smile split his face. "That's great news."

"Indeed it is." Bogo gave a smile of his own, a genuine one, certain he would have recognized... something, if there were any weight to Hopps’ concerns. "Now, get to work, before I find another investigation lead."

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“This is a stupid plan. No, it’s a brilliant plan… no, Judy, this is a really stupid plan. You’ll get laughed at, or kicked out, or worst of all, yelled at by Chief Bogo. But that is a risk I’m willing to take… for justice… I don’t even know what that means, I just thought it sounded good. Now come on, times wasting. Go, Judy. And remember, you are distraught and embarrassed! Like I won’t even be acting at all.”

Rolling her eyes at her own whispered monologue, Judy walked the final few steps to the ZPD headquarters, pushing a door open with her foot as he balanced several cardboard boxes in her arms. She paid no heed to the multitude of eyes turning her way for brief or lingering moments, instead keeping her gaze distant and ears down as she padded over to Clawhauser at the front desk. She had to suppress a smirk at the sight of the cheetah paused mid-bite of a donut. "Uh, hey there, Judy. Wow, wasn’t expecting you so soon after… you know…”

"Yeah, I know.” Judy grunted, making a show of how heavy the boxes were as she shifted them around in her arms. “But medical leave or not, duty calls.”

Clawhauser leaned over his counter for a better look, flinching back into his seat as Judy practically dropped her two-box stack next to the front desk, the resulting BANG ringing through the ZPD lobby. "Cripes! You poor dear! What is all that?"

"Case files,” said Judy, voice low and even, containing just the barest hint of a tremble to it. Her best performance, she thought, since hustling Bellwether. "Photos, forensic reports, all to do with the… the big case. Ni… Wilde and I had them in our apartments to work from home."

She looked up at Clawhauser then, giving her nose the slightest twitching, allowing the slightest tears to water her eyes, made her voice crack ever so slightly on just the right words. “I know that I should be home resting after what Wilde did to me, but I just… I thought I ought to give this all over to Delgato and his team at least. Then I’ll have maybe done s-something to help in this case.”

More than a few sniffles and hastily-blown noses could be heard from around them, but Judy didn’t dare look away from Clawhauser as the cheetah struggled not to lose it. "O-ohhh, that’s the s-saddest thing I-I’ve ever… please, go on, do whatever you need to."

Judy smiled, sure to keep it small and meek rather than the toothy grin she felt like giving. “Thank you, Benji. This really means a lot.” Bending down, she picked up the boxes once more and started past Clawhauser.
Three carefully measured steps later, she paused and turned back. “Oh, um, I’m sorry, but I was also wondering, do you know if Delgato’s in the building? I was wanting to, well, actually needing to, talk to him. To thank him, for making sure Francine made it out okay, and to apologize for everything going so wrong yesterday.”

Seeking comfort for the sadness now enveloping the room, Clawhauser answered between bites of a donut, “Oh, sorry, Jude. You just missed him. Bogo put him in charge of the investigation after you two… well anyway, he’s out interviewing the family of the last victim, if I remember right.”

“Really?” Judy’s ears ached from the strain of keeping her ears droopy. “Well, drat. I guess I’ll just leave a note at his desk or something, after dropping all this off. Take care, Ben.”

“Take care, Judy! I hope you get to feeling better soon!”

Once past Clawhauser, returning the files was easy. Judy took the boxes to the record-keeper’s desk at the front of the Records floor, not ten steps from the stairs, she signed off on a clipboard handed to her by the old boar saying that she had, indeed, been the one to return the files, and then that was that.

Judy waited until the boar and her porcupine assistant had turned away to return the files to their proper shelves, checked that there were no other officers around to see her, and slipped around a corner and into one of the countless aisles filling that floor. Two turns and three more aisles down and she made it to the row of computers sized for animals like her, on and waiting to be used.

Checking once more that nobody was around to see, Judy took a seat and with the press of a few buttons pulled up ZPD employee records. “Let’s see here… Delgato…”

Name: Calisto Delgato.

Age: 50.

Species: Lion.

Sex: Male.

Date of Precinct 1 assignment: January 12th, 1986.

History and service record: Lieutenant Delgato joined the Zootopia Police Department following a dishonorable discharge for—

Judy read down the page faster than she’d read anything since her days at the academy, eyes widening and ears drooping with every paragraph.

“Oh… shit.”

***

Happytown High-Rise, despite its aspiring name, rose only to five stories tall. Fine, perhaps, for the time it had been built, but nothing special by modern standards even in old, forsaken Happytown. That its accommodations could only be charitably described as on-par with those of the Grand Pangolin only helped its reputation as a hive for lowlifes, vandals, and the sorts of predators that gave their kinds bad names.

Walking the hallways at complete ease with himself and his surroundings, Nick stopped at the apartment door of the kindest soul he knew and gave the aging but solid wood three hard knocks,
followed by two soft knocks.

Ten seconds passed where all Nick heard from the apartment was a muffled shuffling and a small, worrisome cough, and then the unlatching of half a dozen locks of every shape and kind. The door swung open and there in a faded violet blouse stood tall vixen, weathered and slightly bent in her age, but with a pair of glimmering green eyes that spoke of a far younger, kinder soul.

“Nicholas, it’s been ages!” Marian Wilde backed up from the door, face beaming as she rubbed her upper arms for warmth. “Come on, get in here before you catch a cold. Or worse, make your poor, grandkit-less mother catch one!”

The hallways seeming to lack any kind of protection against the outside elements, Nick didn’t hesitate to oblige, shutting and locking the door before scooping the older fox up in a hug. She eeped, but returned the hug all the same. “Goodness, Nicky, what’s all this about? Finally come to tell me you proposed to that nice Hopps girl?”

A stab of pain through his heart and Nick set his mother back down, hiding the hurt of recent days away behind a smile. “No, nothing like that, I’m afraid. I’ve just… been missing you, lately. I’ve only got one mom, after all, heh.”

Marian’s eyes narrowed. The next moment Nick was whimpering as he was dragged by the ear into the apartment’s tiny living room, whereupon he was thrown with surprising strength into one of the two overstuffed armchairs. Before he could do more than orient himself on the traitorously comfy piece of furniture, his mother took her seat in the other armchair and fixed him in place with a Mother’s Stare. “Nicholas Piberius Wilde. I understand that your police work is sensitive and sometimes there are going to be things you can’t tell me about, shouldn’t tell me about, or can’t bring yourself to tell me about. But when those times come, I expect you to at least lie well, boy.”

Nick didn’t think he could have felt more thoroughly torn down if Judy had been the one telling him off. Slumping into his seat, he ran a paw over his head as he mulled over the best way to start this conversation. “Well, Mom, I guess… how… how well do you remember Dad?”

Marian flinched back as if struck. That steely stare turned to one of hurt and confusion. “What? Why did you ask that, Nicholas?”

It hurt to watch the wrinkles around his mother’s eyes tighten, to watch his nails dig into the chair’s armrests, to see her ears flatten and hackles rise. Nick looked away from her, studying the faded patterns of the wallpaper across the room. “It’s the latest case we’re working on, Judy and I. The new Wendigo killings.”

“Horrible things, those. Just horrible.”

Nick nodded, wishing suddenly that he had Judy there to support him through this. “The other day, Judy and I were going through the police records for the original murders. One of them was… Mom, one of them was a fox. Dad.”

Silence. Nick let it stretch on for a minute until he couldn’t stand it any longer and looked from the wallpaper to his mother, plastered to her chair like roadkill. “Mom?”

“But… the police, the news, they…”

“He was a fox,” said Nick, making no attempt now to hide the resentment he felt at having to say those words like he would in front of Judy.

Marian nodded. A few tears escaped her eyes before her whole countenance hardened, not steel now
but stone, old and bearing the signs of storms long-weathered. “He never left us, then. Once more he is my husband and your father. I… Nicholas, thank you.”

He smiled at this, or tried to, before his thoughts turned to the other reason he had come there. Glancing out a nearby window speckled by falling snow, Nick frowned at the time of day and stood. “Listen, Mom, I need to get you out of the city for at least tonight, preferably longer.”

To her credit, the older fox waited until she was in her bedroom and folding clothes into an ancient luggage bag to ask her questions. “Why? What’s happened, Nicky? Please don’t tell me you did something to piss off a serial killer.”

In the bathroom, Nick stumbled over one of the first swears he’d heard his mother utter in his entire life, before shaking his head and resuming gathering her medicines, toothbrush, whatever he could think of into a Ziploc bag. “I don’t think so? All I’m sure of, new murders are following the course of the old murders and a fox is up next.”

“And you think…?”

“Well, if this were a movie and the killer had any idea how close Judy and I are to figuring him out…”

Striding back into the bedroom, Nick let Marian pack the Ziploc bag into the larger luggage, before grabbing its handles and starting for the door. Marian followed, turning off all the lights and grabbing her purse. “Where are we going? Mr. Big’s place?”

Nick paused with his paw on the door handle to consider that, before shaking his head and turning back to her. She was handling everything like a champion so far and he couldn’t feel prouder of her, but this next part might be the step too far. “Judy called, and her parents would be more than happy to have you over to their place for a while. There’s a, uh, there’s a train leaving for Bunnyburrow in half an—”

Marian’s eyes grew wide, paws clutching her purse tight to her chest. “N-no, no train.”

Fighting the groan wishing to escape him, Nick reached a paw out to his mother’s shoulder and smiled. “Please, Mom, I promise they’re a lot safer and smoother than back in your—”

The jab to his gut left Nick wheezing. Now Marian glared up at him, the steel back in her eyes. “Nicholas, I said. No. Trains!”

***

Judy heard him coming long before she had to worry, bigger animals never quite being able to hide themselves from her ears. Closing all her tabs, she hopped from her chair and turned around just as Officer Johnson turned the corner to that secluded section of Records.

For a moment the two stared at each other, the lion seeming as surprised to see her as she was to see him. But then his eyes flicked to the computer behind her and a knowing smirk crossed his face. He took a few steps forward, arms crossing over his chest. “Judy… has anyone ever told you that you’re a real workaholic?”

“I…” She cleared her throat, offering up a weak laugh. “I think I might have heard that a few times. Mostly from N—Wilde, Officer Wilde. It’s a vice that’s worked out well for me so far though, so…”

Leaving the desk, Judy kept her walk embarrassed-but-casual as she headed for the lion and the exit past him. “Buuut, I get the feeling I’d better make myself scarce if I don’t want you telling on me to
Chief Bogo, heh. Just need to—"

“You should keep a close eye on that fox of yours, Hopps.”

She froze level with him, heartbeat growing uneven as she looked up and left to Johnson’s distant eyes. “Wh-what?”

“You should keep an eye on Wilde,” the lion said, smile gone now. “For his safety. McHorn figured out after the last murder that they’re following the pattern of the old Wendigo killings. That means a fox is likely to be the next victim. We’re alerting the news stations and increasing patrols through fox-heavy areas, but there are a lot in Zootopia. It’d be horriby easy for one to… slip, through the cracks. You know?”

Judy’s chest hurt, heart feeling halfway between bursting and stopping. She reached up to grip her chest through the fabric of her shirt and jacket, struggling to keep her breathing strong and steady even as the world tilted around her. “Y-yeah, you’re right…”

The lion’s smile returned then, happy but in no way kind. “There’s the shock damage I was looking for. Wilde sure did a number on you, didn’t he? You know, you should go home. Rest up. Stay out of things. For your own health.”

The next few minutes were a confusing collage to Judy, of stumbling through aisles of case files, past the porcupine assistant, of gripping the small mammal-sized bar as she dragged herself up the stairs. Somewhere in there might have been Clawhauser’s worried voice, the clatter of hooves and paws on smooth lobby flooring, then a burst of freezing air—

Judy found herself standing out near the middle of the street in front of the ZPD headquarters, staring across the way at the spray-painted mural adorning city hall. New details had been added to the Wendigo beast. Splotches of white where eyes might be, streaks going down the otherwise-featureless face like tear stains, and wound over and through the antlers streamed garlands of blue flowers. Night Howlers.

The screech of breaking tires snapped Judy from her trance. She spun around, eyes wide at the sight of a van hurtling head-on toward her.
The van screeched to a halt mere inches from Judy, sending her staggering from the rush of air. Through the windshield she could see a fennec fox, Finnick, gaping at her as if he was having the heart attack.

Then Nick was out of the passenger chair and next to her, a panicked look to his face as he patted her over for injury. “Oh God, what were you doing… Judy? What happened?”

Judy licked her lips and turned to look back at the ZPD. She wondered if Johnson was watching from one of those darkened windows, if the lion had seen the close call. “Johnson’s involved… I don’t know how… but he’s involved.”

Nick let off a swear Judy would have gasped at in her younger years, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and leading her to the van’s back. “Let’s save the shocking revelations for somewhere private. Or at least, away from prying cameras.”

As they passed by the driver-side door Finnick poked his head out the window, looking more concerned than Judy could remember. “Hopps, you look like you’ve seen a ghost. You good?”

“T’m fine,” she found herself saying by force of habit. “Just fine, thank you for asking.”

Nick gave her a Look as she said this, but said nothing as he threw open the van’s rear doors and hopped in. Turning, he held out a helping hand that she quickly accepted, eager to get out of the cold air and open spotlight.

“Hello, Judy dear!”

Judy blinked, surprised by the sight of Nick’s mother sitting there amongst the musical instruments, blankets, and packs of beer cans-turned-chairs that cluttered Finnick’s van. “Oh! Uh, hello, Mrs. Wilde. It’s nice to see you. Surprising, but nice.”

The van shook as Nick slammed the rear doors shut, Judy having to step aside as he moved to the front and rapped Finnick’s chair. The van shook again as it began moving, prompting Judy to take a seat near the rear doors. Nick mirrored her a moment later, sitting opposite his mother. “Miss Scaredy-pants here refused to ride the train to Bunnyburrow despite my every insistence of their safety. Thankfully, ol’ Finnick is a real gentleman and—eep!”

Mrs. Wilde sat back down from smacking her son on the knee. “Oh, hush up with that scaredy-pants nonsense! Need I bring up how old you were before you finally stopped sleeping with a nightlight?” And then, turning to the front, “But really, thank you, Mr. Finnick. You really are quite the gentleman to little ol’ me.”

A deep, rumbling chuckle echoed from the driver’s seat. “It ain’t no big deal, Marian. You know I can’t say no to pretty ladies like you.”

Judy, though amused by all this, thought it time for her to come to Nick’s rescue as the fox’s face fluctuated through several fascinating shades of green. “Right, well, it’s going to be a surprise, but my parents are going to love having you over, Mrs. Wilde—”

“Judy, please, call me Marian.”

Judy smiled. “Right, Marian. But anyways, Nick and I have some stuff to discuss on the, uh, on
“The Wendigo case,” said Nick, helping her out. “And don’t worry, it was a long drive over here, she’s as filled in as anyone can be.”

“Oh! Um, good!” Judy cleared her throat, an act which turned into a short coughing fit. She waved Nick away as he reached out to her and put on a smile. “I’m fine, I’m fine. Work now, worry later. I learned some interesting stuff down at the ZPD. Delgato served in the military for one year, working out of the San Dingo Marine Corps base, before getting dishonorably discharged for the alleged, though never confirmed, murder by mauling of a fellow soldier, a horse. Later he joins ZPD, and that same year the Wendigo serial killings happen, also by mauling. For the rest of his career he coasts along as a beat cop, then a detective, always staying in positions he can keep his claws sharp. There have been a few accusations of police brutality over the years, but nothing anybody made much noise over.”

“It’s nothing that would hold up in court, but it could at least get Bogo’s attention.” Nick reached down, plucking a can of beer out from one of the countless cases sitting around and popping it. After a long swig he turned to the front of the van. Out beyond the window, the world shone bright and warm as they transitioned from downtown to Sahara Square, one of the two districts in Zootopia mostly immune to winter. “Finn, old pal, any dirt on Taylor Monahan?”

A grunt came from the front seat. The fennec fox’s ears, the only visible parts of him from where Nick and Judy sat, twitched in annoyance. “Yeah, I got some dirt, so don’t say I never did nothing for ya. The guy moved here from San Dingo about three years back. Before that he was a soldier, stationed—”

“At the San Dingo Marine Corps base,” Judy finished, earning a glare from the fox. “Perfect. The ZPD recruits from the armed forces all the time. So, there’s one connection between Monahan and Delgato.”

The van pulled into a storage depot, rolling to a stop in front of a unit near the back. The engine shut off and Finnick turned in his seat to look at them. “Get ready for another one. Our guy Monahan got dishonorably discharged, just like the lion of the hour. Not alleged murder, but I bet assault on a civilian’s gotta count for something.”

Judy’s eyes narrowed, fists tightening until even her stubby nails felt ready to draw blood. Near her, Nick’s hackles rose. It was Marian, however, who spoke up. “That is a very cruel mammal you have there.”

The four sat there in silence for a long moment, contemplating that statement. Nick looked at Judy, frowning. “You said something about Johnson when we picked you up?”

Having completely forgotten this during the conversation about Monahan and Delgato, Judy’s ears drooped as she remembered the encounter down in ZPD Records. “I’m not really sure what happened. He caught me as I was looking up info on Delgato, made a comment about me being a workaholic, said I should keep my nose out of things…”

She swallowed, gaze flickering around to the three foxes sitting there and watching her, finally settling on Nick. “He also said I… should keep an eye on you, Nick. Said it’s really easy for a fox to ‘slip through the cracks.’ His words, not mine.”

Nick swallowed, visibly unnerved by the clear, yet unspoken threat. Judy quickly scooted closer and took his free hand in hers, while from the driver’s seat Finnick whistled. “These big cats sure aren’t big on subtlety. Only way to make that a more blatant threat would be to be holding a baseball bat.
while saying it.”

Judy started to nod at this, stopped as what the fennec fox had said registered to her. “Delgato, Johnson, Monahan, they’re all big cats… that’s got to mean something…”

“It probably does,” said Nick, standing and pulling Judy up with him by the hand. “But that’s going to have to wait until later. We might have a little something called daylight running out on us.”

“Right,” said Judy, pulling free of Nick and turning to his mother. “Mrs.—sorry, Marian, it was great seeing you again, even if under some of the worst circumstances possible, but your son and I have a lead to follow.”

“Of course, dear!” The elder fox stood and, before Judy could react, gave her a warm, motherly hug. Pulling away, she patted the bunny on the head. “Only… take care of yourself, won’t you? And my son while you’re at it? I know you’re both professionals, but… well, a mother worries, you know?”

“I know,” said Judy, smiling. Backing away, she went around Nick as he went in for a hug of his own and gave Finnick a fist-bump. “And you take care of yourself too, Finn. Thanks for all your help.”

“No problem,” he said. He smiled and flashed Nick a wink as he and Judy opened the back of the van and jumped out. “You two watch yourselves! Ain’t no shame in running away instead of going out in some damned-stupid blaze of glory!”

“Duly noted,” said Nick, giving a salute before shutting the door. “Not that there’s always a choice.”

Judy waited until the van had driven off before turning her attention to the storage unit they’d come to. She’d passed that depot countless times while on patrol with Nick, but saw nothing to make this particular unit stand out from all the rest. “So what’s this, then? Mr. Wilde’s winter home away from home?”

Nick laughed, putting in no effort to hide its fakeness as he strolled up to the unit’s door. He talked as he fished around in his pockets for the key. “Hah hah, very funny. No, this is a humble conman’s special stash. The go-to place for cons and hustles requiring a bit more, you know, STUFF than it’s really worthwhile to hang onto on a daily basis. Ahah!”

Holding the key up as if it was some great treasure, he undid the padlock and started tugging at the sliding door. “Haven’t been here since I joined the ZPD, but it’s too useful to just get rid of. Good thing to, if we’re gonna get to Monahan’s house in one piece.”

Judy’s ears perked. Hurrying forward, she started helping with the rusted door. “W-why’s that? Where’s Monahan live?”

***

Judy hated the Nocturnal District.

No, that wasn’t fair. There was plenty about the Nocturnal District to love. The underground realm, nearly as large as all the rest of the Zootopia districts added together, played host to just as varied a population. Bats, and moles, and shrews, opossums, foxes, raccoons, and many more living lives honest and corrupt, just like those on the surface. It didn’t matter if, by biology or choice, they preferred to the dark and gloomy.

Not that all of the Nocturnal District fit such description, or even most. Beneath the Meadowlands ran the Neon Fields, acres and acres of bioluminescent mushrooms and flowers glowing colors
beyond imagining, home to the hottest dance clubs in Zootopia. Beneath Downtown was an almost-mirror image of hanging skyscrapers, the central nervous system of the vast computer networks that kept Zootopia's environmental systems running.

But then there were the Barrens beneath Tundratown. As bleak and cold as Hell itself, only the poorest, the hardiest, or those with the most to hide ever tried to eke out a living in the Barrens. No sun, only crumbling towers like giant streetlights to cast the land in eternal twilight. No native flora or fauna, only, only the rare greenhouse or pet lost from warmer climes. Not even enough natural moisture for snow or frost. Barren.

"I hate this. I hate this. I hate this. Sweet cheese and crackers do I hate this..."

"Cons-si-erve... breath... f-fo-for walking, C-C-Carrots..."

The pair trudged side by side across the stony landscape, each covered head to foot in the thickest, warmest cold-weather gear hustling money could buy, shoulders bent beneath the weight of packs stuffed with blankets, food... and guns. Real guns. Judy had balked at first at carrying the rifle (sized for Finnick, close enough for her). Nick had insisted.

"Mammals go crazy down in the Barrens, Carrots. I wouldn't even trust our badges to slow down someone wanting our packs. I'm sorry."

Judy would have to apologize to Nick once they returned to somewhere the words didn't freeze in her throat. Waving badges hadn't stopped the trio of hyena hobos they encountered since getting down there, or the steroid-pumped boar, or the gaggle of scrabbling bobcats. Waving the guns had. It made her feel sick.

Cresting a rise in the ground, they saw a single-story house of solid concrete sprawling near the edge of a crag in the earth, no more than a dozen yards away.

"Th-that must be it," said Nick, arm automatically wrapping around Judy as she sidled up against him for mutual warmth. "Wh-what-t a l-lo-lovely sssecond home to ha-have on one's t-tax records."

"I d-don't like it," said Judy, staring at the single shuttered window facing in their direction. "Sh-shooting gallery, th-there."

"N-not that we ha-have mmmuch choice, though," said Nick. He pulled his appropriately sized rifle from its sling on his back. Judy noticed his hands shaking far too hard to make any kind of accurate shot. "It's g-go or become pa-pawpcicles!"

The walk to the building was the most terrifying dozen yards of Judy's life, every step spent expecting the door or window to crack open and BANG to shatter the frozen silence. Her heart felt ready to quit by the time they reached the slab of steel set into the structure's front wall. Leaning in the slim space between the door and the window, Judy let Nick take the lead in searching the immediate area as she worked to get to where her heart didn’t feel like it was trying to punch through her chest. "I d-don’t... sup-p-pose... it’s unlocked..."

Nick shrugged and gave the handle a tug. It didn’t yield in the slightest. “Well, that hope’s a bust. But maybe...”

Walking around Judy, the fox gave the window shutters a try, before running his paws along the bottom of the windowsill. The sound of tearing tape resonated and Nick held aloft a key in triumph. “Aha! Right where amateurs always leave their—”

Judy snatched the key from Nick’s hold, the bare metal burning with cold as she jammed it into the
door’s lock and turned. A click resounded and the metal slab gave the slightest bit.

Nick’s hand on her shoulder stopped her before Judy could push her way. “W-wait, let me go first. You’re ssstill hu-hurt and sluggish, d-don’t even try to d-de-deny it. Plus, I’m a bigger target, I c-can draw any fire.”

“D-don’t be rid-di-diculous,” Judy said, unslinging her own rifle. “I’m sm-smaller, y-you c-ca-can shoot over mm-mme if you n-need t-to. I’ll g-go fffirst!”

KA-CHUNK.

“How about you drop your guns and both go first?”

If the sound of a shotgun being pumped behind them didn’t freeze the pair in fright. The hard, haughty voice did the trick. Turning her head, Judy saw Taylor Monahan in heavy coat and scarf coming to a stop behind them, perhaps come from around the building’s other side by their arguing. At the range he stood, Judy knew the shotgun he carried would leave her as little more than a red smear on the wall.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said drop the rifles and go inside!”

Judy shared a look with Nick, the fox slow nodding and setting his rifle on the ground. Biting her lip, Judy followed suit, kicking her weapon away for good measure. Anything to make the clouded leopard feel more in control, more sure, more liable to make a mistake.

“Good, good.” Monahan walked until he was directly behind them. Not, to Judy’s frustration, close enough for either her or Nick to spin around and knock the shotgun away. “Now get in there, and keep where I can see you!”

There it was, their golden opportunity. Swallowing, Judy walked to and through the door, Nick keeping perfect pace at her left. The moment they were through into the almost Spartan den beyond, she turned and jumped to the right, at the same moment Nick leaping to the left.

“Damn it!”

Monahan charged through the doorway, turning to level his gun on where Nick crouched near stairs leading to some cellar area, but Judy moved faster, jumping from behind to deliver both feet to the middle of the leopard’s back. Even with the heavy winter coat cushioning the blow, a pained mrowl rang through the room as he pitched forward, the gun flying from his hands.

Nick met him, delivering an uppercut to Monahan’s descending chip and snapping his head back. In the five seconds Monahan reeled from this, Judy snatched the dropped shotgun from the carpeted floor, threw it down the stairs, and then drew and leveled a revolver at the him. “On your knees, creep. hands where I can see them.”

That scarred face twisted into a scowl, but after Judy cocked the revolver hammer for emphasis, did as commanded. Judy smiled at this, not taking her eyes off Monahan as she nodded first to Nick, then to the door. “Take care of that, won’t you?”

“Sure thing, Carrots.” And then, as he edged past her to the door, “And by the way, you look way awesome right now.”

It took every ounce of Judy’s willpower not to roll her eyes at that. “Don’t get used to it, Wilde. Not my preferred gun to handle.”
Nick returned, slamming and locking the door behind him, one eyebrow raised. “Oh, don’t I know it.”

A throaty growl from Monahan interrupted the playful banter. “Oh, you two are disgusting. You’re like the emotional equivalent to my face.”

Judy lifted an eyebrow. Beside her Nick laughed. “Not bad! I can appreciate a mammal with a proper sense of self-deprecation.” He set Judy’s rifle aside and leveling his at the leopard, “If you ask me, the world would be a better place with fewer people who took themselves too seriously.”

“The world would be a better place without mammals like you two in it!”

Judy and Nick shared a look. “Now that,” she said, “combined with the holding us at gunpoint, and the secluded bunker hideaway, plus the rash of murders, sounds pretty bad to me. What about you, Nick?”

“Mhm, pretty bad, Carrots.” Smiling, the fox dug his ZPD badge out of his coat and held it up. “Bad enough that I for one feel pretty confident in waving this around and asking questions like, oh, I don’t know…” A jab of the rifle barrel to Monahan’s gut elicited a grunt from him. “What do you know about all this, Monahan? No way are you just a camera guy with a setup like this!”

The leopard growled again, but then smiled. The unmarred half of his face did, anyway, the right side already stuck in a lipless, cheek-less sneer. “Normally at this point I’d say something like ‘you’ve got nothing on me, coppers!’ But you two don’t really care about stuff like that, do you? Hard to when you’re on a first-name-basis with Mr. Big, isn’t it?”

Judy’s mouth went dry, her grip on the revolver tightening until her fingers ached. “How do you know—”

“Delgato.” Monahan licked his remaining lips and chuckled. “He told me everything. Your tolerated relationship with Mr. Big, your history of threatening suspects with mob violence, how you weren’t even part of the force when you took down Bellwether, everything! And what’s all this? A pair of mammals, not even cops, breaking and entering a private citizen’s home with no solid evidence? Oh, what would this city think, what would it DO, if it ever found out its hero cops were rotten down to the core? You think these people would still look up to you?”

“Is that what this has all been about?” Judy couldn’t believe what she was hearing. From the look on Nick’s face, he couldn’t either. “The murders, the terror, just to get at the two of us? To accomplish… what? Making us look bad? You could have just gone to the media with all that supposed ‘dirt’ if you wanted to drag us down!”

Monahan growled and made to stand up. Nick lifted his rifle and bared his fangs. “Nope, stay right there, kitty. “Come on, the bunny’s right, there were way easier ways to do this weird vendetta thing against our sterling reputations. Why dig up a decades-old cold case like the Wendigo Killer?”

Monahan rolled his eyes. “It’s not JUST about ruining you two. Exposing the weakness and corruption of the ZPD is just a delicious, delicious part of it. There are bigger powers at work here than you could ever imagine, bigger mammals than you could ever touch. Though, for me at least, so much of it is simply for the thrill of the hunt.”

“The hunt!” Ignoring Nick’s warning, Judy marched forward and jammed the barrel of her revolver against Monahan’s head. “Those aren’t birds are alligators or whatever out there, they’re people! This is everything Bellwether warned about!”
“Yeah,” the leopard said, good eye alight with glee. “Makes you regret stopping her, doesn’t it?”

Never before had Judy felt such a powerful urge to use violence to wipe away a criminal’s grin. Only Nick’s hand on her forearm kept her from doing something she knew, deep down, she would regret.

“I think,” said Nick after a moment, “that that’s enough about insane motives for now. Who else is in on this, Monahan? Just Delgato? Was that you down at Ratterson’s?”

Looking as if he had failed at some goal by not being shot by Judy, the leopard frowned and turned his gaze to the floor. “That was me. Can’t decide which I enjoyed more, taunting you about your daddy, or seeing you almost kill your partner. Heh, almost worth Delgato’s anger at me letting you two getting so close. And as for who else is in our merry little band of killers…”

He looked back up at them, good eye ablaze, fangs gleaming in a Hellish grin that made Judy’s heart skip a beat, and then another. “Are you only interested in our Precinct 1 members, good ol’ Delgato, Johnson, Trunkaby, Higgins? Or those in the other Zootopia precincts? Or… maybe the Bunnyburrow branch while I’m at it?”

***

Getting to Monahan’s bunker through the Barrens had taken half an hour. They made it back to the central Nocturnal district and its elevators to the surface in twenty minutes, plus ten to tie Monahan up and throw him in a lockable closet. A flash of a badge got them the first express elevator up.

It took fifteen minutes to fight through the late afternoon traffic to ZPD headquarters, talk their way past Clawhauser, and get the keys to their cruiser.

211 miles sat between Zootopia and Bunnyburrow. With the snow and ice forcing Judy to keep to reasonable speeds despite every desire to slam the gas pedal down until it broke, it took three and a half hours to make the drive. For half that time Chief Bogo had been shouting at them through the cruiser’s police radio, demanding explanations at first, then bellowing orders once Judy spat out that explanation, the most bare-bones recap of their trip to Monahan’s bunker and what led to it.

Slow down. Report back to the station. Cool their heads. Let mammals in actual uniform check out whatever might or might not be happening in Bunnyburrow. Judy ignored it all, attention split between the road ahead and Nick’s increasingly-panicked attempts to get Stu, Bonnie, his mom, Finnick, ANYONE to answer the phone. Not one call got through.

Somewhere in all of this, in the transition from knee-jerk panic to grim resolve, Nick looked over at her and spoke in a voice too low and scared to belong to him. “What if it’s all a trick? A lie to make us look like idiots, or get us out of the city, or, or—”

“If it is,” said Judy, the snow-capped trees and rolling hills blurring past as she stepped harder on the gas, “then it is.” Visions of her family, her siblings, the little bunny kits, littering the halls of her childhood home with the faces carved off and blood drenching the walls, danced before her eyes. The steering wheel creaked in her grip. “I can’t… take that chance.”

“No,” said Nick, facing forward again and giving his cellphone another try. “I can’t either.”

No more words passed between them for a long while. An indistinct amount of time later and Judy saw the familiar turnoff to the family home. She took it, barely slowing down as she did so, as in the passenger seat Nick retrieved a pair of tranquilizer guns from the glove compartment and began loading them. As much as both of them wanted, horrible as it was, to deal any threats to their families...
with REAL guns, Judy dared not risk a missed shot around so many civilians.

After another three minutes of driving and past a hilly bend, there stood the Hopps farmhouse in the police cruiser’s headlights, Finnick’s van and a half-dozen other vehicles Judy recognized as belonging to the family spread throughout the front yard. Judy pulled the cruiser to as fast a stop as she dared, before killing the engine and squinting at the building. It’s familiar shape against the encroaching dark of night was suddenly foreign and foreboding.

“Everything looks… normal,” said Nick. “I mean, as I assume it’d look, never coming here before. But it’s all… peaceful.”

Judy, scanning the nearby vehicles, the brick and wood front and upper floors of the house, the hill into which so much more of the house had been built, had to agree. Everything looked as she would expect it to on any normal night. No fallen bodies. No damage to the vehicles or what they could see of the house. Even the lights inside were on, their warm glow shining through the front windows to welcome all comers.

“Hopps,” rang Chief Bogo’s voice from the radio, making Judy and Nick jump. The police chief had been silent for a long while. “I need you and Wilde back in Zootopia. Speaking not as your boss, but as your friend. Please. Something’s happ—”

Judy turned the radio off, before taking the tranquilizer gun Nick offered her and jumping out of the vehicle. Nick following close behind, they approached the farmhouse’s porch and front door, ears cocked and eyes glancing now and then to the surrounding vehicles as they passed them, wary of an ambush. From ahead, inside the building, Judy could only just make out a number of voices, indistinct through the wood and distance. Most of them sounded scared though, some of them angry, and that was enough to make Judy quicken her pace up the porch steps—

CREEAAK.

Judy froze, Nick stumbling not to run into her from behind as she looked down at the traitorously creaky porch step. Her ears fell as the voices inside the house quieted, replaced by countless footsteps. Sharing a look with Nick, Judy swallowed and raised her tranq gun, finger tightening on the trigger as the front door flew open—

“JUDY! Oh, Stu, she’s alright!”

Judy lowered her weapon at once, mouth dropping as her parents ran out onto the porch to envelop her in a bone-crushing hug, accompanied by an avalanche of her siblings. They smothered her, poking and grabbing and shouting and kissing and crying, Judy starting to cry too as she holstered her weapon and returned all the hugs she could. And then, through the press of long ears she saw Marian come out the front door, wading through the bunny horde to grab Nick in a hug herself, one he easily returned. The sight made Judy hug her own parents all the harder.

“I was so scared for all of you. I thought… I was told… you might have been in danger.”

At this her parents broke their hug and stepped back, enough for Judy to see the confusion and fear on their faces. "Worried about us?" asked Bonnie, the motherly rabbit's nose twitching like mad. "Bun-bun, we've been scared sick about you! First Mrs. Wilde and her fennec friend show up just out of the blue with tales of corrupt cops, and then there's all this horrible stuff on the news and you weren't answering your cell phone and—"

"Wait, what?" Nick broke off his hug and took a step toward Judy and her parents, pulling his phone from his pocket as he came. "What calls? We spent the entire drive here trying to call you! I—"
He paused, frowning as he turned and started back for the police cruiser. Judy watched him go a moment before looking back to her parents, who along with Marian looked as lost as Judy felt. "We... Nick and I tracked down the new Wendigo Killer. He had help within the ZPD and... and he implied he had accomplices in Bunnyburrow too. We... thought you all were in danger..."

"Judy..." Stu, her father, looked at a complete loss for words. "That's not what the news is saying at all."

Judy's stomach dropped, sudden understanding hitting her like Nick's stun gun all over again.

"A signal jammer!" Nick ran back to the group, a small black box held aloft in his paw. "There was a signal jammer stuck to our... what did I miss?"

***

It was like watching a mockery of her own life.

There on the family den’s flatscreen TV, Judy watched in growing horror as she and Nick first beat Taylor Monahan around, and then held the clouded leopard at gunpoint for several minutes, before tying him up, shoving him through a door just on the edge of the screen, propping a chair against the door, and then leaving. The high angle of the hidden camera hid nothing as the Judy in the video yelled and screamed at the seemingly-helpless Monahan, jabbing her revolver with reckless abandon at him, Nick hitting his gut with his rifle barrel. It was all true, technically, but bereft of sound and context.

The recording ended after Nick and Judy walked back outside, cutting back to Fabienne Growley and Peter Moosebridge.

“The preceding footage has been confirmed genuine by several experts, both with the ZPD and ZNN. Coworkers have confirmed that these are indeed Sergeant Judy Hopps and Detective Nick Wilde, former hero cops of Zootopia, now possibly the city’s most notorious villains. The footage originates from the private security camera of a Mr. Taylor Monahan, the poor leopard seen here being menaced by the once-heroic duo. In his testimony, Monahan claimed to have discovered evidence of Hopps’ and Wilde’s involvement in the renewed Wendigo Murders.”

The feed of the two news anchors was replaced by footage of Monahan in a non-descript room, shaking in his seat. To Judy’s disgust, Delgato and Johnson flanked him, the larger lion’s paw on one of his shoulders in a show of comfort and support. “I... thought it strange how Officer Hopps had been at both of those first two murders, like, this is a really big city, you know? What are the chances? I tried not to make too big a deal out of it at first. At least, not until I went to the ZPD with what I thought might have been footage of the killer escaping the train. They both got really... aggressive, after that. They took my camera, saying they needed it for evidence, but... but then I got a call later from an Officer Johnson and he said the camera was missing from Evidence. I couldn’t keep my nose out of it after that, and that’s when I found out about Wilde and his dad.”

Standing near the left-most couch, Judy felt Nick’s hand take hers and squeeze. She squeezed back as best she could, gaze never leaving the TV.

Things switched back to the news station, where a photo of Nick in full police uniform appeared next to Peter Moosebridge. “Detective Nicholas Piberius Wilde, ZPD’s first fox police officer, was revealed by inside sources to be the son of one of the original Wendigo Killer’s victims, a Mr. James Wilde. Speculation runs rampant that—”

The TV clicked off, none of the bunnies or foxes present raising any objection. From where she
stood on Nick’s opposite side Marian seethed, hand shaking as she clutched the remote. “It’s lies. All lies. My son is not… OUR CHILDREN are not killers and thugs!”

Bonnie, sitting in front of them on the couch, nodded and held onto her husband tighter. “I couldn’t have said it better myself. I can’t understand how anyone can believe that footage they showed!”

Judy’s mouth felt awfully, horribly dry. “Actually, Mom, that… that was real. But it isn’t what it looked like!” she shouted as several dozen shocked pairs of eyes turned to look at her. “That guy, Monahan, HE is one of the killers! That footage was of us getting him to confess! The two lions standing next to him, those were some of his partners! It’s all a trick, a plot, a, a—”

“Hustle,” said Nick, the first time he had spoken since they’d started watching the news on their supposed reign of terror. Letting out half a laugh and half a sob, he leaned against the couch and pressed his face into his paws. “It’s all been one giant hustle. Goodbye, hero cops Hopps and Wilde. Thanks for nothing.”

Judy looked to Marian over her son’s bent form, before with her reaching out to rub circles across his back. “It’s going to be okay, Nick. We’ll figure something out.” She said it for her sake as much as for his, struggling to keep herself calm, to not let her quivering heart get the better of her once again. From the way her parents’ ears kept turning to her, she didn’t think she succeeded there. “We’ll figure something out.”

“Hopefully before the fuzz come looking for you two losers,” said Finnick as he strode back into the den from where he’d been keeping an eye out on the front yard. “No sign of anybody yet, though. Maybe you’ve still got some friends in blue… say, you ain’t looking too good, Hopps.”

“I’m fine,” snapped Judy, immediately waving away the worried looks given her by those present. She coughed, then took a swaying step past Finnick toward the front door. “Nick, Marian, help my mom get these kids to bed. I just… I need to make a phone call.”

The front porch was deserted when Judy stepped out, the yard beyond as clear of approaching cars as Finnick had promised. Judy went to the railing, half-collapsing against it to keep herself standing, holding the old and worn wood with one hand as she dialed a number on her phone with the other. She took a moment, breathing deep in and out to rein her thundering heart in before hitting CALL.

The phone rang twice before Chief Bogo answered. “You are in deep shit.”

“I know, sir,” said Judy. “I’m begging you, sir, please don’t believe what they’re saying about us. Monahan’s lying, that video going around is his confession! He’s the killer!”

An audible groan came over the line. “I don’t need this, Hopps. There’s just too much stacked against you to rely only on your word. The video, the revelation about Wilde’s personal connection to this case, damning character testimonies from Delgato and Johnson, a lack of solid alibis for your whereabouts during any of the murders—”

Judy thought back to the two lions she’d worked with for years and growled. “They’re two of the ZPD officers working with Monahan! And I was minding that cub on the train!”

“And only you, not Wilde!” A moment of silence following the shout, Bogo’s voice a measure calmer when next he spoke. “And I know about Delgato. The timing of all this after your warning about him is too perfect, but it doesn’t matter because there’s NO PROOF! Mayor Swinton is ordering for your arrests, and sooner or later I am going to have to obey those orders, whether I want to or not!”
“Just give us tu-time!” Hopps wheezed, before falling into a coughing fit. The pain in her chest and all this stress was killing her. “T-time to find what we need to prove ourselves innocent! There has to be SOMETHING you can d-do!”

Judy waited for an answer, nearly a minute passing before she heard Bogo’s voice again. “There was another murder half an hour ago. A Mr. Reginald Pinot, grey fox, Savannah Central shopkeeper. This means a yak will be the next victim and I need the ZPD and the city to prepare accordingly. It also means that, for now, the public at large believes you and Wilde to still be in Zootopia. Therefore, it only makes sense for me to keep my forces here.”

Judy almost wept from the implications, the tightness in her chest loosening. “Sir, are you saying—”

“Two days. That’s forty-eight hours to find something to convince the whole world it’s wrong. You fail, I’m coming for you myself. Am I clear?”

“… crystal clear, sir.”

“Good. And Judy? Take care of yourself, please.”

Judy hesitated, opening and closing her mouth several times before finally managing a quick “I will, thank you.” Then she hung up, sighing as she relaxed against the porch railing, ears drooped against her back and gaze out on the yard. It was a cold night, the stars gleaming bright that far from Zootopia’s light pollution.

The front door creaked open and shut behind Judy, three pairs of feet trodding her way. Two of them stopped just short behind her, the third continuing to her left as Nick joined her at the railing and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“We, uh…” Stu cleared his throat behind them. “We got your siblings to bed, and showed the fo—um, the guests over to their rooms, seeing how late it is and all… plus, I imagine all of you are going to have a long day tomorrow, trying to get this whole thing straightened out.”

Judy nodded, leaning in against Nick. “Thanks, you two. And yeah, we do.”

“Also,” started Bonnie, Judy perking her ears at something in her mother’s voice. “It’s probably not something on your minds right now, what with everything else, but your father and I have thought it over, and… we’re very happy for you, Bun-bun. You and Nick here.”

Judy swallowed, sharing a look with Nick before pulling away from him enough to smile back at her parents. She sniffled, wiping at her moistening eyes. After everything else… any little bit of good she could find felt golden. “Thank you… thank you.”
The Counter-Hustle

Benjamin Clawhauser had expectations going into work that morning. He expected to stress eat worse than usual. He expected to field calls from terrified citizens trying to report that they’d seen Judy Hopps or Nick Wilde lurking outside their house or in an alleyway or beside their business. He expected to have to excuse himself to go cry in the ZPD restrooms at least five times. He expected to have to do his darndest to hide his certainty in the innocence of his two best friends in the police force.

What the portly cheetah did not expect, and in all honesty could never have expected, was for an army of bunnies to come rolling in five minutes to lunchtime, two or three dozen of them, bunnies of all ages and sizes, hopping and jostling and shouting and pushing and pointing and, and—

“Excuse me! Down here!”

Clawhauser snapped out of his cuteness-induced daze, eyes sweeping the forest of bunny ears before landing on one matronly rabbit in a violet blouse, jeans, and coat, arms crossed and foot thumping. Immediately he flinched back, terror gripping his heart at being the target of such Motherly Rage. “H-hello, welcome to the ZPD, how may I help y—”

In one hop the bunny was standing on top of the front desk, now managing to somehow look down on Clawhauser despite, well, being a bunny. “I am Bonnie Hopps, a hardworking farmer, a mother of over 300 children”—at which every non-rabbit woman in earshot winced—“and I demand to know how you ZPD loons dare to accuse my precious little Judy Hopps of being, being… some kind of maniac killer!”

By this point there wasn’t a pair of eyes in the ZPD lobby not watching the exchange, cops and criminals alike thrown totally off by the sheer size of the rabbit horde. Clawhauser, now having a good idea of where Judy had inherited her drive, sunk down in his seat. “I-I-well that is—I can’t comment on official ZPD policy or, or the decisions of city hall, b-but the video going around—”

“If anything, Mrs. Hopps glare blazed hotter than ever. “Oh, as if video ever proved anything!”

“M-Mom…”

“Don’t they have movies here in Zootopia!? Who analyzed that video? What if it all was faked? My kids have made better home movies!”

“Mooommm…”

To Clawhauser’s relief Mrs. Hopps ceased in her tirade, redirecting her glare to somewhere to the side of the front desk. Following her gaze, he saw a bunny around Judy’s age, though significantly smaller than her, dressed in a heavy woolen coat that made her seem even smaller, a monstrous pair of horn-rimmed glasses obscuring her violet eyes.

Clawhauser’s mind focused on that last detail, a lightbulb going off inside his head. For a moment he felt like laughing.

Mrs. Hopps looked less than pleased by the interruption. “Ugh. Yes, Rudy? I am in the middle of something here!”

“Rudy” flinched at her mother’s tone, before turning to Clawhauser and, under the guise of pushing her glasses up, winked and glanced for a moment upstairs, to the offices. “S-Sir, this might be a r-re-
really bad time, but, um, w-well... c-could you direct me to the restroom?"

These last few words came out as barely a squeak. Clawhauser could barely fight back his grin, having a good idea of where Judy got her acting talent as well as he looked back and forth between “Rudy” and her mother. “Oh, well of course, sweetie, I’d be happy to! Or well, sorry, but I think I heard the appropriately-sized restrooms on the ground floor here are having problems, but if you just go up to the offices I’m sure a cute thing like you can—”

Several “Ooohs!” ran through the crowd of bunnies, Clawhauser squeaking and sinking into his chair again as Mrs. Hopps bristled before him. “Did you just call my daughter cute!? That is OUR word! What next, are you going to pick one of us without permission, just because we’re small? I could have you sued! I could have your badge! I could call your boss down here right now! I—”

***

Without another word, ears drooping and body flinching at every shouted word from her mother, the young bunny slipped from the scene and hurried to the indicated stairs. Any that glanced her way felt sympathy for the stereotypical idea of the average bunny, paying her no more mind than that. Even so, the young rabbit kept up appearances all the way up the stairs, down the hallway and past offices both occupied and empty, right up to grabbing hold of the handle to the restrooms.

She paused, turning to glance around for anyone watching. At the sight of nobody she let go and walked to the door to Delgato’s office two doors down, shuffle turning into a stride, back straightening and shoulders dropping their hunch. Judy felt a small measure better than she did that morning to see Clawhauser, at least, trusted her.

The door was unlocked, to little surprise. Most officers in the precinct didn’t bother to lock their offices until they finished their shifts, the worst they had to worry about being pranks from other officers. Judy closed the door behind her, considering locking the door for a moment before deciding that could rouse suspicion and instead heading straight for Delgato’s desk and the computer waiting there.

“Thank God he’s just a lion and not an elephant, or this could turn into a round of gymnastics really fast...”

Judy had never been a technical kind of police officer. It wasn’t the branch of law enforcement that interested her. Close-quarters combat, high-speed chases, the satisfaction of reciting just which laws had done a criminal in, those were more her area. However, with over 300 siblings to call upon, luck had given her five pursuing computer-related professions, all of them eager to help.

As the computer came out of sleep mode, Judy dug out from her heavy coat a slim computer tablet, a gift from a sibling with more than a slight propensity for hacking. She waited until the prompt for a login password came up before plugging in the tablet. The multitude of programs loaded onto the tablet transferred over and, ten seconds of letters and numbers streaming through the password box later, the computer dinged an acceptance and turned on the rest of the way.

A moment of dissonance passed as she looked at the desktop background. It was a photo showing most of the precinct grouped together and smiling, the burly lion near the center of the group, next to Chief Bogo and Clawhauser. She and Nick stood at the very front, arms over shoulders and throwing up victory signs. Every cop present was wearing the most garish of red and green sweaters, decorated all over with tiny bells.

“I remember that Christmas party...” It was a hard one to forget. Clawhauser had set up every doorway with mistletoe. Eventually, Nick and Judy’d had no choice but to share their first kiss.
Delgato had laughed and cheered with all the rest, that night.

Wiping a paw at her suddenly moist eyes, Judy peeked her head out from behind the desk to make sure nobody was walking by the windows to the door’s left and right, before setting to work. An app on the tablet had been labeled, in all capital letters, “FILE COPY”. Judy pressed it, then at a prompt for a specific word or phrase to search for typed in “MONAHAN”. She then watched as a progress bar popped up both on the tablet screen and on the computer and began to fill.

Ears perked as they were for the slightest sound of anyone coming down the hallway, Judy nearly jumped out of her skin when the computer loosed a cheery ding. Looking from the tablet to the computer screen, she saw that Yaxoo Messenger had sprung up, with one new message.

Judy lifted an eyebrow, before checking the program’s progress bar. Forty seconds remained until the file copying was complete. No movement could be heard out in the hallway. She figured she had two, maybe three minutes at most before her mom had to start winding down her tirade and her absence would be noticed.

“Well… it can’t hurt…”

A scroll and click of the mouse and the messaging program opened.

Cloudy_86: Yesterday went just swimmingly. Who is my yak target for tonight?

Judy stared wide-eyed at the message, struggling between a grin and a frown. There in front of her, surer than Monahan simply claiming it, was proof of Delgato’s involvement in the murders. Even as she set paw to keyboard to answer, a part of her hated this.

Officer_Blue: I’d be more pleased if Bogo were cooperative. But yes, a real success. Tonight, go for a yak named Yax. He runs the Mystic Springs Oasis in the Sahara district.

Cloudy_86: Ugh, that naturalist club. Why him?

The tablet next to Judy beeped, indicating the download had finished. She glanced to the windows and hurriedly ducked down as Higgins walked past, coming back up to type a response.

Officer_Blue: He was involved in Hopps’ search for the missing mammals all those years ago. No better reason.


Caught off guard by this, Judy took a moment to respond.

Officer_Blue: Hail Miss White.

Judy logged off before any more could be said, put the computer back to sleep, stuffed the tablet back into her coat, and headed for the door, resuming her hunched and meek persona as she went. It was time to go.

Downstairs, the ZPD lobby had finally returned to somewhat normal sound levels, Chief Bogo himself having come down to see what all the commotion was about. Judy let out a startled squeak at the sight of the cape buffalo escorting her mother and siblings to the doors, letting out a near-continuous stream of apologies as she ran to catch up to the group.

“—and I promise, if any possibility of your daughter presents itself, the ZPD will pursue it with—”

He broke off as Judy reached them, locking eyes with her for the briefest moment before huffing and
turning to walk back to the front desk. “Whatever. Just don’t be a nuisance to any of my officers.”

Judy kept her features meticulously embarrassed at this, slinking back into her horde of siblings to follow Bonnie out of the building. She caught her mother’s eyes and, at a questioning look, gave the briefest of smiles and a nod. The computer tablet sat heavy where it rested in her coat, solid, brimming with hope.

Two vehicles waited a block down, both large vans. On the side of one were plastered the words “Grey’s Bakery”. On the other van was a mural more befitting of a Heroic Fantasy novel. Judy followed the rest of her family toward the bakery van, breaking off at the last minute after a hug from her mother and veered instead to Finnick’s van.

The moment she hopped inside and closed the door behind her Nick was there, hugging and petting and overall being quite intolerably fretful. “Oh thank God you’re okay! You’re okay, right? Your heart feels fine? What about your family? Did you have trouble—”

“I’m okay, I’m fine, quit it!” Judy gave him a small push to get some space, but smiled up at him anyway. As Finnick joined the flow of traffic leaving the ZPD she shrugged off her coat, glasses, and scarf. “Everything went better than we could have hoped for.”

Nick, having finally calmed down a measure, lifted an eyebrow. “Better how?”

She smiled wider and held up the tablet and all it contained. “This is going to take a long while to sort through, but in the meantime, you and I have a date at the Mystic Spring Oasis.”

“If it’s the kind of date you two usually end up in,” said Finnick from the driver’s seat, “you might want to take some backup this time.”

***

Chief Bogo’s laptop dinged, signaling the arrival of an email. He frowned at it and motioned for Trunkaby and Higgins to pause in their pouring over the city map. Opening his laptop, Bogo pulled up his Yaxoo account and saw one email from Officer Hopps.

“Taken from Delgato’s work computer,” read the email, making Bogo groan as he remembered the all-too-recent encounter with Mrs. Hopps and that swarm she called her children. “Don’t trust him, Johnson, Higgins, or Trunkaby.”

The frown deepened as Bogo glanced at the other two officers in the room, both of them looking curiously over his way. This was ridiculous. It hadn’t even been one day yet. Surely Hopps and Wilde hadn’t…

“Pack it up, you two. Go check up on Johnson, see how the registering of the city’s yak population is going.”

With only the slightest grumbling, the pair of officers did as ordered. Bogo waited until the door was shut before clicking on the first attachment, a Word document. As he read, his stomach sank.

***

“Hey.”

Lieutenant Carla Fangmeyer yawned, the tigress looking from the storefronts rolling past her side of the police cruiser to the white wolf in the driver’s seat. “Yeah?”
Lieutenant Adam Fangmeyer signaled, then turned a corner in their patrol route. “Do you ever wonder why we’re here?”

Carla blinked, returning her attention to the passing buildings and alleyways. She’d gotten used to weird questions over the decade they’d been married, but this took the cake. “Wow, getting real deep tonight, aren’t we? I mean, why are we here? Are we the product of some cosmic coincidence, or are we the product of some god, you know, with a plan for us and stuff? I don’t know, Fangy, but it definitely keeps me up at night.”

Silence reigned in the cruiser for five, ten, fifteen seconds, before Adam stopped at a STOP sign and turned to stare at his wife and partner. “What!? I meant what are we doing here in this neighborhood!”

Carla’s eyes widened and ears flattened. “Oh.”

“And what was all that stuff about God?”

“Nothing.”

“You… wanna talk about it?”

“No, no…”

“Okay,” said Adam, turning left once the traffic had cleared. “But why are we here? We’ve been patrolling this same six-block area for the past half-hour.”

As luck had it, their cruiser passed the main entrance to their building of interest just as the wolf finished this question. Carla gave it a nod as they went. “Right there, the Mystic Spring Oasis. Some hippie yak runs the place, declined the offer to get moved to a safer location. Said it would mess with his vibes, or something.”

Adam groaned and rolled his eyes. “Ugh. Naturalists. Why—”

The radio crackled to life, Clawhauser’s voice coming over frantic and rushed. “Fangmeyer and Fangmeyer, we’ve got a possible WildeHopps sighting down 4th and Crescent! Chief Bogo’s calling all nearby officers for an intercept and detainment!”

“Understood,” responded Carla at once, though between putting finger to the button for their sirens and actually pressing it she looked to her husband and frowned. “You don’t think those two are actually the killers, right? Like, it’s an actual impossibility within the parameters of the universe?”

“Damn right,” growled Adam, slamming the gas and tearing down the street. “And I’ll bet my life savings they’ve got a plan right this minute to set everything right.”

Satisfied, Carla hit the sirens and readied for whatever scene Hopps and Wilde had planned for them.

***

An empty minute passed on that snow-blown street before the dark figure emerged from the alleyway shadows. Middling-sized, the wolf wore dark blue pants and coat, a hood up to hide all but the creature’s expressionless face.

The wolf stood at the edge of the street and looked left and right. At the sight of no cars coming he strode across, quick but casual, humming a soft tune to himself as he approached the main doors to the Mystic Spring Oasis. As expected, they opened without resistance. Locks, the wolf figured as he
slid through the doors and closed them behind him, were in the same “unnatural” league as clothes to
the Naturalists.

Having been to the club once that day already, undisguised, the Wendigo Killer had no trouble
navigating the darkened reception area, the empty and silent gardens beyond, the drafty hallways
leading to the sleeping chambers of Yax the yak. He only had to pause once, ducking into an alcove
as a distractingly plump rhino shuffled past, mumbling to herself about snooping cops and occupied
restrooms.

As with the front door, the door to Yax’s sleeping quarters was lock-free. The Wendigo Killer
slipped in, casting a quick glance around the room to ensure nobody else was there. He saw nobody
and nothing of note, only a plotted plant in the corner, a writing desk covered in papers and books,
and a glassless window looking out on a street corner.

Satisfied, the wolf stalked toward the bed across the room. The rumbling snores of the shapeless
lump beneath the covers drowned out all other sound. The Wendigo killer chuckled as he slid his
Ka-Bar knife from its sheath inside his coat, lifting it high as he reached out for the blankets. Another
death, another face for the collect—

“Not so fast there, Scarface.”

The Wendigo Killer froze, before reaching down the rest of the way and tugging the covers away to
find no more than several pillows and a phone playing the snoring noises. He then turned to the fox
standing with crossed arms next to the door. Of course. The door had opened inward, blocking the
fox from view. So simple and obvious, only an idiot would consider it.

Nick Wilde made a face as the Wendigo Killer stepped forward, into the soft light streaming through
the window. “Oh, ew, ew, ew. Please tell me that’s not… is that the face of your wolf victim? That’s
sick!”

The killer tilted his head as if in thought, before loosing a chuckle that in no way was reflected in his
‘face’. He threw his hood back and undid the leather straps going tight around his head, pulling off
the now-loose wolf mask to reveal a scarred and grinning visage. “Yes, unfortunately. I usually try
wearing the face of my last victim, but alas, the fox wasn’t quite ready yet.”

“Monahan.” Nick’s paws clenched into fists. He couldn’t help the growl slipping into his voice as he
stalked forward a step. “You’re a sick, twisted little monster. It’s embarrassing how Judy and I got so
thoroughly hustled by you down in the Barrens.”

“I can’t take all the credit for that,” said the clouded leopard. Idly, he turned the knife in his paw.
“Johnson had the idea after running into Officer Hopps at the ZPD, snooping around where she
shouldn’t be. Then he saw you and your fennec friend pick her up and knew you weren’t dropping
the case that easily.”

“But why!” Nick took another step forward, pausing only when Monahan brought his knife up in a
guard. “I just don’t understand why you’re doing this! I looked you up, you’ve got a successful
business, plenty of clients, work hours to envy! And Delgado, Johnson, all the rest, they’re respected
ZPD officers! Why throw all that away for… for… what, some sick predator thrill?!”

“Oh, don’t act so high and mighty just because you get to pin a shiny badge on every morning!”
Snarling, the leopard spun and stabbed the phone, throwing the wrecked remains to Nick’s feet. “We
can’t all be the pretty face of the ZPD! We don’t all get a better life! You can’t imagine what I owe
to her, to—”
But then he paused, his good eye focusing on Nick’s front shirt pocket and the body camera (standard-issue for all patrol officers) carefully hidden there, and Nick recoiled at the grin splitting Monahan’s face. “Oh, you sly gator! You got me monologuing! Hahahaha, oh, you trying to pull a Bellwether on me, Wilde?”

Nick shrugged, sneaking a glance at the window as he did so, worried that his backup hadn’t arrived yet. “W-well, you know, it worked once. And hey, you sure did a good job at it with that video the other day.”

“Yeah… I did…” Monahan’s teeth gleamed in the darkness as he advanced toward Nick, angling to pin him into one of the room’s corners. He twirled the knife in his paw. “It’s too bad nobody’s going to be seeing that footage…”

“H-hey now!” Nick backed up, grunting as his back hit a wall. Now he made no attempt to hide his look past Monahan toward the window. “Haven’t you already killed a fox this week!?”

“I don’t mind exceptions.” The knife rose high, twisting into a reversed hold to stab down. “Goodbye, Wi—”

Judy flew through the window, hitting the ground into a roll and springing to her feet just a few steps away from Monahan and Nick. Though panting hard and clutching at her chest through her shirt and jacket, her whole air was one of victory as she locked eyes with Monahan. “Sorry I’m late, had to go a bit slow. But now it’s over, Monahan. You’re through.”

“Oh, really?” Smirking, the clouded leopard pulled a second knife from his jacket, leveling one knife at each of the two smaller mammals. “The way I see it, you both—”

Far, far less gracefully than Judy had done, Officer Adam Fangmeyer threw himself through the window, landing with a thud and a puppy-ish yelp. “J-Judy, stop running, p-please… ow…”

Behind him Officer Carla Fangmeyer climbed through the window with some difficulty, the tigress freezing at the scene playing out before her. Nobody moved or said anything. Her eyes went from Nick and Judy to Monahan menacing them with knives, to the empty bed, then to her partner struggling to his feet, and then back to Nick and Judy. She groaned as she leveled her tranq gun on Monahan. “This is another Bellwether scenario, isn’t it?”

“Aw, man.” Adam drew and aimed his gun at the leopard as well. “The paperwork on this is gonna suck.”

“But… but…” Monahan’s whole figure shook, arms slowly lowering to his sides. “I’m… I’m the Wendigo… I’m the greatest of hunters…”

“No, Monahan.” In three quick moves, Judy knocked the knives out of his hold and kicked them over to the official officers on the scene. “You’re just one very, very sick man.”

***

“Breaking news!” Despite years of experience, Fabienne Growley failed utterly to keep the joy out of her voice. “New developments in the renewed Wendigo murders have cleared the names of renowned ZPD Officers Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde. New footage released just this evening by Chief Bogo has revealed the pair, alongside Officers Carla and Adam Fangmeyer, confronting the true Wendigo Killer, Taylor Monahan, during his attempt to claim his next victim.”

Peter Moosebridge kept his voice only a degree calmer as he took over the report. “Also newly released by the ZPD is an edited version of the previous footage with sound, revealing Monahan’s
confession to his role as the new Wendigo Killer. The video was given over by Officer Dean Johnson, one of the officers named as an accomplice to Monahan.

“Yet despite this welcome end to a terrible moment in Zootopian history,” resumed Growley, “for many this turn of events only deepens the controversy surrounding the ZPD’s once-sterling officers. Questions remain concerning how deep their mob ties go, whether they were justified or not in their use of force and extra-legal techniques in securing Monahan’s confession, and who else within the ZPD has been compromised? And most pressing of all: what now?”

***

The paperwork, as Fangmeyer predicted, had been a nightmare to get through. Murder charges and orders for arrest didn’t just disappear with a snap of a finger, even with the chief of police pushing it through. Both Nick and Judy had to give multiple accounts of their actions since the murders began, both together and separate, again and again until the facts all seemed to blur together. There were forms to fill out, photos to be taken, statements to be checked and compared, arrests to be made and confessions to be gotten.

Johnson surrendered without a fight the moment arresting officers approached him. Trunkaby tried to run, injuring several bystanders before he was properly tranquilized. Higgins tried to do himself in, Chief Bogo barely managing to talk the hippo down. There were other arrests in other precincts, but Nick paid them no mind. After the capture of Monahan and the securing of Delgato’s computer files, he and Judy were officially done with the case, and he had never been more grateful.

***

“I’ll tell them nothing. NOTHING. I swear on whatever god you believe in.”

“I believe in no god, Mr. Blue, but I will believe you. You have been a faithful, reliable partner for many years, and despite this staggering at the finish line, we accomplished what we wanted. The Hegemony will reward you greatly for your service. Take care, old friend.”

“Thank you, Miss White. And… what about our blunt instrument?”

“He knows too much and will crack too easily. I have someone on the way to take care of things as we speak.”

***

The strangest arrest, not difficult but strange, had been Delgato. They found the lion in his Savannah Central apartment, standing out on his balcony in his dress blues, a service pistol in one hand and a smartphone in the other.

“It’s over, Delgato,” said Grizzoli, the polar bear taking the lead on the arrest as Nick and Judy lingered back with McHorn. “Drop the weapon and put your hands where I can see them. Please, Calisto. Don’t make this harder on anyone than it needs to be.”

The lion did as commanded, to Nick’s honest surprise, Delgato turning to smile at them as he did. It was, to Nick’s even greater surprise and concern, not in any way an angry or sad smile, but a happy one. “Don’t worry, officers, I won’t cause you any trouble. It’s all settled, and I’m ready for a nice, long retirement.”

“That’s a funny way of looking at prison,” said Grizzoli, forcing Delgato’s arms behind his back to snap on the handcuffs. “We’ll see how long it lasts when we get you a lifetime of solitary, you Goddamn traitor.”
“Sure,” said the lion, his smile at Nick and Judy as he was led past them to the door making Nick step protectively in front of his rabbit. “We’ll see how that works out.”
Eye of the Storm

Operating on only a few hours of sleep each, their presence in the morning’s press conference two days later was mercifully brief. They stayed to the back of the group in their dress uniforms while Mayor Swinton gave empty platitudes on faith in the police force and perseverance through adversity being the Zootopian way, followed by him and Judy taking the stage to recite the most barebones version of their involvement in the case possible, and then oh-so-politely getting shuffled off to the side as Chief Bogo stepped forward to field questions. The entire event left Nick feeling bizarrely empty.

“You know,” he said, whispering to Judy so that even if there had been someone else standing with them near the potted plants he wouldn’t be heard, “I expected to feel a little more celebratory about all this. Right now I just feel tired.”

Leaning against the wall, Judy shrugged. “It’s been a long week and a bad case. I’m amazed you haven’t sprouted any grey hairs yet.”

Nick smiled her way, eyes half-lidded. “You’re the only grey hare this fox needs, Carrots.”

She groaned and rolled her eyes, giving his shoulder a playful punch. “Oh shut up, that’s speciesist. Hares aren’t the same thing as rabbits. Might as well call you a jackal.”

“I think Doctor Beltz would take offense at that,” said Nick, feeling himself relax now. Judy was smiling, a shine back in her eyes. That was good enough for him.

“You know,” said Judy after a moment. “After this is all over, we should go on a vacation.”

“A long, long vacation,” added Nick, smiling. “Somewhere warm and friendly, where you can rest and let your heart heal up.”

Leaning back, Judy clasped her paws behind her head and stared up at the ceiling. “I’m imagining… Pawai. Warm beaches, surfing, flybys over volcanos. Ooh, or maybe Gnu York City. Catch a showing of Camelton.”

“That does all sound good.” Nick mirrored the rabbit’s pose, save for staring up at the ceiling. He couldn’t look away from her. “Although, I was imagining more… a nice countryside farmhouse. Early rise every morning to the sounds of stampeding bunny kits, every meal hearty and home-cooked, afternoons and evenings spent frolicking through fields and nights spent stargazing.”

Judy met his gaze, one eyebrow up and lips turned up in a smile. “You asking me to take you home to the family, Mr. Wilde?”

Nick shrugged, smile growing wider. “Well, Ms. Hopps, you can’t say my first trip to meet the family was under ideal circumstances.”

A laugh, soft and full of warmth. “No, I suppose not.”

A minute of companionable silence passed between them. Then an excessively loud bison’s voice broke out over the general rumble of reporters. “Will there be any legal action or official reprimand concerning the criminal actions of Officers Hopps and Wilde?”

It seemed like a hornet’s nest had been kicked open as the rest of the reporting horde clamped on to that line of questioning. Nick’s smile faded as Bogo struggled to reign in the situation. “Nothing’s
going to be the same after this.”

“No…”

Nick continued. “Don’t know what else Delgato and Monahan and these ‘higher powers’ they were going on about had planned, but they sure accomplished one thing. We’re mud. Even after everything else came to light…”

Judy shrugged beside him, shoulders slumped and gaze somewhere far away. Nick sighed, only restraining from pulling her close because of the press conference still going on mere feet away. But yes, he thought. Getting out of town for a while sounded good.

***

“Monahan, you’ve got a visitor!”

Taylor looked up from his folded hands, the snow leopard blinking as the solid steel door to his solitary prison cell rolled open. He blinked again as a wolf he’d never seen before stepped through. She wore a black business suit and scarf that stood in stark contrast with her white fur, complimenting it far better than Taylor’s orange jumpsuit did his blotchy grey coat. She carried a suitcase and a folded umbrella.

Taylor waited until the door had been rolled closed and locked before speaking. “You’re not my lawyer. Heh. Hehehehee. You’re nobody’s lawyer.”

“No, I’m not.” The wolf smiled, leaning her umbrella against the wall and setting her briefcase down on the cell’s sink. “I am Miss Black. I work for Miss White.”

Taylor dropped his smile, a chill running through his blood. He leaned as far back in his cot as he could, back hitting the wall behind him with a thump. “I’m not saying anything. I don’t even know anything. It was just a bit of fun, I swear! Delgato talked me into it!”

“Mister Blue is a trusted and valued member of our organization,” said Miss Black, opening her briefcase. “You aren’t.”

Taylor swallowed, glancing past the wolf to the cell door. He knew there was no getting to it. “So that’s it, then. You’re going to kill me.”

“No.” Miss Black turned to him, holding up a piece of paper from the briefcase, the legalese on it beyond unintelligible. “I am here to inform you that your job application has been carefully considered and rejected.”

Taylor blinked. “Um… what?”

“Our screening process is very thorough,” said the wolf, assuming the kind of tone used when addressing a wayward student. “Miss White frowns upon the hiring of maniacs like yourself. More trouble than you are worth in the long run. As such, I hope you weren’t planning to rely on our legal expertise to get you out of this mess you’re in.”

“I… um…” He swallowed, not sure what to feel now that his life wasn’t on the line. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good” Snapping her briefcase shut, Miss Black stepped back to the door and knocked. “I suppose this is the last we’ll be seeing of each other, then. Goodbye, Mr. Monahan.”
The door rolled open and she stepped through. Taylor waved her off, then relaxed back on his cot. Never had he been so relieved to be stuck in prison.

Two minutes later, he realized the wolf had left her umbrella behind. **“Hey, wait—”**

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“An explosion rocked Zootopia Correctional Facility this evening, killing a dozen prisoners and five guards and injuring twenty. More after sports.”

In the end, it wasn’t as bad as Judy had lay awake at night fearing. Indefinite suspension from the force, at half pay. Mayor Swinton had apparently been pushing for no pay at all, and the newspapers Judy didn’t dare read were proclaiming the pay a further sign of corruption, but it seemed there were some things Chief Bogo could not be budged on. Yet still…

“It might be best for you two to get out of the city for a while. Visit family, see the world, just… give Zootopia and her citizens time to cool down. They’ll forget about you both soon enough, and I’ll work to get you back on the force as soon as I can.”

Judy couldn’t disagree. She had come home one evening to find “MOB PUPPET” spray-painted on her door, and another evening to find the door broken down, “MURDERER” carved into the wall beside her bed. Escape, for the moment, was the best option.

Few of their fellow officers came to see them off at the train station, the ZPD being as stretched thin as it was. There was Francine, who was also on medical leave anyway. There was Clawhauser, sobbing as he carried to their seats a box of donuts fit for a platoon. And there was Chief Bogo himself, his stern demeanor dropping just enough to wish Nick and Judy a fond farewell.

"Never have I met such infuriating officers. Keep in touch."

"Yeah, don't be strangers, you two! I'll keep your desk warm for when you come back, Hopps!"

"I-I'm g-g-GONNA MISS YOU GUYYYYSSS! I-I'LL GO TO EVERY GAZELLE CONCERT IN Y-YOUR HONOR!"

Judy laughed at this, giving the portly cheetah a hug while Nick shook paws with the others. She hated how final it all felt.

Finnick was there as well, along with Marian Wilde. Judy made sure to hug each of them as tight as she could, then, as Nick started on a conversation with his mother, pulled the dwarf fennec fox aside for a moment. “Hey, I have a bit of a job for you.”

“Course you do,” said Finnick, crossing his arms and glancing over to where the ZPD officers waited. “It’s why you’re whispering this so only us big ears can hear.”

Judy smiled bitterly and nodded. “Right. Keep an eye and ear out for anything… weird, going on in Zootopia, won’t you? And keep me in the loop when you can?"

Finnick frowned and looked her up and down for a moment, as Judy crossed her fingers and hopped the fennec wouldn’t ask any questions she wasn’t sure how to answer. She had her gut instincts, and scraps of hints gleaned from her encounters with Monahan and Delgato, but…

“Sure,” he said at last, smiling and clapping her shoulder. Judy breathed a sigh of relief and nodded
After a final check to make sure they’d loaded all their luggage up, they boarded the train and were soon off. In a mix of nostalgia and a wish to be away from the stares sent their way by the train’s other occupants, Judy found herself gravitating up to the train’s forward observation deck. Up there, with only Nick by her side, she could abandon the brave face that had gotten her there. She stood at the glass with Nick, heart clenching as she watched the snow-bound skyline of Zootopia recede slowly into the distance and out of sight. She felt, like the tears now slipping from her eyes, her hopes and dreams slipping from her as the train plowed on, left behind like Zootopia itself.

“I only wanted to make the world a better place…”

“And you did,” said Nick, a hand on her shoulder, sending an ever-fresh chill up her spine. “Monahan and his ZPD helpers might’ve hurt our reputations with the city, and MAYBE that’s a little on us for throwing Mr. Big around like a club at every obstinate informant or roadblock come our way, but they can’t take you opening the doors to the ZPD for any mammal wanting to try.”

The hills outside rolled past in a green and white blur, the sky a vague mass of grey. Judy sniffed, wiping at her eyes before looking up at Nick. Her Nick. She tried to smile. “No, I… I suppose they can’t. Thanks.”

He smiled back down at her, arm moving to drape over her shoulders as he leaned down to kiss her forehead. “It’s why I’m here.”

“Hmm.” Judy leaned her head against her fox, taking comfort in his warm presence. She wrapped an arm around his waist and held tight when, in the window reflections in front of them, she noticed his eyes growing wet now. “Hey. Hey. I haven’t had a chance to say this, what with how crazy everything’s been, but… I’m sure your dad would be proud of you right now.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” said Nick’s reflection, holding Judy’s reflection tighter. His voice was low but strong, certain. “And even though I had hoped to find out who the original Wendigo Killer was, I feel like… I avenged my dad, a little, by stopping the new Wendigo Killer. Or, Killers, I should say. And at the end of this train ride’s a whole bunch of new family for me, so hey! I think I can… I think I can live with this.”

Judy wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that, looking back along the tracks toward Zootopia and their past. Eventually they sat down, Judy remaining curled up at her fox’s side as they whiled away the hours with small talk and Clawhauser’s donuts. They discussed family member names, and what restaurants they would first visit if and when they returned to Zootopia, and all the old Bunnyburrow stomping grounds Judy couldn’t wait to show Nick. It was, she decided with a yawn, an altogether nice journey. She almost wished the train ride wouldn’t end…

Eventually, though, they did reach the Bunnyburrow train station. It was getting on in the evening by then. Before the pair could do more than begin trying to work out how to carry all their luggage and Clawhauser’s remaining farewell donuts, there came a loud shout of “JUDY!” followed by a half-dozen of some of her closest siblings working their way through the crowd of departing mammals, led along by Stu Hopps. She brightened up at the sight of him, having had to miss Bonnie and the rest returning to Zootopia during her many meetings to get her side of the Wendigo Killer Case straight. She broke off from Nick and ran, almost tackling Stu to the floor of the train with her hug and not caring. “Dad!”

“Whoa there! Heheh, hey, Judy, hey… good to see you…”

As they hugged, Judy felt her siblings hurrying past her, each patting her back as they went. She
broke the hug to watch, with no small amount of amusement, Nick struggling to get to carry at least one bag or suitcase out, a request her brothers and sisters seemed to get the greatest amusement out of denying as they carried his and Judy’s luggage out. Sharing an amused look with her dad, who only shrugged and whistled innocently as he went to join the bunny stream heading out the door, she rolled her eyes and followed along.

Out on the platform, it was organized chaos as Judy’s siblings struggled to cram all the luggage into the back of one of the family’s farm trucks. Stu yelped and ran over to guide them, leaving Judy to join Nick in watching. Even a quick glance around revealed to her fewer watching mammals, the worst look the pair getting being from a horse some ways off, and from experience Judy recognized the stare as offense at a rabbit and fox standing so close and so comfortably, rather than anything they may or may not have done with the Tundratown mob. It was, surprisingly, refreshing.

“Think we should go over there and help?” asked Nick, as Stu experimented to see if tying the box of donuts to the roof of the truck was a viable option.

“We probably should,” agreed Judy. She took a step forward—

—and immediately stopped, ice tumbling down her back, breath hitching as if in preparation for a scream. Judy looked back behind them at the train, an inexplicable sense of dread coming over her as she watched it jerk back into motion for Zootopia.

“You okay, Carrots? Your heart giving you trouble?”

Judy frowned, shaking her head as she watched the train depart. A shout from her dad that they were ready to go barely registered with her. “I don’t know, I just… suddenly feel worried, like something bad’s about to happen. It’s something you feel in the air, like when a tornado’s building.”

She felt Nick’s arm wrap over her shoulders again, gently leading her on toward the waiting Hopps trucks. “Good thing it’s not tornado season then, heh. But more seriously, we’ve just got to trust the rest of the ZPD to handle whatever’s coming their way, right? Not saying I don’t believe you, but after this whole Wendigo Killer mess, what could be worse?”

***

"Primadonna girl, yeah, all I ever wanted was the world!

Can't help that I need it all,
The primadonna life the rise, the fall.

You say that I'm kinda difficult,

But it's always someone else's fault.

Gotcha wrapped around my finger, babe,

You can count on me to misbehave."

A pair of otters at a crosswalk looked scandalized as Jack pulled his metal-green Lamborghini, hare-scaled just for him, to a stop beside them. As he watched them pass in front of him he flashed the lady in the violet sweater an ear-to-ear smile. She eeped and sped up, practically dragging her husband to the other side of the road. Perhaps she had felt his urge, somehow, to run them over. Jack watched the pair go until they turned a corner out of sight, before shrugging and driving on.
"Primadonna girl fill the void up with celluloid,
Take a picture, I'm with the boys
Get what I want because I ask for it,
Not because I'm really that deserving of it.
Living life like I'm in a play
In the lime light I want to stay
I know I've got a big ego,
Not really sure why it's such a big deal, though."

The turnoff for Jack's Downtown apartment came up. He slowed and turned right into the car park, rolling the windows shut as he did so. The song ended just as he reached the third level and the first available parking spot fit for his car. He turned the radio off before another song could start and made a beeline straight for the spot. "Home sweet home."

The car park was empty that night of any other walkers, and painfully cold, though the netting between the levels kept the worst of the ice and snow from getting in. Carefully balancing the trio of grocery bags in his arms as he walked, it took only around five minutes to get through the key card out of his suit pocket, get through the glass doors, and start down the hall to his apartment.

"Let's see, 311, 312, 313, here we—"

Jack paused, ears up and nose twitching at the sight of his apartment door just barely ajar. He glanced up and down the hallway once, glad for the thick green carpeting rendering his footsteps silent as he slowly set his grocery bags down. His hand went to his pocket and for a moment, thoughts of calling the ZPD filled his head. He quickly shook such thoughts off and pushed the door open the rest of the way. The room beyond lay completely dark, save the rectangle of light from the doorway.

"Hmm... I wonder what will happen." Stepping in, Jack closed the door behind him. The next second the lights flickered on to a chorus of snarls and yells.

The first, a weasel, lunged from the right with a bat. Jack ducked the swing, letting it bounce off the door frame as he punched right into his assailant's liver. The weasel seized up, letting Jack grab her shoulders and throw her at the second assailant, a hare like him, mid-swing of bat.

CRACK.

The weasel fell limp to the floor, neck bent at just the wrong angle. Jack jumped over her and slammed into the hare as he pulled back for another swing, ramming him backward into a wall-mounted mirror.

CRASH.

Glass shards fell all around them. Before the hare assailant could try for another swing, Jack grabbed his head in both hands and slammed it against the wall behind the mirror, then slammed again, again and again until the green paint was chipped and smeared red and the bat fell from limp hands. Then Jack slammed the head against the wall one more time, delighting in the CRUNCH of a breaking skull and the sudden gush of blood staining the white fur of his hands red. Only then did he let go,
relaxing back on his knees and taking several deep breaths.

A soft footfall perked his ears. Jack turned and saw a third assailant, a bobcat, standing next to the coffee table at the center of the room, her knees shaking and her toes kneading a suspicious wet patch in the carpet beneath her. At the sight of him turning to her she whimpered and dropped her crowbar, hands going up in a pleading gesture. "Please, we were only told—"

He moved fast, faster than he knew any bobcat could react to, jumping over the bodies of her fallen comrades to latch his legs around her waist. The glass shard in his hand glittered as he STABBED it once, twice, three times into her neck, splattering his face in blood.

A THUMP rang through the apartment as the body fell to the floor, and then all was silent as the snow drifting down out past the bay windows dominating the far wall. Jack let the bloodied shard fall from his grip and stared down at his handiwork, taking a deep breath to calm his racing heart.

"Heh... Heh heh... oh God, it's in my mouth, it's in my mouth!"

He shot to his feet and half-ran, half-stumbled around the corpses and across the living room, throughout the bedroom to the adjoining bathroom, gagging and spitting all the while. Stomach contents demanding their release at the sickeningly sweet gunk in his mouth, he paused just long enough to hit the lights before turning the sink faucet on full blast and dunking his face under the stream.

Glub-glub-glub-glub—

Spit.

Glub-glub-glub-glub—

Spit.

Glub-glub-glub-glub—

Jack pulled his head out from under the water, panting for breath as he shut the faucet off and grabbed for the nearest washcloth. "Blood... in the mouth... not nearly... drunk enough for that..."

He threw the soiled washcloth to the floor, followed moments later by his black jacket and white button-up shirt, both as drenched in blood as his face had been. They could wait for later, when there were some reds to throw in the wash with them.

"Hmm, no, better let a professional cleaner handle them..."

Jack spared a moment to check himself over in the bathroom mirror before turning and striding back through the bedroom to the living room. Three dead bodies, two of them rapidly being enveloped in pools of their own blood, greeted him right where he'd left them. Glass, too, littered the apartment floor, glittering in the carpet like so many alluring diamonds. "Hm, yeah, definitely a professional cleaner."

His phone was still in his jacket. He went back for it, flipped through his contacts for the cleaner crew he knew, and called. As it rang he worked his way through the bodies and glass to the front door, where his groceries still waited in the hallway beyond. They were warm now, warmer than they should have been, but Jack supposed that warm us still better than blood-splattered.

Click.
"Koslov here. Is the job done?"

"Nope!" Phone in one hand and grocery bag in the other, Jack grinned to himself as he hopped and tiptoed his way past the glass, through a door along the left wall to the apartment's kitchen. "And I gotta say, Pops, Mr. Big must be running out of people if these three were the best he could scrounge up for good ol' Jack Savage."

A sigh carried across the line as Jack set the bag on the kitchen countertop and went back for another. "I'll send cleaner right away. Last few days have been... stressful in Zootopia. Very, very stressful. News you were coming back caught everyone flatfooted."

"Flatfooted? Was that a bunny joke?" Setting the last bag down, Jack opened his fridge and started putting away the assorted vegetables and drinks. "And gosh, stress in Zootopia? What, did Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde discover another government conspiracy?"

"In a manner of speaking... it's big, Savage. Real big."

Something in the old polar bear's voice, a touch of worry Jack had never heard from him before, made the rabbit pause in his restocking efforts and turn his full attention to the conversation. "What happened while I was away, Koslov?"

"Like I said, the cleaners are on their way. Standard fee. Just check the news."

Click.

Jack looked down at his phone, eyes narrowing, grip tightening. Koslov had never hung up on him before. Koslov had never DARED to hang up on him before. "I was only gone five months..."

The rest of the groceries forgotten, Jack pulled up the website for Zootopia's premiere newspaper on his phone, scrolling through until he got to the digital edition of the day’s major headline.

"FIRST RABBIT AND FOX COPS SUSPENDED IN DISGRACE"

Jack stared in abject horror at the headline, brain gears locked at cross purposes as he at once tried to comprehend the words and deny them.

"ZPD Officers Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde were put on indefinite suspension today, following a week of intense scrutiny over their ties to the Tundratown mob.

"The news, announced in an official email from the office of ZPD Chief Bogo, is as controversial as Hopps and Wilde themselves. Originally hailed as heroes for their key parts in finding the missing predators and stopping Mayor Bellwether's anti-predator plot, public opinion of them took a massive downward turn during the course of the New Wendigo Killer case, where they were briefly believed to be the killers themselves. The revelation otherwise, and their efforts in bringing in the real killers, has done little to lessen these worries.

"'Hopps and Wilde have always been fine officers of the law,' spoke Chief Mason Bogo when approached on the matter. 'Their ties with the Big family were known, and deemed by multiple Internal Affairs investigations, from multiple precincts, to be non-compromising in every capacity. These officers will be missed, and I hope to work again with them as soon as possible.'"

"These are not the only problems facing the ZPD now. With the critical lack of mammalpower in the wake of Hopps and Wilde's suspensions and the arrests of Officers Delgato, Johnson, Trunkaby, Higgins, and more, rumors swirl that Mayor Swinton is—"
Jack scrolled away from the article, searching for context as he followed the trail of key words. Wendigo Killer. Taylor Monahan. Corrupt ZPD cabals. Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde, ZPD heroes, ZPD villains, suspended and away from a city grown uncomfortable with them and their dubiously-legal actions.

“This… THIS…”

Jack snarled, shutting the news app and slamming his phone onto the kitchen counter. He clenched his fists and breathed deep, in and out, fighting a losing battle against his rage. “I leave for a nice little infiltration vacation to bring down an Arabbitian government from the inside… and a gaggle of power-drunk coppers think they can send MY city into a state of utter terror? Slaughter MY citizens? Make… make God-damn JUDY LAVERNE HOPPS the most notorious rabbit the country’s ever known as if I don’t even exist!”

Deep breath in, deep breath out. Jack started pacing the length of the kitchen, clenched fists now trembling as his eyes roamed for something, anything, to HURT. “Delgato, you stupid, arrogant little worm! How dare you? How dare you!? What was White thinking, edging in on MY TERRITORY? I am no bushy-tailed hare from carrot-choked Podunk! I am Jack Savage! I am THE SAVAGE! I, I—”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

Jack stopped what even he could recognize as unhinged ranting, turning to stare out the kitchen, across the living room to where he had, somehow, had the presence of mind to shut the front door. He stared at the door for a moment, wondering if that was Koslov’s cleaning crew already, certain there was no way they were there that fast.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

“It’s unlocked,” said Jack as he strode into the living room with a knife from the knife rack in hand, deciding he could kill whoever it was if he didn’t like them. And if it was the cleaning crew, well… scared cleaners worked faster, Jack knew.

The door opened. A white-furred wolf in a black coat and scarf stood in the doorway for a moment, looking around at the trio of dead bodies cooling on the carpet with a raised eyebrow. She then began carefully picking her way through the glass, kicking the front door shut behind her and setting the paper bags and flowers on the coffee table. “I bring you wine, you bring me corpses. As romantic as ever, Savage.”

“Bellatrix!” Jack threw the knife into the closest wall for safekeeping and ran forward, waiting just long enough for the wolf to take her scarf off before jumping to tackle-hug her. She stumbled back a step, an amused chuckle reaching Jack as he buried his face into the fluff of her neck. A deep sniff of her scent and he shivered, a leg kicking and fluffy tail twitching. “Sweet cheese and crackers have I missed this scent.”

The wolf, Bellatrix, chuckled again as her arms wrapped around Jack in a return hug, the hare feeling her carefully make her way to the couch running the length of the coffee table and sitting down, the better to hold him in her lap. Her face rubbed over his forehead, marking him as he marked her. “I would have gone with you, had it been allowed. We are lucky White sent me here to cover loose ends the day you returned.”

“More likely White sent you to cover the loose ends today because I was returning.” Jack pulled back, enough to look comfortably up at Bellatrix. “I saw in the news about Mister Blue’s little stunt. The serial killer was a charming touch, but so impractical. And aren’t we early a year or so?”
The wolf shrugged. “White is old. She grew impatient. And what White commands, we make so. The groundwork is laid, at any rate.” She leaned in, the lightest kiss gracing Jack’s forehead. “Is the legendary Jack Savage upset?”

Jack smiled, chuckled, returning the kiss before hopping out of Bellatrix’s lap. “At you? Never, my darling. At White? Only in my head, where she can’t find out and kill me. At Zootopia? Oh, most vocally.”

He turned and grabbed the bag containing the wine bottle, striding at once to the kitchen. He felt the wolf, Bellatrix, Miss Black, follow him as he dug around for his wine glasses. He’d been gone so long, they needed a thorough washing for dust. “After all, as I’d been ranting before you arrived, how dare this city? After all I have done TO this Zootopia and all Judy Hopps has done for it?”

Miss Black popped the wine bottle, let it air for a moment before filling the two glasses Jack had set out. “Criminal. Embarrassing.”

“Thank you.” Jack took his glass and sipped, finding it to be a fine sort of disgusting. He set his phone in its connector to the apartment’s speaker system and set it to shuffle. He didn’t sing along to this one, letting the music fill his home on its own.

I staggered through this criminal reign
I'm not in love, no phony pain
Creeping through this tidal wave
No warm embrace, just a lover's grain
This symphony
This rage in me
I've got a handful of songs to sing
To sting your soul
To fuck you over
This furious reign

Jack’s legs carried him out of the kitchen, into the living room and to the bay window looking out onto Zootopia beyond. The glimmer of the city lights, the ant-like couples taking their romantic strolls, the cops out on nighttime patrol, every little thin veneer of civilization, it all made Jack sick to his stomach. He stood there, swirling his wine, wondering if his reflection in the window would be better completed by a snake or a lizard. “If White’s so impatient, then I have a business proposition for her. Let Hopps and Wilde enjoy their vacation for a little while, they’ve earned it. I want to play a little. It will give White Zootopia on a silver platter.”

Miss Black joined him at the window. “I’m listening.”

I love the sound of an empty room
The screams of night, the end of love
Two beating hearts, one labored scarred
One open wound, wasted and drowned

No sympathy

This furious reign.
It was the perfect wedding. Absolutely the most perfect wedding. The venue was perfect, large enough to make it feel inclusive to those few news crews willing to objectively cover the event, yet small enough for the families of the bride and groom to feel overwhelmed. The scene was set up in white, the banners and flowers and chairs and draperies, a perfect snow white to symbolize the fresh start for all involved. The weather outside was perfect, a brilliant summer blue dotted with wisps of white, like a painting.

Most perfect of all, though, that Winona Hite as she stood at the altar, looking down at the love of her life, was the groom. Gabe Azellia stood firm and handsome in his black tux and tie, only a hint of the nervousness the gazelle must have been feeling showing through his studious features, and that only to Winona’s practiced eye. Not that she didn’t understand his nervousness. It was a new era in San Dingo. A new era for predator freedom, achieved only a few years since the banning of Tame collars. A new era for marriage rights.

“You look handsome,” she whispered, low enough that few in the audience might have heard them.

“Not as handsome as you are beautiful,” he replied, eyes hungrily taking in her towering, muscled form, adorned for the first time in a dress, a real dress, white and satin just for him.

“Not as beautiful as your daughters,” she gave back, glancing to the pair of 6-year-olds standing at the front of the audience, dressed in perfect yellow dresses as they beamed back at her. That was what touched Winona’s heart the most, she thought, looking back to the gazelle before her. That not only had this prey mammal chosen her to love, but his most precious people had as well.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” spoke the bison priest beside them, quieting the murmuring crowds and drawing Winona’s eyes reluctantly from her husband-to-be, leaving only the flashing and clicking of distant cameras to break the peace. “Family, friends, comrades, we gather here today to stand witness to these two mammals uniting together in holy matrimony. They come here as two separate souls, declaring for all to see their private devotion, to live and love, to rejoice and despair, to struggle and succeed, together. They have been drawn together by a deep love, a love that transcends national and species barriers. Barriers that many believe exist for a reason.”

Winona frowned at the direction the speech had gone, sharing a look of sudden doubt with Gabe. A sudden movement to her right, a chorus of gasps and shouts from the gathered audience, made her look quickly back to the priest, in time to see the old bison draw a revolver from his robes and level it with Winona’s gut, his features twisting into the hateful fury that had followed her for all her life. It froze her in place with its depth, its magnitude.

“Die, you freaks!”

“NO!”

A hard shove, sending Winona stumbling back just as a CRACK rang through the church. The wedding party screamed. Winona stared, numb, as if viewing this all as a movie, as Gabe toppled to the side from the force of the gunshot, his eyes wide, his chest an open cavern, a torrent of blood arcing out, almost beautiful. She heard his body hit the floor with a hard thump, heard the continued screams from the attendees, heard the shout of the bison as he was tackled by the bridesmaids and groomsmen, heard someone shrieking for the police, for an ambulance, for, for—

Her own voice reached her then as she fell to her knees at her gazelle’s side, a dying wail, something
beastly and broken.

***

*Many decades later…*

Creeeeaaaak…

Pitter-patter pitter-patter pitter-patter.

“Is he awake yet?”

“He’s still sleeping!”

“No way anyone sleeps this late on a farm. He’s dead!”

“Idiot, you can still hear his heartbeat!”

“Is it supposed to be that slow?”

“Maybe he’s dying!”

“Should we get Mom and Dad?”

“Nah, let’s watch!”

Nick wasn’t asleep, actually, and had heard the exchange between the three or four bunny voices just fine. A bad night’s sleep had seen to that. He waited until his apparent audience had quieted down before rolling onto his side toward them and stretching with a yawn, showing off his gleaming fangs and claws as he did so. “Judy… got my four-kit breakfast ready yet?”

Silence followed this joking threat where Nick expected startled yelps and a mad rush for the still-open door. Then, after a moment, “Do you think he meant four as in the number, or for as in it’s a breakfast for kits?”

“Dummy, why would he want a breakfast for kits? He’s huge!”

“Not big enough to fit four of us in him, though.”

“Why would he be asking if Judy’s got his breakfast ready? Don’t they live in separate apartments?”

“Maybe Big Sis sleeps over a lot?”

“Then HE should be making HER breakfast, as a responsible host!”

Nick groaned, rolling into a sitting position and opening his eyes. As he’d expected, there were four of Judy’s younger siblings clustered near the bottom of the guest bed Mr. Hopps—Stu, the older rabbit had insisted—had shown him to the evening before, down somewhere on the seventh sublevel of the Hopps Farm Burrow. The four were staring at him with shining eyes that put Finnick at his best to shame, and Nick couldn’t help his chuckle as his night troubles were forgotten. “You’re all very lucky I went to bed in pajamas, you know.”

This got a round of giggles from the watching kits, most of whom quickly turned and dashed away out of the room. The one remaining, 11 or so, coughed and straightened her dress out. “Big Sis sent us down to let you know that breakfast is ready whenever you’re good to come up. Oh, and there’s a stack of blueberry pancakes with your name on them.”
Nick’s belly chose that moment to growl, making the kit eep. Nick chuckled, standing and stretching again. “Tell her I’ll be right… um…” He dropped his arms, ears going back as he remembered something Stu had forgotten to mention the previous evening. “Um, where might the showers be?”

***

“Mom, please, at least let me help out a little, here. It’s just a kitchen!”

“A rabbit kitchen, Bun-bun. Just tells me you’ve been away from home for far too long. Now just sit right there and let me and your sisters handle things, okay?”

Judy groaned, slumping forward so her head thumped against the table for Dining Room 3F2. She ignored her mother’s self-satisfied hum, followed the next moment by the sound of her feet retreating on the hardwood floor. Judy sat alone in the room, reserved as it was for guests, and once again coursed her condition. Being suspended hurt enough, but now she had all her family worrying over her for her heart. Stupid electric shock. Stupid fox who had given her that electric shock.

Speaking of, she thought, as her perking ears caught the sound of a fox’s approaching tread. She sat back up in her high-backed seat as the door Bonnie had left through opened and Nick came in, led along by Clara. The fox was dressed in his a red Pawaiian short with yellow floral print today, garish even by his standards. “And here you… go…”

The younger doe faltered at the sight of Judy staring at them, while behind her Nick visibly recoiled. Judy caught herself glaring and cleared her throat, trying to push her annoyances aside and smile. “Hey there, Clara. Thanks for helping my dumb fox find his way around.”

“No, um, problem.” The smaller bunny looked between Judy and Nick, mumbled something about going to see if breakfast was ready, and hurried out of the room.

Nick closed the door behind her and sat down across the table from Judy, who groaned and propped her face in her hands. “Sorry. Didn’t sleep well, and then Mom’s been waiting on me practically hand and foot since I got up. Like I’m a helpless kit again.”

“Well, you are a little helpless,” said Nick, who quickly held his hands up in a placating gesture as Judy looked up at him again. “Not that helpless, just, I mean… It’s probably just a little stressful to have one of your oldest kids come back home like you have, you know? NOBODY handles doctor’s orders well. And it’s not going to be forever, you’re already doing better than you were right out of the hospital, so just a little patience, please?”

Judy stared at Nick, surprised. She’d never say it to the fox himself, but a part of her, and not a small part either, had been expecting to be the one giving comfort to him as he adjusted to… whatever their new lives were. The rest of her felt immediately guilty for such thoughts. She should have known by then, after all, how smart and adaptable her boyfriend could be.

Before Judy could say any sort of agreement or apology to Nick on the matter, the door opened again and Bonnie bustled in, carrying trays heavily laden with breakfast food and drink with the help of Octavia, Cadence, and Melody, brown and white triplets from the litter after Judy. Nick immediately brightened up at the sight of them, nose working overtime as they put the trays down and began setting out plates stacked high with blueberry pancakes and waffles and hash browns, bowls of grits and raspberries and sliced oranges, finished off with pitchers of almond milk, orange juice, and maple syrup. The sheer sizzling scent of the feast laid out was enough to simply obliterate any lingering harsh feelings Judy might have had. She couldn’t imagine what it was doing for her fox.
“Oh my stars and garters,” said Nick, his tail wagging furiously behind him as he looked from the food before him to Judy. “Tell me you can do something like this.”

“Oh out of luck there, Nicholas,” remarked Bonnie as she picked up the trays, Judy’s ears turning red as her sisters giggled. “This poor dear once almost burned a kitchen down trying to make cereal.”

Nick gaped at Judy. Judy groaned and hid her face in her hands again. Her sisters broke into full-blown laughter.

***

That first full day back, at Nick’s vocal (and Bonnie’s subtle) insistence and Judy’s annoyance, was spent almost entirely within the Hopps burrow itself, only a quick foray up to ground level for a breath of fresh air and a lunch out on the porch giving Judy the glimpse of the sky she so craved.

Though, she had to admit (quietly, to nobody else), there was a lot of ground to cover within the burrow, and a lot of family to show her boyfriend off to.

“And this is Tech Support! It keeps track of all the burrow’s computer issues, as well as phones, air systems, environmental control, and security.”

Judy almost laughed at the way Nick looked around them in open astonishment. The room was two stories tall and as large around as the ZPD bullpen, filled with computer towers and monitors that looked like they’d originally been intended for wolves rather than bunnies. There were maybe a dozen rabbits working the room at scattered desks, talking faster than most mammals would be able to follow into headsets. Some of them looked up from their work at the fox in their midst, but to Judy’s relief made no big deal of it.

“You’re your own little city down here, aren’t you?” remarked Nick, turning to look at Judy leaning by the door. She tried to keep her smirk on the inside and, judging by Nick’s smirk in return, failed miserably.

“You don’t know the half of it,” spoke a black-furred buck in jeans and red tee, coming over to meet them from the Tech Support’s central kiosk. He stopped next to Nick, looking up at him for a moment before turning to look at Judy. “This your beau? Always knew you were weird, sis, but I never thought… never even imagined… you’d go for… for… red fur? Seriously!? It’s so hard to find good clothes to compliment it! Just look at that shirt!”

A few laughs from the nearest rabbits listening in. Nick was smirking even wider now, apparently having decided he liked the cut of this rabbit’s jib. Judy sighed, chuckling herself as she moved to hug her litter-brother. “Hey, Terrence. Yes, most of the time Nick here is an utter eyesore. But mmm, when he’s in those ZPD blues…”

“Right,” spoke Terrence, returning her hug before pulling away. “Unless you’re willing to share, you’d be best to stop right there and continue your little tour. “Tell Mom I’ll try to be up for dinner this time.”

“Will do,” said Judy, before motioning for Nick to follow her. “Come on, I know where to go next.”

“Just give me fair warning,” said the fox, walking beside her. “Am I going to be hit on everywhere? And what is the appropriate amount of hitting back that I’m allowed?”

***

“Judy?”
“Yes, Nick?”

The fox turned from the rows upon rows of plants in plain metal containers, the scent of leaf and water heavy in the air. “You live on a farm. Why do you need more farm underground? And how?”

“It’s not Zootopia here, Nick,” Judy replied, looking out over the rows of plants being carefully tended to by rabbits in white coats and gloves. The two of them stood at the top of a stairwell that led down into the main area, a branch to their left leading to several offices. “Aboveground we only have one kind of environment and whatever grows best in that environment. Hydroponics helps us get around that, at least for a few crops. Means being able to grow year-round, too.”

“Oh,” said Nick. “Neat.”

***

Crawl from the wreckage one more time
Horrific memory twists the mind
Dark, rutted, cold and hard to turn
Path of destruction, feel it burn
Still life
Incarnation
Still life
Infamy!”

Lights flared in the soundproofed room, the band of black-dressed rabbits on the stage in front of them shredding away at guitars and drums to the general enjoyment of those in the surrounding stands watching them practice. Judy bobbed her head to the rhythm, while beside her Nick pinned his ears to his head. “The technical proficiency is impressive, but owwwwww!”

Judy rolled her eyes and turned away from the Hopps band, silently figuring it must just be a fox thing. The excitement was starting to make her chest hurt anyway. “Come on, you big baby.”

“Cause we hunt you down without mercy
Hunt you down all nightmare long
Feel us breathe upon your face
Feel us shift, every move we trace
Hunt you down without mercy
Hunt you down all nightmare long, yeah
Luck. Runs. Out!”

***
“You’re pulling my leg.”

“Nope.”

“… no, seriously, this is some kind of joke.”

“Nnnnope.”

“Judy, I’m serious, this is just getting silly now.”

“I uh… I suppose this is another thing I have to avoid while my heart recovers?”

Nick whirled to face her, doing little to keep his voice below a shout as he gestured toward the football field-sized room. “YOU HAVE A GO-KART TRACK IN YOUR HOUSE!”

***

The Hopps family personal art museum, Judy decided, was the perfect place to unwind as the evening wore on. Not just for Nick’s hilarious reaction to there BEING a Hopps family personal art museum, either. It had been years since the last time she’d visited that part of the homestead, and there were an incredible number of new pieces on display from some of her younger siblings.

"Oh, this one's lovely! Nick, come here!"

The fox wandered over to stand next to Judy, whistling as he looked over the painting that had caught Judy's eye. "I could see hanging that on my wall, yeah."

The painting was an Impressionist's depiction of three seahorses dancing through a coral reef. The colors were vivid and vibrant, with such a sense of movement to the trio of seahorses that Judy wondered for a moment if this was one of those motion paintings she'd heard of. “I can’t imagine how long this must have taken.”

A bunny kit in paint-splattered overalls stopped beside them and gave the painting a once-over. “Thank you for your patronage. Male seahorses are the ones that carry the offspring to birth.” Then he turned and started for the next piece.

Judy watched the bunny kit go, bemused by the observation. Looking at Nick, she barely held in her laugh at the look on his face. “Okay, so, never mind on hanging it up on your wall?”

Nick opened his mouth to say something, snapped it shut after a second of unsettled garbling, then turned and followed after the kit. Judy watched him go for a minute, smiling softly. At how comfortably her family settled around Nick, at how openly, even enthusiastically he was seeing life in the burrow, at how she could not remember the last time she had felt so relaxed. She missed her city friends already, and she ached for her work as a police officer, but…

“Hey, Judy!”

She turned at the sound of her name, smile brightening at the sight of a vanilla-furred doe in black jeans and tee jogging over. None of the angsty teenage rebellion Mom had been complaining about could be seen in that bright, cheerful face. “Hey, Stephanie! Is that my jacket?”

“As if you could still fit in it,” the smaller rabbit joked, stopping a foot from Judy and turning in a slow circle to show off the green pleather jacket. As she came around to face Judy again her smile was dimmer and nervous. “So, heard you’re going to be back here for a while. You think, once your heart’s up to it, you could show me and a few friends of mine a thing or two about self-defense?”
There are some real jerk bucks at my school this year who are having a harder and harder time taking no for an answer, if you get me.”

Judy nodded, frowning on the outside but grinning on the inside as, suddenly, new ideas and possibilities occurred to her. Her dream was to help make the world a better place, after all. Being a cop had always been her hoped-for route, but that didn’t mean it was the only route. “I’d be more than happy to, Sis.”

***

“I want to give ya my thanks, Nicholas.”

Nick looked up from where he’d been fixing one of the main porch’s rocking chairs, surprised both by the presence of Stu Hopps and by what he’d just said. It was early evening, four days into his and Judy’s stay, and most of the Hopps family could be found in the various kitchens and dining rooms scattered throughout the property. “Er… thanks for the chair, or…?”

“No, no, no,” said Stu, chuckling as he turned and took a seat in another nearby chair, gesturing for Nick to take a seat as well. Once the fox had done so, Stu leaned back, sighing as the two of them took in the view of the fields from the porch. “No, I’m talking about Judy.”

“Oh.” Guilt wormed into Nick’s gut as the love of his life was brought up. It at once came to the forefront of his thoughts that he had never really interacted much with his girlfriend’s father. His girlfriend who was recently nearly electrocuted to death, and by his own hand no less. “Yeah… um, on that note, I really can’t say enough how sorry I am for… things.”

“No,” agreed Stu, “you probably can’t. But you probably don’t have to, either. She really loves you, you know.”

Nick did know, he knew that very well. He said nothing in response, curious where the rabbit was taking this and content to let it go at its own pace. At the very least, he didn’t see any fox spray or fox tazers within reach.

“I know how important being a cop was to Judy,” continued Stu after a moment, his voice low as he looked away into the distance, containing none of the joviality Nick had come to associate with him. “I remember how crushed she was when she first came back home, those months when everyone though predators were going savage. I worried for sure her heart itself was going to give out from her depression. It’s been known to happen, you know. She hardly ate, she hardly slept, she hardly smiled, she hardly played. She just went on with whatever work needed doing, like some kind of darn robot. But I’m not seeing any of that now. Because of you.”

“I never meant to replace her dream,” said Nick quickly. Too quickly, from the way Stu looked at him. Nick sighed, leaning back to stare up at the porch ceiling. “I just want her to be happy, however she can be. I love her.”

“I know, I know.” Stu grinned then, before grunting as he hefted himself back to his feet. He coughed, patting his hands down his overalls. “Like I said, I just want to say my thanks, for you being here.”

“You’re welcome, I…” Nick paused, swallowing as he stood back up as well, reaching out to place a hand on Stu’s shoulder as he turned to head back inside. “And thank you for having me, Mr. Hopps.”

"Aw heck, boy,” said Stu, looking back at him, "Jude likes ya, Bonnie likes ya, the kids like ya, and
you’re good with your hands. Who wouldn’t want to have ya? And shoot, no need for misters and sirs. Just call me Pops!"

Nick froze at that, unsure if he could trust his own ears, unsure if the flare of hope in his heart warranted feeding. The older rabbit had to know what that meant to Nick. It had been blared through the news for weeks with the Wendigo Case. All of Zootopia knew about Nick and his father’s untimely end.

For his part, Stu gave an understanding smile, patting Nick on the shoulder before turning and going back inside the main farmhouse. Nick stood there alone on the porch for a moment, swallowing a sudden lump in his throat. Wiping at his moistening eyes, he quickly hurried inside as well, wanting nothing more at that moment than dinner with family.

***

"Well hey, Wolford. How's the work coming along?"

"Hey, Ben," sighed Wolford, leaning against the cheetah's desk and folding his arms. He'd needed a walk to clear his head, and a trip to everybody's favorite ZPD officer had seemed the perfect way to destress. "Three weeks, and I'm about ready to call it quits. Higgins and the rest had nothing on their computers save chat logs for coordination. Delgato's had more, but I must've triggered something going into the wrong folder. It's all wiped. Got him for the Wendigo Murders, but not much else."

Clawhauser made a noise of distress and wordlessly held out his current box of donuts. Wolford smiled and took one with a nod of thanks. As he chewed his chocolatey choice, he thought. He hadn't even revealed the half of it to the cheetah. Wiped computers, wiped phones, shredded papers, burned passports, glib offerings of the most cliché motivations. These were not the actions of a mere serial killer, a mere corrupt cop. And they were so at odds with the lion Wolford had spent years working beside as well. Bogo agreed with his assessment, but without anything solid from the computers to back it up, Mayor Swinton promised they were as good as done here…

"Hey now, who in the world is that cutey?"

Wolford jerked from his thoughts at Clawhauser's voice and, following the cheetah's gaze to the central ZPD lobby doors, thought for a moment that Judy had returned already for some reason. But then no, looking closer, the ZPD officer studying the lobby was taller than Judy. Almost as tall as Nick, not counting the ears: a hare, then. Her fur was pure white, complementing well the dark blues of her ZPD bodysuit and armor. He couldn't make out her eye color behind the thick, yellow-tinted glasses she wore.

Almost at the same time as Wolford started staring at her, the hare officer spotted them and, smiling, strode over, a badger in camo pants and a black tank top sauntering along behind her. "Officer Wolford?"

"Yes, that's me." Wolford stood up from where he'd been leaning against Clawhauser's desk. "Can I help you...?"

The hare hurriedly snapped off a salute. "I'm Officer Bethany Blaine, Precinct 2, Tundratown. This is Miss Honey Badger, a local... computer specialist."

Wolford nodded, curious and saying nothing. He'd been in the game long enough to know what a "local computer specialist" was and guess why a cop would bring one in without handcuffs.

Officer Blaine continued. "I'm not technically supposed to be here, or even technically on the
Highway Hacker case, but Miss Badger and I believe we've found a lead, and you're the best computer specialist in the ZPD."

"But ONLY in the ZPD," the badger added, as if offended to think otherwise.

Before the hare had even finished, Wolford was smiling. It was deja vu. Sharing a look with Clawhauser, he bowed and gestured to the nearby elevator. "Well then, Miss Badger, Officer Blaine, let's go to the computer labs and see you lasses have."
4 months post-Wendigo Killer…

“Oh, Bun-bun, you look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Mom. I, uh, I… I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

“That’s perfectly normal, sweetie. We all feel that way. Remember your niece, Charlotte? She actually did, walking down the aisle! Had to do the rest of the ceremony in her regular clothes while her mom and I ran the laundry!”

“Pfttaah! I’d forgotten that! Okay, okay, maybe I’m not so nervous anymore. Thanks, Mom. For… for everything. For that, and all this, and just… accepting Nick. Loving him.”

“Any family’d be lucky to have him be part of it. Now, come on, there are a few more details to get right.”

***

“You doing okay there, Nick? You’re looking a little green.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine… I’m not fine, nope, not fine. I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Completely understandable, son. But just so you know, if you DO throw up on Judy or that nice suit, there’re are about 300 family members here ready to replace you with lead piece by piece.”

“… dang, Pops, didn’t know you had it in you. I’m going to need to remember that for if I ever have kids.”

“Heh, thanks.”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“Oh shoot, you’re right! Here, one of you boys help him with that tie, I’ve gotta get going! See y’all in a minute!”

***

“I’m not going to cry, I’m not going to cry, I’m not going to cry…”

“Chief, mammals are staring. Come on, Big’n Handsome, let it out…”

“LET THEM STARE, BEN! I AM VERY EMOTIONAL AT THESE SORTS OF THINGS!”

***

It was the perfect wedding. Absolutely the most perfect wedding. They’d set up in one of the far western fields on the Hopps farm, the mid-spring weather lavishing them a cheerful blue sky and a soft breeze just enough to rustle the rows upon rows of flowers in every hue arranged as a sort of perimeter for the proceedings. Stadium-style bleachers had been set up to help with the large number
of mammals attending, even with many of Judy’s siblings with families and lives of their own not being able to make it. The bleachers stood facing a small raised platform of gentle pinks and blues. Past it, a picture-perfect view of the Hopps farm in all its variety, and beyond that, wide woods and a winding river.

Nick and Judy had only invited a small number of their friends and colleagues from Zootopia, preferring not to make the event a media spectacle of any kind. There were Chief Bogo and Ben Clawhauser, David Wolford with his 9-year-old daughter, Alexis. The Fangmeyers. Fru Fru Big and her daughter, Judy, Mr. Big not being able to make it due to “business”. Finnick, and of course his mother, Marian. Bucky and Pronk Oryx-Antlerson, who from where he was standing on the raised platform looked to be bawling nearly as heavily as Bogo, something Nick might have laughed at, had this been any other situation.

Most perfect of all, though, thought Nick as he stood at the altar, was the bride before him. He had hardly ever seen Judy wear a dress of any kind, and this one looked old-fashioned, certainly a family heirloom. She positively shone in it, grey fur a perfect match to the cloudy white, her whole form radiating joy and excitement and, to his practiced eyes and quiet relief, nervousness too. That was fine. They could be nervous together.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” spoke the aging rabbit beside them, quieting and drawing the attention of all present. He was the family priest, Judy had told Nick, and seemed as accepting of Nick as anyone else in the family had been. “Family, friends, we are gathered here today to see these two mammals come together in holy matrimony. Trailblazers in their lines of work, they naturally had to make wedding history as well.”

Chuckles ran through the crowd, Nick barely resisting doubling over as before him Judy let’s out a single, attention-grabbing guffaw. The priest grins himself, nodding his head in satisfaction. “That’s all better. A laugh’s rarely a bad place to start things on. Now then, these two mammals, begun as separate souls and separate lives, have found in each other the pieces they never knew were missing. Today they become one, declaring to the whole world their love and devotion to one another.

“Nicholas Piberius Wilde, do you take Judy Hopps to be your lawfully wedded wife? To love and support through good times and bad, through sickness and health, through success and failure, ‘til death do you part?”

Nick breathed deep, feeling the weight of the occasion centering on him in that one blazing moment of anticipation. “I do.”

Somewhere in the crowd, someone, either Stu or Bogo, loosed a sob. The priest nodded and turned his attention to Judy. “And do you, Judith Laverne Hopps, take Nick Wilde to be your lawfully wedded husband? To love and support through good times and bad, through sickness and health, through success and failure, ‘til death do you part?”

“I do,” said Judy, her eyes shining with tears that Nick felt reflected in his own joy. She had said it. They had done it.

“Then by the power invested in me,” continued the priest, “I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now—”

Neither of them bothered waiting for permission.

***
The machine gunfire of her fists against the punching bag was a sound Bethany Blaine could get lost in. The repetition, the sweat matting her snowy fur and making her workout shorts and tank top cling tight (giving a show was always fun), the satisfying thud-thud-thud-thud-thud, the burn in her arms and torso as she pushed her limit hour by hour, day by day. It helped, the quality of Precinct 1’s exercise facilities. Better than Precinct 2’s facilities had been, but not to an insulting degree.

Beth was not mad to the point of an aching stomach. She was not wishing pain onto a certain glory-hogging wolf. She was certainly not imagining his smug face in front of her in place of the punching bag, blackening his eyes and knocking loose his teeth and—

"Damn, Blaine, what’d that bag ever do to you?"

Beth slammed her fist into the bag a final time, leaving it there as she turned to stare at the speaker. Jarvis had been in the same graduating class as her, but unlike her, had gone straight to Precinct 1. It had been to her relief when she found the coyote as lackadaisical as she remembered. "Hey, Jar. Was just finishing. You need something?"

Jarvis turned, nodding toward the doors to the gym some 20 feet off. "You got someone looking for ya. Big admirer, from the way her eyes are eating you alive."

Beth followed his gaze, ears warming and a smile developing at the welcome sight of a familiar badger shifting from foot to foot near the entrance, quickly waving as she noticed Beth looking her way. Beth smiled and waved back, silently accepting the towel Jarvis offered her. She toweled herself down as she strode over to meet the visitor. "Honey, nice seeing you again."

"Yeah, you... too..." Honey raked her gaze down Beth's body, making the hare bite back a smile, before quickly shaking her head and looking back up to eye level. "Congrats! On getting transferred to Precinct 1! And thanks, you know, for helping me out and letting me help out. It was nice, doing field conspiracy work."

Beth chuckled at the term but nodded, amused as ever by the honey badger's eccentricities. "Well, you were a lot of help. I... Wolford... couldn't have done it without you."

Something must have shown on Beth's face or in her voice, something she hadn't intended, because Honey's smile turned into a frown. Before Beth could try to brush it aside or change the subject she found herself being dragged by the hand toward the showers. "Hey! What are you—"

"You gotta get cleaned up," Honey answered, gaze remaining straight ahead and smile back full force. "I know this great Micecan place over in the Rainforest District, cheese enchiladas to kill for. But it's a nice place, so you've gotta clean up first."

Beth wanted to object. A shower might take a while, and there was still some paperwork to finalize her transfer, and she wasn't certain about her work-to-home commute. But Honey's hand was tight around hers, and her smile was warm, and her forest-green eyes made Beth feel like, maybe, she had been a little hard on the punching bag.

***

McHorn didn't like going down to the ZPD labs. The place was cold and he had to hunch down to keep his horn from scraping the ceiling. But it'd been a long day, he had a promising new gash for a scar beneath his right eye, and if doing his job was all that stood between him and a soak in his jacuzzi at him, he'd darn well do it.

"Yo, Beltz, I got something I need you to look into."
The jackal turned from his computer at McHorn's call, barely catching the evidence baggy of neon-blue powder tossed his way. "Gah! McHorn, you imbecile, was that really the safest way to pass along what I'm assuming must be," he paused to give the baggy a look, "a sample of some drug or other? What is this?"

McHorn settled himself down on the office's megafauna chair with a grunt, stretching his bad leg out in front of him. "You got me, Beltz. Got it off a bobcat over in the Canal District. He was half-crazy, tearing up some junker of a truck and scaring the fox inside half to death. Got him in lockup right now to sleep it off, if you want a blood sample."

"Perhaps later..." Beltz had already opened the bag and sprinkled a portion of its contents onto a scanner hooked up to his computer. "Half-crazy, you say? Not savage?"

"Never heard a savage mammal talk," said McHorn, who really didn't even want to contemplate what he knew Beltz was suggesting. He remembered the year following Bellwether's arrest and the revelation of what properly treated Night Howlers could do. It seemed like every two-bit chemist and drug lord in the city was trying to find a way to turn a profit with the flower. None of them ever succeeded in NOT making a drug that turned mammals into freaking zombies, far as he knew. "You... don't suppose..."

"If so," said, pulling a book on deadly flowers from a drawer in his desk, setting it down next to his computer, and flipping through it, "then we'll deal with it."

Chapter End Notes

Next up: time has passed, and the forces arraigned against Zootopia are ready to make their next play.
15 months post-Wendigo Killer…

ZPD Officer Bethany Blaine hurt. She hurt like every bone in her body had been shattered, every muscle torn, every organ squeezed by an elephant. Every inch of her battered body screamed for the sweet embrace of death.

Instead, Beth forced her eyes open. She found herself lying on her back, staring up at a perfect blue sky rapidly getting obscured by thick plumes of smoke and ash. She saw fluffy white clouds up beyond the smoke, like little sheep, and a helicopter turning in jerky circles.

Suddenly, a sense of hearing returned as sound crashed back in on Beth, the crackle and roar of flames, the screams of the pained and terrified, the crunch of breaking stone and metal. She sat up with a jerk and beheld all around her a scene of chaos. Mammals ran in all directions, vehicles up and down the Sahara Square street overturned and on fire, storefronts blasted apart, glass littering the cracked and scorched asphalt as far as Beth could look in any direction. Glass and too many bodies.

“What… I… I don’t…” The Arctic hare groped blindly for her radio, horror mounting as she felt countless bits of shrapnel peppering her bulletproof vest, coming who-knew how close to piercing through and turning her insides to mush. It was all she could do not to vomit at the thought.

“HELP! SOMEONE HELP! DADDY!”

Beth jerked from her downwardly spiraling thoughts, jumping to her feet at once and perking her ears to scan for the source of the cry. Suddenly steadied, her hands found her radio and she clicked it on without further fuss. “Dispatch, this is Officer Blaine. Don’t know how long I was out but we have major destruction on—” she glanced to the street signs, barely visible through the smoke “—West Elephantine, Sahara Square. Multiple civilian casualties, fires raging.”

“10-4, Blaine, emergency vehicles are en route, McHorn, Francine, Wolford, the Fangmeyers, and Bogo are closing in to assist.”

A cough shook Beth’s body as a sudden breeze sent hot smoke her way. “Co-copy that, Clawhau—”

“SOMEONE HELP! PLEASE!”

Beth perked, ears and eyes shooting westward down the street. She took off at once, dancing around fields of glass sparkling in the firelight and leaping a fallen lamppost. Past a pair of smashed together into a barely-recognizable wreck by whatever force had wrought this havoc, she stopped to scan again for the source of the cries for help, at first seeing nobody. “Hello? I am Officer Blaine, I’m here to help!”

“Over here!”

She saw them then, through the smoke and eye-aching light of the fires. A pair of shrews near the sidewalk, one older and on his back and bleeding, the other younger and crouched beside him, trembling with tears. “Please help Daddy!”

In two hops Beth was there beside them, bent over to shield from the random bits of glass still falling from some of the surrounding skyscrapers. Up close the pair looked even worse, a pebble-sized piece of glass leaving the older shrew with more blood outside his body than inside, while one of the...
younger shrew’s arms looked broken. Blood, ash, and fire had marred whatever expensive fineries they’d been wearing beyond recognition.

“Sir, ma’am, emergency vehicles are nearly here! Please remain calm as I move you to—”

A groan of over-stressed metal sounded from the nearest shattered vehicle, a delivery truck only a yard away. Beth looked at it, eyes widening as she read the writing on the side.

**BOB’S BIG BOOMS: FIREWORKS FOR ANY OCCASION!**

“… shit. Shit shit shitshitshitshitshifthitshi—” With all the care she could manage, given the circumstances, Beth scooped the pair of rodents into her paws, cradling them close to her chest as she ran, heedless now of the glass piercing her feet, ran fast as she could past raging fires and over downed lampposts toward the sight of distant but rapidly nearing ambulances. She heard the younger shrew screaming her head off, something Beth too would probably be doing were she not fighting for every breath in the thickening smoke. “—shitshitshitshitshitshi—”

**BOOM.**

Now she could scream, as a wave of heat and pressure threw her off her feet and sent her careening through the air. She flew, flew, then fell, hitting the pavement half a dozen yards off from the main scene of destruction and rolling an additional five feet, not stopping until she none-too-gently collided with the wheel of a parked van, its sides emblazoned with the most eye-catching artwork.

“Ow… owww…” For the second time in recent memory, Beth hurt like she was dying as she forced her eyes open and her body up into a sitting position. She coughed, ears perking as one of the passing emergency vehicles peeled off from the pack to careen to a stop next to her. As the doors of the ambulance flew open and paramedics began hopping out, Beth looked down again at the pair of shrew cradled close to her chest. To her relief, neither looked any worse for wear than when she’d first found them, the woman even cognizant enough to meet her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Beth found herself saying, even as an armadillo paramedic began helping her to her feet, shouting out whatever questions his job needed him to. “Don’t worry, everything’s going to be okay now.”

***

“Terror reigned in Sahara Square this morning, the sight of what authorities are calling the worst terrorist act Zootopia has seen since the Night Howler incident eight years ago.”

Quickly, quickly enough that most watching the TV wouldn’t catch it, Peter Moosebridge glanced over at his longtime snow leopard cohost, worry passing through him as she shifted more than usual in her seat, clenched the papers in front of her tighter than needed. She had family in Sahara Square.

“While no official death count has been released by the authorities so far, estimates have put it anywhere between 24 and 40 as mammals struggle to get in contact with friends and family. Those injured by the attack have reached 60 and counting.”

Peter took over the report from there, keeping his expression cool even as he yearned for the cameras to turn off so he could give his friend the hug she so desperately needed. “In light of this morning’s events, Chief Bogo of the ZPD has issued a general emergency alert to all Districts, advising them to increase patrols and be ready for further attacks. When asked for a statement on these actions, the chief had little to say.”

“Zootopia’s seen more than its fair share of trouble in recent years, from the Night Howlers, to the
Wendigo Killers, and now this, in an election year of all times. All I have time to say is that it will no longer be seen as ZPD policy to stay on the defensive during these crises. We ARE working, and we WILL protect you! That is all!"

“Despite Chief Bogo’s reassurances,” spoke Fabienne Growley, taking over the report once more, “some are calling into question the ZPD’s ability to handle this crisis, especially in light of the revelation of extensive police corruption 15 months ago and the drop in manpower that followed. While several of those currently campaigning for the mayoral office continue to give their support, particularly surprise up-and-comer and former popstar Gazelle, current mayor Rosalind Swinton seems to have changed her stance following this most recent criminal attack.”

“I’m not saying that Chief Bogo has failed this city. I would never say that. He has faithfully served the people of Zootopia for decades. But that is precisely the point. The old cape buffalo has earned his retirement a dozen times over by now. It might be time for him to take that well-deserved rest before he really does slip up.

“Zootopia is changing. Hurting, and scared, but always and gradually changing for the better. If recent events have shown us anything, maybe it’s time for our law enforcement to change too.”

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Five mammals in fine suits sat around three sides of a table in a backroom of a non-descript warehouse in the Canal District, watching the news on a laptop at the fourth, unoccupied side. At the images of the carnage from that morning played, each of them, the steel-tusked boar, the scarred polar bear, the lioness, the pangolin, and the tanuki, bared their teeth and bristled. The crime lords of Zootopia were vicious and murderous, but they all agreed on one rule above all else: no wanton destruction among civilians.

“Do we…” The pangolin coughed and licked her snout, claws twisting at the necklace of pearls wrapped through them. Anjali didn’t like them all meeting in one place like this, not with the horror on TV, not with Mr. Big absent. “Do we know who committed this… atrocity?”

“No,” growled Sarabi. The lioness looked on the verge of standing and marching out of the room. “Not a blasted clue. No warning, no signs of odd shipments, no strange faces where they didn’t belong. Nothing.”

“We should call off all conflict between our people and the police.” Koslov’s voice remained stony and cold as ever, the only aspect of the polar bear that didn’t betray his anger. “At least until the authorities find the perpetrators. I would not sit well with being the distraction that allows another event like… this, to happen.”

“Oh, shut it with that malarkey!” The boar slammed a fist against the table, hard enough to shake the laptop closed. He glared around at the rest of them, lips curled into a sneer. “This could be a goldmine before us! We’re looking at weeks, maybe months where the ZPD will be too busy to even glance our way! This is an unprecedented chance to reclaim lost ground in Zootopia!”

Sarabi hissed, half-standing from her seat to bare her fangs at the boar. “You make one move like that, Balor, and you can expect no mercy from my people!”

“Nor mine,” said Koslov, though he remained sitting. Probably a good move, for the guards of the various crime lords standing around the room’s walls looked unable to handle any more tension.

“We will do nothing,” spoke the tanuki at last, staring both lioness and boar down, “until we are all present and accounted for.”
“That’s right!” Anjali stood up straight again, having rolled herself halfway into a ball the moment the shouting started. “Old Takei is absolutely right! Where is that blasted Mr. Big?”

“In Heaven, with luck.”

A flurry echoed through the room as ten handguns, from bear-sized to hare-sized, were drawn from pockets and levelled at the main door to the backroom. The next moment a rabbit of average size strode through the swinging doors. He wore a black three-piece suit and tie to match the black stripes across his cheeks and ears, the buttons undone and the tie loose about his neck like a noose. Behind him strode a white wolf in a similar suit, though buttoned and tight to a professional degree.

For a moment there was silence as the two groups eyed each other. Then Koslov banged a fist against the table and snarled. “Guns down, all of you. This is Babayka, the Boogie Man. Jack Savage.”

As quickly as they had been drawn, every gun was thrown down, their wielders taking the smallest steps toward the room’s back exit, readying to leave their crime lord charges at the bunny’s mercy.

For his part, Jack Savage smiled and nodded to Koslov. “Always good to be remembered. How’s the son, Boris?”

The polar bear swallowed and crossed himself. “Morris is… doing fine. Moved to new school this year, making many friends.”

“Good! Good…” Jack smiled wider, eyes darting around to the other crime lords. Someone coughed and Jack cleared his throat, leaning back on his heels. “You know, I honestly didn’t think this business offer through past that sweet little entrance of mine. I was certain someone was going to start shooting and I’d have to kill all of you. Glad that didn’t happen.”

A moment’s shuffling noise as all the guards took another step toward the back exit. One of them, a honey badger, took three. Anjali eeped and clenched her pearls tighter. Sarabi and Balor looked caught between the urges to fight or flee. Old Takei glanced around at the guards and gripped his cane, and the sword within, tighter. “Yes, your entrance. Are you saying Mr. Big is… dead?”

To this the rabbit smiled and flourished his Molex wristwatch around for all to see. “As of 7 minutes ago, the dear Mr. Big passed away from blood loss en route to Zootopia Memorial, as witnessed by his only daughter, Zootopia Police Officer Bethany Blaine, and three very well paid paramedics.”

The others did little to hide their gazes moving to Koslov. All knew there had been a time when he and Mr. Big had been inseparable, the picture of loyalty between don and soldier. The polar bear ignored the looks, expression neutral as he leaned back in his chair. “Why have you done this?”

“Because,” Jack started, before stopping just as quickly. He frowned, looked around a moment, quickly dragging a chair over to the unoccupied side of the table and standing atop it to be better seen by those present. “Because I want to paint all of you a picture. Imagine eating at the finest restaurant, the choicest little morsels. Mayor Swinton is your maître de, Chief Bogo your waiter, the city council the cooks slaving away in the kitchens entirely… for your meal. Forever.”

Looks passed between the five crime lords. Looks of fear, treachery, and bloodlust. Sarabi leaned forward in her seat, claws tapping at the table. “We’re listening.”

This time, Jack’s smile did not reach his Arctic eyes. “Good. Now, if you’ll just send your bodyguards out, my friend Miss Black here has a beautiful business proposal.”
Beth sat slumped in a Zootopia Memorial waiting room chair, watching her bandaged feet dangle inches from the ground and trying desperately, oh so desperately, to forget the day so far.

“You did all you could,” the nurses had said, their empty platitudes falling flat as they pulled her along some random hospital hallway, away from the poor shrew sobbing over her father, away from her failure. “We need to check you for any injuries now.”

Minor smoke inhalation. Slight burns from hot ash and sparks in the air. Lacerations from running across glass. Bruising from multiple impacts, but nothing burst or broken. Overall, the aardvark doctor had said, there was nothing to keep her in the hospital for, or even keep her from returning to work, if she felt like it. Hours wasted to tell her she was the luckiest rabbit in the world that day.

Somewhere in the waiting room a TV droned on. Nothing on the morning’s terrors, for which all present were grateful, only some interview with the biggest weasel in town nowadays, Duke Weaselton. Questions and praise for his new bestseller, Hopps & Robbers: How One Rabbit’s Rampage Ruined My Life.

Sighing, Beth moved her gaze from her feet to the ruined piece of chest armor beside her on the oversized seat. Her eyes traced once more the numerous pits and scratches in the vest, the shrapnel that had yet to be dug out, each one of which could have ended her life had it possessed only a bit more force. Lucky, horribly lucky. Yet even dressed in the rest of her police uniform, even as damaged as it was, Beth felt naked without the vest. Damn lucky.

“You’ll go crazy if you keep that up, Blaine.”

Beth jerked to attention at the gruff, familiar voice, only stumbling a little as she jumped from her seat and snapped off a salute. “Chief Bogo, Sir!”

“At ease, officer.” The cape buffalo looked even greyer than usual that day, shoulders drooped with the weight of the world and wrinkles where Beth was certain there had been none at that morning’s bullpen meeting. Yet his gaze was still sharp as he glanced from her to the vest on the chair and back again. A sigh left him as he shook his head. “Like I said, Blaine, you’ll go crazy if you keep that up.”

“Sir, I—”

“Every officer has that moment where the only reason they’re able to walk away is sheer, dumb luck.” Bogo fixed her in place with his eyes, gaze stern but not unkind. “Some don’t have that moment until years into their career, others experience it their very first day. You’re hardly special in that regard, Blaine.”

“Sir…” Beth looked away, to her vest, to the TV, to her clenched fists, anywhere but at her commanding officer. “I failed out there, Sir. I… everything just went to Hell out there and I, I promised that shrew that everything would be okay, but… but the other one died anyway, died practically in my own hands and I couldn’t, I—”

A warm, heavy touch to her shoulder shook Beth from her spiraling thoughts. She looked up at Bogo again, almost flinching from the look in his eyes. “When I accepted your formal transfer to Precinct 1, following your solving of the Highway Hacker case, I knew I was getting a thorough, dedicated officer. Today doesn’t change that impression. You did your best and saved one of them. That’s all any cop can hope for, sometimes. The weight of the dead rests on the villains here, Blaine, not on you or anyone else.”

Beth didn’t know if she could believe that quite yet, but she nodded along all the same. Bogo then sighed and pulled back, looking from her to the doors that would lead out to the wider world.
“There’s not much to be done at the moment but sift through the wreckage and field the media, neither of which you’re all that fit for right now. Go home, Blaine. Rest, eat junk food, cuddle with your partner while watching the sunset. I promise there’ll be more than enough work for you when you get back.”

She almost protested, almost spoke that there had to be something, anything, she could help with. But then her eye caught sight of the mangled vest once more, the armor scarred and broken, and every protest fled her. “Yes, Sir. At once.”

***

Beth did not go home. Not at once, at least. A taxi took her from Zootopia Memorial to the Zootopia Police Department, sharing brief words of kindness with Clawhauser before grabbing the keys to her personal patrol jeep.

From there she drove. Aimlessly at first, through streets and Districts, watching the people go on in their lives, some hurting and grieving, others helping however they could. She saw the damage from the bomb, an entire Sahara Square block blasted apart, still scorched and smoking in too many places. She saw signs in storefronts advertising donation efforts, proclaiming free food or clothes or simple words of comfort for those affected by the attack.

Zootopia, hurt only hours before, had set well on the path to healing the damage.

From there Beth’s path took her out of the city proper, to the outskirts of the less-ordered wilderness separating Zootopia from Bunnyburrow. She drove up to the top of a long-familiar hill, following tracks worn into the grass and dirt by only her and one other parked, and turned off the engine. She got out, hopped up to the hood of her car, and there sat with ears folded and the day’s weight settling over her.

“Hello, beautiful.”

Before her, the grand skyline of Zootopia stood like the world’s most magnificent castle. Its towers glittered and shone in the light of the slowly setting sun, a cacophony of light and life against which the horror of the morning was hardly even a blot. From there even her hare ears could not make out more than a general impression of noise from the city, the honking of cars, the rumble of the trains, the CLANK and CLASH and VROOM and CRACKLE of construction equipment, stores, billboards, stomping feet, banging doors—

Beth closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again, letting it all wash over her. She couldn’t say for how long she sat there, watching as Zootopia gradually lit up a thousand different colors with the sun’s passing. Whatever concert the Mammalia Stadium was hosting that night had been going on for at least three songs, though, when her ears caught the sound of another car driving up the hill, its banging, choking engine as familiar to her as the car’s driver. She smiled and continued looking out over the city, waiting with bated breath as the newcomer parked, got out, and stomped over. The scent of tofu tacos from Beth’s favorite restaurant came with her.

“Mind if I join you up there, officer?”

It took all her effort not to giggle like a schoolgirl out on her first date. “Can’t think of any laws against it.”

The jeep bounced as the newcomer heaved herself up onto it. This time Beth couldn’t hold in the squeal as she was pulled into her girlfriend’s warm, furry lap. “Eep! Honey, stooop!”
“Hush now,” said the honey badger, setting the to-go bag from Tofu Tico into Beth’s lap and hugging her close, head resting between the Arctic hare’s ears. “I saw the news today. YOU were on the news today. You’ve got eight hours of snuggling and smooches, doctor’s orders.”

Warmth flooded Beth at this, a blush lighting up her cheeks and ears. Deciding not to fight it, she sighed and snuggled up against the larger mammal. Right there, she knew, the horrors could not reach her. “It was an awful day.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Mmm, was right in the middle of it… what did you do today?”

“Got great blog post material. Infiltrated a meeting between all of Zootopia’s crime lords where they planned to take over the city.”

“Mmm, that’s nice…”

A minute passed of comfortable silence. Then Beth’s brain caught up with her ears and she sat up, neck popping as she whipped her head around to stare at Honey. “Wait, WHAT!?”

Chief Bogo had many, many long years of dealing with politicians. Decades of experience. From the barely-there whisperyness of Mayor Hathi, to the bumbling incompetence of Mayor Drump, to the boisterous grandstanding of Mayor Lionheart, to the conniving kindness of Mayor Bellwether, Bogo had long grown used to politicians and their conniving, scheming, plotting, and snarling to get their way. As police chief, the connection between City Hall and the ZPD, there were ALWAYS mayors trying to get their way with something. It came with the job.

“What DO YOU MEAN THE INVESTIGATION WILL CONTINUE!?”

But then there came Mayor Swinton, who someone always seemed to know more than she should, always seemed to be right ahead of popular opinion, and always seemed able to get under Bogo’s hide, even in the relative security of his office.

“What I mean is that there are still too many oddities concerning this morning’s attack to simply open and shut it like you want. My duty is to the public safety—”

Mayor Swinton ceased her pacing the width of Bogo’s office and whirled to face him across his desk, the smartly-dressed pig looking ready to throw something. “What is there left to even investigate!? You said yourself, the blast centered close to Mr. Big’s limo, and out of an entire busy Sahara Square block, his is the only major death to occur!”

Bogo clenched his fists at this, doing his best not to snarl at the mammal in the room who could fire him as easily as blink. Instead he turned to look out his office’s window for a long moment, letting the lights shining in the night calm his blood. “There were 25 reported casualties, Mayor. They’re ALL major deaths in my book.”

Swinton rolled her eyes, huffed, and resumed pacing. “Oh please. You’ve got too many grey hairs to think that’s how things work. The first mayoral election after the ZPD gets gutted to the bone by inner corruption, and suddenly the most powerful crime boss in Zootopia gets killed? It doesn’t take a genius to recognize a mob hit.”

Bogo’s phone began buzzing on his desk. He ignored it for the moment and glared daggers at the pig in front of him. “That’s no reason not to look further! If the mobs are acting up, then we need to look
deeper to insure nothing like this happens again! The citizens need—”

“The citizens,” said Swinton, speaking over him, “need to be told City Hall and the ZPD have everything under control! That they can feel safe going to bed at night! That there is no freaking reason for that tone-deaf harlot to have a 13-point lead ahead of me in the polls!”

The phone continued buzzing. Bogo bashed the IGNORE button and went back to glaring at Swinton. “You will not put this city in danger with a tantrum over Gazelle looking ready to be our next mayor!”

For a moment the pig looked ready to continue screaming. But then a knock on the door, followed by Yara Elloway, Mayor Swinton’s assistant, poking her head in. “Ma’am? It’s getting late. You might want to get a start on your speech for tomorrow’s follow-up conference?”

Swinton groaned and deflated, all fight seeming to leave her. She brushed her platinum-blonde bangs from her eyes, straightened her rose-red dress, and opened the office door. She shot one last glare Bogo’s way. “Just make sure the people of Zootopia feel safe and that nothing interferes with the election, understand? Or else I might follow San Dingo’s example and start looking for alternative means of law enforcement.”

The door slammed shut, leaving Bogo finally alone in his office. The moment he was certain Swinton wasn’t coming back he groaned and slumped deeper into his chair, hands coming up to rub away the aching migraine in his forehead. His eyes went to the clock on the wall and he recoiled at the late hour. “I’m getting too old for this…”

The phone on the desk began buzzing again. Bogo sighed and grabbed it, answering without looking to see who was calling. “Chief Bogo speaking.”

“Chief! Oh thank crackers you picked up this time! Please tell me you’re still in your office!”

“Unfortunately,” he said, fighting back a yawn. “Officer Blaine. I could have sworn I told you to—”

The office door flew open and Beth ran in, followed after a few seconds by a panting, sweating Honey Badger. “Chief! It’s an emergency!”

“—take it easy for the rest of the day.” Bogo ended the call and slammed his phone down, standing to tower even more over his sole hare officer. “What in blazes makes you think you can just barge into my office at this time of night, Blaine? In case you haven’t noticed, EVERYTHING is an emergency!”

“I understand that sir, but please!” Beth hopped onto the chair, then the desk itself, stumbling only slightly on her bandaged feet. “I have reason to believe that all of Zootopia and its citizens are in danger. This afternoon, Honey infiltrated a meeting in the Canal District between all the major Zootopian crime bosses! There’s some sort of plot with some rabbit named Jack Savage to take over the city! The bombing this morning was part of it!”

Bogo stared at the hare for a minute, caught between surprise, worry, and aggravation that apparently all long-eared mammals on his force could wander into conspiracies without even trying. He looked from her to Honey standing near the door, who looked just about capable of speaking. “Is this true? Do you have any proof?”

In answer, the badger removed what looked like a normal suit button from her pocket. “I had a hidden recording device on me, but only audio… and we were all told to leave the room before any of the actual plan was disclosed… but this is a start, right?”
“A better start then we usually get,” said Bogo, motioning for Honey to leave the button recorder on his desk. “We’re still going to have to go about this… investigation, very carefully and with minimal resources.” He looked down at his table and grit his teeth, more frustrated now than ever at Mayor Swinton and her political games. “Too many officers are involved in protecting the mayoral candidates, I barely have enough to spare for patrols through the city. Not many options left.”

“Sir?”

“My orders from earlier still stand, Blaine.” Bogo pointed to the door. “Out. I’ve a call to make, but you go home and get what rest you can. It’s going to be a long day tomorrow, and I’m going to have a particular job for you.”

She looked ready to protest, before Honey’s hand on her ankle stilled her. “Come on, Beth, he’s right. Even criminals have gotta sleep.”

A moment more and Beth slumped down, ears dropping as she hopped back to the floor. “Y-yeah, sure, of course. Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight, Blaine. Badger.”

One last look back at him from the hare, and then the door shut. Bogo counted down until he figured the pair were down the stairs at least, before leaning back in his chair and sighing. Almost of its own accord his hand dialed in the number for Swinton’s phone. Suspension be damned, he wanted his best cops on this.

***

BEEP-BEEP-BEE—

Judy rolled over, slapping her hand down on the alarm clock sitting on her nightstand. She groaned, yawning as she returned to her position on her back, opening her eyes to stare up at her bedroom ceiling. Her arm moved left over the space she had just traversed, a sigh leaving her as again she was reminded of the empty space Nick should have been sleeping. Would have been, if such choices were up to her.

“Don’t kid yourself, Hopps. You’d be disappointed if he hadn’t gone off with his idea. Even more disappointed if the ZPD academy hadn’t accepted him on the begin with.”

Great. Now she was talking to herself as well. Deciding that was the signal to get out of bed, Judy threw her covers off and slipped out of bed, turning the bedside lamp on and ears perking as, right on cue, her phone beeped with a new text message. Grinning, she snatched it off the desk as she stood on stretched, holding it above her head as she read and responded.

Foxy_boy: Morning, beautiful. Ready to make the world a better place?

Wilde Bun: Darn tootin’. Get to work, champ. I’ll call later. Hope the academy's not giving too much trouble. Love you.

She bit her lip as she glanced around the bedroom for anything else to say. The bookshelves, filled with all his cheesy RomComs and her horror flicks. The clothes still tossed about on the floor, letting his scent infuse the room. The simple gold band resting on the nightstand, ready for her finger.

Wilde Bun: Come home soon. We all miss you.

Not waiting for a response, Judy set the phone back on the nightstand and headed for the shower,
and from there, breakfast. It was going to be a long day.

***

By the time Judy had finished her shower and gotten dressed in her regular Bunnyburrow sheriff’s uniform, the sun was well on its way up and the surface-level Hopps farm dining area was swarming with bunnies readying for work. She wormed her way through to the cooking stations, soon catching sight of Bonnie Hopps working a waffle iron. "Hey, Mom!"

Ears perked and the bunny matron looked up from her work. "Oh there's my favorite little cop! This a home breakfast day or a Gideon breakfast day?"

Judy paused to consider for a moment, eventually shaking her head as she continued making her way through. She poured herself a glass of orange juice and downed it in one go, setting the cup into a sink before sliding past her mother for the door out. "Sorry, Mom, lot on the plate today. Gotta get a final statement from the Thumpers on those stolen goods, then I need to check on that latest shipment of—"

“Yeesh, Judes,” said Terrence, leaning back in his chair at the kitchen table. “Were you this much of a workaholic in Zootopia? There are other mammals in the Bunnyburrow Sheriff’s Department, if you’ve forgotten that too.”

Judy stopped mid-stride, hand on the brass doorknob as she tried to get what her brother had meant by “too.” Patting herself over for any sort of clue, she felt an unaccounted-for weight in her left pocket and groaned, cheeks lighting up in embarrassment. A few laughs echoed through her siblings’ ranks as she took her wedding band from her pocket and slipped it on. After a final exchange of goodbyes with her mom she opened the door and hurried out, slamming it shut behind her to block out the now-unrepressed laughter. To them she responded with a clear, eloquent phrase as she descended the steps off the back porch and headed around to the building’s front.

“Ugh.”

Her father was already riding a tractor out in the fields. The rumble of its engine made for soothing background noise as Judy walked the stretch of road from the main Hopps family compound to the farm’s outskirts. She spotted him pausing to wave to her and she waved back with a smile.

At the road she turned westward to Bunnyburrow proper, put in her headphones, and brought up her latest exercise playlist, shared with her just a few days before by Clawhauser. A quick look through and Judy nodded, impressed by the cheetah’s choices. Then, the songs of Marena and the Diamonds filling her ears, she ran.

“I was pulling out my hair the day I got the deal

Chemically calm

Was I meant to feel happy

That my life was just about to change?”

The farmland passed in a haze to Judy’s left and right, normal bunnies going about their normal days, pausing to wave and shout hellos to her as she jogged past. Judy waved on autopilot, gaze remaining forward, mentally ticking down the miles to Bunnyburrow Main Street.

“High achiever don't you see
Baby, nothing comes for free
They say I'm a control freak
Driven by a greed to succeed
Nobody can stop me
“Cause it's my problem
If I wanna pack up and run away
It's my business if I feel the need to
Smoke and drink and sway
It's my problem, it's my problem
If I feel the need to hide
And it's my problem if I have no friends
And feel I want to die.”

The sun burned on Judy’s back, making her wish she hadn’t forgotten her hat at the station the night before. Her legs burned worse as the road beneath her transitioned from hard-packed dirt to asphalt and the farms gave way to bunny and carrot-themed buildings, few taller than two stories. She turned onto another street and welcomed the shade provided, eyes wandering now to take in the bunnies and sheep and pigs and goats opening their businesses for the day. Her pace slowed as for a moment in time she was transported back to another city, another street to run on with wildly more diverse mammals around her, but she brushed this aside and pushed on as she saw her destination coming up some yards ahead. A familiar splash of red brought a smile to her lips.

“Are you satisfied with an average life
Do I need to lie to make my way in life

“Are you satisfied with an easy ride
Once you cross the line
Will you be satisfied?”

The song finished and Judy slid to a stop in front of the store just as Gideon Grey set out the welcome mat, causing the plump baker to jump back in surprise. “Land sakes, Judes, you could’ve given me a heart attack right there!”

Judy rolled her eyes as she removed her earphones and stuck them back in a pocket. “No offense, Gids, but I think if that ever happens, your pies will be more to blame than anything I did.”

She emphasized this observation with a poke to the fox’s belly. He eeped and batted her hand away, though kept smiling all the same. “Eh, you’re probably right, Sher-iff, heh. Oh hey, today’s a ring day, is it?”

At this Judy looked down at her right hand, the gold band shining in the sun. She smiled despite the burning in her cheeks. “Yeah… I guess it is.”
A moment of comfortable silence passed between the two, before Gideon coughed and turned for the door to his bakery. “Well, ah guess ah’ll go on and get your usual slice of blueberry pie.”

“Go ahead and make it two slices,” Judy said to the fox’s retreating back. “I’ve got a good feeling about today.”

The bell above the door jangled as Gideon went inside, leaving Judy alone on the bakery porch. She turned and leaned against the wall, smiling and nodding back at mammals as they passed and gave their good mornings, commenting on the weather, the crops, the prospects of the local baseball team and whether Little Tommy Stoat’s broken leg would mend in time for the big game. Little things, easy things, lively things that passed the time as Judy found herself scanning up and down the street. The little shops with their window displays were the same as ever, the mammals tending them as well. It was comfortable. Pleasant. Peachy keen.

Judy almost moaned in relief at the sound of her phone dinging with a new text message. She stood taller, ears perking as she pulled the phone out to see.

Foxy_Boy:Forgot to mention this earlier. Did you see news earlier? Zootopia in trouble!

Judy grimaced at the reminder. She remembered seeing the horror on the news the day before, the blasted city block, the fires burning, the emergency services struggling to keep up with it all. She remembered the others at the dinner table, her mother and father and siblings stared in horror, then glanced her way, as if expecting for her to jump up and run for Zootopia right that minute. She almost had.

Foxy_Boy: You still there? Earth to Carrots. Sorry for bringing Zootopia up.

Wilde Bun: No, it’s fine. Just thinking if I could… I don’t even know.

The bells above the bakery door jingled again as Gideon came back out, a bag with her pie in hand. She started to turn to him, a thank-you on her lips, before a familiar engine roar from down the street froze her in place. She looked, ears and jaw dropping as a ZPD cruiser pulled to a stop in front of the bakery. “What?”

“Oh hey, Judes,” said Gideon, coming to stand next to her. “You didn’t say ya had city friends visiting today.”

“I, I don’t. I…” Judy swallowed, eyes roving over the cruiser hungrily, drinking in the crisp black and white paint job, the reflective windows, the massive wheels. She’d never known until that moment how much she’d missed the sight of the musclebound vehicles.

After a moment, the engine cut off and the driver-side door opened. Judy thought one of the Fangmeyers would step out, or McHorn, or maybe even Chief Bogo, but then—

“Land sakes,” said Gideon. “That’s the tallest rabbit I’ve ever seen.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “She’s not a rabbit, Gid. She’s a hare.”

The Arctic hare did stand tall in her ZPD uniform though, as tall as Gideon without even counting her ears, though she didn’t look nearly as heavy as the fox. She approached the pair with a slow step, a look in her blue eyes as they focused on Judy in her quaint sheriff’s uniform that she had grown long-tired of. “Officer… Judith Laverne Hopps?”

Gideon chuckled as most did whenever her middle name was spoken. Judy sighed and elbowed his gut. “It’s Wilde-Hopps now, actually, and Sheriff, but yes, that’s me.”
The hare paused in her walk and blinked, glancing down at Judy’s ring finger. “Oh! Well, congratulations to both of you then!”

“Thank you, Officer…”

“Blaine.” The hare snapped a quick salute. “Bethany Blaine. Most call me Beth. And I don’t know if you know this, ma’am, but Zootopia desperately needs your help.”

Judy’s sheriff’s badge was off her chest and slapped into Gideon’s outstretched hand almost before she knew what she was doing. She paused, looking down at the shiny circle of polished brass. But try as she might, Judy could not hold the same devotion to it as she did her long-gone ZPD badge. She felt only a twinge of guilt at leaving so suddenly as she looked back to the hare officer, and that was only for the rushed family goodbyes to come and for dropping all her Bunnyburrow paperwork on someone else. “Zootopia needs my help, I’m ready to serve.”
Their First Blasted Day Back

The goodbyes were swift, as Judy feared, but easier than she expected. It seemed they all had been hoping and prepared, deep down, for her return to Zootopia and her dreams.

“Don’t be a stranger now, Jude!”

“You show that city what it’s been missing, Bun-bun!”

“If you’re not going to be wearing that big ol’ sheriff’s hat anymore, can I have it to go with this jacket?”

“Good call, sis. That brown and red combo would be almost as ugly as you.”

“Shut it, Terrence!”

Judy laughed at the sibling talk and hugged them all, every Hopps rabbit she could get her hands on as they saw her off from the front porch. Then she was back in Blaine’s cruiser, a duffel bag all her essentials between her feet in the passenger-side seat, and they were driving down the highway from one home to another, from past to future.

The long drive passed mostly in silence, at least from Judy’s end. Blaine elaborated first on what there was to tell on the developing case, from her own personal experiences at the site of the bombing to what had been gleaned from Honey Badger’s recording of the meeting with Jack Savage. Judy had barely kept herself from crying out in dismay at the news of Mr. Big’s death. She couldn’t stop her wet eyes or her thoughts turning to Fru Fru Big, inheritor of the Big crime family. Even if there were no new case, Judy would have returned for her friend.

Then there was her driver on the way back to Zootopia, Bethany Blaine. Judy wasn’t sure what to make of the hare officer. She spoke easily enough, and on many topics when given even the slightest prompting, intended or not. Yet the tone was… perfunctory and to the point of each topic, like someone torn between a dislike for silence and a dislike for one’s conversation partner. Judy had plenty of ideas for why Blaine might dislike her, none of them mutually exclusive, but then why Blaine coming to retrieve her at all and not Wolford, or Grizzoli, or the Fangmeyers?

Judy felt no closer to any answers for these questions by the time the country around them ended, replaced by bridge and water and ahead of them, Zootopia. Judy sat up straighter in her seat, a breath held in… what? Anticipation? Nervousness? Wonder? Before she could figure it out they were there among the buildings of Savannah Central, and suddenly she didn’t care. The buildings were the same, the streets of concrete and glass and metal, the countless mammals of countless species moving and working like the life blood of some grand beast. Judy watched them pass through the cruiser window, the smile on her face growing as she recognized a favorite coffee shop, the movie theater she and Nick had gone on their first date at, the small park where Nick had been besieged by geese.

She was home.

Unknown minutes later, they pulled to a stop in front of ZPD headquarters, Blaine parking and shutting off the engine. For unknown minutes more they sat there, Judy eyeing the stern structure with a sudden sense of trepidation, not sure what it was she was looking for or expecting. Everything looked about the same as it had the last time she’d seen the building, over 15 months before. Mostly it was the people going in and out that were different, more varied. She saw lot more small mammals like her, both in and out of uniform. The thought of so many of them being somehow inspired by her
example made her heart swell. The thought of having let them down in any way with her actions in pursuit of the Wendigo Killer made her almost ask to turn the car back around. Instead she settled for playing with the zipper of the black jacket she’d thrown on before leaving.

“Wilde-Hopps, you mind if I ask you a question before we go in there?”

Judy looked over at Blaine, surprised at the candid question. “Go ahead. And please, call me Judy. Wilde-Hopps is a bit of a mouthful.”

The hare nodded. “Beth, please. I wanted to know… it couldn’t have taken more than a month for your heart to fully recover from your partner’s accidental electrocution of you. Two, tops. The suspension shouldn’t have kept you from being in Zootopia itself. And your ZPD friends, oh, the stories they share. Clawhauser keeps a Welcome Back mug on his desk, just in case you ever walk through those doors for a visit. The chair Francine tells me you and Wilde used to share is permanently reserved and off-limits. It’s sweet… though creepy.”

Judy nodded, not surprised by the question or anecdotes, though somewhat by the earliness of them. She frowned, looking back out the cruiser’s front window at the mammals coming and going beyond. "That's all just the ZPD, though. We're close like that. Zootopia... it doesn't want me."

"What, 'cause Weaselton's book on all your sordid misdeeds is a bestseller?"

Judy jumped in her seat, doing nothing to hide her indignation as she twisted around to the hare. "Are you kidding me!? That book is some of the most poorly-researched garbage I've ever read! He keeps mistaking clubs for batons, tasers for stun guns! Not a single police radio code in the book is right! And the misspellings, ohhh my gosh!"

"Officer Wilde has an e at the end of his name!"

The hare's grin was infectious. Judy found herself sharing it as she remembered Nick's reaction to that particular misspelling. "The misplaced punctuation marks, the weird capitalization throughout, the page with nothing on it but a single tiny question mark, it's just—"

"Too much," finished Blaine, laughing. Judy laughed with her a few seconds, then relaxed back into her seat. That, at least, had been an honest moment shared between them, and Judy found that most of her trepidation was gone.

“So, you ready to go and make the world a better place?"

Judy glanced at Beth in the driver’s seat, and then unbuckled and opened her door. “Let’s do this.”

They crossed the parking lot with no issue, just a rabbit and a hare going about their business while the weather was good. Then they ran into Francine at the ZPD doors, the elephant cop freezing where she stood and eyeing them like she’d seen a ghost. "Hopps?"

This turned some heads their way. A deer gawked as he walked until he ran into a wall and got his antlers stuck. A family of chipmunks heading for another door paused and started chittering among themselves, pointing. Somewhere a phone camera clicked, and then another.

Judy ignored all this and gave Francine an honest smile. "It's good to see you again."

"Yeah! You too!" The elephant's smile took on a knowing look. "And I'm not the only one who's gonna be saying that. Catch you later!"

Judy watched Francine go, unsure of what that meant. At another camera's click she set that aside
and strode into the ZPD with hastened steps, hoping the people inside would show at least a little more restraint—

"O. M. GOODNESS! JUDY!"

Judy flinched at the exuberant shout echoing through the tan and gold building, suddenly finding herself the center of attention for every cop, criminal, and civilian in the area. Just like outside there were whispers and pointed fingers, not all of them friendly.

"Good job, Clawhauser," said Beth from Judy's side, throwing a pair of fantastically sarcastic thumbs-ups at the chubby cheetah manning the front desk. "Way to make it all feel nice and normal again."

Clawhauser’s meek apology was drowned out by the SLAM of a door being thrown open. Chief Bogo appeared at the railing on the second floor. “BLAINE, HOPPS, MY OFFICE, NOW! AND THE LOT OF YOU, STOP STANDING AROUND LIKE A GAGGLE OF DODO BIRDS!”

With that, he turned and stomped back into his office and slammed the door shut. As if broken from a trance, the lobby became a center of activity once more, prompting Judy to sigh as she started for the elevators, Beth following close behind. Clawhauser gave a subdued wave as they passed and Judy waved back, trying to tell him there were no hard feelings. “I never thought I’d miss Bogo’s yelling, but, there you go.”

“Oh,” said the hare beside her. “So, he’s always been that shouty. The number of times I’ve been called to his office, that actually makes me feel a lot better.”

To that, Judy could only grunt in agreement as she hit the button for the elevator. Getting called to Bogo’s office never meant anything good. Or at least, so she thought until they reached Bogo’s office, a heartachingly familiar voice catching Judy’s ear as she slid the door open.

“And so I said, that’s not an ice cream maker, that’s my car!”

“Nick?”

There he stood in front of Bogo’s in his police uniform, tall and slim and handsome as she remembered him being, that day he’d left the Hopps farm to be a “temp teacher” at the ZPD academy. He turned to the sound of her voice and a smile spread across his muzzle, a smile she loved, the same smile he wore when she pinned his police badge to his uniform, when she slid his wedding band on his finger. “Hey, Carrots. Been a while.”

Judy gave a short, strangled laugh, shaking her head as she stepped forward to punch her husband’s shoulder. “You dweeb.” Punch. “You jerk.” Punch. “You snot-nosed Reynard.” Punch. “Six… six months is a little more than ‘a while,’ dumb fox. I know working at the police academy is important, but you could have… could have visited, Nick. How dare you be so hardworking and responsible?”

“I know, I know…” Smile dropping, the fox cupped Judy’s chin with his left hand, where she noticed he wore his wedding band, and lifted it up until their eyes met. “I’m sorry. I’d been a mentor before. Never been a husband before. Utterly terrifying. I won’t do it again.”

Judy grinned and reached up, giving his tie a tug. “Oh, I’ll make sure of that, Mr. Wilde-Hopps.”

He winked at her, that old hustler’s smirk sliding onto his muzzle as easily as it had the day they’d met. “Oh-ho, I think I’d like to see that, Mrs. Wilde-Hopps.”

"As sure as I am that Clawhauser will kill me for ruining this moment," said Bogo, startling husband
and wife back to the present, "I do believe there are more pressing matters to attend to at the moment?"

"Right, right," said Judy, letting go of Nick's tie and backing up a step, Nick brushing himself down and doing the same. Judy's ears flushed at the amused smirk on Beth's face and she turned her attention to Bogo for distraction. "So! Officer Blaine gave me the basics of the situation on the drive here, but has anything changed in the city since she left for Bunnyburrow?"

"Nothing dramatic, if that's what you're hoping for," said Bogo. He put on his glasses and began flipping through a folder. "No chases through Little Rodentia or exploding boats, at least."

"Blaine's witness, Honey Badger, took me to the supposed site of the crime boss meeting," said Nick as he leaned against Bogo's desk. "Clean as a whistle, as we all expected. Too clean, actually. Didn't look like a living soul had been in that warehouse in years."

Judy thought back on what she remembered of the Canal District and frowned. "That doesn't make any sense. Even in the warmer months those warehouses are prime real estate for the city's homeless. Even if they were cleared out for the meeting, there should have been boxes, blankets, something."

"Not in this case." Bogo slapped the folder shut and tossed it to Beth, who caught it and tucked it under an arm. "So, someone knows to stay away from that place. Clawhauser's reaching out to City Hall for records of whoever owns the lot, but until that gets through, the warehouse is a dead end."

Judy got a foul taste in her mouth. "That leaves the bombing itself to look into."

Bogo nodded and leaned back in his seat. "I'll leave that to you three. Though before you head down to the labs, Hopps, I suggest heading to the armory. "Can't risk going out unarmored against this crew."

"Oh, and Hopps," the cape buffalo said as the trio headed for the door. She turned back and just managed to catch the police badge tossed her way. “Welcome back, Lieutenant.”

***

Judy was still adjusting the straps for one of her arm guards when the elevator reached the ZPD evidence garage, the stark greys and flickering fluorescent lights an immediate eyesore after the warm openness of the building's upper floors. She checked that the badge pinned to her Kevlar vest wasn't obscured by the jacket she'd elected to keep, before giving her name to the sloth running the check-in desk and starting down the rows of vehicles in various stages of disassembly. Here were many of the vehicles taken in by the ZPD that required more thorough levels of examination; or like in the case of their current investigation, the REMAINS of vehicles involved in crimes. Nick had once compared the place to a chop shop, only with nothing for sale. Judy had to agree.

"Look, I’m not saying you’re doing a bad job, I’m just seriously questioning how LONG this is taking. I mean, there really isn’t that much left to sniff over in the first place! It’s TNT, plain and simple.”

“Your underdeveloped fox senses might think so, but I can assure you they are most inadequate for the task at hand. Now silence!”

Ears up, Judy followed the arguing voices to a far middle row. Here she found Nick and Blaine standing next to what she could only assume to have once been the delivery truck, polar bear-scale, for whatever explosives had rocked Sahara Square. Now it was but a charred and shattered husk, the cab barely recognizable. “Wow, that must have taken a lot of heat.”
“Hey, Carrots, looking—”

Whatever compliment Nick was going to give her was drowned out as a black bear in the bizarre combination of denim coveralls and a lab coat waddled out from behind the wreckage, his shout of welcome echoing through the garage. “Ah, Officer Hopps! Finally, someone to control this fox! The hare, she’s no good at it at all.”

It was a struggle to decide whose glare came closer to murderous, Nick’s or Beth’s. Judy didn’t bother trying, instead shaking her head and meeting the black bear next to the close side of the wreck. “Bertrand, always nice to see a familiar face. Anything interesting?”

The bear gave his coat a pat to shake off some black powder, before gesturing to the wreck beside them. “As I was explaining to your wayward partner as you arrived, it was not merely TNT at the source of this bombing. This, based on the required explosive yield necessary for the damage seen against the maximum amount a vehicle this size could have carried, peculiarities in the scorch patterns. I’m also detecting faint traces of ammonium nitrate.”

“That’s amatol!” At Judy and Nick’s questioning stares, Beth coughed and rubbed the back of her head. “Sorry. It’s just, what Bertrand described there, it’s amatol, a common military explosive. Dangerous stuff.”

Judy remembered images of the blast on the news and shuddered. Turning back to the bear examiner she saw him once more picking through the jumble of twisted metal and melted plastics. “How easy would it be for someone to get their hands on this stuff?”

“Eh, hard to say,” Bertrand responded, huffing as he began tugging on some part of the wreck Judy couldn’t see. “Ammonium nitrate itself is common enough in high-nitrogen fertilizers, and TNT, eh, there are always mining and demolition companies willing to sell off extra stock. Find someone with the military know-how to mix the two and you’re in business. No, the real problem our bombers would have faced in all this would have been scale, the AMOUNT of amatol they needed to make.”


A frustrated huff rang out as Bertrand gave up on pulling free whatever he’d been struggling with and instead pulled out his phone. A few seconds later Beth jumped as a buzzing started from her pocket. “You’ll be wanting to look into that as well, I wager,” said Bertrand. “It’s a photo of the license plate. Miraculously, it survived.”

Beth pulled her phone out and started typing on it. After a moment, Judy felt her own phone buzz, followed soon by Nick by the way he jumped. Judy couldn’t help the swell of nostalgia as she checked the photo on her phone. “Well, I don’t know about you, Nick, but this is giving me FLASHbacks.”

“Hah! I get it!”

“I don’t,” said Bertrand. “And I don’t care. Now go! Shoo! We’re all very busy!”

“That’s an understatement,” said Beth, the hare starting back down the row for the check-in desk and elevator. Judy and Nick followed. “We’ll need a day or two to get the pair of you back in the system, so I’ll handle running the license plate.”

“No problem with that here.” Judy grinned over her shoulder at Nick. “Guess that just leaves the
shipping records for us, Nick.”

“Like I said before.” The three stepped into the elevator and Nick hit the button for the ground floor. “Oh, fun.”

***

“Fun AND fruitless, yay. I’m not finding anything out of the ordinary here. But then, available info only goes back six months. Either our bombers got their stuff through avenues that don’t have to record their movements, or they’ve been planning this out for a while.”

“I’d prefer the former, honestly. Opens things up to possible help from old contacts. If they’re still around, anyway. You’d probably know someone, right, Slick?”

“Hm, yeah…”

“Hm?”

“Nothing, just… does this feel weird to you too?”

Judy yawned and looked up from the pages and pages of text displayed on the monitor in front of her to the fox sitting beside her with his own monitor and his own pages and pages of text. Their office had remained untouched during their absence, aside from cleaning services, but even the forgotten stickers and inspirational posters around them did little to alleviate the pure drudgery of their task. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I said, does any of this feel weird to you too?” Nick rolled his chair back and gestured all around them. “You know, being back, being… at work again? Seeing faces old and new? I’d honestly thought we were through here. Not an outcome I was particularly happy with, mind you, but something I could at least learn to live with. Now look at us, back in the thick of it, not even a year and a half out.”

Judy thought her fox’s observations over for a moment, eventually shaking her head and standing up on her chair to stretch. “It’s more like… it’s weird how… how not-weird it feels, I guess? I’d always hoped to come back, but…”

Nick’s chair creaked as he rolled to face her. “Why did you take so long to come back? You were already all hale and hearty when I left for the police academy. I was… I’d expected you to come back with me. Had a big apartment picked out, just right for two mammals. Maybe you could have gone to the academy with me? Maybe you could’ve opened up a Zootopia branch of ol’ Gideon’s store? You could’ve applied for a private detective license, or started up a small mammal self-defense school like you did for your siblings in Bunnyburrow! Where were you!”

By the end, Nick’s voice had risen to a shout. Judy flinched back, ears falling in dismay and nose twitching. She swallowed and reached a paw out for his, but yanked it back as any thought of defending herself failed her. The explanation she’d given Beth in the cruiser felt… unsatisfactory, now. “I was… scared. It was easy to push thoughts of the ZPD, and our coworkers, and the lingering mysteries of the Wendigo Killer case, to the back while I was in Bunnyburrow. I didn’t know if I could’ve done it here.”

At her explanation, Nick’s ears folded against his head, all the anger and most of the hurt draining from his eyes. He reached out, much as she had tried, briefly cupping her face in his palm. “You could’ve done it here, I believe that. And even if you don’t, at least believe we could’ve done it together.”
Judy almost laughed at the sheer corniness, but somehow it all worked when Nick spoke it. She reached up to hold his hand in hers, gripping tight as she smiled back. “You goof, you’re making me blush. Lesson learned, though. Trust we can handle things—”

“I’ve got a match!” Beth ran into their cubicle doorway, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she held a piece of paper out. “Ivan Icenov, otter, Tundratown.”

“I know that name,” said Nick, shooting Judy a wink that said “We’ll continue this later” before hopping from his chair. “Old guy, runs a cross-country delivery service, used to provide services for Mr. Big before jumping ship to Koslov.”

Judy grit her teeth at the reminder of the polar bear, joining the others on the floor and striding at once for the elevators. “Sounds like the guy I’d hire for this kind of job. Let’s pay his place a visit.”

“Huh, imagine that,” said Nick, following behind. “Running a plate sends us to Tundratown. I just want you both to know, if a panther ends up chasing us through the Rainforest District afterward, I’m going back to the academy.”

“Hah! I get it!”

Blaine sighed. “I don’t.”

***

"Tundratown Truckers," read the snow-draped sign arching over the depot's main gate. To the left and right of the gate the chain-link fence stretched for several dozen yards before turning, the links rusted and coated in ice. Fresh tire tracks ran through the gate, but nobody manned the guard stall beyond it.

Judy took this all in as she hopped out of the cruiser, and already she was thoroughly, thoroughly tired of it. "So, anyone have a spare felon to throw over the fence for probable cause?"

"Hah! I get it!"

Judy shot an appreciative glance Nick's way. Beth looked between them, nose twitching and something between a frown and a grin on her face. "Incredible. I'd heard stories of your banter, but I never dared believe the legends were true."

"The snark is deeply appreciated," said Nick, shooting her a pair of thumbs-ups as he passed her by. "It's the best way to stay sane in this line of work, Frosty."

"Frosty" wrinkled her nose. Judy chuckled and shook her head, clapping the hare on the shoulder as they followed Nick through the thrown-open gates. "Don't worry, he only gives nicknames to people he likes. And besides, Frosty is way more dignified than Carrots."

"Hey now," Nick called over his shoulder as he drew near the guard stall. "The carrot is a noble and hardy vegetable, and I will not have it besmirched... oh no. Judy, Blaine, get over here!"

Judy was already running at the sound of her name, Beth not far behind. She slid to a stop beside Nick, heart dropping at the sight of the bullet-riddled wolf slumped on the stall's floor. His glazed eyes stared up at nothing.

Nick grabbed for his radio. Beth, not out of practice as they were, already had hers to her lips. "Dispatch, this is Officer Blaine. I'm up in Tundratown with Officers Wilde-Hopps, at 'Tundratown Truckers.' We have one shooting, probable homicide—"
The sudden echo of more gunfire deeper into the depot made Judy jump. She spun to the nearby loading docks, hand going to the dart gun holstered on her thigh. "Blaine, tell Dispatch shots fired, will need ambulances. Nick, with me!"

"On your tail!"

The pair left Blaine speaking directions to Dispatch at the stall, hunkering low as they crossed the stretch of snow and tire-churned mud to the closest of the steel and cement loading docks. Judy kept her ears swiveling for the slightest sound as she led the approach into the warehouse, trusting Nick to keep lookout behind her as she glanced below the parked 18-wheelers for movement on the other side. Their footsteps echoed across the plain cement floor, soft thumps that could have easily just been the beating of her heart.

“Our first blasted day back,” she heard Nick mutter behind her. “Our first blasted case! Our first blasted lead—”

BANG.

“Aaugh!”

Judy dove for cover behind a stack of wood crates, Nick joining her an instant later. Drawing her sidearm, she glanced over the crates, scanning the warehouse ahead. She spotted two polar bears draped over more crates and a snow leopard hanging halfway out of an idling truck, but no sign of anyone with a weapon—

Another bang, closer and louder, sounded off to their left, past the aisles of stacked crates and boxes. Judy took the lead, leapfrogging with Nick from one aisle to the next until they reached the other side of the warehouse, where the offices were. A wooden door shot nearly to pieces stood ajar, opening to a short hallway that led to other rooms. At the far end of the hallway a steel door emblazoned with the words EMERGENCY EXIT was thrown open to the wintry landscape beyond. Already, snow was starting to gather around the edges of the hallway closest the door.

“Looks like whoever got one too many packages too late has flown the coop.”

Judy shot Nick a glare, before reaching for her radio. “Dispatch, ETA on that backup and those ambulances?”

“ETA is three minutes,” said Clawhauser over the radio. “How’s it looking out there, you two?”

“Bad, Clawhauser.” Advancing with Nick toward the offices, letting the fox and his sensitive nose take the lead, Judy glanced behind them to the bodies littering the warehouse. “Really bad. I’m thinking Wendigo Killer kind of—”

“I’ve got a live one!”

Judy ran. She found Nick in what once might have been the boss’s office, now trashed beyond recognition, kneeling over a frail little otter in slacks. A pool of blood was growing around them. Too much blood, Judy thought, for such a small body to lose.

“Come on, Ivan old buddy, be a fighter like you always are! Help’ll be here any minute now!”

The otter coughed and shook, perhaps laughing as he locked eyes with Nick. “You cops… such optimistic… morons…”

“That’s the spirit,” said Nick. His voice grew shaky as more and more blood seeped through his
fingers. “If you can throw insults around then you can damn well hang on, you furry little… Ivan? Ivan!”

But Icenov was already growing limb where he lay, breathing slowing as his glassy-eyed gaze fell from Nick to Judy, still at the door. Her ears pricked as she watched him mouth two words with his last breath.

“Savage. Aquarium.”

***

A dozen police cruisers and ambulances filled the cordoned-off truck depot, lighting it up red and blue as afternoon sank down into evening. Judy sat on the hood of Beth’s cruiser and watched the paramedics wheel the victims out of the warehouse in body bags, while through the raised doors she saw Forensics collecting spent casings and searching for prints. Here was a part of the job she certainly felt no nostalgia for.

“Frosty, listen, Mr. Big’s organization had nothing to do with this. It’s tradition, no violence or crime for a week with the death of a family member.”

“But you said yourself that Fru Fru’s unlikely to assume leadership of the mob herself, leaving it up to mammals NOT in the Big family. What if they don’t respect tradition?”

Judy ignored Nick pacing around beside the car and arguing with Beth in the driver’s seat, door open to talk to them, instead mentally repeating to herself the last words spoken by Ivan Icenov. Savage. Aquarium. Savage, she remembered, was the last name of the hare that had orchestrated Mr. Big’s death, but as for aquariums...

Judy was shaken from her thoughts by Chief Bogo stomping toward the trio, his entire countenance scowling. “On your first assignment. Not even one day back. Not even one hour spent back out on the streets! And already it’s massacres and gunfights! What is it with you two?!”

Nick stopped his pacing and backed up to Judy’s side, a weak chuckle leaving him. “Would it, uh, make you feel any better that I had almost the exact same thought as this was going on?”

Bogo’s flat glare made it clear that this did not make him feel any better. At all. Judy sighed and dropped off the car. “Sir, I really don’t know what to tell you. If we hadn’t shown up here, then there’s no telling when all of this—” she gestured around them “—would’ve been reported. And we wouldn’t have a clue where to go next.”

Bogo blinked, some of the anger disappearing. “You did find something then?”

“Well…” Judy looked at Nick, who could only shrug. “Sort of. We found Icenov in his office, already dying. Just before he… expired… he managed two words. Savage, and aquarium.”

“Savage? As in the hare Blaine’s informant mentioned? But then these would be his own people he had killed. Hardly an effective way to not draw attention to something.”

“Which means,” said Nick, giving his hands a weak little wave in faux-excitement, “We’re dealing with a bloodthirsty maniac! Yay—ow!”

Judy pulled her elbow back from the fox’s side and shook her head that no, now was not the time. Looking over as one of the paramedics yelled that they got the last body loaded up, she sighed and let her ears droop as she turned back to Bogo. “Sir, with all due respect, I don’t think there’s much more use in us staying around here.”
“I agree,” said Bogo. “Get back to the station and write up your reports for the day, all of you. Then call it a night. I want you at the station first thing tomorrow.”

“Yes Sir—” Judy started, but the cape buffalo was already stomping away. She slumped where she stood and turned to Nick and Beth, fighting the sudden urge to yawn. “Well, you heard the man. Let’s go.”

“I have a suggestion first, before we return to the station.” Beth gave the engine a rev. “Coffee.”

This made Judy smile, while Nick did a fist pump as he walked around to the passenger-side door. “Frosty, this might be the start of a wonderful friendship.”

***

“Hmm… so what do you think? Chinese?”

“…”

“Okay… how ‘bout Thai?”

“…”

“No, you’re right, too spicy. Greek?”

“…”

“Micecan? Listen, Bellatrix, I know you like to keep professional when on a job, but I am going to keep the Ghostbusters quotes coming all night if you don’t respond to at least one!”

“… pizza.”

“Thin or thick?”

“Chicagoat.”

“Yes!” Jack laughed and fell back onto his living room couch, kicking his legs up at the ceiling in glee. He’d known, known for certain, that he could get the stone exterior of the wolf sitting off at the desk in the corner to crack. “And all it took was the threat of cinematic torture.”

“Congratulations.” Miss Black didn’t raise her head from the disassembled assault rifle on the desk before her, picking each piece up to examine and clean. “Miss White’s wasting your talents by allowing you to freelance.”

Jack rolled his eyes and grabbed for his phone. “I think it’s safe to say your sarcasm isn’t going to waste. Now hush, I’m trying to remember the phone—”

The door to Jack’s apartment flew open, cracking as it slammed into the wall. Jack sat up at the noise, a shotgun already halfway-pulled from beneath the couch cushions. He relaxed at the sight of the polar bear crouched down low in the doorway. “Koslov! Great timing! I was just about to order dinner!”

The polar bear growled and gestured with a balled fist, prompting five weasels with pipes and knuckle dusters to crowd into the living room. Jack kept his smile up as he eyed them, twitching his left ear to signal Miss Black. “Yeah, if I’m ordering for this many people, we’re gonna have to pool our money. Also, I get final veto powers on all pizza toppings.”
One of the weasels smacked a crowbar into the TV. Koslov growled and slammed a fist into the doorframe. “Savage, you maniac! You think you can just gun down seven of my people without retaliation!? Do you know how long it will take me to gather again a solid foothold in that area? Other bosses will move in, bosses with delivery crews that are STILL BREATHING!”

“Hm.” Jack looked from the broken remains of the television to the polar bear. “I just want to clarify one thing, if that’s okay with you. First off, my favorite movie, Terror Train, was coming on in five minutes. Second, I did not shoot up your men. My girlfriend did.” He pointed behind him at Miss Black, who had begun the process of putting her rifle back together. “See? She just finished up stripping and cleaning the weapon and everything, right? And third—”

Jack dragged the shotgun the rest of the way out of the couch, aimed, and proceeded to paint the apartment wall with the closest of the weasels. “IT WOULDN’T HAVE HAPPENED IN THE FIRST PLACE IF THE COPS HADN’T BEEN THERE!”

The remaining four weasels screamed and ran out the door. Koslov remained standing there, eyes wide as Jack jumped over the back of the couch and strode over to jam the still-smoking barrel against his throat. “What kind of amateur leaves the license plate on!? If Delgato’s little ZPD backdoors weren’t still in place and hadn’t alerted us to what they were doing, your boys would be downtown spilling their guts to Chief Bogo! You should feel lucky enough I let Black over there take care of things quick and efficiently, otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation because I’d still be having my fun, up to my elbows in Icenov’s organs! Understand that, Koslov?”

“Y-yes, I underst—”

“And another thing!” Jack turned back to the couch, trading the shotgun for the TV remote and switching on the news. Video appeared of a dozen or more reporters of every species waiting in the fluorescent-lit night outside the ZPD. They all charged forward in a stampede at the sight of a rabbit and a fox in civilian clothes exiting the building, voices overlapping as they yammered on and on with questions. “Why the Hell are Wilde-Hopps back in action!?"

***

Judy knew it was only a matter of time until the media cottoned on to her and Nick’s return. However, just getting off of the day she’d had, capped ever so perfectly by two hours of paperwork and filing, she did not appreciate the timing.

“Judy Hopps! What are your reasons for returning to Zootopia in light of the controversy surrounding your departure?”

“Is there any relation to the reported death of Tundratown mob boss Mr. Big in yesterday’s bombing? Are you still associated with the family?”

“Do you have any words to say on Duke Weselton’s book naming you the most corrupt cop of the ZPD?”

“Will you be attending Gazelle’s charity banquet for the victims of the Sahara Square bombing?”

“Can you verify reports of a shooting massacre in Tundratown? Is that related any to—”

“Who’s the lucky man or woman who put that ring on your finger?”

Judy flinched and pulled that hand back from where she’d been about to jab a particularly pushy raccoon reporter in the chest. Before she could say anything Nick growled and stepped forward, doing the finger jabbing for her. “Hey! That is a wildly inappropriate question!”
Unfortunately, Nick had done the finger jabbing with the hand adorned with HIS wedding band, which became the instant focus of every reporter and cameraman in the crowd. Her ears began to ache as the flood of questions turned into a frenzy, spots growing in her eyes from the flash of cameras.

Salvation came in the form of a gaudily painted van, indecipherable rap music blaring into the night as it barreled into the ZPD parking lot. Judy flinched as it came to a screeching stop mere inches from the crowd of reporters, sending more than a few of them scattering, but hurried to the back doors anyway.

The moment she and Nick were both inside the van took off, sending more reporters scattering. Judy laughed as she worked her way to the front of the wildly swerving and tilting van, turning off the music so that the fennec fox driving could hear her. “Finnick! You’re an absolute lifesaver!”

“Damn right,” Finnick growled, not taking his eyes off the road as he drove, through some unspoken understanding, for Happytown High-Rise. “So, do I even want to know how much trouble we’re all in now?”

Nick wormed his way past Judy into the passenger seat, shooting his fellow fox a familiar smirk as he pulled her down into the seat with him. “Oh boy, where to even begin. Crime lords from all across Zootopia gathering together, hares organizing bombings, warehouses getting shot to pieces…”

“I changed my mind,” said Finnick, parking the van in front of the Happytown High-Rise apartment complex. “Ignorance is bliss and I should start looking into Bunnyburrow housing, got it. Now get out before I decide to pay the lovely Marian Wilde a social visit.”

Judy laughed. Nick kept his smile up as he hopped out of the van and looked back at Finnick. “You do that, friend, and they will never find your body.”

Finnick looked unsure of how seriously to take that threat. Judy rolled her eyes and punched Nick’s arm, before waving the fennec fox goodbye. “Take care of yourself, Finnick.”

“Yeah… you too…”

From there it was a short trip to the apartment’s third floor. Nick’s mother greeted them with all the joy and warmth Judy had long-grown to associate with the elder fox. If she felt any surprise or disquiet at their sudden appearance she didn’t show it as she stepped back and invited them in. “Come on, you two lovebirds, get in before there’s a draft! Was just finishing up dinner when I saw you two on the news and simply couldn’t believe the, the invasiveness of those reporters! Thank goodness for dear old Finnick, yes? What a sweet little man. Oh, but you two look famished! Have you eaten yet? Come on, there’s plenty of spaghetti left if you want it.”

“Hey, Ma.” Nick bent down to hug her, amazing Judy as always with how soft and warm he could seem around her. “Spaghetti sounds perfect, I’m absolutely starving. And yeah, those people, guh! Right, Judes?”

“Yeah,” said Judy, hanging her jacket by the door as she went to hug Marian as well. “Absolutely guh.”

They moved to the small apartment’s even smaller kitchen, where despite protests from both Judy and Nick, Marian insisted on serving both of them. It went unspoken to not bring up work, so as Marian spooned out the spaghetti and turned the oven on to reheat the garlic bread they discussed anything and everything else. Zootopian gossip Marian had heard from her circle of friends and Finnick, tall tales Nick swore up and down he’d witnessed at the police academy, thoughts and
observations on the mayoral race and Gazelle’s chances of winning, down to family news and stories from the Hopps side of the family. It was the most relaxed Judy had felt since returning to Zootopia.

“—took two hours to get his foot out, and he hasn’t gone down to the south fields for a week. Janine finished the second draft of her big fantasy novel and is sending it around for critiques. I’ll get you a copy of it if you want, Marian, though I think it’s a little derivative of Legends of Heraldale. Oh, and my mom and dad made it three months without any new pregnancies as of last Thursday, so I think they’re actually going to stick to their ‘no more kits’ promise this time.”

“Oh thank God,” said Nick, visibly relaxing into his chair. “No offense, Carrots, but my name memory banks ran out somewhere around the 300 mark. Had to dump out the names of all the districts and five ice cream flavors just to remember your parents are Bonnie and Stu. And let me just tell you, I would be completely lost at the ZPD if everybody didn’t wear nametags.”

They laughed, at ease. They shared more news, as much as they could remember. They finished eating and Judy succeeded in getting Marian to accept her help cleaning the dishes. Then it was straight to bed in the guest room, Judy grateful she had remembered to bring a duffel bag of clothes to let her shower and change at the ZPD.

As she lay in the guest bed, warm in the presence of the fox beside her, his arm draped across her, Judy looked up at the ceiling. In the dark, despite the fresh troubles assaulting them and the terror in the city, she smiled, softly and to herself. It was good to be back.
“And they all just ignored me, Honey! Like I wasn’t even there! Like I didn’t even exist!”

No word came from the honey badger sitting in bed, clacking away on her laptop. Beth paused in her pacing around the bunker long enough to ball her fists and glare at her girlfriend, comfy as she was in her pink nightgown, draped in her pink blankets, propped up by half a dozen pink pillows nearly as big as the honey badger, before huffing and resumed wearing a groove in the carpeting. As she went she stripped and threw off her police uniform, exchanging it for a ZPD tee sized for a wolf as a makeshift nightgown.

“And it’s not even like I ask for much, right? Let Wilde-Hopps have most of the attention, I’ve never seen them eat real food, maybe they need it for sustenance! But would one tiny, little ‘Joining them in their investigation is Officer Bethany Blaine, first hare officer’ really be that hard for even ONE reporter to say? There were enough of them out there for the odds to at least slightly favor me!”

“Beth,” said Honey. “Come to bed. You’re ranting and need a hug.”

Though still seething, Beth did as she was told and crawled up to Honey’s side. The badger hugged her for several seconds, then handed her a pillow. Beth grabbed the pillow, mumbled a thanks, and proceeded to scream into it for a good, long minute. By the end of it she flopped down lifeless, eyes to the ceiling covered in a map of Zootopia and all of its districts, too out of breath to rant any more.

“Feeling better?”

“Very,” said Beth, eyes tracing the long-since-memorized streets and train routes. “Where would I be without you?”

“Probably still maiding those meters,” said Honey, grinning as she continued typing away on her laptop. “While I’d still be drifting aimless from one message board to the next, lost after the reveal of the grand sheep conspiracy I’d rallied against for so long.”

“Clashing eternally with the reptile conspiracy theorists…”

Honey closed the laptop and side it on the nightstand, turning to face Beth fully. “Seriously, why don’t movies ever show what conspiracy theorists do after their theories have been shown correct? You assume it’s all fun and games, but no, you’re expected to get a ‘real job’ and stuff!”

“Yeah, said Beth, mentally reading off the districts now. Rainforest District, Meadowlands, Sahara Square. “It’s a big… big mystery…” Downtown, Tundratown, Nocturnal District, Outback Island…

Beth paused, gears grinding as realization flickered on the edge of being grasped, before slipping away once more. “I should know this…”

Her phone began ringing where it rested on the nightstand on Beth’s side of the bed, Gazelle’s eternal classic “Try Everything” filling the bunker’s bedroom. Beth flopped over onto her belly and reached to snatch the phone from the nightstand, pointedly ignoring Honey’s snickers at her having a decade-old song as a ringtone. Beth frowned for a moment when she didn’t recognize the number, but answered anyway with the thought that it might be work-related, perhaps one of the Wilde-Hoppses thinking to share their phone numbers. “This is ZPD officer Bethany Blaine speaking, who may I ask is calling?”

The person on the other end of the line answered. It took several seconds for Beth’s brain to catch up
with her ears and fully process the words she had heard. “I… w-who!?”

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The car ride the next morning was quiet. More quiet than Judy, used to both the babble and hum of the Hopps family farm and a comfortable stream of shared snark with Nick, liked as she shared the passenger-side seat with her husband and watched Beth drive. The hare had been in a calm, silently seething mood from the moment she’d picked them up from Happytown High-Rise early that morning with donuts and coffee, speech short and direct as she explained the situation.

“Call from Gazelle last night. Saw us on news, wanted to speak with you. Probably case-related. Cleared with Bogo already.”

And that had been that. They drove out of Savannah Central, into the wet and winding roads of the Rainforest District. Her coffee and breakfast long-finished, Judy watched with some appreciation the hare navigating those streets as if it was second nature, remembering well her own early, nervous patrols through the district. Doubly impressive, considering how rare Arctic hares would be in the jungle.

Nick seemed to have similar thoughts, as well as a similar distaste for the quiet. “How long you been in the ZPD, Frosty? Don’t remember you in the precinct when Carrot and I were there, and I think I’d remember those goofy specs at the academy.”

Beth adjusted her yellow-tinted glasses, frowning as she pulled the cruiser down onto a side road that led down to the lower, older Rainforest District neighborhoods at the feet of the mountains. “Different precinct back then. Tundratown, obviously. Worked there about… 6 months, I think, before transferring over to Precinct 1 a month after you two were suspended.”

A memory resurfaced in Judy’s head at hearing this, making her perk up and smile. “Wait, that was about the time Wolford cracked the Highway Hacker case, right? I remember it on the news how—”

Nick’s hand on her leg stopped Judy, warned her to pay attention. She looked, saw the tightening of Beth’s hands on the wheel, the narrowing of her eyes, the subtle shift in her cheeks revealing the clenching of her teeth. Judy decided dropping the topic might be wise, the opportunity to do so without comment arising as a rounding of a corner along the road revealed to them a well-sized, well-kept bungalow. It was a one-and-a-half-story home, the second floor built mostly into the sloping roof, surrounded by trees and carefully planted to block observation from most vantage points and with a large, screened-in veranda running along the outside.

“A nice place,” said Nick. Judy had to agree.

They parked close to the front, near to a generic sort of car fit for medium mammals, yellow, old but well cared for. As they got out the door to the veranda creaked open, a tiger in khaki pants and a green polo shirt first looking out to get a better look at them, then stepping to the side to hold the door open for them as they approached. Judy kept careful watch of him as they passed into the cool shade of the veranda, wary of big cats ever since the debacle with Delgado, Johnson, and Monahan, despite her better senses.

Then her attention was grabbed, almost forcefully, by the reason they had come here in the first place, the clack of a keyboard drawing her gaze from the tiger to the antelope sitting at the porch coffee table, her own attention focused in a frown on whatever she was writing. Gazelle looked as beautiful as Judy remembered from that park concert years ago, though refined now by a visible touch. Gone was the provocative miniskirt, replaced by a sensible but flattering pink and red dress suit, the jacket beside her and the top two buttons undone. There was a touch of grey to her hair,
Judy noticed, and the most miniscule of wrinkles at the edges of her eyes and mouth. Judy had never wondered before how old Gazelle was.

But none of that seemed to matter as Gazelle looked over at them, frown disappearing into a radiant smile. She stood, hurrying to them in two strides and reaching a hand down. “Officers Wilde-Hopps, how wonderful it is I was able to get a moment of your time! And to have the two of you back on the force, where you belong. I apologize for not calling you directly, but you weren’t in the system yet. I remembered seeing Officer Blaine here with you, though, and thought she might be able to help.”

“It’s good to be back, ma’am, and we’re always happy to help,” said Judy as she shook Gazelle’s offered hand, trying to keep her giddiness at meeting GAZELLE to herself. As the former pop star moved to shake Nick and Beth’s hands, Judy saw the hare brighten a degree and breathed an inner sigh of relief. It had never occurred to her that she and Nick getting so much attention might be distressing to someone else.

Once handshakes were finished being exchanged, Gazelle returned to her seat at the coffee table and motioned for them to take the others. As they settled down she sent the tiger off for lemonade, and only once that had been brought back and served (Judy wishing after one sip from her glass that she could buy the heavenly nectar by the gallon) did Gazelle begin, hands intertwining in her lap.

“Thank you all again for coming. I imagine you must be very busy, following the last few days.”

“As busy as it takes to get the job done,” said Judy. “I’m not sure what all it entails, but I imagine running for mayor must be busy as well.”

Gazelle’s smile dimmed, grew somewhat wistful. “More than they could ever warn you going into it. Since we’re all shorter on time than we’d like, I’ll try to cut to the chase. I had been in communication with Mr. Big since the start of my mayoral election campaign.”

Beth choked on her lemonade. Nick hurriedly reached over to pat her back, while Judy tried not to gape at their host. “That’s… surprising. Is this… something you should be telling the police while running for mayor?”

“It wasn’t anything illegal,” continued Gazelle, glancing over at a panting Beth with concern. “In fact, quite the opposite. A major theme of my campaign, if you’re unaware, is the development of a stronger focus on rehabilitation rather than mere imprisonment. Mr. Big was my primary anonymous funder. He had been expressing interest in ending the… ahem, ‘family business’ and going legitimate. He seemed… displeased, with the direction the Zootopian crime world was going.”

Mr. Big going straight. That was a surprise to hear for Judy, who couldn’t help but wonder and hope that she and Nick had something to do with it. As she pondered this, she heard Nick ask the next pressing question. “Did you know what he meant by that?”

Gazelle nodded. “He told me there had been a rising influx of new, unfamiliar drugs finding its way into Tundratown, something he frowned upon. Then, two months ago, he received a threatening command to start working in the drug business, or else. He never told me who from, but… I wanted to help him. I had hoped, even if I could never publicly take credit for it, Mr. Big going straight would work as a symbol for many others that there was a better way in Zootopia. Perhaps… if I had given more concern to the implied threat…”

Gazelle stopped, sniffling as she reached a hand up to brush at her eyes. Judy stood and hurried around to her side, touching her other hand in a sign of comfort. “It’s okay. You did fine, and I can’t think of anything else you could have done. I think it was very noble what you were trying to do. And I promise, we will make sure the perpetrators behind this are brought to justice.”
Gazelle nodded, sniffing once more before looking between Judy and Nick. “Thank you. Mr. Big spoke often about you two, and quite highly. He was absolutely beaming when darling Fru Fru returned from your wedding—oh!” She looked toward Beth, who until that moment had kept quiet and taken notes. “That reminds me. Thank you so much for your valiant efforts to save the both of them. I would have been down two precious friends that terrible day, if not for you.”

Beth’s snowy fur did absolutely nothing to hide her blush, to Judy’s amusement. “Um, well, it was… just part of the job, ma’am. Cough. Um… is there anything else you could share with us? Even the smallest detail could be what we need.”

To their regret, Gazelle had little else. Pleasantries were exchanged for a minute more as they worked on their lemonades, then with a promise to call if anything turned up from both parties, the trio of cops returned to their cruiser and left.

“Well that was more enlightening than I would’ve expected,” said Judy, once they were all in and heading down the road.

“So hey, Frosty,” said Nick as the bungalow passed out of sight beyond a curve behind them, “you worked in Tundratown for a while. What’s this about new drugs hitting the streets?”

“Night Howler variants,” answered the hare, turning the cruiser to get on the main road back to Downtown. “Good ones, from what I hear, none of that shoddy stuff you saw people trying immediately after the Savage Conspiracy. They were suspecting Doug Ramley is involved, but that was before I transferred to Precinct 1, and so far it’s still just a Tundratown issue.”

“Bellwether’s scientist-slash-sharpshooter? I always wondered what happened to that guy. Did you go to question—”

Judy’s phone beeped, drawing her attention away from the ongoing conversation between Beth and Nick. She drew it from her pocket, finding a text from Wolford.

“Glad to have you back, lass. New lead to follow, return to ZPD. Possible Tundratown Trucker survivor.”

“One case at a time,” she said, handing the phone off to Nick. “Wolford’s got something for us.”

It would have been difficult to miss Beth’s grip tightening on the wheel once more.

***

“Come on, Nicky! Play ball with us! It’s spring!”

Nick looked back and forth between the gaggle of fawning bunny kits gathered in front of him and Judy beside him on the front porch bench, who looked more amused by the situation by the second. “Well? Go on, Mr. Wilde-Hopps. Show us country folk how a real city slicker plays ball.”

A chorus of giggles rose from the watching bunnies, making Nick thank the Maiden Marian for his red fur to hide his blush. He coughed, shifting on the bench so his old Pawaiian shirt didn’t bunch up so much around the back. “Er, well, I don’t really think I put on enough deodorant today and there’s an old wife’s tale that rabbits go absolutely bonkers at a sweaty fox’s—”

Judy took his hand in hers, squeezing and smiling up at him. “Nick, please… my siblings really want to play with you again before you go to the police academy. Just one more time?”

Nick groaned and looked away, never having been able to resist when Judy’s eyes got all big and
“Okay, okay, I guess I should before I end up needing a replacement hand from you crushing that one.”

Judy eeped and pulled back, her grey fur doing far less to hide her blush as the children around them giggled and made “Oooh!” noises. Nick laughed with them as he hopped off the bench. He stretched his arms up over his head and shot Judy a toothy grin, before following the now-cheering bunny horde as it stampeded toward the nearest empty field.

“Have fun, Nick!”

“Always do, Carrots!”

“Nick. Nick! NICK!”

A sharp jab to his shoulder snapped Nick from his daydream. He jerked, looking around in half a panic before remembering he was in a ZPD cruiser, driving from headquarters to northern Tundratown to check up on the one employee for Tundratown Truckers who records said was out sick from work and therefore, they hoped, still alive and able to shed light on the situation.

“Earth to Nick, you still with me?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” He coughed, rubbing the back of his forearm and thanking the Maiden Marian once more that the bunny in the driver’s seat couldn’t see his blush. “But uh, what was the question?”

Judy huffed, rolling her eyes as she made a left turn. Outside a light rain fell, almost more of a mist, turning the cheerful shops and pedestrians going about their normal lives unfamiliar and remote. “I said, I’m going to go see Fru Fru this evening if I can find the time, do you want to come with? She just lost her dad, I imagine she’s going to need all the friends she can get for a while.”

Nick frowned and looked out the side window, watching as a train sped over a lake toward the Rainforest District. He remembered his long-gone days of working with the Bigs. He’d never interacted much or gotten too familiar with the boss’ daughter, but she’d always been polite and friendly. And as cops, it had mostly been Judy being Fru Fru’s friend and their main “in” with the Bigs. But still… “Yeah, I’m in. Should probably talk with her about anything her dad might’ve known about ‘Jack Savage’ anyway.”

“That’s… not really what I had in mind, Nick.”

“Yeah… I know.” Nick yawned, cursing the rain. It always put him in a weird mood. No, he corrected himself after a moment. It was the case rattling him. The idea of Mr. Big, THE Mr. Big, being dead and gone was… unnatural.

Through the window he watched them cross a bridge, the rain falling behind them as they transitioned into the more wooded area of Tundratown. He knew it a poor place to live, practically its own separate community. Or at least it had been, back in the day. A lot of time had passed since, though.

Following the GPS, Judy kept them driving through the woods for several miles more, before a turnoff in the road brought them to a secluded and thoroughly trashy trailer park. A quick word with the raccoon manning the gate for directions and they crawled through the winding, aimless pathways that seemed more grown than planned out, mindful of children playing in the snow. Nick did his level best to ignore the stink eye aimed their way from more than a few of the surrounding trailers. Here was one part of the job he certainly hadn’t missed.
The mobile home they eventually parked in front of looked better than most in the park, in that at least all its windows were in place, its short lawn had been kept in good order, and the earthy-brown van next to it looked like it could actually start. Even so, Nick kept wary as he and Judy trudged through the snow to the front door, letting her take the lead in knocking. “Mr. Lovehog? It’s the ZPD, we’d like to ask you a few questions.”

Nick counted down from 10 in his head. When no answer came he glanced around to the nearby houses before speaking, low so that only Judy could hear. “I’m going around to the back. Try again once I’m out of sight.”

“Be careful, Nick. We have a knack for showing up when the trouble’s happening.”

“Hey.” He turned to walk backwards around the mobile home, shooting her a smile. “It’s me!”

The look she shot him at that said it all. Chuckling, Nick turned back around and circled to the mobile home’s back, past a table, some benches, a kiddie pool, up to a door near-identical to the front. He listened with ears perked for Judy’s second round of knocking, and then for any sounds of movement from inside the building.

Half a minute passed, and then a full minute. When nothing was heard he sighed and knocked on the back door. “Sir, this is a serious issue and we have reason to believe you are in dang—”

“NICK!”

At Judy’s scream he ran, nearly tripping over himself as he rushed back to the mobile home’s front. He found his partner standing at the back of the van, its rear doors opened and a miserable look upon her face. As he drew closer he heard a sound as well, like a phone ringing.

“Judy, what—”

He looked in the van and groaned. There lay Mr. Lovehog, the boar sprawled out in the back of his own van with a noose wrapped tight around the boar’s neck. A cell phone lay atop his belly, vibrating as it rang.

“That’s what got me over here,” said Judy, nodding to the phone. “It just started ringing all of a sudden…”

“Better get on the radio,” said Nick. He’d already climbed into the van and knelt beside the boar’s body. Careful not to touch anything else, he snapped on a crime scene glove drawn from his belt before picking up the phone and answering. “Hello?”

“Hi, Ju—oh, it’s the fox.” The voice coming through was low and throaty, as if the speaker smoked too much or had some metal down in his throat. “A shame. I was really hoping Judy would answer. That’s why I want to give the both of you a warning.”

“Eh, wouldn’t be my first. The name’s Jack, don’t forget it. And don’t feel bad, Mr. Wilde-Hopps. I’m a fan of you too. That’s why I want to give the both of you a warning.”

Nick joined Judy at the cruiser, letting her listen in to the conversation as well. “Oh, a warning?
That’s way more generous than most other murderous psychopaths we’ve had to deal with. Lay it on me, Jacky-boy.”

A laugh, the kind Nick might have let out back in the day to help get friendly with a mark before the inevitable hustle. “You two are a train barreling down the wrong track, and all the little people of the city are gathering to watch the inevitable crash. Give up now while you’re still… eh, maybe not ahead, but at least breaking even.”

“Uh-huh,” said Nick, glancing at Judy. “And by ‘little people’, do you mean that figuratively, or as in like literally mice and shrews and—”

Nick heard a click, followed by nothing. He looked down at the phone and saw the call had been ended from the other side. “He… hung up on me? Who does that!?”

“Mass murderers, apparently.” Judy sighed and hopped back into her seat, reaching to grab their crime scene kit out from under the dash. “CSI will be here in 10, guess we better get this place cordoned off. I hope Beth’s having better luck on her end.”

“Yeah,” said Nick, dropping the cell phone into an evidence back. “Because at this rate, bodies are just going to start dropping from the sky when we walk down the street.”

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“Ma’am, put your hands up and step away from the computer!”

Eyes wide and fearful, the honey badger in dingy overalls to match the dingy apartment looked back and forth between Beth and the computer in front of her. A window was open on the computer, an executive sign-in page for some tech company or other, numbers and letters flickering through the box in search of the password. “Officer, you gotta let me finish! I’ve been tracking this guy for months! If he gets into this company we’re talking about millions and millions of dollars lost!”

Beth narrowed her eyes and stepped further into the room. “Millions have already been lost. You’re not saying that you’re not the Highway Hacker, are you?”

At this the badger laughed and gestured to the threadbare apartment around them, which aside from a cork board riddled with photos connected by strings and the desk with its computer, was absolutely barren. “You think any mammal with millions to her name would live in this dump!?"

Beth blinked, biting her lip as she lowered her tranq gun halfway. “Then… what are you doing?”

“What are you doing, Beth? Beth? Beth!”

The shout snapped Beth from her daydream. The hare nearly fell from her rolling chair, ears lighting up with a blush as she glanced around the crowded ZPD computer labs before looking back at the irate timber wolf at whose table she’d been waiting at. That helped. Irritation was a useful cure for embarrassment. “Sorry, I got… nostalgic. You were saying?”

Wolford rolled his eyes but said no more, turning his chair back to the computer in front of him. “I’m sorry to say that so far I’m not finding anything at all in our criminal databases on a criminal named Jack Savage. I’ve shot a few similar questions to friends in other cities and the ones that’ve gotten back to me say ‘bout the same.”

Beth punched her palm. “Dang it! Nobody’s heard of this guy?”

“Far as I can tell, no. Least not at the city level.” He shrugged, looking apologetic. “Sorry, Blaine. It
was a good idea. From what I’ve heard I’d have thought this Savage fellow some other city’s crime lord looking to expand into Zootopia too. Heck, might be he still is, just with a different name. ‘Jack Savage’ doesn’t sound too much like an actual rabbit name, now does it?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Beth, standing up. She put all the irritation she could into her voice. “I’m a hare, not a rabbit. A subtle difference, to be sure, what with the average head and a half height difference, but I’m sure you’ll get it eventually.”

Wolford groaned, leaning back in his chair to rub his face in his hands. “Beth, please, how many times am I going to have to say sorry? I seriously did not intentionally take all the credit for bagging the Highway Hacker! Bogo had his precinct pride, and then the mayor got behind it—

“I’ve heard you say that before, yeah,” said Beth, tired that day and unable to get herself in the mood for her usual arguing with the wolf. The fox and rabbit-shaped attention magnets hadn’t been doing much for her mood lately. “Anyway, if you’ve got nothing else I’ll just get out of your fur.”

“Actually,” Wolford said as she started to turn away, the low, conspiratorial tone his voice took all that kept her from walking off. “There uh, might be something else, if you can keep it quiet for now, lass.”

She raised an eyebrow but sat back down, leaning in as he motioned her closer. “Yeah?”

Wolford cast a glance around at the other techs in the lab before answering. “Had some of my lads trying to piece together the computers from Tundratown Truckers this morning, but they were all too shot up to be salvageable.”

“Okay…”

Wolford continued. “But then, blessed be, Bertrand from down in the Garage comes up to the labs with the GPS systems from a few of the delivery vehicles with the bright idea of trying to get something from them! Oh, I could have kissed the old bear!”

Beth grinned despite herself, liking where this story was going. “Sounds like you just need to see if Alexis likes him and Bert’s in.”

The wolf rolled his eyes again, but grinned along with her. “Well, he’s decided he’s actually Alex, now, and he’s been asking when the cool bu—hare’s coming back around. I don’t think Bert even factors into it. But anyway, back on topic. A lot of the older delivery routes had been wiped from the devices, but I found a few from the past week that raised some eyebrows. The construction yards in the Nocturnal District for the new HiteTech Industries branch coming in to Zootopia, the old Outback Island train station… and City Hall.”

Beth gaped. Wolford nodded. “Aye, lass. Too early to start pointing fingers or even saying it out loud, but keep your ears primed, won’t ya? We just might have another Lionheart or Bellwether situation brewing.”

“Great, because that’s exactly what we need during an election…” Beth frowned, thinking through the list Wolford had given. Again the thought of Outback Island sparked a flare of insight for her. If she could only grasp it…

“Er, Blaine? You’re looking a little strained there. The uh, the restroom’s just through that door and down the hall…”

“What?” She blinked at the remark, before shaking her head and standing again. “No, it’s not that, I just… I need to go look into something. I’m forgetting something. Something about Zootopia itself.”
Beth was half a dozen steps away before she stopped again, looking back at Wolford as the wolf turned to his computer. She bit her lip and tightened her fists, opening her mouth to say… something, an apology or a thanks or a question on if she had done well in bringing Judy and Nick back, knowing they and the wolf were good friends… but then she closed her mouth without saying a word and turned continue on, certain she could discuss those matters later. There was something about an aquarium to attend to.

***

By the time Judy and Nick had finished up at the late Mr. Lovehog’s house, filled out all the paperwork and questioned all the neighbors and phoned all their reports to Chief Bogo, early afternoon had turned to early evening. By then Judy had a hard time thinking of anything other than getting out of the cold and getting food in her stomach, but whatever hidden stores of resolve had gotten her through the police academy kept her going, buoyed by a hastily-grabbed cup of coffee and the first radio station with music Nick could find. They still had a stop to make before home.

“Yeah

A door left open

A woman walking by

A drop in the water

A look in your eye

A phone on the table

A man on your side

Or someone that you think that you can trust

It's just

Another way to die.”

"Carrots, I think the car has it in for us."

Judy chuckled and shook her head. Outside the snow-bound trees and hills passed half-hidden in the icy haze, like ghosts at dusk. "Sure it does, Nick. ZPD cruisers are secretly plotting to take over the city. They're in cahoots with the fire trucks."

“Another girl with her finger on the world singing do what you wanna hear

Another gun thrown down and surrendered took away your fear

Another man that stands right behind you looking in the mirror—"

"I knew it." Nick gave the dashboard a friendly tap. "Just remember who always changes your oil when you're on top of the world, bud."

Now Judy let out a full laugh. "You're a funny fox, Mr. Wilde-Hopps. Your wife must be quite lucky."

“Yeah
A door left open
A woman walking by
A drop in the water
A look in your eye
A phone on the table
A man on your side
Or someone that you think that you can trust

It's just

Another way to die.”

Nick grinned and sipped on his coffee. "Not as lucky as your husband, Mrs. Wilde-Hopps."

Minutes later found them pulling up to the gates for the Big Estate. Before Judy had so much as set their cruiser into park a polar bear in a somber black suit stepped out from the shadows on the other side of the surrounding wall and walked toward them, giving her pause. She shared a look with Nick before rolling her window down and poking her head out. "Hey, Kevin. I know it's been a long time, but I'm here as a friend, not a cop. Is Fru Fru home?"

“She is,” spoke the polar bear, leaning down to Judy’s height as he did. “However, she, her husband, and her daughter are in mourning, and she has requested for there to be no visitors.”

“But surely—”

“I’m sorry, Officer Hopps,” and to his credit, Kevin did look genuinely sorry.

Judy sighed and slumped into her seat. It was no more than she expected, but less than she’d hoped for. Glancing over at Nick, Judy was surprised to find him frowning at a text on his phone.

Ignoring that for the moment, she looked back to Kevin. “We understand and will respect the Lady Big’s wishes. Although, if you could, would you mind passing along a message to her from me?” At the polar bear’s nod she smiled. “Please let Fru Fru know that Nick and I are deeply sorry for her loss, and if there’s anything... well, anything within the bounds of the law she needs, we’ll be there. We won’t rest until this killer has been brought to justice.”

“My friend, Mrs. Big wants revenge.” Kevin stood back up and backed away, back to his post by the fence. “But, ah, justice will do.”

There was nothing more to be said after that. Judy put the cruiser into reverse and backed out onto the road, putting it into drive to start the long drive back to the station. Her ears drooped as they went, Judy on autopilot as she mourned for one of her oldest Zootopia friends.

“Well,” said Nick after a moment, voice full of what sounded, to Judy, surprisingly like honest cheer. “We might have a little uh, good news to end the day on.”

“Oh? Judy perked an ear, remembering the text her fox had been looking at earlier. “Beth find anything?”

In answer Nick cleared his throat and took on the voice of reading the gravest of official documents.
“I’ve got two texts here. From Frosty we’ve got… ‘Figured out what Aquarium meant. Meet me at the train station tomorrow at 8 AM.’ Because who doesn’t like trains?”

“Well,” said Judy, “it sounds like a date. The other text?”

Here Nick’s grin truly broke out. “From dear, old Clawhauser. ‘Get-together at McShammy’s tonight to welcome you back. Be there or be square, you two.’”

Judy grinned alongside her fox. “Now that’s definitely a date.”
“I think I’m going to die.”

Judy groaned at the fox’s statement, eyes closed in what was probably a vain wish to will the throbbing headache away. She, and probably the groaning fox loitering next to her near the Savannah Central train station’s juice bar, had drunk too much last night, and ate too much junk food last night, and stayed up too late sharing stories with Clawhauser and Wolford and the Fangmeyers and Francine last night. The light in the train station was too bright. The sounds were too loud. The pointedly obvious stares and barely-hushed whispers from other morning commuters too… pointedly obvious and barely-hushed, she guessed.

“I mean it. I think I’m going to die. Mom always warned me this was how I was gonna go. I want you to tell Bonnie and Stu I loved them.”

Judy’s ear twitched at the sound of a camera taking a photo. Somewhere else she could hear a mammal reading aloud from Weaselton’s book. It was about when she stuffed the weasel in a giant donut and rolled him all the way to ZPD headquarters.

“It’ll get better,” said Nick, as their loitering near the station’s juice bar reached the 10 minute mark. “Just gotta solve this case and all those glares will turn to looks of admiration once more.”

“Hmm.”

“And heck,” he continued, stretching his arms above his head. “Even if that doesn’t work out, they’ll get bored and find something else new or interesting to stare at. That’s life, Carrots.”

“Hmm.” Judy sat on a bench, knuckles propping up her head as she watched a TV attached to the juice bar. Gazelle, dressed in a simple but refined lavender business suit, fielded questions from some talk show host or other, doing a remarkable job of ignoring several pointed remarks at her history or turning them to her advantage. “Weird to think, isn’t it?”

Nick joined her by the bench. “What, that she used to dance around on a stage in a skirt that really didn’t leave anything to the imagination, or that she’s currently in the lead? And the biggest question of all: is there a connection?”

Judy elbowed him in the ribs, but smirked all the same. “Har har. But no, I don’t think her being in the lead for mayor is all that surprising. I still remember that amazing speech for peace during the savage predator crisis Bellwether caused. I’ve believed since I first heard it she could do amazing in politics.”

“Aw, don’t sell yourself too short, Carrots.” Nick smirked and patted her head. “They still play recordings of your ‘Try to make the world a better place’ speech in the police academy. Not a bad legacy, I think, all things considered.”

“Wilde-Hopps!”

Judy jumped back to her feet, scanning around for the source of the shout. She saw Beth weaving through the crowd toward a blue and black train readying to depart, waving to them with one hand while holding tight to a badger in a tank top and camo pants with the other. "Wilde-Hopps, this way!"

"Nick, come on!"
Running, they just managed to join their fellow officer before the doors slid shut and the train lurched into motion, leaving Nick holding his tail close to avoid it getting cut off. "Yikes!"

"That was a close one," said Beth, smoothing her ears back as she headed toward the front of the train. A dozen’s dozen mammals sitting or standing in the train car, and not a one of them paying attention to the trio of cops among them, to Judy’s relief. "Sorry if I kept you both waiting too long. Someone," and here she glared at her companion, "thought it'd be a good idea to turn my alarm off."

"What? You stayed up half the night on the computer! I thought you'd finally caught the conspiracy bug!"

“It was research!” Beth poked the honey badger following her in the chest, right on a Junior Detective sticker Judy just then noticed. “Important research! So please, Honey, behave and don’t make me regret pulling a Nick Wilde with you!”

“Pulling a… Nick Wilde…?” Judy shared a look with Nick as they followed along behind, before putting the obvious question there aside for later and holding her hand out to the badger. “Right, well, I am Lieutenant Judy Wilde-Hopps. You must be Officer Beth’s civilian informant?”

“Among other things, heheh” Walking backwards to face Judy, the badger laughed and clapped her hand, leaving it stinging. “Honey Badger, you can call me! Yeah, like my species, only I think I pull it off way better than Gazelle. Plus, it was fun watching your fox there struggle to come up with a nickname while I was showing him ‘round the warehouse.”

That got Judy grinning, her headache fading like magic with the stress as she turned to look at the fox in question. “Oh, how I wish I could have seen that. Hey, Nick, looks like you’ve met your match… Nick? You okay there?"

The fox, looking as if Christmas had come early, slowly smiled. "Honey-Frosted Carrots. It’s… beautiful."

Honey started laughing, stopping as Beth glared at her. Judy groaned, covering her blushing face with her hand. "Niiiick…"

"Right, right, sorry.” He coughed and put on his shades, looking anything but sorry. “Now then, uh, anyone want to maybe fill us in on why we’re riding the Outer Sea Line?"

A pause came in the conversation as they reached and ascended the stairs near the top of the train to the upper observation level. Judy could not help but pause and take in the view of the city whizzing by beyond the windows, reminding her so much of that first wondrous journey into Zootopia. Aside from a rabbit and wolf pair on a bench at the front who seemed far more interested in each other’s mouths than the view outside, their little cop group had the deck to themselves.

“Okay,” said Beth, going to the right-hand windows before turning around to look at Judy and the rest. “So last night I was looking over a map of Zootopia and its districts—”

“While in bed, I might add.”

“Hush, Honey!” The hare’s entire face was blushing. Judy tried her hardest not to giggle, doing a better job of it than Nick. “L-looking at the map, because that’s a thing I do when I need to think and, and… stuff, and that’s when I had this… brain… spark… realization thing?”

“I am well aware of brain spark realization things,” said Judy, smiling and inwardly relieved that she wasn’t the only person who had trouble explaining those moments.
Beth smiled and went on. “Right, well I remembered that “Aquarium” is an old, and I mean OLD, slang term for the Ocean Bay Complex!”

Judy blinked, making a little “ohh” noise as beside her, Nick facepalmed. Past the hare, past the wolf and bunny couple, she saw far ahead and approaching rapidly a steel and glass tunnel entrance that dived a mere dozen feet on into Zootopia Bay. She went to the glass and looked out, watching the tunnel approach with something between excitement and nervousness. Nervexcited? “The giant underwater complex where land and ocean mammals can interact more easily. I don’t think I’ve ever been called to go down into the Ocean Bay District in my entire ZPD career. Nick, you ever go down there?”

“Oh,” he said, joining her at the glass, Beth and Honey to their right. “Did a job for a really weird narwhal. Thought I’d never get the smell of fish out of my fur.”

The laugh that bubbled up Judy’s throat at this thought caught her off-guard, making her hardly notice as the train plunged into the tunnel. Then the tunnel dove into the bay water and she gasped. Everything outside the train and its mostly see-through tunnel was a bright and dazzling blue. She could see schools of otters and seals in business suits swimming between buildings styled after coral reefs. Two dolphins in construction armor darted to and fro among clusters of underwater lampposts, making her wonder at the amount of effort that went into maintaining even this marginal connection between the two worlds. A walrus in some sort of toga lazed about near one of the tunnel’s support pillars, seemingly being berated by a tiger in a wetsuit. A seal swam along with a pair of clippers, tending to fields of seaweed like one tends to hedges.

“Wow…” It was moments like this, moments when the whole world opened up and a whole new shade of Zootopia revealed itself to her, that Judy lived for.

“Wow?” Beth’s grin could be heard clear in her voice. “No, Lieutenant, THAT is wow.”

The train turned left and leveled out its descent, and that’s when Judy saw the Ocean Bay Complex emerge from the distance. Her jaw dropped at the size of the structure, at least half-again as large as the Zootenial Stadium above in Zootopia proper, a dome-like mashing together of stone, steel, and glass, into and through which Judy could see countless more glass tunnels and corridors connecting. The entire thing stood 20 feet above the sea floor on countless metal-supported stone pillars, among which swam seemingly hundreds of mammals. “Okay, yeah, that IS wow!”

The train slowed as the tunnel brought it into the Complex, coming to an eventual stop in what looked for all intents and purposes like an ocean-themed twin of the train station they had started from, only totally inside and with far, far more steel. They followed the wolf and bunny out of the train to the platform, Judy only barely keeping herself from gawking like a day-one tourist with the understanding that Nick would never, ever let her live it down. But even then…

“Careful, Fluff, I’m pretty certain flies aren’t part of a rabbit’s diet.”

Judy snapped her mouth closed and glared at her husband. To Beth she said, “So what do you think Icenov meant by sending us down here?”

“Good question.” The hare went to a relatively secluded stretch of wall near a porthole and leaned against it, arms folded. “Historically speaking, this was a major area of smuggling in the days of Prohibition. A lot harder to patrol the entire water, you know? Plus there’s still a lot of fishing business that comes through here.”

“Which means,” said Nick, “maybe this is a backup in case ‘Tundratown Truckers’ ever got compromised. Which it did the other day. Thoroughly.”
“Wow, Nick, morbid much?” Judy sighed and shook her head. Looking around, she saw mammals in mostly the mid-range going about their business, wolf to horse-sized, leaving and coming in through tunnels spread around the cavernous station or perched at computer terminals in a corner café. A trio of moon pools along the opposite wall let land mammals converse easily with dolphins poking their heads up from the water. Having never been there before, Judy thought things seemed normal enough.

“Still,” she continued, “it’s probably our best avenue to start on. If fishing’s a thing here than there will be businesses, warehouses. We’ll start with them first, see if anything suspicious has—”

“Excuse me, officers, but I have an alternative theory.”

Judy, Nick, and Beth looked at Honey, who somehow during the course of their conversation had procured for herself a coffee. At Judy’s questioning look the honey badger shrugged, aimed a thumb over her shoulder at the corner café, and then held up a flyer dominated by a photo of Mayor Swinton.

“Today!” read the flyer, “Mayor Swinton asks for YOUR vote! See her today at the Grand Moon Pool, and learn how Swinton speaks for you!”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “That could be a pretty big problem. Suppose for a moment that not all of the explosives were used in Sahara Square?”

“Oh God.” Judy looked around at the dozens of mammals just in the train station alone, the hundreds more that could be in the “Aquarium”, far underwater and kept safe by far-too-fragile glass. “Oh God,” she said again, before grabbing for her radio. “Dispatch, this is Judy Wilde-Hopps, put me through to the chief.”

A moment of static, and then, "Bogo here. What've you got, Judy?"

"A possible major emergency," sir." Judy glanced around to make sure none of the passerby looked to be listening in before continuing. "Officer Blaine figured out Icenov meant the Ocean Bay Complex last night when he said 'Aquarium.' At first we thought maybe this was a backup route now that the warehouse is taken down, but Sir—"

"Mayor Swinton's campaign rally," said Bogo, finishing the thought. "Oh damn it. Double damn it!"

Judy swallowed, her superior’s distress doing nothing for her nerves as she ran through the math of how quickly they could evacuate that many people on the train. She didn’t like how the math turned out. “I’m here with Nick, Blaine, and Honey Badger. What… what can we do?”

“The Fangmeyers are down there already,” Bogo said after a long moment. “ZPD has a presence at every rally. I’ll appraise them of the situation. You need to get to the local security and—"

SCREEEEEECHEEEECEEEE—

Judy yelped and pulled back from the radio, the others around her flinching as she fumbled to turn it off. “Sweet cheese and crackers! What in blazes was that!?"

“Sure wasn’t any signal jammer I ever heard.” Nick whined, rubbing his ears. “Ow…”

“I’ve heard something like that before,” said Honey. She seemed remarkably unphased by the auditory attack from moments before. “There’s another signal overpowering whatever band your radios use. Probably just random gibberish getting shouted out. Harder to get around by going to another channel because, you know, EVERYONE would have to know which channel to change to.”
Another seconds-long burst of static sent them all flinching again, Blaine hastily turning her radio back off. “They must have multiple going at once. I guess we can’t hope for Bogo getting through to the Fangmeyers.”

“That means we’re on our own.” Judy looked over to the train, watching it depart back to Zootopia-proper with a hiss and crash. “At least until Bogo gets backup down here. He’ll know something’s wrong from the radios.”

If Nick rolled his eyes any harder at that, they’d roll right out of his head. “That’s great. Perfect. Chief Buffalo Butt bringing in the cavalry to save us at the last minute is a time-honored tradition among us Wilde-Hoppses. But what do we do until then? Put SCUBA gear on everyone and push them out an airlock?”

Judy shared a look with Beth. Nick groaned. “I was not seriously suggesting that! I mean, I assume this place would have more than enough emergency gear for everyone if it came down to it—”

“Or we could make everyone jog up the train tunnel!” Honey suggested.

“—but I’d rather not have to get in that ‘save everyone in a panic’ situation to begin with!” Nick finished, turning a stare at the badger.

“That’s the plan,” said Judy. Spotting a nearby kiosk, she ran to it and pulled up a map of the complex. “Nick, get to the main security hub for this place and alert them to the situation. Who we’re dealing with, what we’re dealing with, and how we hope to deal with it. Honey, as an officer of the law I am empowering you to commandeer one of those café computers. Nobody’s panicking over there, so Wi-Fi still seems to be working. Beth, we’ll go to the rally at this ‘Grand Moon Pool’. We MIGHT just be dealing with an old-fashioned assassination attempt.”

“Got it.”

Nick sighed and shook his head, grabbing a physical map for himself. “Man, when did life get to the point where assassination attempts could be old-fashioned?”

“That’s something to ponder some other time.” Judy checked that her foldout baton, cuffs, stun gun, and emergency aid kit were still secure to her belt, before starting for the tunnel marked for the Grand Moon Pool. “Let’s roll, Beth.”

They made it ten feet before a shout from behind made them stop. Judy looked in time to see Honey run over and embrace Blaine in a hug that at the least got bones creaking, the hare’s face lighting up in a blush.

“Be careful, Beth, please. I’ve suddenly got a real bad feeling about all this.”

After a moment of struggling for breath, Beth managed a smile and patted Honey’s back. “Careful as I ever am. Just… need… to breathe…”

Honey yelped and let go, blushing as she backed up and scratched her chin. “Sorry, sorry. Er… to the computers I go then, heh heh…”

Judy watched the pair as they turned to go on their separate ways, smiling despite everything as she turned to see Nick watching just the same. “You be safe too, Slick. I’d hate to have to pull your tail out of the fire again.”

“Aw, you beat me to it.” Nick’s words joked, but his frantic tail and forced smile told the truth of his worry. Things rarely went right when they separated.
Unable to spare the time for one last look, Judy turned and ran to catch up to Beth.

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The Grand Moon Pool, as it turned out, was a giant artificial beach area taking up the entire bottom level of the complex, dotted with rocks and trees, dominated at the center by a moon pool thirty feet across from every side, opening directly into the bay beyond. Double sets of airlocks at every entrance insured that no changes in air pressure would allow the water to flood into the complex, while land and sea mammals alike could lounge around and frolic together in comfort.

Judy and Beth found the raised platform for Mayor Swinton’s rally at the very edge of this pool, the pig standing at a podium atop it and speaking to the countless mammals gathered around the pool’s other edges or poking their heads out of the water. Beside her were a pair of deer bodyguards, while Judy could just make out the tigress Officer Fangmeyer at the left-hand edge of the platform and the wolf Officer Fangmeyer at the right-hand edge.

“You take right, I take left,” she said to Beth, nodding to each indicated officer. “Fill them in on what’s going down. And keep an eye on the crowd while you’re at it.”

“Got it, Boss. Be careful.”

Returning the sentiment, Judy turned and started through the crowd of milling mammals, figuring that less likely to seem panic-worthy than going around the crowd. She whispered her apologies and excuse-me’s as she hopped over mice and slid between horses, stomach dropping as she noticed how many wolves and rabbits she could see around her, her thoughts turning to Honey’s description of the wolf and rabbit that interrupted the crime lord meeting. She kept one ear turned to the crowd, listening for the slightest hint of anything dangerous, the cocking of a gun or the sliding of a knife from its sheath. The other she kept turned to Swinton at her podium, almost as worried about the mayor as she was everything else, considering how the previous two mayors turned out.

“—and with the reforms already implemented during my current term, my re-election guarantees a stronger, more thorough integration between land and sea than ever seen in Zootopia’s history! This insures new jobs, new housing, and new opportunity for anyone willing to seek it”

Applause rang through the crowd. Judy ducted under a hammock some elephant had found the audacity to set up and found herself in a relative clearing in the crowd. Across the moon pool she could see Beth already in conversation with Adam Fangmeyer, while Carla Fangmeyer had at some point caught sight of Judy and kept her gaze on her. Judy waved to her, then said in sign language “Radios not working. Terrorist threat likely. Keep lookout for white wolf or striped hare.”

Fangmeyer’s eyes widened. She gave a short nod and turned her gaze to the crowd, the turn of her head so subtle most probably wouldn’t notice it.

“Furthermore,” Swinton continued, “I can promise with absolute certainty a renewed focus on law enforcement in my second term as your mayor. I’m talking better equipment, better training, and most important of all, better accountability! By this time next year, trust in the ZPD will be as certain as the sun rising every morning!”

More cheers and applause, this time even louder than before. Ignoring this and the way it made her stomach twist into knots, Judy allowed herself the briefest sigh of relief at having got her message across to Fangmeyer, before moving to restart her squirming through the crowd.

“Oh wow, Officer Judy Hopps! Can I have your autograph?”
Judy bit back her groan and turned to tell whatever mammal had noticed her that she was busy on police business. She froze, heart skipping a beat as she came face to face with a hare in a plain black suit and tie, his light-grey fur off-set by black stripes around his head and ears, Arctic-blue eyes contrasting the smile on his face.

“You… you…”

The tilt of Jack Savage’s ears turned quizzical. “Am incredibly handsome, yes, but if I remember right, you’re already taken. So alas, it is not meant to be.” His smile widened then as he held out the piece of paper and pen he held another inch. “So… I’m like, sorry if this is a bad time, but I am a really big fan of your work. You are such an inspiration. I mean that, truly.”

Hoping that Fangmeyer had noticed them by that point, Judy forced herself to smile as she looked from the hare’s face to the outstretched items. “Of course, anything for a fan…” She turned, putting her handcuffs just the slightest bit forward, and reached a hand out as if to take the pen. “And who am I making this out to?”

“Jack Savage, ma’am.”

Judy smiled. “Exactly what I wanted to hear.”

CLICK.

Jack blinked and looked down at his left hand, a handcuff around the wrist. “Did… did you really just…?”

“Jack Savage, you are under arrest.” Judy kept her voice to a whisper as she turned the stunned rabbit around and twisted his arms behind his back to cuff them together. The few mammals standing next to them looking on in mild panic was enough for her at the moment. “You are charged with murder, attempted murder, conspiracy to commit murder, terrorism, destruction of property—”

“You can’t be serious.” Jack Savage sounded undecided between amusement and rage. “I just wanted to come get your autograph. How could you have possibly known any of that? Did one of the other bosses squeal on me? Were you friends with more than just Mr. Big?”

“That’s none of your business.” Judy gave a shove in the direction she figured the closest of the tunnels to be, flashing a reassuring smile to every mammal to catch her eye. One ear remained trained on Swinton fielding questions behind them as Judy made Savage walk. “You have the right to remain silent,” she continued whispering. “Anything you say can and will be used against you—”

“Of course, of course,” said Savage, voice finally settling on amusement. “This isn’t my first rodeo, I understand. Not one more word… just a question. Wherever might my wolf friend be?”

Judy paused, eyes widening. “She—”

THWACK—CRUNCH.

Judy jolted backward, stars exploding in her eyes. Her breath exploded out of her throbbing face as her back hit the sandy floor, sending a family of shrews scurrying and a number of other mammals stumbling, shouting in alarm. Her vision cleared enough in time to see Savage roll his handcuffed arms over his head with more flexibility than should have been physically possible, his flaring jacket revealing a pistol holstered at his hip.

He reached for the gun. Judy flipped back to her feet, turning her momentum into a headbutt to his gut. Savage grunted and stumbled back, hands clapping the gun the same moment Judy’s hands did.
A moment’s wrestling for the weapon before a shot rang out, kicking up a plume of sand to the left. Mammals around them screamed and turned tail, Judy catching out of the corner of her eye Swinton getting tackled to the ground by her bodyguards, Beth joining them a moment later with tranq gun drawn and aimed hesitantly toward the struggle. The Fangmeyers were nowhere to be seen from Judy’s position, maybe rushing to aid her, maybe directing the fleeing civilians to safe rou—

A two-fisted uppercut to Judy’s chin snapped her head back, breaking her grip on the gun. She heard Savage let out a laugh, recovering from the blow just in time to see him level the gun to her head.

Everything else, the sand, the screams, the rumble of mammals barreling past all around them, fell away before Judy. She saw in a blink her life flash before her, Gideon’s bullying, training at the academy, meeting Nick, saving Zootopia from Bellwether, their first kiss, the wedding ring—

The near-imperceptible click of metal on metal as Savage tightened his grip on the trigger and Judy broke free from her reverie to throw herself forward. The shot went wide, blowing off the last inch from her left ear in a spray of pain as Judy tackled him and kept going, ignoring his pounding fists on her back, screaming as she ran him full-charge into one of the trees scattered around.

There she kept the other rabbit pinned, ignoring the blood dribbling down her head from her ear as she delivered blow after blow upon him, punches, elbows, knees, shoulders; every striking surface she could bring to bear on this killer, this murderer, this grinning mockery of all rabbits every—

Wait, Judy’s gut told her. Grinning?

That and the ground starting to rumble were all the warning Judy got before the moon pools throughout the room erupted.

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“What do you MEAN, all communications are down!?”

The dik-dik in the ill-fitting security uniform flinched back from Nick’s growl, something the fox felt only marginally bad for, and turned back around to the array of computer screens arranged along the far wall, providing most of the illumination to the darkened security room. “I, I mean just what I said, officer. Only a minute or two after that last train pulled in, something trampled all of our systems. Radios can’t work, phones can’t reach Zootopia-proper, phones get a busy signal. Even the Wi-Fi’s spottier than normal!”

Nick groaned, hearing absolutely everything he hadn’t been wanting to hear. “Well crap. Okay then. Our sheer inaccessibility will be like a beacon to everyone, going ‘Hey, look over here, something’s wrong and we need help!’ That’s that. Can anything in this room help us STOP whatever’s causing this, or are these computers all as much for show as my tail!?”

Letting out a huff, the dik-dik tapped buttons on the console faster than Nick could follow, pulling up video camera feeds on each of the screens. “Look, security feeds are still working all throughout the Complex. I’ve got the other guards out searching all the likely places for whatever device got plugged in to cause all this havoc, as well as a beluga technician outside coordinating sonar messages with a few dolphin runners. Communications are going to be back up as soon as there’s someone on the other side of the water for the dolphins to talk to.”

The bunny-sized deer rolled his chair back around to look at Nick. “All of that, plus Swinton’s guys doing regular sweeps for explosives or anything like that. Listen, friend. I don’t know how lax things get above-water to allow something like the Sahara Square attack to happen, but down here we can’t afford to get like that. There’s enough trying to make this place not work even before throwing the
idea of bombs around!"

Something in that statement kept Nick from making the snide remark he’d had planned. He looked to
the cameras, grin turning into a frown as he mentally ran through the vital locations: communications
hub, air filters, power generators, outside support beams, security station—

“Man,” said the dik-dik, shaking his head and gesturing to the camera showing the Grand Moon
Pool. “Look at all those people come to see some swine talk. As if any mayor’s ever actually kept to
most of their sea mammal promises.”

“Yeah,” said Nick, distracted, pieces clinking around in his head as he stared at the opening directly
into the bay surrounding Zootopia and the thousands upon thousands of gallons of pressure it
represented. “Bunch of… rubes…”

The door to the security control room opened behind them, making the fur on the back of Nick’s
neck bristle in sudden alarm.

“Hey!” shouted the dik-dik, already turned around in his chair and on his hooves. “Unless you’re
part of Swinton’s posse, you can’t come in here. This is a restricted section!”

Nick turned, grabbing for the stun gun at his belt. The white wolf in the doorway was faster, drawing
her own stun gun from the depths of her trench coat and firing before Nick could so much as raise
his.

Pain coursed through him as every muscle spasmed at once, a yowl that might have been his own
echoing through the security control room. Then the next thing he knew he was staring up at the
ceiling from the floor, fingers and toes twitching, all the rest of his body unresponsive to the too-
simple request to MOVE.

“Oh God! Don’t hurt me, please!”

From his vantage point on the floor, Nick could only watch helplessly as the wolf stepped over him
to the control consoles, grabbing the dik-dik completely around the waist with one hand and facing
him toward the computers. “Where are the door controls?”

“D-door controls? What a-are you ta-talking abou—"

The wolf squeezed. Something snapped and Nick couldn’t even flinch as the dik-dik screamed,
upper body thrashing in pain, legs hanging limp and lifeless. “EMER-GERGENCY RELEASE!
LLLLLEFT! C-CORNER CONSOLE R-RE-RED BUTTONNNGH!”

“Thank you, very much” said the wolf, before cracking the dik-dik’s neck over the back of his chair
and tossing him aside. She then rolled the chair out of her way and strode to the indicated console.

Nick stared at the lifeless mammal mere feet from his head, glassy eyes staring at nothing with terror.
A growl rose in his throat, the paralysis of the shocked muscles finally starting to fade as he rolled
himself to face the wolf’s back. “You monster. He just did as you asked! You didn’t have to kill him
like that!”

“It was a mercy,” said the wolf, not looking his way as she drew a flash drive from her pocket and
inserting it into the console. Computer code flashed onto the primary screen above it and the wolf
leaned in, typing command after command in. “Broken neck, fairly quick and painless.
Drowning…” Computer screen in front of her suddenly displaying “EMERGENCY” in bold red
letters, she pressed the seven red buttons arrayed before her and turned to look at Nick. From her
coat she retrieved a pair of canine micro-rebreathers. “Utter agony.”
"I've pulled as many officers as I can to head to the Complex. We're loading onto police boats this moment. Any change to the situation down there?"

Honey looked away from her Muzzlebook chat with Chief Bogo to the crowds of mammals still rushing into the central train hub, some of them nursing wounds, some crying, all of them radiating fear like a thick stench. A tiger in a ZPD uniform looked to be trying to keep them all calm and organized, to little success.

Turning back to the computer, Honey started typing a response. "Everyone's panicked. Some kind of fight between Judy and another rabbit, maybe Savage. Shots were fired. Don't know where anyone is right now."

Several agonizing seconds passed as the cape buffalo typed out his response. "Understood, am calling for more medical teams—"

Honey's attention was snapped from the chat text by the sudden blaring of an alarm, loud enough to send a few rabbits and hares among the crowd staggering and clutching their ears. 10 seconds with the alarm blaring before, to Honey's immediate alarm, every door, gate, and porthole in sight opened. Every mammal there cried out as their ears popped from the sudden change in air pressure, followed by a deathly silence as a low rumbling echoed from deep down below, and with it, distant screams.

"Oh God." Honey half-jumped from her seat, hurriedly turning back to type out one last message to Bogo while she could.

"Every door's opened, place is flooding! Hurry!"

She just managed to hit send before the first rush of water, and mammals caught in the current, gushed up from the tunnel to the Grand Moon Pool.

Beth loved swimming, had loved it since the moment she learned how to swim. Many of her fondest childhood memories came from those long-past summer days when her family would go out to secluded Meadowlands lakes, or her victories on the high school swim team, or the five months after college she'd trained for the professional leagues before daring to dream of law enforcement. She loved swimming.

Getting knocked off her feet by an explosion of water flooding the room with the force of a tidal wave was NOT the kind of swimming she loved. Tranq gun lost in the swirling currents, she fought to regain some sense of up and down as everything around her devolved into chaos. An elephant trumpeting bubbles tumbled past in one direction, a lion in the other, nearly slashing Beth with his claws as he kicked and thrashed. She ducked beneath him, curling her legs to kick off the elephant's side, up a dozen feet to the ever-dwindling space yet to be flooded.

With a gasp she breached the surface, shoulders shaking as she took deep lungfuls of air. All around was panic as mammals fought to stay afloat. Dolphins and other swimmers could be seen grabbing their land-bound brethren out of the Complex and to the surface, a sight that might've warmed Beth's heart if she wasn't one of those endangered mammals.

"Ma'am! Hold on, I'm coming!"

Beth waved the walrus away, toward a trio of floundering meerkats. "No, help them! I'm a cop, I can handle myself!"
I hope, she thought to herself as she ducked back into the water. She looked around and saw seven glass and steel tunnels leading from that room to all the rest of the Complex, each wide open to allow the flood of water to reach elsewhere. A few mammals had chosen to swim out that way, but if the water wasn’t stopped, she knew, they’d have more luck fleeing through the moon pools.

Going up for another breath of air, Beth swam down to the closest of the tunnels. She grasped a handlebar beside the tunnel entrance to steady herself, taking a moment to reorient before kicking the shiny red EMERGENCY button beside it as hard as she could. A red light flickered above the doorway before solid steel shutters slammed down over it, cutting off the flow of water in that direction.

Again Beth rose to the dwindling surface for breath, waving off a dolphin as she went to go help an absolutely terrified llama instead. And then again she dove to another tunnel doorway, repeating the earlier process there, and then at the next door, and then the next. All though of her own safety was pushed aside, the chill creeping into her from every dive and the growing ache in her limbs nothing, no more than distractions to work through.

By the time she dove for the final tunnel, Beth found herself eerily alone in the flooded room, all the rest either saved or beyond saving. Abandoned purses, chairs, phones, and more floated through that dim blue space, moved through ghostly dances by unseen currents. Beth swam to the tunnel side of the door and found the emergency override button there, slamming it with all her strength like so many before. Nothing happened.

_Fudgsicles._

Beth hit the button again, then again and again as she struggled not to panic that no red light was coming on, no shutters were slamming down. Lungs starting to burn, she glanced up the tunnel behind her, before swimming around to the other side of the doorway and hitting the button there. The shutter slammed down before she could swim through.

_Double-fudgsicles._

Lungs screaming now for oxygen, Beth swam up to the surface, finding barely enough room by this point to get her head above water. The urge to cry rose alongside the water rising up her shoulders, her neck, up to her chin. She took a final deep breath just before the rising tides reached her face and the room’s ceiling, leaving nowhere to go but down.

_Escape, must escape, must escape, get to open water, get to surface, escape._

Beth kicked off the ceiling for extra speed, gaze focused ahead as she swam down, down, down toward the central moon pool. The chairs, trees, tables, and stands floated about in the otherworldly calm around her were obstacles now, some she twisted to avoid, others she kicked off of for even the slightest gain in distance.

_Go, go, go go go, get out, out, God, out!_

Outstretched fingers grasped the edge of the moon pool for dear life. Beth hauled herself through, sudden vertigo hitting her as she paused, losing precious air bubbles as she struggled to reorient herself. A familiar ache started in her chest as she dragged herself along the bottom of the complex, racing now for the closest edge to let her ascend.

_Air. Air. God air, need air, please, can’t breathe can’t breathe—_

The metal hull of the Complex disappeared below (above, above!) her and she began to ascend
slowly. Too slowly. Legs kicking, Beth’s hands struggled to unclasp and throw away her bulletproof vest to the encroaching darkness below. Arm and leg guards went next, precious pounds shed to get her moving that much faster, not enough, not enough.

*Can’t breathe no can’t breathe can’t breathe—*

Everywhere around Beth looked faded to a dim blue, fading dimmer as the seconds passed. She scrabbled for the surface still dozens of feet above. Her limbs felt dead, her chest ready to burst. It was hard, so hard now to think, to will her legs to kick and her arms to grasp and her lips to remain sealed and not gasp for air, precious air. And slowly, so slowly, she felt her limbs… stop.

*Can’t… I can’t… Honey…*

Beth watched the bubbles stream from her mouth to the bright, sparkling surface above before all vision fled, barely feeling something hit her from below before the blackness took her.

***

When Nick returned to consciousness, it was to red lights flashing, alarms blaring, and one soaking wet honey badger shaking him by the shoulders. "Wilde! Come on, Wilde! Get up! NICK!"

Nick groaned and slowly, body screaming its protest, forced himself up into a sitting position. He had to reach out for Honey's help to pull him the rest of the way to his feet. "What's... going on?"

"All the doors in the Complex opened at once," said Honey, moving to wring out her shirt once she seemed satisfied he wasn't going to keel over without her support. "It completely destroyed the air pressure keeping the moon pools in check and everything started flooding!"

Blinking back his headache from the alarms, Nick staggered fast as he could to the console he remembered Miss Black using. "It was the wolf you told us 'bout... Black... did something here. I don't..." He dragged his eyes over the myriad buttons in front of him, having no more clue what to do here than he did in the train Bellwether's cronies had been operating from. "Oh what I wouldn't do to have Carrots here right now..."

"I'm allergic to carrots," said Honey, the badger sidling in beside Nick and giving the red buttons a few experimental taps, "but I lurked in the depths of the doomsday preppers' guilds for years and learned a few things. Let me see what I can do."

Nick let her work, turning his attention to the cameras instead. He saw scenes of panic, mammals barely keeping afloat in some sections of the Complex and barely having to tread it in others. Yet nowhere was the water rising any more. "Looks like someone manually closed the doors to the Grand Moon Pool."

"Thank God for that," said Honey, claws a blur over the controls as she typed in commands. "We'd be up to our necks in water right now if it was still coming in. Just gotta..."

The alarms and flashing lights shut off. Nick sighed in relief, mirrored by more than a few of the mammals on-camera. Honey grinned and kept going. "Now that we can all think clearly, just gotta turn on the pumps..."

The most excruciating 15 seconds of Nick’s life passed by, scored by the clack of computer keys and his nails against the desk. He worried that something else would go wrong, that the doors to the Grand Moon Pool would reopen and the flooding would start again. But then there came a CLICK, followed by a distant chugging noise that seemed to come from nowhere in particular. Nick let the smallest of grins flicker over his face as across the camera screens water could be seen draining from
every flooded room. "You did it."

"Holy carp," said Honey, eyes wide as dinner plates as she looked over the camera feeds. "I DID do it."

Then she fell over in a dead faint. Nick flinched from the hard landing, before grabbing his radio and hesitating for only a moment before switching it on.

The blessed sound of dozens of voices engaged in rapid back-and-forth was like music to his ears. "Oh thank cheese and crackers everything's working again."

"Nick!?" Adam Fangmeyer’s rang out loud and clear through the radio. Nick could just imagine the wolf officer's tail wagging. "Nick, we were worried sick! Where've you been, man!?"

“The security control room,” Nick answered, turning to scan through the cameras for his fellow cop. Nick found him in the train hub, sitting on a crate as a kudu set one of his arms in a splint. “Long story. Just got the water draining with a friend’s help. Who closed off the doors? Judy?"

The wolf on the screen gave the camera a wave with his good arm. Through the radio he said “No idea. Don’t think it was Judy, last I saw of her she was in a pretty vicious fight with that rabbit we’re on the lookout for. Savage, or something?”

Worry, kept in check with practiced ease, squirmed to life in Nick’s gut. He switched his radio back to a wider frequency. “Anyone seen Officer Judy Wilde-Hopps? Who closed off the Grand Moon Pool?” Another moment’s thought, hesitation. “Where’s Officer Blaine? Dispatch?”

“I know Blaine closed off at least some of the doors,” said Officer Carla Fangmeyer, voice aching even through the radio. Nick quickly found her on another camera, somewhere up the train tunnel, directing arriving paramedics. “Saw it as I was dragging a horse out of there. Never saw Judy once the flooding started, though."

Worry turned to fear, clawing its way from Nick’s gut to his heart as he scanned through the camera feeds over and over. He saw bunnies, countless bunnies crying or hugging or helping the relief efforts or being helped, but not a one in the ZPD uniform. “D-Dispatch?"

“Blaine’s with Chief Bogo,” spoke up Clawhauser over the radio, the cheetah’s voice subdued but remarkably firm in the face of this latest tragedy to strike the city. “A beluga brought her to shore half-drowned. They’re rushing her to the hospital now.”

“Damn,” said both Fangmeyers at once. Then Carla said, “Nick, if you’re able, get out here. We need all the help we can—”

Nick barely heard her. He shook, breaths coming in ragged gasps some ignored part of his brain knew couldn’t be good, eyes burning as they searched through each camera feed, fear hatching to full-grown panic and roosting in his head.

“Nick? Officer Wilde-Hopps, come in!"

“Where…” Nick backed up, seeking out a wall to lean on as his legs threatened to give out beneath him. “Where’s Judy?”
“—struck by terror unlike anything seen before, following the attempted destruction of the Ocean Bay Complex and the disruption of Mayor Swinton’s pro-sea mammal rally. Reports are still coming in, but the ZPD have reported at least 7 dead by the rapid flooding, with another 38 injured. This comes mere days after a bombing in Sahara Square—”

Beth felt warm sheets all around her, a bed beneath her that felt like it was trying to suck her sore body into its soft, yielding depths. Her eyes ached, blinding light scorching through her eyelids to render the world in hot yellows and oranges. Along with the TV, Beth caught the sound of distant voices, many feet and hooves padding across tiled floor, beeps and whirs, a nearby chair creaking as the weight shifted in it.

“Mayor Swinton wasted no time in laying the blame for the attack squarely upon the Zootopia Police Department, giving this short statement from the back of an ambulance before being taken to Zootopia Mercy Hospital for treatment of injuries sustained in the attack.”

“I saw four officers down there with us when everything went down, and I’m being told there was another in the security control station. I need to seriously call into question the competency of the ZPD when something this horrible is allowed to happen!”

Beth’s ears caught a low-throated growl from the general direction of the squeaking chair. Her eyelids useless to protect her from the hellish light streaming through whatever window had been left uncovered, she opened her eyes and looked around. She lay in a hospital bed, the blasphemous window to her right and a closed door to her left. Next to the window sat Chief Bogo, arms crossed as he watched the news on a wall-mounted TV opposite him.

“However,” continued Peter Moosebridge from the TV, “many other mammals recovering from the events in the Ocean Bay Complex have expressed goodwill and thankfulness toward the ZPD for their quick resolution to the situation, in particular one Officer Bethany Blaine, the first hare on the force.”

A photo of Beth in full police uniform replaced the news anchor on the TV, beaming as she saluted the camera. Beth felt her eyes grow wet as the report cut to a dolphin poking his head out of the water to speak into a microphone. “I saw it all as I was helping carry out non-sea mammals to the surface. She kept waving away our help toward others until the last minute, staying instead to close down the Grand Moon Pool doors so that the rest of the place wouldn’t flood. It was amazing!”

The report cut back to the studio. “Officer Blaine is currently recovering in Zootopia Mercy Hospital,” spoke Fabienne Growley. “We at ZNN wish her a speedy recovery. In less happy news, the search has entered hour three and Police Lieutenant Judy Wilde-Hopps has yet to be found—”

Beth almost didn’t realize the cry of distress came from her. The television shut off with the click of a remote and Chief Bogo stood, moving to her oversized bed in two long strides. “Blaine, you’re awake! Good. The doctor’s thought you wouldn’t—”

“Chief, please.” Beth sat up and scrubbed away at her eyes, refusing to let tears fall when she had, apparently, gotten off so much better than so many others. She was alive, at least, which was more than she had been expecting, if her most recent memories could be trusted. “Sir, what happened to Ju… to Officer Wilde-Hopps?”

Bogo’s shoulders sagged, gaze growing distant as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I had been
hoping you could tell me. She’s not among those rescued from the Complex, and her… body, hasn’t washed up anywhere. Dive teams are combing the waters, but… the currents can get strong, down there, and the sea is not that far beyond Tundratown.”

“You mean…” Beth struggled for the words, hardly able to grasp the concept of Judy, THE Judy Hopps, now Wilde-Hopps, meeting so ignoble an end as drowning.

Examining Bogo’s tired, greying features, he seemed to have as much trouble with it. “Where did you last see her, Blaine? Officers Fangmeyer and Fangmeyer have given me their reports, but I need yours too before I can… start any paperwork.”

Absently, almost as if she was watching her body do it without her, Beth nodded, swallowed the lump in her throat, looked down to her hands clenched in her lap, nails digging into her palms. “She was engaged with the hare terrorist Honey told us about, Jack Savage. There were shots fired, she was fighting…” She frowned, shook her head. “No, she was winning. Had him cuffed and pinned against a tree. Then the flooding started and I… I lost sight of…”

She looked back up at Bogo, meeting the cape buffalo’s eyes. “I had to focus on saving civilians, sir. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for, Blaine. You did your duty—”

The door flew open hard enough for the handle to leave a dent in the wall, Beth jumping at the sudden bang enough to nearly fall out of bed. A scowling Mayor Swinton in a neck brace hobbled into the room on crutches, her left leg in a cast. She was trailed by a doe nurse pleading in vain for her to return to her room, and then a thoroughly embarrassed-looking Officer Grizzoli.

“Well,” snapped the pig, scowl fluctuating into and out of a smile as she stopped halfway to Beth’s bed and looked between her and Bogo. “There’s the hero of the hour! All comfy and restful while the rest of us have to actually DEAL with the problem we’re all in!”

Bogo snorted and stood to his full height, subtly placing himself between Swinton and Beth. “Stop right there. Mayor or not, I won’t have you harassing my officers.”

“Well that’s dandy,” said Swinton, Beth shuddering at the smile on the pig’s muzzle. “Because I’m here to harass YOU, and she’s just lucky enough to be present! You stupid, ineffectual old cow! As if a blown-up city block wasn’t enough, now we’ve gotta have an entire sub-district nearly destroyed, and the hare responsible for it no closer to being found than my ex-husband!”

“Mayor Swinton, my officers gained control of the situation—”

“By the skin of their teeth!” shouted Swinton. Beth gasped as the pig poked a hoof into Bogo’s gut. “People still died! Tens of thousands of property damage was accrued! The perpetrators still got away! And to top it all off, the corrupt disgrace of a rabbit you called back in to ‘solve everything’ is probably feeding the fishes right now! So you tell ME HOW IN CONTROL OF THE SITUATION YOU FEEL!”

Silence after that outburst, or relative silence at least, filled by Swinton’s gasping for air and the regular, monotonous sounds of the hospital. Beth noticed the nurse leave, dragged away by a furiously whispering Yara Elloway, while Grizzoli looked like he wished he could do the same. Bogo only stood there, stone-faced and quiet. Beth, finding it difficult not to leap out of bed at the pig, wished she had that level of calm in her.

Finally, Swinton managed a steady breath and swept her bangs out of her eyes. “48 hours, Bogo. For
old time’s sake. That’s two days to put a stop to this madness. Jack Savage not in jail or in a body bag, I’ll bring in H.A.W.C. like Winona Hite’s been badgering me to and the ZPD are out of business."

At this Bogo’s brow furrowed, the only change in his demeanor Beth could see. “HiteTech’s private police organization?”

Swinton shrugged. “Miss Winona Hite’s been looking to expand their operations for months, and they’ve had nothing but success in San Dingo. I may only be mayor for a few more months, but I’ll make whatever decisions I have to in order to protect this city.”

She looked over at Beth then, the hare feeling like she was being x-rayed, before huffing and turning for the door. “Show me if you’re really willing to do the same.”

And then she was gone, dragging Grizzoli along with her and leaving the two cops alone in silence. Beth looked at Bogo, winced as he seemed to once more deflate before her, and rapidly tried to think of a positive in the situation. “At least… we… have plenty of camera footage of Jack Savage and this ‘Miss Black’ character to identify them better!”

This seemed to get the cape buffalo out of his funk, or at least roused him enough to make him put up a front for her sake. He cleared his throat, nodding as he started for the door. “Right. Officers Wolford and Wilde-Hopps are working on that now. I should…”

He paused at the door, clutching the frame as he looked back at her with a look Beth had never seen from him before. “I’ll send Honey in, now that you’re awake. Get better, Blaine. You’re back in the field tomorrow."

***

“Oh, well that was a wee bit easier than I expected. Seems our lass Black’s got a bit of a name for herself in the international community, eh, Wilde? Wilde? Nick?”

Nick had heard Wolford plain and clear, being only at the other end of the table, and with no other mammals working in the ZPD computer labs to make noise or distract them. He kept his focus down, on the smartphone he held loose in his hands, almost on autopilot as he typed in a new text to Judy’s phone every 10, 15 seconds. Not large texts, no great speeches, mostly one or three-word statements, hellos and call-me’s. Something to keep his hands busy and his mind from drifting.

“Nick, if—”

“I’m listening, just… just read what you’ve got.”

Out the corner of his vision Nick saw the grey-toned timber wolf frown, before rolling his chair back to the computer screen glowing with text and a large photo of the white wolf in question. “Right, sure. Anyway… Miss Black seems to be a relatively new alias for her. The Mammal Intelligence Agency’s records list her as Copperhead, real name Morana Kasun, 32 years old, hails from Cowatia. High profile assassin, war criminal, terrorist, and… huh. That’s weird.”

Keeping the majority of his attention on asking Judy if she could describe her surroundings, Nick nevertheless couldn’t help but glance over for a moment at the tone in Wolford’s voice. “What is it?”

Wolford shrugged, brow creasing as he scrolled through fields of text. “The MIA has her listed as deceased. Killed during a cooperative strike by special agents and a H.A.W.C team over in San Dingo, three years ago. Says they had to collapse the building she was holed up in on top of her to take her out.”
Nick raised an eyebrow at this. “Might want to get on the phone, let them know their building didn’t do the job. Black’s still kicking and running ‘round Zootopia, blowing streets up and… and ruining…”

“You know,” said Wolford after several long seconds of Nick being unable to find a way to finish that thought, wheeling his chair around to face Nick, “It’s been a hell of a week. Nobody around here’s going to give you a hard time if you want to—”


Wolford paused, shooting Nick an apologetic smile as he dug his phone of his pants pocket and quickly answered. “Hello, Officer Ben Wolf—oh, Alex, darling! It’s lovely to hear from you, darling, but shouldn’t you be in…”

Nick felt a touch of the worry for Judy filling his gut shift over to the wolf in front of him as Wolford’s smile dropped, ears pinning back against his head. “What? No, no, everything’s fine here, I promise. Daddy’s all safe and sound at work. You—they’re doing what—oh, okay. No, no, no, I understand, it’s okay. Do you need me to pick you up? I can… okay, as long as she’s running down here anyway. I love you, see you soon. Bye.”

The call seemed to end, as Wolford sighed and set the phone next to his keyboard on his desk. Nick waited a moment for Wolford to provide any detail on what that had all been about, eventually clearing his throat as half a minute passed and nothing came. Wolford jumped in his seat, quickly shooting Nick another smile. “Sorry, lad. That was just Alex. He says they’re cancelling schools for the foreseeable future. I can’t blame them, after today. No telling when or where Savage might strike next. It’s probably for the best, anyway, if it means I can keep my kid close.”

Nick nodded in understanding, trying on a supportive smile that was all flash and surface level. The sudden thought of Wolford’s son had gotten the thought of kids in general in Nick’s head, and that got him thinking over Judy from a whole new angle. “Kids, yeah, heh… gotta keep them safe. I think they were some of my favorite parts of going home to Bunnyburrow with Judy, all the… all the kits running around. Judy’s younger siblings, or the kits of older siblings, or cousins, or… gosh. I’ve gone to schools to meet and greet like any other cop, but being there as a part of the family, as someone to legitimately run to for advice or playtime or a funny story without even a second thought on their part…”

Wolford’s chair creaked as he leaned back in it, folding his arms and giving a pitying smile. “You two think of having one of your own?”

Nick shrugged and gave a wistful smile. “No, no, not really, ya know, physically possible for the two of us. And then we were hardly married before I went off to the academy, and there was always more work than there was time to check out adoption, and Judy was recovering from her heart problem, and there’s my whole host of daddy issues, and I don’t think with Judy’s reputation she ever, she ever thought a kid w-would—”

A splash of water on the desk before him surprised Nick. He sniffed, wiping at his eyes with the back of a hand as he stood up from his chair. “Anyway, like I said, tell MIA that they want Black, and ask about Jack Savage while you’re at it. I’ve got a friend to check up on and a very important lead to foll—”

A firm grip on his arm kept him from walking away. Nick looked back at Wolford, the senior cop’s gaze frustratingly pitying and understanding. “Listen lad, we can’t say we’re going through exactly what you’re going through, but all of us at the ZPD were friends with Judy. She was a great cop and a great person. You know that if I or Clawhauser or Francine could take the lass’s place—”
“You’d be no worse off than you are now,” said Nick, yanking his arm free. He gave his best smile before turning for the elevator out. “Judy’s not dead,” he said over his shoulder, having a good idea the face Wolford would be making at about that moment. “Judy’s not the kind of rabbit who’d drown. Until she shows up again, call whatever she’s doing recon.”

***

“Jack Savage is a certified maniac.”

A chorus of mumbled agreements and nodding heads passed around the industrial kitchen table, not one voice dissenting. Koslov looked around at his fellow crime lords, seeing the same nervousness in their eyes that he knew must be in his after that morning’s events. He had been well aware of how well the hare could live up to his last name, but he had never imagined…

“Jack Savage,” he continued. “Is an egomaniacal, sociopathic, murderous primadonna with all the resources to make his darkest fantasies reality.”

“You know,” said Sarabi, the lioness dusting lint off her business suit, “you could have told all of us this BEFORE we made our, apparently literal, deal with the Devil.”

“She speaks truly,” said Takei. The tanuki sat at the far end of the table from Koslov, running a whetstone over his cane sword. “I signed up for money, power, and crime. Not full-blown, wanton terrorism.”

“It’s bad for business,” grumbled Balor, the boar filing his tusks to their usual sharp point. “The Aquarium was a major road for my drug trade. I’m looking at months of lost revenue as it is. If the ZPD had failed and the whole place got flooded…”

Anjali said nothing, for the pangolin had been sitting there in her seat, rolled up in a ball since the meeting started. The first to arrive, as always. Koslov dismissed her silence with a snort and turned to the others. “All of this, I am aware of. Savage has always had a flair for the dramatic. I had hoped his associate, Miss Black, would keep him at least somewhat in line, though. I was wrong.”

“People in our line of work rarely get another chance after being wrong.” Sarabi gave a toothy smirk, tapping her claws against the table for emphasis. “Mr. Big proves that. Still, Savage is the point of this meeting. What is to be done with him? It is too late to back out of our arrangement with him, for sure, but surely there must be some way to—”

“Bring him to heel?”

They all jumped at the voice, turning as one to the doorway. There, to Koslov’s unease, stood Miss Black, her business suit traded for a black turtleneck and black cargo pants, one hand holding the handle of a suitcase, the other resting on a revolver holstered at her belt.

“Miss Black. We… did not expect you to be here. Where is Savage?”

“Working on the next phase of the operation.” The wolf strode over to the table, slamming the suitcase down between Koslov and Balor. The entire table shook from the weight. “It’s a need-to-know situation, and none of you quite need to know yet. Sent me to assuage your worries instead.”

“Oh? Takei leaned forward, steepling his fingers. “And how might that be done?”

Saying nothing, Miss Black scrolled through the suitcase’s tumblers, unlocked it, and spun it around for the others to look inside as she lifted the lid. Koslov’s jaw dropped. Balor moaned. Takei jumped from his seat. Sarabi gasped. Anjali finally unrolled from her ball, eyes lighting up at the bars of...
gleaming gold filling the suitcase. It was she who found her voice first. “That must be tens of millions in Zootopian dollars in there!”

“Solid Mosbull gold,” said Miss Black, letting go of the suitcase and stepping back. “Courtesy of Miss White and Jack Savage. Does this assuage your… doubts, ladies and gentlemen?”

Koslov reached out to grab a gold bar, hefting it to test the weight, putting it side by side with the weight of his abandoned ties of friendship with the Big family and Zootopia in general.

“Oh yeah,” said Balor, taking a bar for himself. “This does the job nicely.”

***

“This is the second time you’ve almost died in this job in almost as many days, Beth. It’s… it’s scaring me, honestly.”

The pair lay curled up over the covers of Beth’s hospital bed, no thoughts of doing anything more risqué crossing their minds as they simply found comfort in each other’s warmth, softness, presence. It was a hospital, after all.

“I know,” said Beth after taking a moment to chew over Honey’s words in the comfort of the bed and the badger’s embrace, all heightened by the spare pair of yellow glasses Honey had brought from home, her old pair lost in the initial flooding. “I’m just as scared as you, Honey.” She remembered. She remembered the one bulletproof vest, riddled with shrapnel and abandoned to the back of some cupboard or closet in their home, to never be seen again. She remembered another bulletproof vest, weighing her thrashing form down and abandoned to the depths of Zootopia Bay. It, too, hopefully never to be seen again. “Just as scared.”

The honey badger’s arms tightened around Beth, as if sensing where her thoughts were going. “And yet,” Honey added after a while, “I also felt so incredible in that security room after draining the water out. I’d done… SOMETHING, to help people, and set things right a little, you know? Like a big middle finger to Savage and Black!”

Beth laughed, half in amusement and half in relief, her thoughts heading toward that moment she’d seen her praise and recognition on the news. “Yeah, I know. And we’re going to keep giving those bastards the middle finger until they take the hint and bugger off!”

That got the honey badger cackling, Beth joining her a moment later. They laughed, laughed until their guts ached and their throats grew sore and tears streamed down their cheeks and Beth couldn’t tell anymore if she were happy or sad, laughing or sobbing. All she knew was that it felt GOOD to be letting it all out like this.

Eventually they wound down, Beth once more settling into her lover’s lap with a sigh, and that’s when she finally noticed their audience. There in the doorway stood Nick Wilde, one eyebrow raised, one hand holding a duffle bag, the other holding—

“Nicky,” growled Honey, setting the back of Beth’s neck tingling, “if you do what you’re about to do, I will hack your bank accounts and—”

CLICK.

“—empty them into the charity of Beth’s choice until you delete that photo.”

“Not a chance,” said Nick, slipping his phone back into his pocket and skipping to the bedside with a smile even Beth could tell was utterly fake. “Only a total square keeps money in bank accounts
nowadays. Besides, you two looked utterly adorable together. Judy’s going to flip when she gets back and sees proof positive that you really are a softy, Frosty."

Beth grimaced, sharing a look with Honey before climbing out of her lap and sitting on the edge of the bed. “Detective Wilde-Hopps… Nick, I know I’d be in complete denial if anything bad happened to Honey, but… it’s been hours and she hasn’t been found. The chances of her surviving down there are…”

“I know,” said Nick, smile dropping as he set the duffle bag down in a chair. “It’s impossible, AND it’s impossible for her to have died like that, so the only option is that Savage and his wolf friend took her with them when they escaped. And you,” he said as he pointed to Honey, “are going to help me find them.”

“Me? What can I do?”

“Computers,” he said. “Most of the rest of the ZPD are busy handling the Complex emergency, reaching out to other law enforcement agencies for info, or doubling up security around Swinton and Gazelle, and I am not the most computer-literate fox in the world. Plus, these guys are gonna figure out you’re involved sooner or later, and there’s safety in numbers. PLUS… I don’t work well without a partner. I start talking to myself, and one-sided snark is NOT a pretty sight.”

“Hey, hold on a minute!” Beth stood up her bed to glare down at Nick, swaying for only a moment before Honey reached out to steady her. “You are not going to drag my girlfriend into any more of this… this madness! She’s done enough for the cause!”

“Uh, actually, I’d be more than happy to—”

“Hush, you!” Beth glared over her shoulder at the honey badger for a moment, before turning to look back at Nick. “It is dangerous, and irresponsible, and reckless, and I refuse to just sit back here and watch you two prance off into dangers unknown on your own!”

“Sounds fair enough.” Nick picked the duffle bag back up, opened it, and pulled out a ZPD bodysuit, so like the one she usually wore but dark blue with white highlights. “So come with.”

She gaped, first at the fox in front of her, then at the bodysuit, then at Honey grinning like a loon next to her. She snapped her mouth shut and looked down at the irritating hospital gown, her decision practically made for her.

After all, the bad guys were still out there somewhere, Judy Wilde-Hopps was still out there somewhere, and Beth had only PARTLY drowned.

***

Darkness. Smothering. Cold, drowning, biting teeth, gnashing, cracking, a scream—

Judy jerked awake, her cry for Nick muffled by a thick strip of duct tape. Confusion piercing through the terror from her nightmare like a needle through a balloon, she tried reaching up to rip the tape off, only to find her arms and legs connected to a chair by handcuffs, barely visible in the dim light of sterile tile room around her.

“What? Where—”

Her last memories before unconsciousness hit her like a brick. The Complex, Swinton’s rally, trying to arrest Jack Savage, the sudden flooding, capped off by a flare of pain to the back of the head, and then darkness. Like a cliffhanger in some bad movie. Nothing to tell her the state of Nick, Beth,
Honey, or anyone else.

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, Judy looked around herself with more care. She’d been stripped of her uniform, left only in her shorts and black undershirt. She saw around her tiled walls and marble floors in utilitarian shades of green, a cot shoved up into a corner, a sink and toilet next to it, one wall completely glass—

Judy snapped her full attention to this glass wall and sliding door, the spark of recognition sending her ears straight up. “The hospital Lionheart kept the savage animals!” Well, that’s what she tried saying, at least, though the duct tape hampered it somewhat.

“Ah, you remember this place. I was worried you wouldn’t.”

Judy’s fur bristled, fear lancing through her at the voice drifting over from the half of the observation room she couldn’t crane her head back far enough to see. Before she could try, Jack Savage stepped around to her front, suit crisp and clean, a smile on his lips. To her disappointment, he looked none the worse for wear from their earlier fight, save for a bandage across the bridge of his nose and a single black eye.

Unable to properly vocalize her loathing of the hare in front of her, Judy expressed it non-verbally. Both hands. Full mast. He laughed at this, reaching out to rip the duct tape (and more than a few hairs) from her face before dancing back. “There. Isn’t that better, Judy?”

“YOU SON OF A—”

SMACK.

Head thrown back by the force of the slap, Judy stared at the hideous wall tiles for a second before looking back at Savage. He looked as embarrassed by the blow as she felt for not having seen it coming, rubbing his hand with the other and trying to work up a smile. “I’m sorry, I… didn’t mean to do that. Just the excitement of the moment, you know?”

Judy stared, truly at a loss for words in the presence of this bipolar madman. A second passed and he cleared his throat, blue eyes almost glowing in the dimly lit room as he got his smile to stick. Striding back to the part of the room Judy couldn’t see, he came back after a moment pushing a rolling table. Her eyes widened at the sheer number and variety of bladed instruments at rest upon it.

“I don’t like hitting people I’m leaving alive,” he continued, picking up a worryingly serrated scalpel and turning back to her. “Blows like that don’t really last long upon the person. Guns are better, especially when they manage to take off a chunk of something. Like your ear, for instance.” He started walking toward her, smile not reaching his eyes as she leaned back, away. “Claws are best, if you’re a predator, but being a rabbit I have to settle for—”

A sudden swipe, untelegraphed, and Judy jerked as pain blossomed across the back of her right forearm. It took all her effort not to give him the satisfaction of a scream.

“—knives. That’s a nasty cut there. It will probably scar. Fairly easy to hide, though.”

“I don’t know what you’re planning,” said Judy, fighting through the pain, “but you’ll never get away with it. Nick and the others will find me, and we will take you down. You might as well give up now.”

To her annoyance, Savage chuckled and shook his head. “Hope, born by the false security of numbers on your side. Allies. Friends, even family. I remember having that hope, once upon a time.”
Judy watched, wary as he set the scalpel back down on its tray. Picking up next a shaving razor, he tested its weight in his palm for a moment before turning and beginning to circle around her. “I was a child the last time I felt the hope of comradery. 10, I think, maybe 11, when I and 49 of my siblings, ranging from two years younger than me to a year older, were kidnapped en masse and thrown, naked and afraid, onto… well, the where doesn’t matter. Just some island or other, full of dangers. A group of terribly rich mammals, you see, had gotten it into their heads to do a little hunting every few years. Harken back to older, purer days. Mostly prey, if you can believe it, only a few predators. Real wendigos, those people.”

A slash to Judy’s left shoulder made her flinch and bite back a grunt once more. Savage gave an apologetic smile as he passed in front of her. “I remember their proclamation on that sharp-rocked beach, my siblings and I all huddled together like the terrified kits we were. ‘Seven days on the island! Four to prepare, three to survive! Any of us left by sundown that final day get to go home!’ Home! Can you believe the kind of HOPE that promise inspired, Judy? Home, if only all my siblings and I could work together and survive!”

Another slash, this time to the back of Judy’s neck, just enough to draw blood. She whimpered and squirmed in her seat, looking with unwanted pity at the hare as he circled around. “Jack, you—”

“Snakes,” he said over her, razor dancing between his fingers. “Venomous snakes. Venomous spiders. Venomous freaking ants! Tics that caused paralysis! Crocodiles big enough to eat two or three of us in one bite! Beautiful flowers that drove those of us who ate them mad with savagery! A third of us died before the hunting even began! WE WERE ONLY KITS!”

The razor clattered to the floor at Judy’s feet, nicking a toe. She ignored that slight pain, staring instead in horror at Jack as he grabbed up an x-acto knife. He rolled it in his palm as he resumed circling her. “Every day I watched more and more of my brothers and sisters die, our crude spears smacked away, our pathetic traps laughed at, our attempted hideaways sniffed out by a trained grizzly. And every night we lay huddled in the tallest trees we could find, watching the bonfires in the forest clearings as our tormentors… enjoyed, the spoils of the hunt. Until one night, the last night, none of my brothers and sisters joined me in those branches. I heard no other soft sobbing, no whimpers for our parents to save us, just… me, and the stench of roasting meat.”

Judy wanted to throw up. Might have, if she’d felt any food in her stomach. She barely shuddered as the other rabbit stopped in front of her and dragged the knife down her belly, again just enough to draw blood. “Jack, how… how did you…”

“Survive?” His smile held no mirth, only rage. He stood before her with eyes alight, like a demon possessed. “With the great equalizer. Fire. I stole into their camp as they slept and I stole their fire. With it I set the entire island ablaze. I burned every inch of it to ash. The hunters. The animals. The bones of my family. None survived but a lion, an antelope, and a clouded leopard with half his face eaten off. And when I finally stood alone and saved atop the ash and cinders, awash in the smoke of the burning Night Howlers, I realized the truth of this world. The same truth you know, Judy, even if you’re in denial.”

Broken from the spell of his narration, Judy swallowed and shook her head, disgusted with the thought of having anything in common with the pitiable monster in front of her. “No, I don’t know what you—”

“It’s a lie.” Jack Savage set the knife back on the tray, tracing a stubby claw over a bone saw before shaking his head and turning back to her. “This world, Zootopia, everything, they’re built on the fundamental lie that predator and prey mean anything. But you see, Judy, the only real difference, the only thing that decides who is predator and who is prey… is who gets in the last BITE.”
The last word was accompanied by a snap of Jack’s teeth at her face. She leaned back as far as she
could, nose twitching as if the hare in front of her were something larger, something fanged and
clawed and primordial. Her mouth was dry, her next words taking a few tries to come out. “What is
it… what is it that you want?”

He looked at her then in a way she could not recall anyone looking at her before, like a particularly
interesting butterfly struggling on its pin, all smiles and intellectual curiosity. “I want… what you
want, Judy. I want to make the world a better place. Don’t blame me if I have a different idea of
what that means.”

She almost laughed at that. “You can’t make the world a better place through violence and chaos.”

“And you can’t make the world a better place by letting its guts fester with corruption,” Jack replied,
turning for the door. “Perhaps we’re both on the wrong track. Only way to find out for sure is…
forward.”

Judy watched the hare leave, turning around to hit the button to close the door. She let him engage
the locks before speaking again. “Jack. I wish I could help you. But I don’t think anyone can. So I’ll
have to settle for stopping you.”

Jack stood there on the other side of the wall for a moment, gaze focused nowhere, a hand pressing
to the glass. “If you can,” he said, “you’re more than welcome to. Miss Black and Miss White would
certainly love to see that, especially if they had an inkling of Plan B. Until then, though…” He
smiled, turning and walking down the corridor beyond with a song on his lips.

“Hey, hey, hey

Since I'm gonna go to hell anyway

I'll go out with a bang, bang, bang

Crash and burn it all away.

Hey, hey, hey

Since I'm gonna go to hell anyway

I'll go out with a bang, bang, bang

Crash and burn it all away.”
“Okay officers, the wall is down and I am in. Now what?”

Nick rejoined Honey at his work computer from where he’d been sifting through the Bay Complex’s security camera recordings on his laptop. Beth joined them seconds later, her desk further away, looking rather put-out. “Hurray. Tell me again why you needed my girlfriend to remotely hack the city’s traffic camera network? We’re police, we could just ask Swinton for access in a snap.”

“True,” said Nick as he scanned the screen for the system he wanted. “But then Swinton would know what we’re doing, and let’s just say this city’s got a really bad track record when it comes to trustworthy mayors.”

To Honey he pointed to the screen and said “There, Savannah Central, the streets immediately surrounding Zootopia Central Station. Sometime before we got on the train.”

“Oh it,” said Honey, typing away and pulling up multiple windows showing different streets. “And we are looking for…?”

“Savage and Black,” said Nick. “Public displays of affection are one of the best methods to make people NOT want to look at you, every decent hustler and con-mammal knows that, and I’m ashamed to have forgotten it.”

Beth loosed a swore that tinged Honey’s cheeks pink. “The wolf and hare on the train with us! Augh!”

“Exactly,” said Nick. “The two didn’t just teleport onto the train, either. If we can follow them backwards through the jam cams—”

“We might be able to find their hideout,” finished Beth, grinning. “Pretty clever, Slick.”

Nick shrugged. “I try.”

“I think I got them,” said Honey, keeping Nick from saying more. They looked to the window the badger had enlarged, showing a tan jeep sitting out near the western entrance to the train station. She dragged the video backward, and as they watched, a wolf and a hare, the same as they’d seen on the train and encountered underwater, walked backward out of the station, hopping into the jeep and starting it up. The vehicle pulled out, turned, moved in reverse onto the exit ramp for the cross-city highway.

“Don’t lose them,” said Beth, but Honey was already clicking to new windows and reversing the flow of the footage. They followed the vehicle back down (up?) the highway for several miles, before it backed onto an on-ramp, slowing into a residential neighborhood that opened into shops and parks.

“Still in Savannah Central,” said Beth, sounding almost disappointed. “Wait, are they…?”

Now Nick swore as on the camera recording the jeep reversed back into a parking spot next to Savannah Central Park. “That’s just down the freaking street! Clawhauser could have looked out the front doors and seen this happen! And why the park, for God’s sake!”?

At Honey’s questioning look Beth said “There are no traffic or security cameras in the park surrounding Little Rodentia. And to scan through every camera surrounding the park in the hope of
catching them entering it would take hours…”

“Oh…” The honey badger wound back the recording they’d stopped on and, sure enough, wolf and rabbit fell out of the vehicle, handed the keys off to a miserable-looking polar bear, and backed away out of sight into the wooded park. That section of recorded footage ended just as the polar bear started getting into (out of?) the jeep. “Well, why don’t we follow him further on instead? I think I remember seeing him at the big crime boss meeting too, one of the bodyguards.

“Yeah, one of Koslov’s guys.” Nick scratched his chin, thinking. This turn of events didn’t make sense, said his old hustler instincts. Someone was being led on. “If they’ve got all the crime lords working together on this, why have Koslov provide the vehicle here? Why not Sarabi the lioness? She controls the crime in Savannah Central and Sahara Square… Honey, play the footage normally.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

She clicked play and they watched, Nick keeping his gaze glued to Jack Savage and Miss Black the moment they stepped out of the park, following them up to the polar bear, Savage waving a cheery greeting, taking the keys—

“Stop! Wind it back a few seconds and play again.”

Nick grinned at his hare compatriot having caught something too. They watched as Savage waved to the polar bear, took the keys from him… and then glance toward the traffic camera they watched from before getting into the jeep.

“They know we watched them,” said Beth after a deep breath, sounding half-amazed and half-dismayed. “How could they know that?”

“Paranoid delusions?” Honey offered. “Checking where all the cameras in an area are is a habit I picked up from my sheep conspiracy days.”

Nick blinked and looked at the badger. “Sheep… conspiracy? Actually no, never mind, not important right now. What is important is that THAT polar bear,” he said, pressing a claw to the computer screen, “is a hustle.” At the blank expressions this got him he clarified. “A trap. Something so out of place it catches our eye leads us to… who knows? I’d put good money on somewhere remote and abandoned, where nobody will ear our bodies getting riddled with bullets by the countless criminals lying in wait.”

“Wow,” said Honey. “That is remarkably pessimistic.”

Nick shrugged, his smile bitter. “What can I say? Judy usually carries enough optimism for the both of—”

He stopped, the computer grabbing his attention once more as, without any of their input, the screen changed to video of a living room. The walls were a deep, rich red, a few landscape paintings scattered about, a plant in the corner tying it all together. It seemed normal, save for the immediately recognizable hare sitting at the center of the couch dominating the screen, smiling. “… the hell?”

***

Throughout Zootopia, from Tundratown to Little Rodentia, from the Oasis Hotel to the trains zipping through the Rainforest District, on every available screen there appeared the video feed of the black and grey hare sitting on the couch, idly twirling a toy train car in his hands. To the camera he smiled, his Arctic eyes glowing in the room’s dimmed lighting.
“Hello, citizens of Zootopi. My name is Jack Savage. Remember it. You may know me from my latest hit singles, “Bombing in Sahara Square” and “Oh God, There’s Water Everywhere, Glub Glub”. And I’m sure you’ve all been wondering why this terror, this… evil, has chosen to befall you. You’re a nice city after all, a nice people. You’ve had your stumbles along the way, but you’re getting better, right?”

He set the toy train on the coffee table in front of him, next to a toy truck and a toy boat, and continued. “Well the answer is quite simple, really. I want to be… remembered. Forever. Forget Judy Hopps and her stumbling mediocrity, JACK SAVAGE is the hare to remember, you stupid, simpering, pathetic whelps!”

Screams would be heard throughout Zootopia as Jack pulled a handgun out from under the table and methodically shot each of the toys, the train last.

As the smoke cleared he set the gun beside him on the couch and smiled once more to the camera and those watching. “I command Zootopia’s criminals. All of them. Tomorrow night, at mayoral candidate Gazelle’s charity event for the victims of the bombing and, I assume, soon the Complex flooding as well, we will KILL Gazelle. And there is nothing the ZPD will be able to do to stop us. They are powerless. And the longer they refuse to accept that, the more people will die. Bye bye!”

Then, as quickly as it had come, across Zootopia the video feed cut off.

***

For a long moment the three stood there, stunned silent.

“Nick, you think… this might be another hustle?”

Nick blinked and looked at Beth beside him, shaking his head before looking back at the screen. “I don’t think so. It fits his pattern so far. Grandiose, attention-grabbing, plus he’s already made an attempt on one candidate’s life…” The only anomaly that Nick could find was the announcement of what Jack Savage was intending to do. That was a new one.

The sound of staggering footsteps behind them broke Nick from his train of thought. He turned and saw Wolford rushing up the aisle of offices, panting like he’d run straight from the computer labs. “Oh Wolfy, baby, please tell me you were able to track that. Pretty please.”

“Not… for one… second,” the wolf managed as he came to rest against the office wall to steady himself. “Whatever equipment these bassas be using to hide themselves, it’s gotta be military grade stuff.”

Nick grit his teeth, claws digging into the back of Honey’s chair as he tried hard, very hard, to not scream. He knew at least that Judy wouldn’t want him screaming. “Then why did you come running like that?”

Wolford pried himself off the wall. “A lot of things. Bad things. The MIA got back saying, in no uncertain terms, that our Miss Black absolutely HAS to be dead, and that we’re pulling their leg with Jack Savage, that he’s just a ghost story they tell new agents to scare them. Bunch of dobbers, if you ask me.”

“But they’ve got to take this seriously!” Beth’s voice was shrill, panicked, grating to Nick’s ears. “Send them the security feeds, send them what we just saw, send them… whatever it takes!”

“I’ll do it myself,” said Honey, already turned back to the computer, hands a blur. “That, and that, and the traffic cam stuff for good measure—”
The radios of every cop there crackled to life, Clawhauser’s voice coming over on the verge of panic. “This is a mass emergency! Precinct 2 is reporting heavy gunfire on their building and are requesting assistance from all available units! I can’t raise anyone over at Precinct 4! Reports of robberies, muggings, and vandalism are flooding in front all Districts! Bogo’s calling in all officers for—”

Nick clicked his radio off, throwing it to the floor and backing away from it, from Honey and Beth and Wolford staring at him in sudden worry. He worked to stop panting, to get his shaking under control, to disperse the ringing in his ears, failing spectacularly at each effort. “It’s too—I can’t—what—just, just wait…”

“Nick…” Beth stepped forward, the hare reaching for him, palm out. “Calm down—”

“To hell with calm,” he said, turning around when he bumped against a chair and nearly fell. He propped himself against the chair, suddenly feeling like he was going to throw up. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this! It would be just another case! The bad guy’d do bad stuff, we’d follow the trail, catch him, and everything would be okay in the end! Judy would have her job back, her passion back, stopping crime and solving mysteries! She, she’d already be out the door right now, ears perked, everything falling into place as she figured out what needed doing! She, we, I thought, I can’t… without her—”

BZZZZZZ—BZZZZZZ-BZZZZZZ—

Everyone there jumped at the sound of Nick’s phone ringing, Nick most of all. The breath-halting panic fled, utterly, as if it had never been there at all. Realizing the depth of the breakdown he’d just had, Nick’s ears felt ready to burst into flame as he struggled to pull out his phone from his pants pocket and answer it. “H-hello?”

“Nicky? Is this a bad time? You sound shaken.”

At first Nick couldn’t put name and face to voice, but then he could. “Fru Fru? Oh God, Fru Fru, I’m so sorry for your father… for everything…”

“Thank you, Nicky, but that’s only partly why I’m calling. I saw the video just a moment ago. Now I’m doing this for our Judies. My daughter and your wife.”

Nick blinked, feeling like, with everything happening all at once, he was missing some key puzzle piece. From the side Wolford mouthed a question. Nick shook his head and focused on the phone, setting it to speakerphone so the others could listen in. “Doing… Fru Fru, doing what?”

“That Savage trash has all the crime lords and their people working for him, tearing up the city for him. All thanks to Koslov.” The amount of raw hatred put into that single name made Nick’s hackles rise. “The Big family’s people aren’t joining in, but I’m not a boss like my daddy. I can’t lead them against this like he would. But I can still make that polar bear pay for turning his back on my family and hurting our Judies.”

Nick swallowed, a feeling of hope rising in him despite his best efforts for pessimism. Koslov had once been part of the Big crime family, and if Koslov knew how to find Jack Savage… “How, Fru Fru?”

“The Big Family is going straight,” the Arctic shrew on the other end of the line said, drawing gasps from her and Nick’s audience. “And I’m bringing everyone we’ve ever done business with down with me.”
Jack waited a moment after the camera was off before standing from his couch, dropping the handgun to the side. He looked right, smiling at Black as she came over to him from where she’d been standing near the entryway to his apartment kitchen. “That went well,” he said, adjusting the cuffs to his suit. “I think it went well. I hope it did. Was I okay?”

Black smiled, or at least gave the closest Jack had ever seen the wolf get to a smile while on the job, kneeling beside him so that they were almost eye-level, gripping both his shoulders, and leaning in to plant a kiss on his brow. “You were perfect, as always. The toys were an unexpected touch. I could almost hear the screams of the citizenry from here.”

Jack sighed, relaxing in relief from his lover’s reassurances. He reached up, holding Black’s hands on his shoulders with his own, standing on tiptoe to peck her on the lips. “Thanks, my precious Belle. You know, after we’re done here, the two of us should get out of the city for a while. Go somewhere pure and relaxing, like the countryside. Just rest easy and bask in the glory of a job well done, you know?”

“That sounds great,” said Black, coming even closer to smiling as she snaked her hands out of his and stood up. “At the moment, however, there’s work to do and places to be.”

Jack frowned and looked at his wristwatch, jumping as he saw the time. “Sweet cheese and crackers, you’re right! And still with so much to get ready before the big show!”

He turned away, grabbing and securing the handgun back in its holster as he strode for the door. He stopped with his hand on the knob, frowning, a sense of foreboding suddenly coming over him. He looked back at Black beside the couch, saw the white wolf watching him go with a troubled look of her own. He licked his lips and almost let go of the doorknob, confused at where the unwillingness to leave had come from all of a sudden. “Belle, you’re… certain you’ll be fine?”

“Of course,” said Black, and if she felt any of the same trepidation that Jack felt, it didn’t reach her voice to enough of a degree for him to hear it. “I’ll be up at Cliffside Asylum, keeping watch on our prisoner. I still think we’d be better off killing her now, you know.”

“I know,” said Jack, smiling in fondness at both the reminder of the rabbit and the familiar argument. “But alas, here’s a command from Miss White I truly don’t want to disobey. It had to happen eventually.”

“Yeah. I suppose it did.”

They stared at each other a moment more, but nothing more felt right to say. With a final farewell and good luck, Jack opened and hurried through the door. As Black had said, there were things to do and people to see. He could trust the wolf to handle herself.

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“—and in response to the threat against her life by international terrorist Jack Savage, mayoral candidate and former popstar Gazelle had much to say.”

“He is a coward. All his kind are. I can’t imagine what traumas in his life made him this way, for there is always a trauma, but they do nothing to excuse the PAIN and fear he has inflicted on our beautiful city. The people of Zootopia will rebuild from this. We will recover and move on with our lives as long as we have each other to rely upon. THAT is the strength that will see us through these evil times.
“And to any who may now be reconsidering my charity event tonight, I will not let this rabbit make me cower away in fear, but I will ask nothing of anybody. My campaign offices remain open, so if you prefer, merely call there and I will match whatever amount you hoped to give in the name of those hurt by Savage’s crimes.”

“Meanwhile, as quickly as it began, the sudden crime wave throughout Zootopia has faltered, stricken by a series of precise SWAT raids against the leaders of the District-wide gangs.”

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“So, uh… you ever wonder why we’re here?”

The leopard guard regarded his dhole companion with only vaguely-concealed annoyance as they rounded the corner to Cliffside Asylum’s high-security wing. “We’re here because Mrs. Anjali is paying us lots and lots of good money to play nice with Miss Black’s goons, dummy.”

“Oh, right, money. That’s always a good reason to be somewhere.”

The pair stopped in front of the high-security wing’s main door. Taking out a keycard, the dhole unlocked the slab of steel and hauled it open for his taller companion. “But uh, I mean, are we still supposed to be doing this? You heard the radio, the other big bosses are on the run and Mrs. Anjali is probably next.”

“Assuming she didn’t rat everyone else out to save her own cowardly—” The leopard cut off as something strange in one of the right-hand cells caught his eye, hard to see as it was in the perpetually-gloomy abandoned hospital. “Gotta get better lighting around this blasted—”

His flashlight beam illuminated a lonesome chair, broken handcuffs and a worn-down bonesaw on the floor around it. “Oh Hell!”

The dhole’s flashlight beam joined his, sweeping around the cell a scant second before falling on a limp rabbit body hanging halfway out of the toilet, legs swaying as if movement had only just ceased. “Double-Hell!”

They tripped over themselves in their rush to unlock and open the cell’s glass door, Jack Savage’s warning to KEEP HOPPS ALIVE blaring in their heads like a tornado siren. The leopard knelt beside the toilet, wondering if the rabbit had tried flushing herself out through the oversized plumping as he reached out for her—

WHAP-CRUNCH.

Not sure how it happened, the leopard suddenly found himself on his back, something warm and wet running down his cheeks it took him a surprising amount of time to recognize as blood from a broken nose. He watched, dazed, as a grey blur bounced around the cell, punching and kicking the dhole from every angle before finally rebounding off the ceiling to deliver a dropkick to the top of the canine’s head that dropped him for good. His ears barely registered the low thud that rang out before he saw those feet shooting his way—

THUMP.

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Judy rifled through the pockets of the two guards, ears perked for the sound of any more coming her way as she confiscated two keycards, a flashlight that in her hands felt more like a deadly club, a pocket knife, and to her silent joy, a cell phone. Pressing the On button, she winced at the mere 5%
battery left, but took it anyway, finishing with drying her face and head off with the dhole’s shirt.

Leaving the two guards locked away in the cell, Judy hopped out the way they’d come into the high-security wing and down the corridor beyond, trying to remember the layout of the building from the one time she had been there, years ago, when she and the ZPD had arrested Mayor Lionheart for locking up the savage predators. If she remembered right the corridor she was in would lead first to some offices, and then split off to stairs that would—

“Continue your patrols. Leave what’s happening in Zootopia to me.”

The unfamiliar voice sent Judy stumbling to a stop inches from turning a corner, eyes locked on the wolf-sized shadow growing from the intersecting corridor. She scrambled backward for a broom closet she’d passed moments before, closing the door behind her just as she heard footsteps round the corner beyond.

“I’ll stay, if you insist. The criminals are growing nervous about these setbacks, and someone needs to keep them in line here. No, I suppose the fewer the better for us. Better bargaining position. Does Miss White know what Plan B is? I never…”

Judy gripped the flashlight and held her breath as the accented voice passed the closet by, not allowing herself to breathe until it had faded completely even from her rabbit hearing. Retreating to the farthest corner of the supply closet from the door, she crouched behind a mop bucket and, with some difficulty, dialed Nick’s phone number from memory. The phone on the other end rang once… twice… three times…

“Come on, come onnn, pick up…”

At the fifth ring the other phone answered and Judy immediately started talking, worried at the cell phone’s low battery. “Nick, I hope to God you’re okay. It’s Judy! I’m at Cliffside Asylum, where we found all the savage mammals! Jack Savage is using it as a base of operations! Get everyone you can over here immediately!”

Silence for a moment, and then, “Judy? It’s mighty fine ta hear your voice after everything we heard happened over in Zootopia, but what in blazes are ya rambling on about?”

Judy bit her hand to keep from screaming at herself, her and her stupid forgetfulness with the little things. “Gideon! Call Nick or the ZPD or someone and tell them everything I just said! It’s a matter of life and death!”

“Judy, calm down, I—”

Gideon went quiet. Judy waited a moment in case something had simply happened on his end, before looking at the stolen phone and swearing at the blank screen. She pressed the power button just to be safe, then swore again. “What kind of self-respecting mammal lets their battery get that low!”

Setting the phone down, she crept back to the door and listened for a minute, straining to catch the slightest sound of movement beyond it. When she heard nothing, she opened the door, peaked left and right, and started again the way she was going. She’d wasted enough time around there, and the longer she stayed, the more likely someone would find her gone.

A lone tiger lounged in the offices, chuckling as she watched a Ewetube video on her phone. Judy kept low to the floor as she crept around the far edge of the area, pausing to check she wasn’t looking Judy’s way. Once she was certain the coast was clear she opened the door enough to
squeeze through and rushed down the stairwell two steps at a time.

Two levels down Judy came to the ground floor, just as the door to her right swung open. She ducked behind it as a pair of boars in what looked like repurposed riot gear trudged past the basement stairs. She waited for their footfalls to pass out of hearing before hurrying through the door.

Judy found herself in a long hallway lined with doors, wood against tile. At the far end she saw a pair of double-doors that, if her memory served, led into the asylum’s front lobby, and then from there it’d be a straight run across a bridge to freedom and relative safety. Assuming there wasn’t a marksmammal or anything watching the bridge.

“Come on, Judy, cynicism’s not getting you anywhere… wait.”

She slid to a stop halfway down the hallway, eyes caught by a familiar name upon a door.

JACK SAVAGE’S ROOM: NO ENTRY UNLESS MISS BLACK. (Okay Francis, you can come in too.)

“He… can’t be serious.”

The echo of distant voices from the stairwell reached Judy’s ears. In a split-second decision she tried the door, found it unlocked, and ducked in, closing the door behind her. She stood there for a moment with her uninjured ear pressed against it, listening until the sound of passing footsteps faded, before turning and taking stock of the room she found herself in. The faded green walls and flattop counters told her it had been an examination room for larger mammals once upon a time, though it had long since been converted into an office-type area, the examination table replaced by a low-slung table covered in papers, laptops, and what looked alarmingly like a stick of C4.

“Well, never one to risk missing evidence…”

Judy picked up the top paper and looked it over. “Dates and times… no context though. Are these for clandestine meetings?”

Another paper showed the schematics for what looked like a train station, though there were no indicators of which, or even if it was one in Zootopia. A third paper showed similar schematics for the environmental control wall separating Tundratown and Sahara Square. A fourth paper read “Plan B” in massive letters, followed only by a childish drawing of an explosion.

A fifth paper seemed the most substantial, a list of cargo shipments done through Tundratown Truckers. Judy’s eyes widened as she read down the list, mind boggling at the sheer amount of explosives that had been smuggled into Zootopia over the course of months.

“Who’s supplying all this?”

One laptop was off, the other on and with three windows open. The first, a list of flights and arrival times from San Dingo. The second, Gazelle’s public rally itinerary. The third, to Judy’s mixed annoyance and confusion, Strangers on a Train paused halfway through.

Before she could contemplate any of this, a sound came from the hallway beyond. Judy scampered back to the door and pressed an ear up to listen, poking her head out when she heard nothing. She found the coast clear and, deciding she’d pushed her luck far enough, started again for the exit.

Outside the asylum, the world was grey and stormy, much as she remembered it being all those years before, on her first investigation with Nick. Judy crept from one parked vehicle to the next toward the bridge, ears twisting every direction to catch a sound, heart thundering as she imagined guards
appearing at any moment to halt her progress. None appeared.

Crouching down between a jeep and the guardrail encircling the area, Judy surveyed the bridge ahead of her with an ever-present sense of dread that she just couldn’t pin down. There should have been someone out there keeping watch. Even Lionheart had kept a good half-dozen timber wolves on outside guard duty alone, not counting those inside the old asylum. Yet aside from a vague figure inside the guard booth at the far end of the bridge, she didn’t see a single soul out there.

Judy looked behind her at the doors to the darkened building one last time, before setting off across the bridge at a sprint. If she could keep her ears down and circle around the guard booth fast enough, she could get past unsee—

A crack rang through the air. The spot of bridge in front of Judy’s right foot exploded into a plume of dust. She skidded to a stop and staggered back, eyes wide and heart racing at the close brush with becoming an amputee.

From the guard booth stepped a white-coated timber wolf in a grey bodysuit and Kevlar armor, marksman rifle still smoking as she slung it by a strap over her shoulders onto her back. “Officer Hopps. I can’t let you leave.”

Judy backed up a step, arms up and stance wide for a fight. “Miss Black, I presume. Too bad, because I think I’ve kept my loved ones worried for long enough. Not to mention the whole ‘city in danger’ thing.”

At this Black scoffed. “The city is always in danger, Officer Hopps. Every crime and criminal risks being the final straw to send it spiraling into anarchy. You are a good cop, but Zootopia needs more now.”

Judy tensed as Black then reached for her belt, but all the wolf did was draw out a radio and bring it to her muzzle. “Savage, this is Black. There’s a problem, get started without me. Yes, she escaped. No, I’ll only kill her if I have to. Good luck to—”

Judy dove for the space between Black’s legs. Immediately the wolf dropped the radio, fell into a crouch, and swept her leg out in a kick that drove the air from Judy’s lungs and sent her flying to the bridge’s guardrails. She barely got her hands in front of her in time to grab the rail and turn her momentum into a swing, back toward the slowly advancing wolf. This time when Black threw a kick Judy grabbed the limb, spinning around it to deliver a double-footed kick to the back of her other leg.

“Aaugh!”

Black fell forward onto all fours. Judy let go and started running again for escape off the bridge, thinking she could lose her foe in the wild and rugged land beyond. A nearing growl was the only warning before she was grabbed by the ears and thrown back toward the asylum. Judy grunted as her shoulder slammed the concrete road, hard, but she managed to roll with it into a crouched stance that left her facing Black. The only outward signs that anything had happened were that both had started panting and, to Judy’s distress, she had actually been pushed back across the bridge by the encounter.

Calm and collected as ever despite her harsher breathing, Black cracked her knuckles as she started striding toward Judy. “Savage truly is your biggest fan, you know. Thinks you’re amazing. White is of a similar opinion. I think you’re a disappointment.”

Judy blinked, caught off-guard by the familiarity of the name. She remembered well enough the
vague reference to a White in the text message between Delgado and Monahan she’d infiltrated.

“White? Who is—”

A barely-dodged downward punch cracked the concrete Judy had just been standing on. Deciding she could save the interrogation for a time she wasn’t fighting for her life, Judy ran up the limb, delivering a trio of haymakers to the wolf’s face before jumping up and over her. Judy cried out as Black whipped her wolf tail up into her eyes, the tail followed by a kick that sent Judy tumbling head over head across the bridge.

“Savage embraced Zootopia’s nightmare. You RAN from it, cowering in the safety of home and family. That’s all you do when the world seems too much, Officer Hopps. You RUN.”

Judy struggled to her feet, barely managing to roll with a kick and deliver an elbow up into Black’s side. The wolf barely stumbled in her advance, body-checking Judy into the ground before grabbing her with one hand around her neck and lifting her up as if she weighed nothing. Perhaps she did, to her opponent.

“Pathetic.”

Now struggling to breathe on top of everything else, Judy kicked out with her legs as hard as she could, barely managing to graze Black’s chest. Her kicks grew more frantic, stubby claws scrabbling at Black’s hand and forearm as the wolf strode to the side of the bridge. Judy’s heart seized as Black held her out over the edge, the roaring waterfall below them seeming to churn with terrible, all-consuming indifference to the drama above.

Black squeezed until Judy shuddered, wolf and rabbit eyes locking together. For the first time since the fight began, Judy saw Black smile. “Savage will miss you. He’ll get over it. Goodbye, Officer —”

Without warning, a white and blue blur shot forth from the edges of Judy’s dimming vision. It crashed into Black’s elbow with what must have been the force of a gunshot and resolved into the form of Officer Bethany Blaine, the arm bending to a horrifically unnatural angle with an ear-splitting CRACK to accompany it.

Black howled in agony, fingers splaying open. Judy yelped, arms flailing for the bridge just out of reach as she fell—

“JUDY!”

—until Nick threw himself halfway through the bridge’s guardrails and grabbed her hand in his, nearly pulling her right arm from its socket but stopping her fall. For a moment Judy could only hang there above the waterfall and look up, amethyst meeting green as she lost herself in her husband’s eyes and the endless love and worry she found there, exultant relief that he was there, he had her, he was okay, filling her. Then, in a soft voice she almost didn’t recognize as her own, “Don’t let go.”

“I won’t,” Nick said, all smiles as he twisted around to plant both feet against the railing and pulled.

“I can’t. I love you.”

Judy’s heart swelled. The moment she’d been pulled within reach she grabbed the railing and hauled herself over, not caring who else might be watching as she tackled her fox to the ground and pressed her lips to his. He moaned up at her, a shiver running through Judy as he wrapped his arms around her and pressed in with his tongue—

“NICK! JUDY! THIS IS LITERALLY THE WORST TIME AND PLACE FOR THAT!”
The kiss broke, Judy jumping to her feet to see Beth frantically ducking and weaving around kicks from a growling, snapping Miss Black. Her right arm dangling useless at her side seemed to hardly slow the white wolf down. For a moment, the two of them could do nothing but stand there and watch, mesmerized by the blur of martial arts prowess on display before them. Judy knew she was good, knew she had learned to effectively put all her unique rabbit skills to use in her hand-to-hand combat, just as she had with every aspect of her ZPD training, but Beth at once seemed her clear superior—

Right until a sudden slip on a wet patch of bridge. Beth unbalanced for a moment, distracted, allowing Black to manage a backhand to the hare’s chin that sent her tumbling head-over-heels backwards. She managed to twist in mid-air and catch herself in a handstand, flipping onto her feet and turning to face Black once more in the time it took for her dislodged yellow shades to hit the ground.

Judy, in the process of running to Beth’s aid, slid to a stop, Nick not far behind her. Idly aware of Black coming to a halt as well somewhere behind her, Judy gaped at Beth. The hare’s Arctic blue eyes were hauntingly familiar.

“You…” managed Black.

“Me,” replied Beth, reaching up to wipe away a dribble of blood from a split lip. She left the glasses where they’d fallen and charged Black again, forcing the wolf once more into a furious exchange of blows, struggling to keep up with the hare dancing around her.

“Wow,” said Nick, looking from the fight, to the abandoned glasses, and then back. “This, uh, might be something.”

Judy followed his gaze to the glasses, her mind churning as it always did for plots and possibilities. Then she glanced to the ZPD cruisers gathering at the far end of the bridge before breaking into a run toward the fight. “This needs to end.”

Black had just managed to send Beth staggering with a grazing blow when Judy leapt over the hare. Black blocked her drop kick with her good arm, leaving herself open to Nick planting a fist firmly into her liver.

“Urk!”

The wolf staggered back, wheezing as she visibly struggled not to puke. Judy ran and jumped, kicking Black’s chest and sending her further back, up against the bridge’s rails. Seeming to panic now, she reached up for the rifle strapped to her back. Judy watched with an almost morbid fascination as Beth charged forward, twisted into another handstand, and kicked up into the wolf’s chin. There came a short grunt, seeming more surprised than pained, and then Miss Black toppled silently over the edge into the waterfall below. If there was a scream, it was drowned out by the roar of the water.

For five seconds, maybe ten, Judy stood there with her guard up, unsure if it was really over. But then more ZPD officers came charging up the bridge toward the asylum to secure it and Judy felt as if strings holding her up had been cut. She stumbled, nearly falling before Nick caught her, sinking down with her into a sitting position with her in his lap. There they kissed again, quick little pecks as Nick ran his hands over her, whimpering at every cut and bruise on her body. Judy might have laughed at the concern, were she not so completely, totally exhausted.

“I’m okay, Nick. I’m okay. We’re okay.”
“I love you, oh God do I love you. Frosty, radio, tell that ambulance to hurry! Cheese and crackers, Judy, I was so scared! I tried, I tried continuing the job but I… I need you, Judy.”

Judy couldn’t find the words for how she felt in that moment, reunited with the most important person in her life after everything they both had been through, so she settled for kissing him again, another long and deep kiss that Nick eagerly returned.

Eventually the sounds of the Fangmeyers, McHorn, and Francine coming back out of the asylum, pushing along handcuffed criminals and conspirators ahead of them, made Judy break the kiss and oh-so-reluctantly stand up, Nick following suit a moment later. Taking his hand in hers, she settled for looking up into those green eyes she loved so much. “How did you find me? I managed to grab a phone and tried calling you, but only managed to get Gideon Grey of all people!”

To his credit, Nick’s face and ears flushed heavily at this. As if to save a little of his dignity Beth came back over and joined the conversation, a ZPD cruiser’s first-aid kit in her hands and her tinted glasses firmly back in place. “Fru Fru Big called us after Jack Savage made a televised threat to the entire city. She offered up the entire Big criminal empire so that we could stop Savage, and that included how to corner Koslov. He, in turn, pointed us this way in exchange for charging him only for his crimes BEFORE helping bring Savage into the city.”

“I guess even mammals like Koslov have a line they won’t cross,” said Judy, offering no resistance as Nick started leading her toward the waiting vehicles and dotting disinfectant over the cuts Jack had left. “And good work here, Beth. We… probably should have tried arresting Miss Black…”

The hare shrugged, a smile playing over her lips. “She resisted arrest and reached for a gun. Nothing to be done about it. So sad, such a shame.”

Judy sighed, smiled and shook her head, watching as an ambulance joined the cruisers at the bridge. But still, her mind could help returning to the plans she’d found in Savage’s office, to Miss Black’s reference to a “White”, and to the familiar blue eyes of the hare beside her.
Queen’s Harbor Inn was a low-key establishment, a two-story brick structure built along the frozen channels of Tundratown, far back in the days when the promise of Zootopia was still mostly a mere promise. Originally thought up as a safe haven in case of prey lynch mobs, the building’s basement was a veritable fortress, reinforced with steel and concrete, the doors into the inn refurbished bank vault doors, a number of escape passages going out as far as half a mile away, its own separate plumbing and power system, and enough stores to last for three months. And this was all before the modern niceties and defensive measures installed when Koslov purchased the establishment, under several layers of fake names and with Jack Savage’s funding, a year ago.

Jack sat at a round table near the back of the room, upon a raised platform that once upon a time had been a stage for performances. He tapped against the worn oak wood, ignoring the looks from Balor and Takei at their ends of the table as he stared over the assembled mob captains and lieutenants. Every sort of mammal could be seen in that room, talking in hushed tones over the state of Zootopia, trading whispers and rumors of what had happened to the crime lords not present. Koslov, arrested by the ZPD. Anjali, surrendered without a fight. Sarabi, killed by her own second-in-command after a fierce gun battle with police, the new lioness in charge then surrendering or getting killed or fleeing the country or—and so on the rumors went. Jack paid them only partial attention, more focused upon the clock hanging from the opposite wall.

Just as Balor looked on the verge of jumping to his hooves and speaking his mind, a maned wolf staggered down the stairs from the inn above, immediately ceasing all conversation as all there turned to look at him. Jack watched the fox-like mammal weave through the crowded tables toward the raised platform, his trepidation growing the nearer the canine got. Once he was close enough to not have to shout, Jack spoke. “You were assigned to the asylum. What’s happened there? Where’s Miss Black?”

Upon reaching the stage, the maned wolf took a moment to catch his breath before answering. “Hopps escaped! There was a big police raid, SWAT and everything! Almost everyone was arrested, but Miss Black, she—Hopps, Wilde, and that hare, Blaine, they killed her! Sent her flying off the bridge and down the waterfall! I saw it from a window! Miss Black’s dead!”

Jack’s tapping finger stopped. His breathing stopped. His heart stopped. Everything stopped, the world fleeing around him save those three words, repeating relentlessly, fraying like worn rope until it was so much noise burned meaninglessly into his brain. Miss Black’s dead Miss Black’s dead Miss Black’s dead Miss Black’s dead—

The words ruptured, scattered before a void of fury welling up from Jack’s gut. Fury at Judy Hopps, at the ZPD, at Zootopia, at the entire criminal element surrounding him in that room. He became aware all at once of animated discussion around him, worry at the turn of events, questioning whether they should proceed, whether they even could proceed without Miss Black. Takei was leaning down the table toward him, eyes glittering with fear, or perhaps ambition. “You can act as liaison with Miss White, can’t you? This hasn’t ruined the plan after all our hard work, has it?”

Jack looked at the old tanuki mob boss, imagining for a moment lopping his head off with his own cane sword. But no, the plan. The plans. Events would proceed and break the tanuki at their own pace. Control. Calm. Answer the question. Jack did, with a smile. “Ruined? No. Not at all. Miss White will be upset by the loss of her soldier, but events will—”

“Enough of this!” Balor leapt from his chair, looming over the table to slam his fist with stone-breaking force down onto Jack’s hand on the table. “Enough with the secret plans and nonsense!
You’ve gotten most of us killed or arrested and I… I won’t…”

Whispers danced through the watching criminals. Jack stared at Balor, keeping his smile as the boar stumbled upon noticing none of the pain of a hand getting crushed. Jack lifted Balor’s fist with his free hand, the crime lord’s face paling further as all his muscle was overpowered as if it meant nothing, and drew his “crushed” hand back off the table. He flexed and clenched the hand in full view of the watching crowds, just to rub it in that nothing had been hurt but Balor’s pride.

“Now, as I was saying… events will proceed just fine. You two hash out who gets whose peoples and properties now that Koslov, Anjali, and Sarabi out of the picture. I’ll take care of everything city-side.”

“G-good.” Balor took a file out of a jacket pocket and began working on one of his tusks, a nervous tic if Jack had ever seen one. “This affair has been bloody awful from the start. The sooner it’s over and done, the better.”

“Don’t worry,” said Jack, looking at the boar and imagining him charred and mangled. He would do it for his precious Belle. He could already taste the bacon. “It will all be over soon.”

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The ZPD Precinct 1 building stood triumphant that evening, thrumming with the bounties of its police raids against the crime lords, with city hall consultants, with reporters and journalists and photographers, with officers of the law. The general atmosphere, like much of Zootopia itself, was jubilant, exhausted, and wary of what might come next.

Chief Bogo’s office, by contrast, carried an air of deceptive calm that Judy found almost as unnerving as Cliffside Asylum. At her insistence and Nick’s reluctance she’d gone straight to the ZPD rather than the hospital to tell of her ordeal. So now there she sat in one of the chairs in front of Chief Bogo’s desk, a sable marten in a lab coat and scrubs tending to her cuts and bruises. Yet Bogo, infuriatingly, had insisted on waiting until the ZPD’s on-site nurse had finished.

“Well it’s not the kind of expert work an actual hospital would do, but this should suffice for now.” The sable snipped off the last stitch’s dangling thread with a pair of scissors, before trading them for a bottle of antiseptic which she began spritzing over Judy’s wounds. Judy flinched at the burning sensation, but kept still. “There’ll probably be some inflammation and a mild fever within the next few days, but I don’t think you’ll need to worry about any major infections. I suppose it’s pointless to ask you not to do anything too strenuous.”

“Thank you, Nurse Sabine,” said Bogo from his seat behind the desk, Judy nodding her agreement. The moment the nurse had packed up her things and left, Nick climbed up onto the seat to hold Judy at his side, all pretense at professionalism abandoned after the day they’d had. Judy blushed at the attention, but raised no objection. Thankfully, Bogo simply leaned back in his chair and regarded Judy over crossed arms, making no comment on the scene. “Now then, with that out of the way… it’s good to have you back and alive, Judy. You had a lot of us scared there. We would all appreciate it if you didn’t EVER disappear without a trace again. Am I clear?”

“Clear as crystal, sir,” said Judy, taking Nick’s hand in her own and squeezing. Putting her life on the line in service to the city was one thing, but Jack Savage, the nightmare of his origin, was something she could go the rest of her life without experiencing again.

“Good. Now then.” Bogo glanced over to where Beth stood off to the side, near his map of Zootopia, before looking back at Judy. “I believe Officers Blaine and Wilde filled you in on their sides of things from the morning’s disaster to now on the drive over. Now, if you can, tell us what
happened to you. ONLY if you can. I understand these kinds of situations can be very traumatizing, and if you’d rather save this for the morning—"

“No!” shouted Judy, flinching the next moment at the urgency in her voice and the looks from the others in the room. “That is, no sir, I think it’d be best to get through this as soon as possible.”

“Very well. Proceed.”

It took fifteen minutes, perhaps, for Judy to recount the last day of her life, from her attempted arrest and fight with Jack Savage to her escape from the asylum and defeating of Miss Black, including every detail she could remember of Jack’s childhood story. By the end of it, despite her best efforts, she found herself shaking with the enormity of her brush with madness and death. It hadn’t even dawned on her until then how little time all of it had actually taken. The only thing keeping her from doing more than merely tremble was the tightness and warmth of Nick’s arm around her, the look on his face as if he never planned to let her out of her sight again.

“What was that he meant, about making the world a better place? It sounds like something you’d hear from an inspirational movie, not… Jack.”

Judy shrugged at Beth. “I haven’t a clue. Honestly, I was still caught up on his trauma.”

A chill seeped through the room at the mere mention of Jack Savage’s story, all present shivering. Nick cleared his throat, a forced smile on his muzzle. “Not uh, not too weird… Bellwether probably thought she was making Zootopia a better place. Now a leopard with half his face eaten off… now THAT is uniquely familiar to me…”

“Taylor Monahan,” said Judy, having reached the same realization. “The Wendigo Killer. He did say he owed his injuries to a hunting accident… and the lion, Delgato, maybe…”

“Outback Island…”

Judy snapped her gaze to Bogo, ears shooting up straight and Nick stiffening beside her in alarm at the low, subdued tone to the police chief’s voice. Beth stepped away from the map, a hand coming up to rest on the desk. “Sir?”

Bogo sat there, chin resting on his interlocked hands as he stared off into nothing. Judy had never noticed before how… old, he looked.

“What I am about to say,” he said at last, still not looking at them, “never leaves this room. EVER. Am I understood?”

Judy looked to Nick, then Beth, seeing her own uncertainty in their eyes. “Chief… do you know what Jack was talking about?”

Here Bogo looked at them, though only for a moment. Then he sighed and returned his gaze to his office door past them. “It was 20, 22 years ago, I think. I was still just a captain then, not chief yet, so I don’t have all the details, but one morning we get the call that the entirety of Outback Island, the WHOLE DISTRICT, had been set ablaze.”

Nick groaned beside Judy, a hand dragging over his face. “The Outback Fire… I remember that from the news. Back in the day it was the worst disaster Zootopia had seen since the Mass Scurry of ’17.”

Bogo nodded and continued. “In those days, Outback Island was less of a District and more of a… nature preserve. Somewhere city mammals could go to see truly natural life and beauty. Or so the
brochures said, anyway. The official story given was that an experimental weather balloon went
down over the jungle and started the blaze. It had been an especially hot summer with noticeably
little rainfall, so people thought it reasonable."

“Most people,” said Beth with a bitter smile. “Honey’s always thought there was more to the story
than a mere weather balloon. Came up with conspiracies like a government experiment gone awry,
or aliens delivering a warning for peace. Guess she was right, to an extent. Not that I can tell her.”

“When we arrived once the blaze had gotten under control,” Bogo continued, as if nobody else had
spoken, “it didn’t take long to find the bones. Hundreds of them scattered across the still-smoking
wastes, of countless species. It took later, after the experts had gone through, to realize the vast
majority of the bones belonged to… to children. By then the records had been sealed, the full facts
locked up by politicians with suddenly-full pockets and an all-new desire to ‘protect Zootopian
sensibilities.’ The sole survivor we found, a hare kit, was never claimed by a family and never
offered a family name, so he was put in the foster system. That’s the extent of all I know on the
matter. Not sure if he ever even got adopted.”

Silence consumed the room, a silence of uncertain thoughts and worries. Judy stared down at the
carpet, finding little distraction from the horror in its stripes of alternating green. She had always
believed that the world, overall, was a good place, Zootopia most of all. Problems still existed,
speciesism still hurt so many, but hard work and trust would surely make each new day better than
the last. Lionheart, Bellwether, Monahan and Delgato, and most recently Jack Savage, had all done
their part to darken this ideal, to muddy it, to show her that not all mammals WANTED the world to
be a better place. Or worse, had harmful ideas of what a better world meant. But this… the enormity
of the horror so easily swept under the rug…

“It’s no wonder Savage goes on so much about remembering.”

All eyes turned to Beth at the office door. The hare stood resolute before their stares, anger and
disappointment in her gaze as she grabbed the door handle. “Maybe this is the reason for everything.
The murder and mayhem. Can’t say I’d take being forgotten like this all that well either.”

“Frosty, come on, you don’t mean that…”

She looked at Nick, hackles rising at the nickname. She opened the door and backed out, never
looking away. “My name is Bethany Blaine, Detective Wilde-Hopps, and as Savage would probably
say, don’t forget it.”

“Beth—”

The slamming door cut Judy off. She stared at it a short second, before sighing and standing to look
back at Bogo. “Sir, should we…”

“She’ll be fine,” said Bogo, sounding more confident than he looked. “She’s right, and we all know
it. Perhaps events would have turned out better if someone had spoken out about keeping things
quiet. It’s too easy, though, to go along with the herd, even now.”

At that, Judy almost spoke her suspicions regarding Beth, holding back only for the thought of what
if she was wrong. There were too many unknowns still, and blue eyes were hardly the rarest color.
She’d yet to meet another mammal with her particular shade of purple, for example. And it felt so
late, she felt so tired, and tomorrow would be so busy…

“Well then, if there’s nothing else that requires immediate attention, I would really to bring this
complete nightmare of a day to a close before anything else happens.”
Discarding her suspicions until she could look into them in private, Judy allowed Nick to help her down from the chair at Bogo’s dismissal and started for the door. Whatever came next, good or ill, it could wait for the ‘morrow.

***

Beth! I heard that Hopps is back and safe and stuff! Yay! =D Hope you get home soon, I’ve got your favorite pasta cooking!"

"Beth, is everything okay? You always respond to texts. Guess there’s a lot of paperwork after today and you gotta stay late. Be safe!"

"Beth?"

"You’re starting to scare me. Please text or call or something"

"If you don’t msg right now im hacking cameras to find you dammit"

Beth sat leaned back on the ZPD motorcycle, gripping the handlebars with one hand and holding her phone with the other. Ahead of her, stretching on beyond sight into the sea fog, ran the old Lionsgate Bridge connecting Savannah Central to Outback Island, little more than a railway flanked by a pair of service roads. It waited there ahead of her, patient, hungry. The path to breaking whatever high hopes and trust she had in her city.

Her thumb hovered over the CALL button, afraid, uncertain of what she would say to explain herself. Her thoughts had been a raging mess when she’d stormed out of Bogo’s office to the ZPD vehicle lot. She couldn't even tell herself what she was doing out there, let alone tell someone else. By all rights she hated Jack Savage for hurting so many people, for putting her life and the lives of her friends in so much danger. Yet, she’d be lying if she said she couldn’t relate to righteous fury over such a traumatic experience being so routinely covered up…

“I’m only here… because Outback Island is one of the places Tundratown Truckers shipped to.”

That, at least, she could hold onto as firm reasoning. Nothing was on Outback Island now but barren rock and a smoldering junkyard. It was a developing haven for birds and small reptiles. There shouldn’t be any reason for semis to be going out there.

Beth’s phone dinged as another text from Honey popped up. ‘Right, hacked cameras. The hell you doing at Lionsgate Bridge!?”

Beth groaned, ears flopping down as she looked up and over her shoulder at a blinking traffic camera over the intersection behind her. Halfway between touched and annoyed, she shook her head and turned back to her phone. “Don’t worry. Just hunch. Don’t call cops.”

“Beth, darling, ‘don’t worry’ and ‘don’t call cops’ are 9/10 signals to worry and call cops.”

Unable to think of any way to dispute that, Beth chuckled and shook her head. “You know what I mean. Head to bed, Hun. Home before you know it. ZPD’s honor.”

Honey’s next text took nearly two minutes, judging by the clock on Beth’s phone, to the point where the hare nearly put her phone up and started riding down the bridge. “This is about all the news, isn’t it?”

“I…” Beth shook her head, looking again to the traffic camera, then to her phone, then to the camera, then back again to her phone. She licked her lips, thoughts straying to the tablet Clawhauser had pulled up at his desk in the main foyer, the cheetah practically vibrating with glee as he showed the
news report off to every officer, criminal, and civilian to walk by.

"—ZPD correspondent now reports that Lieutenant Judy Wilde-Hopps has been found alive and well, following an intense police raid of what insiders are calling terrorist Jack Savage's primary hideout in the abandoned Cliffside Asylum. Longtime residents of Zootopia will remember Cliffside as where former mayor Leodore Lionheart held captive several predators turned savage during the Night Howler Crisis.

“While Savage himself was not apprehended in the raid, ZNN can confirm that his second-in-command, operating under the codename 'Miss Black', perished during an altercation with Wilde-Hopps and her husband, Detective Nick Wilde-Hopps. It has also been reported, though unverified at the moment, that Lieutenant Wilde-Hopps suffered minor injuries during her imprisonment. We at ZNN wish her a speedy—”

That had been the last Beth had heard before storming away to the garage. Her thoughts then she typed into her phone now, mashing the enter key with a savage satisfaction. “SHE DIDN'T EVEN DO ANYTHING! I SAVED HER LIFE! I KILLED BLACK! I SAVED ALL THOSE MAMMALS IN THE AQUARIUM! I'M THE HERO!”

Honey’s answering text came almost instantly. “Am I not enough for you, Miss Savage?”

Beth felt like she’d been punched in the gut. Looking up at the bridge to Outback Island again, she grasped finally the idiocy she’d almost driven headlong into, the haze of her rage lifting. “I’m not… I have a good… I just…”

Every attempt for an excuse to herself fell flat before it could even fully form. Beth swallowed, hand shaking as she responded. “Not going to ask how you know. You’re right. So right. I’m sorry. I can’t help it. I. I need to make a stop before coming home. A safe stop. Someone deserves talking to. Please trust me.”

And then, Honey’s response. “I’ll always trust you. Good luck, Frosty.”

Beth smiled despite herself, the nickname not seeming so bad now. She gave the bridge to Outback Island one final look, before shaking her head and shoving her phone back into its holster. Then she revved her engine and turned back around, thoughts already away, ahead of her down the road to the Rainforest District, to someone deeply in need of an apology.

***

As exhausted as Judy felt and knew Nick felt, dinner was a mostly quiet affair of Tofu Tico carryout eaten in the peace of Marian Wilde’s kitchen. Only mostly quiet though, beyond Marian fussing over Judy’s injuries, thanking anyone listening for the bunny’s safe return and asking, again and again to Judy’s embarrassed enjoyment, if there might be anything she could do or get for the rabbit. At last, and at Nick’s insistence, Judy caved and requested an extra pillow for the guest room.

After that came the Muzzletime call with Judy’s parents. They had sent off a quick text on the drive to the ZPD to see Bogo, letting them know she was okay and safe, but Judy knew her parents needed more than that.

The reactions to her inch-shorter left ear were as bad as she’d expected, Bonnie actually letting out a swear and Stu devolving into frantic, breathless sobs it took nearly ten minutes to calm him down from. For one terrifying instant Judy feared they might revert back to their overly protective, "Come back to Bunnyburrow right this instant" stance. But they didn't, and Judy breathed easier.
Now, fed, washed, and dried, Judy allowed herself to relax in Marian’s guest bed, her back to Nick’s chest as she sank into his deep embrace. She basked in the warm, predatory scent of her fox as it surrounded her, speaking to some deeper part of her mind of safety, of a warm den, of soft kisses in the dark and gentle claws caressing unimpeded.

“Carrots… I don’t want you returning to the case tomorrow.”

Judy hmmed, nuzzling into the crook of her fox’s arm. “I know, Nick.”

“The thought of you going out in your state… of maybe running headfirst into Savage all over again, alone again… terrifies me.”

She leaned further in, lifting his hand from where it rested on her belly to kiss the paw pads. “I know, Nick.”

“And there… is not a single thing I can do to talk you out of it, is there? I mean, I know I made a thing about you staying in Bunnyburrow as long as you did when we first got back, but—”

“Nick,” she said, amused by the rambling turn he had taken. When he said nothing else, only looking down at her with full attention, she sighed and twisted around in his arms to face him. She caressed his cheek, just along the jawline like he enjoyed it. “I’m staying this time, Slick. I’m not running away.”

“I’m not saying you do that,” said Nick, though to Judy’s ears he sounded unsure.

“I know,” she said back, “but it’s what I feel like I’ve been doing. I fled Zootopia during the Night Howler Crisis, rather than stay and help however I could. I didn’t come back to Zootopia like you did, even though I could have. Now I’m more scared now than ever before. Jack Savage terrifies me.”

“He terrifies me too…”

“But you came for me anyway.” Her hand moved up, petting one of his ears now. “And now I’m choosing to stay and make sure Savage gets put behind bars like he deserves. If he’s so obsessed with having the spotlight and being remembered, then he’s going to be remembered as just one more psycho good ol’ Wilde-Hopps took down.”

“Just one more psycho,” Nick repeated, seeming to mull it over for a moment before nodding and leaning down to kiss Judy, sending tingles racing up and down her spine. “I can live with that.”

***

David Wolford had just come down from Alex's room after helping the younger wolf with a last bit of homework before bed, his own thoughts on the stack of dishes awaiting him in the kitchen, when he heard the doorbell ring. Ears perking in surprise at a visitor at such a late hour, he veered from the kitchen doorway to head for the front door farther down the hall. He paused halfway there, nose twitching as through the wood he caught a trembling mix of water, green, and wet hare. The thought of Jack Savage targeting ZPD officers individually for revenge caught his mind and had him drawing his service pistol from where it hung in its holster near the vine-addled door, backing away a pace and leveling the weapon where he estimated a hare's head to be. "Who's there?"

"It's Blaine," came the answer at once, easing David's worries but heightening his curiosity in equal measure. "It's Beth. I... want to talk."

David quickly stowed his gun away in its holster once more, silently cursing himself for the dual
embarrassment of letting fear over Jack Savage get to him and not recognizing one of his own work partner's scents immediately. He unbolted and opened the door and there she was, as promised, an Arctic hare sodden in the falling mist and bearing a look of monkish guilt. Her glasses were off, showing off those startling sapphires of hers. "Beth. What... what are you doing here? Come on, come in, please—"

"I'm not here for long," the hare chattered out, smile adding apology to its shades of guilt. She shifted her weight from one foot to another, right for left, hands looking like they desperately wanted pockets to hide in. "I've got Honey waiting for me at home, and tomorrow is Gazelle's big event, and... I just came here to say I'm sorry."

David looked up, checking to see if the skies had cracked open. Upon confirming that the only thing falling was the rain he looked back at Beth, more confused and surprised than ever. "Sorry for...?"

She frowned, ears flat along her back and one and rubbing the other arm's elbow. "For... holding things against you. And never letting you explain, or ever believing your explanations, or just... I know you never meant to take the credit from the Highway Hacker case from me, but it just felt..."

"Easy?" he offered, making her look up at him, seemingly her turn to be surprised. He only shrugged, trying to smile. Was a go-to interrogator, before computers became my thing. I can read mammals.

"And before you ask," he continued, seeing the look on her face, "yes, you're forgiven, for everything. Assuming you can forgive me, at least."

"Mutually assured forgiveness, huh?" Beth's smile lightened, gaze firmer and back straighter, ears perking. "Yeah, I can do that. Thank you." She glanced around then, an embarrassed chuckle escaping her. "I should go, I've probably taken enough of your time."

"You're certain you don't want to come in at least for a moment?" David asked to be safe, turning to the side and gesturing vaguely down the hallway. "A coffee, or hot tea, or... I think I have some cocoa, if that's more your speed?"

Beth paused, the contemplation clear in her eyes. Enough at least to get David's tail wagging. A glance from the promised warm kitchen to her motorcycle waiting several paces behind her however and she shrugged, shaking her head. "Sorry, maybe some other time. I'll see you at work tomorrow, Wolford."

He sighed but nodded, continuing to smile as he returned the farewell. He stood there and watched as the hare returned to her cycle and kicked it into gear, a rev of the engine getting it snarling down the slick pavement. David stayed watching until the bloody glow of her lights faded into the night, before closing the door and re-securing it. Idly he found his own step lighter as he paced to his bedroom, following the siren song of his sheets.
“Squad 1, in position at the elevators.”

“Squad 2, getting into position at the stairwell now. Good to go on your mark, Hopps.”

“Roger that, Fangmeyer. Proceeding.”

Judy lowered her hand from her ear-mounted radio and turned to regard the three mammals in full SWAT gear beside her in the elevator. Nick stood loading shells into his shotgun, while Beth double-checked the armor plates on the fourth member of their team. She’d never worked with Jarvis before, but the coyote had been in Beth’s class and the hare seemed to trust in him enough. More importantly, he was the only other member of Precinct 1 small enough to work in the apartment they were raiding in the first place. They’d had to borrow mammals from Precincts 3 and 5 just to make up most of Squad 2.

“You all remember the floor plan?” They nodded and she continued. “Good. Nick, take point. Jarvis, cover my six while Beth brings up the rear. Check for corners and don’t hesitate to shoot to kill, but watch for friendly fire. We go in 5, 4—”

She counted down from 3 on her fingers, hitting the button to open the door at 1. As the elevator slid open Nick took the lead, advancing down the apartment hallway with shotgun trained exclusively on the door at the end. Judy covered him, flicking her rabbit-scaled UMP submachine gun at each door they passed, half-expecting armed criminals to leap from each one, a final defensive battle.

After what felt like the Longest Hallway in the World, they reached the door to what Koslov claimed to be Jack Savage’s apartment, owned under the name “Jaclynn McHopps.” A part of Judy wondered if that had been Savage’s real name, once upon a time, but such questions were neither here nor there.

Judy, Beth, and Jarvis stacked up next to the door. Nick took position in front of it and looked to Judy again. She signaled go. At once he fired, blasting off the door hinges with two clean shots. A swift kick and the door fell inward, Nick leading the charge into the apartment with a shout of “ZPD, FREEZE!”

They found the central living area empty beyond a laptop, on which played Runaway Train. Judy turned to Beth and Jarvis and signaled for them to guard the door, before signaling for Nick to follow her. Together they swept and cleared each room in the apartment, every bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, and closet, even inside the fridge and out on the balcony. Judy, growing frustrated, even made sure to glance inside some of the larger-looking drawers and cupboards before finally rejoining their fellow officers in the living room, empty-handed.

“Damn it!” Reaching up to her earpiece once more, Judy gave the all-clear to Squad 2, before patching through to Dispatch and Chief Bogo. “We’ve got nothing, Chief. I’m bringing up Squad 2 for a more thorough search for documents and this laptop, but Savage is gone.”

“Roger that, Hopps. Do you think he knew you were coming?”

She glanced at the laptop on the coffee table. Something about it bugged her, but she couldn’t put her claw on what. “Not sure. He must’ve known Koslov was arrested, but from the looks of things he didn’t leave in a panic. The movie he was watching is still playing, though.”

“Good choice of movie too,” quipped Nick from a few paces off, examining a suspicious stain on a
“Though, the book was better.”

“Can it, Wilde,” said Bogo over the radio, not missing a beat. “I want you two back the moment Fangmeyer gets to work up there. Gazelle’s charity rally is in a few hours and I want all the mammalpower possible there.”

“Understood, Sir. Wilde-Hopps out.”

Turning to Beth and Jarvis still keeping watch at the apartment door, she took the momentary lull in action as they waited for Squad 2 to arrive to size the hare up. She’d been quieter than usual since they met up that morning, radiating a sense of guilt so heavy that even McHorn had been able to pick up on it. “Beth, you good?”

The hare looked her way, their eyes meeting for a moment, before looking back to the windows across the living room. “Fine, Lieutenant. Just wish we’d gotten the bastard right here and now.”

“You and me both.” And though she knew there was more bothering Beth than that, Judy decided to let it rest for the moment. She heard Fangmeyer leading the way down the hallway outside, and like Bogo had said, they’d need all the mammalpower they could muster in a few hours. There was still a lot Judy wanted done before then.

Yet the question lingered. Where was Jack Savage?

***

“Judy! Nick!”

Perking up at the sound of her name as she left the armory, Judy smiled and hopped over to where Clawhauser and Wolford had been chatting at the front desk, trusting Nick to keep up behind her. “Hey, Wolford, Ben. Sorry we haven’t had much chance to talk, with everything that’s been going on. How’s it going?”

“Oh, just as fine as usual. I’m just always happy to see you up and about!” As if that sentiment needed verbal expressing, from the positive gleam in the cheetah’s eyes and the near-permanent grin he seemed to be sporting. “Dave and I were just talking about your case. It’s been a rough couple of days, that’s for sure, but if there were ever a mammal who could get the job done! Wish you’d had more luck this morning, though.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Judy. She turned and smiled up at the wolf loitering around the desk with them. “Wolford, I’ve been meaning to say this, but thanks for all the help you’ve been on this case. You know, on and off the clock.”

The wolf shrugged, reaching up to scratch the back of his neck. “Oh, it’s nothing, really. S’what friends are for, working computers and throwing welcome-back parties… hey, now that I’ve got you here, there was something I wanted to ask—”

“Wolford!” came Bogo’s voice from across the room. “A word before the briefing, now.”

Judy flinched at the shout and the way it seemed to make Wolford wilt. She put on her best supportive smile and shrugged her shoulders in a “What can you do?” manner. “How about we get out for another round of drinks once this is all over? I’ll buy this time. The Hopps funds run deep.”

Wolford chuckled, perking back up somewhat as he began backing away from the desk. “That sounds good, Judes. See you then.”
Judy watched her fellow officer turn away, continuing until he’d reached Bogo waiting at a door to a conference room before sighing and turning her attention back to her more immediate surroundings. She found Nick and Clawhauser in conversation over the spoils of a new donut shop that had apparently opened nearby, though considering the topic, the cheetah seemed more subdued than was normal. At her friend’s dimming smile, Judy frowned and hopped up to lay both arms on the counter in front of Clawhauser, not caring how undignified the rest of her looked dangling off the side. “Hey, you sure everything’s okay?”

“Weeell…” Clawhauser coughed in a clear bid for time, setting down his half-finished donut before leaning in as if afraid to speak too loud. “I know it’s really petty compared to everyone else’s problems, but Bogo’s got me manning the front desk like usual this evening.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Nick leaned against the counter beside Judy, hand grasping blindly for a moment before finding the donut box and plucking one out for himself. “You always run desk duty.”

“I know, I know, I just…” Clawhauser grabbed up his donut again and finished it off in two bites before continuing, bringing to Judy’s mind images of someone downing a shot of alcohol to steel their nerves. “Voting for mayor is in two weeks. Gazelle’s charity rally is going to be her last big push, the one where she lays all her cards on the table. And not just for herself or Zootopia, but for everyone hurt by that, that… oooh, Savage scoundrel!”

Judy could see where this was going. “And you wish you could be one of the cops keeping an eye on the place for Savage’s threat?” At his embarrassed nod she sighed and shook her head. “Sorry, Ben, but you’re going to be needed here today more than any other time. If Savage tries to make good on that video he sent out—”

“And I’d bet my bottom dollar that he will,” added Nick in between mouthfuls of donut.

Judy shot her partner a glare before continuing. “The point is, we’ll need everyone doing the best they can wherever they’re best at. And you, ZPD Officer Benjamin Clawhauser, are the best darned Dispatcher and Mission Control this precinct has ever seen, and everyone knows it!”

Clawhauser seemed to sit taller in his chair at every word Judy spoke. When she finished he grinned wide at her, giving the impression to several passersby that a portion of the sun had decided to give the lobby a visit. “Gosh, thanks, Jude! It’s great having friends like you and Nick around here!”

“And it’s great to have a friend like you around here, Ben!”

A clearing through at her side made Judy look at Nick, tapping his wrist as if there were a watch there. “Ooh, right.” She looked back at Clawhauser. “Sorry to cut and run, but it’s almost time for Chief Bogo’s big meeting before the rally.”

“Don’t let me keep you then,” said Clawhauser, digging back into his donut box. “Just be sure to give that Jack Savage what he has coming!”

***

The meeting in the bullpen involved every cop who could be spared from performing the most bare-bones of patrols, almost every other case set aside in the name of the largest concerted effort Judy had ever seen the ZPD organize. The dark, cynical side of her, a side she hid even as it grew day by day, wondered how many of the mammals in the room with her and Nick would remain to see another bullpen meeting.

"Everyone settle down," said Chief Bogo, though the command was hardly needed. After a moment,
he gestured to the cork board behind and to his left, where had been tacked a number of floor plans and maps. "Zootopia University. Our premiere college of higher learning, and this evening, the site of mayoral candidate Gazelle's charity rally. The rally Jack Savage has promised to kill Gazelle at."

Growls and snarls, roars and slamming fists, filled the room, taking every ounce of Judy's restraint not to join in. The cuts across her body, the back of her neck in particular, still stung.

“SHUT IT!”

Once the shouted command had been obeyed, somewhat unwillingly on a few mammals’ parts, Bogo continued. “We’re going to have the entire campus under watch, but the focus of our efforts will be here,” he said as he pointed to the central photo of a four-story brick and glass structure, twice again the size of the ZPD headquarters and following a similar pronged style.

"This is Oppenmouser Auditorium,” said Bogo, answering the unspoken question. “Where Gazelle will be giving her speech during the latter half of the event. Francine, McHorn, Jones, I want you three guarding the trio of entrances along the back, above the audience. Naylor, Griffin, you have the two side entrances. Anderson and Rhinowitz, you've got the doors behind the stage to the preparation areas and the hall to the banquet and dining area. None of you are to leave your assigned stations without calling in for a replacement, and I want full radio contact every 5 minutes.

“Wilde, Jarvis, Growly, Adam Fangmeyer,” he went on, “you’ve got the auditorium roof. Cover the entrances, keep an eye on the surrounding grounds, and again, maintain stringent radio contact. Understood?”

A chorus of affirmatives filled the room. Bogo nodded and gestured to another photo, what looked like the rear half of Oppenmouser Auditorium. “Before the speech, Gazelle will be having an open dinner and meet & greet with supporters and media. Hopps, Carla Fangmeyer, Blaine, you’ll be with me patrolling this event. A lot of people, a lot of chances for Savage or one of his goons to sneak in. Grizzoli, Snarloff, you’re covering the main entrances. Ramsay, you have the kitchen. In addition to this, there will be members of SWAT at stand-by in vans nearby to the building. Is everyone clear regarding their positions?"

Francine raised her trunk, waiting for Bogo to nod her way before speaking. “What about officers Wolford and Hogrid, sir?”

“Officer Hogrid will be keeping an eye on Mayor Swinton, in case this threat against Gazelle is merely a distraction for another attempt on her life instead. Officer Wolford will be assisting Officer Clawhauser here at the station. While Clawhauser will be helping maintain radio coherency, Wolford has been allowed access to the university’s private security camera system and will be keeping careful watch through there.”

The wave of satisfied and relieved sighs that passed through the bullpen at this nearly made Judy grin. It was well-earned. There was no better mammal to have at your back than Wolford.

“And on that note,” said Bogo, bringing the room once more to attention, “Wolford will have made up detailed floor plans for the auditorium and related buildings for each of you, which you will find at Clawhauser’s desk. It’s four hours to the start of the rally, that means two hours until we move out to get ourselves set up, and I want each of you able to remember the layout and every possible entrance and exit to this place as easily as you can remember the names of your siblings!”

“That might be harder for some of us than it is for others,” quipped Nick, drawing all eyes to him. “I’m pretty certain they ran out of names and just started giving Judy’s youngest siblings serial numbers.”
And like that, the tension that had been slowly building up in the room at the enormity of the task ahead of them broke, every mammal there letting out at the very least a chuckle, most giving a full-bellied laugh, Carla Fangmeyer going as far as toppling out of her chair before her husband could catch her. Judy smiled and gripped Nick’s hand beneath the table.

Even Bogo smirked. “Shut it, Wilde”

***

“Testing, testing, this is a radio testing. Oo-de-lally, oo-de-lally—”

“Golly what a day,” finished Judy, adjusting her ear bud as she entered the banquet hall and did a quick scan of her surroundings. Plush violet carpet; tables bedecked with cream tablecloths and fine silverware, spaced wide enough apart for mammals to easily move in-between; the entire opposite wall from her a window looking out on the university’s flower gardens; a rabbit string quartet in the corner, playing what Judy’s ears told her was a slowed-down, string-only version of Try Everything. And then the mammals, more than she had honestly expected to come with Jack Savage’s threat overhead, most of them in fine suits and dresses that made Jud feel alarmingly out of place in her ZPD bodysuit.

“Expensive that. How’re things looking down there, Carrots?”

“Expensive,” she said back, passing by a table of gnus in heated debate over plates of steaming pasta. A few paces ahead, near a wall decorated with plaques commemorating famous mammals who’d graduated from the university, she spotted a pair of refreshingly familiar snow-white ears poking up over a gaggle of chattering groundhogs. “Expensive and tasteless. Breaking radio contact now, remember to keep the channel clear for emergencies. Okay, Nick?”

“Roger dodger, codger.”

Rolling her eyes, Judy circled around the group and joined Beth in front of the wall of plaques. She watched a moment, smiling as the hare stared up at the noteworthy alumni with open admiration. “You like fame, don’t you, Officer Blaine?”

Beth jumped and turned to Judy with a look of guilt on her face. “Judy, uh, sir! I uh…”

“Relax,” said Judy, turning around as the groundhogs moved along and surveying the room again. She noted the Gazelle supporters who kept glancing their way, the way more than a few mammals were keeping none-too-discreet eyes on the exits, the way hardly anyone actually seemed to be eating the delicious-smelling food being served. “Just relax. People don’t like to see nervous cops.”

“Sorry,” said Beth, turning to join her in looking the room over. And to Judy’s relief she did manage to visibly calm down, or at least to keep her nose from twitching and ears from flicking at every random noise. “I’ve just never been brought on for something as important as this.”

Judy perked a brow at her taller companion. “Really? Because I think there are a few hundred Aquarium survivors who’d say otherwise.”

“I mean something we know from the start to be as important as this! All this!” She gestured around them, almost wildly, making Judy flinch. “Or I mean, maybe what I mean is high-profile. It’s daunting, actually knowing what you’re getting into. We knew there’d be trouble in the Aquarium, but we hardly could’ve imagined to flood the entire district. And with the Highway Hacker case, I wasn’t even supposed to be working on that. Fought and wormed and bribed my way in, basically, hardly anything to work with at first beyond a record of abnormal bandwidth usage and one plucky
scoundrel.”

Judy bit her lip to keep from smiling too widely. “Ohhh, I think I can relate to that, believe me. I
don’t know, maybe these big ears of ours are bad luck at attracting ridiculous cases?”

Beth shrugged, looking away, to the window and the garden beyond. “I don’t know… Wouldn’t
have met Honey without this knack for trouble…”

Before Judy could say again that, yes, she certainly could understand that sentiment, Clawhauser’s
voice came over the radio in a general message. “Hey, Francine’s reporting in about a weird smell in
the auditorium. Could we get a sniffer in there?”

"On it,” said Bogo. Then, ”Wilde, get down there, see what you can find."

"Can do, boss."

"Why Wilde?” asked Beth once radio silence fell. "Naylor's a wolf and in the auditorium, I'd think
he could sniff the smell out."

"It's not just about having a powerful sense of smell," said Judy, relieved at the safer conversation
waters. She remembered back to Nick's argument with Bertrand and couldn't hold back her grin. "It's
about training too. Nick went through extensive tests and training to be able to make out even
individual chemicals. I'm going to assume Officer Naylor hasn't yet."

"Heh, just like Wilde to stick his nose where it doesn't belong."

Judy groaned at that voice, a voice she quite honestly could have gone the rest of her life without
hearing again, at least in person. Turning, she stared dismissively at the weasel in the garish blue suit
and top hat strolling her way from the door out to the restrooms. "Duke Weselton. Long time, no
see."

Though dressed to the nines and looking like he'd finally discovered the wonders of shampoo and a
comb, the weasel's teeth (and breath) were as bad as ever as he growled at her. "It's
WEASELTON."

"Not if your book's author bio page is to be believed, Mr. Weselton, sir." Beth's look of embarrassed
sympathy almost fooled Judy, making her chuckle into her knuckles. "You might want to talk to
your agent about that."

"Wilde, here. Found an unmarked cardboard box under some of the seating. Doesn't look to have
anything in it you need to worry about. I mean, unless you're a college student who just heard your
parents are coming for a surprise visit."

Judy barely kept in her laugh. Weaselton's right eye gave an impressive twitch as he turned his gaze
to Beth. He looked her up and down and gave a dismissive snort. "Great. As if we needed another
rabbit running amok in this city."

Beth bristled at that remark, fists clenching as she took a step toward the smirking weasel. “I am not a
rabbit, you stinking—”

Judy, thinking this had gone far enough, stepped between them, resting a hand on the taller cop's
shoulder. "Hey, how about you take a quick look over at the refreshments, check in with
Clawhauser?"

For a moment, Beth looked ready to stay and argue the point, making Judy glance worriedly at Bogo
across the room. But then the hare deflated, shrugging out of Judy’s hold to turn and march away.

Judy watched her go until she passed a table with a polar bear who was starting to look nauseous over his food, before turning back to Weaselton with a level glare. “It’s too bad weasel is in your name, Duke. To me you seem more like a vulture, or a particularly gluttonous snake.”

“While you’re still just a real knight in shining armor, aintcha?” Weaselton snagged a glass of champagne off a passing tray and downed it in one gulp, smacking his lips in exaggerated fashion. “Don’t know what you’re complaining about, Flatfoot. I just wrote a book lots of people’re buying. You’re the one who did all the stuff IN the book. So I make a few bucks off it, who cares?”

Judy decided not to gratify him with the response “I would,” instead turning and bringing her hand up to her earpiece. “Someone please tell me there’s something interesting going on elsewhere? I literally have the worst company right now.”

“I just saw a bird fly into a window here,” came Snarloff’s voice in response. “Otherwise, I got nothing. Are we sure Savage is going to do something here? Maybe he just wanted us to look paranoid and junk.”

“Better safe than sorry,” spoke Bogo over the line. “Now I mean it, OFF the radio unless it’s important.”

Judy mumbled her acknowledgment of this, thoughts already going elsewhere. She wandered through the milling mammals, the pointed looks and not-hushed enough whispers only marginally easier to ignore now that their general mood was more positive than negative. Weaselton had been right about one thing, she admitted to herself as she exchanged nods with a passing Officer Carla Fangmeyer. It had been her doing all the questionable acts that had made the city so easy to distrust her. Nick had been right, too. All it took was something else big to happen to change moods again, something equal parts useful and depressing.

Reaching the windows, Judy stood and stared out at the Tundratown snow, worrying her bottom lip in anxiety, impatience. Where was Jack Savage?

***

Owain continued talking. “I remember my mother taking me on trips to the beach in Avalon, before she left, when I was only a colt of six or seven. The beach is different up in Avalon. Less sand, more shards of rock that’d make this harsh clacking when hooves walk on them. Not so much grass either… now that I think about it, Avalon beaches do not sound so great.”

Brynjar snorted. “The truth comes out. You unicorns are taking over the world for our beaches. I never thought you to be so petty.”

Owain flicked a stone at Brynjar over the fire. The gryphon caught it and threw it back, hitting Owain square between the eyes, beneath the horn. The unicorn yelped and—

“Where IS that hare?”

Alex Wolford stopped reading, looking up from his copy of Legends of Heraldale to glance over at his dad at his desk. The older wolf looked ready to leap from his chair at any moment, a thought Alex might’ve found funny if he didn’t look so cross at the same time. “Dad? Is everything okay?”

“Hm? What?” David looked from his computers to Alex, posture visibly relaxing a degree as he dredged up a smile. “Sure thing, kiddo, everything’s just, uh, just fine. Just trying to find a mammal who said he was going to be somewhere, but hasn’t shown up yet. It’s a little stressful, that’s all. Just
enjoy your book and don’t you worry about it.” He had already turned back to the computers at this last comment, brow creasing in concentration as he worked the keyboard. “It’s all good…”

Alex frowned, watching his dad for a moment more before looking down again at the book in his lap. He didn’t return to reading, though. He’d read the book several times through already since buying it with the money he’d saved up from getting good grades. He kept quiet, though, and pretended to read. Being quiet and seemingly busy had helped him avoid trouble more than he could count. It made the teachers more willing to take his side whenever the bullying started back up, at least. Not all the time, and not with all the teachers, but at least with the ones that didn’t mind his… differences.

On that note…

“Dad? I’m going to go use the restroom, then get something from the breakroom. Is that okay?”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” said David, managing a smile again and looking Alex’s way. Wallet’s in my desk drawer if you want something from the vending machines, or I’ve got some Bugburga in the fridge down there as well.”

Alex nodded and hopped out of his chair, putting in a pencil to mark his place and setting the book down. He padded over and took a few bills out, looking up at his dad afterward to find him focused on the computers again. Biting back a sigh at how he’d thought sticking around the ZPD while a supervillain (what else could Jack Savage be?) ran amuck would be more exciting, he turned and started off for the elevator. Where was that hare?

***

Tink tink tink tink.

Judy paused in her light conversation with the well-to-do businesspig from Bunnyburrow and turned, along with most the rest of those in the room, to the source of the noise. Gazelle, dressed in a sharply cut suit a creamy gold, stood upon a slightly raised portion of the floor near the back and center of the room, tapping a spoon against her champagne glass and smiling her ever-genuine smile. Were it not for the bags under her eyes and the grey starting to creep into her shock of hair, Judy might’ve thought the stresses of the last few days hadn't reached her at all.

Once all attention had turned to her and all conversation had, for the most part, ceased, Gazelle set the spoon and glass down on a nearby table and clasped her hands together. "Welcome, everyone. Before we move on with the rest of the evening I would just like to thank you, all of you, for coming. It has been an awful week for all of Zootopia, and I am heartened to see us come together in times of crisis."

Judy glanced in the direction she had last seen Weaselton lurking and couldn't help rolling her eyes at this sentiment. Had she ever been so naive?

***

"Delivery for Officer Bethany Blaine!"

Clawhauser nearly jumped out of his seat, so surprised he was by the sudden, chipper shout after focusing so long on the radio setup in front of him. Looking up, he blinked at the sight of a brightly grinning moose in a forest-green track suit, his antlers adorned with a number of gaudy rings and bracelets. He hopped from hoof to hoof as if in a hurry, jostling the cardboard box held in his arms.

"Uh..." Clawhauser wracked his brain for the procedure for this kind of situation, but all that came to
mind was butterscotch donuts. "I'm... sorry, Officer Blaine isn't available right now. And er, sorry, we’re all on edge after the last week, so I don’t think I can allow in any unmarked boxes…”

The moose blinked, stopping his little dancing in place. “What—oh! Sorry!” He turned the box around so that Clawhauser could see the other side, which read “Grey’s Baked Deliveries!” in bold lettering over a drawing of a steaming-fresh pie. “Gosh, that must have looked awful from where you’re sitting!”

Clawhauser, who had relaxed at once upon seeing the familiar logo from his favorite Bunnyburrow bakery, laughed and gave a wave of his hand. “Oh, don’t worry, I’ve made that mistake plenty of times. Now, like I said before, Officer Blaine’s not here, but I’ll be happy to take that to our break room fridge for her for later. May I ask who it’s from?”

The moose gave a relieved sigh and set the box down on Clawhauser’s desk. “Gosh these pies can get heavy after a while. And some mammal Blaine saved from the Aquarium, I figure.” Still smiling, the moose started walking backwards toward the main ZPD entrance, giving a little wave as he went. “Just let her know… Mr. Green sends his regards.”

***

“I would also,” continued Gazelle, nodding in turn to Chief Bogo, Fangmeyer, Judy, and Beth, “like to give my thanks to the brave members of the ZPD who are with us today, ensuring our safety.”

Murmurs ran through the crowd. Judy ignored the fresh wave of looks sent her way and tried to focus on Gazelle, but a nearly-imperceptible, sickly groaning kept catching her ears. The polar bear by now looked like he’d eaten something rotten.

Gazelle’s voice cut through the murmuring, almost demanding their full attention with its softness, its gentleness. “The last week has been trying for all of us. I don’t think there is a single mammal in this room who has not felt the pain of Jack Savage’s brutal attacks in some way. Yet in our hurt, our sadness, and our anger from these atrocities, I hope, I sincerely hope, that we do not lose our faith in our system and our way of life. Not in that they are perfect, but that they can be fixed and made better when they fail us. That they are worth standing strong and united for.”

Light applause greeted this sentiment, Judy joining in. Picking up her champagne glass from the table once more, the antelope held it high and looked at each mammal in the room around her. “I ask now that we all have a moment of silence for those taken from us, and dedicate ourselves to ensuring that they will not have died in vain.”

Throughout the room, glasses were raised and silence fell. Having no glass, Judy closed her eyes and lowered her head, giving a silent prayer to the departed, and a promise that she would see justice done for them.

The room-wide silence was swiftly broken by a wet, agonized retching.

***

“Hey, Clawhauser! Whatcha got there?”

Clawhauser looked over at the young wolf drinking a can of orange soda by the breakroom vending machine, surprised but pleased as well, always happy to hang with ZPD kids. “Oh, hey, little Alexis!” he said as he edged through the doorway, carefully balancing the box of baked goods in his arms toward the closest table. “Just... some treats... for Beth. Gonna be a surprise!”

After setting the box down and backing up with a grunt, he noticed the wolf pup’s ears fold back and
wagging tail droop. Paw met face as he realized his error. “I’m so sorry! Alex, it’s just Alex, right. Sorry. Oh, I’m always making mistakes like that…”

“It’s okay,” Alex assured him, padding over and hopping up into a chair to look closer at the box. “Beth, you said? Big box for just a hare… think she’d mind a little missing?”

Clawhauser, truth be told, had been wondering something similar, the whole walk from the front desk filled with thoughts of blackberry pies, of triple chocolate cakes, of rows and rows of donuts laden with extra sprinkles, of baklava and beignets. He glanced around to make sure the breakroom was otherwise empty and that nobody could be seen through the glass of the breakroom doors, before sharing a conspiratorial wink with the wolf pup. Extending one claw, he cut neatly through the tape sealing the box’s top flaps. “I’m sure good ol’ Beth won’t notice one or two missing…”

The neatly-stacked sticks of dynamite, enough perhaps to turn that whole building floor to rubble, killed Clawhauser’s appetite. “Oh… oh hairballs.”
The Hardest Choice

Judy ran to the source of the retching as fast as her legs could carry her, beating Beth and Fangmeyer there just as the polar bear let out another wail of agony. He had pushed his chair back from the table and was bent over nearly double, frothing and hacking as his claws gripped at his oversized gut. “Sir?” She gripped his suit jacket at the elbow, placing her other hand near her tranq gun in case this turned violent. “Sir, can you hear me—”

The polar bear jerked forward, a burst of blood and half-chewed appetizers splattering the table in front of him. Shrieks rang out as the other mammals at the table jumped back in shock, while others that had come over to gawk quickly backed away.

Covering her nose against the stench, Judy shared a look with Beth as the polar bear resumed groaning and shuddering in his seat, then looked to Bogo, who had gone to stand beside a wide-eyed and pale Gazelle. The cape buffalo frowned and jerked his head toward the closest set of doors, to which Judy nodded and reached for her radio. “Dispatch, we’re going to need an ambulance over here stat. Dispatch, you copy?”

“Oh, big guy,” said Fangmeyer, the tigress coming up and placing a hand on the polar bear’s shoulder. “Come on, we’ll get you to a hospital and—”

Another retch, all blood this time as the polar bear jerked to his feet, panting and scrabbling at his belly with his claw. “N-no… he sa-said he’d c-climb ou… ouaaAAAUUGH!”

Judy had a moment to grasp this last, terrible statement before the polar bear threw his head back and screamed, belly bulging outward grotesquely. There was a sound, like the kind of miniature chainsaws Judy remembered her father using to cut down a tree for Christmas every year, and then the polar bear’s whole front half ruptured, showering Fangmeyer and Judy in blood and entrails. Then more screaming from all around them, drowning out the thud of the polar bear’s body hitting the floor, a stampede began for the doors only to find them, against ZPD orders and by unknown means, locked.

“Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!” stammered Fangmeyer, staring down at her blood-soaked uniform, eyes wide, breath shallow, shoulders shaking, on the verge of hyperventilating. Judy barely heard this. Barely heard Beth losing her dinner as the hare staggered backwards in the vague direction of their VIP. Barely heard Bogo’s shouting into his radio as he moved in front of a shell-shocked Gazelle, a flurry of panicking voices from other officers across the university answering him.

All that registered to Judy was the sticky warmth of the blood clotting in her fur, and the hare in a grey wetsuit pulling himself out of the polar bear’s guts. As the hare balanced itself on the corpse’s chest and wiped away steaming entrails as if they were no more than a sprinkling of dust or snow, the eyes of every mammal trapped in the room slowly turned to look at it. They watched in mounting horror as it spat out its pocket rebreather, threw off its goggles, and ripped off its mask, allowing Jack Savage to cast a long, measuring look around the room and its terrified occupants.

“Hmm… looks like I should have taken a left turn at Albuquerque.”

Someone, somewhere in the crowd of onlookers let out a strangled little laugh that quickly died out in the otherwise sickened atmosphere. A silent moment passed as all parties looked at each other, before nearly as one Judy, Beth, Bogo, and Fangmeyer drew their service pistols.

Savage was faster, holding up what could only be a remote detonator and moving his thumb over the
red button before Judy could even begin to level her gun on him. “Ah ah ah, let’s not be so trigger-happy, hm? Unless one of you wants to be responsible for the ZPD blowing sky-high, of course.”

Judy barely pulled back from squeezing her trigger by muscle memory, seeing from the corner of her eye Beth and Fangmeyer grimace as they too came within a mere twitch’s distance from destroying the ZPD. Bogo stood firm as ever, the only signs that Savage’s words got to him being a tightening in his eyes and the barely-perceptible lowering of his pistol. "You bloody maniac. What are you playing at, Savage? You can't think we'll buy that you got explosives into the ZPD? On nothing but your word?"

"You're right, that'd be ridiculous." Savage let out a dry chuckle as he mimed grabbing a radio. "I'm sure you'd buy that on, oh... Clawhauser's word though."

A silent moment of terror, before Bogo reached for his earpiece. "Dispatch, this is Bogo, come in." Another second, Judy's grip on her pistol tightening as a dozen nightmare scenarios danced through her head. "Dispatch, come in. Clawhauser?"

"Chief!" Judy almost let herself visibly sag with relief at the cheetah's voice. That relief vanished at his next few words. "Chief, don't panic, but there is a bomb in the ZPD!"

Bogo slumped where he stood. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

***

Clawhauser jumped as the breakroom doors flew open, a hand going to his chest as Wolford stormed through them. "Jeez! You almost gave me a heart attack, Wolford!"

"Oh well sorry, lad," snapped the wolf as he brushed past Clawhauser to the table where the bomb sat. "Heaven forbid that happen after MY heart attack when the chief radios me and says, hey fyi, there's a BOMB IN THE BUILD—"

He stopped, jaw dropping and tail bristling at the sight of his son sitting at the table the bomb rested on, looking back at him with wide eyes and folded back ears. “Dad? Is everything going to be okay?”

Wolford swallowed, looking from Alex to the bomb, then to Clawhauser, and then finally back to his son. As he did he gestured behind him toward the breakroom doors. “Go, right this instant. Go across the plaza to city hall, find the first security booth you can, and stay there until… until you hear from me, okay?”

If anything, the wolf pup looked even more frightened at this command. “Wh-what about you? You can’t st-stay here, I need—"

“GO!”

The scream sent Alex running for the doors, choking back a sob. Clawhauser watched him go, coming so close to following him to make sure he was okay. He took a step toward the doors before stopping, turning back to join Wolford at the table, thinking the wolf might need help. “Is there anything you can do? Disconnect the right wire, or block a signal, or, or something?”

Wolford didn't answer right away, taking his time to open the box and fully examine the bomb within. "It's crude... primitive... purposely so. Just the explosives, the primer, this here radio receiver for what I'm guessing's a remote detonator... way more wires here than needed, good smokescreen..." He sniffed, sniffed deeper, took a deep, full-throated sniff, almost sneezing afterward. “This thing going off would make the Sahara Square bombing look like a firecracker.”
Clawhauser swallowed. "Hairballs."

***

“What do you want, Savage?” Judy edged around, subtly moving herself between the blood-soaked hare and Gazelle. She had the most experience with the madman, for good or ill, and Bogo and the others seemed willing for the moment to let her take the lead on this. Her movement also helped to distract from Beth’s gradual circling around to behind Savage. “So you got past us in the most disgusting way possible, but what now? We’re not just going to hand Gazelle over to you, and surely you don’t expect to just walk out of here.”

He ignored her at first, to her annoyance, keeping the detonator raised and in plain sight as he reached back down into the polar bear corpse to bring out what she quickly recognized as the same kind of combat knife the Wendigo Killer had used for his kills. He twirled it once, then smiled at Judy. “How’re those cuts from our last little chat feeling, Judy? Still hurting, or are they healing up nicely? And tell me, have you noticed any hearing loss ever since the damage to your ear there? I hope not. Hearing is a rabbit’s most important asset. After all, it—“

He spun then, a clean 360 degree turn, swiping his razor at Beth’s face just as she came close enough to grab at the detonator. She screamed and staggered back, blood dribbling out from around the hand clapped over her mouth.

“—always warns us of danger. Oh, so sorry, little… siss.” A gasp rose from the crowd. Savage glanced past Judy at Bogo, grinning as the cape buffalo fumed. “You really should take better care of your officers, chief. They’re practically falling to pieces all around us!”

Bogo growled. Judy watched Beth fight through the pain of her slashed-open mouth to level her gun on Savage once more, eyes lit up by both physical pain and emotional hurt. Her glasses had flown off when she’d jerked back from Savage’s slash across her face, leaving her blue glare open for all there to see. Judy swallowed and steadied her nerves, setting the flood of questions about that aside for more pressing matters. “Jack, don’t ignore the question. What do you want?”

He made a show of thinking it over before shrugging. “My face on the dollar bill?”

Judy took a deep breath, working to remain calm. “Jack, no. That’s a line from Flying Fox. That’s Nick’s favorite movie, I’ve had to watch it enough to know every line. What do you WANT, Jack?”

Savage’s smile dropped for the briefest moment, before returning full-force as he turned to take in the room. He held his arms out wide, as if the magician on stage they his rapt audience. “Welcome, all of you! The name is Jack Savage, remember it. Now that all the preamble and opening acts to get you pumped have done their jump, welcome to the main event!”

He pointed at Judy, smile turning cruel. “Welcome to the night the ZPD destroy Zootopia!”

***

“Ben, quick, help me get this thing over onto that utility cart there.”

Clawhauser did as told, taking one side of the box containing the bomb while Wolford took the other. On the count of three they lifted it and, with the utmost care now that they knew they were handling explosives, walked over to the cart sitting near to the breakroom fridge and set the box down on it.

Once this was done Clawhauser backed away and wiped his brow, the stress of the situation getting to him more than any of the physical labor. “Okay, what now? We going to take it down to the
garage? Try to drive it somewhere safe? To meet one of the SWAT teams to disarm it?"

Wolford shook his head as he grabbed the cart’s handles, pushing it out the breakroom doors and down the hall to the elevators. Clawhauser followed close behind. “They’re all the way in Tundratown, and there’s no telling when this will go off. I don’t want to be on the highway with a bomb this big. Better the ZPD get turned to rubble than a bridge.”

Clawhauser nodded. He didn’t want to die, the thought terrified him, but he was still a ZPD officer. Safety of civilians first. “Okay, then where are we going?”

“The ZPD Labs, one of the private examination rooms. The lead lining down there will interfere with radio waves and might, MIGHT keep this thing from blowing.”

The elevator doors opened several paces ahead of them, Bertrand making his nightly stroll to the breakroom for coffee. He stopped, gaping as they wheeled the cart and its deadly cargo past him. Wolford moved to hit the button for the labs, before pausing and looking at the bear. “Bert, handsome, unless you know how to disarm a radio-activated bomb, I’d suggest you call it an early night.”

“Uh…”

“Right.” Wolford hit the button, then as the doors slid shut, “Might have to cancel Saturday!”

***

One of the doors to the banquet hall shuddered, then shattered, sending the mammals closest to it scurrying. Officer Francine charged in with service pistol drawn, followed by Adam Fangmeyer, Naylor, McHorn, and to Judy's mixed relief and worry, Nick.

As half the civilians present ran for it now that an exit had been given them, Savage held the detonator higher for all remaining to see. "Welcome, officers! It's great to have you here! You will make all of this so much easier!"

"What do you mean?" said Judy, glancing appreciatively Nick's way as he sidled up next to her. Alongside Bogo and the Fangmeyers, they had a solid wall of blue between Savage and Gazelle. "What do you mean we're going to destroy Zootopia?"

Savage paused before answering, turning to smile at a koala recording the scene with a phone. He lifted the hand holding the knife up, hovering the hand holding the detonator over the strap-on timer hanging from his wrist. "I shall activate this detonator in— " CLICK. "—60 seconds, blowing the Zootopia Police Department to smithereens and killing every cop still inside... UNLESS someone in this room, probably a cop since they have guns, shoots and KILLS mayoral candidate Gazelle! Oh, and you only have 50 seconds now."

Silence followed this declaration, silence and horror. Judy looked at Nick and found his eyes wide, his gun shaking in his grip. The picture of how she felt.

"You can't be serious," said Bogo, voice shakier to Judy's ears than she'd ever heard it. "What in God's name are you trying to prove here!?"

"Nothing," said Savage, every trace of his smile gone now. "There doesn’t need to be some greater goal or ulterior motive. If, in pursuit of eternal infamy, I show these people that you're willing to kill any of them to protect your own, well, that's your business. 40 seconds."

“Sir?” Francine looked between Savage and Bogo, voice waverin. “We can't just… Clawhauser's
still at the ZPD… Wolford…”

“I know, I know!” The cape buffalo took a step forward, prompting Savage to step back. “We could rush you right now. Or down you in a hail of bullets. There’s no leaving this room free, Savage.”

“I know. I don’t care. 25 seconds.”

Judy swallowed, heart dropping as she noted McHorn and Fangmeyer regarding Gazelle with narrowed eyes and twitchy revolvers. Beth’s focus on her was laser-like, slashed mouth seemingly forgotten as she half-turned her pistol in Gazelle’s direction. The antelope, for her part, stood remarkably tall for someone surrounded by people a maniac had designated as her executioners, though Judy still saw a powerful fear in her eyes, the kind she’d seen drive mammals caught in a burning building to leap out windows, even from floors too high to survive. And yet, even then…

“I don’t want Zootopia to tear itself apart over me, and I refuse to give a mammal like you the satisfaction of driving good cops to murder. You’ll never have the infamy you crave.”

Murmurs sprang up among the crowd of onlookers at this, while Savage frowned. “15 seconds.”

“Sthir…” Beth started to raise her gun at Gazelle, until Bogo sent her cowering back with a glare. What only Judy and Nick beside her noticed was Gazelle reaching into a pocket of her suit.

“Miss Gazelle, please—”

“We can’t just stand here and let him—”

“Swore oaths—”

“Clawhauser!” Bogo’s voice was hoarse as he shouted into his radio. “Clawhauser, get out of the building now! Ben!”

“10 seconds… 9… 8… 7—”

The antelope drew a snub-nosed revolver from her pocket. Judy gasped, lowering her pistol at once and stepping toward her, one hand raised as if to grab the weapon, though they stood several feet away. “Miss Gazelle, no!”

The shout drew everyone’s attention, gasps echoing among both cops and civilians. Even Savage seemed caught off-guard. Off-guard and furious “What are you—”

“You only said that someone in the room had to shoot me,” said Gazelle. She trembled even as she cocked the revolver. “It doesn’t have to be a cop. I won’t let the ZPD be villainized or Zootopia give up the rule of law. Not in my name. Zootopia can stand without me. It can’t stand without the ZPD.”

Shaking with rage, Savage growled his next few words out. “4… 3… 2—”

Judy, alongside Nick, the Fangmeyers, and Bog, lunged for Gazelle. Yet as fast as Judy was, even she could only watch as the idol defiantly brought the gun to her temple, eyes locked with Jack Savage’s.

BANG.

Screaming started throughout the room, Judy’s heart leaping up into her throat. As quickly as it started, however, the screaming died off at the unexpected scene playing out before them. Gazelle staggered back a step, then another, a gasp of pain leaving her as the revolver slipped from her
slackening hand to clatter on the ground. Blood blossomed around a hole punched through her suit over her gut, red on gold.

“What?” spoke Savage, speaking for all of them. His eyes turned from Gazelle to Beth beside him, dragging every other eye in the room to the smoking pistol gripped to trembling in the hare’s hands, still trained on the antelope. Savage’s hand holding the detonator lowered, relaxing. “That wasn’t leth—”

While Savage was looking at Beth and away from her Judy charged forward, a palm strike sending the remote detonator spinning out of his hand and into Nick’s. Savage snarled and spun to slash his knife at her in response, forcing Judy to bend back nearly horizontal to avoid getting her throat opened, one arm supporting her weight as she kicked out, sending the knife spinning from him next. He turned to catch it and Beth met him, a punch to his throat sending her fellow hare choking to the floor

By this time the other members of the ZPD were charging in to assist, Fangmeyer pinning Savage down to the ground with a single hand and a snarl, McHorn unwinding a length of steel cable to secure the hare’s limbs to his body, Bogo shouting commands for an ambulance for Gazelle, for a sit-rep from Clawhauser, for someone to escort the civilians out of there. Without realizing when she started, Judy found herself drawing a pair of handcuffs right for a hare from her belt and passing them on to Fangmeyer, before stepping back and watching the arrest continue to unfold. Beside her Nick was securing the depowered detonator in an evidence bag. Beth—

Hopps, see to Blaine!

Judy was already moving when she got the command, alarmed at a sudden stagger from Beth. She circled around Savage on the floor and reached the hare’s side just in time to keep her from collapsing. "Woah there, it's alright, good work, Officer Blaine. Let's get you sitting down, yeah?"

Beth mumbled something, words slurring as she struggled to get her pistol back in its holster. Judy carefully took the weapon from her and guided her over to a chair. Once there she set the gun down, grabbed her personal first aid kit from her belt, and began digging through for cotton swabs and bandages. Her ears twitched at the sound of Bogo's voice, gentle now that the crisis was seemingly over, speaking comfort and calm to a softly crying Gazelle.

"It's over... you're safe now... I promise, you’re going to be fine, the ambulance is coming, just keep pressure on the wound…"

"I’m going to be in so much trouble,” managed Beth through a mouthful of blood. “The hare who shot Gazelle…”

Judy frowned at her, looking at those blue eyes so similar to Jack Savage’s and remembering her misgivings when she’d first seen them. Yet, they belonged to a mammal so different. Judy finally shook her head and set to work applying cotton to stop up the bleeding, making sure to catch Beth’s eyes as she did. "No. The hare who saved Gazelle."

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“Breaking news from mayoral candidate Gazelle’s charity rally tonight. Eyewitness reports are flooding in, describing a scene of carnage and chaos that culminated with the subduing and arrest of infamous terrorist Jack Savage, responsible for the acts of violence that have plagued Zootopia for the past week.

"Viewers will remember yesterday's sudden broadcast, where Savage publicly announced his
intentions to infiltrate Gazelle's rally and kill her. The increased police presence at the rally resulting from this led directly to Savage’s capture, following an intense standoff between the hare and ZPD officers present.

“Following the arrest, Gazelle was seen being rushed to Mercy Hospital in Tundratown for treatment of a gunshot wound. The wound was inflicted on her by ZPD officer Bethany Blaine, first hare on the force, though reports are conflicting on whether the act was intentional or not. Blaine was, however, also rushed to Mercy for wounds from the confrontation with Savage.

"Neither the ZPD nor Gazelle's campaign have released official statements, and rumors of a bomb threat against the ZPD remain uncorroborated. Nevertheless, we at ZNN, as well as all of Zootopia, can sleep easier knowing the nightmare is over."

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Once they had all the civilians checked up and cleared away, the scene of the encounter secured for CSI to go over, and Beth and Gazelle driven to the hospital, all that remained to do for that night was to return to the ZPD. Five minutes as SWAT made sure the bomb was safely disassembled, another ten spent commiserating with Clawhauser while Wolford retrieved his son from city hall, and then, finally, as long and hot a trip to the station showers as Judy dared. The water scorching and pummeling her body, she let the sweat and blood wash away and tried her hardest not to think anything at all.

Not yet having her own locker back yet, Judy had to make do with spare sweats from Beth's locker as she rejoined Nick in their old office. There wasn't as much paperwork as Judy feared there would be, but more than she would have liked all the same. She kept her recounting of the day's events and her thoughts and actions terse and concise, the whole process passing like a blur after the adrenaline rush that had been basically the entire week up to that point.

"Judy?"

"Yes, Nick?"

"I'm not quitting, but once this is all squared away, let's take a nice, long vacation."

Judy groaned her agreement and returned to detailing her argument with Duke Weaselton.

A vacation sounded nice. Probably not a long one, only a week, two weeks. They'd only just got started back on the job, and Judy didn't want to give the impression (or offer the temptation) of quitting again already. And they would spend the vacation in Zootopia, seeing the sights and enjoying the activities they never had the time for as police officers. They would use the time to find more permanent accommodations than Marian Wilde's home, as lovely as it was. She'd heard there were some lovely new housing developments in the Nocturnal District.

Judy didn't notice Nick calling Finnick, but they still found the fennec fox waiting outside the ZPD in his familiar van. She said nothing, but Judy was thankful all the same. She really didn't feel like driving or taking public transportation right then.

Finnick waited until they'd clambered into the passenger seat and the van was on its way before grumbling. "I oughta start my own limo service, the way I'm always picking you two up." He glanced at them and huffed. "You look like you've seen hell, Cottontail."

Judy thought back to the polar bear getting torn open from the inside, to Savage's leering, blood-soaked face, and shuddered. She welcomed Nick's arm around her shoulders, drawing her close.
"Maybe I have."

They stopped at a red light and Finnick glanced over, concerned eyes putting lie to his frown. "Is uh, is the news right 'bout Savage? You really got him?"

"Saw them slap the cuffs on, myself, bud," said Nick, running a hand up and down Judy's upper arm. "Guy looked like he'd had a close call with a live wire as they led him down to the holding cells."

Finnick's grin was all teeth. "Good."

The light turned green and they drove on. Judy rested her head against Nick's chest, letting the two foxes catch up on mundanities as she listened to his heartbeat. She remembered it from days off from work, basking together on the Sahara Square beach. From late-night movie marathons. From their beautiful night together after the wedding, when the only other sounds to be heard were the rustle of sheets and each other's names, whispered breathless in the dark. Judy listened to the sound, basked in it.

At some unspoken bidding Finnick took them through Bugburga, where they got half a dozen bug burgers, two tomato lettuce wraps, and three mango smoothies. Suddenly feeling famished, Judy dove into her meal with all the voraciousness of the legendary Bigwig himself.

"You know," said Nick between bites of burger, "we should get together this weekend. Our first weekend back. Go out to a pub or somewhere, like the good old days."

"Right, tellin' you right now, I ain't driving all you guys around."

"I like that idea." Judy slurped from her smoothie, spilling a touch on her sweatshirt. "Lots of people to reconnect with. There's the Ottertons. Mr. Manchas, uh... I..." She grimaced, setting her drink down to tap her claws against her leg. She felt Nick's frown on her. "Fru Fru..."

"Bucky and Pronk." Nick suddenly took her hand in his, pulling it into his lap and squeezing. "I think I owe one of them money for going with Wilde-Hopps instead of Hopps-Wilde."

Judy laughed, finding herself coming dangerously close to crying as she buried her face against Nick's chest. "You... you dork."

***

"Yes, I am completely relieved to hear that Jack Savage's attempt on Gazelle's life failed and he is behind bars. May he rot there 'til the end of time. And no, it has nothing to do with possibly being a future target of his. Zootopia is a place of law, justice, and order, and it must be so in every facet of life. I of course want to remain mayor, but never at the cost of my political rival. I am relieved to hear that Gazelle’s surgery went well and I wish her the best of luck in the coming weeks."

***

“And in other news, HiteTech President Winona Hite of San Dingo announced this morning the passing of Captain Bellatrix Lacross, leader of the private law enforcement initiative H.A.W.C. The timber wolf had allegedly been in Zootopia on vacation and was caught in Jack Savage’s Sahara Square attack. However, an anonymous source close to Hite has gone on record with ZNN that Lacross had been under suspicion for several months for misuse of—"
“Miss White, please, there’s no need to shout—”

“I SHALL DECIDE IF THERE’S NEED TO SHOUT. Don’t you dare forget that, or I will make sure your last days will end how I found you, scrabbling in some dank alleyway, glass in your gut and blood in your eyes! Am I understood, Miss Yellow?”

“Y-yes, Miss White. I’m sorry, Miss White.”

“Good. I’m sending Mister Grey over there in the morning to salvage what he can of this situation. You will meet him, you will make sure you gets where he needs to be, and then you will stay out of the way. IS. THAT. CLEAR?”

“… yes, ma’am. Crystal clear.”

***

"I have called this morning press conference for the purpose of dispelling some of the wilder rumors running rampant through Zootopia, as well as provide the official ZPD account of what transpired last night.

"First off, it was in no way a trap for Jack Savage, and Gazelle continued with the planned event of her own volition, and in fact against my own suggestion. Clearly though, limited amounts of death and injury, it has turned out for the best overall.

"Savage's method of infiltrating the event was monstrous and sickening, and I decline from speaking it aloud where innocent ears might hear. Those with a strong stomach can find it out in their own time. What I will say is that Savage’s entire plan was to turn the ZPD and the greater city of Zootopia against each other. His method: threatening to blow up ZPD headquarters unless one of us shot Gazelle ourselves. Thanks to Miss Gazelle's bravery and the quick thinking of Officer Bethany Blaine, who is currently recovering from injuries received in the line of duty, this nefarious plot was foiled and Savage apprehended.

"There is one point that I wish to make perfectly clear. While Jack Savage and Miss Black, the seeming ringleaders of the recent attacks, have both been killed or arrested, their connections with the local criminal element remain. The main danger has passed, but we must all remain vigilant for the time being, until the last of these collaborators have been apprehended, a task our detectives are already well on their way to accomplishing.

"I recognize that, in recent years, the ZPD has lost the trust of much of Zootopia, and I will not say there hasn’t been good reason for this. There has been controversy, murder, conspiracy, abusive interrogation tactics, questionable personal connections, and worse. I deny none of this.

"However, as Senior Chief of Police, today I am publicly reaffirming ZPD dedication to the public safety. I humbly hope that our weathering this crisis together can be the first step to returning this police department to where it should be. To returning to Zootopia the police force it and its people deserve.

"As my first step for this, I am publicly promising to the mammals of Zootopia that the internal investigations into Officer Bethany Blaine’s actions during the Jack Savage encounter will be stringent and thorough, with experts brought in from other precincts to ensure objectivity. However, the results of her shooting Gazelle, as well as certain aspects of the event, leave me certain there was no ill intent on Officer Blaine’s part. She aimed low in the center of mass, where clothing and body mass would provide the most protection. The smaller caliber of her hare-scaled handgun would have required a shot to the head, neck, or chest for an immediately fatal or life-threatening wound.
“Any questions?”
The multitude of flowers and fruit baskets Judy found upon entering Beth’s hospital room made her think for a moment they were in the Rainforest District rather than Tundratown. Beth’s bed could hardly be seen beneath the Get Well Soon cards the hare and Honey Badger were currently busy looking through. Judy grinned. "Well, someone’s pretty popular now."

Beth looked up, a smile brightening her stitched-up face for a moment before she winced and clapped a hand over her mouth. "Ow…"

Honey sighed beside Beth. "You do that one more time and I'm taking these cards away until those stitches are out." And then, to Judy, “she actually started crying when she woke up and found all this here. It was so sweet.”

Judy chuckled at the hare’s resultant pout and moved a basket out of the bedside chair to sit herself and her bag down there, offering Beth a sympathetic smile. "Enjoy it while it lasts, friend. You’ll be back to paperwork and desk duty in no time. Not to mention the kind of crazies who focus more on ‘she shot Gazelle’ than ‘she saved Gazelle’. They usually take more time with their cards.”

Beth groaned. Still grinning, Judy turned to Honey. "What do the doctors say? Will there be any serious scarring?"

"Well she won't be looking like the Joker, if that's what you're worried about," said Honey, setting down the card she held to draw Beth into a hug. "Will probably have a wicked mean glower when all is said and done though, heh."

Judy eyed the half-inch slashes extending from the left and right of Beth’s mouth and sighed, reaching out to place a comforting hand on her forearm. "We sure don't get into this job for our looks, do we?"

Beth chuckled, a low and throaty noise, weak as she pulled her arm away from Judy’s touch. She tried to be discreet about it, but Judy had plenty of years of reading suspects and siblings to know when someone wasn’t acting the way she hoped. “Beth?”

“I’m sorry, I…”

The hare turned to look at Honey. The badger rolled her eyes and sighed, reaching out to take Beth’s hand in hers. “It’s okay, I promise, everything will be fine…” To Judy she said “she’s just worried that you’ll think less of her for her brother. Something I keep trying to tell her is ridiculous, but… you know how it goes…”

“Yeah, I know,” said Judy, looking at her fellow officer with newfound understanding. She didn’t like having to understand this rotten little happenstance, but she did. “Beth, listen. I would never hold anything about Jack Savage against you. The same way I don’t think less of every sheep for what Bellwether did, or every lion for what Lionheart did. He chose to do everything he did, but you DIDN’T choose your last name… okay?”

“Didn’t choose…” The hare sniffled, blinking and reaching up to scrub away at the tears suddenly threatening to fall. She wasn’t making much progress, as far as Judy saw. “I… I grew up hearing stories of my 50 missing siblings… knowing their names… my mom, she said I was the only one who had eyes like Jaclynn’s. Why I started wearing colored glasses, to make her stop. And when, when you became a cop I thought maybe, maybe I… I could avenge them, a little…”
“And when I recounted Savage’s story, that’s when you realized who he was?”

Beth was slow to answer between the soft sobs now wracking her body, giving a short nod before turning and burying her muzzle against Honey’s shoulder. The badger immediately pulled her in close, stroking the hare’s ears back and whispering sweetness to her. Judy sat apart, keeping quiet for fear of ruining the moment. She understood when tears needed shedding, and there wasn’t too much of a rush.

Eventually, the tears did stop. Beth sniffled again, rubbing her eyes before looking at Judy. “What brings… you… here?” Her eyes flickered to the bag next to Judy. “Not just… social… call.”

Judy gave a tight smile. She wished the quiet could have lasted a little longer. But the worries had been bothering her all night and early morning, and there were few better she felt she could discuss this with. “It’s… probably nothing. I hope, at least, it’s nothing. Jack Savage is in police custody, Miss Black is dead, the city’s crime lords dead or arrested with them. And yet…”

“Too simple,” whispered Beth. Her grip tightened on the bedsheets over her lap. “Loose ends…”

Judy nodded, relieved at once that she and Nick weren’t the only ones with such worries. “Too many. Like, everything Savage did, I just feel, did he really need to approach the crime lords? And what about those shipments Wolford discovered to City Hall? HiteTech Construction? Outback Island?”

“Right?” Honey took on a rather manic grin as she looked over at Judy. The rabbit, upon glancing Beth’s exasperated features, realized she was about to get a taste of the honey badger’s conspiracy theory fervor. “And what was up with Miss Black in all that? Who was she? Where’d she come from? What was she planning to get out of all this? And why call her ‘Miss Black’ anyway? It’s obviously an alias, but she was all white, so you’d think they’d call her Miss White, right?”

“Yeah, I… I…” Judy frowned, gaze turning down as what felt like a long-forgotten puzzle piece was suddenly remembered. “Miss White… Miss White…”

Cloudy_86: Ugh, that naturalist club. Why him?

The tablet next to Judy beeped, indicating the download had finished. She glanced to the windows and hurriedly ducked down as Higgins walked past, coming back up to type a response.

Officer_Blue: He was involved in Hopps’ search for the missing mammals all those years ago. No better reason.


Caught off guard by this, Judy took a moment to respond.

Officer_Blue: Hail Miss White.

“Savage truly is your biggest fan, you know. Thinks you’re amazing. White is of a similar opinion. I think you’re a disappointment.”

“Judy? You okay there?”

Judy blinked, looking from Honey to Beth and back, suddenly unsure of where to start, suddenly terrified of losing this thread of a mystery without unraveling it. “During… during the Wendigo Killings last year, when Nick and I were investigating, I found Delgato and the copycat Wendigo Killer, Taylor Monahan, make a reference to a Miss White. Delgato’s handle was ‘Officer Blue’,
or… Mister Blue. And when he had me captured and was telling me about his childhood trauma on Outback Island, Savage mentioned a lion and a spotted leopard with half a mutilated face as among the few survivors…”

Beth nodded. “Delgato and Monahan.”

“And then,” continued Judy, standing up because sitting down at a moment like this was beyond her, “Clawhauser said the moose who delivered the bomb last night said… what was it… said that they were ‘courtesy of Mister Green,’ or something like that.”

“Miss White… Miss Black… Mister Blue… Mister Green…” Honey turned to look at Beth. “I know you know I can get a little… overzealous in my pursuit of conspiracies, buuut… four mammals using colors as aliases is a bit much for a coincidence.”

The three looked at each other, unsure of what it was they were stumbling into. Judy gulped, glancing toward the door behind her before pulling her bag onto her lap and unzipping it. She drew out a slim white laptop, which she offered out to Honey. “This is one of the computers taken from Savage’s room at Cliffsie Asylum. Our computer labs couldn’t crack it, so I thought that… well, Nick’s spoken quite highly of your skills here.”

Honey blushed as Beth let out the tiniest of chuckles. Now grinning, the badger cracked her knuckles before swinging the laptop open. “Finally, the chance to use my conspiratorial tendencies for good instead of evil.”

***

“What exactly am I looking at here, guys?”

“Robobunny, the latest in law enforcement technology.”

Nick bit his lip to keep from laughing at Dr. Beltz’s joke, keeping his focus forced on the slowly rotating hologram of… something, projected into the center of the ZPD’s labs. It looked mostly like the illustrations of skinless rabbits he remembered in his old high school textbooks, only with additions. Both arms, the left leg, and the lower jaw were full prosthetics, with further bits of metal and wiring in place throughout the body. And the brain, too, it looked off to Nick, but he wasn’t enough of an expert on the subject to say how exactly.

After a moment passed and it became clear Nick wasn’t going to laugh, Beltz sighed and hit a button on the projector. The hologram shimmered, then became overlaid by an image of a white and black hare in a suit. “That was a scan of your Jack Savage, after you brought him in last night.”

Nick blinked, looking from the image to the jackal a step away. “Uh, does… does Beth look like that on the inside?”

"Not unless her mom's actually a microwave," said Beltz, tone flat despite the joke. He picked up a scalpel and began gesturing to points of interest. "As you can see here, both arms at the shoulders and the left leg from the knee down have been replaced, and by some damn fine hardware too. I read an article about a senator's son who was in a car wreck and got fixed up something like this. Must've cost a fortune."

"The guy was kidnapped and thrown into the wild as a kid," said Nick, scratching his chin. "Hunted for days, had to set everything on fire to escape. Not surprised he wasn't in one piece after that."

"That would explain the throat and lungs," said the jackal, gesturing to the mentioned areas. "Lots of old scarring from smoke inhalation there. It raises the question though of who paid for all this. He
certainly didn’t, not as a child.”

Nick frowned, at the thought and at his not realizing it himself. Bogo had said the child rescued from the remains of Outback Island had been put in the foster system. If he’d been adopted…

Bzzz-bzzz-bzzz.

"Dang it, Wilde!" Beltz slammed his fist down on the projector, shutting off the hologram. "NO CALLS IN THE LAB!"

"Right, right, because I can control when other people call or text me." Rolling his eyes, Nick fished his phone out of his pocket and turned the screen on. "It's a text from Beth? Or no, just Judy borrowing her phone. Looks like she… wants to talk to Koslov? Hm."

Putting his phone away, he looked to the jackal with a grin. “Well, Doc, this has been a ball. Unless you… have anything else?”

Beltz shook his head, frowning as he turned the hologram back on. He then narrowed his eyes, pulling a pencil and notepad from his coat pocket. “I’ll call if I find something else noteworthy. This really is some stellar work here…”

***

“Carrots. Caaarrrooooootssss. Fluff? Uh, Judy?”

At the sound of her name finally reaching her Judy blinked, turning from the observation window to Nick beside her. “Hm? I’m sorry Nick, did you say something?”

Nick rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “Just trying to get your attention for the last five minutes, Judes. Savage and Black are taken care of, I’m sure old Buffalo Butt wouldn’t mind too much if we traded for something less strenuous.”

Judy shook her head, before glancing down at the folder of photos and files she’d printed off from Jack Savage’s laptop in a rush. No, I…” She looked back up at the window, watching the polar bear in the garish orange jumpsuit drum his claws against the interrogation table. Interrogating Koslov, if nothing else, at least meant they wouldn’t be interrogating Jack Savage when his time came. “I’m fine. Just… nervous.”

She felt Nick’s gaze flick down to the folder for the briefest moment. “You find some bad stuff in that computer, Carrots? Gonna try to hit Koslov hard for all we can squeeze out of him?”

She shook her head again. “Not bad, just… conflicting. Think we’ve let him sweat it out in there enough?”

To her relief the fox accepted her change of topic, turning his own gaze back to the mirror. “Sure, I think we’ve managed to move him JUST past ‘cool as a cucumber’. I’d say it’s time to roll. Hey, why is it ‘cool as a cucumber’ anyway? I have never for the life of me understood what made cucumbers so special on the hot to cold spectrum.”

Judy rolled her eyes and chuckled, heading for the door to the interrogation room. “I guess cucumber just rolls off the tongue the best. Carrots aren’t all that cool, anyway.”

“Some are.”

“Dork. Come on.”
Koslov looked up as the door opened, features settling into a mask of cool indifference as Judy and Nick took their seats across from him. “Ah, Officers Wilde-Hopps. I was wondering when we would talk. I heard from your Officer Clawhauser that my request to only be charged for crimes unrelated to Jack Savage was accepted, so… I am uncertain what there remains to discuss.”

Judy set the folder down on the table, hiding her smile as Koslov glanced at it, instead ignoring it for the moment and resting her chin on her hands. “You were very quick to make that request, I’ve heard. Strange, how you’ve refused the services of a lawyer. You don’t like Jack Savage all that much, do you?”

“Well who would,” added Nick, propping his head up on his palm as he turned a conversational gaze Judy’s way. “I mean stellar taste in suits aside, he’s an absolute lunatic! And you know, having personally met Dawn Bellwether, I think of myself as somewhat of an authority on absolute lunatics. I don’t know, what do you think, Koslov?”

“I don’t think it matters one way or the other,” said the polar bear. “Savage is arrested. You’ve won.”

“That is true, but…” Judy reached down for the folder, pulling her hand back at seeing Koslov shift the slightest bit in his seat and instead folding both hands in her lap. “Before that, he did also leave quite a large number of dead bodies in his wake. Have you heard how he managed to infiltrate mayoral candidate Gazelle’s charity rally, Mr. Koslov?”

The polar bear raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Judy shrugged. “He had a polar bear, I’m guessing one of your former guys, swallow him whole while he wore a diving suit and rebreather. Now, I’m guessing, from the polar bear’s final, agonized words, that Savage promised to simply crawl out the way he went in. But no… he tore his way straight out of the bear’s stomach. With a chainsaw. I’d wager they’re still busy trying to get the stains out of the carpet.”

They had watched Koslov grow more agitated as Judy went on. At this last comment he loosed a growly groan, handcuffs clinking as he buried his muzzle into his hands. “Petrov… stupid, stupid Petrov… STUPID!”

Judy barely kept herself from jumping as Koslov slammed his fists into the table, reaching one hand out to keep Nick from grabbing his stun gun and instead letting the polar bear rage. “I always warned them not to trust Savage to any degree! Zhal’, chto ya mog by nanizany yego sam! Eto gryaznoye , gniloye , chert krolika ! Nenavistnyy Bugimen!”


"I'm glad to see there's no love lost between you two," said Judy. She frowned, not quite comfortable with what she was about to do. Yet still she slid the folder over to the polar bear, meeting his eyes as she stopped halfway down the table. "Sadly, that wasn't always the case, was it?"

Koslov's brow creased as he reached out to flip open the folder. The moment his eyes fell upon the first photo he pulled back as if stung, lips curling into a snarl. "Where did you get this!!?"

“Savage’s computer,” said Judy, dragging the photo back and turning it so Nick could see. “It was his desktop background.”

The photo was innocent at first glance, to anyone who didn’t know better. It showed a multitude of mammals in college graduation robes in celebration, tossing their hats up and hugging, some even kissing. Near to the front stood a hare Judy never would have recognized, were it not for his Arctic blue eyes. Jack Savage had little fur making it through his burn scars back in his college years, and his left arm was an old-fashioned, clunky sort of contraption, something that at times must’ve been
more of a hindrance than a help in getting through life. And yet, the smile on his face as he slung his remaining arm over a kneeling Koslov’s neck was heartbreakingly genuine.

“Must’ve been a real lady-killer,” remarked Nick, leaning back in his seat. “Or buck-killer, if that’s what he preferred. I don’t judge.”

“… no,” said Koslov after a moment, audibly restraining his anger. “He never had anyone that I knew of. He was a very… studious, young man, and never showed much interest in such matters as romance. Heh, his obsession with you, Officer Hopps, is probably the closest I’ve ever seen him come to even a crush.”

Judy chose to ignore that, instead spreading photos from the folder across the table, photos of what must have been happy moments in Jack Savage’s life, from birthdays and sports games to museum visits and lavish meals. The college graduation one, however, seemed to have been the last. “Chief Bogo mentioned the hare kit survivor from Outback Island being placed into foster care, but I wasn’t able to find out anything more on that. You took him in, didn’t you? That’s why you were his connection to the crime lords of Zootopia.”

Koslov didn’t respond, not at first. He reached out across the table, pausing as Judy and Nick both stiffened, before picking the graduation photo and leaning back in his chair to look at it. Whatever remained of his anger died out, replaced by a bitter smile. “It seemed a simple enough request, at first. Mr. Big’s organization has often taken in the less-fortunate children from foster homes. Better work ethic. And I will not lie, I pitied the kit for what he’d gone through, and knew nobody else would take him in for his scars. I’d hoped to… civilize him. You don’t get far in this line of work being a mere animal.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “The guy calls himself Jack SAVAGE. I think it’s fair to say you failed.”

Judy groaned and elbowed Nick’s side, eliciting a grunt. Koslov ignored them, setting the photo back down. “It started simple. Deliveries, driving, then minor racketeering, smashing up the stores of smaller mammals that missed payments, helping with cleanup and disposal. Even when he was picking fights with other gangs and pulling off weekend arsons, he was… manageable. He did it for the rush, the power, the fear other mammals felt toward him, and as long as I could provide those things, we stayed as good as father and son.”

“But eventually you couldn’t anymore. What happened?”

A snarl rippled across Koslov’s features at Judy’s question. “Miss White and her posse. Don’t dare ask, I will say nothing on them. I wish to see my darling Boris grow up and have little cubs of his own.”

Nick leaned forward, trying for his easy smile. “Aw, come on, ya big lug. We’re taking everyone else apart, I’m sure you can—”

“I can’t,” said Koslov, glaring Nick down. “I won’t endanger my son in such a manner.”

“Mr. Koslov, please, the ZPD can—”

“You can’t,” said the polar bear, looking to Judy with the sort of half-amused, half-pitying expression she hadn’t seen in years. It made her feel like it was her first day on the job all over again. “Miss White, her people, they are not some gang, some mob, some Rodentian mafia family. They are not a crime to be stopped or an injustice against the world to be avenged. They are as solid and part of the world as… as the city of Zootopia itself. Your Delgato, their Mister Blue, a part of the ZPD for decades and never suspected. It is such everywhere. Do not even try, little rabbit.”
“Is that so…” Judy didn’t believe that, and the assertion to not even try, well, anyone who knew her would know that would only make her try harder. But even she could tell from the polar bear’s tone, every word dripping with the same kind of certainty that came with stating the Earth revolved around the Sun, that he would not be budging on the subject any time soon. That was fine. There were other, more pressing matters to attend to.

“Well anyway,” she said as she began gathering up the photos from the table. “I believe that only leaves one major question to ask, and then we’ll be out of your fur.”

Koslov’s gaze narrowed, suspicious. “And what would that be?”

“Well anyway,” she said as she began gathering up the photos from the table. “I believe that only leaves one major question to ask, and then we’ll be out of your fur.”

“Why?” asked Nick. “Why do all of this? What was the endgame here, ol’ Koslov, ol’ pal? Jacky boy talked a big game of discrediting the ZPD, which yeah, I can see how you crime lords could benefit in the short term, but what about the long term? Big crime like yours flourishes best in stability, so eventually there’d have to be SOME kind of law and order restored, even if something built way in your favor. You gotta walk us through this, big guy, gotta help us out. Why?”

For nearly a minute Koslov sat there in silence, the question hanging over the room like the guillotine’s blade. Judy shared a look with her fox, wondering now if this question was too close to the Miss White issue and would remain unanswered. But then Koslov leaned forward, sliding the graduation photo back across the table to her. “We crime bosses were not the only ones poised to benefit from Jack Savage destroying the ZPD. The timing of this reign of terror was not accidental.”

Looking at the photo again, Judy didn’t know what the polar bear meant at first, but then Nick straightened in the seat beside her, tail bristling and hackles rising as he hissed “Carrots!” Then she looked again, looked harder at everyone in the graduating class. Aside from Savage she saw a moose, two bulls, a pig, a leopard, a—

Judy’s gaze snapped back to the pig. A moment of gears grinding into place, followed by a gasp. “Oh.”

***

Wolford wasn’t sure what to expect when he received the sudden call from Clawhauser that Chief Bogo wanted to see him in his office, the wolf having just been finishing his report on the previous night’s events. Wolford knew he’d been slow in getting the thing written, but he’d had other things on his mind in the meantime. Speaking of…

“Duty calls, lad. You’ll be fine here on your own?”

Alex nodded, not looking up from his book as he silently mouthed along to what he read. Wolford could only smile at the sight. The night before, the moment the crisis was over, he had taken Alex up to the closest bookstore Zoogle told him of and bought everything the younger wolf pointed out. Expensive, but oh so needed.

Wolford saved and closed his report, leaned in to plant a kiss on Alex’s head, and walked out of his main floor office for the elevator. He passed Judy and Nick as they were getting out of the elevator and exchanged quick nods of greeting, but the pair seemed in a hurry for the exit and so he refrained from anything more. It wasn’t until he’d gotten into the elevator himself and hit the button for the floor with Chief Bogo’s office that he remembered he still needed to ask them about Alex.

"Dang it! After work, ask after work..."

The door to Bogo’s office was closed, rarely a good sign. Wolford knocked, waiting for his chief's
response before opening the door and stepping through. He looked first to Bogo behind the desk,
tired and harried but looking for once hopeful at how things were going, and then as Wolford closed
the door behind him he looked to the new mammal in the room, occupying one of the chairs in front
of the desk. For a moment he thought it was Gazelle already out of the hospital somehow. But no, he
thought after a moment more of looking, this gazelle was male, taller and thicker of build, dressed in
a light grey suit and white tie. His face bore the wrinkles of an ever-present glower.

"Wolford," said Bogo, nodding in greeting. "This is Doctor Elliot Grayson, a psychological
researcher and trained psychiatrist from San Dingo University. He arrived late this morning at the
mayor's request to evaluate Jack Savage."

Wolford raised an eyebrow at that. "There's a question of his sanity, sir? I know the hare's done
monstrous things, but most experts would recognize his plans too coherent and thought out for any
kind of mental illness."

Bogo shrugged and looked to Doctor Grayson. The gazelle smiled and stood, brushing imaginary
dust from his lap. "This is true, but certain details of the situation roused my interest. It's always
unpredictable how childhood traumas affect the developing mind."

"Either way," continued Bogo, "it's better to get this cleared up now, before Savage's questionable
sanity becomes a court issue. We're short-handed right now, so I need you to accompany Doctor
Grayson to the interrogation rooms and oversee the evaluation."

Wolford's gut felt heavy and ready to heave as he thought over the situation. His eyes found
Grayson's and it was all he could do not to start growling. He didn't like this. Everything, his years of
experience as a veteran of the ZPD, his training for handling of any high-stress encounter, his plain
animal instinct, all were ringing the alarm bells. He could not get a read on the gazelle. But, the chief
was the chief, and the mayor was the mayor...

"Very well," said Wolford, glancing Bogo's way and trying to communicate every ounce of his
unease, even as he turned and opened the door once more. "Doctor Grayson, if you would follow
me, I'll have an interrogation room readied for us right away."

***

Bzzz. “Mayor Swinton? I’ve got officers Judy and Nick Wilde-Hopps out here wanting to-no wait,
you can’t just barge in there—"

Judy ignored Assistant Mayor Elloway’s pleas and threw the doors to the mayor’s office open,
causing the pig across the glass and marble room to jump in her seat. Judy ignored the hooves patting
frantically at her suit to brush away dust from the paper shredder Swinton had just been using,
remaining silent as she strode toward the desk with clenched fists. Nick at her side was a welcome
source of calm. “O-oh, Officer, er, Judy! Nick! How wonderful it is to see you!”

Nick’s smile at this was veritably savage as he moved to stand at one side of Swinton’s desk, Judy at
the other. “Oh, we’re sure it’s as wonderful as a root canal. Lot’s of pain, and embarrassment, and
digging around for what’s ROTTEN, but in the end we all come away the better for it. Right,
Carrots?"

“Right, Nick.”

Swinton chuckled, glancing between the pair as she worried the necklace of pearls around her neck.
“That’s eh, that’s a good one, Officer Wilde. Do you mind if I call you Wilde still? We’re not really
close enough for me to call you Nick, and Wilde-Hopps is such a mouthful—"
“How long have you been in cahoots with Jack Savage and Miss Black?”

This stopped Swinton dead, the look on the pig’s muzzle extremely satisfying to Judy. The expression got even better when Nick laid the graduation photo on the desk in front of her, Swinton looking like the window behind her was a tempting alternative to the conversation in front of her. “Oh Jiminy Cricket…”

“It finally makes sense,” said Judy, leaning with arms folded against the desk. “Paperwork retrieved from Cliffside Asylum places Savage’s earliest plans for these attacks about 15 months ago. Coincidentally, that’s around the same time you first begin making your disparaging remarks about the ZPD to the media.”

“The Wendigo Killer fiasco had just occurred,” said Swinton, looking to regain some standing in the conversation. “The ZPD’s reputation was in tatters anyway, Hopps. It doesn’t take a political genius to figure out continuing to support you would amount to a career suicide!”

At this Nick rolled his eyes and drew a newspaper from his uniform pocket, slapping it to the table next to the photo. “Sure didn’t stop Gazelle and her lead in the polls from the start, now did it? No, you’d had a term as mayor and you wanted more. Unfortunately, you needed just the teensiest bit of help to make sure that happened, didn’t you?”

Swinton sputtered, standing from her seat in, as far as Judy could tell, genuine anger. “Are you honestly suggesting, officers, that I made some kind of… of deal with Savage to make him destroy the ZPD, which I might add was already doing a fine job destroying itself? Or to take out my sole political rival to secure the mayor’s office another term? After everything YOU have done, Officer Hopps, you have the audacity to come in here without even a shred of evidence—”

“Oh I get it,” said Nick, grinning. “Shred of evidence. Because you were just using a shredder. I assume to shred evidence.”

Had Swinton ever turned the glare she now leveled at Nick onto Gazelle, they might’ve had grounds for assault right there. “This is an office, fox. There’s always paperwork to be shredded.”

***

Wolford kept himself to the far corner of the barren interrogation room as McHorn and Jarvis pushed a handcuffed Jack Savage in, the hare looking blessedly normal and nonthreatening in his orange jumpsuit. Wolf and rhino eyes met while the coyote did the more delicate work of securing Savage’s cuffs to the table, McHorn giving a subtle nod of his head to the observation window before turning to go. Wolford watched the hare flex his cuffs and felt the knot in his gut tighten. “Just peachy, doc,” replied Savage, giving a matching smile. Wolford watched the hare flex his cuffed hands and felt the knot in his gut tighten. "Just peachy. Suppose you want to know all about my dark childhood traumas?"

Grayson shook his head. "No need, Bogo gave me Officer Wilde-Hopps’ report on the matter. Including a strange saying you told her. It was, I believe, that the only difference between predator and prey is who gets the last bite? A philosophy that power decides good and evil?"
"Sure, if you want to get pretentious about it."

Wolford almost smiled at that. Grayson looked less amused. "Then, since they were able to do so, officers Wilde-Hopps and Officer Blaine were justified in killing Miss Black?"

Savage's smile died. A look appeared in his eyes that made Wolford feel like someone was walking over his grave. "Only if I don't succeed in killing them," the hare replied, turning his head to stare at Wolford. "Something I am going to start at very, very soon. A little emotional anguish first, I think, to prime them."

Wolford hadn't a chance to consider the implications of that before, with strength that should have been impossible for a mammal his size, Savage yanked his arms apart and snapped the cuffs securing him. Wolford shot to attention, hand shooting to the pistol holstered at his belt. "Stay where you—"

Savage leaped onto and off the table, smashing Wolford back against the wall as he wrapped his legs tight around the wolf's middle. Wolford had a moment to stare straight into Savage's wide, Arctic eyes, before the hare pulled back and drove a fist into Wolford's throat. Blood splattered Savage's whole front, down his arm and across his grinning face and heaving chest, blood Wolford realized after a moment to be his.

"Hggg-egglk..."

Savage pulled his arm back, something tearing out from Wolford's throat as he did, and kicked back off onto the table. There were screams, mammals rushing into the room, Grayson backed away into a corner, all a fading blur of motion and sound. Wolford managed a step forward before choking, dropping to his knees, hands clutching at his ripped throat as he sank to the floor. "A... Al...K-Khhhlglk—"


***

“She has a point there, Nick. However, on the topic of proof…” Judy pulled several papers from a pocket and held them up for Swinton to see. “You might be interested to know that during that reported shooting massacre at Tundratown Truckers, all the computers were destroyed. However, the GPS’s for the vehicles were left untouched, and one of them recorded a trip just last week… right here to City Hall. So, there’s two connections between you and Jack Savage. College, and the delivery company that took the bomb to Sahara Square and started this entire investigation. And wouldn’t you know it, Tundratown Truckers’ computers were all shot up, but their paper records hadn’t been touched, and that included a Proof of Delivery form, signed by one Mayor Swinton.”

“Suffice to say, that was just about enough to get one of these.” Nick held up a search warrant, causing Swinton to blanch. “So, just for fun, let me see if I can guess just how things went down. Savage contacted you for some crazy scheme to destroy the ZPD and secure your second term as mayor. Obviously, though, the ZPD have to be replaced by somebody. Maybe San Dingo’s H.A.W.C agency you’ve been threatening Chief Bogo with the last few days? Then of course, Savage goes and recruits the crime lords with, I’m guessing, the chance to strike mutually-beneficial deals with the new law enforcement regime.”

“What? Where in the world does H.A.W.C.—”

Judy held up her phone. It was opened to a news article, showing a photo of a white-coated wolf in military-style gear. “The wolf leader of H.A.W.C. is announced dead in Zootopia following the death of Jack Savage’s wolf partner. A wolf partner who before showing up here was last seen alive
in San Dingo. Even if we didn’t have photos of Miss Black to identify her as the same mammal as Lacross, it’s not the wildest guess to make. Don’t you think, Nick?”

“I do indeed think, Carrots. What do you think, Mayor?”

Swinton looked between the pair for a moment longer, mouth opening and closing as if grasping for anything to say. Finally, she slumped back into her seat, resting her head in her hooves. “I think I want my lawyer.”

Judy smiled and high-foured Nick. I thought you’d say that. Now come on, it’s only a small walk to —”

Nick and Judy’s radios crackled to life at the same instant, making them and Swinton flinch at the sound of shouts, gunfire, and Clawhauser’s frantic voice. “All units, I repeat, all units! Return to the ZPD IMMEDIATELY! We have multiple officers down, civilians dead and wounded, Savage—”

A sudden burst of automatic gunfire, loud enough to make Judy’s ears ring, and the radios went dead.
They found the ZPD lobby in shambles by the time they got back there from City Hall, the glass doors shattered, bullet holes perforating the floor and walls, the display cases for the many awards and trophies earned by Precinct 1 broken and their contents scattered to the floor. Splotches of blood could be seen wherever one turned, though as far as Judy knew everyone who’d been in the lobby had escaped into the crowds they passed on the way in, awaiting the ambulances.

They found Clawhauser ducked down beside his desk, shakily bandaging the head of Alex, Wolford’s son. At the sight of them the cheetah’s eyes lit up, a broken cry somewhere between a laugh and sob escaping him. “Nick! Judy! But wait, if you got here fine then it must be safe to move out of the lobby!”

“There are several officers come back from patrol keeping watch over those injured outside,” said Judy, placing a paw on her oldest city friend’s shoulder. Nick stayed above them, dart gun drawn as he kept lookout. “Ambulances are already on the way too. You’re good to go.”

She then turned her attention to the wolf pup, grimacing at his tattered shirt and the bloody dust caked to him, the alarming splotch of red in the bandages covering the left side of his head. Kneeling in front of where he sat so they were at eye level, she placed a hand on the wolf’s shoulder, hoping to still it. “Hey there, Alex. Everything’s going to be okay now, I promise. Do you know where your dad is?”

Alex’s one visible eye, a startling shade of gold, stared at her for a long moment, lips moving as if trying to say something, before glancing up past the desk, to one of the higher levels ringing the lobby. “Went to see the chief before everything… I… I don’t…”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” said Judy, squeezing the pup’s shoulder and trying her best at a smile. “We’ll find him, don’t you worry.”

She then looked back up at Clawhauser. “Get him out to safety. Nick and I will handle things.”

The sound of gunfire echoing from down a nearby hall made Clawhauser and Alex flinch, but Judy perked. “I think that came from… Ben, what happened here? Who attacked us, how many of them are there?”

It took Clawhauser a moment to respond as he struggled to help Alex to his feet. “It all happened so fast. It was Savage, Jack Savage, but—we thought it was Beth at first! He came up the elevator in one of her spare bodysuits and armor. Then Bertrand noticed McHorn was bleeding out in the elevator, then the gunfire started. Francine and Grizzoli managed to herd him down that hallway, away from the civilians, but…”

Judy could see the black bear some ways past Clawhauser, motionless on the floor.

More gunfire and a pained shout from farther down the hallway Clawhauser had indicated put an end to further discussion. Judy wished Clawhauser luck, checked that her dart gun was loaded, and started across the lobby toward the hallway the noises came from, Nick a pace behind. They found McHorn slumped against a wall near the elevators, uniform shirt torn off and wrapped around his neck. The rhino’s eyes were wide and unfocused from the pain. Judy wasn’t sure he even noticed them as they strode past, following the sounds of violence. Then he jerked forward, gasping and shaking, reaching out to Judy. “Hopps! Get… get out… he’ll kill you! Kill… kill…”
Judy carefully guided McHorn’s hand back to where it’d been resting on his belly, giving the best grin of confidence she could while her stomach churned and roiled. “Just stay here and rest, McHorn. Help will be here soon.” Then, having a thought, “Have you seen Wolford? His son’s outside, worried for…” She trailed off, seeing the anguish spreading across the rhino’s features, drilling into her through his eyes. All ZPD officers learned to feel and recognize that pain, sooner or later.

“Oh God.” Beside her, Nick looked ready to collapse against the wall, chest heaving, hand holding his tranq gun dropping to his side. “Oh God, not Dave…”

Judy closed her eyes, squeezing back the tears threatening to tear her throat out, heart yearning to break. With strength she’d never grasped before she pulled it all back, chained it up, hid it away for when there weren’t lives on the line. She pat McHorn’s hand once, motioned with a jerk of her head for Nick to follow, and turned away.

Further on and around a corner they found Naylor. The black wolf had been shot to pieces while coming out of the bullpen, his bullet-riddled body keeping the blood-splattered door propped open. Straining her ears, Judy couldn’t hear even the slightest hint of a pulse coming from him. They continued without stopping.

“You think he’s going where I think he’s going?”

“Yeah…”

Another half-minute of careful forward progress, of checking around corners and through doors gun-first, brought them to the doors to the ZPD vehicle lot. An elephant lay near the doors, her right ear shredded, left eye bruised shut, blood dripping from what looked like a bone saw embedded in her right shoulder. Judy almost broke down, before seeing her body rise and fall with continued breathing. “Francine!”

The elephant groaned, struggling to sit up as Judy and Nick ran to her side. “Oh… hi, you two… always kinda thought Judy and Beth the freakish exceptions to how hard you shorties can hit…”

“I could have told you that,” said Nick, trying to lighten the mood and not quite succeeding. “Good thing there are certain facts of biology that no training can overcome, yeah? Poor Jack just couldn’t get to anything vital! Good… good thing you never took my diet advice, r-right?”

Francine let out a laugh that quickly turned into pained wheezing. Judy started forward, almost pulling the bone saw out before thinking better of it and reaching for her radio instead. “To anyone listening, this is Officer Judy Wilde-Hopps. I’m near the ZPD car lot, we’ve got an injured officer here. Elephant, so make sure proper equipment—“

The sound of an engine revving out in the car lot made Judy look to the doors. She bit her lip and looked back up at Francine, only to see the elephant give the faintest of nods. “For everyone lost today, Hopps. The bastard’s got it coming.”

Judy stared for a moment, before nodding and turning away. A familiar resolve settled over her as she and Nick strode for the door. It was the same resolve when they had taken down Lionheart, taken down Bellwether, taken down the Wendigo Killer, taken down any number of criminals, thieves, murderers, and kidnappers. “Damn right he does.”

On the count of three they threw the doors open and charged out into the ZPD car lot. Immediately Judy had to duck and roll one way and Nick the other as a hail of bullets from a patrol cruiser two yards ahead peppered the ground around them. As Judy hopped back to her feet she heard Jack
Savage’s voice ring out through the concrete structure, loud and guttural. “Catch me if you can, coppers!”

“You can bet we can!” Judy shouted back as she leapt into a sprint toward the patrol cruiser, pulling out a pair of batons from her back as she ran and flipping them to hold them by the long end. Even as the cruiser’s engine roared and tires squealed as it pulled away she kept running, using the tight corners and inability for the escaping vehicle to go too fast as Savage navigated toward the exit to keep even with it, gaining an inch, then another. Then with a scream she lunged forward with all the power she could pack into her rabbit legs and hooked the baton handles onto the cruiser’s rear fender, pulling herself up onto the back of the vehicle in a flash.

“Just like Terminanteater 2,” she said to herself with a grin, before catching sight of Savage aiming a pistol at her through the rear window, the car lot’s exit onto the open road to be seen past him. The hare looked half-dead, a rabid gleam in his eyes. She ducked just as the window exploded out, feeling the bullet pass over her head close enough to graze the fur.

Then they were out on the open road toward southern Savannah Central, careening toward oncoming traffic. Judy took the opportunity as Savage focused on driving to climb forward, just barely managing to hook her batons to the edges of the shot-out window before a wild swerve around a semi nearly sent her flying.

“WOOO! What a ride!” came Savage’s voice from the driver’s seat to mock her. “Hey, what kind of tunes can these bad boys pick up, Hopps?”

Judy tried climbing forward again, slipping back down as Savage crashed through a row of lane dividers to get onto a highway that could take them halfway across Zootopia. Even as he did this she could hear him flicking on the radio, giggling to himself as he searched through stations until—

"Primadonna girl, yeah, all I ever wanted was the world!

Can't help that I need it all,
The primadonna life the rise, the fall.
You say that I'm kinda difficult,
But it's always someone else's fault.
Gotcha wrapped around my finger, babe,
You can count on me to misbehave."

“Oh God,” growled Judy. “I hate this song.”

“(Ooh) And I'm sad to the core, core, core
(Yeah) Every day is a chore, chore, chore
(Wow) When you give, I want more, more, more
I wanna be adored!”

The radio on Judy’s belt crackled to life, granting her the blessed distraction from Jack Savage’s off-key singing that she just wasn’t getting from careening double the speed limit the wrong way through traffic. “Carrots! Keep calm, I’m right behind you!”
She glanced behind her to see another patrol cruiser following close behind them, Nick holding the wheel with one hand and his radio with the other. “Hey, beautiful! Fancy meeting you here. You know, Jack Savage is really driving me crazy—”

Judy would have laughed, had Savage not decided at that moment to swerve to the left, bashing a taller giraffe-mobile off the highway. Judy watched the civilian vehicle crash into a backyard pool a dozen feet down, loosing a sigh of relief at catching a glimpse of the driver swimming out to safety before the scene whipped out of view from a turn in the road. Facing forward again, she traded one of her batons for a five-round dart gun. “It’s time to end this.”

The first shot missed Savage by a country mile. The second embedded itself in the driver’s seat headrest. The third hit his forearm with a solid thunk and fell uselessly to the floor of the cruiser. The fourth he batted away with a lazy swipe of his hand, accompanied by “The mosquitoes seem remarkably thick this time of year, don’t they?”

Judy screamed. Before she could fire her final dart at one of Savage’s exposed ears her swerved again, to the right this time and onto an off ramp, running over a lemur’s town car in the process. She yelped at the sudden jarring movement, taking the shot forgotten as her single baton dislodged from the broken window and sent her falling backward. Dropping both baton and dart gun, she barely got her legs up and under her in time to kick off the cruiser’s rear hood, giving her just enough horizontal momentum to land (hard) on the hood of Nick’s cruiser instead of under one of its wheels.

“She’s not the place to fight him, Carrots. He can send you flying with a hard enough swerve, can aim better than you, and anything stronger than that dart gun you lost would send you flying too.”

She turned to glare at her partner, who somehow kept his steely gaze on the road past her and returned her glare at the same time. “Nick—”

“Judy.”

The use of her real name gave her pause. Before either of them could say anything more, Chief Bogo’s voice came over the radios. “All units, this is Chief Bogo aboard SWAT Heli-1. I am joining the pursuit of Jack Savage. Traffic cam predictors suggest he is en route to the Lionsgate Bridge. All units, drop whatever the hell you are doing and GET TO THAT BRIDGE. Bogo out.”

Judy stared at her radio for a brief second, then looked behind their cruiser. Two or three miles off in the distance she could see the ZPD’s main SWAT helicopter tearing through the open sky in their direction. Soon it would be close enough for her to start hearing the beat of its rotary wings.

“Yeah, I know,” she said, finally accepting that there’d be no stopping Savage on the road. Sliding backward, she carefully swung herself through the passenger side’s lowered window, groaning despite herself as she relaxed onto the seat. “Lionsgate Bridge is the only land path to Outback Island. Where Tundratown Truckers made one of their last deliveries. Where all of this started.”
Nick swung the cruiser into a wide turn, following down a narrow backstreet. Just ahead, past Savage’s stolen cruiser, they could see cloudy skies, fog, and water, Zootopia Sound and Lionsgate Bridge only a few blocks off now. “Yes, yes, we can all appreciate the symbolism, but WHY is he heading for Outback Island? Supplies? H.A.W.C. mercenaries lying in wait? A readied escape boat?”

“Good question.” Judy turned around in her seat and grabbed the rabbit and fox-scaled combat shotgun mounted there. “And you know what?” Turning forward again, she opened the glove compartment and grabbed the box of shotgun shells, ignoring Nick’s pointed glances as she loaded one after another. “I’m not going to ask him.”

The next few minutes passed in relative silence, save for Nick’s mumbled swear as Savage reached the bridge before anyone could intercept him and terse radio chatter. He turned to follow after him down the straight shot of a bridge, joining up with two other police cruisers racing down the opposite side of the train tracks that ran down the bridge’s middle. Peering through the growing evening fog, Judy saw their fellow cars occupied by the Fangmeyers, Grizzoli, and Rhinowitz. Overhead she heard the THUMP-THUMP-THUMP of the SWAT chopper, flown by Bogo and whoever he had with him.

“We got this,” she said, as much to herself as to Nick beside her. “We got this.”

At only a hair longer than a mile and a half, they reached the far end of the Lionsgate Bridge far sooner than Judy felt comfortable with, as if a drive of that importance should have taken longer. From the fog around them emerged stacks of discarded, rusting train cars for every size of mammal, long-empty tankers, the back half of a fire truck with the ladder extended to the sky like a withered arm grasping for life. The solid cement and steel of the bridge changed almost at once to gravel made slick by the fog. It kicked up beneath the cruiser wheels, the crashing cacophony nearly deafening after the relative silence of before.

“Because who needs the element of surprise, right?” Nick joked, though it fell flat in the cold gloom around them. Judy responded with a quick chuckle anyway, for his pride if nothing else.

“This is Bogo. Pulling off to sweep the island perimeter for escape boats. SWAT teams and more patrol cars are on their way. Keep safe down there.”

“Keep safe up there,” Judy whispered back, though she didn’t use her radio.

After several more seconds the train tracks led them to a charred, rust-covered husk of a train station that lacked every bit of vibrancy and decoration that characterized the Zootopia Central Station. Its windows were shattered and shuttered, its gates lowered, its doors, at least those Judy could see as they drove closer, shut and barred. She felt her apprehension rise as she counted a dozen vehicles sized for various mammals assembled across that side of the station, Savage’s stolen cruiser among them. “He’s got friends.”

“I’m not sure if a guy like this can even have friends,” said Nick as he pulled to a stop next to a corrugated steel sign that read, all too drearily, ‘Welcome to Outback Island’. “More likely just a gaggle of well-trained…”

Judy had been hopping out of the cruiser, door thrown wide open for cover, but at Nick’s pause she looked back at him. He was halfway out of the driver’s seat and frowning, a look on his face not unlike the one he’d worn years before, getting the idea to use the traffic cams to track what had happened to the savage Mr. Manchas. “Nick? You got something?”

“Maybe. I…” He glanced toward their fellow officers suiting up at their squad cars and hurried to
join Judy at the trunk of theirs, open to show off their more specialized gear. “Trains, Carrots. Trains keep popping up.”

The shotgun set aside for Nick to take, Judy slapped a magazine into her custom-order designated marksmammal rifle and paused, thinking back on the case thus far. “Trains… Savage had Strangers on a Train playing on one of the laptops at Cliffside Asylum… and Runaway Train playing in his apartment…”

Nick slipped on his tactical bulletproof vest, the gears in his head visibly turning as he did the straps. “In his broadcast to the city he had three toys with him. A toy truck, a toy boat, and a toy train. If the truck meant Sahara Square and the boat meant the Aquarium…”

Judy almost didn’t secure the straps to her assault helmet as the full magnitude of what they were realizing hit her, focus quickly turning to her helmet’s built-in radio. “Grizzoli, Fangmeyer’s, Rhinowitz, Chief Bogo. Wilde and I have reason to suspect situation is a tra—”

Two things happened then, almost at once. First came a BOOM of breaking stone and screeching metal and blistering heat and blinding air from behind them that sent Judy and Nick flying against their cruiser’s rear bumper, that swept them up in a whirlwind of dust, that shattered every window and headlight and toppled a nearby crane. Then, Judy’s ears still ringing from the explosion, out from behind every vehicle arrayed between them and the station building popped a mammal in balaclavas and body armor, opening fire on them with the fury of a Rainforest District thunderstorm.

Judy saw Grizzoli go down almost immediately, panting hard as he clutched at his perforated right knee. Beside him Rhinowitz swore and dragged him back behind cover, before returning fire with his M16A2 assault rifle. The Fangmeyers joined in immediately with covering fire, Judy a moment later, picking off the station's defenders with quick, clean shots the moment they poked their heads out to fire back. She had to clamp down on the sickness curdling in her gut as she did this, the fear of what that explosion might have been. There was a job to do and another one of her ZPD comrades had been hurt. That was enough for her.

"This is Officer Wilde, we are under heavy fire! I count 15—" BANG "—14 assailants! Savage is nowhere in sight! Officer Grizzoli is down and our cars are being made into Swiss cheese! We need air support NOW!"

"Chief Bogo here, circling around now to rejoin, expect in 30 secs. SWAT teams previously en route are reporting Lionsgate Bridge destroyed, diverting to acquire air and see vehicles. ETA 15 minutes."

Judy sent a zebra in an upper window of the train station sprawling with a shot between the eyes before swearing and grabbing for her radio. "That’s 15 too late, chief! We’re being torn apart down —"

"RPG!"

Carla Fangmeyer’s shout snapped Judy’s focus back to the firefight, breath catching as she caught sight of the grizzly bear aiming a military-grade rocket-propelled grenade launcher at the cop car she and Nick were currently crouched behind. She didn't even waste time verbalizing her swear, grabbing her husband by the arm and running with him for the cover of a stack of barrel drums on the opposite side of the island's welcome sign, bullets kicking up gravel all around them.

They'd barely escaped the bullet rain when the surprisingly understated thump of the RPG firing reached them, followed a split-second later by the boom of their cruiser exploding. Judy ducked down and covered her head with her arms, wincing at the second rush of heated air and ringing in
her ears.

"THAT WAS OUR FOURTH CAR!" shouted Nick far too loudly, pieces of the vehicle in question falling around them. "THAT HAS TO BE A PRECINCT RECORD!"

"Shit," came Adam Fangmeyer's voice over the radio. "Wilde-Hopps, come in, do you copy!?"

"We copy," said Judy as the ringing faded, taking advantage of the change in angle to put a bullet in the RPG operator before he could reload. "Chief, be advised, they have anti-vehicle weaponry!"

"Copy that, Hopps. Coming in now."

Even as Judy heard these words, the SWAT chopper swung into view from around the station, doors slid open and Bogo kneeling there with a SAW loaded and propped against his shoulder. The buzzing roar as the cape buffalo began unloading on the defenders below, cutting through mammal and vehicle alike as easily as through paper, was the most satisfying sound Judy had heard in a long, long time.

"GOD BLESS AIR SUPERIORITY," shouted Nick beside her. Judy rolled her eyes and fought her smirk down. Taking aim, she put a bullet in the leg of a gazelle trying to escape out a side door, Nick following up with a gut shot to the badger behind her.

As quickly as the firefight had started, the roar of Bogo’s machine gun ended it, the world falling away into a cold, foggy silence. It was broken only by the thumping of the SWAT chopper’s blades and short, pained huffs of breath from Grizzoli as Rhinowitz applied pressure to his bullet wounds. Judy poked her head and rifle out from behind the barrels, snapping from one avenue of attack to another in search of any remaining defenders, but if any remained they had fled back into the station and retreated from the windows.

"Officers," came Bogo's voice over the radio, once half a minute had passed, “move in and secure the building. Find Savage and put him down. ETA on backup is 12 minutes with the bridge down.”

“Sir,” responded Rhinowitz on the radio, “I’m going to need evac immediately. Grizzoli was hit bad and needs better attention than I can give him.”

A moment of quiet, Judy imagining clear as day the cape buffalo mulling over his options as she and Nick picked their way back over to the wreckage of their cruiser to see if anything could be salvaged. Eventually their radios crackled again, Judy instinctively lowering her ears from the downdraft as the chopper hovered lower. “Roger that, Rhinowitz. Get yourself and Officer Grizzoli ready to depart. Fangmeyers, Wilde-Hopps, I know I’m about to ask much of you, but if Savage is still inside that station then he can’t be allowed to escape and regroup. It's not something Zootopia can handle.”

Judy knelt beside the cruiser wreckage as Bogo spoke, scavenging whatever ammo clips scattered by the explosion were still usable. She watched out the corner of her eye as the chopper hovered lower, Bogo letting down a rope and harness to the waiting rhino and the bear he supported. “Understood, sir.”

“Yeah, with all due respect, chief,” said Adam Fangmeyer through the radio, he and Carla joining Judy and Nick at their cruiser’s wreckage, “you couldn’t pay us to stay out of there.”

“Then good luck, the lot of you, and don’t do anything stupid.”

"Not going to make a promise I can't keep."
Nick's whisper was low, probably something only Judy was meant to quite make out. She gave him a fleeting smile, reaching out and up to squeeze his shoulder, a gesture he returned before turning and starting for the closest door into the train station. The others fell in behind him, weapons raised. With the rumble of the SWAT chopper fading, the world returned to its silence. Every step through the gravel seemed a thunderclap, every creak of metal from the surrounding vehicles and train cars a scream of isolation. For them, and Jack Savage.

Judy took point beside the door. She'd set her rifle aside earlier, preferring her service pistol for the upcoming indoor fighting. Adam Fangmeyer took the opposite side of the door, Carla Fangmeyer moving behind her husband and aiming her handgun over his head. Nick took center, blasting off the door's hinges with two shotgun blasts and then sending it to the ground with a swift kick. "ZPD, FREEZE!"

No answer came, neither bullet nor shout. Judy went in first, sweeping wide with her pistol as the others fell in behind her. The inside of the Outback Island Train Station was as desolate and gloomy as the outside, rusting train hulks resting on the three sets of tracks ahead and to their left, much of the free space now occupied by more barrel drums, by the trash of the most desperate homeless, by stacks of wooden crates bigger than a fox left to rot in the sea air. Judy had thought the building possessed a second floor from the mammals shooting at them from the upper windows, but instead they saw a series of grated metal walkways lining the walls and crisscrossing the length and width of the stadium-sized building. There were staircases leading up to them just to the left, past a series of ticket booth fallen to ruin.

"Fangmeyers," said Judy, keeping her gaze ahead on the daunting labyrinth of debris to navigate, "I want you two up on the walkways, keeping a bird's eye view on things. Nick and I will sweep the main space first, then move on to offices and—"

"It's really not fair, you know."

The station's PA system crackled and spat, Jack Savage's voice echoing hollow and metallic from all around them. Judy was just surprised the ancient electronics still worked in a place like that.

"If you think about it, I haven't had a real, complete success since that very first Sahara Square bombing. How embarrassing!"

Judy saw Nick roll his eyes. "Oh boy. And here comes the monologuing."

Judy agreed with the sentiment but said nothing, scanning around for a possible source for the ramblings. After a second she spotted an apparent control room halfway along the right-hand wall, where the walkways correlated with a third floor for the building, reachable by a staggered stairway. The lights were on within, brighter than the light fixtures hanging from the railings that did little to dispel the evening gloom.

She motioned for the others to follow and started up the steps. Savage continued his rant over the PA system all the while.

"Hopps and Wilde weren't supposed to return to Zootopia. The Aquarium attack wasn't supposed to fail. Little Fru Fru Big wasn't supposed to go clean and ruin my team up with Zootopia's crime lords. My... my Belle wasn't supposed to FREAKING die! Gazelle wasn't supposed to pull a gun on herself! Sweet sister Beth wasn't supposed to FUCKING OUTPLAY ME! NONE OF US SHOULD EVEN BE HERE, but I guess Plan B's down the damn drain too! So much planning, just to end in the second-worst week of my life EVER."

They reached the split in the stairs and continued up to the third floor where the control room waited,
hugging the wall as they ascended. Carla growled, the tiger bristling at Savage's tone. "Cry me a
damn river..."

Judy motioned for silence, holstering her pistol long enough to sign that with the control room only
three yards ahead, they were close enough for a rabbit or hare to hear them coming. If Savage really
was in there, at least.

"So really, I'm left with Plan C. That is, 'C for Cut and Run.' But not before this final, beautiful trap.
You four all alone, cut off from any help for, oh, 10 more minutes I'd wager, if the beach surprises I
set up work right. Plenty of time to kill you and make good my escape."

Judy paused as they came within knocking distance of the door to the train station control room,
suddenly struck by the significance of the moment. Through the crack in the lion-sized door she
could make out movement, and a quieter echo of the voice echoing from the PA system.

The pause lasted only a moment. Taking a deep breath in and out, she readied the pistol in her grip,
shared a final look with her fellow cops around her, and then charged forward to kick the door the
rest of the way open. "Give it up, Savage—"

Jack Savage couldn't give it up. He wasn't even there. Not at any of the tables or chairs spread out
around the control room, not at the fallen-to-pieces juke box in the far corner, not at any of the work
stations, not at the microphone for the PA system hooked up near to the bay windows overlooking to
station to their left, a cell phone set on loudspeaker sitting on the table right next to it.

More immediately attention-grabbing, of course, were the stacks upon stacks of dynamite. Boxes of
the explosives, stacked together along with barrels and drums of powders and fluids she couldn't
name.

Judy sagged. "Oh you've got to be freaking kidding me..."

A beep sounded from the cellphone and the world in front of Judy turned into an orange-tinted
white. What came next went beyond sound, a solid wave of heat and pressure that knocked Judy off
her feet, up, down, screams around her, something sharp and burning-hot crossing her face, a body-
stopping slam into something unyielding that drove the breath from her lungs and a soundless scream
from her lips. Then a falling sensation, another slam—

"Ngh!"

Judy lay sprawled on that broken, unyielding floor, panting for breath as pain radiated from her face,
hers limbs, her lungs, from everywhere. Her eyes stung. Her ears felt like they'd been used as
makeshift stress relievers.

"Probably... better than... alternative..."

Rolling first onto her side, then onto all fours, she ignored the prickle of pain in her toes and palms
and spit something wet, warm, and gunky up from her throat onto the ground. A hand reached up, a
whimper leaving her as she felt several gashes across her face from shrapnel, long and jagged but
blessedly shallow. She breathed in to push back that pain, draying up whatever dregs of strength
remained for the task of opening her eyes. The flames spreading in every direction, scorching the
walkways and turning the stacks of crates into eye-searing infernos, probably should have been more
worrisome.

"Oh... Everything's on fire..."

The explosion had scattered them all. Ahead a few yards she saw Carla half-buried beneath a pile of
broken crates and barrels, Adam working frantically with one arm to dig her free. The other arm hung at a bad angle from his shoulder. Nick—

“Aauh… AUUGH! NNNG!”

Judy knelt frozen in horror at the fox weakly writhing on the stairwell a dozen paces away, her eyes locked on the tattered remnants of his left shirt sleeve and the blood drooling out from it. His head was thrown back, eyes up and rolling in their sockets. She could hear his heart pounding, hard and erratic, deafening to her hypersensitive ears. “Oh God, Ni—”

“Get over here, girl!”

A sudden crushing grip on her ears yanked Judy backward, off her hands and knees and onto her back. She stared up, her body locked up by the shock of pain as Jack Savage stared down at her in open disgust. No smile, no cheer, only rage now. He stood there over her, a mockery in ZPD blues, eyes turned a Hellish purple by the flames dancing around them, white fur turned red.

A sudden stomp to her face smacked the back of her head against the concrete floor and sent a tooth flying, followed by another yank on her ears by his iron grip as he turned and began dragging her behind him toward the far side of the train station, heedless of the flames surrounding them. Judy clawed at what she could reach of him, but her limbs felt weak and sluggish still from the blast, her blunt rabbit nails doing little against his neoprene bodysuit. She looked backward as best she could, watching in growing terror as her fox went still. “Please… no… Nick…”

“He’ll live,” snarled Jack, drawing her eyes back to him. “You’ll live too. You took my Belle from me, my Black, and now I’ll take the two of you from each other. Alone, in agony, separated from all family and friends as day by day I devise new methods of terror, none worse than the absolute knowledge that you have failed. That WHITE. HAS TAKEN. ZOOTOPIA. And you weren’t there to stop her.”

Judy growled at the proclamation, terror giving strength to her struggles as she cast her gaze about for something, anything to give her the advantage. Everything around them was burning, the glass and splinter-strewn floor agony as she was dragged across it… Glass… splinters…

“One day I’ll grow bored, and you’ll see each other again, just a final time before I rip the fangs from his mouth and blinding you both, your final moments spent grasping in the darkness for each other as I bleed you dry!”

They were past the initial flaming wreckage now, out among the burning crates and carcasses of rusting trains. The heat smoldered Judy’s fur, the light of the flames almost blinding. Behind them Nick and the Fangmeyer’s could no longer be seen or heard. Ahead of them could be seen the station’s rearward gates open, a helicopter done up in faux-news markings waiting and ready for liftoff. To the side—

—a smoldering scrap of rebar among a pile of rubble, fallen miraculously far from the initial explosion. Ignoring the screaming of her battered body, Judy lunged for it, grabbed it, turning the pain of the heated metal in her hand to strength as she twisted and stabbed the piece of metal deep into the back of Jack’s left knee, right where flesh met prosthetic.

“AAAAUUUGGHHHH!”

Jack’s grip on Judy’s ears spasmed tighter for a moment before letting go, dropping her as he staggered forward, wailing. She rolled to her feet, adrenaline pumping now as she snatched chunk of stone from the floor and charged her foe, screaming her rage, her pain, her sorrow. She aimed for the
hare’s head, mind filled with visions of caving it in—

Jack turned, eyes glowing murder as he caught the wrist of the hand holding the stone. He punched down in her face with his free hand once, twice, then she blocked the third punch with her free arm and delivered a kick up into his groin.

“Hurk!”

Jack stumbled backward but didn’t let go, dragging Judy with him. She snarled now, delivering a trio of jabs to his face before culminating with an uppercut that sent an audible crack through the air and a splatter of blood from his nose.

Before Judy could go for another punch Savage let go of her caught arm and shoved for more space, then swung a kick into her right kneecap.

CRACK.

Judy screamed, almost collapsed, Savage's free hand grabbing her throat and lifting the only thing keeping that from happening. The glow of his eyes turned manic as he ignored her fists pounding his arm and staggered forward. Each step brought a grimace of pain to his face, a horrible squelching noise coming from his left leg. "Okay, to Hell with years of torture. You die now."

Judy felt the heat growing against her back, saw his face grow brighter in the light of nearing flames, and struggled harder. Punching what she could reach of his arm and kicking at his chest, glancing harmlessly off the bulletproof vest he'd stolen from her. Her horror swelled as he took it all in stride, lifting her up to a pyre of wreckage. "Scream for Jack Savage, you—"

A shot rang out, the rest of the world silent before it. Savage stopped, Judy watching with matching shock as he looked down to the growing red in the belly of his bodysuit. He looked back up into her eyes where he held her aloft, a smile twisting his features a final time. “Guess… I don’t get to see… the final act of this subtle war…”

His grip on Judy’s throat disappeared. She dropped, rolled, dislocated leg screaming its protest. She found herself on her back, looking up at Jack Savage. He swayed where he stood for a moment before straightening his back, squaring his shoulders, and marching best as he could with his mutilated leg into the pyre he’d been about to throw her into. She watched as he caught flame, motionless at first as fur and flesh blackened and cracked, before a spasm dropped him to his knees, then his side. There were no screams, no shrieks, nothing but the stench of roasting flesh and metal.

The patter of several unsteady steps was all the warning Judy got before a shuddering, alarmingly pale Nick dropped to the ground beside her from behind, her pistol skittering from his remaining hand. Judy managed to remain sitting up for only a moment longer before flopping down with him. She tried to move, couldn’t, and settled for lying there in the pooling warmth that was her husband’s blood. Above them the station ceiling was obscured by smoke, but beyond it she could imagine the open sky, the fog of the bay clearing for brilliant blues, the clouds soft and heavenly light.

“Ju… Judy…”

Judy reached out at once, managing to find Nick’s hand with her own and squeezing tight as she could. She felt him give a weak squeeze in response and smiled. Her eyes closed.
I forgot to do this Friday, and I don't post on Saturdays, so happy one year anniversary, Zootopia! =D It's been an amazing year, full of beautiful fan art and fantastic fan fiction. Here's to hoping there's plenty more to come in year two!

Let's have some fun with this. To those who leave comments, include your fave Zootopia fic. I'll include mine here: Water Under the Bridge.

Five days passed. Five days of conferences and paperwork, of arrests and arraignments, of hospital visits and grief counselors. Of taking measure of the hurt left behind. The remaining crime lords had gone to ground after Jack Savage's capture, not a trace to be found no matter how the ZPD pressed the mercs and gang members they had rounded up in their raids. Judy wondered, in the brief hours she wasn't asleep or consumed by the meds they'd given her for her mending leg and stitched-up face, if Miss White had disappeared the crime lords, doing away with any loose ends that could possibly lead to the mysterious figure. That certainly seemed the only reasonable explanation for Swinton being found swinging from a noose by officers come to arrest her, for Koslov turning up one morning in the ZPD holding cells with a bullet between the eyes.

On the sixth day, it rained in the Meadowlands. From her place near the front of the massed police officers, glad for her black raincoat and hood to protect her dress uniform and leg brace, Judy thought the rain dancing down the rows of gravestones beautiful. In a mournful sense, in the same way as the wail of the nearing bagpipes sent chills up her spine and an ache through her heart. It reflected Zootopia itself, in those days, both grieving for the lost and taking heart that it had ended, that Jack Savage was gone renewal could commence. She wished that Nick could be there with her.

Finally, the pall bearers emerged into view from beyond the edge of the assembled crowd of mourners, laden with their sacred burdens. A command from Chief Bogo snapped every officer to attention, then into a salute as the three caskets were brought forth to the two open graves awaiting them. Somewhere to her right Judy could hear soft crying from Beth, but said nothing. She was out of tears.

Francine played Last Post on a bugle as the green, white, and tan Zootopian flags were removed from the caskets, which were then loaded onto the belts that would lower them down into the graves. As her elephant compatriot played the last few notes Judy braced herself, flinching only slightly at the first crack of the rifle volley, managing to stand still for the next two.

Once the last echoes had faded and the silence of the cemetery returned, Bogo issued more commands. The flags from the three caskets were folded, then folded again until they were tightly cinched triangles, whereupon they were carried with the utmost reverence by Adam Fangmeyer and Grizzoli to the grieving family members along the front row. It was about there that everything went blurry for Judy, hot and blurry and shaky. By the time she had managed to get herself back under control and blinked the tears away the officers had returned to the police ranks.

"PARADE!" Bogo's voice carried no tears, nor the age Judy could see creeping into his eyes every day. In that hour, at least, before all those teary eyes in need of strength, he was again the stern and powerful police chief he'd seemed when Judy first joined. "AT EASE. STAND EASY."
Judy relaxed alongside her fellows, but only comparatively. There was no real relaxing at a funeral.

From there they watched as Bogo stepped aside for the ancient marten priest, his non-descript black robes in sharp contrast to his long-greyed fur. "Family, friends, brave officers of the law, we are gathered here today to pay final respects to the lives, bravery, and selflessness of Officers John Naylor, Bertrand Deschain, and David Wolford. Lost to us this past week in a moment of terrible violence."

All had fallen silent as the priest spoke, a deeper silence, noticeable only in that moment's pause for breath. For Judy, all sound seemed to go away save for his voice, swept away by the swelling flood of sadness within and around her.

"There comes a time when each of us, young or old, predator or prey, whatever our profession, where we must ask the hardest question. Why? Why must the innocent, the good, the heroes and protectors, suffer just the same as the evil? Why the grief? Why the pain?"

Judy clenched her fists, fighting off memories of every victim of a crime who had looked at her with eyes asking those very questions. The scars across her face and neck ached, her broken leg throbbing in the cold rain.

"There aren't any promises," continued the priest, bowing his head to the pair of caskets. "Nothing is certain. Only that some get called earlier than we feel they should. They won't ever know the hardship and grief left behind.

"And yet, for every heart now aching, every throat ready to howl in grief and misery, there is a person who was touched by one of these taken souls, a person whose life was made better by knowing them in even the smallest way, a person who will remember them, the good and the bad times. And that is a better legacy than we can ever hope for."

"Hey Wilde, you remember that time over in the Canal District, with the three little piggy jewel thieves and that exotic camel assassin? Who knew it was so hard to get the stench of sewer water out of your fur?"

"Yeah," said Nick, face flushing at the memories and Judy's giggles. "How could I ever forget that case, Wolford..."

He signaled, and with the start of an engine the caskets began lowering into the graves. "And so we commit our fallen fellows to the next land, to be remembered, and thanked."

Judy watched the caskets lower, now even the priest's words lost to her as she grieved, and thought. There had been so many times in the past where she'd skirted death, waved to it in passing, dared it to seek her. Not only the flooding of the Aquarium or the fight against Miss Black or the shootout with Jack Savage's mercs, either. From that very first moment of truly representing her badge, chasing down Weaselton and saving Fru Fru’s life, the possibility of someone’s death had been with her. And every time she thought Zootopia had thrown the worst it could at her, there came something, some mammal, worse. Sooner or later, she somehow knew, it would be her or Nick in one of those graves, being spoken of with reference they could never earn.

The service slowly drew to a close. Mammals began to disperse, some clapping a hand on Judy’s shoulder or back, some shooting her freshly pitying looks, her fellow officers mostly giving respectful nods. There was talk of some meeting up later at the old cop hangout for drinks to remember friends by, but Judy didn’t participate in that. Her pain pills would be keeping her from alcohol for some time.
Eventually, the only mammals remaining besides Judy were the crew of beavers filling in the graves, Beth, and the now orphaned Alex Wolford. Soon, even the beavers were gone. Judy limped over to where the hare and wolf pup both stood, looking down at the packed squares of grass beneath which the late David Wolford now rested, resting a hand on Alex’s shoulder and offering Beth a nod. It was not yet time even for smiles of comfort.

“It’s my fault,” said Beth, after the minutes of silence grew heavy. Judy looked her way, wondering how much the scars developing from the corners of the hare’s mouth must still hurt to talk. “It’s all my fault, this. I should have shot Savage that day instead of Gazelle. She had everyone distracted, he, he wouldn’t have seen the headshot coming. None of this would’ve happened if I’d just…”

“He might have pressed the detonator button in his death spasms,” said Judy, easily, having already spent the hospital nights pondering these same regrets. “Then the ZPD would be gone, and we’d be here anyway. You have to… you have to tell yourself you did the best you could.”

Beth said nothing in response to this, merely lowering her head lower and loosing a shaky sigh. In counterpoint, Alex looked up from his father’s headstone, gaze almost even with Judy’s. His right eye was red-raw and shimmering, leaking tears. She couldn’t see the left eye past the bandages still covering much of that side of his head, but the thin line of red trailing down from where the eye should be troubled her. “I don’t have other family. Nobody that wants me. What happens now?”

Judy didn’t know what to say to the child, what she even could say. She’d witnessed first-hand orphanage and foster care horror stories, especially when it came to predator children. He might have a better chance than many, being the son of a cop killed in the line of duty. But then, his gender might negate it. The world could be so cruel to those different. She knew she couldn’t give any false reassurances to the wolf either. Not to Wolford’s son.

“I guess,” she ventured at last, wishing her voice could be steadier, “first we head back to the hospital and get those bandages changed, maybe get a bite to eat, see how Nick’s doing. After that we’ll just… take it from there, one step at a time.”

“Oh.” Alex looked back down, frowning at the headstone before nodding. “Okay.”

Judy bit her lip, but could think of nothing else to say. She took the wolf pup’s hand and turned, starting in the direction of the nearest cemetery gate where she’d parked her cruiser. The rain had all but died off, the clouds above starting to break and let down patches of sunlight. Five steps on she slowed, looking back at Beth still at the grave. “Hey, are you… coming? It’s been a long day. Honey’s probably getting worried.”

No response at first, before the hare gave a jerky nod and turned to join them, hands sliding into her raincoat’s pockets. As this happened Judy looked past her, giving the headstone a final look, promising the officer there that whatever happened next, she would guard his son. Whatever it took.

“**And in brighter news, mayoral candidate and former popstar Gazelle was released from the hospital earlier today, following a gunshot wound inflicted on her during terrorist Jack Savage’s attack on her charity rally. Greeted outside the hospital by hundreds of fans and members of the press, Gazelle delivered this short address.**

“I thank you all for coming, and for all your well-wishes. Your support has helped me this harrowing ordeal as surely as anything else, and I can only hope to live up to it as your mayor. But please, remember as well the true heroes to support as well, the brave members of the ZPD who worked every day to bring the nightmare of Jack Savage to an end. In this, they have succeeded, but
at terrible cost.

“It is impossible to say for certain what the future will bring us, what joys and griefs we will face in the comings weeks, months, and years. We must remember that we are strongest always when we pull together! When we support each other, all of us, we are unbreakable! Zootopia stands today unbroken, just as it will in a year, in five years, in 10 years! Thank you!”

“Truly, inspiring words. With the former Mayor Swinton deceased and all other candidates dropped out, Gazelle has earned victory in all but name. Questions abound concerning how the newcomer to the political sphere will acclimate herself to her new surroundings, especially coming in as she is during such turbulent times. One campaign insider, speaking anonymously, says that Gazelle is in meetings already with Swinton’s chief assistant, Yara Elloway, for a smooth transition of power.

“The most critical issue facing Gazelle, of course, will be the serious lack of manpower available to the ZPD following Jack Savage’s rampage through—"

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“Mom, real talk here. If you fluff my pillows one more time, I think they’re going to catch on fire.”

A blessed, much-needed round of laughter passed through the hospital room at this, Marian Wilde joining in even as she gave her bedridden son the lightest of swats to the shoulder. “Oh, hush, you little runt! It’s motherly magic. We can fluff pillows and fidget over blankets all we want with no ill effects.”

“Oh,” mumbled Nick, blinking slowly, turning his head even more slowly toward the older fox sitting on the right-hand side of his hospital bed and smiling. “That sounds real nice. I wouldn’t mind… getting in on that…”

Judy watched the exchange from where she sat with Alex along the wall opposite the door in, near to the window looking out on a clear Savannah Central day. Nick still looked pale through his fur, sickly ill, but not to quite as unhealthy an extent as he had the day before, or the day before that, his body doing its best to replenish its lost blood after the doctors had gotten him stabilized that first day. He still had heavy bags under his eyes, still moved with sluggishness almost befitting a sloth, but he seemed fully aware of himself and his surroundings, and he could smile, and that was enough progress for Judy at the moment.

As it inevitably did during these visits, Judy’s gaze traveled down from her husband’s face, down to the stump of a left arm remaining to him. As always, the sight chipped at her heart, even hidden as it was beneath the sleeve of his hospital gown. The doctors had managed to save the limb down almost to its elbow, but no more. It had been a relatively lucky instance, the doctors had asserted. With the fires that had been raging, there was surprisingly little nerve loss in the limb. In time, once Nick had properly healed, he could easily go for a prosthetic limb replacement.

Judy had gotten a bitter laugh from that. She and Nick had little enough money saved up as it was, and with the ZPD in as dire straits as it was, she doubted they’d be able to call upon their insurance policies through it. She knew her family could help, probably would, but even then… Judy didn’t think they could hope for a prosthetic fit for anything more strenuous than deskwork for years to come.

It didn’t matter, she reminded herself as she watched Nick and his mother converse, taking full advantage of his newly reduced pain medication and the resulting ability to stay conscious for more than a half-hour at a time. What mattered was that Nick had survived. They both had, in a situation where too many others hadn’t. She was grateful for that, eternally so.
A knocking brought pause to the foxes’ conversation and drew all eyes to the hospital room door; even, Judy noticed with some relief, Alex’s, who had spent the majority of the visit either staring off into space or reading some book. Still not crying.

After a moment, the door opened. In came Nick’s doctor, a lynx whose smile toward Nick made Judy’s guts twist. Following her came a deer in a suit that screamed, as if in flashing neon letters, LAWYER.

“Ah, good,” spoke the doctor upon looking Nick’s way. “You’re still awake. That’s a good sign. How are you feeling, Mr. Wilde-Hopps?”

“Like we should’ve chosen a faster to say name,” said the fox in answer, making Judy smile where she remained sitting. “Always nice to get new… visitors…”

The doctor nodded and stepped aside, allowing the deer to step forward. He glanced Nick’s way a moment before switching the suitcase he carried from his right to his left hand and looking Judy’s way. “Mrs—sorry, Officer—Wilde-Hopps, I’m Dave Busik, the late Officer Wolford’s lawyer. I’d like to start by thanking you for all you’ve done for the city, as well as for volunteering to keep watch on Alex Wolford while affairs were put in order. That simplified things immensely.”

“Oh, of course,” said Judy, giving a polite smile as she recognized the deer’s voice now, having previously only spoken to him on the phone. “It was the least I could do,” she continued, looking Alex’s way. “Wolford was a good friend.”

“You’ll be glad to know then that my client certainly seemed to think the same of you,” Busik said, striding to the little table set against the wall opposite Nick’s bed. He set the briefcase down before pausing, Judy feeling a touch of alarm as he frowned and turned first to Marian Wilde, then the lynx doctor still in the room. “I… appreciate, the seriousness of certain health issues, but this is confidential information. Would it be a problem if I asked you to step out for a moment?”

At first the lynx bristled, eyes narrowing at the potential insult that was being asked to leave her own patient’s hospital room. But then she sighed, nodding. “Very well, Officer Wilde-Hopps isn’t due for another examination or more medication for a few hours.” Then, to Judy and Nick both, “Please, let me know if anything comes up.”

“I suppose I should be going as well,” said Marian, clambering off her chair with a grunt. She smiled at her son, moving as if to adjust his pillow again before changing course and stroking a hand down Nick’s head and neck. “Take care, boy, stay strong. I’ll see you again tomorrow. Love you.”

“Love you too, Ma,” said Nick, emerald eyes regaining their full luster as he said this.

Marian stayed smiling there a moment more, hand on his shoulder, before turning to shoot Judy an equally warm smile. Together she and the doctor left the room, leaving only Nick, Judy, Alex Wolford, and the lawyer. Judy let the door close before dropping from her seat and hurrying over into the chair Marian had been occupying, happy to have let the elder fox have it but just as happy now to be able to sit beside her husband and partner and hold his hand in hers. More than seeing him and hearing him, feeling the roughness of his paw pads told her he was still there, with her. From how his hand returned her grip and his smile brightened, she suspected Nick felt the same.

Once everyone remaining was settled, Busik cleared his throat and turned once more to his suitcase, body blocking view as he worked the locks. “As I said, I was the late Officer Wolford’s lawyer. Good man, clever and fun, truly a service to his kind. In the event of his passing, it was empowered to me to release the contents of his will.”
Judy wasn’t surprised to hear any of this. Most cops, or at least those in Precinct 1, kept wills that they updated every few months. “So, Wolford had some things he wanted to give us?”

“A few things, large and small,” answered Busik, finally opening the case and stepping aside to reveal a laptop. He opened that next, entering a password to reveal a video waiting to be played. “Primarily, this video he sent me, the day after the Sahara Square bombing. As you’ll see…”

A few more taps on the keys and the video started, the deer hurriedly backing away so that Judy and the rest could view it unobstructed. For a moment, Judy wasn’t sure what she was seeing, being a vague, shifting mass of greys and blues. Soon though there was an “Ahah!” in a heartbeatingly familiar voice, followed by the shifting mass resolving into a grinning Wolford backing up from whatever camera was recording. The view was clearly in the ZPD tech’s office, the wall behind him decorated in ironic inspirational mottos and old movie posters. “How long has this been running? Ohhh dear, sorry, first time with a new mounted camera and… er, whatever, not important. I’ll fix it in post, as the saying goes, heh.

"Sorry, sorry, not a time to be joking. Hi, all. Uh, so, this is my video will. I mean obviously, since you're all watching it... Probably should have rehearsed this beforehand... Okay, here goes. This is my new video will, as approved by my lawyer. It is mid-spring, 2020. A horrific terrorist attack has just been committed against Zootopia, and I am scared for my life, and more importantly, for the life of my son, Alex. I’ve no other family to take him if something happens to me, least of all his mother. I don’t want my poor lad in the foster system either. He's different, and systems are ever unkind to the different. As such, in the event that I am unable to care for him, I ask that Nick and Judy Wilde-Hopps take in my Alex as their own."

Judy startled in her seat, shooting a surprised glance her husband’s way. Nick looked just as surprised as her, actually managing to prop himself up onto his remaining elbow to better watch the screen. Looking the other way, Judy could see the wolf pup in question staring at the computer with a mask of indifference that, to her trained eye and years of living with hundreds of siblings, only shoddily covered his own shock.

The recording continued, Wolford giving them all a sad smile. "Nick, Judy, sorry to spring this on you, if I don't find the chance to talk it over in person. But you're the best cops I've ever met, and the best mammals. Both of you have been inspirations, and I think myself a better mammal thanks to knowing you. I know you'd see to Alex like he was your own. Sell off my house and get a good one for yourselves, or put it in a college fund, or what have you. I—"

The wolf on the screen paused, looking away a moment, lips pressed tight together, overcome it seemed by what he was asking. Judy's hands clenched, heart arcing out for her lost friend.

"I'm hoping this never has to happen, of course," Wolford finally managed, swallowing before looking back at them. "Probably won't. But still... better to have a will and not need it than need a will and not have it, right? And, and if something's wrong, if you're not in a place to take care of Alex, I understand. It's a big responsibility. Just know that... that I trusted you, if you're watching this, and that I'll miss you. And Alex, if you're there too…”

Judy looked to the pup in question, nearly jumping at the sight of his eyes starting to brim over with tears.

"If you’re there too, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for every birthday present I got wrong, and every time I made you eat dessert last, and every g-game I missed... and I’m sorry for leaving, however it happened. Just know that I love you, no matter what, and even if I’m not there to see it, I know you’re going to grow up into an amazing mammal.”
Wolford trailed off in the video for a moment, gaze turning from the camera to something else. There was a distant noise from far off-camera that made the wolf’s ears perk, Judy realizing with a start that it was Clawhauser’s shout of elation at first seeing her coming back in at the ZPD. A smile graced Wolford’s muzzle as he focused back on the camera. “Right. Um, on to the less life-changing stuff to bestow. Nick, I know you were always envious of my Sci-Fi book collection...”

Judy let the video trail on, only halfway listening to it as she thought over the request laid on her and Nick. It wasn’t that she was opposed to the idea in a general sense. The two of them had talked a few times before about eventually adopting a child or two, since they couldn’t conceive themselves. But Wolford’s son? So soon after everything that had happened? With one of them still in the hospital? She and Nick didn’t even have a place of their own yet, didn’t have a car, didn’t have current paychecks on medical leave, didn’t—

Nick’s hand tightening around her own, a soft caress of strength and warmth, drew Judy from her thoughts. She looked first up at him, his gaze of whole-hearted trust, then followed his turning gaze to Alex. The wolf pup had drawn his legs up onto his chair, face buried against his knees and arms wrapped as stockades around his head. He might have been silent, but for Judy's rabbit ears catching his low, choked-back sobs. It was the first she’d seen him cry that whole week.

... They had Marian Wilde in Zootopia, and Wolford's Rainforest District home for extra funds, and the gratitude of an entire city, and most of all, the entire Hopps clan back home in Bunnyburrow to lean on for support, and all the time of medical leave to introduce Alex. The decision wasn't so hard after all.

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The machine gunfire of her fists against the punching bag was a sound Bethany Blaine could get lost in. The repetition, the sweat matting her snowy fur, the satisfying thud-thud-thud-thud-thud echoing through the near-empty Precinct 1 workout room, the burn in her arms and torso as she pushed her limit hour by hour, day by day. The way the pain could so thoroughly supersede the need to cry.

Thud-thud-thud-thud-thudthudthud-WHAM.

Beth backed away from the punching bag, panting as she watched it swing from her combo-finishing right hook. Her eyes stung with sweat and she reached up to wipe at her face. As she did she pointedly ignored the sound of footsteps slowly approaching her from behind. No matter how much it hurt.

“Beth,” spoke Honey’s voice softly, forcing the hare to focus all her inner will on keeping her ears from perking at her girlfriend’s voice. “Beth, you’ve been in here for two solid hours, just wailing away on that punching bag. Talk to me, please. You know you can, always. You’re scaring me.”

That got under Beth’s skin. She held off enough to catch the punching bag as it swung back her way, helping it settle back into its resting position as she worked her jaw for a response. “I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to do that. I just… I… argh!”

She threw another full-body right hook, sending the bag swinging once more. “I am supposed to protect and serve! Citizens and my fellow officers! I failed BOTH! I! WASN’T THERE!”

With each shout she punched, snarling, punched ‘til her wrists hurt and her fingers felt close to breaking. She saw in the punching bag every source of her frustrations, her despairs, her rages, and felt more than ready to bleed at them. “I SHOT HER! BUT IT DIDN’T WORK! I APOLOGIZED! BUT HE’S GONE! I CAUGHT HIM! I CAUGHT HIM, BUT HE, HE—”
A scream, something savage and broken as Beth fell to her knees, face buried against the bag and bottoms of her fists tapping, tapping, as impotent against the material as she had ever been against the horrors of the world. That was it, she realized with numbing horror, Honey’s arms bringing no comfort as they encircled her from behind, the badger hugging her close. Impotent. Weak. Failure. Jack Savage had rampaged his way through the ZPD, and she had done NOTHING to stop him. Impotent. Weak. Failure. Coward. If she had dared—if she had cared—if she had shot her brother, not the popstar with delusions of grandeur—if Wilde-Hopps had only had the guts to execute her brother then—

“Oh oh oh oh oh, try everything!”

Beth jumped and flopped out of Honey’s own startled hold, heart jackhammering at the sudden ringtone to her phone. The cheery pop tune with its inspirational lyrics seemed to mock her almost as much as the get-well-soon cards she’d gotten in the hospital, thanking her for stopping Savage and saving Gazelle. She hadn’t stopped her brother in the end, after all, and she’d trade their new mayor for the lost ZPD officers in a heartbeat.

“Birds don’t just fly, they fall down and get up—”

Beth drew her phone from her pocket and answered it more to make the music stop than anything else, ignoring the way Honey was warily watching her. “This is Officer Blaine. To whom am I speaking?”

“Hello, Officer Blaine. This is Winona Hite. I’m a fan of your work. I have a sudden job opening for you.”
Interlude 3

Gazelle walked into the mayor’s office, pausing for a moment to stare at the ceiling fan from which Swinton had been found hanging. Making a mental note to have it removed first chance she got, she pressed the wrinkles out of her crimson business dress and strode the length of the room to her new desk. She had assumed the role of mayor in all but name in the days since Swinton’s apparent suicide over having her dirty dealings discovered, and tomorrow it would be made official in the eyes of Zootopia.

“And then, finally we can start doing some real good for this city, and put the horrors of the past behind us.”

Sitting down in the mayor’s chair, Gazelle set her purse down on the desk, pulling from it an old-fashioned tape recorder. Recovered, with the calling in of some favors, from the ZPD evidence lockers. Checking that she was indeed alone in the room and that she’d closed the door behind her, she hit play on the recorder. The metallic voice of Jack Savage echoed out, sending shivers down her spine.

“Survive? With the great equalizer. Fire. I stole into their camp as they slept and I stole their fire. With it I set the entire island ablaze. I burned every inch of it to ash. The hunters. The animals. The bones of my family. None survived but a lion, an antelope, and a—”

Gazelle hit stop, rewound, and erased the tape. Stuffing the recorder back into her purse, she leaned back in the chair and rolled it around to regard Zootopia through the spacious windows. The storm clouds were long gone, the city in all its diversity bathing now in the golden rays of the setting sun. Nearly 50 million lives for her to protect, care for, and serve. A daunting task that none of the previous mayors were at all qualified for.

“Start doing some real good indeed.”

A knocking on wood came from behind Gazelle, followed by the creak of the office door opening. “Ms., um, Mayor Gazelle?” spoke the voice of Yara Elloway, Swinton’s former assistant and now Gazelle’s. She had made a point of keeping on as much of the former mayor’s staff as she could, Yara especially, their experience far more important in those troubled times than any kind of political statement she could have made. “Chief Bogo is here to see you as you requested, ma’am.”

Gazelle turned her chair back around to smile at the cheetah. “Excellent. Please, let him in.”

Elloway nodded and stepped the rest of the way into the mayor’s office, turning and moving to the side to hold the door open. Chief Bogo stomped inside after her, giving the diminutive cheetah a nod before moving to take the chair at the desk opposite Gazelle. “Ma’am,” the cape buffalo said, nodding respectfully to her now, which Gazelle returned. “It’s good to see you’re out and moving so well after your injury. I’ve said this before, but on behalf of the Zootopia Police Department, I would like to formally apologize for—”

“Chief Bogo, please,” said Gazelle, keeping her smile and waving her hand in a dismissive gesture. “You’ve apologized before, and I have accepted your apology, many times. I’d be concerned for the mammal who could have predicted so sickening a method of infiltrating an area, and Officer Blaine’s methods, though… painful, were perhaps the best option we had in that situation.”

A chuckle slipped out, her smile growing rueful as she thought back on her first thoughts at getting shot in the gut, the pain and confusion countered almost immediately by the sight of Jack Savage
getting disarmed and arrested, until she didn’t know what she was supposed to be feeling at all. “And to be honest, it might sound selfish, but I am relieved at not quite having to follow through on my convictions to their utmost end.

“But enough of that,” she continued, returning to the matter that had brought them both there. “There’re more pertinent issues to discuss. The city is only just starting to come to terms with all that has passed. We both, in our positions, have a lot of work ahead of us in returning to them a sense of normalcy and safety.”

“It won’t be easy,” said Bogo, tapping a hoof against the desk, gaze distant and thoughtful. “The ZPD’s suffered… losses. The Precinct 1 ranks are dangerously thin. We can mitigate this by transferring officers over from other Precincts, but until the next Academy class graduates… even with the major crime lords dead or arrested, we’re certain to see an upsurge of crime in the city for the next few months, perhaps for as long as a year or two.”

Gazelle sighed, leaning back in her seat and rubbing her temple. She had expected such an answer. She watched and read the news, she drove the streets, she read the reports. Zootopia, though recuperating, stood on the edge of the brink. One wrong move, even too much hesitation to make the right move, could send everything collapsing down into chaos. Gazelle had dedicated her entire life, every day since Outback Island, to fighting back the chaos of the world. The thought of losing to it right then, at the cusp of being in a better position than ever to fight…

“I have an idea.”

Gazelle startled in her chair, turning with Bogo to look at the cheetah they both seemed to have forgotten about beside the office door. Elloway swallowed, stepping forward and laying a thick folder on the desk. “Swinton was a… troubled, mammal… but she wasn’t bad until Miss Black contacted her in the guise of Bellatrix Lacross, head of HiteTech’s H.A.W.C. And HiteTech itself…”

“Might be open to fairer negotiations,” said Bogo, rubbing his chin and staring off elsewhere again. “They’re building a branch down in the Nocturnal District anyway…”

Gazelle frowned, staring at Elloway with narrowed eyes even as she reached out to open the folder. Charts, polls, estimated costs, ratios of the Nocturnal District’s ZPD force made up of mammals that weren’t solely attuned to that environment and could be transferred to other precincts. The cheetah, and those Gazelle suspected she worked with, was a thorough mammal. Dangerously thorough.

“I don’t like it,” she said finally, setting the folder back down. “Miss Black never took the limelight like Savage did, but the association with HiteTech and H.A.W.C. is still there. The message we’re sending is, at best, problematic.”

“I don’t like it either,” agreed Bogo as he slid the folder over to read through as well, “but short of providing Zootopia insufficient law and order, what other choices do we have?”

None, Gazelle realized, a sinking feeling growing in her stomach. She sank back further in her seat, gripping the armrests tight. Of everything, she disliked Elloway’s private smile most of all.

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The hardest part to taking Alex in was not, to Judy’s surprise, the paperwork. There was a lot of it, much in legalese that even she found somewhat tedious. But that was the worst of the paperwork, boredom, interspersed now and again by a sudden flash of realization that she was taking another mammal’s life in her hands in a way she’d never done before, that her home was growing by one,
that everything was changing.

The hardest part of the whole experience was not even finding a home for them all, though Nick still being in the hospital and not being able to help didn’t make it all that easy. Alex had lived in the Rainforest District but gone to school in Sahara Square, and Judy was desperate to preserve as much of Wolford’s son’s old life as possible, so she limited her home search specifically to those two districts. Wolf-scale housing was just barely on the too-large side of things for mammals like Judy and Nick, which limited things further. There was the usual anti-predator and anti-fox prejudice to be encountered when Judy told realtors of exactly what sort of family was shopping around, not to mention the interspecies relationship prejudice, all such things weaker than in the days Judy had first come to Zootopia but still prevalent here and there.

To Judy’s pleasant surprise and relief, Fru Fru Big came to her rescue four days into the search. The Arctic shrew was proving true to her word in dismantling the “family business”. What wasn’t being shut down and confiscated by the police, donated generously to the police, or put to auction for funds for the Big family to focus on their non-criminal ventures, Fru Fru was wholeheartedly offering to Judy to help her on her way. The mid-sized, well-to-do Sahara Square apartment, though a longer commute to work, in its proximity to Alex’s regular haunts was otherwise perfect.

“You brought my dearly departed father to justice, Judy. I can never, ever repay you for that. Just take care of yourself, darling. You and Nick.”

No, the hardest part of it all was the slow, thorough process of saying goodbye to the Rainforest District house Alex had lived his whole life in. Putting the house on the market. Going through and categorizing everything in it as something to keep, sell, give away, or if it was anything case-related, organized and returned to the ZPD. Some days it was just her and Alex, other days someone else from the precinct would pitch in, Clawhauser or Adam Fangmeyer, and sometimes it’d be one of Judy’s siblings, once the process of bringing over belongings from the farm started. Those, ironically, were the hardest days. Alex would hide away in what would soon become his former bedroom, leaving only the rabbits to the work. Judy, despite how hurt it made her family feel, couldn’t really blame the wolf. Things were changing, for everyone.

It was the last day of the process before Nick would be getting out of the hospital, the majority of everything to be sold or returned to the ZPD sold or returned, leaving only the basic furniture that would be staying with the house and some last items from Wolford’s bedroom and study. Raining, naturally, though a natural rain for once in the Rainforest District. Judy stopped outside of the door to Alex’s old room, listening for any sounds of one of the wolf pup’s crying fits, knowing from experience how much he hated her walking in on those. When she heard nothing, she breathed a sigh of relief and knocked on the door. “Hello? Alex? I ordered a pizza for lunch, it should be here in a few minutes. You want to come take a break and wash up before it gets here?”

The following silence felt like it lasted for several minutes, though really it couldn’t have been more than one before the door opened and Alex stood there, looking at Judy with eyes recently crying, from the subtle stains marking his oversized tee. Judy made no comment about this, putting on a smile and holding her hand out. Half a minute of Alex staring at the offered hand before he sighed and took it.

They ate out on the house’s small patio, watching the rain fall from the safety of the leaf-styled overhang. It was a soft rain, warm and steady, the kind to fall asleep to when it came at night. Judy did most of the talking over the pizza, dismayed but undaunted as her foster son gave his terse responses.

“So, once Nick’s out of the hospital, I was thinking the three of us could go over to Bunnyburrow
for a couple of weeks. Just get out of the city for some fresh air, introduce you to the Hopps clan and the Hopps clan to you. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds fine.”

“Good… How has it been, going back to school? Any classes you’re glad to be doing again? Any you wish you could stop again? I remember, back when I was around your age, I absolutely hated History. Unless it had something to do with Zootopia or law enforcement, it just would not stay inside my brain! Heh.”

“School’s been fine. After everything, nobody still cares that I’m a boy. That’s nice.”

“Yeah, it is. I uh, I noticed you have a lot of books? I mean, kind of hard to miss when you’re helping to pack them, but uh… really great to see someone your age being so into that. Reading’s great! You have any favorite books?”

A shrug. “Redwall is nice. Legends of Heraldale. Dracula.”

“Oh, wow, that last one’s a little… a little heavy for you, isn’t it?”

“My dad let me read it.”

Judy winced, looking away from Alex to her plate. Her appetite suddenly gone, she occupied a minute with sliding her remaining half-eaten slice back into the pizza box and gathering up the plates and used napkins. Something to keep her hands busy as she thought, distraction from the numbing rain still pouring.

“About four years ago now,” she started, not looking over to see if the wolf pup was listening, “I lost my last grandparent. An old buck, gnarled and stuck in his ways, but someone I loved dearly all the same. He was the first grandparent or great-grandparent whose passing I missed, being in Zootopia at the time. The others had all been by natural causes, old age or sickness that we could see coming and I could return home for. But he—it’d been an accident, a hit-and-run while he was getting the mail—he—the paramedics, they said it’d probably been instantaneous, no pain. It didn’t help, knowing that he… that he was… gone.”

Judy dumbed the gathered trash in a garbage bag they’d brought along for the job and returned to her seat at the patio table, only then looking Alex’s way. He was watching her, silent, perked ears alone telling her how closely he was listening. She took a drink of the tea she’d been having with the pizza to wet her mouth before continuing. “When I got the phone call, I was at my apartment, luckily. It let me cry and sob to my heart’s content. Then I went home for a week, and there was a funeral with all my family, and we all cried and sobbed some more. Only, it was easier, there on the farm. More… fulfilling, for lack of a better word on my part. Because of my family there with me.”

“I don’t have any family,” said Alex, in such a straightforward fashion it made Judy shudder. “Just you and Nick.”

“I know,” said Judy, slowly, picking her words carefully. “I’m… sorry, for that. I… truly don’t know what you’re going through right now, what it’s like. I’m just trying to… I want you to know that we’re here for you, Nick and I, and all of my family. However you want us. If I can just share my family with you, in any way, please… let me.”

The rain continued pouring. Alex sniffled, wiping his nose with the back of one hand while the other worried at the edge of his plate. Just as Judy began to think he wasn’t going to respond at all he swallowed and looked back over at her. “Judy?”
“Yes?”
“I’m… I’m looking forward to going to visit your family.”

Judy smiled.

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“THIS IS GODDAMN POLICE BRUTALITY, YOU WART-NOSED FLAMIN’ GALAH! I’M GOING TO RIP YOUR—AUGH!”

Beth gave the koala’s arm another twist where she had it behind his back, trying not to grin as she guided the fight-seeking little mammal toward the trashed-up bar’s rear exit. “I don’t know exactly what you just called an officer of the law, and I don’t know what you were planning to rip off of me, but really they’re just icing on the cake anyway compared to everything else I got on you.”

It had been plain, dumb luck that she and Honey had stopped at the Savannah Central bar for a vague attempt at a night out at the same time the koala had decided to move on from throwing bottles and chairs around to picking fights with other patrons. Two rabbits and a dingo had been laid out on the floor with black eyes in their immediate future before Beth had managed to get through the half-horrified, half-fascinated crowd of onlookers. The koala had been snarling, spitting swears and punches as readily as he breathed.

And even out of uniform as she was, casual black with a green jacket, he still seemed to recognize her easily enough.

“HEY, LOOK! IT’S JACK SAVAGE’S DUMBER SISTER! I’M GOING TO SMASH YOUR CARVED UP LITTLE FACE—”

He got no further than mid-swing, Beth stepping inside his reach to plant an elbow firmly in his gut. All his breath left him then, Beth stepping aside so his weight couldn’t fall on her. From there she’d grabbed his arm, twisted, and ended the fight clean as could be, to the general cheers of the onlookers.

BANG flew open the bar’s rear door, Beth marching the koala out into the dark, trash-strewn alleyway beyond. She tossed him bodily to the ground, ignoring his spluttering yells from the middle of a puddle and looking to Honey beside her. “You call the ZPD?”

“Yes,” said the badger, looking left and right down the alley as if to make sure the area was clear aside from them. “They said they’d have a car over in 5 to pick him up.”

Beth grinned, looking back at the koala in time to catch a punch aimed for her face. She struck out with a palm strike to his gut, followed by a spin and roundhouse kick to the backs of his legs that had him sprawled on his back on the ground once more. “Stop that before I feel like getting serious about hurting you!”

“Stup… stupid hare… bloody… kill you…”

He tried getting to his feet, Beth stopping him with a foot planted firmly on his chest. Frowning at the koala’s near-suicidal want for a fight despite a lack of any alcohol on his breath, Beth knelt down and began rifling through the pockets of his jacket and jeans. Wallet, cellphone, pen, pocketknife, lighter—

The crinkle of plastic caught her ear, deepening her frown. She heard Honey swear behind her as she pulled a small sandwich bag half-filled with small, neon-blue crystals from an inside jacket pocket.
“Oh cuss. Is that what I think it is?”

Beth nodded, pocketing the drugs before rolling the koala over onto his belly to cuff his hands behind his back. Night Sapphires. The strongest, most expensive Night Howler-based drug on the streets at the moment. And this, on her night out of all times, was the first discovered presence of it in Savannah Central.
Decided I wanted to get a little experimental with this interlude. I don't know how well it works out, but I hope y'all enjoy it all the same.

Also! Been writing fan fiction for literally years, and one of my fave practices is picking out perfect actors and actresses for OCs. Doing the same here got me curious. Who all do you hear for Bethany Blaine, or Jack Savage, or Yara Elloway?

“Dear Detective Nicholas Wilde-Hopps,

“I am Winona Hite, President and CEO of HiteTech Industries and Director of H.A.W.C. We have never met before, but I have long followed your career with great interest. When I first heard that a fox had been allowed into the Zootopia Police Department, I was disbelieving. After looking into you and your role in stopping Mayor Bellwether’s Night Howler Conspiracy, I was ecstatic. Finally, another step on the long road toward the true equality that I have fought and bled for. Your performance record over the years, the cases you have solved, only heighten this. Good work.

“I have sent you this letter to thank you for your recent work in bringing Jack Savage to justice. Not only him, but his partner, Miss Black, as well. I profess, I am embarrassed that the commander of my own private law enforcement agency could have also been an infamous terrorist for so long. It is a blemish on H.A.W.C.’s record that will take many years of work to make up for. But, that process could not have started at all without you and your wife, Officer Judith Wilde-Hopps. H.A.W.C. shall grow better and more just by your actions.

“As a sign of my appreciation, I have sent more than merely this letter. There in your hospital is the first in a new line of advanced prosthetics HiteTech will be releasing soon, intended specifically for law enforcement and military personnel. This particular prosthetic comes equipped with devices fitting your and your wife’s general needs, including a GPS tracker, a radio, and a recording device. I won’t bore you with the technical details here, but along with the prosthetic come a suite of instructions for maintenance and care, as well as the requisite tools, though I would recommend going to a professional for more involved repairs. You should have no problem returning to normal policework if you choose to accept this gift. I understand you and your wife work best together, and I would not see you separated by a mere stroke of misfortune.

“May the days ahead shine ever bright upon you,

“Winona Hite.”

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"Dear diary,

"This is Alex. Alex Wolford. To me, at least. I don't know how the foster papers work, exactly, but I'm not adopted and Judy and Nick have never introduced me as such, so I know I'm not Alex Wilde-Hopps. That name is a mouthful.
"Today's the first day I've written in you. Sorry. The doctors said it'd be a healthy way to unload, but I never felt like it. A lot of stuff happened today that I need to get down, though. Left Zootopia for the Hopps family farm today. Didn't pay much attention at the wedding, so the farm felt new. Wonder if farming's really as fun as they make it sound...

"The Hoppses were... rabbits, I guess. Judy's not an exception, even the adults are only my size. Don't dare hang around the kids actually my age. Which is fine. I'd rather stay in the room they gave me as much as possible. The rabbits maybe didn't mean it, but they were skittish. Really, really skittish. It's weird. Nick's still taller than me, at least. Maybe orphans are just really that rare with rabbits.

"Nobody seemed to mind Nick's pros... prosti... prosthetic? That much. Something about a thresher accident. Ouch.

"It's late. I'm going to read some and go to bed. Um... Bye."

***

"Hey, Beth, Judy here! Guess I called you at a bad time, heh. I just wanted to call and say thanks for your idea of devoting this week away to paperwork. You were right, a lot of cases got interrupted by Jack Savage, to get things reprioritized and to the correct mammals again. Chief Bogo definitely seemed grateful for the help there. Boring stuff, but any way to help, right?

"Alex is... doing as well as I could've hoped. We've only been here a couple days, and he seems to be getting along well with those who approach him, but he's not really... connecting, if you know what I mean. I'd hoped a change of scenery would help him, but I don't know now...

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ramble on like that. I'll figure something out. Still lots of things to show him around the farm and around town.

"And hey, when you get this message, send me Honey's phone number! I know her specialist field means only a third the time at the academy, but I want to know how she's doing anyway.

"Well, I've probably rambled enough. Hope you get this message soon, take care!"

***

"WHY DIDNT THEY SHOW ME THE HOPPS FAMILY LIBRARY EARLIER!?

"Stupid, stupid bunnies!!!"

"Last day here before the day we leave for Zootopia, and only now does someone think to show me the library... It was amazing. Crazy extensive, just like their theater and music room and gardens and and... AAAAAUGH.

"They must have done this on purpose. It's the only thing that makes sense. They knew I'd spend all my time there instead of 'socializing', blech. Now we have to come back if I really wanna look around. Meanies. Dumbheads. Floppy-eared hairballs. Heh, hare balls.

"Not giving Judy the satisfaction of asking to come back soon. I heard one of them, Terrence, talking about holiday get-togethers. Only a couple months 'til what they're calling the Carrot Days Festival. I can wait that long. Dad taught me how.

"Stupid, stupid bunnies.
"I guess things haven't been too bad here, aside from the library jerkery (Is that a real word?). Really pretty out here. The city's not open like out here. There's a fox baker in town, fed me carrot cake 'til I thought I was gonna burst. And there's this bunny girl twice my age, and a guy a few years older than me. They're, they're like me. Judy's mom said there were two more, but they'd moved away to families of their own already. I I guess with that many kids, the odds get on your side eventually. It was scary talking to them, but we became friends on Muzzlebook and now... now I don't know.

"Tomorrow we go back to Zootopia. It's the first day in my new house too. I hope it's okay.

"Good night."

***

"The legal battle all of Zootopia has been following reached a surprising conclusion today. Mayor Gazelle, after much public and private deliberation with the city council and district leaders, decided to accept HiteTech Industries' denial of any connection to the terrorist acts of Jack Savage and Miss Black that plagued this city two months ago.

"The accusations first arose following leaks from anonymous sources that individuals within HiteTech had been aware of Miss Black's second identity as Bellatrix Lacross, commander of H. A. W. C. Mammals named as having known this include Doctor Grayson, of HiteTech's Psychological Research Division, as well as company president and CEO, Winona Hite.

"Aside from a lack of evidence found to support such claims, it is theorized that the decision comes partly thanks to the swell of public approval following yesterday's sudden and daring Nocturnal District raid by H. A. W. C. forces on what was revealed to be a mammal-smuggling ring. The raid, approved beforehand by Mayor Gazelle and overseen by veteran ZPD officers, was led by former ZPD officer Bethany 'Frosty' Blaine, now H. A. W. C. strike leader.

"Officer Blaine, viewers will remember, played several critical roles in the capture and eventual death of Jack Savage, her brother. The exact details regarding her departure from the ZPD remain a mystery.

"And now the weather, with Olly Otter. How's it looking out there, Olly?"

"IT RAINING SIDEWAYS."

***

“Hey, Finn. You good to come pick me up? I think I kinda need to get out of the apartment for a little bit.”

“What’d you mess up this time, Wilde?”

“Oh no, I didn’t mess up anything! Everything was going fine! Better than fine, probably as nice as it’s been in weeks!”

“Mhm, sure, sure.”

“I mean it! Or I mean… I don’t know, man. I was helping Alex with some homework, then Judy got home from the store with dinner. We started heading for the kitchen to eat when I just…”

“Just?”

“Nothing! I just told the little runt to wash his hands before eating, and suddenly he explodes on me.
Shouting, snarling, then he stomped back to his room and locked the door. Still refusing to open it to me, though Carrots at least got him to open it enough for a sandwich. After giving me this Look, though. Capital L, man."

"Wow, loser. Helping with homework, telling to wash his hands. We haven’t done our scam in so long, you desperate to be a real responsible sort of daddy?"

"Uhgh. I wasn’t trying—I wouldn’t—I can’t be Wolford! I wouldn’t dare try to do that to Alex? I hadn’t meant to… aw cuss. When the cuss did I start it with the homework?"

"Iunno, probably around the time you started faking your swear like some kind of ninny. You got any real problems, Wilde, or can I get back to the game?"

"No, no, I guess not… uh, thanks for talking, man. Take care."

"Take care, yourself, ‘Pops’. Hah!"

***

"Terrence, it’s hilarious! Judy and Nick were chasing some suspect through a construction yard and Nick’s prosthetic arm got caught by a magnet!"

"Nice hearing from you, too, pup. Was wondering if you forgot my Muzzlebook account. But oh my gosh, is Nick okay???

"I think so. He didn’t have to go to the hospital or anything, and Mom couldn’t stop laughing while she told me about it. I think they’re going to take Nick off field duty until they can make his arm safe again, which is a bummer."

"Yeah, I—

"Wait, Mom? You mean Judy?"

"…"

"Alex, come on, it’s okay if you start thinking that. You said you don’t remember your original mom, you’re not replacing anyone."

"Shut up. Don’t tell anyone. I didn’t mean it!"

"Alex…"

"SERIOUSLY! I DIDN’T MEAN IT!"

***

"Mom, I texted you this so that nobody else can hear it, and please delete it once you’re done. Please.

"First, thank you for the wonderful time this Carrot Days Festival. It was great being back and seeing the family again. Even better seeing Alex getting along with the family more. I worry about him so much, you know? I want to do the best I can for him. For his sake, and Wolford’s. He so rarely smiles, but when he did in the library, or at the game booths, or at Gideon’s pie stand…

"And that reminds me why I’m texting you. Please, if you ever loved me, go burn that tape of my old Carrot Days play. PLEASE. Alex kept looking over at me and GIGGLING on the train ride home! I thought my ears were going to catch on fire!"
“If nothing else, at least just give me a little warning next time you plan to play it. Make sure I’m properly inebriated. Anyways, love you, talk again soon.”

***


“At 4:29 pm, my partner, Detective Nick Wilde and I, responded to calls about some sort of domestic disturbance on Trunkway and 5th, Sahara Square, due to unrelated circumstances putting us in the same general vicinity. At the given address we found the front door open, almost off its hinges, and I could hear pained breathing from somewhere within the house. After calling in an ambulance for possible injured civilians, we entered the house to a scene of utter destruction. Tables and chairs upended, cabinets clawed up, pictures on the walls and various collected vases and knick-knacks shattered and thrown around. Claw marks along the walls and floor as well, not large, but deep.

“It was at this point, as Detective Wilde radioed in for backup, that I founded two of the house’s occupants in the living room. Greg and Delila King, deer, married for 15 years. The pair were huddled against a wall, clothing torn and bodies littered with numerous small but unmistakably savage bites and claw marks. The wife was openly weeping, the husband close to that point. When I tried to approach they both pressed closer against the wall, as if frightened by me. I stopped and backed away a pace in hopes this would help calm them down, and asked what had happened. The most I could get from either of them was a frightened look toward the stairs to the house’s second floor.

“Waiting for Detective Wilde to rejoin me, we left the Kings downstairs and ventured up. It was at the top of the stairs that we found the third family member. A young buck, 7 or 8, lay sprawled in the hallway connecting the stairs to the upstairs rooms. A thorough check for pulse and heartbeat confirmed him deceased. His muzzle and hooves were covered in blood, and an on-site toxicology analysis found heavy traces of Night Sapphire in his system. A quick search of the upstairs rooms found an open and half-empty bag of the drug on the master bedroom’s floor.

“Professional impression: the child went digging through his father’s or mother’s belongings, found the Night Sapphire, and overdosed from his smaller size into full savagery. Eventually his heart quit from the strain. What remains now is determining which parent, if not both of them, the drugs had belonged to, and what to do with them.”

***

“Dear Diary,

“Getting kind of weirded out. It’s been a week and Mom Judy is still acting really clingy. Sits closer during dinner, wants to hang in the living room watching TV and movies more, always asking a lot about how my day’s been and how I’m doing. It’s not bad, just… weird. Nick’s not as bad, but I think he’s still hurt from when I yelled at him. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that. I miss my dad, but he and Dad were friends, weren’t they? He should be okay. I think this is all because something happened at work. Something bad. Judy doesn’t talk about work as much as she used to. I hope everything’s okay.

“Today was Saturday, their off day. We went over to Zootopia’s Museum of Art after I told them I’d never been there. It was really neat! There was this one section totally devoted to aquatic mammal art. We saw these big ol’ statues of a fox, a bunny, and a bear, made by some orca who’d never seen any of them in his life and had just gone off descriptions of them. They were awesome!

“And terrifying. Really, really terrifying. At least, I think they were to Nick and Judy. I didn’t really
get that much, but… the doctors said that’s normal too, after my experiences at the ZPD while Jack Savage was there. It made me feel bad. I’m not broken.

“I’m going to go see if Judy wants to watch Meowana again.”

***

“Mrs. Wilde, this is Doctor Crushrew. I’m calling to let you know that I’ve got the results of your July physical from last week back. When you get this, I’d greatly appreciate you calling back so we can schedule another appointment. It’s nothing to get alarmed about, I’d merely like to increase your medication. It’s not at all uncommon for vixens of your age to develop heart issues. As long as we get this issue settled and you take it easy from here on, things will be just fine. I gave you my card at the physical, so please, call soon.”

***

“Hey, Frosty, it’s Nick. Pick up your darn phone. I need to talk to you about that mammal-smuggling ring you and your H.A.W.C. goons busted up a couple months ago. The paperwork’s not adding up. You transferred five mammals our way for processing, but the earlier paperwork said there were seven taken into custody. The official report on fatalities and the on-scene report are a mess too. What kind of Mickey Mouse operation are you guys running down in the Nocturnal District?”

***

“Honey Badger War Journal, August 1st, 2019,

“There’s a sickness crawling through this city. It’s scaring me. It’s so subtle, but so pervasive. Even I probably wouldn’t have noticed anything, if I weren’t in with the ZPD. But there’s so clearly something happening, here. Months ago, nearly the entire leadership of the city’s criminal empires gets taken out, along with the current mayor and two major import/export routes, Tundratown Truckers and the Aquarium. A drop in ZPD numbers requires HiteTech to bring in its own law enforcement forces to keep its business secure. There’s a steady rise in Night Howler-related drugs hitting the streets. Whispers now from arrested dealers of a new crime lord assuming control over ALL the beheaded Zootopia gangs and families.

“Miss White. Probably same Miss White as involved in Wendigo Killer and Jack Savage. Keeping suspicions close to chest for now. ZPD infiltrated/corrupted before, no certainty it can’t be again. Maybe already has been. Same with H.A.W.C. I trust Beth, but otherwise…

“Mayor Gazelle seems on the level. Mayoral efforts have been focused mostly on rebuilding from Jack Savage damage and dealing with Night Howler drug crisis. Remotely hacked her computer, found nothing incriminating beyond a single strange contact. Why does Gazelle have email and phone number for Doctor Grayson?”

***

“Hey, Dad. It’s me, Nick. I haven’t come down here in a while. Sorry for that. It’s uh, it’s been a busy past six months. Lotta crime and criminals to stop, citizens to save, stuff like that. It’s been tough, but, there’s nothing I’d rather be doing and nobody I’d rather be doing it with.

"I'd like you to meet someone. That handsome rogue of a wolf pup waiting with Mom in the car there is Alex, Alex Wolford. He's the son of one of my oldest friends in the ZPD, David... ah, but you two are probably hanging out right now anyway. Trading embarrassing stories about me and stuff, I bet. Heh..."
"Anyway, Judy and I, we've been taking care of Alex for about half a year now, will be doing so for... as long as he'll have us, I guess. He's a good kid. Smart, wicked-smart, helpful, what someone like Judy might call 'cultured'. You'd have liked him, I think.

"We're heading out this weekend to Bunnyburrow for a fishing trip with some of Judy's folk. Judy's caught in testifying for a case and can't make it, but insisted we go on without her. And yeah, I know. Bunnies, fishing? Guess they like it for the sport, plus apparently fish can be made into a pretty good fertilizer. Who knew?

"Our family... it's not what anyone would probably call conventional. Bunnies, and foxes, and wolves now. Crazy, right? But it works. We make it work. Having Alex around, it makes me realize how much I took you for granted, how much it hurt losing you. I miss you, Dad. I love you."

***

"Chief Bogo! Nick found a lead on the Night Howler Drug case! It's Bunnyburrow! There's a supplier in Bunnyburrow! One of my sisters told him! We finally have a substantial lead! We can end this!"
The Bust

One month. One month and three days, if Judy wanted to be precise. It had taken that long to assess and track the Bunnyburrow NH dealer in her sister’s school, move from him to his suppliers, follow invoices and cross-reference shipping dates for plant growth additives, attain warrants, follow lead after lead in the long, winding trail back from Judy’s hometown to the source in Zootopia, the entire process made all the harder by the extreme care taken not to alert anyone. One month and three days, and they were nearly ready to finally cut out the heart of the Night Howler drug infestation growing within the city she loved.

It made the remaining waiting all the more unbearable.

“No more, please, I beg of you. No more guessing games!”

Judy chuckled at the almost-whining tone in Lieutenant Carla Fangmeyer’s voice, though inwardly agreed that perhaps plain boredom would be better than another forced attempt at keeping busy. The pair of ZPD officers were hunkered down in a discreet Fjord Pinto, barely fitting into a back alley somewhere deep in Zootopia’s industrial sector one late morning early in September, watching for the quarry that had lead them to that particular stretch of warehouses to show up for the final bust. If all went well, they would arrest every leading member of the gang involved in the growth of the Night Howlers and their processing into the varied drugs plaguing the city streets in one fell swoop.

“So… hey, did you get down to Barns & Noble this weekend? I took Alex for the big midnight release of Legends of Heraldale III, or something, and the place was packed out through the doors! I wasn’t sure we’d be able to get a copy!”

The tiger officer rolled her eyes and smirked. “Tell me about it. I haven’t seen such long lines since the final Harry Otter novel released.”

Judy perked at this, turning to her partner in the passenger seat with a look Nick might’ve labeled as “trouble”. Not that Judy would’ve disagreed with her husband. “You read Harry Otter?”

Fangmeyer stilled, a blush shining through her thick tiger fur. “Er… that um, that is to say…”

“Aw, come on,” said Judy, leaning over to give Carla a punch to the shoulder. “Nothing to get embarrassed over. It’s a good book series, read it with my brothers and sisters all the time as a kit. Besides, there’s nobody here but you, me, and the crumbling brick buildings that could collapse and bury this alleyway in rubble at any moment. Live a little.”

That got the tiger chuckling. “Well—”

The radio crackled to life with the too-many-cigarettes voice of Officer Jarvis, cutting off conversation as both officers turned their attention to it. “Wilde-Hopps, Fangmeyer, I’ve got eyes on our guy, just entered the industrial park. Mid-sized van, white, blackened windows, should be passing your spot in five, four, three—”

Judy mentally continued the coyote’s countdown as she and Carla hunkered down in their seats. Right on time the white van rumbled past the alleyway, moving at a crawl as the sheep at the wheel navigated the muddy gravel roads. Judy knew the sheep well. Doug Ramley. One of Dawn Bellwether’s accomplices during the Night Howler Crisis years ago, the creator of the Night Howler formula, and the only mammal involved in the conspiracy to never be apprehended. This had been a long time coming.
The moment the van completely disappeared from view, Judy and Carla sat back up, the tiger rubbing her neck in displeasure. "Tell me again why we've been waiting on Breaking Baaa'd over here?"

The comment was so much like a joke Nick might've made it gave Judy pause, a sudden wish for her husband and usual partner to be there beside her twisting her insides. She hurriedly shook the feeling off and grabbed her tranq gun, checking again that it was fully loaded as she mulled over the question. "This is THE major production facility for the NH derivative hitting the streets, according to our source, and that's because of ol' Doug. It's not enough to shut this place down, we've got to get that sheep too, or else he'll just run, hide, and start back up again."

"Roger that," said Carla. "The last thing we need's more half-savage mammals thinking it's a good idea to knock over a bank with just their claws."

Opening and closing their doors as quietly as possible, the pair hurried to the trunk of the Fjord. There they strapped on SWAT-quality ballistic gloves, helmets, and for Carla, a vest. Previous NH labs the ZPD had busted primarily used NH pellet guns and tranquilizers for defense, which any decent ZPD uniform could withstand with ease. As good a shot as Judy knew Doug to be, she didn't think he'd be a problem with no more than their ears exposed.

"You ready for this, Jude?"

"Ready to cap things off, that's for sure."

"Wilde-Hopps, Fangmeyer," spoke Jarvis through their helmet radios, "van just rolled into that big warehouse half a block down, across the road. Counted five more sheep with him and what might've been a goat. Not seeing any guards out."

"Half a block in broad daylight, with no cover on the way. Not the worst odds I've seen," said Judy as she slipped two darts of NH antidote into a belt pouch and shut the trunk. "Not the best, either. Radio Rhinowitz and have him take SWAT teams 1 and 2 to the east side, McHorn with team 3 to the north side. Have them go in 30. Fangmeyer and I have the entrance Doug went through. You keep to the rooftops and out of sight."

"Roger that, ma'am. Luck go with you."

Judy had no response to that. Signaling for Carla to follow her, the rabbit circled back around the car to the alleyway exit, peaking out to check with her own eyes that the coast was clear. She saw nothing and nobody in any direction, save the barely noticeable glint off Jarvis' sniper rifle scope atop a rusting steel mill several blocks to the left. Judy gave it a wave, before taking off at a run toward the warehouse the coyote had indicated, Carla a welcome presence behind her. She kept her ears perked the entire half-block, awaiting a shout or shot from the ragged structure to signal that they'd been spotted.

 Luck apparently was with them that day, as they made it to the central bay door that side of the warehouse without alarm. That was where their luck seemed to end, however, as no matter how hard Carla pulled at the bay door, it would barely budge a half an inch.

“Dang it!” spat the tiger, taking a knee next to the door. “Either they’ve got a couple of elephants in there or one of those rams is a former bodybuilder, because that door’s not budging from this side.”

Judy bit her lip, casting her gaze around for any other entrances on that side of the building as she pressed on her radio. “McHorn, Rhinowitz, be advised, there may be megafauna present.”
“Roger that, Hopps. Breaching perimeter in 10, 9—”

Not wanting to be left out of the action, Judy looked around again, then up at a whim. Her gaze caught on a pair of open double-windows four stories up, almost straight up from the bay door that was stymying them. She grinned. They weren't large enough to fit a tiger, but... "Carla, heads up, got an entrance."

Carla followed her gaze, a matching grin crossing her muzzle. Shifting to her other knee, she cracked her knuckles before holding both hands out palms up, one over the other. "Haven't breached with a Fastball Special since the Raid of '17. Got a plan?"

From somewhere in the warehouse came a distant shout, accompanied by the sound of air guns firing. Judy had a feeling as she backed up for a running start that only she of the pair could even hear them. "Let the big guys handle the big guys, focus on finding Doug. You make sure nobody tries escaping this WAY!"

The last word Judy shouted as she ran full speed at her fellow officer, bouncing once, then jumping to land square in her open palm. Then she braced herself as the tiger stood and threw in the same motion, sending Judy rocketing up towards the open window at such a speed that action required more instinct than conscious thought. At the apex of the throw Judy reached out, just managing to grab hold of the window edge. She grit her teeth through the sudden stress on her shoulders and twisted, flipping herself up and through the window into the room beyond.

"Ow, ow, owwww wow."

No lights were on in the room Judy had landed in, but enough streamed in through the windows for her to see her surroundings. Rows of tanks and hosing filled the room, as much as could be crammed in there and still leave room to walk around and WELL above the safety regulations for pressurized canisters. Walking down the aisle she found herself in, Judy read off labels for nitrogen, for hydrogen, for pure oxygen, and more.

"NH cultivation in a lab is hard and expensive, but this is way... they've got to have funding from outside the city. How did our inside guy not know about this..."

The sound of hurried hoofsteps in the hallway beyond the storage room snapped Judy's attention to the door several feet down from her. She watched through the door's frosted glass as two sheep-shaped blurs ran past, and then a third stopping at the door, the knob turning a moment later. She ducked behind the door, letting it block her from view as the bighorn ram swung it open, quietly drawing her tranq gun from its holster and listening to the panicked pacing around the room.

"Nooo, no no no, cops and guns and big bosses yelling is NOT what I signed up for! Ohhhh this is bad!"

Taking that as her cue, Judy kicked the door closed and leveled her tranq gun on the sheep. "ZPD, freeze!"

The ram loosed a girlish shriek, dropping his pistol before dropping to his knees and holding his hooves up. "Oh God, it's Hopps! I surrender!"

Judy paused with one eyebrow raised, having never quite gotten that reaction before. Looking closer she found the sheep younger than expected, a punk high schooler at best, torn jeans and Deaf Leopard shirt and all. The sight of that got her eyebrow lifting even higher. "You're wearing a t-shirt for an all-predator band... while working for a prey supremacist group?"
The ram quieted his bleating, looking down at his shirt for a moment before looking back up at her as if personally insulted. "Music transcends politics, bunny."

"Oh for goodness' sake—" Judy marched forward, hauling the sheep up and spinning him around to slam muzzle-first into a stack of canisters. She then took advantage of his stunned state to trade her tranq gun for some zip ties, first securing his wrists together, then securing his wrists to a crate as tall as he was and at least as heavy. "I don't have time for this. Stay here and be a good boy while we finish up here, and maybe someone down the line will have a good word for you."

The ram nodded and sniffled, a trickle of red coming from a nostril. "Yes, ma'am, can do, ma'am, no worries, ma'am."

The hallway beyond was empty, all cracked tiling and peeling grey-brown wallpaper, two more doors along the opposite wall and an intersection three yards to the left. Tranq gun at a down readied position, Judy crept that way after the shadows she'd seen earlier, listening all the while for more sounds of fighting. The shouts and gunfire she could hear were faint, which wasn't surprising. It was a large warehouse. Anything major, good or bad, would have to come over the radi—

"Hopps, McHorn, Rhinowhitz," came Carla's voice over the radio. "Bagged a ram and a goat trying to flee in van, vehicle is secured."

"Copy that," said Judy as she glanced through another storage room. "Secured one suspect upstairs, fourth floor."

"This is McHorn, my team's pinned down in what looks like the main NH cultivation room. Three suspects tranqed, no sign of Doug or our informant."

"This is Anderson. Rhinowhitz is down, but we've secured our entrance and are proceeding deeper into the facility. Jarvis, alert Bogo that Wave 2 is needed."

The radio chatter continued, but Judy stopped listening at the sound of a door slamming shut nearby. Snapping back to attention, she raised her tranq gun and advanced on the hallway intersection, twisting right in the direction of the noise. She narrowed her eyes at the sight of another closed door at the end of a short hallway, a deep blue light shining through the glass.

"That looks familiar..."

"Fangmeyer, here. Got a horse now."

Judy winced and paused, lowering her radio's volume. "Guys, got a possible second cultivation room, 4th floor. Checking it out."

A rousing round of "Copy that" followed her to the door, which she found unlocked, to her relief. Cracking it open on mercifully oiled hinges, she peeked into the room beyond. A soft gasp left her and she opened the door enough for her to slip through, quickly closing it behind her. It was a cultivation room as she'd suspected, 10 by 10 with rows of soil and plant lamps running the length of the room away from her, but those weren't Night Howlers being grown. Or at least, the ghostly white flowers weren't a variety she'd ever seen before.

Judy almost voiced her confusion, before the squeak of a chair stilled her. Edging around a table, she saw a sheep at the back of the room, facing away from her as he worked furiously at a trio of desktop computers. Now that she was listening for it she could hear the rapid-fire tapping of the keyboard, his agitated mumblings.

"I know, I know, wipe everything, every backup and every server. No time to burn the crops, no
time to escape, get caught, say nothing, do nothing, just hope it's quick, I got it. Ohhhh God what I'd give for a latte right now--sorry, sorry, focus."

Doug Ramley. It'd been years, but Judy would recognize that garish yellow hazard suit anywhere. And it almost sounded, if Judy didn't know any better, like he was talking to someone. Yet turning her ears every direction as she crept down the row towards the ram, she didn't hear anyone else—

The door flew open behind her, slamming into the wall. "Doug, we gotta—"

Judy spun and fired, catching the bleating sheep with a tranquilizer dart right in the neck. She gurgled once and fell backward. Before the ewe even hit the floor Judy spun back around to Doug, only for one shot to send her gun spinning from her paws, then another catching her in the chest and sending her sprawling, the breath knocked out of her.

Doug snarled, NH pistol trained on her as he stalked forward. Before Judy could get back up his foot slammed down into her gut, pinning her down and keeping her from catching her breath. "You stupid, STUPID bunny! Do you have any idea what you're interfering with here!?"

Judy huffed, struggling to pull her stun baton from where it was pinned between her and the floor. "Is... is it... bingo night?"

The ram snarled again and aimed his gun at one of her exposed ears. "Even if driving the famed Judy Wilde-Hopps savage doesn't make me too valuable to cut loose, it's going to be so incredibly satisfying to get payback for you ruining Bellwether's plans."

Through her darkening vision, Judy could just make out another sheep plodding into the room, armed with a tranq gun. That was enough to get her grinning. "What, were y-you and Da... Dawn... an... item?"

Doug screamed. "OH THAT IS—"

Thwip.  
Gurgle.  
THUMP.

Judy breathed deep as the "sheep" helped her to her feet, taking the time spent catching her breath to glare at the snoozing ram on the floor before turning to smile at her rescuer. "I see you're a fellow student of Nick Wilde's School of Dramatic Timing."

The "sheep" shrugged before yanking off a full-head mask to reveal the smirking visage of ZPD Sergeant Adam Fangmeyer. "What can I say? The teacher's handsome."

Judy removed her helmet and raised an eyebrow. "I'll be sure to let Nick, and your wife, know that. Speaking of..." She grabbed her belt radio and set it to the relevant frequencies. "McHorn, Jarvis, Anderson, Fangmeyer, I've got both Doug and our inside guy right here. What's your status?"

"Building is secure," answered McHorn, sounding winded but otherwise fine. "All hostiles apprehended, Bogo's sending in search and CSI teams now. We got ambulances too, either of you hurt?"

"Just my pride," Judy responded, earning a snicker from Adam. She rolled her eyes and continued. "Get some computer and NH experts up here ASAP, got something... strange."
"Copy that, McHorn out."

"Strange is an understatement," said Adam, the wolf walking the length of the table and eyeing the white Night Howlers. "Been here three weeks and never seen these things before. Always something new though, isn't there, Jude?"

"Yeah..." Judy stared past her fellow officer to the abandoned computers. On each screen was displayed an image that unsettled her to her core. A prismatic elk-like figure of many colors, dressed in simple robes, hooves like claws and dripping with blood, antlers adorned with a crown of Night Howlers.

Judy found herself standing out near the middle of the street in front of the ZPD headquarters, staring across the way at the spray-painted mural adorning city hall. New details had been added to the Wendigo beast. Splotches of white where eyes might be, streaks going down the otherwise-featureless face like tear stains, and wound over and through the antlers streamed garlands of blue flowers. Night Howlers.

"But sometimes something old, too."

"Zootopia's old industrial park was a scene of some excitement this morning, as the Zootopia Police Department conducted a raid on what early reports are telling us was a massive Night Howler drug lab. This makes the fifth such large-scale ZPD action in the seven months since Gazelle took office as mayor.

"When asked for a statement on the matter, veteran officer and ZPD Chief Bogo had this to say":

"We are proud to serve our city as always, and I don't see what that has to do with who we have as mayor. Mayor Gazelle has expressed a strong inclination for regaining the public's trust in their government, and if I have to say anything, it's that there are worse ways to go about that than making sure our streets are safe from Night Howler."

Fabienne Growley nodded, shuffling the papers in her paws. "Strong words as always from the cape buffalo. However, despite the increasingly thorough ZPD action, some are expressing concern at the seeming increase in drug activity in Zootopia. Night Howler, viewers might remember, was the primary component in Mayor Bellwether's attempt to ostracize Zootopia's predator population. In the years since, however, it has seen an ever-growing use in illicit drug manufacture, found in materials as diverse as catnip and peppermint.

"Some, most notably Doctor Elliot Grayson of HiteTech Industries, exposit that Night Howler's possible positive uses have gone woefully under-researched. His employer, Miss Winona Hite, continues her case with the mayor's office for permission to proceed with live trials—"

Judy tuned out the news as she typed up the last of her report, breathing a deep sigh of relief. Police duty was important, that she knew. She'd never say otherwise to anyone. Police raids, drug busts, murder investigations, even everyday patrol, it was all something to be relished for the good of Zootopia and her citizens. The paperwork that followed, however...

"They should include computer classes at the academy. Make sure future officers have the typing endurance for police work..."

"Aww, are the widdle bunny's paws aching? I know how to make them all better."

Judy rolled her eyes before rolling her chair around, slugging the fox sharing her cubicle in the
shoulder. "So do I, but it's gonna have to wait until we're home."

Nick quirked an eyebrow, smug smirk a welcome sight to Judy after that harrowing morning. "My my, Mrs. Wilde-Hopps, so risque. Hardly appropriate for a workplace environment."

"You're right," she said, slumping back in her chair and folding her arms. She wasn't pouting, she swore, despite whatever Nick's amused smirk said otherwise. "Not like it'd be a problem if the office weren't the only place we really got to spend time together, any more. I miss you out in the field with me, Nick."

Nick's smile softened, growing warmer as he stood and hopped up onto Judy's chair. "I know, I know, me too. Desk duty sucks. Buuuut… it's probably preferable to a repeat of what happened the last time I got into a chase with a fleeing criminal, right?"

Judy winced, thoughts turning back to that day two months ago. "Oh, come on... we've chased suspects through a million construction yards... how could I have known that one would have an active electromagnet?"

Nick's gaze went flat. "I hung from that crane by my prosthetic arm for almost five minutes before they were able to shut it off. That's seven minutes faster than you noticed anything was wrong. Honey still makes jokes about it."

"And that," said Judy, trying to avoid her husband's gaze, "is why we're saving up for a completely NON-magnetic prosthetic for ya, Nick. Then you'll be able to get back out there with me where you belong!"

Silence followed this promise for a minute, during which time Judy coughed and shifted in her seat, idly looking over her case report for that morning's raid. Then Nick sighed beside her, a sound she had been dreading, instantly dropping her ears. "Carrots, you know I want to be back out there with you, but... I'm not exactly a young—"

The timer on Judy's computer went off, Gazelle's old classic "Try Everything" filling their cubicle for the two seconds it took her to lunge forward and hit the off key. Glancing to the computer's clock, she saw that it was 3:30 pm. "Oh sweet cheese and crackers, it's that time already!?"

“Wow,” said Nick as he hopped off her seat, sounding genuinely surprised as well, to her relief. “Time flies when you’re doing paperwork, I guess. See you at home later, Carrots?"

“Of course!” Judy quickly emailed her report to Chief Bogo and switched her computer off, before standing and grabbing her work bag. She paused there, frowning at the unsatisfying conclusion to their earlier conversation, before turning around. Before Nick could say anything, she pulled his head down by his tie and kissed him. Hard. Her heart fluttered as one of his paws found the small of her back, her own moving up to caress down his head and neck. She tried putting in every ounce of her care for her fox into the kiss, to say what words failed to manage. From the look in his green eyes when they finally parted, she succeeded. “I love you, Nick.”

“I love you too, Judy. Now go on, before the other cubicles get the bright idea to start filming this.”

That gave Judy the laugh she’d been needing. Smiling, she turned and hurried out of the offices for the elevator, mind turning now from the most important fox in her life to the most important wolf in her life.

***

Sahara Square Elementary was not the best-positioned school in relation to where Judy and Nick
worked at the ZPD, 15 minutes by bus even if one got lucky with the traffic, but it had plenty more advantages to make up for this in Judy's eyes. It was an easy morning commute from the apartment Fru Fru had gifted them for bringing her father's killer to justice. Judy Big attended there, so they already knew it was a good quality school. And most importantly, it was just across the street from a public library, for the hour or so between classes ending and one of them being able to get off from work.

Judy pulled her aging truck into one of the library's parking spots, ignoring the eyes of passing mammals drawn by the struggling engine. They really needed to get a car of their own and get the truck back to the farm where it belonged, she thought to herself, ignoring how this particular train of thought always seemed to come in Nick's voice. She heard enough of him saying the exact same thing every morning they drove to work.

"Maybe Fru Fru knows a good dealer..."

Before Judy could do more than put the truck into park, the main doors to the library opened and a small wolf pup in jeans, tee, and jacket walked out. Judy immediately knew something was wrong as the pup kept his head down the whole way to the truck, hands gripping the straps of his backpack with a sullen lack of real energy. She kept silent on this as he opened the passenger door and threw his backpack in, waiting until he had clambered in and shut the door before saying anything. "Hey, Alex. I'm gonna guess it was a... rough day?"

He made no move to buckle, just sitting there for half a moment before turning to look up at her. Judy only kept herself from flinching through her many years of experience keeping a poker face during interrogations. The jagged scar cutting vertically down his left eye was nothing new, the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time when the maniacal Jack Savage stormed his way through the ZPD. The bruises developing around his right eye, however, were all too new.

Judy resisted the urge to squeeze the steering wheel in anger, pushing that gut reaction aside to instead reach out and caress behind the pup's left ear, like she remembered her own mother doing so many times. "Oh, sweetie... Was it that cheetah boy again?"

The kit leaned into the careful petting, turning to look out the front window. His voice, when he finally spoke, so much softer than a boy's. "It was a zebra this time..."

Judy closed her eyes and took a single deep breath, her heart aching that he even needed to add those last two words. She had known, when she and Nick decided to foster Alex, that there would be difficulties for them all. As kind as Gideon Grey was now, he'd taught her plenty how kids could be cruel, especially to those different than the norm. "And... why did the zebra hit you? Was it because you're a predator?"

"No."

She sighed, relieved that at least he wasn't going through the same trouble Nick had as a kit. Not that the other possible reasons for bullying were any better. "Was it... was it because you're trans?"

Alex glanced at her. More specifically, the badge pinned to her vest. "No..."

Judy swallowed, now having an idea of what the problem was, though little idea of how to fix it. "It was because we're police officers, Nick and I?"

He nodded, then looked over at her, a touch of anger now in his eyes alongside the sadness and hurt. "Judy, why do mammals bully? I've never hurt that zebra before! It w-was lunch, I was just saying I wanted to be a cop like my Dad!"
That made her smile, if only bitterly. Ruffling the fur atop his head, Judy sighed and leaned back into her seat, staring ahead at the mammals coming and going into the library. "You know, that's a question I've wondered on and off since I was just about your age, Alex. Being a cop, you'd think I'd have a deeper insight into this kind of thing, but really..."

She noticed Alex's frown deepening at this and scrambled for something else to say to give her pup some kind of closure. "When I was your age... Have I ever told you my Carrot Days story, Alex?" At his shaking head, she smiled and put the truck in reverse. "Buckle up, I'll tell you while I drive."

He quickly did as instructed, staying turned in his seat to stare eagerly at her. Judy took her time to get started, pulling out of the parking space and starting home before saying anything more. "When I was around your age, a few of my friends and I put on a play all about the wonders of Zootopia for Bunnyburrow's Carrot Days festival, with little bunny me going on and on about being a police officer. You've seen the home video, you know what I'm talking about. Well, this fox kid, Gideon, he thought that was the dumbest thing he'd ever heard, and when I tried stopping him from taking my friend's fair tickets, he shoved me down and scratched up my face something fierce. Told me to remember that moment of being at his mercy the next time I thought I could ever be more than a dumb bunny."

"Gideon? But he's so nice!"

Judy nodded. "Yep. Mammals change. Sometimes for the better, if you can believe it."

"Well... what happened then?"

She chanced a smile his way while making a right turn. "I went on to become Zootopia's first rabbit officer, and he became the best baker in the triburrow, and we've been lifelong friends for years. You know what that means?"

Alex took a moment to answer, the hurt of earlier seemingly forgotten as he furrowed his brow in thought. "It means... you... didn't listen to him?"

"Close," said Judy, making a left turn. Their apartment complex rose up ahead of them, all warm colors and gentle curves in the usual Sahara Square style. "I did listen to him, I did remember that moment every time I struggled to be more than some dumb, carrot-farming bunny. And trust me, that happened a lot. There are always going to be mammals ready to push you down for one reason or another, sweetie. What matters is how you stand back up."

***

Dinner was grilled vegetable kabobs and cricket lo mein, along with a small box of Alex's favorite cinnamon cookies Nick picked up on his way home after Judy called and told him what had happened with the zebra. They ate in their apartment's living area after only a token resistance from Judy, clustered up on the couch together while Meowana played on the TV across from them. It was a movie they'd watched a million times, probably, being Alex's favorite, but neither Judy nor Nick minded all that much. The House of Mouse's movies were always a perfect pick-me-up.

It wasn't until the credits started playing and Judy felt the wolf pup softly snoring with his head in her lap (wouldn't be able to do that for much longer, the way he was growing) that she dared make a move. Gently sliding herself out from under him, she glared at Nick's chuckling and motioned for the pillow next to the larger fox. With the utmost care, she turned and laid Alex's head down on the pillow, kissing his forehead before moving to gather up the plates and glasses from their meal.

Without being asked, because of course he was too sweet to ever need asking for this sort of thing,
Nick joined her at the kitchen sink to help clean and dry. "So, I don't know about you, but I could have sworn that kid movies were way more dark and scary when I was a wee kit. You know, not afraid to show a little blood and horror."

Judy rolled her eyes, having heard this argument plenty of times before. Not that she disagreed with it, but she got the feeling Alex wouldn't exactly appreciate the maturity of Land Before Time. Although... perhaps Secret of NIMH... All Iguanas Go to Heaven was definitely right out, obviously, but perhaps…

"Everything okay over there, Fluff? You've been working that same dish for the last 5 minutes."

She paused, cheeks flushing before she passed the plate over to Nick and grabbed a bowl to rinse. "Sorry, just... tired after this morning, I guess."

Her fox nodded his understanding, wiping away at the plate with a rag. "Can't say I'm surprised. Been working for this day for how long? But hey, we finally got good ol' Doug! The chief ought to give you a raise for that!"

"The chief will give me a raise the day he retires."

"Oh, I’m sure we’ve got another stress-inducing city crisis or two in us that should do the trick."

Judy chuckled at that, waiting for Nick to stash the plate away before handing him the bowl and starting on another plate. A comfortable silence fell as they worked, the simple domesticity of the moment relaxing Judy almost as much as the dinner and movie before. As had constantly been happening ever since Alex had come into their lives, it dawned on her how... difficult but interesting it was to be on the opposite side of the parent/child relationship.

Unfortunately, relaxed as she was, Judy found her wandering thoughts taking her back to that morning, to the end of the raid and the sight that had greeted her on Doug's computer screens. That familiar elk-like figure...

"Nick, do you ever get the feeling that something you thought was over and done with actually isn't?"

"All the time," he replied, putting up the bowl and taking the new plate. "Usually right before Bogo barges into my office demanding I redo that report I just sent him."

"Nick!" She elbowed him. "Be serious!"

"I am being serious," said Nick, smiling as he turned to face her. "It's late, tomorrow's the weekend, and I am taking my solemn husband duty of keeping you relaxed and happy VERY seriously. There are plenty of great cops to handle Doug and whatever he was getting into for the next two days. Seriously, just take 5 for the night. You've earned it, Carrots, especially for today. Plus, after what you just told me about Alex’s day, it sounds like you both need what I have planned tomorrow."

Judy turned to look at her husband, having to set down the plate she'd been working on for fear of dropping it in her excitement. "You got them? You mean you really got them?"

Smiling, Nick drew three tickets for the Savannah Central Museum of Art from his pants pocket. "Tomorrow, Alex is going to be the happiest little wolf pup this side of the United Mammalia Cities."
The Museum Visit

“Pawpsicles! Get your pawpsicles!”

Had Finnick not been waiting on a red light to turn green when he heard that familiar old shout, he would have crashed his van for sure. As it was, he shut off his radio, rolled down his driver-side window to look out, scanning the Downtown sidewalks. It was impossible, he thought. Nick had gone straighter than a ruler; there was no way—

“Yummy, organic pawpsicles!”

Finnick saw her then, standing next to an open cooler just a few feet off from the Lemming Bros. Bank. Gosh did he see her. He’d never met a “flying fox” before, but seeing one now, the bats earned their name. More rounded ears than a fox, maybe, no bushy tail, and she handed out the paw-shaped treats to passing mammals with wings rather than normal arms, but otherwise yeah, he could see the resemblance. Though, no self-respecting fox he knew would be caught dead in that sleeveless, floral-print poncho—

The blare of a honking horn from behind made Finnick jolt in his seat, nearly hitting his head on the van ceiling. The light was green and there was a line of cars starting to gather behind him.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going…”

It was a spur of the moment sort of decision. Finnick circled the block, parking his van three spaces down from where the bat was selling her wares.

The wheeze from the ailing machine as Finnick shut off the engine caught the bat’s ear, to his annoyance, so she was already watching him with a curious eye as he hopped out and strolled (casual, dang it, casual!) his way over to her. “Good heavens, that old tank of a model is still legal to drive? I’m not sure I feel comfortable standing so close to a Z1.”

The slight to what had been his sole home and mode of conveyance for more years than he could count would normally have set Finnick off worse than any joke about him resembling a child. The person doing the slighting actually knowing the vehicle as anything more than “the loud van”, however, brought him up short (and wouldn’t Nick LOVE that pun, if he were around to hear it). “Er… cops got better things to do than worry ‘bout vans. What d’you know about the old Z1?”

The bat exchanged a pawpsicle for a dollar with an ocelot before answering, her ears wiggling in a way Finnick refused on principle to consider cute. “Discontinued, let me think, 16 years ago? No, 17, next month. Bad rollover rates, and at least for the first production cycle, that beast and sand did NOT mix.”

That was true enough, and certainly something Finnick had learned the hard way the one time he’d tried driving out along the Sahara Square beach.

Shaking his head, the fennec fox refocused on what he’d parked for in the first place. “Right, whatever. Look, I’m a busy fox, so let’s cut to the chase. Where the hell—”

“Language.”

Finnick blinked, looking up at the bat. “What?”

The bat smiled—no, smirked, that same smug smirk Nick would always wear—and leaned down
Finnick’s mouth went dry. It took a moment for him to find his voice again. “I mean, where the... heck, did you find out about pawpsicles?”

“Oh, is that all?” Looking disappointed, the bat stood back up, handing out pawpsicles to a trio of groundhogs and pocketing the bills. “Well I was reading this surprisingly badly written autobiography from a... Weselton, or whatever, and in one chapter he mentioned this slim idiot and this short idiot who drove around in a rump-ugly van, melting down…”

She paused and blinked, looking again at Finnick’s van and then down at Finnick. An overjoyed grin split her muzzle. “Oh my gosh! Short idiot! You’re my hero!”

It was fine that the bat had expressed distaste for foul language, Finnick thought, clenching his paws and scowling ’til his cheeks hurt. He didn’t think he could manage any intelligible swears at the moment. “It’s so… freaking… nice… to have fffffans…”

“Yeah,” sighed the bat, folding her wings across her chest and looking infuriatingly self-satisfied. “It really is.”

Silence for a long moment, Finnick staring up at the bat and doing his level best not to bare his teeth. That just wasn’t something you did at people you didn’t know.

“Well then,” he said at last, louder than he’d meant to, “I guess I’ll be going. Don’t buy and sell from the same place twice in a row, and figure out whatchu gonna do with those sticks when you’re done.”

“Gosh, thanks!” She smiled, a smile all the more infuriating to Finnick for its clear sincerity. He could feel it hitting his back the entire walk back to his van. “It was cool meeting you, don’t be a stranger, hope that van doesn’t explode with you inside!”

The hilariously startled gasps Finnick heard from more than a few mammals as he hopped back into the van in question made the fennec fox think that no, maybe he wouldn’t be a stranger.

***

Judy took it as a good sign that, even after calling the city home for the better part of a decade, Zootopia could still find ways to surprise and amaze her. Case in point, in this instance, was the Savannah Central Museum of Art. At first glance a five-story-tall eyesore located in the southwestern portion of Savannah Central, it had taken Judy years of driving by it on patrol before ever realizing the mishmash of icy blues, jungle green, sun-bleached white, and half a dozen shades of yellow and red were representative of Zootopia itself.

"But of course, Carrots," said Nick when she shared this revelation with him one morning before the bullpen, his voice taking on a posh tone. "I suppose I should have known better than to expect some dumb country bunny to recognize the plush Baabaaist overtones mixing with such a particular strain of latter-days Art Nouveau."

That had earned the fox a punch to the shoulder. Yet somehow, despite that gentle teasing, they had never actually made it into the still-ugly-but-in-a-meaningful-way-now building. Not until Judy had noticed how much the fox pup enjoyed the Hopps Burrow Art Gallery. Not until they walked through those stark glass doors together that Saturday afternoon in semi-formal attire, Alex between them and holding one of Nick's paws tight with one of his. The inside of the building, to Judy's unspoken relief, was far more conventional in style, minimalist and elegant with its white walls and
"Enjoy your time here," said the dik-dik manning the front desk with a smile as she took their tickets. After typing something into the computer in front of her, the diminutive mammal pointed down a painting-lined hall to their left, past a stunning statue of a lion in knightly armor. "The fastest route to the new heroes and myth gallery is that way. Mayor Gazelle will be making a small speech in half an hour, if you'd like to browse the rest of the museum in the meantime."

"Thanks," said Nick. "That sounds just great. Although, if it's not too much trouble, this is a first time here for all three of us, and it would be just the nicest thing if you had any sort of map, maybe?"

"Oh, that's no problem, sir," said the receptionist, holding up a smartphone. "The entire museum is set up with special apps that can only be accessed in the building, including a map of the place, history on different items, special donors to the museum, and more. It's pretty cool."

Judy had taken her phone out as the dik-dik talked, and sure enough, there were the apps. She pulled up the museum map and turned to Alex, letting him look with her. "Seems we have some time to kill. Anywhere else in the museum you'd like to check out?"

"Um..." The pup scanned the map, biting his lip in a way Judy couldn't help but find adorable as he thought it over. Finally, he pointed to a gallery on the third floor, looking back and forth between Judy and Nick with a grin. "There! I wanna see how it compares to that Tundratown Museum's version!"

Judy looked at where Alex was pointing and raised an eyebrow. "Postmodern and Traditional Aquatic Mammal Art? Compare and contrast? I'll make an art connoisseur out of you yet."

***

Judy stared at the elephant-sized hourglass. It wasn't an hourglass sized FOR an elephant, which would already be bigger than Judy was tall, but actually as big as any elephant she had ever seen. It looked constructed out of glass and coral, and instead of being filled with sand it was filled with water. Genuine ocean water, the phone app said, with real fish swimming around inside. She wasn't wrong, this certainly was "interesting", but...

"... I don't get it."

***

"Good heavens. That building is hideous."

The sun was warm against her back as she sat crouched on the rooftop of the church across the street from the art museum. Hunched forward and muzzle set in a snarl, she trusted the average passerby in the street down below to think her no more than another gargoyle as she waited and watched. She knew it wouldn't be long now. Her Intel said it would be that day, that building, that hour. Revenge.

***

"Oh, well this one... looks familiar. Nick, come here a moment."

The fox wandered over to stand next to Judy, groaning as he caught sight of the painting as that had caught his wife's eye. "You've got to be kidding me..."

The painting was an Impressionist's depiction of three seahorses dancing through a coral reef. The colors were vivid and vibrant, with such a sense of movement to the trio of seahorses that Judy...
wondered again if this was meant to be one of those motion paintings she'd heard of.

"On loan from Bunnyburrow, the work of an anonymous up-and-comer," read Nick from the plaque below the painting, each word tinged with reluctant amusement. "Well, I thought something was missing from home last time we visited. We'll have to give Bonnie and Stu a call when we get back to the apartment."

Judy nodded, able to hear the excited squeals from a couple dozen overjoyed siblings already.

***

She perked at the sight of a trio of limos pulling into the back of the museum's parking area, away from the rest of the vehicles. She waited with bated breath for confirmation that this was it, watching first a pair of wolves in black suits get out, then an antelope of some sort, followed by—

"There you are, you monster. Right where I want you."

Turning from the scene, she hopped off her perch to a hidden alcove behind it, where waited a number of armored cases she'd spent three nights covertly flying up there. She input her security code and flung the largest case open, a bitter smile crossing her muzzle at the gear within.

***

"This has got to be some kind of joke, right?"

The three stood in front of a pair of... mammal statues, for lack of a better term, though Judy felt insulted by the mere thought. The proportions were all wrong for the mammals allegedly bring depicted, she had never seen a rabbit colored purple, the use of so much scrap metal and felt was bizarre, and—

"Carrots, why is the fox dressed like a pirate? The version in Tundratown wasn't dressed like a pirate."

"That..." Judy paused to find her words. "That is a good question. Alex, honey, does the app have a good answer?"

The pup shrugged and scrolled through the app to that piece's entry. "Says here they're the last known works by an infamous orca sculptor. He'd never seen land mammals before and created them entirely off of oral descriptions."

"I thought the three in Tundratown were made by an infamous orca sculptor off of oral descriptions alone? And why do these look so much... junkier? The others looked like candy!"

“No no,” said Alex, still scrolling through the app’s article. “Looks like these are the originals and those were made off oral descriptions of these two. It says there used to be a third, too, but someone used it for... oh... ew.”

The three stood in silence a while after that, before Nick finally sighed and said "Art is weird."

Judy nodded to that, but at seeing Alex’s expression going slightly crestfallen added "But it can be a good kind of weird, one that helps you see familiar stuff in a fresh way. And you know, speaking of art..." She glanced at her phone. "We should probably start heading for the new gallery if we want to catch the mayor's speech. Come on, you two."

***
She counted three guards on the museum roof, two cougars and a black bear. She would take them out first, ensuring her safe way in and out. Even at the most conservative estimates though, there'd be at least half a dozen more inside, plus whatever cops they would have on their payroll. She'd faced worse odds before, but not many.

Pausing a final moment before getting started, she knelt at the edge of the church roof and looked down at a photograph. She allowed a second's pain at the smiling faces, before securing the photo beneath an armor plate and standing. "Time to go to work."

***

"Nick! Judy!"

At the sound of their names Judy paused along with her family just outside the doorway to the new art gallery, turning to look behind them. She perked, grinning at the sight of the wolf and tiger in ZPD uniforms strolling their way. "Well well well, Officers Carla and Adam Fangmeyer. Fancy seeing you here!"

"I could say the same," said the tiger, taking a knee to better talk to them, to Judy's gratitude. "No offense to you, Judes, although maybe a little offense to your old hustler there, but I never imagined you for an art museum kind of mammal."

"Oh, you know us," said Judy, smiling wider as she wrapped one arm around Nick’s waist and the other around Alex’s shoulders. "How’s that old Gazelle song go? Try everything? That’s us. Besides, little Alex here just loves learning, and neither Nick or I are the kind to say no to a little self-improvement."

Carla chuckled and nodded. "No, you certainly aren’t, Mr. and Mrs. First-Rabbit-and-Fox-Cops. And you!" She turned her smile to Alex on Judy’s left. "Long time, no see. I hope you haven’t been giving these poor schmucks too hard a time. You excited for the new gallery?"

"Totally!" said Alex with the utmost enthusiasm, and Judy loosed a breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding in, sharing a grin with Nick. In the early weeks after Alex had come into their life on a more permanent basis than merely a coworker and friend’s kid, the wolf pup had been shy around the larger ZPD officers at best, utterly terrified at worst, comfortable seemingly only around Clawhauser. And well, that was Clawhauser. The only things that had reason to feel nervous around him were donuts. And while Alex had been gradually getting better, he still had his... moments. That day, thankfully, didn’t look like it was going to be one of those days.

"Glad to hear it," said Carla, snapping Judy back to the present. Standing back up, the tiger ruffled each of their heads before jerking a thumb to the wolf beside her. "Well, the chief has us over here to keep an eye on the mayor in case of, you know, literally anything, but I’m pretty sure we don’t have to worry about trouble from you three. What do you think, Fangy?"

"Hmm," I don't know," said the wolf, rubbing his chin in exaggerated thought. "I play pool with that shifty-looking fox over there every Wednesday, and he cheats like the dickens."

"Hey now, I take offense to that," said Nick, crossing his arms and giving a friendly glare. "Against you, 'Fangy', I don't need to... cheat..."

"Hrm," I don't know," said Nick, wide-eyed gape past the two officers on duty, and suddenly rigid posture sent alarm bells ringing in Judy's head. She hardly noticed it as she stepped to the side, putting herself subtly in front of Alex and in a position to see around the similarly confused Fangmeyers. "Nick, what—whoa!"
Simple rabbit instinct took over, driving Judy to grab both husband and foster-son and pull them to the hallway wall and out of the advancing feline's way, the Fangmeyers doing the same across the way. Not a moment too soon, either, from the glares sent their way by the armored wolves seemingly acting as the figure's bodyguards.

Judy barely noticed them, gaze trained on the figure stalking between them, cop and rabbit senses together screaming DANGER. The mammal’s fur was pale, almost white, tiger-like stripes just barely discernible. Though clearly advanced in age from the scars and wrinkles across her face, the feline towered over Carla, who Judy knew to be tall even by tiger standards. The all-white suit and coat, too, did nothing to hide the mammal's solid build. Judy swore she felt vibrations from each step the feline took, uneven as they were by a bad limp in the mammal’s left leg.

A thrill of terror hit Judy as the strange feline regarded them in passing. To the Fangmeyers, she gave the curtest of nods. To Nick and Alex, she gave the smallest of smiles. To Judy, she paused and stared—no, GLARED—and said simply, "Rabbit..."

Then she was past them, marching through the open doorway to the new gallery as if they had never been there.

Judy stared after the strange troupe, fighting to get her heart rate back to something resembling normal before daring to speak. "Who... what..."

"Winona Hite," said Adam, voice unusually solemn. "CEO of HiteTech Industries and a major figure in San Dingo’s fight for predator equality with prey. She's a liger, a hybrid. Lion dad and tiger mom. Not sure why she's here..."

"Winona Hite..." The name was plenty familiar to Judy. There had been a massive scandal months before at the discovery that Jack Savage's partner, Miss Black, was secretly also the leader of HiteTech's private law enforcement agency, H.A.W.C. Multiple investigations had found no evidence of Hite being aware of this or having any role in the rabbit maniac's attacks on Zootopia, but even then, the whole situation left a dark mark in the opinions of many mammals. Judy being one of them.

The mood somewhat dampened by that close encounter, the small party went the rest of the way to the doorway to the new art gallery. Judy breathed a sigh of relief upon not seeing the liger or her wolf guards anywhere nearby, allowing herself to relax and take in the sights around them to their fullest. "HEROES AND MYTH" proclaimed a banner strung up high above them, the ceiling for this wing of the museum almost twice as high as other areas they'd been through, the place more of a large ballroom than a simple hall for art. Mammals of many stripes lingered about the place, oohing and aahing over art and statues both old and new.

"Well, we better find the mayor," said Carla after a moment of standing and gawking. Shooting them a smile that Judy and Nick returned, the pair of cops turned and quickly disappeared into the crowds.

"Yo Carrots, check this piece out! It's practically you!"

Judy turned and followed the sound of Nick's voice, finding him a few feet off in front of a bronze statue just a head shorter than Chief Bogo. It was of a rabbit in classical armor, a shield strapped to one arm and a club held in the opposite paw. "Oh, Harecules! He was always my favorite mythical hero growing up!"

"You don't say." Winking, Nick turned and led them on, Judy happy to let the fox take the lead for...
the moment as she regaled Alex with a cleaned-up version of the old Harecules stories. The ones that she could remember off the top of her head, at least. The way the pup's eyes lit up with excitement and wonder at every word was perfect, and soon enough she'd all but forgotten her earlier unease concerning Ms. Hite.

The minutes passed and they saw many more heroes old and new represented in the art around them. Judy laughed as Nick practically squealed like a school girl over a painting of Robin Hood and his Merry Mammals, listening with a smile as he discussed, with surprising authority, over the importance of the one notable fox hero also being a real historical figure. Alex looked on with even greater wonderment here. Judy found herself wishing for a moment she could share that subtle connection. It was just a risk one took, getting so close to different kinds of mammals.

Alex had just dragged her and Nick over to a small TV playing grainy footage of renowned blockade runner Kit Cloudkicker when the sound of a microphone being adjusted caught their ears. Judy looked around, following the shifting gazes of surrounding mammals to a short stage set near the center of the room. Edging past an elephant, she saw Mayor Gazelle standing atop the stage, waiting for the room to settle down. Near the stage she saw the Fangmeyers, Assistant Mayor Yara Elloway in a sunflower-yellow dress, and to her surprise, Hite and her guards, the liger seeming to be in a quiet chat with the cheetah official.

“Miss Gazelle looks way nicer than Hite,” said Alex, getting a few chuckles from nearby mammals. Judy smiled, but agreed. The gazelle, in her soft red, almost pink dress suit, looked absolutely radiant. The liger looked in dire need of a hug, or maybe a stiff drink.

“Greetings, my fellow Zootopians,” Mayor Gazelle said at last, garnering some scattered greetings in return. “It is a pleasure to see you as always. I am happy to see you all enjoying this new exhibit, much of which is the result of generous donations by the venerable Ms. Winona Hite and her Foundation for the Arts.”

“Oh,” said Judy, more to herself than to anyone else. “So that’s why she’s here.”

“It is fortuitous, the timing of this new gallery,” Gazelle continued. “In just two months shall be the Zootopia World’s Fair, a celebration of the history of friendship and comradery between all the diverse species of mammal, from the smallest of shrews to the grandest of whales. Our own heroes, real and mythical, are a vital part of that history. In them we see our best nature, to learn and share in peace and friendship—”

“Lies. Ugly, meaningless lies!”

A hush fell over the room at the sudden, unfamiliar voice that seemed to come from every direction at once. Judy felt Alex jump beside her and grab her hand, prompting him to pull him closer. Before she could say anything comforting to the pup, Nick subtly nudged her with an elbow and nodded back toward the stage. Looking, Judy noticed Hite sneering, a paw in her coat as her guards took up defensive positions behind her. The Fangmeyers took up similar positions around the mayor, Carla whispering into her radio.

“Who…” Gazelle turned in a slow circle up on the platform, doing a respectable job of remaining calm in Judy’s estimation. “Who, might I ask, said that? And what do you mean, lies? Zootopia is a shining testament to what mammals working together can achieve.”

A distant clang of metal striking metal reached Judy’s ears, and perhaps hers alone. She looked around as subtly as she could, glancing up at a whim and spotting the grating of a ceiling-mounted air vent hanging loose.
“Lies, lies, lies,” continued the voice, the sound of building rage added to now by something else, a sound slow and rhythmic, almost like fabric. “Still hateful, still blind, still divided! You didn’t help us! We needed you! Needed you against HER!”

A screech like tiger nails on a chalkboard sent Judy, and probably any more rabbits in the crowd, clutching her ears and staggering. She saw, dimly, a winged figure break away from a hanging display of crafted fighter planes and take off like a shot at Winona Hite. A bat, her police training made her register, dressed up in what seemed a scavenged collage of homemade gear and ZPD armor.

“FANGMEYERS, BEHIND YOU!”

At Nick’s shout, the wolf and tiger officers near the platform turned, then at the sight of the bat speeding in their general direction drew and fired their tranq guns in a single, practiced motion. Whatever awe and intimidation the flying fox might have engendered with its arrival on the scene was summarily drained as the two darts struck true in one of the bat’s wings and sent it tumbling out of the air. Judy just managed to catch the bat falling out of sight past the crowds of taller mammals, the CRASH of it hitting the platform ringing out, before one frightened, insistent tug from Alex on her arm had Judy hurrying along with the wolf pup to the nearest exit, ears alert for any more signs of danger in the vicinity. Over the roar and tumult of the crowds struggling at odds to both escape like them or get a better look at the scene, Nick’s familiar presence just behind her kept Judy steady.

Well, there was one sightseeing attraction they wouldn’t be returning to any time soon.

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“Violence marred the celebratory opening of Savannah Central Museum of Art’s new hero-themed wing today. A bat, ex-community theater worker Carol Williams, attacked the main contributor to the wing, HiteTech CEO and H.A.W.C. Director Winona Hite.

“Williams was taken into ZPD custody on the scene, before being handed over to H.A.W.C. for undisclosed reasons. A joint search of the suspect’s Nocturnal District home, led by H.A.W.C. commander Bethany Blaine, found large quantities of Night Howler-derived drugs in Williams’ possession. More as this develops.

“In other news, new rumors abound that ZPD Chief Mason Bogo will announce his retirement soon, bringing to an end a decades-long career as—”

Nick muted the den TV at the sound of the door to Alex’s room opening. He looked over to see Judy walk around the corner from the hallway, his bunny sighing before plopping down on the sofa beside him. He quickly wrapped his tail and left arm around her and pulled her close. “How’s he holding up?”

“Like a champ,” said Judy, reaching up to hold his prosthetic hand in her two natural hands. “Seemed about as in control as during dinner, and he didn’t ask for his nightlight, but…”

“But it’s going to be a night on the couch, just in case,” finished Nick, to which the rabbit nodded. He sighed but nodded back, pulling her closer. The couch was closer to Alex’s room than their bedroom on the other side of the apartment. They’d quickly learned, during those first few months when the nightmares had been most prevalent, that speed in reacting was key.

“Well, look on the bright side,” he said after a minute, trying a smile on as he looked at her. “No case here for us to have to bother with. Sometimes, it’s nice having H.A.W.C. around.”
Judy rolled her eyes and huffed, but the smile clearly tugging at her lips was all Nick needed to see. They were going to be just fine.
Saturday passed, Sunday came, and with it, work again.

“Today is going to be a good day.”

Judy told herself this while in front of the bedroom mirror, feet shoulder-length apart and hands on her hips. She checked herself over, grinning as she found her uniform crisp and spotless as ever, every tool secured firmly to her belt, her elbow and knee pads strapped on tight, her badge gleaming gold where it was pinned with the utmost professional precision onto her ballistic vest. She looked as good to go as she ever had.

“You look lovely,” said Nick, slouching into view of the mirror, resting both hands on her shoulders to plant a kiss on the top of her head. Judy’s scarred face lit up with a blush in the mirror. She quickly took her fox, dressed only marginally better than adequate, by the tie and pulled him down enough to return the kiss. It was a good thing they’d gotten up early that morning.

“Today’s going to be a good day,” Judy next said to Alex soon after, leaning in to kiss his forehead as, behind him in the living room, Marian Wilde fretted about straightening cushions and picking up scattered blankets to fold. “Both Nick and I have short shifts today, and Marian will be free to hang with while we’re gone. Then we’ll be back with pizza and the latest Pikar movie. Sound good?”

“Sounds great,” the wolf pup replied, quickly hugging her. Judy sighed, heart clenching as she just as quickly hugged him back.

“Today is going to be a good day,” Judy said again as she and Nick walked toward the main doors to the ZPD, a coffee in one of her hands and the last croissant from her favorite breakfast bakery already half-eaten in the other. The sky was bright above them, peppered with clouds off along the horizon that promised, if the reports were to be believed, a light series of showers. A light almost-fall breeze brought the sounds of the city to her, living and breathing as it always was, always had been, always would be. Nick was beside her, chatting on about some amusing anecdote regarding Finnick and a dozen banana cream pies. A beaver coming out of the ZPD smiled their way and held the door open for them, to which Judy smiled and nodded back.

Inside the ZPD, the atmosphere was one of almost happy activity. The arrest of Doug and closing of the NH rings’ main supplier seemed to have put a spring in more than just Judy’s steps, hardly hampered by yesterday’s museum excitement. She saw Clawhauser and Honey Badger, the latter dressed in a blue ZPD tee along with her usual cargo pants, in an animated discussion over cereal and, figuring she and Nick had a few minutes to spare, turned her course from the bullpen to the front desk. “Hey, you two! Today’s looking good, isn’t—”

SCHREEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—

Judy grabbed at her ears, whiting out for a split-second from the sudden blast of white noise from the banks of TVs along the walls of the main hall, from Clawhauser’s laptop, from every phone on every mammal around her. She nearly fell into the puddled remnants of her coffee and breakfast from the pain, stopped only by Nick’s trembling arms around her. All around them mammals were staggering from the aural assault, digging white noise-blasting phones out of pockets or clutching their ears in shared agony. A few other rabbits that had been in the main hall had vomited from sheer pain, while elephants like Francine had completely collapsed to the floor, where they lay motionless.

Two seconds after the white noise and static had started, it stopped. Judy stayed pressed against
Nick’s side several seconds longer, shaking as she fought to get her breathing under control. Eventually she managed to pull herself away, one hand wiping the tears from her eyes as she shot her fox an appreciative smile before turning to see how others were doing. Most of her fellow officers had managed to recover by now and started checking over the civilians for injuries more serious than aching ears and rattled teeth, others crowding around Francine to try waking her.

“What… what is this?”

Judy looked farther off to the voice, saw Assistant Mayor Yara Elloway at the bottom of the stairs to the second floor, leaning against the railing for support as she kept her weight off her right leg. The cheetah was staring down in confusion at a computer tablet in her hand.

“Carrots…”

Judy paused in her looking around at other mammals staring at tablets and smartphones in confusion and followed Nick’s gaze to the closest bank of TVs. She blinked, mentally agreeing with the gasps and questioning grunts from other mammals looking over at the identical image on every screen. The room depicted before them was not immediately ominous in any way, unless one had a fear of lavish hotel rooms, one satin-covered bed big enough for a rhino taking up only a quarter of it, red against the warm yellows and oranges of the walls, a potted plant and an ice-blue desk opposite the bed adding some contrasting color to the scene. There was an oval mirror mounted to the wall opposite whatever video camera had recorded all of this, and next to the mirror stood black double-doors garnished in gold leafing.

“The sides of the view,” whispered Nick, low so that only Judy could hear him. “Straight-edged wood, slightly swaying in a breeze. Video recorded from a balcony looking into the room, somewhere high up.”

Judy nodded and started to respond, stopping as the doors into the hotel room were suddenly thrown open. All thoughts of anything other than the horribly familiar figure standing at the hotel room's entryway fled from her, Nick’s grip on her shoulder tightening and letting her know that he too recognized the figure. “It's not possible..."

The white wolf staggered further into the room, gate unsteady, turning and closing the doors behind her before turning back to the camera. She wore a plain black shirt and military-style pants, over which went a black bulletproof vest similar to the kind Judy herself wore, as well as a black military jacket, its collar turned up high. Despite the months that had passed despite her last sighting, Judy would recognize Miss Black anywhere.

"Greetings, Zootopia," spoke the wolf, approaching the camera at a strange pace, as if having to put thought into each step. "I... have... a message for you. I am Bellatrix Lacross, better known among some of you as Miss Black. Jack Savage’s partner."

Looks of alarm passed among the watching police officers, murmurs and gasps among the watching civilians. Judy clenched her fists and kept watching.

"Yes, the one and only Jack Savage. May his soul rest in peace. Or Hell. Took the ZPD long enough to send him either way, didn’t it? The ZPD… you little… busybodies and your bunny mascot. You want to make the world a better place, but what does that mean? Better for who? How? It’s so easy to trick yourself into believing you’re making progress when you keep your goal so… vague."

Black reached the edges of where Judy guessed the balcony doors to be and stopped, arms going out to support her weight against the doors. Her gaze turned distant, reminiscent. “I see a world… where the strong are allowed to be strong and the weak allowed to be weak, and no… social constraints to
Chuckling, she reached into a jacket pocket and withdrew a combat knife. Idly twirling it among the fingers of her right hand, which Judy only just then noticed to be a prosthetic like Nick's, the wolf suddenly started as if struck by a thought, leaving the doorway to continue approaching the camera. "Alexander Trotsky. That's the name of a zebra, a Savannah Central native. Owns a small but well-liked lawyer firm, catering mostly to prey. A seemingly normal mammal, by all accounts. When he was 10 years old, he and the other boys of his Junior Ranger troop welcomed into their midst a young fox kit named Nicholas Piberius Wilde."

Judy started in shock, flinching as Nick's grip on her shoulder tightened enough to cause pain. Her ears twitched at the sound of more gasps among the mammals around them, not having to look to picture the heads turning to the stricken fox next to her.

"Welcomed is the wrong word," continued Black, Judy's heart sinking at knowing where this was going. "What really happened was the Junior Ranger pack, all prey mammals, lured young Nick down into the church basement their troop met in for his first meeting, only to instead beat him down to the ground. They muzzled him. MUZZLED HIM!"

Many of the watching mammals, Judy included, jumped as Black suddenly lashed out with a fist, breaking the balcony door to her left. "He was only a defenseless kit, no larger than a bunny, and they, they—"

But then, as quickly as the outburst had come, it was over, Black back to her calm, expressionless self as she loomed before the camera. The slowly twirling knife in her right hand kept going as she stopped again, now no more than a foot from the camera, which to Judy's alarm had started to subtly shake. "Nicholas Piberius Wilde spent the next 20 years of his life as a hustler, a con-fox, a cheat and a thief, everything society expects foxes to be. That he eventually managed to overcome the trauma changes nothing. Because you see, Zootopia, aside from lions and tigers and bears, most predators are hardly bigger at all than the average prey mammal. And without numbers on our side, we're so much easier to... push around."

Judy realized what was about to happen just as Black reached out toward the camera. The wolf's muzzle finally twisted up into an almost-loving smile, as first she pulled a wad of saliva-sodden rags into view, a stream of softly-whimpered pleas suddenly to be heard from someone just behind the camera, and then she gave an almost-gentle push.

Slowly, the camera tilted upward toward a clear blue sky, those whimpered pleas growing into shouts, then screams as the camera inverted, showing an upside-down view of Sahara Square, downward at the rapidly-approaching pavement, up the side of what Judy now recognized as the Palm Hotel, up again toward Black looking down from the rapidly-dwindling balcony, screaming all the while.

Judy, Nick, and half the officers present were out the doors to their squad cars before Alexander Trotsky's second rotation had even begun.

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Even despite pushing their cruiser as fast as she dared, by the time Judy and Nick arrived with the rest of the Precinct 1 officers to the Palm Hotel courtyard in central Sahara Square, local officers from Precinct 3 had already arrived and mostly cordoned off the area, lengths of yellow and black tape declaring official police business keeping back a near-horde of curious and horrified onlookers from the scene of Alexander Trotsky's demise. Many of the mammals, Judy noted with some disgust, were holding up cameras and smartphones to snap pictures and video of whatever lay in the center of
the courtyard Palm Hotel overlooked, some of them turning to do the same to their vehicle.

Hopping out of the cruiser where she parked it near those of the Precinct 3 officers, Judy hurried around to Nick's side of the car before he had done more than throw open his door and held a hand out, making him pause and look at her with an odd, distressingly calm and detached expression. "Nick, wait. Maybe you should... I mean... I can't imagine what this must be—"

"I'm a member of the ZPD, aren't I?" Nick's voice as he interrupted her was flat, almost robotic, and did little to settle Judy's nerves as he brushed her hand away and dropped out of the police vehicle. "We need to see what we can here. There's no time for... for..." He blinked, closing his eyes and shaking his head as cruisers holding their fellow officers started pulling up around them before starting forward. "We'll process this later, Judy. Right now, let's just... do our jobs."

Knowing she wouldn't be able to get more than that promise out of him, Judy nodded and hurried to stride side by side with her fox toward the crowd of onlookers between them and the hotel. A quick shout of "Police business!" got most of them edging out of their way, those that remained to gawk at Nick hurriedly backing up as larger members of the force joined up with them. Past the ring of mammals and hastily set up police tape they found a half-dozen officers from Precinct 3, mostly camels, helping load a mid-sized black body bag onto a stretcher for a waiting ambulance. Without pausing Judy gestured toward them. "McHorn, help with that."

The rhino stomped off at once to assist the smaller officers, one of whom broke away from the group at the sight of his approach to hurry to Judy's side. It was one of the few non-camels among the Precinct 2 officers, a coyote with a limp in the right leg and a harried look on her muzzle. "Detective Cochran, Precinct 3," she introduced as she fell in line with them, raising no objection as they passed through the courtyard toward the hotel doors. "Hotel security says they started securing every entrance in and out the moment they recognized the hotel in the video. All elevators and stairwells are on lockdown, and they have mammals searching through the cameras for any sight of Miss Black."

"Thank God for competence," said Judy, before they entered the hotel-proper. It was a place beyond opulence, just as she remembered from when she and Nick had visited there for the Wendigo Killer case, a place of rich carpeting and imported flowers in the most delicately-crafted vases, of brilliant pink and white and blue marble, of precisely-built fountains and classical music, of gold and silver and garish colors streaming from the attached casino. Any other day Judy might have marveled at the riches around her, but that day a mammal had been murdered and a danger to her family and her city made itself known. "I want full statements from all the hotel staff and as many of the guests as can be managed. Get SWAT and Forensics down here ASAP, from Precincts 1 and 3. Get some people over to the car park to monitor the entrances and exits there as well."

"Isn't this all a bit much for one wolf—"

Judy shot the coyote a look that might have made Bogo quail. "You weren't involved much in the investigations around Jack Savage, were you? Never use that tone regarding anyone who would work freely with that hare."

"Er... sure, of course."

Detective Cochran turned and made for the hotel lobby's main desk, where several dozen mammals, some in the hotel's uniform, some in ZPD uniforms, and some, to Judy's surprise, in the white and red uniforms of H.A.W.C., could be seen clustered "Grizzoli, go see how you can assist there. And keep an eye on those guys."

The polar bear rumbled his understanding and went to join those at the main desk. By the time Judy
and Nick had reached the elevators at the far side of the lobby, only Adam Fangmeyer, Jarvis, and Anderson were with them. Nodding to the hotel security zebras as they unlocked and opened the elevator cart for large groups for them, Judy pulled her stun gun free from its holster and told herself the wolf, coyote, and polar bear would be enough to handle the terrorist and whatever accomplices she had with her. Simply getting down there themselves had taken enough time for Black to either fortify herself in her room or find some unforeseen way to escape. Judy didn’t want to give her any more time to do either of those by waiting for SWAT to arrive.

“70th floor,” said one of the zebras, sliding the ornamental brass gates shut behind their group. “Presidential penthouse. Just the one suite for the whole floor.” Judy nodded to him, then took a deep breath as Fangmeyer hit the button for floor 70 and the elevator car lurched upward.

The seconds passed in mostly silence. A soft beep was made with each floor passed. Jarvis kept muttering something under his breath Judy was pretty certain only she could hear, an old coyote prayer of some sort that she tried not to listen in on out of respect for her fellow officer. Fangmeyer shifted his weight from the pads of one foot to the other, before quickly taking out a photo of himself and his wife making funny faces in front of a beach and focusing on it. Behind her she could hear Anderson cracking his knuckles, remaining otherwise quiet. To her right Judy could feel Nick not-quite shaking, his tail flicking about in unconscious distress. She reached out and took his hand in hers, and after a moment the tail stilled.

At floor 20 Anderson cleared his throat, the polar bear glancing down at Nick. "Uh, Wilde, um... everything that weirdo Black was spouting off, about the zebra and the Junior Rangers..."

"Yeah," snapped Nick, making all present in the elevator car flinch from the sharpness of his voice. "Yeah, it was all true."

"Jeez," the polar bear said after a moment, clearly not sure what to say. Judy just wished he would stop trying to say anything at all. "Sorry, man..."

"Don't worry about it," said Nick, giving Judy's hand a squeeze. "It was a long time ago. Plenty good has happened to me since. Just… I’d rather not be talking about this right now."

At floor 45 their phones dinged. Judy pulled hers out and clicked it on, a small smile coming to her muzzle. "Honey's got the floor plan of the penthouse suite. One short entrance hall just off the elevator, a small closet immediately to the right, then doors farther on to the left and right, then double-doors across from the elevator. Left door's to a bathroom area, looks more like a pool to me. Right's to a built-in kitchen. Straight ahead's the room we saw in the video."

"Sounds straightforward enough," said Fangmeyer, getting a nod of agreement from Judy. It didn't sound like there were many ways for Miss Black to escape from them up there, not with the hotel on lockdown. If they could hit her hard and fast enough once everything started...

At the 60th floor Jarvis ceased his whispering and drew his stun gun from his belt. Fangmeyer returned his family photo to its proper pocket and drew his own stun gun, while Anderson drew instead a pellet tranq pistol. Judy checked the power setting on her stun gun, while Nick let go of her hand and drew a pair of tranq pistols. Out the corner of her eye, Judy saw her fox shoot a grim grin her way. "Bet there aren't any industrial-strength magnets up here, Carrots."

"Well now that you've said it," said Judy, leaving it at that.

A few seconds later and the elevator rumbled to a halt, the doors sliding open. Immediately Judy stepped out and turned right, opening the closet door with one hand while Nick and Jarvis trained their stun guns on it, Anderson and Fangmeyer keeping lookout elsewhere. They found nothing
inside except a few bare hangers and a vacuum cleaner sized for a mammal about Anderson's size.

"Anderson, Jarvis," said Judy, "cover our backs and the elevator. Fangmeyer, Nick, with me."

The wolf and fox fell in beside her as the others hung back. They checked the kitchen first, finding the steel and chrome room empty and clearly untouched from Miss Black's stay there, none of the cabinets full and the refrigerator stocked with nothing but alcohol that was clearly compliments of the hotel. The only anomaly here were that the kitchen's stock of knives was gone.

Crossing the short hallway next, they found the suite's bathroom as empty as the kitchen. A large room, at least three times as wide as Judy's first apartment in Zootopia and twice as long, the room was dominated by a bathtub-slash-swimming pool in the center, empty of water at the moment, stacks of towels off to the left and a floor-to-ceiling mirror to the right behind a countertop covered in soaps and shampoos. An attached linen closet was similarly empty.

Finally came the scene of the crime. The sleeping room was just as Judy remembered it from the video earlier, sans one wolf and any sign of accomplices. They found nothing beneath the bed or inside a closet off to the side of the writing desk, out of view of where the camera—and Mr. Alexander Trotsky—had been situated out on the balcony, and the desk itself was clear save for a single sheet of paper on which had been written, in messy cursive, "You three killed me. I want to return the favor."

"Doesn't sound like all her marbles are there," said Fangmeyer, leaning over the note. "Lovely penmanship, though. Wonder if she actually wrote this, or if she made the victim write it. Will have to get some copies of Trotsky's hoofwriting..."

Judy only vaguely responded to the wolf's remarks, stepping out onto the balcony with a quick glance to the smashed door. As she had feared, there was no sign of Miss Black out here either, just the clear blue sky above and a sheer, proven-lethal drop below.

"She must have propped Trotsky in a chair up here, the legs balanced over the railing," she said, nudging the solid rods of metal with a foot. "Tied up like he probably was, wouldn't have dared trying to wriggle forward in fear of losing balance..."

Nick joined her on the balcony, holstering his pistols before clicking on the radio on his upper chest. "All units, this is Detective Wilde-Hopps, crime scene is secure, suspect is nowhere to be found. Have SWAT sweep the hotel and get Forensics up here yesterday."

"Roger that," came McHorn's voice over the radio. "SWAT and Forensics are on their way up now. Wilde-Hopps, the hotel manager is down here pulling records right now, if you want to—"

McHorn was drowned out all of a sudden by the ringing of Nick's smartphone. He and Judy shared a look for a moment, before she gave a thumbs-up to him and brought her hand to her radio. "Hold on that, McHorn, sorry, the detective is indisposed at the moment. Could you repeat that?"

"Roger that, ma'am. I said, the hotel manager is—"

Judy half-listened to the rhino officer, watching as Nick moved a pace away and answered his phone. She saw his expression change from confused to alarmed. "Yes, this is Nick—yes, what—my mom? She—" A sudden dread hit Judy then, as the look on Nick's face changed from alarm to full-blown panic. "The Hell is she doing at the hospital!?"

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Nick didn't remember leaving the hotel. He didn't remember how he got to Zootopia General,
whether someone drove him there or he had somehow, by the grace of God, managed to drive there himself without incident. It all seemed one long, tear-filled blur, looking back on it.

The first clear memory he had was of running through the hospital doors and straight to the nurse’s desk. He babbled something, his voice strangely muted to his own ears, and the doe nurse across the counter from him pointed toward the elevators to the left and babbled something back at him. Nick went to the elevators without further comment, jabbing the button for the third floor with a hand he suddenly couldn’t seem to keep from trembling. He clenched the hand into a fist, gritting his teeth to keep from screaming as the elevator ticked its way slowly up to the floor they were keeping his mother.

Something dinged and the door slid open to the third floor, an otter nurse and a weasel in crutches waiting to get on. Nick hurried past them to the left, down the corridor to the first intersection, then a right, the dull white walls and dull brown doors passing by him mockingly, the smell of blood and antiseptics cloying at his nose, hushed voices and bland muzak and whimpers from too-small doses of painkillers and—

"Nick!"

At his name and the sight of Alex and Finnick trudging out of Room 326 just a few paces further down the hall, Nick snapped back to full consciousness in time to catch the wolf pup running over to press his softly crying face into Nick’s stomach. Wrapping his arms around Alex to hold him close, Nick remembered that yes, that was right, he and Judy had invited Marian over to watch Alex for them that Sunday morning, a whole lifetime ago. "Shh, shhh, it's okay," Nick found himself saying, uncertain of the actual truthfulness of the words. "It's okay. I'm here now..."

To Finnick, coming over at a far slower pace, he asked with the calmest voice he could manage "What happened, Finn?"

"We were all just watching 'toons on the TV," mumbled the fennec fox, voice completely absent of its usual brashness and bluster, eyes distant and unfocused. Nick watched him struggle, for once not begrudging him for his soft spot regarding Marian. "We were watching 'toons and suddenly this crazy bi... this crazy wolf comes on, spouting this story about..." His gaze focused then, casting a look of pity up at Nick. "That trash about the Junior Rangers then, all that was...?"

Nick swallowed, looking from his oldest friend down to Alex as the wolf pulled away enough to look up at him. The pain there in those bright orbs, after so much effort on his and Judy’s part to heal him after the trauma of Jack Savage, almost got Nick crying once again.

Before the final walls of resolve could be broken, the door Finnick and Alex had come out of opened once again. Out came a black-wooled sheep in a doctor's coat and glasses, scribbling on a board. He glanced up at them all and stopped, a sympathetic smile crossing his muzzle. "Ah, Officer Wilde-Hopps. Glad you could make it so quickly. I'm Doctor Woolord."

Nick hated the doctor's calmly professional tone, berating himself for doing so as he reluctantly let go of his Alex and stepped around to shake Woolord's hooves. "How is she? What happened?"

The sheep glanced down at Alex with honest worry, but at Nick's clearing throat sighed and flipped through the notes on his board. "It's not uncommon for vixens her age and with the kind of life she's had... there are still some tests to run, but it seems the shock of that... broadcast... well, there are some things the body can't handle. Luckily these two were able to get her help quickly, but..." Sighing, he removed his glasses and looked straight on at Nick. "At this point it's more a matter of keeping her comfortable and calm, and waiting. It's the best that can be hoped for."
Nick felt something crumbling away in his chest. It hurt worse than the muzzling incident, worse than Judy's betrayal at the press conference, worse than learning the real fate of his father, worse than the shock of seeing his deepest secret revealed to the world. He took a deep, staggering breath, throat feeling like hours had been spent screaming. "Can I... is she well enough to see?"

Woolord consulted his notes again, quickly nodding. "She's asleep at the moment, but you can go in if you swear to keep your peace."

Nick was already heading for the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, steeling himself before turning it and pushing through.

The room's lights were dim, but that meant nothing for his fox eyes. The room was bare too, nothing but a chair next to the door, a stand covered in pill bottles and a half-empty glass of water, and the Bed. On the bed, almost disappearing into the voluminous sheets, lay Marian Wilde. She looked old and frail, older and frailer than Nick remembered, as if someone had taken a knife and dug all the muscle out of her. The oxygen mask secured to her muzzle and hospital gown clinging to her body looked more real than her, more THERE.

Keeping as quiet as he could, Nick pulled the chair over to the side of the bed and clambered up. Sitting, he stared down at the quiet form of his mother, eyes trained on the slow rise and fall of her chest. He hardly heard the door open and close again, but the feel of Alex's smaller hand taking his gave strength enough to let the tears fall.

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The ZPD was eerily empty by the time Judy finally made it back there, sometime after 5 P.M. Most of the police force was still out in the city, she guessed, putting on a show of strength or assisting Precinct 3 comb through the Palm Hotel and its surrounding establishments for the slightest hint of where Miss Black had gone. The lack of reporters and photographers, she assumed as she hurried to the front desk, was because they were all busy covering the recent crime. That or, less likely but worse in her mind, they were trying to follow up on the story Miss Black had proclaimed for all Zootopia to hear, in which case even she could summon up a sliver of pity for the remaining members of the Junior Ranger troop that had tortured Nick years ago.

"Clawhauser, can you run something to Honey for me?"

The portly cheetah signaled for quiet for a moment as he nodded along to whoever was on the other side of the phone he held pressed to his ear for several more seconds, before finally saying a rushed "Thank you, the ZPD will contact you ASAP," and hanging up. Then he groaned, slumping into his seat and rubbing his forehead with one hand while reaching for a donut from the box sitting beside him with the other. "We need to get someone else to run this place with me... especially if these crises become a regular thing... I could feel myself losing pounds with every phone call..."

Judy winced, wishing she had time to chat and cheer the cheetah up. "I'm really sorry to hear that, Ben. Wish I could help. But listen, I need to go get to Nick as soon as possible, so if you could please run this up to Honey to me..." She held up a trio of flash drives and put on what she hoped was a convincing smile. "They're the security footage for the last week from the Palm Hotel."

"Clawhauser seemed to snap to attention at the sound of Nick's name, a look of guilt flashing across his face for a moment, followed by a look of sadness, then another of guilt as he bent over his desk to look down at her. "Ohhh, I'm really sorry, Judy, I'd be happy to do that, of course. I can't imagine what poor Nick is feeling right..." He blinked, pausing with one hand outstretched for the flash drives as he looked to Judy's left and right. "Uh, where is Nick, anyway?"
Judy flinched, internally debating for a moment how much to tell the cheetah. Marian was a wonderful lady who seemed adored by all who had the chance to meet her, but a preference for privacy strongly ran in the Wilde family. "Uh, he had to... make a personal stop elsewhere. Really important."

Clawhauser seemed to hear something in her voice, because after a moment he just nodded and took the flash drives from her. "Okay, well, I hope things get better for him soon... oh! Sorry, but Chief Bogo and Mayor Gazelle are up in the Chief's office, they wanted to talk to you and Nick the moment you came in. I think it's really important."

Judy slumped at hearing that, ears hitting the back of her head. Sighing, she nodded to Clawhauser and circled the front desk for the elevators. It was a quick ride up to the third floor where the chief's office was and an even quicker stride down the hall to it. Being a rabbit, she could already hear the heated conversation ahead of her.

"I’m only asking you to be pragmatic about this—"

"I won’t be distracted from Carol’s case, Erollay. This is Zootopia. If we can’t handle multiple issues at once, we might be too far gone already."

"Mayor—"

H.A.W.C. has had more than enough time with her. Nocturnal District being their area or not, the crime occurred in Savannah Central, and I will not have a citizen of Zootopia mistreated—"

Judy paused for a moment outside the closed door, steeling herself for whatever might await her on the other side, before hopping up to grab the handle and turning it, dropping down as her momentum made the door slide open a few inches.

"Wilde-Hopps, there you—Judy, where’s your partner?"

Judy paused for a split-second at seeing Mayor Gazelle standing at one side of Chief Bogo’s desk and Assistant Mayor Erollay at the other, a part of her always feeling somewhat surprised by the popstar-turned-politician Shaking it away with increasing ease, she stepped fully into the room and closed the door behind her. "Sorry, sir, but he's at Zootopia General. He got a call at the Palm Hotel from a doctor. I didn't hear much, but... I think his mom had a heart attack at seeing Miss Black's broadcast."

Immediately, and to Judy's extreme discomfort, a wave of pity rolled through the office from the other mammals there, something Judy knew Nick would not have been able to handle if he'd been there to receive it. "I see," said Bogo after a moment, clearing his throat and shuffling a stack of papers on his desk. "Well, we all wish the elder Wilde a swift recovery then. On the topic of Miss Black's broadcast, however. Lieutenant Wilde-Hopps... Judy... I hate asking you this, but what Black claimed..."

"It's true," said Judy. She clenched her fists, willing her voice to stay even. Damn if she wasn't sick of saying those words today. "All of it. And, I know what you must be thinking, but I swear, there is absolutely no way Nick, my partner, my husband, had any hand in today's events. Unless I need to remind those present that last time Miss Black showed herself in Zootopia, it was moments away from killing me. Probably not the first mammal my husband would go to for any sort of petty revenge scheme."

"The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind," said Bogo, and Judy desperately wanted to believe the cape buffalo. "However, that still leaves a bloodthirsty maniac with a known grudge against the ZPD
running loose in Zootopia, and that’s not something I will long stand for. So please, please tell me you found something of use up in that hotel room?”

Giving a silent prayer of thanks to Serendipity and Karma for the conversation moving with little fuss to an area she felt far more comfortable speaking in, Judy hopped up onto one of the chairs in front of the desk, squared her shoulders, and started her report. “Nothing immediately useful, sir. The penthouse suite from which the crime was committed was found completely empty, with no sign of how Black escaped or to where. Preliminary forensics found no skin or hair other than those of the victim and a white wolf, presumably Black. The hotel manager has handed over all their security footage for the duration of time they had Black as a guest, about a week, which I sent off to the Computer Labs to look through on my way up here.”

“Stop right there,” said Elloway, voice a too-many-cigarettes sort of growl as she moved around Fangmeyer’s desk to lean with crossed arms against the chair Judy stood on. “How exactly does a known terrorist stay in plain sight like that for a week without anybody noticing or saying anything?”

“False name and credentials,” guessed Bogo with a shrug. “Plus, you forget, Black has been presumed dead for seven, nearly eight months now, and she never took the spotlight like Savage did. Unless, Miss. Elloway, you think you could have picked that wolf out of a lineup before today’s broadcast?”

The cheetah said nothing. Fighting back her smirk, Judy continued. “There was a note found in the suite, a taunt, but we’ll need to get samples of the victim’s hoofwriting for comparison to make sure Black didn’t make him write it. Detectives Fangmeyer and Anderson are back at the hotel, conducting on-site interviews with the staff to see if any of them saw or heard anything relevant, though I suggest, considering the Palm Hotel’s size, assigning more officers to the task. I also called the city networks and am waiting to hear back on how Black could have broadcast to the entire city. And as for her escaping…”

“A personal theory?” asked Gazelle.

Judy shrugged. “Hang-gliding is a popular Sahara Square activity. Take off the moment the victim hit the ground and everyone’s focused elsewhere, I don’t think anyone would have looked twice. The hotel might not have had cameras positioned right to catch someone taking off from the suite, either.”

“We’ll have to get a wolf officer to test that theory,” said Bogo, nodding. “We’ll radio Adam Fangmeyer as soon as we’re through here to get on it. Before that, though—”

“Before that, though,” spoke Elloway over Bogo, earning her two ignored glares from the cops in the room, “we need to form an official response to this… this catastrophe. Right now, every predator in Zootopia who’s ever been hurt by a prey mammal and has a conscience is dreading the possibility of a murder in their name. Every prey mammal who’s ever refused a weasel service, cheated a lion out of a paycheck, or failed to hold the elevator for a wolverine is terrified for their life. This will only get worse when Black kills again. I suggest making arrangements with HiteTech and H.A.W.C. —”

“We already have VERY thorough arrangements with H.A.W.C.,” said Bogo with what was only barely not a snarl, standing to tower over the cheetah. “The ZPD is more than capable anyways of handling this situation. Bringing H.A.W.C. into this might be taken as a sign of weakness that will only make the citizenry MORE scared.”

“If one more murder occurs thanks to your bullheaded—”
A sudden clearing throat sent Judy jumping and stopped Bogo and Elloway in their argument, reminding all that Mayor Gazelle was still there. Once a moment had passed and she looked certain she had their undivided attention, Gazelle spoke, “I am siding with Chief Bogo on this for now, and that will be my final decision until the situation changes for the worse. So please, let’s try to put the personal squabbles behind us and instead focus on protecting Zootopia, yes?”

When nobody raised an objection to this, Gazelle tugged at the bottom edges of her suit jacket and looked to Judy. “Lieutenant Judy Wilde-Hopps, you and your partner are the most familiar with Miss Black. After discussing it with Chief Bogo, by mayoral mandate I am assigning the both of you to find Miss Black, apprehend or kill her, and if possible, bring an end to this color-based organization she is a part of. No more loose ends, no more chances for them to return and threaten our dear city once more. I want it over. You have the full backing of City Hall and the ZPD for this. Do you understand?”

Judy gaped up at the mayor, overwhelmed by the enormity of the task set before her and Nick. She had never heard the gazelle sound so stern, so cold. Quickly nodding, she snapped into a salute. “You can count on us, mayor. Trust me, I’m as eager to see the end of all this as you are.”

Gazelle nodded and glanced Bogo’s way. When he said nothing else she looked back at Judy. “Dismissed. If you have any ideas on leads, get to them.”

That, thought Judy as she turned for the door, was an understatement. They just so happened to have a lead right in the ZPD’s holding cells.
The ZPD jail interrogation cell was dim and grimy. Not their best one to use, by far, with a faulty light faintly swaying in a weak draft, and an observation mirror that featured a long crack running from the top-left to the bottom-right from when a goat had tried headbutting his way to freedom. He had managed to headbutt his way to the emergency room, but no closer to freedom. The metal table was smudged and dirty, the chairs rickety and too small for anything larger than a cougar. The strange odor of over-boiled eggs permeated the room. It was an utterly unpleasant room to spend any length of time in.

That Judy knew all this to be entirely intentional didn't make the experience any better. Nor did how Doug Ramley seemed utterly at home as he was brought in by the pair of wolf officers, his orange prisoner’s uniform as ill-fitting as anything she’d seen him wear. He simply looked around in mild interest as he was shoved down onto the too-small chair, not looking at Judy until his cuffs had been secured to the table and the other officers left the room.

Only once the lock had clicked into place did he look her way, acidic smile made worse by the bruise around his left eye. "Hello, Officer Wilde-Hopps. I didn't expect to see you again so soon. As I understand it, usually you big ZPD types like to let small fry like me stew away in our cells for a while before trying to talk."

"Usually," Judy agreed, keeping her voice and expression carefully neutral. "However, things have happened that make that technique... too slow. I assume you've heard a thing or two, Ramley?"

"Sure," said the ram as he made a show of cracking his neck. "I heard some wolf nutjob threw an innocent prey mammal off a building. Miss Black, I think it was? Some loose ends from that Jack Savage business? Nasty stuff, that was. Glad I'd been out of town on... business."

Judy struggled not to show her teeth. "You and I have very different ideas of innocent, Mr. Ramley. But forget that, let's just cut to the chase. Miss Black works for some kind of widespread organization, its leadership named after colors, possibly represented by a stylized wendigo."

"Sounds like someone's done their research."

"I'm a cop," said Judy. "I pick up things everywhere I look. I know I saw a symbol similar to all this on your computers back at the NH labs, Ramley. I know you're involved in all of this somehow. The question is how, and how deeply."

Like her, the ram had kept a carefully neutral expression on save for that smile at the beginning. Now his shoulders gave a shake, as if he'd just held in a laugh. "No, Lieutenant, the question is... what are you willing to offer?"

"What do you want?"

Doug paused here, silent for a minute, then two minutes. Finally he frowned and sighed. "Total pardon is off the table, not even going to ask. Right now, I'm going to guess I'm heading for a supermax prison, yeah? Life without parole? No need to answer, just get me out of that. Regular prison, regular criminals, don't give a damn if it's all-prey or not. Maybe someplace with a good library."

Judy made a mental note of that before nodding. "Doesn't sound too hard. I'll see what I can do. Anything else?"
"Sure," he continued. For the first time that acidic smile returned, something in the ram's eyes darkening as he leaned over the table toward her as far as his cuffs would allow. "If it comes down to violence, let me blow that dirty chomper's head off, yeah? Let her know she messed up big time by messing with prey like that. We ain't prey anymore! Not with guns! Got me?"

To this, Judy took longer to respond to, glancing at the observation mirror before matching Doug’s gaze. She did not like the mammal in front of her. In fact, if there was a mammal in the world she disliked more than Dawn Bellwether or Jack Savage, it was probably Doug Ramley. It was too bad he was so useful. “If it comes to violence and you prove yourself trustworthy enough… I’ll see what I can do. No promises. Now talk. What can you tell me about the organization with the rainbow Wendigo?”

The ram didn’t look exactly happy with Judy’s promise and quick switch to questions, but he didn’t object as he slumped back into his seat. “Not as much as you want, I bet. Hadn’t been brought in for long, maybe a month and a half after the Jack Savage fiasco. Way bigger than Bellwether’s little conspiracy, too. Unlike her, all they have me doing is growing the Night Howlers.”

“What about those white Night Howlers we confiscated? What about NH serum?”

Doug shrugged. “They did something with regular Night Howlers to make those, not me. I’m a chemist, not a botanist. And no, I produce some NH drugs on the side, but mostly they have me grow the plants. Never asked what for. They just visit every three weeks to collect what I have and deliver the finished drugs for my part in the distribution.”

Judy nodded, taking notes as he talked. “These mammals have other prey working for them, then? I assume you wouldn’t be doing business with predators.”

“You assume right,” he said, smiling again. His teeth were yellow and crooked. “Local gangs and criminals, middle-mammals. One of them, a giant fruit bat, favors this dive over in the Rainforest District near the canals. Calls herself Faunt. I figure it’s fake, ‘cause that’s the name of the bar as well. She wasn’t at the warehouse when your people raided it, so maybe you can find more out from her.”

A tapping came from the other side of the glass. Judy glanced that way a moment, standing as she looked back at Doug. “This should be enough to go on for now, though I’ll be back. One last thing, though. The name of this organization. I don’t believe I’ve ever heard it.”

Doug huffed at this, chuckling as the door opened and the pair of wolf officers came in to retrieve him. “That one you get for free, little bunny. I was always told to just call them the Hegemony.”

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Judy's phone read 9:12 P.M. when she finally staggered into her apartment, ears drooping, barely able to lift her feet from the floor. Closing and locking the door behind her more through instinct than any real thought, she made her slow way through the entrance hall, past the kitchen, pausing only at the sight of a fox and a wolf curled up together on the couch beneath a blanket, having spent who knew how long waiting up for her. She sighed, her heart now aching on top of everything else. "Oh, you sweet little boys..."

Shrugging off her police armor, she dimmed the lights completely before crawling up onto the couch with Nick and Alex, sighing as the red fox's tail curled up over her. In the peace and gloom and silence she was able to finally catch her breath and reflect on everything that had happened since that day, from the perfect morning to that ominous exchange with Doug. "What a nightmare..."
"Penny for your thoughts, Carrots?"

Judy flinched out of her thoughts to find Nick’s eyes open and looking her way, their gorgeous green dull and bloodshot. He had been crying, she realized, even in his sleep. “Oh, Nick… your mom…” She’d called the hospital on the train home, the news of Marian Wilde’s condition hitting harder than anything else to happen that day. She loved the elderly vixen like her own mother. She couldn’t even imagine Bonnie or Stu in the same situation. “Nick, I’m so sorry.”

One of Nick’s arms wrapped around her and pulled her close. He kissed her softly, then pressed his forehead against hers. “I… I don’t know what to do, Judy,” he whispered, ears flat against his head. “I can’t… she was all, all I had for so long. And Alex, we’d only just given him a family again.”

Tears filled Judy’s eyes, hot and painful. Brushing a hand up her Nick’s cheek, she fought for the right words to say. They wouldn’t come however, and eventually she had to settle for hugging her fox with all her strength, a silent offer of support as she felt his tears trail down her face.

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Breakfast the next morning was blueberry pancakes. Judy rose early, her internal clock was telling her the sun had started to rise and well before either of her boy cuddled with her on the couch was awake. The soft snores drifting in from the other room were all the music she needed as she made the pancakes from scratch, quick and nimble with the flour, milk, eggs, and butter in their proper measure, just as her mother had taught her years ago. The sizzle of the pan was satisfying on an almost primal level, and soon Judy lost herself in the routine. If she could treat this like any other morning, just until breakfast was finished and work reared its ugly head…

“Judy, is Nick going to be okay?”

Judy almost dropped the blueberries she’d been about to add to the mix onto the floor, barely catching them in time before turning to Alex at her side. The pup stood there looking (barely) up at her, silent save the brief sentence spoken, eyes wide and too old for such a young age. The scar didn’t help.

Looking away at the heavy patter of feet, Judy watched Nick leave the living room for the bathroom, ears back and tail dragging the floor. Swallowing, she looked at the still-waiting Alex and then back to the cooking pancakes, dropping the blueberries in and turning the cakes over before it was too late. “I don’t know. I hope so. It… can’t be easy… The best we can do for him is be there for him, just like how he’s there for us.”

From the bathroom came the sound of the shower turning on. Alex nodded, then looked down as he began setting the table for breakfast. Judy watched a moment, worrying, then set the stove temperature to low and placed a hand on the wolf’s shoulder. “Alex, I want you to know that even when we’re hurting, Nick and I still love you and we’re still here for you. If you want to talk about anything, I’m—” she paused a split-second, almost saying “all ears,” a poor joke among rabbits—“ready to listen.”

Alex looked at her, lips twitching as he hurriedly set the plate he’d been holding down. He took a deep breath, gulping for breath, visibly fighting back tears. “I just, I-I, I don’t want the zebra that punched me thrown out a wind-d-dow…”

Oh. Judy’s eyes snapped to the bruise still faintly visible around the pup’s right eye and her heart broke. Oh, to face so much and still be so sweet…

“Alex… come here.” She didn’t give him much choice, pulling him into a tight hug that he returned
without hesitation. She stood on her tiptoes to brush her scent across his forehead and between his ears, a fierce feeling of motherhood welling up in her chest. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Nick and I are going to find and stop Miss Black, I promise. We’re cops. It’s our duty to stop the bad guys.”

He giggled at her nuzzling, making Judy grin, before pulling back and looking at her with those too-old eyes once more. “But Dad was a cop, and he’s… You don’t always stop the bad guys in time, do you?”

Her eyes went unbidden to the scar down the left side of her pup’s face, and Judy’s smile died as memories of Jack Savage and Wolford sped through her thoughts. “No, I suppose we don’t.”

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“So,” said Honey Badger, spinning in her chair away from the array of computers arranged on the desk in front of her to face Judy and Nick. “Do you want the good news, the bad news, or the ‘I don’t even know’ news first?”

Judy and Nick shared a look, both finished with their extra-large expressos from the drive to work but neither quite ready yet for the honey badger’s ever-present cheer. After a moment, Judy sighed and popped her neck. “Same order you just asked, I guess.”

"Excellent! Just one moment, then!"

Turning back in her chair to the computers, Honey typed away at the keyboards before her, swiftly bringing up a series of pictures, a unique one to each monitor. "So, the good news is that the bat our old pal Doug mentioned does indeed actually exist, and has a rap sheet to prove it!"

Breathing a silent sigh of relief that at least one thing the ram had said was true, Judy stepped forward to stand beside the ZPD Comp Specialist and look at the photos. The bat portrayed in them looked on the younger side, maybe mid-20s, almost indistinguishable from a fox aside from the rounder ears, lack of fluffy tail, and membranous wings rather than proper arms. The photos portrayed her in a variety of ways, some official snapshots of her being brought in, some of her in a prison yard, one or two seemingly taken of her out and about living her daily life. "Excellent. We have a name?"

At that, Honey frowned and shook her head, to Judy’s surprise. "What? But how—"

"Fire," said the badger, pulling up a news article from some newspaper Judy had never heard of before, out from San Dingo. "Destroyed a lot of the San Dingo PD's records. And then, a lot more was lost as the mayor dissolved the department. Wasn't able to get a hold of anything from H.A.W.C. either, unfortunately. However, I did manage to find something by inputting these photos into the city-wide database." More typing away, before a new image appeared on the central computer monitor. It showed the bat, Faunt, dressed in a gaudy green poncho and stepping off one of the trains into Zootopia. The time stamp at the corner of the image revealed the photo had been taken at nearly the same time as when Doug had been brought in to work for the Hegemony.

"So," said Nick, between sips of coffee, "We have a few photos, a probably-fake name, a time of arrival in Zootopia, and a favored hangout. Meh. Carrots and I've made due with less. What's the bad news, Bumblebee?"

"Right away, Magnetod."

Judy grinned at Nick's exaggerated scowl at the much-loathed nickname, Honey turning away from her computers once more. "So, I haven't been able to comb through all the camera footage from the
Palm Hotel, but I'm not finding anything concerning Miss Black."

"What," said Nick, "you mean like no accomplices up there with her? No proof of how she escaped?"

"No," said Honey, frowning. "I mean no sign of Black AT ALL. Not a single frame showing her in all the footage I've been through. If there weren't the video footage showing her in the room or written records of her signing into the hotel, under the false name of Whitney Fears, I wouldn't think she'd have been to the Palm Hotel at all."

Judy and Nick shared a look, Judy putting to word what they were both thinking. "So, either we weren't given all of the footage—"

"Or this Hegemony group's got a tech magician way out of my league," finished Honey, nodding. She had the decency to look embarrassed at what she said next. "I loathe saying this, you know I do, but I could probably do a little more for ya if I wasn’t… you know… tryin’ to walk the ZPD straight and narrow. Not that you heard that from me."

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Nick, leaning against a monitor and winking at the honey badger, an act which got Judy rolling her eyes. It’s very important to stick to the ZPD straight and narrow. Not much history there of officers going above and beyond the call of duty, ethics, or sanity for the sake of a case. I hope you’ve been properly warned now, Officer Badger.”

It took a moment, but Honey eventually grinned, leaning back to crack her knuckles. “Don’t worry, sir, I’m picking up what you’re laying down. Anyway, that’s the good and bad. You ready for the weird?"

“As long as you NOT try using slang like that again,” said Nick, Judy silently agreeing, “then sure, absolutely.”

Honey rolled her eyes and turned to pull up Zoogle on a web browser. “That rainbow, robed wendigo figure you saw on Doug’s computers. The wendigo drawing years ago, during the Wendigo murders. They’re pretty similar, right? Well, on a hunch I’ve looked and looked, but I’ve only been able to find anything like them in two other places. And, well…”

She rolled her chair away to give Judy and Nick unblocked views. On one monitor, to Judy’s surprise, was a photo of the gate through the fencing surrounding Cliffside Asylum. She’d never given the structure much thought the few times she had been there before, but now she saw them. To the left of the gate stood a statue of a bear in featureless robes, arms out to the sides, while to the right was a similar statue of an ox or bull in the same pose. The resemblance to the Wendigo drawing, a deer or elk in plain robes and clawed hands instead of hooves, was uncanny.

“Oookay… creepy,” she muttered as she looked to the other monitor. There she saw what looked like a courtyard in front of a steel and granite office building. In the center of the courtyard stood a bronze statue 15 feet tall, judging from the elephant standing near it. This one was of a cat of some sort, something between a lion and a tiger, arms out and palms up to the sky.

“Well hello, tonight’s nightmares,” said Nick, stepping back from the monitors and putting hands on his hips. “We’ve got most of the day to blow before trying to find our bat at her bar. The asylum’s in the Meadowlands. Where do we need to go to find tall, dark, and scary?”

“Nocturnal District,” said Honey Badger, looking at them once more, differently now. All humor had fled from her voice and expression, something nervous and sullen crawled into its place. “HiteTech Industries Tower, Zootopia branch. Guess you’ll be having a chat with ol’ Winona Hite.”
They didn’t talk the two and a half blocks to the train station. There were too many pitying eyes on them, too many mammals staring as they passed by for Judy to do anything but hold Nick’s prosthetic hand in her own, forget professionalism. The fox, for his part, strode through it all with an ice-cold air of detachment dressed up with lidded eyes and a lazy smile. It hurt Judy to see that smile. It was too much like his smiles the first day they met, before the Missing Mammal Case, before everything.

Silent, the pair reached the station just as a train arrived. The doors opened, loosing a small horde of smaller mammals in business suits and heavy coats, shades and umbrellas to shield against the sun being the most prominent fashion items. Judy led the way through them into the train, finding seats near to the front where she could look out a window. Ignoring the other passengers with them for the moment, mostly a mix of smaller mammals from raccoons to hedgehogs, she watched as the train shuddered into motion, the view of the outside station and the above-ground world swiftly disappearing behind stone walls. Unlike most other train lines in Zootopia, the N-Line catered almost exclusively to the Nocturnal District, rising up above ground at only one stop in Downtown, Tundratown, Sahara Square, Savannah Central, and the Meadowlands.

20 seconds passed with nothing but smooth rock and dim service lights whizzing past to be seen through the window, before they exited the tunnel into the Nocturnal District-proper. Even bracing herself, knowing what was coming, Judy felt her breath taken away by the sight below them of almost a whole other city contained within a single massive cavern deep below Zootopia. A city with its own streets, its own buildings and sky(ground?)scrapers, its own parks and lakes and municipal buildings. Instead of trees and bushes and grass there were unique fungi that were beautiful in their own ways, mushrooms that towered as tall as a giraffe or as small as a mouse, many varieties glowing vivid neon blues and greens, purples and reds. What lighting didn’t come from these or from the flush of neon to mimic the fungus came from an array of movable lights set up all across the ceiling of the cavern, mimicking through technology beyond Judy’s understand the night sky itself, down to season-appropriate constellations.

"I always meant to bring her down here, you know."

Judy looked from the approaching city beyond to Nick’s faint reflection in the glass. The false smile had dropped away into something more thoughtful. She waited for him to continue, safe knowing that by some unspoken courtesy, strangers never talked or listened to strangers while on the N-train.

“My mom, she’s never had much money to spare for what she’d call ‘frivolities’ back in the day, but something she’s always had a passion for is seeing the sights of Zootopia. Every time she scrounges up enough savings she gets a day or two emptied of obligations and takes the train to another district or sub-district. It’s always had to be money she earned herself, always insistent on that. In the 50 years since she moved here, she’s managed to enjoy the specialties and wonders of every part of Zootopia except… except…”

Nick fell silent there, and neither he nor Judy spoke another word the remaining ride down. The train swept down the tracks into the nocturnal city, rattling to a stop inside a station verifiably less pristine than the one they’d started from, discarded newspapers and fast food wrappers in the gutters, sodden cardboard boxes stacked haphazardly along the pea-green walls. An amami rabbit manned a rickety cart near an information kiosk, steam rising from the cart as he hawked bowls of hot noodles to passing raccoon dog businessmen. Up above them a tube-nosed bat in overalls mumbled a continuous stream of curses in an unfamiliar language as he worked on a flickering light unit.

From the train station, they took a cab to HiteTech Industries Tower, Judy watching out the window at the various buildings and mammals they passed. The Nocturnal District, to her surprise, was
almost visibly changing before her eyes, at least since the last time she had been down there. Aside from the major business structures and government infrastructure, there never had been much focus on public maintenance down there in the dark. Mammals often had to make do with what they could scrounge, make, or steal themselves, the buildings as worn and haphazard as anything she might have seen up in the abandoned Happytown slums. But now, looking out, she could see a change. More mammals walked the streets with looks of confidence on their faces, children laughing as they played games. On one street corner she spotted a trio of red foxes in fancy kimonos playing instruments, to the joy of a growing crowd. Newer buildings were under construction, solid buildings of brick and stone rather than old wooden and sheet metal shacks that had once been the norm.

"So, hey," she said to their cab's raccoon driver as they stopped at a red light. "Not to pry, but this place is looking on the up and up since last I was down here. Did Mayor Gazelle start a new effort?"

"Not Gazelle," answered the racoon, voice at first dismissive before turning almost reverent. "The Lady Hite is to thank, and her wonderful H.A.W.C. Yes, many blessings to them."

Judy shared a look with Nick, before spotting something past him and clambering up over his lap for a better look, to his audible surprise. She ignored his yelp, her jaw dropping and ears flopping against the back of her head as she gaped up at a poster 20 feet tall and 10 wide, a painfully familiar Arctic hare standing front and center on it. Bethany Blain stood in white and red military-style armor against a dark grey background, scarred face stoic as she saluted the viewer. Above Beth, in blood-red letters, ran in all-capitals "H.A.W.C. WANTS YOU!"

"Well," remarked Nick, following her gaze. "Frosty’s doing pretty well for herself. Sure beats our grinning mugs in the ZPD's recruitment campaigns."

Judy had nothing to say to that, merely returning to her seat. She knew that, as a legally-recognized private organization, H.A.W.C. was entirely free to advertise and recruit as they say fit, but actually seeing such an advertisement in Zootopia, HER Zootopia, unsettled her in ways she couldn't quite name. The pang of nostalgia at seeing Beth again as well, so suddenly and, as Nick had said, apparently doing so well, brought its own sort of pain. She had liked working with the hare in the ZPD.

“I guess you never really know a mammal…”

Things didn't get any better once they arrived at HiteTech Industries Tower. Hopping out of the cab, Judy had only a moment to gaze up at the tall liger statue in the middle of the courtyard and the towering ziggurat of black stone, sheer steel, and mirrored glass behind it, before a rising cacophony ahead drew her attention. To her surprise, a thick ring of mammals stood between them and the main series of doors leading into HiteTech Tower, waving signs and shouting at a line of armored H.A.W.C. officers guarding the entrances. There were foxes among the crowd of protestors, and moles, raccoons, and various other nocturnal mammals, but overwhelmingly the crowd was composed mostly of bats of all mammals.

Nick sidled up beside her, sliding his hands into his pockets as the cab rolled away. “Huh, would you look at that. Controversy around someone other than us.”

Judy tried summoning up an example to refute her fox’s claim, couldn’t think of anything, and returned to looking the scene over with a sigh. The more she looked at HiteTech Industries Tower, she found, the less she liked it, with how thoroughly it clashed with the rest of the Nocturnal District. So much of the underground realm, even the most recent of other towers, had been hewn or formed from the native cavern, built with only the cheapest supplies from above where it couldn’t be built from native rock and decorated by native arts. More than any other District, there was a close, lived-in quality to the Nocturnal District, since it was so much harder to provide the most modern amenities
down there in the dank and dark. It almost reminded Judy of Bunnyburrow, of home.

HiteTech Industries Tower was nothing like any of this. The building towered above all others nearby, reaching straight from the bottom of the cavern to the top, connecting to the cavern ceiling in a shroud of support pylons and cables. It was metal and glass, gleaming in the neon glow of the city around it, separate and alone. It carried within itself its own power source, unconnected to the city grid. Its own medical facilities, its own law enforcement in the form of H.A.W.C., its own living quarters for sure, as Judy hadn't heard anything about Hite staying anywhere else. The only connection to the rest of Zootopia, as far as she was aware, was the water supply.

"What an awful eyesore of a building," said Nick, speaking what they all thought. A sigh, then a paw on Judy's shoulder. "Unless you've gained psychic powers in the last five minutes and have been holding out on me, not going to learn anything standing here."

That was true enough, no matter how things changed. Nodding, Judy took the lead, crossing the four or so yards separating them from the protestors and trying not to let the statue towering over them unnerve her any more than it needed to. To her relief, many of the closest protestors noticed their approach, and with surprisingly welcome looks on their faces nudged other mammals and parted ways to let the pair through. Judy smiled and nodded her thanks to them, while beside her Nick grinned and exchanged high-fours or finger guns.

Reaching the other side of the protestors, they were met by the unwavering line of H.A.W.C. officers, led to Judy's surprise and uncertain relief by Bethany Blaine herself. The hare stood apart from the rest of the line, a gold bar at her armored collar signifying rank. At the sight of her and Nick, Beth's whole countenance brightened, from a stern glower that would have done Chief Bogo proud to something almost resembling a smile. She met them halfway, a hand out that Judy quickly shook. "Ju… Lieutenant and Detective Wilde-Hopps, it's good to see both of you again. I think it's an easy guess what you two are doing all the way down here. Miss Black?"

"Easy is an understatement," said Nick, shaking Beth's hand next. "In our next breaking report, snow found to be cold, lava hot."

"More of that legendary Nick Wilde banter," said the hare, looking almost sad as she turned away and toward the line of H.A.W.C. officers, and the tower behind them. "Well, come on, let's head somewhere less… volatile. I think we both have questions to ask."

Judy was more than happy to follow that suggestion. After another exchanged look between them, Judy and Nick followed after Beth through the H.A.W.C. line without any hindrance, Judy not sure why she had been almost expecting some. To her ears the shouts of the protestors seemed to grow louder as the pair of them followed Beth to the sliding double-doors into HiteTech Tower, as if anyone getting through to the building was a victory for them.

"So, you've been doing well for yourself," said Nick as they passed through the doors, mirroring his comments in the cab. "Finally got to be the big-time face everyone sees thanks to H.A.W.C., huh?"

"It's been fine," replied Beth. If she detected the undertones of resentment for having jumped ship, she didn't react to them. "H.A.W.C. doesn't have the… personality, of the ZPD, but I feel I get better results down here. Less standing in my way. You two should join me. Lots of job opportunities in HiteTech."

"Not if it means that welcoming committee every morning," remarked Nick as they followed along behind Beth down a several-yards-long hall, their surroundings plain black and white granite, pipes running the length of the ceiling above them. "People blaming Hite for Black's little stunt yesterday, or... is there something else we missed?"
"A little of both," replied Beth, tone much more relaxed now that they were inside and away from both protestors and her fellow H.A.W.C. soldiers. "The protests have been going on for months now, since before construction on the building was even finished. I don't know what the deal is exactly, something about some important bat structure getting torn down to make space."

Judy’s nose twitched, ears catching a slight tremble in the hare’s voice at the word “structure”. That was something to look into later. And though she wasn’t part of the official investigation, it might explain the bat that tried to kill Director Hite the day before as well.

A whistle from Nick beside her broke Judy from her thoughts and made her look at him, then forward to whatever had impressed him. The hallway came to an end in front of a door that looked like it had been repurposed from a bank vault, thick, gleaming metal, with multiple magnetic locks along the top, bottom, and right side.

Beth sighed as they came to a stop in front of the security door, the hare drawing a key card from one of her belt pouches and sliding it through a scanner set in the middle of the door. Following that she began inputting a code into a keypad next to the scanner, doing surprisingly little to hide the code from Judy and Nick.

FN2187.

“Sorry about this,” said Beth, stepping back as the door hissed and began disengaging its locks. “The protestors had the top brass nervous already, but the museum and Black kicked things up to a ludicrous new level. And on that note…” All professionalism dropped as she turned to look at Judy and Nick, Judy immediately taken aback by the worry and concern in the hare’s blue eyes. “This is going to get personal, isn’t it? What with our last little encounter with Black at Cliffside Asylum?”

“What could possibly make you think that?” asked Nick, Judy wincing at his snark-laden voice. “The time when you broke Blacky’s arm, or when you kicked her off a bridge to her seeming death?”

Beth grimaced and looked away to the middle distance, buckteeth worrying her bottom lip. Judy sighed, only restraining herself from elbowing Nick in the side because she knew the snark and cynicism to be his coping mechanism. “What my dumb fox means is that… probably. There was a note in the hotel suite. It claimed we should die."

Beth didn’t look much comforted by that. The hare sighed and dragged a hand down her face, lingering briefly on the scars extending from her mouth. As the last of the locks on the security door deactivated and the slab of metal started gliding inward to allow them admittance, she nodded as if reaching a decision and turned her gaze straight ahead. “However I can, I and H.A.W.C. will help. Resources, info, contacts, whatever, long as Black is taken down.”

Judy felt her own eyebrow matching Nick’s raised eyebrow as the pair exchanged glances. “That’s… a nice surprise,” she managed after a second, turning forward again. “No offense, but I figured… you would want to pursue Black yourself, with H.A.W.C. For the glory.”

The look of utter hurt Beth shot her way made Judy feel 9 years old again. “The hell would you say that for, Hopps? I changed jobs, not jumped head-first from the Light Side of the Force to the Dark Side or something! Black’s threatening you two, my friends, and myself, and that makes Honey a potential avenue of emotional attack on me. Does that sound selfish enough to you, Lieutenant?”

That hadn’t been what Judy meant at all. Or at least, it hadn’t been something she’d intended to mean. “Beth, I—"
The security door shuddered to a stop and Beth stormed through, gaze forward. Judy shot a helpless look at Nick, who merely shrugged and gestured forward. Sighing, Judy strode through the security door to catch up to their guide, her fox close behind. She’d only just done so when her surroundings registered to her and the careful apology Judy had been formulating died on her lips. Its remains were used to nourish a bold-faced “Whoa…” as she slowly turned in a circle to take everything in.

The tower seemed to run hollow down the center, big enough to comfortably fit in the entire ZPD building where they stood at the base, crisscrossed with walkways as it narrowed toward the very top of the tower. Around them there were countless bubbling fountains and flowering plants, wooden bridges crossing over artificial streams that wound through marble channels, computer kiosks where mammals of all sorts typed and drew and dictated. Hundreds of mammals more hurried to and fro around them, HiteTech Industries Tower bursting with life like it was its own miniature city. At the center of the building rose a pillar of elevators, angled walkways connecting to them from every floor.

“Yeah,” said Beth, the trouble from earlier seemingly forgotten as she took clear pleasure in Judy’s awe. “I know.”
A Meeting Long Awaited

“And what are THEY doing here, Blaine?”

Judy snapped from her gaping and turned in the direction of the new voice, frowning at the sight of a gazelle in a dark grey turtleneck and black vest heading their way, other mammals making a wide berth at his approach. Even had he not looked like a near-twin of Mayor Gazelle, she’d have recognized Doctor Grayson anywhere. Every officer in Precinct 1 would. He’d been there, “interviewing” Jack Savage the day the hare escaped custody and hurt so many of her fellow officers. That Savage had not killed the defenseless gazelle, not even hurt him, had been a topic of debate and suspicious conversation inside the bullpen for weeks, but nothing had ever come of it, as far as Judy knew.

“Doctor Grayson,” said Beth, once the gazelle had come within actually polite conversation distance. “Lieutenant and Detective Wilde-Hopps. They’re only here to ask Director Hite some questions concerning… you know. The thing, yesterday.”

To Judy’s relief, Grayson’s scowl grew marginally smaller upon hearing this. He looked her and Nick over with a glance, sending a chill down her spine, before looking back at Beth. “Very well, that is sensible. Thank you for your discretion concerning that topic while out here in… public. Return to the protest lines. I shall escort these two to Director Hite myself.”

Beth opened her mouth as if to object, paused as if thinking better of it, and turned to Judy with a sigh. “Well, it was nice seeing both of you again while it lasted. We should get together sometime, get drinks, chat about the old days. Faunt’s Fountain, that’s usually a good place to find me. And please, remember my offer about HiteTech. Lot of opportunity here.”

Judy nodded, getting the hint as she shook hands with the hare. She worked to keep her expression carefully neutral at the feel of a slip of paper in Beth’s hand, carefully drawing it into hers as she let go and pulled back. Beth turned to Nick next, shaking his prosthetic hand. “Take care, detective. I want you to know, I’m really sorry to hear about your mother. Call if you need anything.”

Nick nodded, mouth a thin, tight line. Judy noticed him reach over with his other hand to clasp Beth’s hand with both of his, Judy’s attentive eyes catching him switch on the prosthetic arm’s built-in recorder as he did. Once that was done, Beth spared them a final look before turning and heading back in the direction they’d come. Judy shared a look with Nick, a silent comment on all that had just happened, before looking up at Grayson, who seemed preoccupied watching Beth depart. “Doctor Grayson, sir, if you’re ready to show us around?”

"Yes, of course," said the gazelle after a moment, turning and making for the elevator at the center of the tower. A flash of a badge from his suit jacket and those waiting for the elevator cleared away, allowing the three of them to take one of the waiting cars without further passengers. "She's a good mammal, Blaine," said Grayson after hitting the button for a floor labeled CEO SUITE. "Dedicated to her job, skilled, thorough, driven. Though, with your history, I suppose I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know."

"Well, driven is certainly one word I’d use for ol’ Frosty," said Nick, hands in his pockets and slouching against one of the elevator’s glass walls, the fox putting on a disaffected air Judy knew to be aimed at getting under the gazelle’s skin. “But you know, I’ve got to admit, I was really surprised when I heard she was joining up with your little—you mind if I call H.A.W.C. a legal gang?—your legal gang. No Mammal Inclusion Initiative for private organizations, or else I’ve been cheated out of a whole host of job opportunities.”
"It is all thanks to Director Hite," said Grayson, doing an admirable job of ignoring Nick’s efforts as his gaze focused away, seemingly on the floors they could see passing by through the elevator's clear glass walls. "So much to thank her for in the realms of civil liberties. Did you know that it was Winona Hite that started San Dingo's Happytown riots? She pulled a cop to safety out of a random wreck, then used the cop's key to uncollar hundreds of predators. Many were hurt and killed in the riots, but in the end, San Dingo outlawed the use of Tame collars on predators three years earlier than any other city or county! And that was only the start. Dozens of measures for equality were pushed through by her force of personality. Interspecies relationships, even marriage, became legal. Predators became able to own and operate large businesses. Prey became able to adopt predators and vice-versa. It'd be strange for her own private forces not to reflect all this."

"Ah," said Nick, nodding along. "Now I get it. Well gosh, San Dingo sounds like a proper predator paradise. What's Ms. Hite doing in our dinky little Zootopia neighborhood?"

"Improving livelihoods, providing jobs and education, enforcing law and order. What she has always tried to do, in other words." The elevator slowed to a stop, the doors sliding open in front of them. Grayson led the way out, across a suspended corridor of glass and steel toward a pair of cherry-red wood doors that looked almost quaint there in the stark, futuristic surroundings. The gazelle typed a code into a keypad next to the doors (Judy not being able to read out this one) and a light above them turned from red to green. Grayson pushed the doors open and stepped aside, gesturing for the two ZPD officers to go in first. "Making the world a better place."

The room beyond the doors, at a first glance, looked more a comfortable living room or den than the office of one of if not THE most powerful businessmammals in Zootopia. Spacious beyond practicality, the room carried a bar along the wall to the left, a plethora of television and computer monitors of various sizes along the walls to the right. The entire wall straight ahead was window, allowing a perfect view out on the neon-drenched Nocturnal District. Closer to the window than them stood a desk that would fit two Chief Bogos comfortably and looked carved from solid black marble, contrasting with the snow-white walls, floor, and ceiling.

At that desk, silhouetted against the window on an equally-imposing block of a chair, sat Director Winona Hite, looking much as she had at the museum. No, perhaps a shade more tired, more frail now that she wasn’t out in public and needing to present as much of an unassailable image. Judy could, at least, relate to the utter disdain for monotonous paperwork the liger oh-so-clearly bore. "Director Hite," said Grayson, approaching the desk and the liger sitting there, Judy and Nick following close behind. "I present to you officers Judy and Nick Wilde-Hopps. They were in the lobby, asking questions with Colonel Blaine."

Hite typed away a few more seconds at her laptop, before slowly closing it and looking down at them. Judy almost stepped back from the Stare she found leveled at her, before suddenly the eyes warmed and something like a smile graced the liger's features. "Ah, Officers Wilde-Hopps. It is a pleasure to properly meet you at last." The voice was not at all what Judy had been expecting, almost musical in its softness and refinement, with a hint of an accent similar to Mayor Gazelle's, soaked in age and sorrow. "I think I remember seeing you both at the museum the other day… yes, out in the hall, with the wolf pup. A friend’s?"

“A long-gone friend, yeah,” replied Nick, tone kept carefully neutral as always when dealing with the topic of Wolford. “One of Jack Savage’s victim’s. Doing our best to raise the kid like our own, which… usually doesn’t involve blundering into assassination attempts, but… you do what you can.”

Hite nodded with unexpected familiarity at this, making Judy silently wonder if the liger had any kids of her own. “We all do what we can. Like you did, shouting to your fellow officers to watch out.
Thank you for that. How is the prosthetic arm working out for you, Detective Wilde-Hopps?"

Nick shrugged and smiled. “I’m certainly getting as much use out of it as my old one, heh, but you might want to look into magnets. Not exactly easy to navigate around.”

Hite raised an eyebrow at this, but nodded. “I’ll look into it. I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you. You both, and Bethany Blaine, saved me a lot of trouble with your handling of my former H.A.W.C. commander. Although, considering yesterday, perhaps not as much as we all thought.”

Judy noticed Nick take the slightest step back, subtly allowing her the lead. Shifting her head in a subtle nod to this, she folded her hands in front of her and put on her best public servant smile. Whatever she felt about H.A.W.C. and suspected about this Winona Hite, as a business owner in Zootopia she was still a part of the public to be served. "I'm afraid I have to agree with you there, ma'am, but I promise, the ZPD is doing everything in its power to find and apprehend the terrorist currently known as Miss Black."

Hite made a noise of thought at this, dismissing Grayson with a wave of her hand before standing and turning to gaze out the windows at the Nocturnal District. She moved, Judy noted, with the limp of a long-ago injury. "I hope you understand my position, of course, when I say I don't particularly trust or care for the ZPD, or traditional police forces in general. A bad history of them."

"Of course," said Judy, remembering both Grayson's stories on the elevator ride up and her own early experiences of prejudice when joining the ZPD, how to that day she still encountered some resistance from other precincts. "I understand completely."

"Do you?" Hite perked an ear, her reflection on the glass smiling again. "Yes, a meek little rabbit on the police force of wolves and polar bears and cape buffalos... perhaps you do. In any case, I doubt you came here to discuss the fineries of law enforcement. I am a busy mammal, officers, so if we could cut to the chase..."

"Of course, ma'am." Joining Hite at the window, Judy drew her phone from her pocket and pulled up the photos of both the rainbow-colored Wendigo image found at Doug’s Night Howler lab and the one scrawled on the wall of city hall during the Wendigo Killer crisis. "These were both found in connection to known criminals and killers, one of whom professed a connection to the same criminal organization that Miss Black belongs to. The Hegemony. We noticed it carries a certain resemblance to the statue out in front of your tower and were hoping to ask you some questions about it."

Frowning, Hite took the offered phone and scrutinized the photos for a minute, before looking out and down through the window to where, Judy could barely see, stood the statue in question. "Ah, that. I'd read in the news something about a Wendigo painting in Zootopia, but... hm." Looking back at Judy, the liger gave a fang-filled smile, offering the phone back before returning to her window. "I can't explain why this... Hegemony? This organization is using the symbol, but as for myself... there are ancient stories among the deer and elk tribes, passed down through the generations. Tales of the Wendigo. A spirit, or demon, that would come in times of famine and hardship. Cannibals, it would make those with greed in their hearts, turning them to savage meat-eaters, prey turned into predators until the sun came again and the snow left. Nightmarish stories, certainly."

"Not one I'd want to tell my kid at bedtime," Nick commented, earning an elbow to the gut from Judy. He winced and rubbed where she struck, before commenting again "So, you model yourself after a savage spirit?"

Hite chuckled, shaking her head. "Not at all. The truth is... more complicated than that. But then, you're both cops, you must certainly know the truth is always complicated. No, as time passed, among some mammals the idea of the Wendigo became a symbol for general greed, gluttony,
bloodshed, wrath. An unfortunate warping of an indigenous story, but one that happened all the same. From there, some sought to claim it as a symbol of peace and harmony of all things, a coming together of prey and predator aspects into a single entity. The worst aspects of predator and prey, of course, but still, I at least thought there was something admirable about the idea..."

She turned back to them then, another fang-filled smile stretching her muzzle. "Or, maybe I'm just an egotistical maniac and LIKE statues of me. I trust the officers who brought down the rotten Bellwether to decipher the better answer to your question there."

“Well, that certainly is a heck of a story,” said Nick, voicing Judy’s own thoughts on the matter. “And hey, why not a little of column A and column B, ya know what I mean, Whitey?”

Nick had meant it as a joke, Judy could tell by the tone of his voice and the relaxed swishing of his tail as he leaned against Hite’s desk. Yet immediately the air around Hite changed, her posture stiffening, her hands clenching into fists, eyes narrowing into the gaze of a hunter that has just found a rival predator in its territory. Leaving the window, Hite forced Judy to back up toward Nick as she stalked back to her desk, dropping down into her throne-like chair with little pomp. “Unless you have any other business, officers, I’m sure you can find your own way out. As I said before, I am a very busy mammal.”

Judy looked at Nick. Nick looked at Judy, standing back to attention as he did. Both saw in the other’s eyes an understanding in the change of mood. “Of course,” said Judy, drawing a card with her contact information from a pocket and setting it on Hite’s desk, next to the computer. “We’ll be in touch if there’s any pertinent news.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Hite had already opened her laptop back up and set her hands to the keyboard. Before she resumed typing, however, she frowned, shoulders dropping from their stiff, professional positions. “Actually,” she said, looking from the computer to them again, “I do have a… question. Are you two… happy?”

“Happy? I…” Judy frowned, sharing a look with Nick at this complete 180 in how the conversation had been going. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure what you mean exactly by that.”

“I mean…” Hite waved a hand in a vague gesture toward them. “Are you two happy… married? Everything is… good for you? A fox and a rabbit? A predator and a prey? The, the love… is there? It’s all been worth it?”

Judy could tell, somehow or other, that this was an important, personal question for the liger. Something deeper than merely being the offspring of lion and tiger. She reached out without looking, taking Nick’s hand in hers and squeezing, smiling. “It’s been absolutely worth it. I love Nick with my everything.”

Hite nodded and focused next solely on Nick. “And you, fox? Even after everything Black said happened to you as a kit, after everything prey mammals have done against you, you can still love this rabbit? Just like that?”

Judy felt his grip on her hand tighten as he answered without hesitation. “Just like that.”

Hite’s smile at this was equal parts happy and sad. “Good. Good.”

***

Mystic Spring Oasis was supposed to be Finnick’s last resort to distracting himself from the anxiety and mounting dread revolving around the hospitalized Marian Wilde. It was supposed to be
somewhere he could find some measure of peace, where he could partake in at least a temporary illusion that the troubles of real life and the modern world were all far, far away.

It wasn’t supposed to be where he ran into the wannabe hustler bat again.

"Oh hey, Short Idiot!"

Finnick stumbled off the short ledge from the door into the main spa and relaxation area, eyes going wide and ears flashing red at the sight of the bat strutting out of the pleasure pool and toward him. He barely resisted the sudden and foreign urge to cover himself up with a nearby fern leaf, instead managing a smile Nick wouldn’t have even bothered laughing at, but instead have gone straight to offering whatever hard alcohol was at hand. "Hey there... bat... and the name's Finnick."

The bat lifted one eyebrow and smiled, a soft and spicy sort of smile that might've made Finnick's knees quiver, five or ten years ago. She flapped her wings to get off the excess water from the pool, before crouching down and offering one wing out to shake. "Finnick the fennec. Cute. I won't pry. You can call me Faunt. Angela Faunt."

Finnick took the offered wing and shook, unable to help the quick, discrete sniff of the air as he did. Hers was a scent of strange contrasts, of strawberries and gunpowder and grass and gasoline and grapes heavy on the vi—DUNG SNOT SWEAT FLIES DIRT OH GOD WHY—

Yax mussed up Finnick's fur atop his head as he strolled by, plopping down to throw an arm around Angela's shoulders. "Heeyy, my man Finnick! Awesome to see you already know Angel here, hah hah! She's our new cook, heheheh, just started the day after your last visit! Ain't that wild!?!"

"Yeah," said Finnick, struggling not to let his suffering from getting a full blast of the yak’s stench show on his muzzle. Giving his head a shake, he scanned the area for something, some reason to get away from Yax without offense, finding it in a cute little beach-style juice bar set off to the east side of the pleasure pool. "Oh hey, that’s new. Faunt, why don’t you show me what you’re made of?"

"Sounds like a plan." Still smiling, Angela carefully extracted herself from under Yak's arm, giving his hoof a quick pat. "I'll be off then, Mr. Boss man. Catch you later!"

"Oh sure," said the yak, standing and walking backwards with a wave. "I'll totally catch ya later! Hey little Finn man, stick around until dark, we're gonna be having a limbo competition! I'm the 10 Time Club Champion!"

The mental image this statement provided Finnick, of the dirty, smelly, fly-ridden old yak from angles no mammal had any right to be at, sent shivers down his back. Attempting the hard alcohol smile once more, he gave a non-committal nod before turning and hurrying toward the juice bar. The bat, Angela, was already there, grabbing up various fruits from beneath the counter and setting them down next to a surprisingly modern (for the Mystic Spring Oasis) blender.

"Quite a character, that Yax," said Angela as Finnick struggled up onto a stool. "I don't know about you, but I think I'll be heading out tonight. Seeing him just standing or sitting is enough for me."

Finnick grunted his agreement, eyes roaming as he took in the increasingly impressive array of fruits and vegetables the bat was assembling on the counter. "Dang. I can't even name some of these."

She shrugged, closing a drawer with a knee and taking the top off the blender. "Not surprising. Bit of a fruit connoisseur, heh heh. Plus, it's best to be prepared. Some fruit's simply better at cheering up the sad and lonesome than other fruit."

That gave Finnick pause. Looking up from the fruits and vegetables, he regarded the bat with a
newly-closed expression. “What’s got you thinking I’m sad?”

At this Angela gave her own sad smile. “Had to get damn good at reading mammals, friend, with my old profession. That and, well, you’ve got the emotive ears of a rabbit, no offense.”

Without thinking about it, Finnick reached a hand back to feel that yes, his ears were flopped against the back of his head. Scowling, he forced his ears up and crossed his arms. "Whatever. None of your business anyhow. Give me a... give me a banana and blueberry smoothie." The moment he'd said this he winced. Freaking blueberries. Freaking Nick and Marian and Alex and Karma-blast it all, why did he have to CARE so much?

"Right, just one sec..." Saying nothing about what she must surely have been reading off him, to Finnick’s silent gratitude, Angela got to work loading the blender with fruits and other varied ingredients. The pair sat or stood in silence for the next minute or so as Angela worked on the smoothie, neither saying another word until she set down a glass of the mushy mix of blue and yellow down in front of him. "Cheers, friend. You’ve not had a fruit smoothie ‘til you’ve had one with a blast of Nippony honey."

Finnick eyed the concoction for a moment, before shrugging and grabbing the glass up to take a large swig. After the first gulp it was a struggle not to drink it in one go, only years of practice and the very real threat of brain freeze eventually forcing him to set the half-empty glass back down. "Dang! What you doing hawking pawpsicles for two bucks on street corners when you could be selling this somewhere that'd actually pay for 'em?"

"Charmer." Angela grabbed the glass, setting to work refilling it without being asked. She seemed to take the busy moment to think over her response to the question. "Suppose it’s the same reason I moved up here from the Nocturnal District. You get your money where you can, yeah?"

She set the refilled glass down in front of him. Finnick took it, keeping his sip much more respectable this time, content to savor the cool flavor now that the rush was over. That, and this simply wasn't conversation for gulping drinks down. "Yeah... yeah, I do. Say, how about a night bar-hopping, on me? Probably a better evening then trying not to think about the limbo champ over there.” On the one hand, he knew Nick would be 10 kinds of disappointed in him for falling back on old, reliable ways of drowning out troubles. But on the other hand, Finnick had been the one spending the morning at the hospital watching the elderly red fox sleep away possibly the last days of her life, not Nick. An evening of doing the same, he knew, was more than his own heart could handle.

The bat, knowing of none of this, just grinned and winked. “I know the best place to start.”

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"So, what do you think about all that?"

They were back on the train to the surface, watching the Nocturnal District slowly drawn down before them through the windows. They had waited until they were on the train and relatively alone and secluded before saying anything at Judy's insistence, something on her mind insisting that there were more mammals to not trust than either was comfortable with.

Nick considered his wife’s question for a moment, having to focus to keep his thoughts on the trip to HiteTech and not let them drift off to where he really wanted to be that moment. "It's hard to say, fluff. Lot to take in and follow up on. Hite’s little history lesson about the Wendigo, Hite herself, whatever HiteTech did to get mammals protesting, and I don't know about you, but something seemed a little... off, about the way Frosty was acting.”
“She named the same bar we’re watching for Doug’s bat…”

“Exactly! It’s been a while since my hustling days, but I’ve still got my nose for mammals it’d be better to not try pulling anything on. That whole building reeked of that sensation.”

In the window reflection Judy could be seen glancing back down at the slip of paper Beth had slipped her in his handshake. On it, messily scrawled, were two simple but ominous words.

BEING WATCHED.

"I wonder when she wrote this," said Judy, turning the paper over as if a new message would reveal itself if she did so enough times. "There would have been no chance to do so while with us... could they have known we were coming?"

"Their former head of security and a wanted terrorist of the highest degree had just murdered a mammal live to all of Zootopia, Carrots. You'd have to be really stupid not to be expecting us at some point. I guess it's just that natural Wilde-Hopps luck that Frosty was there the day we came knocking."

"Yeah... luck..." She frowned, mouthed the word again, brow creasing as something seemed to occur to her. “Expecting us... How did Beth know about your mom?”

“I…” Nick stopped, frowning himself now as he thought it over. At first, he thought Honey would obviously have told the hare, but no, thinking on it more, they hadn’t told Honey. He hadn’t personally told anyone, and he knew from Judy that she had only told Bogo, Mayor Gazelle, and Assistant Mayor Elloway when she had to explain where he was the previous night. “That’s a really, really good question. Unless…” The fur on the back of his neck stood up with a sudden sense of danger. Unless either they were being monitored, or someone within that three-mammal group had reasons unknown to tell HiteTech on them.

BEING WATCHED, the slip of paper said. Now it seemed the question had turned from “who was watching who” to why were H.A.W.C. watching the two of them, and why would Beth warn them about it.

“I’ll talk to Honey about it first chance I get,” said Judy, earning a nod from Nick. That sounded all-too-pressing a matter to put off.

Conversation petered out. Soon, the train ground to a halt in the Downtown station. The pair got off, Nick saying nothing at how Judy kept looking at him with those damn-pitying eyes. His focus so on keeping his tail waving at a natural pace, he didn't notice the bunny stopping at the edge of the station's entrance until he had gotten several feet ahead. He turned to look at her, one eyebrow raised.

"Something wrong, Carrots? Step in gum, maybe?"

The look in her eyes didn't change and he almost bared his teeth, just wanting them to get back to the ZPD and looking up information and setting up the lookout on the Rainforest District club that evening and—

"Nick, I can handle things back at the station if you want to grab Alex and check on Marian."

Nick's increasingly angry thoughts ground to a halt, rebooting after an agonizing second. He blinked, a hand moving up to rub at the elbow of his prosthetic. "I... no, come on, Fluff, you know I can't—"

"It's okay," she said, smiling that stupid smile of hers that always got his heart fluttering as she stepped forward and put a hand to his chest. "I mean it, really. The school let Alex stay home today, with everything happening, but I don’t think that’s the best place for him to be right now. And if
your mom wakes up today, she’ll want you there. She’ll need you there. Besides, as for the case, I've got the entire ZPD at my disposal. Chief Bogo and Mayor Gazelle said so themselves. I think I can handle one or two nights of observation all by myself. Honest."

The offer, and the kindness it represented, were both so fundamentally Judy Hopps that Nick couldn’t help but laugh, at least one weight lifting from his heart. Stepping forward, he bent down enough to place a chaste little kiss on Judy’s lips before pulling back and looking into her eyes. The vibrant purple was as beautiful as ever. “Have I ever told you that I love you?”

“Once or twice.” Meeting his gaze for a moment, the rabbit smiled once more before sliding past Nick, forcing him to turn to keep his eyes on her as she began backing up in the direction of the ZPD. “I’ll call you after my shift at the stakeout or after we’ve caught our bat, whichever comes first. Tell Alex I love him!”

“I will!” Nick shouted to her, for by that point Judy was starting to be lost in the crowd of mammals going on their way. Watching until the bunny was completely gone from sight, Nick let his smile drop as he turned his thoughts to what awaited him at home and, from there, at the hospital. Turning, he hurried to the curb and hailed a passing taxi.

The ride home was long and awkward, the oryx cab driver continuously trying to make small talk that Nick was simply not in the mood for. He kept his gaze out the window, watching the buildings beyond change from the plain brick and mortar of Downtown to the sunbleached stone of Sahara Square.

“Now remember, Nicholas. Once I’m gone, I want to be put to rest in the Sahara Settlers Cemetery.”

“Mom, it’s a gorgeous spring day, I’m here introducing you to Judy, and thank God she’s in the bathroom right now. I really don’t want to talk or think about this right now!”

“I know, I know, I just… seeing you in that uniform, graduating up on that stage, it made me realize how time’s passing. I’m certainly not getting any younger, Nicholas. I just… don’t want you being caught unawares and unprepared. I worry, Nick…”

“Mom…”

The cab driver clearing his throat snapped Nick back to the present. He quickly hopped out and paid his fare, before hurrying up the steps into the apartment complex. A sudden sense of urgency struck him, making him rush through the lobby to the elevators with hardly a word of greeting to the brown bear manning the front desk.

“Hey, Rich.”

“Yo, Nick.”

There were no other mammals waiting around and the elevator opened the moment Nick pressed the button. As the elevator brought him up to the fifth floor where their apartment was he paced and thought. He would greet Alex with a hug, the biggest hug he could manage for the wolf pup. Then he’d change out of uniform into something more comfortable and go to the hospital, picking something up on the way if Alex was hungry. Definitely picking up flowers. The biggest bundle of flowers a fox like him could carry around, to be set right on the nightstand beside his mom’s bed. Then they’d wait in Marian Wilde’s hospital room. They’d take books if they needed to, but they would wait and watch as long as the hospital would let them, and Nick would NOT need to plan out his mother’s funeral that day, and there would be no—
The elevator dinged to a stop and opened. Nick strode out, making it five feet down the apartment hall before his police training finally yanked his thoughts from their downward spiral and to the smashed-in door two apartments down. It was the door to his, Judy’s, and Alex’s apartment.

“Hello again, Mr. Wilde.”

Nick spun, hand going for his tranq gun. He’d barely registered the white wolf looming over him before a sudden, sharp pain. He staggered back, just managing to pull the syringe from his neck before his knees gave out and the floor rushed up to meet him.
Faunt’s Fountain was not the scummiest bar Judy had been to over the course of her police career, but it at least made it into the top 10. Half-built into, half-wedged in between two gnarled old trees on the edge of the Mareas River cutting through the deeper reaches of the Rainforest District, the wood hut carried an ever-present aura of claustrophobia, despite the floor plans actually having room for nearly a hundred mammals, depending on if any elephants were visiting. Elbows were best left close to the body with how sticky and splintered the tables and counter were, and the rusting relic of a jukebox over in the corner near the restrooms wouldn’t have looked out of place down in Bunnyburrow. The best that could be said of the place was that the roof didn’t leak, something always to be appreciated in the Rainforest District, and the glasses were clean, something always to be appreciated anywhere.

“—and so that’s why Chief Bogo finally decided to ban Casual Friday from Precinct 1.”

Sitting there in the corner booth, nursing her third Virgin Mary after an hour and a half of watching the bar’s evening crowd filter in, Judy only slightly regretted not going with Nick to see Marian and leaving at least the first night’s surveillance job to someone else. It wasn’t even Carla Fangmeyer’s fault, really. Normally Judy would be contributing just as much to the stakeout’s banter. That evening, though, with so much else going on in her life at the moment, she found she really would have preferred a quieter sort of temp partner while Nick was occupied elsewhere.

Sighing as the tiger started on about the hoofball game being played on the TV above the bar, Judy discretely switched her earpiece to a private channel and whispered "Please, for the love of all that is law enforcement, tell me you see something, man."

A low chuckle came over the line, Judy able to imagine Adam Fangmeyer's smirk as the wolf kept his eyes on the video feeds lining the inside of the nondescript van parked in the bar's small lot. "Sorry, can't say we have yet. A few bats flew by a couple of minutes ago, but none of them quite matched the photos of Faunt we have and nothing sounded suspicious in their chatter. My lady love going on about hoofball, I'm guessing?"

"Like you wouldn't believe." Judy actually liked hoofball, for what it was worth. One of many rarities among rabbits she happened to embody. But that was all, liking. Try as she might, she simply couldn't get super-fanatic about sports like so many other mammals did, unless it was something like track or gymnastics, both of which she had considered key to becoming a police officer when growing up. She was in even less of a mood for the sport talk that evening, worried as she was about Nick and his mom. She'd been glad to let Nick go on his way earlier that afternoon, and nobody at the ZPD had thought it worth objecting to, but still... were it up to her, she'd be sitting right there next to her husband in the hospital, waiting for whatever good or bad news might come their way.

"Well think of it this way," continued Adam after a moment of private talking with his fellow surveillance operator, Honey. "At least it's only hoofball. You've never had to see her getting excited over motorcycle racing, least not firsthand. I swear, I thought I thought I was going to have to take her to the hospital, the moment she found out Blaine liked to race in her spare time. Actually tried talking the hare into getting back into the amateur racing scene, though nothing ever came of it. I wonder if anything’s changed, now that she’s over with H.A.W.C.? You think they have different hours than we do? All that private money to throw around—"

Judy switched her earpiece back to a general channel, sighing as she drained the last of her Virgin Mary. Tuning the wolf out as she signaled for another glass, her attention turned to one of the TVs above the bar, a news broadcast on at the moment. They were reporting on a Screamer drug ring
recently busted up in Trottingpig, at which Judy felt mixed feelings. Screamers were some of the more violent Night Howler drug derivatives hitting the streets the last year or so, hitting just the sweet spot between strength of the experience, cheapness, and harmful effects on the body. Hearing that at least the Trottingpig branch of wherever they were coming from had been demolished should have brought a grin to her face, but all Judy could think about was the continuing mystery of the Hegemony and whatever they were doing with the Night Howlers. She hadn't seen anything about Night Howlers or drugs when dealing with Jack Savage months ago, and the link between them and Delgato was tenuous, at best, really only coming into play with their inclusion in the Wendigo painting during the Wendigo murders.

And for that matter, where or how any of this connected to Miss Black's murderous activities was beyond her. Unless the murder victim, Trotsky, had been somehow involved in a rival drug ring. But no, nothing they had found in Trotsky’s life was anything diverting from the straight and narrow, anti-predator tendencies asi—

“Wait,” said Judy aloud, latching onto a thought, feeling a kernel, a seed of some greater realization within it, just out of full reach. A puzzle in need of just one more piece for her to make out the rest of the picture herself. “New Night Howler drugs start surfacing soon after we have our first known encounter with this… Hegemony… Why… Why paint that image of a Wendigo in the first place? The only other mammals we know interested in the flower were Bellwether's group and—”

“Sorry to interrupt,” came Honey’s voice over their earpieces, the sudden urgency in her voice making Judy sit up straight. “You’re gonna have to put the thinking on hold for now. I’ve got eyes on a bat matching our photos, just climbed out of some gaudy van. She’s… heck, she’s not alone. Entering the bar in three, two, one—”

The bar door swung open. Immediately Judy swung her gaze close to it, keeping it just off to the side as if looking at the stained movie poster on the wall beyond it rather than on whoever was stepping through. The bar was crowded that evening, but most mammals were sitting down, making it easy enough for Judy to see the bat come in, her vibrant green poncho reminding her horribly of Nick's classic Pawaiian shirts. For a moment she didn't see whoever Honey had seen accompanying the flying fox, before a short gasp from Carla beside her made her snap her gaze lower. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of the dwarf fennec, recognizing that scowl and lazy glare at once. "Oh God, Finnick."

Those massive ears of Finnick's shot up the moment their owner's name left Judy's mouth, Finnick looking in their direction a moment later and the scowl lightening by a smidge. "Oh hey there, Flopsy! What're the chances, loser!?"

Beneath the table, Judy rapidly palmed her concealed stun gun, sensing more than seeing or feeling Carla do the same beside her. Her ears did pick up her whispering to her earpiece for Adam to move in to the main entrance. A moment passed where Finnick and the bat, Faunt, approached the table all smiles, and Judy allowed herself to believe this might go perfectly smoothly, that Finnick would bring their suspect in close enough that they could apprehend her without any kind of big scene.

But then Faunt stopped walking, forcing Finnick to do the same. Her smile dropped as she looked between Judy and Carla at the table, confusion quickly turning to alarm. Before Judy could do more than hop from her seat the bat turned and ran back to the bar's front door.

Adam waited for her there. The wolf lunged, a stun baton in hand, but faster than Judy could have expected the bat spun, knocking the weapon from him with one wing before battering him over the head with the other. In a blink Carla’s husband was sprawled out on the floor of the bar and Faunt was escaping out the door, barely avoiding the tranq dart the tiger fired at her.
"No!" Judy leaped, hopping from one table to the next to avoid the shouting, panicking civilians and barely catching a glimpse of Finnick's confused, hurt face. Then she was over Adam and through the door, gravel kicking up as she skid to a stop and looked around, stun gun at the ready. She saw Honey at the unmarked ZPD van to the right, Finnick's junker of a van off to the left, then past that — "Ah-hah!"

Running, Judy jumped first onto the hood of Finnick's van, ears ringing as this set off his alarm, then jumped for the roof of the vehicle, then barely slowing down to make sure her footing was certain on the rain-slicked surface she jumped to the closest limb of the tree looming over the bar and parking lot. Ahead she could see Faunt scampering through the tree limbs, pausing at the farthest one to glance back for pursuit. The look of shock and fear at the sight of her was satisfying to Judy, who began closing the distance between them fast as she dared on the slick, uneven branch surfaces.

"Stop in the name of the law, right now!"

Faunt didn’t stop, didn’t even slow, turning and taking to the air with a flap of her wings, quickly clearing the last of the branches for the open sky. Hissing her frustration, Judy moved faster, self-preservation forgotten as she reached the last of the branches and jumped with every ounce of power she could pack in her legs...

... just barely missing grabbing one of Faunt’s legs. She dropped, hitting a lower tree’s branch with a thud and oof, watching the bat fly up into the night sky from where she lay sprawled on her back.

“No… no no no—"

BANG.

Judy bounced where she lay in shock, eyes wide and ears ringing as Faunt’s right shoulder burst, spattering wing and head and poncho with red. A horrible cry of pain echoed out into the night as the bat fell, slamming down onto Judy’s branch with a CRUNCH before sliding off and dropping the remaining half-dozen feet to the mossy ground. Judy rolled over onto her belly, staring down with a mix of dismay and horror as Faunt lay twitching among the ferns clustering the tree’s roots, panting and shuddering with agony.

Police training kicked in and Judy rolled again, dropping down beside the wounded suspect, ignoring the jolt to her knees and ache in her back as she touched her earpiece. "Honey, get the emergency aid kit over here, hurry! Carla, get me an ambulance here five minutes ago!"

The answering affirmatives could barely be heard over Faunt’s pain. Judy knelt at the bat’s side, tearing apart the poncho to better distribute weight against the bullet wound and stem the flow of blood. “Hang on, please. Everything’s going to be okay, you hear me? Just listen to my voice and breathe. Everything’s going to be—"

A trio of rushing footsteps and hissed expletives made Judy look up, eyes widening at the sight of Bethany Blaine and a pair of wolverines in red and white H.A.W.C. uniforms approaching. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of a rifle slung over the shoulder of one of the wolverines, a growl slipping from her that made the approaching trio come to a halt. “The HELL are you H.A.W.C. goons doing out here in the Rainforest District!? This is official police business, not a damn shooting gallery! Maybe our only connection between Doug’s NH ring and Miss Black, and you’ve… gah!”

Beth glanced between Judy and the slowly quieting bat, the hare’s fists clenching before she knelt down across the suspect from Judy and added her hands to applying pressure. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Our source brought us to similar conclusions about the NH smuggling. I waited, really! I’m sorry! Had Renfield hold off taking the shot until the last second, I… I wanted you to get her! I thought you could get her!”
Judy bit back the curse she wanted to level so bad on the hare, ears perking and some measure of relief finding her at the distant but nearing wail of sirens. “We could’ve pursued her, Blaine. Tracked her down somewhere else, gotten answers from her then!”

“I think,” managed Faunt between gasps for air, surprising both rabbit and hare, “I think I would’ve preferred that…”

Honey finally arrived with the emergency aid kit, none-too-gently shoving past Beth to kneel at Faunt’s side. Letting the badger take the lead in applying first aid, Judy looked up to see hurt drown out the anger in the hare’s Arctic eyes. “She’s… she’s a bat,” said Beth. “There are no bats in the ZPD to chase her, or in… or in H.A.W.C…. She doesn’t need to wait on a train or plane or get to a vehicle of any sort to escape clear of Zootopia. You wouldn’t… wouldn’t have been able to…”

Judy’s earpiece crackled to life again, a welcome relief to her from the brewing discontent as she stood up from helping Honey tend to Faunt to answer it. Yet when Clawhauser spoke, he sounded scared. More scared than Judy had heard him since the height of the Night Howler Crisis. “Judy! Get back to the station now, hurry!”

“What?” Judy glanced around at Honey, her expression telling Judy that she had gotten the message as well. Beth’s softened frown probably meant she had caught it too, hare that she was. “Clawhauser, calm down. What’s going on?”

“It’s Nick!” shouted the cheetah over the line, the sheer panic in his voice making Judy’s heart stop. “Someone in your apartment complex called in a noise complaint. Jarvis, the responding officer, he found your door kicked down and the place torn up! We can’t find—”

But Judy was no longer listening, Faunt and Beth and everyone forgotten behind her as she ran for her truck back at the bar parking lot.

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Judy did not quite remember reaching her truck, nor the drive from the Rainforest District to the apartment in Sahara Square. Her mind was elsewhere, the entire experience bearing the otherworldliness of a dream to her. She remembered pulling to a stop in front of the apartment complex, the night lit by the flashing of red and blue police cruiser lights, and elsewhere, the snap and flash of cameras whose holders she could not see. Her body was on autopilot as she turned the engine off and got off, passing by ZPD officers she did not recognize as she walked, strode, staggered into the lobby. She saw Adam Fangmeyer at the desk, taking down a testimony from the desk clerk there, and over to the right, in the little den area with the TV and couches, there was Jarvis talking to Frank, the complex’s security guard. Something about security cameras, and footage, and...

The elevator ride passed as a blur. Judy stepped off on the floor for her apartment, finding more ZPD officers here, this time mammals in scrubs from Forensics. She ignored them and walked in a daze down the hall. Her eyes at once alighted on the door to her and Nick’s apartment, broken from its hinges and cracked mightily in two. Yellow police tape stretched across the gaping opening, warnings declaring for civilians to not enter, that this was a police matter. Her apartment. It was her apartment that was the police matter. Her apartment, and her husband, and her son—

A sudden grip on her arm, gentle but firm. Judy snapped her head around and found herself looking into Chief Bogo’s eyes, the cape buffalo kneeling down in the corridor behind her, features worried but calm. "Judy, I'm sorry about all of this. I can't imagine what you're going through right now, but I need you to come down to the station. There was... Forensics is busy cleaning up in there, you wouldn't want to get in their way."
"It's my apartment," mumbled Judy, not noticing or caring how much like a petulant child's her voice had become. "It's my apartment, Alex, he was waiting... I let Nick go to pick him up, go see... see Marian..."

Sudden panic broke through the daze she had been in the entire trip from the Rainforest District, but before she could voice it there was Bogo again, voice calm and soothing, the same kind of voice Judy had put on hundreds of times before when dealing with the distraught, thousands of times before. "It's okay, it's okay, Marian Wilde is just fine. I have McHorn down there right now keeping watch in her hospital room, and Officer Kevin as well. She's safe, Judy. Now please, let's get you down to the police station to... Judy?"

Judy had only been half-listening for the last few seconds now, her attention drawn to the hallway wall a few feet down past Bogo and just about at eye level for a rabbit. Carefully pulling her arm free, she slipped past her boss and hurried down the hall to the spot she'd noticed. A foot by foot area of the wall was discolored, a darker shade of the peaceful pastel pink much of the rest of the surroundings were. She dragged a hand across it, yanking back with a frown as her fingers came back feeling greasy. This section of the wall was newer than the rest...

"Come on," said Bogo, voice somewhat firmer now as he took Judy by the shoulder and led her back to the elevator. "To the ZPD. Everything's going to be okay, Judy. I promise."

Wiping her hand on her pant leg, Judy nodded and followed along. She didn't believe the cape buffalo.

***

They were in the ZPD's computer labs with Honey, quietly watching the security footage taken from the apartment complex. Judy huddled deep under the blanket given to her at some point or other, her memory distressingly patchy of the last few hours. Statements had been taken, her movements for the last two or three days thoroughly recorded and discussed with Bogo personally, as well as all that Judy could recall of Nick's and Alex's. There wasn't much to be told, really, the last few days focused as they were on mostly ZPD business and therefore already known. And really, Judy thought, it was obviously who hated her and Nick enough to do this, "Covering all possibilities" be damned. She finally understood why people she had to interview always seemed to hate that phrase.

The security footage only confirmed for the rest what Judy already knew. They watched, silent, as a white-furred wolf in blue pants and green jacket strode straight into and through the apartment building's main lobby, accompanied by a wolverine and a hyena in similar garb. For a split-second Judy couldn't understand why nobody had noticed the wanted terrorist striding around in broad daylight, before chalking it up to the massive difference in clothing. When a mammal gets associated with all one color, like black, she knew from police experience it could be easy to overlook things otherwise obvious.

They turned to the camera footage from the floor Judy and Nick's apartment was on and watched as Miss Black and her two accomplices entered the frame, kicking down the door to the apartment just barely in the camera's view and striding in. There came a brief, high-pitched scream that made Judy's heart clench, then silence. Honey fast-forwarded through the next half-hour, returning to normal speed the moment they saw Black exit the apartment and start back down the hall, eyes trained on a wristwatch. She ducked into a supply closet. A minute later a red fox in ZPD uniform entered into frame, walking past the closet door without a second look, ears not even twitching as the door opened and Black emerged.

Judy looked away, but couldn't block her ears from hearing Black's greeting, nor Nick's grunt of pain as he was stabbed with the syringe, nor the thud as he hit the hallway floor. Heart in her throat, she
looked back in time to see Black hefting Nick over her shoulder and striding out of frame toward the emergency fire exit, followed a second later by the wolverine and hyena, the latter of whom carried Alex's motionless form.

The footage ended. Immediately Judy staggered back, blanket dropping away, hand groping out to find a chair for her to collapse in. She felt Honey's and Bogo's eyes on her and hated it, hated them, hated that damned, friendly pity. She swallowed, fighting to find her voice. "Why... why did it take so long for us to find out about this? The f- footage, the noise... noise complaint..."

"A virus had been uploaded into the complex's computer networks beforehand," explained the honey badger, closing the tabs for the security footage and turning to face Judy and the chief. "The cameras were recording, but the computers couldn't read it until a set time afterward. Considering that the information only became readable after the response to the noise complaint, I'm gonna hazard a guess that the complaint was false, meant only to get our attention over there. Meaning—" "Black wanted us seeing it," finished Judy, the chair she'd found the only thing keeping her from sinking all the way to the floor. She stared out, not at her fellow officers, not at the computers, not to anything in particular. She saw before her, in her mind's eye, the events of that night all those months ago, when she had been escaping from Cliffside Asylum, saw Miss Black stopping her, saw Nick and Bethany Blaine coming to her rescue, saw the young cop knock Black off the bridge into the churning waterfall below. They had all thought the wolf dead, then. Had thought Jack Savage the worst they would have to deal with from that point on. "If only she had died in those waters..." If only Beth and H.A.W.C. hadn't taken that deadly shot... if only SHE, Judy, had been faster, as the hare had said... As if reading some of these thoughts, Honey spoke up with "I heard from the hospital the Fangmeyers followed Faunt to. The bat's still in surgery, but there's a... a good chance she'll pull through."

"It'll still be a long time until she'll be up for questioning," replied Judy on autopilot. "Too long..."

"Investigating officers are still combing the apartment and hallway for any clues to be found," promised Bogo, coming over to kneel next to Judy and place a hand on her shoulder. "Plus, neither Black nor either of her accomplices bothered to hide their faces from the cameras. We already have people running searches through the databases for any matches. Every precinct is assisting in this, Judy. We'll find them AND your family, I promise."

Judy nodded, sincerely wishing she could believe the cape buffalo more than she actually did. Swallowing, she sat up straighter in the chair and looked between her two fellow officers. "Just... just tell me what I can do and I'll get to work. We don't have Faunt, but there's still Cliffside Asylum to look into, there are background checks and interrogations and—"

"No," said Bogo at once, voice dropping to a Chief of Police's professional steel. "I'm sorry, Judy, I really am, but I can't allow you to remain on this case. You're too personally involved now."

Judy stared at her friend—no, she had to remind herself, her chief—and tried to puzzle out what she'd just been told. "What? No, you don't understand, this is my FAMILY—"

"Exactly." The Chief stood, expression stern and what might have been intended as understanding. To Judy it simply seemed patronizing. "This is your family, and because of that, no matter how much I trust and respect you as one of my officers, I simply can't trust you enough to keep calm or detached enough to—"

"FUCK CALM!" Judy didn't even when she stood up on the chair, the added height helping little as
she still had to glare UP at Bogo. "Don't you see? Black did this specifically to hurt ME! Not Zootopia, not the ZPD, but ME! There's no telling what she'll do to Nick or Alex if... if I can't find... Alex is only a kid! He has to sleep with a night light, and he still has nightmares about J-Jack Savage, and he gets bullied at school for being a predator, and for being trans, a-and for ha-having f-fo-foster... p-parents..."

Judy trailed off, throat raw and chest heaving for breath from her shouting, Bogo and Honey and the whole of the computer labs around her blurred by a veil of tears that wouldn't go away, no matter how much she blinked. She could feel them staring at her still, only now the pity made her feel nauseous.

"I can't," she managed again after several long seconds to catch her breath. "I can't sit by and leave this for others... not when Nick kept looking for me... I just can't."

Another long stretch of seconds, during which Judy could hear nothing but the incessant ticking of a wall-mounted clock somewhere. Then the blur of blue in front of her sighed and reached out. Judy flinched as a rough hoofnail began wiping at her face, soon ridding her of the tears that had hidden Bogo's tired, uncertain, resigned smile. "I suppose that would make me a pretty awful hypocrite, wouldn’t it?"

Hiccupping, almost laughing from the sudden flood of relief hitting her, Judy collapsed back into her chair and wiped at her face. "Thank you... oh God, thank you..."
Sensation returned to Nick in an avalanche. One moment there was nothing, a void of thought and impression. The next moment, everything was turned up to 11. The floor was too hard, too cold, too gritty, scratching away at his skin. The air stank with a mix of noxious odors, body and mechanical, none of which would do to dwell on. His ears rang from the sound of a child’s sobbing, banging away at his brain—

Wait, child sobbing!?

Nick opened his eyes and snapped into a sitting position, muscles shouting their protest from the sudden burst of motion as he spun around to take in the 12x12 granite cell, one wall rusting bars starting to ice over, the only light coming from the hallway beyond. His eyes quickly found a small, shivering wolf pup curled up in a corner, t-shirt and shorts useless against the frosty air blowing in through the barred window above him. “Alex!”

The pup stopped crying, quickly rolling over onto all fours to look at Nick with wet, frightened, yet hopeful eyes. “D-Dad!”

Nick’s heart broke that the first time he heard Alex call him Dad was in a situation like this, but he shoved that heartache to the side and forced his still-sluggish body to stand. It was difficult, made more so by his sudden realization that his prosthetic left arm had been removed. But for Wildes and Hoppeses both, family is the ultimate motivator, and the moment he was up he started staggering toward his son. “I’m here, Alex, I’m right—”

BEEP.

A snap and crackle, like static after rubbing his fur across a carpet, making Nick pause. He had a split-second to ponder it before pain beyond anything he had experienced since the loss of his arm erupted from his neck, cascading through his body from the tips of his ears to the bottoms of his paw pads. He screamed, fell, writhing, throat tearing limbs beating floor eyes bulging fur smoking neck burning burning burning oh God—

The electrical charge stopped, leaving Nick gasping on the stone floor, the smell of burnt fur and meat now added to the cell’s stench. Shattered thoughts slowly dragged themselves back together into something resembling a working mind, led back by Alex’s renewed crying. Nick tried to sit up, a sudden and (blessedly) far weaker shock convincing him to remain lying there for the moment. He reached his one hand up to his neck, heart dropping as he touched a thick, spiked collar there, a square metal box with a small dome of glass hooked up to it. Looking at Alex hovering a few feet away, seemingly afraid to come closer, he saw that the young wolf too had the same sort of collar.

“Oh no… oh God no…”

Taming collars. He had heard about them. Every predator worth their weight knew about them. About how, until San Dingo’s riots no more than half a century ago, predators had to wear the Tame collars after a certain age, and if they ever got angry… or scared… or happy…

“Don’t worry,” said a hatefully familiar voice behind him. “Those are only remote-controlled.”

Nick turned around, moving himself between Alex and the black-clad wolf standing out in the hallway. Though one-armed, though cold and tired, though stripped of all his police gear, he bared his teeth and growled at the larger predator as if he had a whole pack at his side, for he had a son
behind him. “Back off, Black, you dirty—”

Miss Black held up a slim grey remote in her right hand, thumb poised threateningly over one of two central buttons. “Another word like that, and your daughter there will get a taste of what it was like growing up in MY home country.”

Nick snapped his mouth shut, just barely managing to stifle his growls. Looking behind him at Alex, he found the wolf panting, almost hyperventilating in fright as he looked back and forth between Nick and the wolf holding them captive. Nick hurriedly backed up a step, wrapping his whole arm around Alex’s shoulders and holding him close, hoping to comfort. To Black he said “His name’s Alex, and if you threaten him again, I am going shove one of these collars down your throat and HOLD THE BUTTON ‘TIL IT BREAKS!”

“Oh, how threatening.” Miss Black tilted her head and perked an ear, looking at him more like he was something to be curious over than something to actually fear. Yet after a moment she did return the remote to a belt pouch. “I see you, at least, know how it is to be a parent in my home country. Predators were not so liked there as they are here. Still publicly used collars as recently as 15 years ago. Still privately used collars… well… black market swims in military surplus. Was easy to buy child’s-size.”

Nick shuddered at what Black was telling him and held Alex tighter, the wolf clinging to his side. “Sorry to hear that. Cool motive, still kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, and torture.”

Miss Black tilted her head the other way now, muzzle curling up in an unholy approximation of a smile. “You are remarkably calm. So certain bunny will find you?”

“It’s been a long, bad week,” said Nick, though as he said this he had a smile of his own. “Little worn out. Little furious that you and Miss White and whoever else is in your cute little group would sink this low. But see, Black, it’s not a question of IF Judy’s going to find me. The answer is yes. It’s not a question of WHEN Judy’s going to find me. The answer is soon. The only question worth asking is… what’s that rabbit going to do to the wolf who threatened her most precious people?”

What little color made it through Miss Black’s white fur had drained from her face by the end of Nick’s speech. She backed away a step, a hand hesitating at the pouch the collar remote waited in before going up to rub nervously at her throat. Her muzzle clacked as she started to say something and just as quickly stopped, the wolf finally turning and striding away out of sight down the hallway. The CLANG of a metal door slamming shut echoed down the hall and through the cell, as good of a victory bell as Nick could have asked for.

***

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG.

Beth's pistol clicked empty. She released the empty clip, slid in a new one, cocked, began firing again.

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG.

Click.

Beth released her empty clip again, pausing with her hand hovering over its replacement sitting on the bench before her, considering. She frowned as she looked over at the half-dozen such clips she had already burned through without feeling an ounce better. That would be an ugly cut of her paycheck if she used too many more.
Deciding she'd done enough for the night, Beth set her pistol to safe and put it down, hitting the button to bring her target in before removing her protective ear- and eyewear.

"Still down here, Blaine? Something must have really riled you up this time."

Beth grit her teeth, ignoring the gazelle's barbed words as she watched her target come in along its rail.

"Why upset, though? Another successful mission tonight, Blaine. Hite's quite happy with you. And our contacts say the bat has stabilized, so… why unhappy?"

Beth dumped her spent clips in the disposal basket for the H. A. W. C. quartermaster to attend to, before turning and leaning against the bench to look up at Grayson. "And what even makes you think I'm upset or unhappy?"

The gazelle lifted an eyebrow. Beth pulled back as he reached past her, ripping the target loose and holding it out for them both to look at. "Because you only get the rabbit-sized target out when you're angry, Blaine. Would this happen to have anything to do with Lieutenant Wilde-Hopps?"

Scowling, Beth snatched the hole-riddled target from Grayson's hooves and balled it up, tossing it in the trash. "I am not. Mad. With Wilde-Hopps. We are both adults who made adult, rational decisions. That she, and Honey, seem to suddenly think me to be my brother all over again..."

The gazelle nodded along, rubbing his chin in thought. "Projection of self-doubt and loathing onto important mammals in your life, brought on by a series of escalating morally dubious decisions in the name of a greater good. Classic. But I suppose, since you've been down here all evening, you haven't heard that you're going to be the last mammal on Wilde-Hopps' mind for a while, which should cheer you up."

Beth supposed, being in conversation with the professional psychologist with psychiatric training, she had practically been begging for that evaluation. Still, her frown deepened at the gazelle's words, a sliver of worry worming its way up from her gut. "What do you mean?"

"It was on the news," continued Grayson, smiling like he was discussing the weather. "Detective Nicholas Wilde-Hopps, and that wolf foster child of theirs. Miss Black kidnapped them from their own home earlier today. And, from what I hear, while another family member is in the hospital. Really, how trag—"

Beth was shoving past him, running for the elevator out before he came close to finishing, thoughts a whirlwind of panic.

***

Though Bogo had promised to keep Judy onboard the investigation, at that point it seemed there was not much for her to do.

“It’s late,” the cape buffalo explained on the elevator ride up to the floor for the Police Chief’s office from the computer labs. “You’re tired, physically and emotionally, and we need time to take stock of where we are and what we need to do next.”

It was, perhaps, a sign of just how tired and beaten-down from the day’s events that she couldn’t summon up any sort of counter-argument. Such was how Judy found herself stepping out into the lobby from the elevator alone, ears down and body, once more, turning numb beyond the minimum
needed to keep her moving. She looked around, saw the precinct operating much as it always had. Cops were still hurrying around to secure evidence, or log in new information, or confirm an arrest, or just to gossip on the latest tragedy to bear the name Wilde-Hopps. Civilians were still coming in for help, even at that late hour, reporting crimes, checking up on arrested family and friends, providing testimonies, confirming or disproving alibis. The lights shone bright in the lobby, not uncomfortably so, the large windows and glass doors letting it shine out into the night of Zootopia like a beacon of hope, law, and order for the helpless. The most that stood out to Judy was Finnick leaving one of the farther away offices with Carla, his interrogation for that evening’s events seemingly finished. Judy had completely forgotten he’d even been there, and his careful avoidance of looking at her was one more sting upon her heart.

Oh, how Judy hated that moment, to find herself caught on both sides of the divide, victim and officer meant to help victim. That every one of her fellow officers passing by her seemed to have heard what had happened didn’t help.

“Hey, Jude. Call if you need anything, right?”

“Here if you need someone to talk to, okay?”

“You have my number if any lead comes up.”

“In my thoughts and prayers, Hopps.”

Judy tuned them out, not bothering to nod or even look over in acknowledgment of the comments as she shuffled her way through the main hall. It was with little surprise she found Honey by the doors out, a computer bag slung over her right shoulder showing the badger was leaving for the night.

“Hey, Judy. Figured it’d be a bad idea to let you be alone tonight. Your apartment’s still a crime scene anyway, so you’re coming home with me, no refusal allowed.”

Judy had not considered where she would be spending the night, the idea of sleeping alone in Marian Wilde’s apartment carrying with it a presence of sad terror that left her feeling sick to her stomach. Accepting Honey’s offer with the best smile she could manage, she fell in beside the badger as together the two of them left the ZPD and made the short walk down the street and across the plaza to the train station. To Judy’s relief, Honey kept quiet for the walk, seeming to understand that talking was really the last thing Judy wanted to do right then. Or perhaps, Judy thought, remembering that somehow there had been a night before learning that her husband and foster son were missing, the badger was reflecting on the argument with Beth. In the near-year Judy had known them, she couldn’t remember ever seeing the pair argue before.

The train ride to Tundratown passed by in a blur of looking through the window and half-heard mumblings from the on-board TVs. Before Judy knew it, they were out and walking through the snow down some street, the crunch of their footfalls carrying wide through the cloudless night and a breeze biting at her exposed face. She blinked and rubbed at her eyes, looking around in unwanted curiosity. It occurred to her that she had never actually been to Honey and Beth’s house before.

Judy was at first disappointed with what they eventually came to 5 minutes later, down in the poorer eastern section of Tundratown. At first look it seemed the same as any of the other squat ice structures glistening in the streetlights around them, perhaps incorporating more wood and other “normal” building materials than them. Inside, the house seemed shockingly plain and bare, possessed of little more than a couch and TV in one room, a clearly seldom-used bed in another, and a barely-stocked kitchen for a third room, the most notable feature being a number of heavy and light power cables running through to a partly-open cupboard beneath the kitchen counter.

“This is… roomy.”
“This,” said Honey, gesturing vaguely behind her at everything as she headed for the cupboard, “is a cover, a ruse of normality. Real house down below, away from prying eyes.”

There might have been a day, years ago, when Judy would have been skeptical, even amused, by the idea of “prying eyes”. Then the Hegemony happened. And so Judy followed Honey into the cupboard without comment, finding a heavy iron door instead of a back wall, and beyond that was a metal ladder built into the wall, leading down through a circular hole in the floor too small to admit anything larger than a wolf.

“Congrats,” said Honey, clambering down the ladder ahead of Judy. “You’re the first mammal since Beth I’ve invited down into my secret bunker. It’s normally a tight fit getting in, but you’re small, you should be fine.”

Judy chuckled at the attempts at humor, more out of politeness than anything else as she followed her host down the ladder. 10 seconds of climbing down through the dark passed, Judy feeling the ice around her transition to stone at about the halfway mark, before she reached the bottom.

“Careful with that last rung,” said Honey from somewhere below and nearby. “It’s loose, and a biit of a drop besides.”

Just as she dropped down to a thickly-carpeted floor, the lights flickered on with a quick clap of Honey’s hands, the blessedly low-level lighting suddenly revealing a bunker far more in line with what Judy had been expecting of the conspiracy theorist cop. They stood in a squareish central room of roughly hewn rock about the size of the ZPD bullpen, lights strung along the low ceiling and the multitudes of Oriental rugs across the floor giving it a close, warm atmosphere at violent odds with the house above. Five hallways lead off from the den, interspersed with a couch, a TV across from the couch, and cork boards of various sizes, the largest of which hung opposite the ladder they’d come down and was covered in photos, newspaper clippings, and internet printouts connected by string.

“That leads to the computer room,” said Honey, gesturing to each of the hallways in turn. “Then the master bedroom, the kitchen, the Private Valentine’s Day room, and the supply room. I keep enough in there to last two mammals a year and a half without going outside. Two whole years, if I decide to forego showering. I… should probably look into digging out a guest room…”

“The couch is fine,” said Judy, finding herself wandering over to the primary cork board, more just to be moving than out of any real curiosity. She saw articles on HiteTech, H.A.W.C., the Wendigo Murders, the first reported case of the new Night Howler drugs, and more. “This seems like it’d be easier on a computer…”

Honey wandered over, looking the board over before shrugging. “To record, sure. But I don’t know, seeing everything of possible significance spread out together like this… feels like it helps you see the bigger picture. Which reminds me, first thing tomorrow, I need to add literally all of today to this. Right now…”

“Sleep,” offered Judy.

Honey nodded. “Sleep, right. Just uh, there’s a bathroom halfway down the hall to the bedroom. I’ll get you a blanket from the supply room… might have one of Beth’s old shirts too…”

Judy watched the honey badger halfway to the hallway to the supply room before thinking to ask “I just remembered, won’t Beth be coming in soon?”

Honey stopped in the doorway, standing silent long enough for Judy to start to worry before
shrugging and letting loose a weak laugh. “She uh, she spends the night over at HiteTech as often as
she comes ‘round here. I… think tonight’s going to be one of those nights. I should get you your
blanket now.”

Of course, thought Judy, mentally hitting herself as she turned and headed for the bathroom. Faunt,
the argument, Beth and Honey seemingly on the outs with each other. It was so easy to get lost in her
own misery, to forget other mammals struggling. That Honey was still managing to open her home to
Judy, with everything else going on…

“Thanks, Honey,” said Judy, once she had finished washing her face and settled down on the couch.
There had been blankets to spare but no clean shirts, unfortunately, leaving her to make do with the
clothes she’d been wearing to Faunt’s Fountain. She could at least count herself lucky she hadn’t
been wearing her police uniform. “Thank you for… for everything. I don’t think… if I had needed to
be alone, tonight—”

“You wouldn’t have,” said Honey from the doorway to the bedroom, her own uniform changed out
for a surprisingly frilly pink nightdress. “You’re Judy Wilde-Hopps, girl. The entire precinct was
willing to open their houses to you. Literally. I had to demand first right by virtue of working so
close with you. I thought things were gonna get ugly with Clawhauser, on account of his knowing
you first, but he eventually relented.”

Judy didn’t know how much of what had just been said and implied was true, but there were worse
thoughts to curl up beneath a blanket to as her badger host clapped the lights off and shuffled off.

I’ll find you, she thought to herself, yawning, slowly drifting off. I’ll find you, Nick, Alex, and I’ll
have the whole ZPD behind me.

***

"You're beautiful, my dearest Bellatrix. Did I ever tell you that?"

Black sat in front of the mirror dominating her washing quarters, a array of brushes, soaps, irons, and
dyes scattered across the counter in front of her. She kept her gaze carefully on her own naked form,
refusing to look at the ghost standing beside her reflection.

"I'm sure I told you, many times. The most beautiful of wolves. The HELEN of wolves! If only
you'd smile."

Black took one of the thinner brushes and dipped it in the Special Black. The noxious, inky dye,
when properly heated as it was right then, would not only change the fur but soak into the skin, the
glands. Permanent. With the brush she drew six slashes of black along her cheeks, three for each side
to mirror the ghost beside her. Then she took one of the larger brushes and colored the top and back
of her head to connect the six cheek marks, ears twitching from the burning sensation.

"What would White think of this, Bellatrix, my darling? The excuse of ‘psychological warfare’ can
only get you so far. Furious enough about the child! Oh, you know how she is about children..."

Once the burning had stopped and Black felt certain her new colors wouldn't run, she stood and
flexed. Only then did she look at the ghost standing beside her. Jack Savage looked as handsome in
death as he had in life, his prosthetics replaced by real limbs, his blue eyes alight with mirth. He
looked pleased by the entire situation. But then, of course he did. He didn't have to be in it anymore.
He got be dead. He wasn't even there, except in her head.

Turning away without a word, Black grabbed the finely-tailored suit off its hook in the wall. She
could feel Savage-who-was-not-there smiling at her from behind as she dressed. It was early. Far too
early. She could feel the lack of sleep the past few weeks dragging at her. And yet, as always, there
was business to attend to.

***

The nightmare was an old and familiar one to Judy Wilde-Hopps, yet it still carried all the
heartbreaking terror it had that first night she remembered having it. She stood motionless in the
blueberry fields to the far northern edges of the Hopps farm, the hedges far taller and shadow-filled
than they were in the waking world. Judy wore again her ZPD uniform, her badge a blaze of gold in
the noonday sun. The sound of children playing echoed in from the distance.

But then, before Judy's eyes the shadows of the hedges stretched out, up, staining the sky grey. In the
unnatural dusk the blueberries in their hedges bulged, then unfurled into Night Howlers, the flowers
glowing an electric-blue. The laughter of playing children turned to screams, soon drowned out by
snarls, roars, and howls.

"Judy! Judy, help!"

As always, Judy turned around at a glacial pace, the sound of ripping flesh reaching her ears long
before her eyes found the source. There stood Nick, forced to stand ramrod straight as branches and
vines entwined themselves around him. They dug into him, in and out until it became nearly
impossible to tell where fox ended and plant began.

"Judy... help me..."

"Nick!" She hopped toward him; or at least, tried to, before sudden bone-breaking pain erupted
through her legs, sending her screaming and reeling in place. She looked down and saw wolves
chomping down on her legs to hold her in place, Arctic eyes glaring at her.

She looked back up and saw Nick again, free of the branches but sans left arm now, eyes turned an
Arctic blue. As she watched, his fur and skin split, Night Howler flowers sprouting free as if from
plain soil. And as this happened he smiled, a smile no loved one could give. "Your legacy, Carrots."

"Judy! JUDY!"

Judy lurched into full consciousness, sitting up on an unfamiliar couch in an unfamiliar den, a scream
half-torn from her lips. "N-Ni-Nick!"

No answering voice came, not from the fox she loved, only a younger, rougher voice from
somewhere nearby. "Judy, calm down, it was only a nightmare! You’ve got to see this!"

Judy blinked, and suddenly she could remember where and when she was, could remember that
Nick wasn’t there, might not be there for a while, maybe never again. She blinked, almost crying
before her eyes found Honey near the other end of the couch Judy lay on, eyes wide and frightened,
lit to a haunted aspect by a stark blueish-white light. Judy rolled into a sitting position and turned for
the source of the light, wincing at the brightness of the TV mounted to the far wall. "What, what is..."

At first, she had thought it was nothing but static on the screen, but as her eyes adjusted and lost their
last dregs of sleep blurriness, she saw instead it was a look out upon a field of thick, snow-laden
clouds, snow tossed about by a stiff breeze in every which way. At the edges of the screen could be
seen snow-dusted rock, as if the camera were positioned right at the entrance to some cave
somewhere in Tundratown. At this video she completely snapped awake, dread forming in the pit of
her stomach. She knew what was coming next.

"Hello, Zootopia," spoke a deep, cold voice from somewhere off-camera. Miss Black's voice. "I apologize for the early awakening, but today is going to be a busy day. We'll get through this fast...

Mr. Archibald Boulder. Kudu. Owner and operator of a small-time bookstore in Savannah Central. Formerly the owner and landlord of Boulder Estates, a primarily predator apartment complex in Sahara Square, up to 10 years ago. Back then he was approached by a business wanting to put in a large chain store in the area, and they were seeking out local businesses open to closing up shop. Boulder was, but the apartment lease was structured in such a way by the mammals he'd bought it from that he needed the approval of the tenants, who would not give it. So, Boulder got persuasive."

Judy and Honey shared a look. They could guess what sorts of actions Miss Black would consider persuasive.

"First," the off-screen wolf continued, "he fired all security personnel for the complex and purposely brought in new, criminal clientele. There was an obvious rise in crime that sent many tenants running. For those that remained, he waited until the deepest part of summer... and shut off environmental controls for the building. Three mammals were sent to the hospital, all elderly, and one died. Since they were predators, and poor, none of them were able to file charges against Mr. Boulder for his actions. In a civilized society, Boulder would be guilty of mammalslaughter, at best. In Zootopia... he got millions from the company seeking to buy his building and was able to semi-retire into a life of upper-middle class peace and prosperity. Now, I think it's time for justice."

There came a sound then, the instantly recognizable sound of a shovel digging into snow. For a moment, Judy did not understand, until Miss Black loomed into sight above the camera, shovel in hand, and Judy realized they were not looking out from a cavern onto a cloudy, snowy landscape, but looking up from a fresh grave.

"This is for the dead," said Miss Black, before dropping the first shovelful of snow onto the camera, turning the screen white. The next moment came static, real static, then the feed switched back to normal television.
Almost There...

A bang resounded from the house above them, Judy and Honey both jumping in shock. Judy remembered that there was a second TV up there, moments before they heard the creak of the hidden iron door being moved and the clunk of someone hurrying down the ladder. Her mind started and stopped, trying to process everything that had happened all at once as she slid off the couch to join Honey in watching the ladder, only just remembering the teasing comment the badger had made the night before.

"Congrats," said Honey, clambering down the ladder ahead of Judy. "You’re the first mammal since Beth I’ve invited down into my secret bunker."

With that thought, Judy grimaced as Beth dropped into view from the hatch in the ceiling leading up to the surface, the hare foregoing the last foot or two for the sake of speed. She turned, eyes sticking at once on Judy and Honey and growing wide. She froze. Judy noted idly the dark shadows under Beth’s eyes, the general dishevel of her fur, and how she didn’t seem to have changed clothes since the night before.

Then Honey cleared her throat and Beth flinched, shrinking into herself more than Judy thought possible for the hare. Beth looked down at her feet, glanced at the TV, swallowed, looked back up at them. “I… apologize, for last night. I… I did not… she was going to get away, and everything I said before about us being unable to track her is still true, but I wish… I wish to God you had been that slightest bit faster to have caught her, to have your lead to… to…”

“Miss Black,” said Judy, uttering the name with loathing shocking even to her own ears. When Beth nodded Judy sighed, rubbing a hand up her face before sitting down on the couch. She felt so tired. Not sleep-tired, the one-two punch of the nightmare and Miss Black’s broadcast but simply… tired. She wanted the situation over with. She needed it over with. In all honesty, and she could at least be honest with herself, she didn’t even know if Beth was in the right or wrong. If perhaps the ZPD, if perhaps SHE, didn’t have what it would take to better the city anymore. Nearly 10 years she had been working at it, 10 years since that first day of giving out tickets and helping a fox father get his son some ice cream, and nothing looked all that much better, no matter where she looked. All she could see was a bat in need of help, twitching in the foliage, slowly dying.

“What,” mumbled Honey from somewhere, “just going to apologize to her?”

“Honey,” said Beth, from somewhere nearby, “I will get on one knee right now and ask you to marry me if that’s what it took to get your forgiveness.”

“… um… I mean, if you’re offering—”

The sudden blasting of Honey’s phone ringing from where she’d put it on the couch interrupted any further conversation. Judy looked back up from where she’d been staring down at the ground, watching as the badger snatched the phone up with a huff and answered. Several seconds of mostly-silence passed, save for the hint of Bogo’s voice Judy could hear over the line. Honey nodded along, giving a terse “Will do” before hanging up and looking at Judy and Beth. “I hate being the one to say this, and I blame both of you for being such honorably rotten influences on an old conspiracy nut like me, but duty calls. I’d had all sorts of plans to add onto my Color Conspiracy board before heading in, too… and of course, that minutes-old offer…”

She looked back at Beth, eyebrow raised. “You didn’t stay out all night getting a ring or something, did you? You know I’d prefer that kind of money spent on a new generator for the bunker, or a
desalination machine.”

“No, I stayed up late trying to…” But then Beth paused, biting her lip as she glanced Judy’s way. “Er… Judy, I don’t know if you remember, with everything that’s happened since, but I tried hinting that H.A.W.C. keeps you and Nick under surveillance…”

Judy remembered. It had been a welcome brain teaser to while away the hours waiting for Faunt to show up the night before. She’d eventually settled on it making a frustrating amount of sense, no matter how little she liked it. Most threats to the overall city did seem to have a fixation on them in particular. And if Beth had gone through the trouble of trying to alert them about it, she at least either didn’t condone it or thought they should be aware of it. And since it was being brought up… “Did you get footage of anything the apartment’s security cameras missed? An identifying feature to track one of Black’s helpers down, or—”

But Beth was shaking her head. “I found it painted over when I got there. Probably by Miss Black. I didn’t get anything.”

“But…” Judy thought over the implications, slowly, sorely missing Nick’s presence to bounce ideas and info around until they reached the case-breaking realization. “But that means… Miss Black knew about H.A.W.C.’s hidden camera. Which means someone in H.A.W.C., or even HiteTech… is involved with Miss Black.”

The three shared a look. Judy swallowed, turning to grab her jacket from where she’d dropped it beside the couch. “Honey, I’m going to need you to look into a few things at work today. Recent HiteTech Industries events and actions, whatever’s public about Black’s tenure with H.A.W.C., Winona Hite’s life and history, Doctor Grayson’s published work, just… anything and everything you can get your hands on.”

“I’ll help with that,” said Beth, making both other mammals look at her. She frowned, looking affronted. “What? Why always this look when I’m being friendly or offering to help? If we’re going to be questioning about this, what are you going to do, Jude?”

Judy zipped up her jacket and sighed as she thought forward to the day she’d be having. There was one avenue of investigation left open to her, and in all honesty she probably wouldn’t have even been considering it if anyone other than Nick and Alex were in danger. “I’m going to say hi to an old friend. Someone involved in all this from the start.”

***

"Careful... careful... hold the bars if you need to, it's okay."

"Ow! They're cold!"

"I know they're cold, champ, but paws a little frosty are better than a head cracked open."

Alex looked down from where he was trying to balance on his father's head to glare the fox in the eye. "I think Mom would hit you if you tried comforting her like that, Dad."

Nick grinned and shrugged, quickly reaching up with his one hand to help steady Alex when that movement unbalanced him. "Yeah, she probably would. So uh, let's not tell her about it."

Alex wasn't dumb or naive like many kids his age, a fact that gave him no small amount of grief in school. He knew most of the brave front Nick put on was for Alex's benefit, because that was what adults were supposed to do when kids were scared or in danger. He also knew that the only reason Nick was able to smile so brightly was because Alex was calling him Dad and Judy Mom, and so he
tried to do it every chance he got. Because he also knew, thanks to Jack Savage, that adults needed brave faces too.

"Careful with your foot there, champ. What do you see?"

Quickly focusing back on the window, Alex bit back a yelp as he grabbed the frozen bars to steady himself and look out. "I see... some kind of courtyard, or outdoor garage. Lot of vehicles under tarps. There's ice and snow everywhere. I think I see trees in the distance."

"Tundratown," said Nick, Alex having to strain to hear him. "No way we were asleep long enough to get north enough for snow. And if we're still in Zootopia—"

The low screech of the metal door that led to their hallway made both foxes look toward their cell's sliding bar door, Alex letting go of the window bars and wobbling to not fall. But then he realized, in a moment's epiphany, We're no good to Miss Black dead or hurt.

***

Nick was so focused on the hallway beyond their cell, he didn't notice a weight suddenly lifting from his head until he actually caught sight of Alex falling in front of him. The wolf pup hit the ground with a hard THUNK, grunted once in pain, then lay motionless. Nick dropped to his side at once, eyes wide and thoughts a tumbling mass of panic as he checked him over for injury. Oh God I turned too fast he fell he's not moving unconscious dying dead nononoAlex—

Curling up on his side and facing toward Nick, Alex opened one eye enough to wink. Nick's thoughts came to a screeching halt, heart jumping from panic to relief to outrage to an annoyed sort of pride in the span of a single breath, and it was all Nick could do to keep the horror on his face as a lynx guard in black cold-weather gear stomped into sight in the hallway and looked in at them. "What's going on here!? The girl, what happened to her?"

"H-he was trying to see out the window," said Nick, not having to fake the defensiveness in his voice as he knelt over Alex's prone body as if to shield him. "The door startled us a-and he fell. Please, he needs medical help! He landed on his head, he's not moving! Please, he's just a kid!"

There was a moment where the lynx looked back and forth between the two prisoners and Nick was certain the impromptu ruse wouldn't work. But then the lynx was pulling a key from one of his parka's pockets and unlocking the cell door. Nick stood and tried stepping forward, stopping and raising his arm in surrender when the lynx stepped in and trained a handgun at him. "Woah, hey!"

"Back corner, now!" The lynx jabbed his handgun at Nick, then at the corner in question. "Go on, move it! Away from the kit!"

"Of course, of course!" Nick stepped back, arm still raised as he shuffled over into the corner. He kept his eyes trained on the gun, judging from the sway of the barrel that this was not a mammal used to holding other mammals at gunpoint. Normally he'd have no doubt about his ability to wrestle the weapon away, but without his prosthetic... "Just please, help my boy."

Keeping the gun on Nick, the lynx took a knee beside Alex and felt first on his neck for a pulse, then over his head for any injuries. When the hand reached an ear, Alex yelped and shuddered as if in horrible pain, an impression Nick added to by taking a step forward and baring his teeth, only backing away again at a jab from the gun. The concerted display seemed enough for the lynx, who after another moment reached his free hand to the radio at his belt—

With a speed that Nick knew would've made Judy proud, Alex rolled over onto all fours while both
the lynx's hands were occupied and with the strength of all four limbs drove his head into the feline's groin. There came a short-breathed yowl, the lynx's eyes bulging as he jerked back.

In the same instant, Nick charged forward and decked the lynx in the chin, sending him flopping back boneless to the cell floor.

Keeping his momentum, Nick grabbed both the dropped gun and radio before ushering Alex out of the cell. He turned to grab the dropped key and found Alex holding it up for him with a cheeky smile. "I did well?"

"Better than you should ever have to do," said Nick, taking the key and locking the cell with the lynx guard in it. Now that the most immediate problem was resolved, Nick allowed himself a moment of parental disapproval as he turned back and glared down at Alex. "Just one thing. Please, don't ever, EVER try a plan like that again without warning me! I swear, I almost had a heart attack!"

"If I can avoid having to make up such bad plans, then definitely. But uh..." the wolf pup glanced first at the unconscious lynx guard, then at the door down the dank and dimly lit hallway that he had come from. "We might want to..."

"Right," said Nick, handing the radio he'd grabbed to Alex before stepping in front of him. "Stay behind me as much as you can, and try to keep as quiet as possible. This has only been the easy part so far."

Alex nodded his understanding, grin fading as he looked ahead to the door, to Nick's relief. Nick took a deep breath, mentally steeling himself for the trials ahead, knowing as he did that even with the element of surprise they had for the moment, the chances of them actually escaping from there were slim to none. He remembered many months ago, Judy barely managing to get outside the Cliffside Asylum before Miss Black intercepted and stopped her, coming within seconds of killing her before he and Beth arrived and intervened. Something told him things wouldn't be nearly so easy for the two of them.

“That prosthetic arm’s built-in GPS tracker, radio, or recorder would be cussing useful right about now…”

The short hallway beyond the door was blessedly empty, some kind of check-in station with a desk to one side, a row of lockers to the other side, and the middle dominated by a support pillar. The desk's drawers were all locked with no key in sight, and the phone on it had had its cord cut. “Well, nothing useful here…”

Continuing through, the door on the other end of the room led to a metal-grated catwalk overlooking what Nick guessed had once been a factory assembly room, discolored lines across the length of the quarter-mile room showing where the assembly lines had once been. At some point it had been converted into a vast storage area, stacks of wood and metal crates reaching up nearly to the catwalks connecting the upper levels. They had just come out of what Nick guessed had once been offices, and along the sides of the room he could see five more such doors on their level. Further down the catwalk to their left stood a guard, a wolverine in body armor and carrying a shotgun, but to Nick's relief she was facing away from them and preoccupied with smoking a cigarette.

Glancing around once more to make sure nobody was looking their way, Nick closed the door behind them with a soft click and scampered down the catwalk ahead of them to take shelter from view behind an especially high stack of crates. Pausing to listen for any signs that they'd been spotted, he breathed a soft sigh of relief and turned to Alex. “We might have just gotten a little lucky, champ. I didn't see any other guards on this level. Plus, your coat blends in well with all this wood and rusted metal. If we take down that one wolverine, you can climb down the crates to the ground
floor, sneak out into the vehicle garage you saw earlier, grab something fast, and be out of here before anyone can raise an alarm."

"But there are mammals working down there," said Alex, pointing down to a wolf operating a forklift to emphasize his point. "And you're a really bright orange. How are we going to sneak past them all without being spotted?"

Nick bit his lower lip and looked away, mentally counting the number of mammals on the ground floor: 9, 10 if he counted the wolverine up there with them. He then removed the clip for the handgun he'd grabbed and saw it carried 7 bullets. "And there are bound to be guards outside to... but then, if I can grab the wolverine's shotgun..."

"Dad?" Though not smiling, Alex had at least looked confident earlier. Now he was starting to look scared. "How are you going to sneak out with me?"

“I…” Nick looked around again, saw another guard, a black bear, standing next to a fire extinguisher on the opposite side of the building from the open loading dock he figured led to the outside garage, chatting with a polar bear in coveralls. “Look,” he said, nodding toward the extinguisher. “I'll shoot that and get it gushing everywhere, and while everyone’s distracted we’ll climb down and go for the vehicles.”

“Will you—”

“Alex.” Nick turned to the kit, setting the gun down for a moment to hold his son’s shoulder. Something in his tone or his gaze made Alex stop, looking up at him in mute terror. “Listen, I am going to stay with you as long as I possibly can. All the way if possible. But if something happens, if I have to stop or am stopped, I do NOT want you to stop! Don’t even slow down! Do you hear me, Alex?"

“But—"

“Do. You. Here me?"

Alex nodded helplessly. Nick tried to smile, leaning in to kiss his boy’s forehead before picking the gun back up. “Okay. Stay here until I give my signal, then start climbing down. I’ll be right behind you, I swear.”

Getting another nod from Alex, Nick clapped him on the shoulder before standing and ducking back along the catwalk. The wolverine had finished her cigarette by that point, but thankfully was still facing the other way, allowing Nick to creep up right behind her without notice. He exhaled softly, swallowed, then jumped up, bringing the butt of the handgun down on the back of the wolverine’s head in a hammer blow.

“Hrk!”

Nick barely managed to catch the guard’s far heavier body and lower it to the catwalk, her grip on the shotgun remaining blessedly firm. Checking to make sure she was unconscious, Nick slipped the weapon over his shoulders by its strap before hurrying back over to Alex. He gave a thumbs up, at which Alex smiled, before circling around to better see the fire extinguisher. The polar beat had walked away by now, the black bear turned away and speaking to someone over his radio.

Breathing deep, Nick got to one knee and aimed the handgun at the fire extinguisher, a red beacon against the rusted greys and browns of the warehouse wall. The sights wavered alarmingly, as they were to be expected to when trying to aim one-handed. Nick dropped lower, onto his belly, so that
the rigid grating could help keep his arm and aim steady.

“Dad—”

“Go,” Nick said, finger on the trigger. “I’ll be right behind you, I swear, just go!”

Movement behind him, the creak of weight being put on wood, Nick’s finger tightening around the trigger—

One side of the extinguisher exploded, spraying the black bear with stark-white foam. Nick hurried to his feet, turning and jumping onto the wood crates as the startled screams of the bear echoed through the warehouse, drawing the other workers and guards to him, shouts of alarm and screams for someone to get the on-site doctor joining the deafening chorus.

10 seconds of hurried clambering to reach the ground floor, the undecorated concrete freezing cold to Nick’s paw pads. He turned, saw a wolf three feet off aiming a handgun at Alex far ahead, put a bullet through his head without a second thought.

Then they were running, Alex ahead and Nick behind, catching up as they ran for the open loading dock, an 18-wheeler idling out in the snowy courtyard beyond as if waiting for them by divine providence. They were almost there, no guards in sight beyond the dock, most of the shouts behind them still in concern over the bear doused in extinguisher foam. 20 feet, 15 feet, 10 feet—

Alex skid to a stop, Nick almost running into him before stopping, gaping in numbing terror as a light-grey hare strode through the loading dock toward them. His cheeks bore black markings, like tiger stripes, and his eyes shone an icy blue. He wore a black suit, and in his right hand he held—

Beep.

***

Miss Black stood over the pair of prisoners, fuming in silence as they writhed and screamed. She kept the button for the Tame collar remote pressed, content to let the sheer pain send the fox and wolf into unconsciousness.

"Well," said Jack Savage beside her, grinning as if the whole situation was a joke. "That was rather close for comfort, wasn’t it? Maybe you should chop their legs off? It can’t be long now until Judy finds her way here, just like these two always find each other, and then you’ll really be trouble"

Black ignored the ghost, returning the remote to her suit jacket as the first of the guards responding to the scene reached her to gape at the two smoldering figures collapsed on the ground. "That was too close. Return them to their cell. Chain their legs to the wall. Don’t let this happen again."

***

Prison had not been kind to Delgato, Judy thought to herself at first sight of the once-proud lion being lead into the interrogation room by the pair of moose prison guards. His mane, which she remembered often joking at how much time he spent caring for it, had withered and thinned, worryingly loose in spots. His fur, too, had thinned, showing off the greyish pallor of his skin, emphasized worse by how much bonier he looked since the last time she had seen him, being lead out of his apartment in handcuffs. In the harsh, too-bright fluorescent lighting, he looked alarmingly gaunt.

The guards shoved the lion down into the iron chair opposite the table from Judy, ignoring his bared fangs and Judy’s disapproving glare as they snapped the built-in manacles into place around his
wrists and ankles. Once that was done, the lead prison guard turned back to give Judy some final instructions before marching out. “15 minutes, max, starting the moment this door closes. You will be monitored the entire time. If he attacks, we will end the meeting. If you attack, we will end the meeting. If he has an attack, we will end the meeting. If the two of you cease speaking for longer than three minutes straight, we will come in to investigate. This happens three times, we will end the meeting.”

Nick would have had a sarcastic remark to make at all this. Judy just nodded to show that she understood. The guard nodded back, before turning and slamming the door shut. The drumbeat of locks sliding into place resounded, leaving the cop and former cop alone in the room.

“Well,” said Delgato, once several long seconds had passed. “I never expected to see you again. You must be truly desperate, to come to me for help.”

Judy kept her expression neutral, hands calm in her lap, thoughts turning and turning to the idea of Nick and Alex safe, returned, happy. “Delgato. Trust me, you weren’t my first choice. You look…”

“Dying?” The lion shrugged, smirking. “Well, there are some things a nice retirement in a cherry-picked prison can’t help you with. I get my pills, and my chemo, and my surgeries, and we’ll see what happens.”

He looked forward then, smile vicious, hungry. “Bet you a 100 I’ll still outlive either you or good ol’ Nick. Things haven’t been going too well for either of you out there, have they?”

“No,” Judy agreed after a moment’s thought, “they haven’t. I guess you do get the news in here. I’ve come, Delgato, because I need your help, like you said. Miss Black has my husband and son. I need your help figuring out where they are?”

The lion frowned and leaned back, perhaps annoyed the opening banter had been cut short. He glanced left to the security camera in the far upper corner of the room, Judy just managing to resist the urge to turn and look at it as well. “And what makes you think I would help you? What makes you think I COULD help you? Miss Black and I never worked all that much together. She was always away, obsessed with her precious little Mister Green.”

“Mister Green?”

“Yeah—” Delgato paused, rolling his eyes. “Right, he never went by that if he could get away with it. I mean Jack Savage. How the hell did you and Nick deal with that maniac, anyway?”

A shot rang out, the rest of the world silent before it. Savage stopped, Judy watching with matching shock as he looked down to the growing red in the belly of his bodysuit. He looked back up into her eyes where he held her aloft, a smile twisting his features a final time. “Guess… I don’t get to see… the final act of this subtle war…”

His grip on Judy’s throat disappeared. She dropped, rolled, dislocated leg screaming its protest. She found herself on her back three feet away, looking up at Jack Savage. He swayed where he stood for a moment before straightening his back, squaring his shoulders, and marching best as he could with his mutilated leg into the pyre he’d been about to throw her into. She watched as he caught flame, motionless at first as fur and flesh blackened and cracked, before a spasm dropped him to his knees, then his side. There were no screams, no shrieks, nothing but the stench of roasting flesh and metal.

“We didn’t, really,” said Judy, pulling herself out from her memories and looking back at Delgato. “He mostly dealt with himself, in the end. But that’s not what we’re talking about, Delgato. We’re talking about Miss Black. How do I find her? Your career is proof the Hegemony has had its eyes set
on Zootopia for a long time, you must have had a base of operations within, or nearby, somewhere Black might have taken my… taken her hostages. Where is that?”

“I’m not answering,” replied Delgato, starting to look bored with the conversation now, to Judy’s frustration. He sat leaned back in his restraints, loosing a theatrically large yawn and glancing again at the camera. “You’ve asked your questions, but haven’t said a damn thing in answer to mine. What makes you think I would help you? I’m here in prison because of you. Maybe I want to see you sob and scream like the emotional little bunny you are as you lose your family. Maybe Miss White will make Miss Black the new Lady Red when she walks in all decked out with a fox fur scarf—”

Judy shot up to a standing position on her chair, vision red, hands balled into fists at her sides, a snarl clawing up from her gut—

“There are always going to be mammals ready to push you down for one reason or another, sweetie. What matters is how you stand back up.”

Judy snapped her mouth shut, forcing her hands to unclench as she took one long, slow breath, and then another, forcing it all back down. She could not lose control. She could not let this one, last, desperate chance to save her family slip away from her because she couldn’t handle the taunting of a killer and a liar, a traitor and a bully.

Slowly, deliberately, Judy sat back down in her raised chair and stared Delgato square in the eyes, not letting her satisfaction at his visible disappointment show. She held onto her own words of wisdom to Alex like a lifeline, trusting them to see her through this. “I can’t believe that you really are this cruel, even knowing your involvement in the Wendigo Murders. I remember you among the ZPD forces that arrested Mayor Bellwether, all those years ago. You, and all the rest, came because you believed I was in danger. We worked together for years. You’ve been on late-night stakeouts with Nick. You can’t tell me that all of that meant nothing. That Nick’s life means nothing. That being a cop meant nothing.”

A minute of silence passed as Delgato stared at her, muzzle turned down in a frown, brow furrowed in thought, fingers drumming against the armrests of his restraining chair. Then he shifted, looking away, teeth bared. “You really are astoundingly naïve, even after all these years. I suppose it all comes down to what we think… police are.”

“They’re keepers of the peace,” answered Judy immediately, not certain where her verbal adversary was taking this. “Protectors of the citizenry, righters of wrongs. They—we, make the world a better place—”

“But that’s the thing!” Delgato growled, looking at her again. “You are wrong! Police do not make the world a better place! You can’t! Except in rare occasions, you do not stop crimes before they occur! You do not solve whatever elements turn mammals to crime! Something bad happens and you come, and you investigate all you can, and if you’re lucky you right whatever wrong happened or, at least, bring the perpetrator to justice. THAT is my experience, Wilde-Hopps. Police don’t make the world a better place. They uphold the status quo. At best, you keep the world from getting worse. That’s all.”

A beep sounded from the door behind Delgato, signaling to Judy that she only had five minutes left. She squeezed her fists tight in her lap, thinking over and over what the lion had said, searching for something, some fault to pry at or inconsistency to exploit. With Nick beside her, she feared, she might have found something. Alone, she found nothing.

With Nick…
Judy smiled. “Zootopia found its first fox cop, thanks to me. Thanks to us, it then found its first hare cop, and badger cop, and on, and on. Mammals, slowly, haltingly, are finding they’re only as bound in society by their species as much as they want to be. I’ll be damned if that’s not making the world a better place, and I’ll be damned if Miss White, Miss Black, or any other member of your Hegemony thinks they can stop that progress on my watch.”

She stood, planting her hands on the desk, leaning forward over it to stare the struck-silent lion down. “So if your whole thing is that you didn’t feel like you were doing enough as a cop, then good news. You’re not a cop anymore. So God damn it, help me find Miss Black and my family NOW.”

At first, Delgato stared. Then, he shook, grinning, a laugh deep from the belly escaping him. He fell back in his chair as far as he could and laughed until tears streamed from his eyes, until the moose guards opened the door to see that everything was okay, until Judy almost, almost, started to join in. But that might have ruined everything. And besides, she thought she’d sounded impressive, at least.

Eventually, the laughter began to die down, Delgato wiping at his eyes and looking at Judy almost fondly. “I’d like… hah… I’d like to be there and se-heheh, and see you give a speech like that to Miss Black. I can’t help with that, having been, you know, in prison since before that Jack Savage fiasco, but you’re right. The Hegemony does have a staging area for Zootopia. Probably how it gets all its Night Howlers and NH drugs in and out of the city. Akhlut Airways, Tundratown. Old airport, private, abandoned. And that’s all the help you’re getting from me, Lieutenant.”

This last part was said as the moose guards came forward and started unhooking Delgato’s limbs from the chair, the time for the meeting up. Judy stood up to her full height, already typing the information given into her phone. “That’s fine. That’s all the help I’ll need.”
In the Black

Yellow paced the length of her public identity's office, certain she was wearing a groove in the carpet as she fretted and waited for Miss White to pick up her phone. She knew if she looked over at the mirror hanging by the office door she would see one frazzled feline, all color but her spots drained from her features by terror, tail whipping in a panic. Such was why she did her level best to keep her gaze as far from the mirror as possible. The windows behind her desk, too, for good measure.

CLICK. "Miss. Yellow. I can hear your pacing from here. What happened?"

Yellow glanced at her mirror, confirmed that yep, she was near-white from panic. "Hehe, please, remember your blood pressure—"

"It's Black, isn't it?"

"It's, like uh..." Yellow stopped her pacing, moving to her desk and opening a drawer in search of the bottle of wine she kept nearby for just such an occasion. "No, actually, it's... Blue. Hopps visited him in prison and he told her how to find Black."

Silence over the line. Oh God, thought Yellow, foregoing use of a glass entirely and chugging straight from the bottle. White didn't get quiet like this unless she was well and truly angry. Yellow had never heard her go quiet for so long. "N-now, in Black's defense, her logic in grabbing Wilde and that Wolford boy was sound. The perfect living shields. The mammals she would never, ever try to shoot around or—"

"I gave her very simple orders," spoke White at last, Yellow clacking her mouth shut in mute terror at her superior's tranquil fury. "Simple. Orders. Occupy the news at certain times, and cause fear. No more. Her mania is putting everything at risk. I should have killed her the moment Jack Savage died."

Yellow took another chug of wine. It was nicely sobering, hearing that rage at someone else. "Y-you do have a policy against working with the insane."

"Liabilities," snarled White. "I trust you called me first. Tell Black NOTHING. We've accomplished what we need anyway. If she repels the police, nothing is lost. If not... Grey has contingencies."

CLICK.

Yellow looked at her phone, annoyance at the abrupt end to the call battling, and eventually losing to, relief that SHE had gotten off fine. Slumping into her office chair, she took another swig from the bottle and thought. Black had gone crazy. Blue had squealed on them. White was furious. Grey was playing with his pretty white flowers. "If one more thing goes south..."

***

Beth: Here's the collected internal memos for all recent HiteTech court cases for the past three years. A lot there I never saw on the news.

Honey: Got it, thanks. Did you get that old news footage I sent you from your boss's attempted marriage?

Beth: Received, watched, and horrified. Poor Hite. I dated the occurrence, turns out there was barely any investigation by the San Dingo police, and that priest got off with only light sentence. Hite
form H.A.W.C. soon after.

Honey: I’d totally do the same if someone shot you at our wedding.

Beth: Aww, that’s sweet and disturbing. Back at you.

Honey: Hold on, Jude just texted me! Delgato gave lead! Off to tell chief!!! Will keep you updated with drone footage! If lead right, we strike!!!!!!

***

“Colonel Blaine, I don’t do personal calls often. Doctor Grayson has informed me that you’ve not been attending to your regular H.A.W.C. duties. Explain yourself.”

“Director Hite, I’m deeply sorry about this, but something urgent has come up. The ZPD have a lead on Miss Black’s location and are preparing a strike force as we speak. I… put in a request that H.A.W.C. provide support.”

“I have not received any such request. I will oversee an investigation into this supposed lead myself, and if it is found to be accurate, then that requested support will be provided. For now, return to HiteTech Tower for a debriefing.”

“Director, ma’am… I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. The ZPD need us. My friends need me. You have to reconsider.”

“… are you questioning my authority?”

“What? N-no, I’m only—”

“You have been an exemplary H.A.W.C. operative, Blaine. Especially in how well you FOLLOW ORDERS. And right now, your very. Simple. Order. Is to return to HiteTech, and leave the ZPD to their own machinations. Is. That. Clear!”

“… Ma’am, with all due respect, I always preferred blue and gold to red and white anyway.”

“What—”

Beth hit END CALL, quickly turning the phone off so that a follow-up call couldn’t come. Looking back at the rest of the ZPD bullpen, most of which was paying more attention to her at the moment than to whatever detailed battle plan Bogo had been laying out, Beth shrugged and slid the phone back in her pocket. “Boring conversation anyway. Would you happen to still have hare-sized uniforms around anywhere?”

***

Marian Wilde looked better than she had the last time Judy had come to visit, that first night the fox matron spent in the hospital. The breathing mask and tubes had been removed, at least, and some color had come back to her. The worst of the scare, the doctors assured, had miraculously been gotten through without incident. If she managed even a day longer, they said, she would most likely wake up hardly the worse for wear for the whole ordeal.

“You will wake up like that,” Judy promised to the vixen, motionless in the late evening light save for the small rise and fall of her body with each breath. Judy leaned in from where she had carefully climbed onto the bed, placing a kiss just above Marian’s brow. “And your son and grandson will be there to greet you, I promise.”
The soft stomp of McHorn’s feet near the hospital room door told Judy it was time to go.

***

7 PM in Tundratown at that time of year, the sun hovered just above the horizon, a heavy cloud cover darkening the world further. Snow fell, light but persistent, keeping visibility blurred and uncertain. It collected on the surrounding trees, on the ordered rows of blocky concrete and steel buildings and airplane hangers lining the Akhlut Airways main take-off and landing strip, on the lone cargo plane idling on the strip, its doors opened and ramp lowered for the predators in heavy parkas and body armor loading crates into it. The snow collected on the unnamed river running a quarter-mile from the allegedly-abandoned airport’s central building, the river connecting via several short, winding miles to the seas to the north of Zootopia.

A knife the length of a rabbit stabbed through the ice at the center of the river, where it was thinnest. The knife was thick, with a straight back and a saw’s edge that split the ice with minimal effort. 30 seconds passed as the knife sawed through the ice, cutting out a hole large enough for an elephant to climb through. The cut-out portion lifted up and slid to the side, followed a moment later by a polar bear, a white-furred wolf, an Arctic hare, and a grey rabbit.

Judy slid off her wetsuit’s helmet and took a deep breath of the fresh Tundratown air, blinking against the sudden harshness of the light after so long underwater. Shrugging off the rest of her wetsuit to reveal her usual ZPD uniform underneath, she turned and edged around Snarlov pulling up the waterproof bag containing the rest of their gear to kneel at the edge of the water. “Thanks for the lift, Officer Douglas,”

“No problem,” said the dolphin in armored ZPD blues poking his head out of the water. “My boys and I’ll keep an eye on the river in case anyone tries fleeing this way. Godspeed, landlubbers.”

Judy saluted the departing dolphin, then turned to the rest of her fellow officers, out of their wetsuits as well and quickly pulling on their cold weather raid gear. Beth caught her eye and grinned as she tossed a pack to her. “I’d pay good money to see those mammals our drones spotted try to escape by sea. Never seen aquatic cops at work.”

“Same,” answered Judy, opening the pack containing her own rabbit-sized gear. Her armguards were changed out for heavier, white and grey armored gloves that connected to her grey elbow pads. White shin guards strapped onto her legs. Her regular bulletproof vest was switched out for something a degree heavier, white and with sectioned plates going down to offer protection to the gut. A white balaclava exposing only her eyes and ears went over her head, followed by a visored helmet that left only her ears exposed. The last she pulled out was a rabbit-scaled, semi-auto rifle with collapsible stock and special tranquilizer-coated rounds for hitting above her weight class. “But then, if anyone fleeing gets as far as the river, something’s gone horribly wrong.”

“River team, come in,” came Chief Bogo’s voice over their helmet radios. “What’s your status?”

“We are out of the river and armored up,” responded Judy, standing back as Snarlov and the white wolf, Sergeant Adam Fangmeyer, carefully slid the cut-out potion of ice back into place. “Wilde-Hopps, Blaine, Snarlov, and Fangmeyer all accounted for. Standing by for orders.”

“Roger that. Pleasure to have you back, Blaine. Alpha, Beta, and Gamma teams are standing by on my signal. Honey’s drone sees eight hostiles gathered around the cargo plane, another four hostiles standing guard at the central building’s rear entrances, all predators. Two jeeps with an unknown number inside patrolling the perimeter. Three wolves in sniper positions in the airport’s control tower. A wolverine and a badger standing guard over a helicopter at the far end of the central building.”
That meant 19 hostiles, bare minimum. 20, counting Miss Black herself. Judy shared equally
apprhensive looks with Beth, Snarlov, and Adam before returning to the radio. “Roger that.
Proceeding toward perimeter fence and main building for hostage retrieval.”

“Copy that, river team. We’ll have you covered. Godspep.”

The radio went silent, though Judy could almost make herself hear the flurry of reports and
commands being delivered between the chief and the other teams surrounding the airport.
Shouldering her rifle, Judy motioned forward and began leading the way across the ice to the
shoreline. The ice creaked alarmingly beneath Snarlov and the wind-tossed snow stung at their eyes,
but Judy kept her visor up for the moment to see better.

They reached the shore and immediately hunkered down, crawling up the incline toward the airport’s
fence perimeter. A sound caught at Judy’s ears and she stopped, she and Beth signaling for everyone
to drop at the same time, and not a moment too soon. Seconds later one of the jeeps warned about
rolled past on the other side of the chain-link fence, a wolf in grey fatigues sitting in the open back
with a rifle in his lap.

Judy waited 10 seconds after the vehicle had gone by to motion them on again. The fence slowed
them only slightly, Judy and Beth digging under through the snow, while Snarlov threw Adam over
before clambering up a nearby tree to leap over. The THUD that rang out as the several-hundred-
pound polar bear hit the ground couldn’t be helped, and picking up the pace the group of four ran in
a crouch toward the nearest building for cover, a hanger for smaller propeller craft.

“River team, chief, this is Jarvis. Got a good perch on a hill here, seeing a lot of the compound. I
think one of the control tower snipers noticed something, he’s called one of his fellows over and is
scanning river team’s general area. I’ve got a clean shot on both.”

“Take it,” snapped Bogo, Judy almost jumping at the harsh, commanding tone. She listened,
anxious, flinching as two shots cracked rapidly through the cold Tundratown air from somewhere
nearby, followed immediately by distant shouts from the hostiles loading the plane and return fire
from the lone surviving tower sniper. “Alpha, Beta, Gamma, move in! River team, proceed with the
objective!”

On the wind there came now the sudden roar of engines as ZPD cruisers and SWAT cars came
crashing through the airport’s main and southern gates, the pop and crack of distant gunfire, the
ragged shouts and cries of mammals. Wasting no time, Judy and the rest moved out of cover at a
controlled run toward the main terminal, sweeping the area with their rifles for hostiles. They found
none in their way, the main thrust of the ZPD raid seeming to draw all attention.

I’m coming, Nick, thought Judy as they reached the building and started across the expansive metal
outer wall for the closest door, Adam already prepping a breaching charge. I’m coming, Alex. Stay
safe for me, please.

***

The moment the shooting started, Nick had stood up from where he’d been sitting in one corner of
the cell and moved to the center, motioning for Alex to join him there. Together they watched the
cell door, ears perked to the sounds of gunfire and fighting reaching them through the narrow
window neither of them could reach thanks to the chains securing them to the cell floor. As they
waited, Nick mentally prepared himself for what might happen next. He foresaw two possibilities.
The first, the one he hoped for, was that the sounds of fighting would gradually grow nearer,
culminating in Judy charging in through the door and getting them out of there, safe and sound and
with no more harm. The second, and to his regret probably the more likely, Miss Black coming to
them with some of her goons to try escaping with them, hostages for a worst-case scenario. And if that possibility happened, Nick didn't know if Judy would be able to reach them in time.

"Dad?" Alex's voice was scratchy and hoarse, worn from the screaming earlier as the collar around his neck electrocuted him to within an inch of his life. "Dad, is it Mom? Are we going to be safe soon?"

Looking down, Nick put on a brave face and wrapped an arm around the wolf pup's shoulders. "You bet it is, champ. She's coming straight for us right now. And when she gets here—"

"I will put a bullet between her eyes."

Nick snapped his head up, teeth baring at the wolf in black staring at them from beyond the bars of the cell. Two guards stood beside her, both of them wolves as well, submachine guns trained down the hallway they'd come from. "As if. That's the boast of someone on the ropes if I ever heard one, Black. Maybe if you just let us go and surrender now, you'll at least be able to avoid the death penalty."

Black gave no response to this, simply unlocking the cell door and sliding it out of the way before striding in toward them. Nick made to move between her and Alex, until a blast of electricity from his collar sent him to his knees with a grunt. Before he could regain his footing Black was there, the physically larger wolf grabbing him by his throat and lifting him up in the air until his head banged into the cell's ceiling. Before his eyes she did the same to Alex, the pup yelping and thrashing as he was lifted up to eye level with her. "N-no," he choked out, beating feebly at her arm with his. "L-let... him... g-go..."

She said nothing again, simply turning and stalking out of the cell to regroup with her pair of guards. Together the group left the hallway, passing quickly through the small check-in station before stepping out onto the catwalks. Here the sounds of fighting were louder, closer, the roar of gunfire quickly approaching the realm of deafening.

Nick gasped as Black suddenly let him go, Nick dropping to the grated metal of the catwalk with a grunt and wince. He hurried back onto his feet, pulling a fist back to punch the closest wolf when the click of a handgun's hammer getting cocked stopped him. He looked and saw Black still holding Alex, a gun pressed to the pup's head. The wolf spoke a single word to him, nodding past Nick to a doorway at the far end of the catwalk. "Move."

It took a moment for Nick to realize that bloodcurdling growl was coming from him. "Is that it, then? You're really the kind of mammal able to hold a gun to a child's head?"

"It gets the job done," Black retorted, though even Nick could see the slight tremble in the hand holding the gun. "I know first-hand. Now, move."

Nick could only obey. They walked fast, the two wolves at Black's sides holding their weapons tight as they scanned their surroundings for any ZPD officers reaching them. Now Nick feared the thought of Judy finding them, feared what Miss Black might do to their son. If they could only manage to get some surprise on their side...

Past the door was a high walkway connecting their building to the airport's central terminal. They crossed it at a near run, the wolves barking and snapping at Nick's tail to keep him moving. Around them raged a battle that Nick could only glimpse out the corners of his eyes. Miss Black's soldiers had taken up defensive positions behind parked cars and doorways, firing with a mix of rifles and submachine guns at a scattered mass of ZPD officers making a slow approach down the runway toward the central building. The police forces were more methodical, taking potshots while using
either the doors of their cruisers or the mega fauna among them as cover. A trio of elephants and four rhinos in heavy armor led the assault, their body armor comparable to a tank's and their riot shields almost as large as the police cruisers of the smaller mammals. Bullets bounced off them with little to no effect, only the edges of the elephants' ears open to any real hurt. Yet looking farther back Nick could see one rhino sprawled across the runway, motionless, while nearby sat a flaming wreck bearing the ZPD insignia across the side.

Then they were moving inside of the central terminal and Nick lost sight of the ongoing battle, the sudden quiet compared to the noise outside making him almost pause in shock. But then came a growl from one of the wolves behind him and he started again, heading now for an emergency stairwell door across the atrium they found themselves in. The place was dusty and shadowed, little light available other than that reaching them through the expanse of windows running along the wall to their left.

"Moira, it's Black," spoke Miss Black from behind him, Nick chancing a long enough glance to see the white wolf speaking on a radio. "We're on our way now. Is the helicopter ready? Good. Be ready for us in 3. ZPD hot on our—"

The head of the wolf to Miss Black's right exploded out from the front, sending him toppling to the floor. The group stumbled to a stop and turned almost as one, Nick unable to keep his smile to himself as he saw a group of four cops in SWAT gear stepping from the shadows of a darkened doorway toward them, led by a rabbit with brilliant purple eyes. "Judy!"

***

"Judy!"

Judy felt a flush of relief at hearing her name from the fox. She strode a few more steps forward before stopping, eyes on the gun pressed tight to Alex's head, just below the right ear. She signaled for the others to stop, then take up flanking positions to the left and right as she trained her gun on Miss Black. "It's over, Black. The ZPD has your men on the run, and there are choppers in the air to keep you from escaping. Drop the kid and give up now, while you still have a chance for leniency."

The white wolf looked between her and the other members of her team, stopping to snarl briefly at Beth before glancing over at Nick. Keeping the gun to Alex's head, she began to sidestep, putting her remaining wolf guard between herself and Judy. "Leniency. Cute. I don't believe in it. More, I don't believe you want to give it. After everything I've done to you, are you telling me you really don't want to just... pull that trigger and blow my brains out? Rid the world of me forever? Nothing but a bloody stain for the cleanup crew?"

Judy's finger tightened on the trigger, not pulling quite yet. She looked from Black to the pup the wolf held tight, Alex's eyes wide and frightened as he stared back at her. Judy swallowed, glancing a moment at Nick nearby, looking from her to Black, before looking back at her target. "No mind games, Black. I'll repeat, drop the kid now."

"No. Kill me, officer. Like you did Jack Savage."

"Jack Savage killed himself," said Judy, daring a step forward, restraining a flinch as Black edged further behind her guard. The news of Savage’s actual fate had made Black’s eyes go wide, and Judy worried to push her too hard. "Walked willingly into fire rather than let himself be captured again. You don’t have to end up like that. Come quietly. There's nowhere for you to go, no more mammals for you to sic on us, and you can't fight your way out of this."

Something like amusement then passed across Black's face, and Judy paused in confusion as the
wolf actually started to pull the gun away from Alex's head. "Maybe you're right. I can't fight my way out of this. I have no more mammals of my own to throw at you... But you do."

Judy didn't grasp what Black meant until she turned her handgun on Snarlov and fired a single shot, no bullet hitting the polar bear on his exposed ear, but a splatter of vibrant blue. Then Fangmeyer and Beth were shooting, Black ducking behind her remaining guard with Alex in tow as Nick dove to the side. The wolf guard let out a yowl as his body was riddled with bullets, the pain quickly being drowned out by a deafening, full-body ROAR of rage and bloodlust.

"Judy, look out!"

Judy had a moment to respond to Beth's sudden shout by jumping forward into a roll, barely avoiding a swipe from one of Snarlov's mighty paws. The polar bear had fallen to all fours, helmet torn off in his thrashing and eyes narrowed to bloodshot slits. Judy almost screamed as she was forced to roll back again to avoid another swipe of those claws, grunting as her back hit a pillar. Snarlov charged, roaring and teeth bared, and Judy barely dove to the side in time to avoid getting bitten in half.

"Mommy!"

Judy looked up from her sprawled position on her back, shocked by the voice of Alex. She saw Miss Black disappearing into the stairwell she'd been heading for before Judy and her team had intercepted them, Alex hiked over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes and staring back at Judy in terror. "Mommy, hel—"

Then the stairwell door slammed shut behind them. In the same instant Snarlov charged again, this time catching Judy in her distracted state with a swipe of his paw that sent her tumbling head over heels through the air, landing with a grunt against a row of seating. Thankfully her armor absorbed the worst of the blow, and she was able to rocket up to her feet with only minor swaying. Her grip on her gun had remained tight, through some unknown twist of luck or muscle memory, and she snapped the rifle up in the direction she expected Snarlov to come charging from, only to see the savage polar bear already occupied. Beth danced around him, dodging swipes of his paws by the thinnest margin to keep him distracted, while Fangmeyer clung on to his back for dear life, battering away at his head with his helmet. And Nick—

A presence at her side made Judy spin, barely stopping herself from putting a bullet in Nick's gut as the fox skid to a stop beside her. There was a moment where their eyes met and a rush of relief and love rose up in Judy, a smile tugging at her lips at finally being reunited with her fox, her partner, her husband.

Then she was tossing her sidearm to him, hoping the relatively small pistol would be enough for him as she turned for the door Black had disappeared through with their son.

They burst into the stairwell and started up, taking the stairs two at a time, three at a time, Judy's ears perked to the sounds of matching footsteps high above them, to Alex's shouts and sounds of struggling, to the labored breathing of the fox in tattered ZPD blue beside her. With every step her terror grew, with every second she feared the sound of an angry snarl followed by a yelp of pain.

Somewhere above, at the top of the stairwell, a door opened then slammed shut. Judy's terror peaked and she flicked on her radio. "Jarvis, Chief, someone tell me the rooftop chopper's out of commission!"

Nothing but static, within which might have been a distant scream, answered her. In that moment, as they reached the final landing before the end of the stairs and the rooftop from which Miss Black
planned to make good her escape, a dreadful certainty settled over Judy that had little to do with facts or evidence. They, she and Nick, were alone in this. Something had gone wrong, help had come to Miss Black or there had been more hostiles than thought, and now they were cut off, fragmented, fighting for survival. Doom, for one side or the other.

The door to the roof was unlocked, unbarred, nothing blocking their way as Judy and Nick threw it open and stepped out onto the gravel-packed roof. Snow fell around them, gathering at the corners of the building, around ledges, ice collecting on the long-shut-off heating units dotting the rooftop. Ahead of them, a dozen yards off, sat the airport's helipad. Atop the helipad sat a helicopter, white and ordinary, the sort Judy had seen used countless times by the news for following a car chase or bank heist, or any significant news. The door for the main body was thrown open, Miss Black standing there halfway in and looking back at them, Alex held tight against her by one arm. Above her the helicopter blades spun, not quite up to speed for liftoff yet, but rapidly approaching it.

For several seconds the two groups stood and stared at each other, guns trained forward. A gust of wind sent snow whirling, Judy's eyes stinging from the patter of icy droplets. She exhaled, watching her frosty breath tumble out into the air, dispersed near-instantly by the wind of the helicopter blades.

Nick took a step forward. Miss Black hiked Alex up higher, gun moving from aimed at them to back against his head. "Not a step closer! Not one more step! You can't come any closer! Not either of you! Because I know you now! I know you're weak, like me!"

Judy and Nick shared a look, a subtle nod from the fox granting Judy the lead here. She nodded back, looking forward again and taking her own step forward. "Where are you going to go, Black? What's left for you? Your operations in Zootopia are ruined! The MIA will be searching for you again after this! You're the most wanted mammal in the world! Just drop the kid and give up!"

Black glanced behind her to the wolverine at the helicopter's controls, lips twisting into a snarl as he merely shrugged at her. She looked back and raised her other leg into the helicopter cabin. "I never wanted this! None of this! The Hegemony was supposed to make everything better! But Officer Blue's in prison, Lady Red's defected for decades now, my Jack Savage is dead, Yellow'd probably drop out for the sake of her cushy government job in a heartbeat! It's all breaking apart, just like everything else! Miss White lied!"

"Come on, Black," said Nick, joining in. "That's just the world giving you one last chance here! Take it! Let our boy go, please!"

The wolf loosed a laugh more befitting a hyena. "You don't get it! You're still trying, but how? How, how do you persist!? The world, it hurts and hurts you, until you don't know any better but to hurt back! Look at me, holding guns to kids' heads! What do you think of me, Wilde-Hopps!?"

Judy stepped forward again, ahead of Nick now. She flicked her right ear once, then her left twice, followed by her right ear again (shoot for the engine at my mark). "I think you're a monster, Black. But you've got a chance here to stop being one! Just let my son go... please... I don't know what happened to you, however long ago, to make you like this, but—"

"Yes you do!" Suddenly Black was grinning, a toothy smile that looked like it belonged more to Jack Savage than the normally-stoic wolf. With the black suit and painted-on stripes, the being in front of them looked more like Jack Savage reborn than the wolf they'd fought months ago. "Of course you know, rabbit! All your kind does! You and your pretty, lovely, safe little life! You never knew what it was like to grow up with so much of the world hating you for the shape of your teeth, for the sharpness of your claws, for the practices of mammals thousands of years ago! You've never had to sit in terror in a basement, praying for the hunts to stop, wondering how the rest of the world can simply stand back and let the atrocities continue! You know nothing but hypocrisy! 'Evil prevails
when good mammals do nothing’, the saying goes, and here I am. The evil prevailing when good mammals did nothing. I hope you—"

Judy took her shot, hitting the monologuing Miss Black in the shoulder holding the gun. The wolf grunted and staggered, the gun falling uselessly from her, followed soon by Alex. A second later Nick fired, emptying his pistol’s full clip into the engine compartment of the helicopter. It choked and rumbled, sparks and smoke pouring out. Gradually, the propellers started to slow.

"Mommy!"

Stumbling over his own two feet, Alex came running toward them as fast as his little body could. Dropping her gun, Judy ran out to meet him, unable to stop herself, the rest of the world dropping away in joy and relief as finally their family was together again. Her vision grew blurry at the edges from tears, her feet struggling to find purchase on the gravel and snow, and with a laugh she held her arms out to catch the wolf pup.

Beep.

Judy slid to a stop, breath catching as Alex staggered and fell, screaming and convulsing and grabbing at the collar around his neck. At echoing screams from behind her she turned and saw Nick in matching agony, bloody foam spilling down his cheeks from a bit tongue. Ahead of her, past Alex, she beheld Black standing tall, ignoring the crackle of sparks from her prosthetic arm (of course, stupid, STUPID) and pressing the buttons on a small black remote held tight in her left hand. Her eyes promised murder. “50 seconds. 50 seconds of continuous shocking before the pup’s heart gives out. 20 more for the adult.”

Judy’s breath hitched—

"Judy, why do mammals bully?"

Her fists clenched—

"Judy, why do mammals bully?"

Her right foot slid back—

“But you see, Judy, the only real difference, the only thing that decides who is predator and who is prey... is who gets in the last BITE.”

Judy hardly noticed her own screaming as she leaped over Alex and charged Miss Black, an extendable stun baton drawn from the small of her back and crackling with electricity. She ducked under a swing of Black’s prosthetic arm, delivering a jab to the back of the wolf’s right knee. Rolling forward, she jumped and bounced off the side of the helicopter over another swipe from Black, slamming the baton straight down between her shoulder blades. Black yowled but spun around, fist connecting with Judy’s head.

CRACK.

Judy flew back and slammed into the side of an air conditioning unit, her dented helmet rolling away from her as she fell to the roof. Clambering back to her feet, she growled and charged again, ducking under a punch, then over a kick as Black crouched and spun, jabbing her baton at the shoulder of the wolf’s prosthetic arm. A crackle rang out and the limb flopped limp at Black’s side.

Before Judy could relish the small victory Black had turned to face her again, finesse gone as she body-slammed Judy out of the air. A second of running, then a crushing weight as Black pinned her
against the side of the rooftop. “AAUGH!”

“DIE!” Black screamed into her face, pulling back and slamming her into the concrete siding again, and again, and again. The baton fell from Judy’s slackening grip, the world turning into a jumble of impressions, light and dark and cold and hot and the crunch of gravel and snow and Nick and Alex’s weakening screams and the rush of air from the helicopter’s tail blades spinning not two feet away, still a blur from momentum.

Grunting, Judy got her legs between them as Black reared back to slam her forward again and kicked hard at the wolf’s left side. Black stumbled, lips back in frustration as Judy slipped free and dropped to the ground. Ignoring the ache throughout her body, Judy bounced back from a backhand, then as Black reared back to punch again she rebounded off an air conditioning unit and slammed full-body into the wolf’s chest. Black fell backward, eyes growing wide as she turned, some sense of doom warning her of something behind—

VVV VV V—SSSCHHHHLIK—VVV VV V.

Thump.

Silence fell over the airport rooftop then, Nick and Alex’s screams ending, the gunfire and explosions from down below long finished. Collapsing against the AC unit, Judy stared for a long moment at the wolf collapsed in front of her, the snow turning red around her from the head split nearly in half vertically by the helicopter’s tail blades. Judy’s body heaved in a mix of sickness at the sight and relief it was finally over, that the day was finally done, that she could sit there now and simply catch her—

The wolverine jumped out of the helicopter, turning toward Judy. Before he could say a word, however, a crack that hurt Judy’s ears rang in the air and his chest blossomed red. He fell back into the helicopter, the gun slipping from his grasp to clatter uselessly onto the rooftop.

Judy stared for a moment, then looked up as Nick hobbled into sight, her discarded rifle a crutch as Alex helped him along. She smiled, a delirious laugh escaping her. None of them said a word as the fox and wolf pup dropped down beside her, each of them wrapping the others tight in arms and tails.

Together the family rested, and waited for whoever would next come for them.
Revelation

"Bellatrix Lacross, infamous terrorist operating under the codename of 'Miss Black', has been announced dead following an intense ZPD assault on her Tundratown hideout late this evening. The death comes following the publicly broadcast murders of two prey supremacists, as well as the kidnapping of Detective Nicholas Wilde-Hopps and Alex Wolford, foster-son. Both were rushed from the scene following their rescue to Tundra Mercy Hospital, where both are hoped to make a full recovery.

"Insider sources also put Lieutenant Judith Wilde-Hopps in the hospital, allegedly from injuries sustained over the course of stopping Miss Black and her Night Howler smuggling operations. The extent of her injuries remains unknown, as does who else among the ZPD was injured in the raid.

"We here at Zootopia News 9 with all mammals involved a swift, total recovery.

"In related news, today marks the end of a long era, as leaked info from the mayor's office asserts that ZPD Chief Mason Bogo will be announcing his retirement from the position within the week. Mayor Gazelle could not be reached for confirmation, but Assistant Mayor Elloway—"

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"—two cracked ribs, one bruised rib, a femur with multiple hairline fractures, three broken knuckles, multiple torn muscles, a slipped disc a breath away from paralyzing you, and minor internal bleeding. That of course isn't getting into the multitude of cuts, scrapes, and bruises you managed to fit onto that tiny rabbit body of yours."

Judy tried to give the weasel doctor her best smile, her efforts somewhat hampered by the bandages covering most of her body, the casts on three out of four limbs, and the ungodly amount of painkillers she assumed they had her on to make the walls that lovely shade of purple. "Give it to me straight, doc. Will I ever dance the Charleston again?"

The corner of Doctor Weasling's mouth just barely twitched. "Ma'am, seeing a bunny and a fox succeeding as cops was the only thing that kept me trucking through med school. You're going to be dancing, don't worry."

"That'll make you an honest-to-god miracle worker, then, 'cause she could not dance at our wedding to save her life."

Judy sat up as much as her bandages would allow, honest joy making it through to her smile now at the sight of the trio of mammals coming into her room. There was Alex, freshly showered and dressed in khaki shorts and tee retrieved from home, some wrappings around his neck for minor burns from the Tame collar but looking otherwise uninjured, smile wavering but bright. Beside him sat Marian Wilde in a hospital gown and wheelchair, tired and frail but awake and smiling. Nick stood behind her, looking probably the best off of the three, his prosthetic arm back in place as he pushed his mother's chair along.

"Hey, Carrots," said Nick, smile softening as he seemed to see something in her look. "Getting plenty of bed rest?"

Judy chuckled, wiping at her eyes with her one free hand. "Well, what can I say? It's exhausting, keeping track of you people."

Doctor Weasling said something Judy didn't quite catch, sending her a last nod and smile before
slipping out of the room, patting Nick on the shoulder as he went. With him gone the others shuffled in, Nick rolling Marian over to the window-side of the bed, the vixen seeming more lively in the direct sunlight. He then took a chair for himself and dragged it over to the bedside, sitting and leaning forward to caress behind one of Judy's ears. Alex, after a moment of uncertainty, clambered up onto the bed and curled up next Judy, who quickly wrapped an arm around his shoulders. He felt warm, his fur coarse but well-groomed, and Judy found she could have fallen asleep right there.

"We're all okay," she said to herself, almost not believing it. And then, more surely, to the room at large, "We're all okay. We all made it." Then, a sudden bout of fear, turning her to look at Nick. "We are all okay, aren't we? Beth and Fangmeyer, they were trying to subdue a savage Anderson. And Rhinowhitz! I heard him go down, and Jarvis was in such a vulnerable spot, and Carla—"

"They're okay," said Nick quickly, grinning, hand moving from caressing behind her ear to down the back of her head and neck, a move that had never failed to calm her. "They're alive. Everyone made it out okay. Frosty and Adam subdued Anderson without harm and he's sleeping the NH antidote off right this moment. Rhinowhitz was touch and go in his surgery, but he's out now and the docs sounded confident last I checked. Jarvis is good, Carla's with her husband are good—" He reached down, holding her bandaged and cast-covered hand as best he could. "EVERYONE is good. You really did it, Judy."

She had. No, they had. Judy sniffed, blinking to clear her eyes with both arms unavailable. She felt her mouth turning up in a smile and couldn't stop her laugh, even though it hurt her chest something fierce. Without thinking about it, she leaned in and kissed the top of Alex's head. "And we're all going to stay that way."

"I don't suppose," said Marian, once another minute of comfortable silence had passed, during which Judy almost fell asleep, "that the next case or crisis you two find yourselves in the middle of could be a little less stressful? Or at the least, not involving the fate of Zootopia?"

"I don't think we'll be doing any cases of any kind for a while," said Judy. She yawned and glanced down at herself, wishing she wasn't so comfortable so that she could talk more. "I'm a little... broken right now." Not to mention tired. Not to mention worried for Alex's mental health after all this, no matter the brave face the wolf pup put on. Not to mention the quiet, lingering dread of knowing that, Miss Black dead or not, the Hegemony was still out there.

"And on that note," said Nick, hand drawing reluctantly from Judy's head as he sat back and looked to Marian. "Mom, I know how attached you are to Zootopia, and the apartment in particular, but you are moving out to Bunnyburrow to live with the Hoppses ASAP. They're family, and they like us, and I'm sorry, but a mammal your age really should not be living on her own anymore."

“Oh no, please, I wouldn’t want to be a bother…”

“"You wouldn’t be a bother,” said Judy. She yawned again, blinking as she felt the excitement of the last half-hour start to catch up with her. “You’re family. Rabbits always there for… yawn… family… One of those stereotypes that’s actually true.”

Alex yawned wide after Judy, shifting around to be able to sit up and look at both her and the other adults in the room. “Are we going to go to Bunnyburrow too? I like Mom’s family. They’re weird, and fun, and nice.”

Oh, right, Judy thought, grimacing from the wolf pup’s choice of words. Glancing for a second at Nick before looking back at Alex, she saw the same sort of embarrassed guilt she felt in his gaze. “Um, on that note… Alex… it really, like REALLY, means a lot that you call me and Nick stuff like that. We’re thrilled by it, honestly. But…”
“But you don’t need to,” continued Nick, to Judy’s quiet relief. “We were never trying—and we never will try—to replace your actual father. David was a good mammal, and you don’t need to do anything you don’t really want to.”

Alex looked back and forth between them for several seconds, Judy wishing she could kick herself for even saying anything as his contented smile turned to a frown, shoulders slumping, a familiar embarrassed guilt filled his eyes. He swallowed, biting his lower lip as he looked down at his hands in his lap. “I… I still miss my dad… so much… I miss his jokes, and how he’d take me out for ice cream on Sundays, and his off-key singing in the morning… I want to grow up and be just like him. He was my d-dad.

“But…” He swallowed again, still not looking up at any of them beyond a blink-and-miss-it glance Judy’s way. “But he’s gone. And you two are there for me now. And I… I love Nick’s corny jokes, and how you take me to a new bookstore to explore every Saturday, and how you both think you can hit Gazelle’s high notes, and… and…”

Alex looked up at them both, eyes shining and wet. “And I want you as my family too… if that’s okay.”

Struggling not to choke up, her own vision starting to blur from tears, Judy nodded wordlessly and pulled Alex close with her one good arm, straining up to rub her chin over the wolf pup’s head. She could hear Nick having somewhat less success at keeping his composure, to Marian’s vocal amusement, and felt a smile come on. She held her son close and sighed. This was good. Whatever happened next, however the days ahead would go, this was good.

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Chief Bogo sat rigid behind his desk, surveying the mammals assembled in his office with a look Honey thought both commanding and exhausted. Not that she could blame him, herself feeling as tired as he looked. As all the mammals there looked. Probably the only well-rested ZPD officers were those in the hospital. The raid was only the glamorous half of police life, she’d quickly learned. The rest was taking stock of everything gained and lost after the fact.

“Okay,” said Bogo at last, leaning back in his chair and steepling his hoof fingers. “Report. What do we have to work with now that Miss Black’s been eliminated? Officer Badger?”

Honey straightened in her chair, flashing an apologetic smile her boss’s way. “Miss Black’s computers that we recovered from her airport hideout were all loaded with the same family of anti-hacking software that eventually made Jack Savage’s recovered laptops unusable, so they’re mostly dead weight now.”

“Mostly?”

Honey nodded. “Thanks to my experience from failing with Savage’s computers, I was more prepared this time and managed to save a small scrap of data at least. Not that she could blame him, herself feeling as tired as he looked. As all the mammals there looked. Probably the only well-rested ZPD officers were those in the hospital. The raid was only the glamorous half of police life, she’d quickly learned. The rest was taking stock of everything gained and lost after the fact.

“Okay,” said Bogo at last, leaning back in his chair and steepling his hoof fingers. “Report. What do we have to work with now that Miss Black’s been eliminated? Officer Badger?”

Honey straightened in her chair, flashing an apologetic smile her boss’s way. “Miss Black’s computers that we recovered from her airport hideout were all loaded with the same family of anti-hacking software that eventually made Jack Savage’s recovered laptops unusable, so they’re mostly dead weight now.”

“Mostly?”

Honey nodded. “Thanks to my experience from failing with Savage’s computers, I was more prepared this time and managed to save a small scrap of data at least. Nothing too substantial, just the origin and destination for that cargo plane they were loading up. Came from San Dingo, was heading for Trottingham. Which is new, I think? I haven’t found anything yet about NH troubles over in Trottingham on the Deep Web? So, that’s something to alert them about.”

Bogo nodded, turning next to the tiger a few feet to Honey’s right. “Lieutenant Fangmeyer, an update on what exactly they were sending to our neighbors out east?”

Fangmeyer yawned as she straightened, rubbing a hand over her face. “You’re not going to like it. A thousand pounds of Screamer, 750 pounds of Day Whisper, 750 pounds of Wild Whistler, and 200
pounds of Night Sapphire. And that’s just what they still had on the plane. There was an equivalent amount of Screamer and Day Whistler, and 100 pounds of Night Sapphire transferred over to trucks, I’m guessing for distribution through Zootopia.”

A round of swears filtered through the office, Honey adding her share. It only took a few ounces for Night Sapphire to carry a mammal from “Have a nice day, friend” to “I WILL EAT YOUR FACE IF YOU DON’T EFF OFF!”, and that was only for mid-sized mammals like deer, wolves, and cheetahs. For smaller mammals…

Bogo sighed, exhaustion making up a greater and greater portion of his countenance. “God-damn Night Howlers… Grizzoli, anything on those of Black’s goons that surrendered or were incapacitated for arrest?”

The bear shrugged, flicking through a folder of notes in his lap. “Lot of stuff to follow up on, but not much that actually looks promising. Most of them looked to be from local gangs and crime families, mammals set loose by their collective collapse during the Jack Savage fiasco. Turns out, most of them were snatched up and consolidated by a newcomer to the scene, someone from outside the city with lots of money and resources already to throw around.”

“Miss Black?”

Grizzoli shook his head at Bogo’s suggestion. “Miss White, and Judy’s little Hegemony. Black might be the only member any of them have ever met in person, though. I need to do more thorough interrogations to be sure. It was… sort of a rush job last night.”

Bogo nodding, seeming to take this for what it was. “Well, it’s still better than what we could have expected, considering our track record with this group so far. Go home and get a few hours sleep, all of you. After that, Fangmeyer, I want you looking into who owns that airport, and who owns those owners, as far back as you have to go. A place like that isn’t just ‘abandoned’. Grizzoli, do those deeper interrogations. Badger, I believe Wilde-Hopps already had certain tasks assigned to you, so resume those. Dismissed.”

The others filed out. Honey waited until they were gone and the door closed again before dropping from her chair, silently remarking to herself how the larger mammals of course didn’t think to check that she had gone out with them. Shaking her head, she grabbed her computer bag from where she’d leaned it against her chair upon first entering the office and, removing the laptop inside, approached Bogo’s desk. “Chief, if you have a moment?”

The cape buffalo looked up from his paperwork, one eyebrow rising as he looked her over. “You have something else, Badger?”

“Maybe,” Honey replied, waddling over to Bogo’s side of the desk to set the laptop down. At the look he was giving her she huffed. “I mean it, only maybe! It’s why I’m bringing it to you, because the Wilde-Hopps duo is in the hospital and Beth’s who-knows-where and just… watch for a minute, ‘kay? I think I have something from Jude’s suggestion to look into Hite, but just… watch.”

When the cape buffalo offered no further remark, Honey turned back to the laptop on the desk. After a moment’s straining herself to reach the keys now rather higher than normal, she huffed and hurried dragged one of the chairs in front of the desk over to stand upon. That done, she hurriedly typed in her password, then from her desktop (thankful for Bogo remaining silent at the sight of her Cute Iguanas desktop wallpaper) clicked a folder to choose a video. “Before the raid, Judy asked me to look into Hite’s background, guessing there had been one too many callbacks to the businessmammal for her liking her something. I found this news video from a few decades back that… well, just watch.”
Honey clicked the video in question and leaned back, allowing her boss an unobstructed view as the long-ago wedding disaster played out. Having seen the video at least a dozen times already, Honey watched instead Bogo’s face, watching it turn from mildly annoyed humoring, to keen professional interest at realizing that this was the marriage of Winona Hite, to a sort of revolt at the priest’s words, the ensuing gunshot.

“Die, you freaks!”

“NO!”

A hard shove, sending Winona stumbling back just as a CRACK rang through the church. The wedding party screamed. Winona stared, numb, as if viewing this all as a movie, as Gabe toppled to the side from the force of the gunshot, his eyes wide, his chest an open cavern, a torrent of blood arcing out, almost beautiful.

Honey stopped the video just as whatever reporter recording the scene started to add his own commentary. She glanced back at Bogo to find his elbows on the desk and muzzle on his hands, his gaze distant in thought. When no question of why, exactly, Honey had shown this to him came, she turned and rewound the video to before things turned south, leaning back and pointing to two brightly-dressed gazelle kids at the front of the crowd, just on the edge of the screen. “Right there, those two. Twin daughters of Gabe Azellia, the gazelle Winona Hite tried to marry, the first such marriage between predator and prey in San Dingo history.”

“We’ve all come a long way since those days,” said Bogo, dropping his hands. “The Wilde-Hoppses are proof enough of that. Aside from some evidence that Director Hite might have some sympathy for the pro-predator cause Miss Black championed, I’m not sure why you’re taking my time showing me this.”

Were this one of her old message boards or conspiracy forums, Honey would have felt incredible enjoyment unloading vitriol on a commenter missing her point so thoroughly. Being that this was real life and the mammal in front of her was her boss, she managed somewhat more restraint than that, instead shrinking the video window and pulling up a downloaded newspaper article dated several weeks after the failed wedding. “The marriage failed, but after intense negotiations with the murdered groom’s surviving relatives, negotiations that ended suddenly under, ah, ‘suspicious’ circumstances, Hite formally adopted the two kids. The first such adoption in San Dingo history, I might add. So, Hite has two kids. Buuuuuut…”

Bogo loosed a long-suffering sigh. “But what?”

“But nothing.”

Bogo glared at Honey. She went over what she’d said and quickly waved her hands in front of her. “No no, I mean literally nothing! A couple months after the adoption and the kids basically disappear from public life! No photos, few school records, nothing about them in any biographies I could find on Hite. Nothing to show they were even still alive except testimony from friends and family.”

Finally, Bogo looked like he was starting to see where she was going with all of this. “Except… Winona Hite has a gazelle working for her. An incredibly high-ranking gazelle, if I recall. But… what possible reason could Doctor Grayson have not to go by either his father’s name or his adoptive mother’s name?”

It was hearing it said out loud that finally got it to click for Honey. She fell back in her chair, making it nearly topple over from the sudden shift in weight, the pieces in her mind falling into place. “He showed up so fast to talk to Savage, even before City Hall could find a lawyer for the hare…” Judy
said that Savage named a gazelle as one of the other island survivors… he’s the one pushing for incity Night Howler testing… but the name, it’s so simple, so juvenile, so, so STUPID!”

“What are you talking about, Badger?”

Honey shot back to her feet, barely restraining herself from jumping down and running off to find Beth, to find Nick, to find SOMEBODY to roll this off with, not bothering to look at Bogo as she closed her laptop and stuffed it back into her bag. “Grayson, chief! GRAY son! Like the color!”

She was halfway to the office door before Bogo’s voice stopped her. “Badger, wait! There’s no proof connecting him to Miss Black or the Hegemony! We have nothing but conjecture, and not even enough to merit an arrest warrant! Where do you even think you are going?”

Honey looked back at Bogo then, letting the computer bag drop from her shoulder to the floor, unwilling to let it slow her down. “Where else? To the one other gazelle who’s managed to be involved in all this from the start! There were two kids adopted by Hite, after all!”

***

After a few minutes more of staying and talking with Judy, minutes where it became ever more obvious his wife needed rest at the moment more than anything else, after escorting both his mother and Alex (His son? Oh sweet Karma, his son!) back to their hospital rooms, Nick finally managed to find a minute and sit down in a hallway to just not think. He leaned back until his head touched the wall, closing his eyes to block away the nurses and doctors and other hospital techs roaming the halls around him, and took solace in the fact, plain for anyone to see, that there was nothing more for him or Judy to fret about. A first in what felt like years, really.

Miss White and her Hegemony (What did that word even mean?) were still something to be investigated, tracked down, arrested, and brought to the fullness of justice, but that was all something he felt more than happy to leave to other mammals. Judy, certainly, was in no shape to jump back into the fray. He was technically hale and whole after his time spent captured, aside from some scrapes and burns from the Tame collars but nothing wrong with his heart, the doctors said, but with three family members in the hospital (Alex, smaller, had been hurt far worse by the repeated shocks), Nick didn’t really feel like countering Bogo’s order for him to sit the rest of the whole investigation out.

So here he was, chilling in some random hospital hallway, keeping his breathing slow and steady to counter his traitorous thoughts’ want to race around and put clues together, trying to think only of the sunny blue skies of Bunnyburrow and the tang of home-cooked blueberry pies awaiting them once Judy was fit enough to leave the hospital. Nothing. Else.

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“—cerations from glass, and minor smoke inhalation. Take him down to room 313, then let Meadow’s Mercy we have room for a dozen more, max. Awful, what happened, just awful…”

Nick’s right ear twitched. Against his better judgment he opened his eyes back up and looked to his right, watching as an otter and a raccoon nurse rolled a stretcher carrying a ferret first toward, then past him. Nick watched them go until they disappeared into a room just a few down from Alex’s, before looking back at the red panda doctor who’d been giving them instructions, standing by the
elevators and looking in desperate need of a smoke. “What’s the story there? Something happen at the Meadowlands District hospital?”

The red panda doctor glanced over his way and, seeming to recognize Nick, sighed and shook his head. “Nothing so serious, fortunately. They just started running out of room and started sending patients here.”

That got Nick’s attention. He sat up, alarm bells ringing in his head as he looked again down the hallway the ferret had been taken down. He didn’t recall hearing about anything going on in, stormy weather aside, maybe Zootopia’s most pleasant district. But then, he and most everyone else had been rather distracted the last few days… “What in blazes happened in the Meadowlands to hurt so many mammals!!?”

Another sigh, the doctor stuffing his hands in his coat pockets and leaning against the wall. “Eh, it’s a sad thing. Bunch of sheep and like mammals kept prime grazing farms up in the northwest there, places in the families for generations, that sort of thing. Had a cousin helped manage them. Couple of months ago, some big company or other got city hall to sign away permission to develop the land as a flower farm or something, saw it in the smaller local papers. The sheep didn’t like this, set up protests.”

Ears perked as he listened to this rather uncomfortable story, Nick frowned at the implications of that last part. “The ZPD’s not in the habit of getting violent with protestors… Precinct 1, anyway.”

The red panda waved him off. “No, no, nothing that sinister. There was a visit yesterday by one of the company’s top guys and his guards to the main farm. One of the helping protestors brought in earlier wouldn’t stop ranting about it. Somewhere in the camp a fire started, lot of confusion how, and before anyone can do anything the whole place is ablaze. Well, there goes any opposition to that business venture. And rotten luck to those landowners, to have all this happen while everyone else is distracted by that Miss Black business!”

“Yeah,” said Nick, half to himself, turning away from the doctor shaking his head and considering what he’d heard. A big business… flower farm… one of the company’s top guys and his guards… “You wouldn’t happen to know if it was HiteTech Industries? A Doctor Grayson? I saw him on the news wanting to do studies on Night Howlers in Zootopia.”

“I don’t know. Probably?" Checking his watch, the red panda quickly excused himself, turning and disappearing into one of the elevators. Nick watched the doors close, then leaned back again and stared straight ahead. The nails of his right hand drummed against his pants leg. It really was the worst luck, as the doctor had said. Just the worst luck this happened when it did. Luck… that everything turned up roses for HiteTech…

Swallowing from a sudden nervousness as the implications unfolded themselves before him, Nick pulled his phone from his wallet and opened up Zoogle. Somehow he managed to keep his fingers steady as he typed in a search for any news NOT about Jack Savage back when the mad hare was terrorizing the city.

HISTORIC NOCTURNAL DISTRICT BAT ENCLAVE DEMOLISHED, HUNDREDS HOMELESS.

Nick looked back up at the hallway’s opposite wall, remembering back to that trip to HiteTech Tower days before.

"A little of both," replied Beth, tone much more relaxed now that they were inside and away from both protestors and her fellow H.A.W.C. soldiers. "The protests have been going on for months now,
since before construction on the building was even finished. I don't know what the deal is exactly, something about some important bat structure getting torn down to make space."

"It's insane," said Nick, fighting vainly to believe those words. He forced a laugh, shrunk in his seat at the startled look from a passing polar bear nurse, hurriedly searching for anything from the week's surrounding the Wendigo Killer case. "It's just too... too... banal..."

It took longer to find anything, the Wendigo Murders occurring longer ago and over a longer period of time than either Jack Savage's reign of terror or Miss Black's murderous vengeance. When he did find something, it was, embarrassingly enough, nothing more than a brief but detailed post by Honey Badger, back before she met Beth or any of the rest of them, at the height of her conspiracy days.

INSIDER TELLS ALL! SECRET MEETING BETWEEN ZOOTOPIA MAYOR AND H.A.W.C. MARKS END OF ZPD!

Nick's phone nearly slipped from his hands. He stood, shoving the phone back into its pants pocket before walking aimlessly, thoughtlessly toward the elevators. Once was just a thing, twice was a coincidence, thrice... thrice was a pattern. And there were other pieces, now that Nick knew what to look for. The boat Delgato and Monahan had used in their Wendigo escapades, claimed by Mr. Big to be owned by Winona Hite. The area Zootopia's HiteTech Tower was being built, one of the locations Tundratown Truckers had delivered to alongside City Hall and Outback Island. And there was something else, something so clear, something so just THERE for his grasping, something on the tip of his tongue…

A reindeer in doctor’s scrubs and white coat joined Nick on the elevator from the second floor. On hustler’s habit Nick looked at him, eyes latching on the doctor’s nametag. It was a simple thing, the reindeer’s profession, followed by first initial and last name, the last two parts by sheer happenstance forming a rude word. A chuckle slipped from Nick at the sight, the humor quickly dying as the last infuriating piece clicked.

Winona Hite.

1. Hite.

White.

BANG rang the elevator as Nick smashed his head against one of the walls in frustration, heedless of the reindeer doctor’s staring. “But that’s so God-damn juvenile!”

***

Honey didn’t like the way Assistant Mayor Yara Elloway looked at them as the cheetah led her into Mayor Gazelle’s office. “Excuse me, mayor, but you have an Officer Honey Badger to see you and she seems to have me confused for a secretary or something.”

Mayor Gazelle looked up from an embarrassment of paperwork scattered across her desk, weary eyes and frown turning into a sparkling smile. Whether honestly at the sight of her or merely at the sight of a momentary relief from the workload, Honey couldn't be sure. "Officer Badger! Always a pleasure to see a member of the ZPD! I was only just now putting the finishing touches on my next speech concerning the Miss Black case. I believe, publicly, it would be best to let the populace know that while Black has been shut down, there are still compatriots of hers to be found. Yara, of course, disagrees."

She gestured past Honey at the cheetah behind her, before shrugging in a "What can you do?"
manner. Elloway, for her part, simply turned and stalked out the door, closing it behind her with only an ounce less force than could be called a slam. Gazelle made no response to it. "But which way do you think would be better here, officer? Honesty, or discretion?"

"If I had to be honest, mayor," said Honey, looking at the doors Elloway had disappeared through and wondering if she should have stopped her, "considering my pre-ZPD career, I'd be a hell of a hypocrite to suggest anything but truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"So help me God," replied Gazelle, finishing the court quote. Her smile stayed in place as she slid the laptop on her desk shut. "But look at me, commanding the conversation. You came for your own reasons, I'm certain. How may I help you, officer?"

Honey knew she had to approach this carefully. She wasn't, after all, a real cop in the vein of the Wilde-Hoppses or the Fangmeyes or Bogo, not having their years of training or experience for field duty. She was a computer specialist, a hacker and conspiracy theorist happy to be of more use behind a desk than behind bars. She had to trust that, utilizing every ounce of tact and wit she possessed, she could get to the bottom of the situation with no problem.

"Are you one of Winona Hite's adopted daughters?"

Gazelle's smile froze, becoming a stone mask ready to slip and shatter at the next wrong move. She brought her hands up and lay them on the desk, palms down, drumming her fingers against the wood in plain view of Honey. "That's an interesting question to ask. If I could inquire as to how the idea came to you..."

Honey didn't see the harm in that, and the gazelle in front of her hadn't lied yet. "Judy told me to look into Hite the other day. While doing that, I came across old news footage from Hite's... Hite's attempted wedding. There were two girls there she adopted that I couldn't account for anywhere else."

"Ah, the wedding, of course..." Gazelle slumped back, drumming fingers stopping as she looked up, to the ceiling. Honey, sorely wishing she had the hustling smarts of Nick or the perceptive eye of Judy to be able to read the other mammal, kept quiet for her to speak again. Eventually Gazelle did, though her gaze remained on the ceiling. "When they went to see Hite, did she tell Wilde-Hopps about Wendigos and what they mean?"

Caught off-guard by the change in topic, Honey frowned. "I... think Judy mentioned something like that in her report..."

"Beasts of unnatural hunger and greed," said Gazelle, almost smiling, almost wistful. Honey thought she could see a glimpse of tears in her eyes. "Born of... desperation. The world is full of Wendigos, though they may not be known as such. Sometimes, there are mammals, weak and alone though they may be, who do everything in their power to keep the Wendigos in check."

Even Honey could see now what Gazelle was getting at. And with that understanding came anger. "Why didn't you tell anyone!? Why didn't you alert the ZPD, or the media, or, or mammals like me!? Is it some stupid unwillingness because Hite and Grayson are family or something? Mammals have died!"

Gazelle's head snapped back down, gaze darkening as she stared at Honey, who at that moment realized that she had never seen the mayor mad. "Yes, officer, I am aware that mammals have died. It has made me sick every day being unable to stop the deaths. But what more, exactly, did you expect me to do? I was only a teenager when I fled Hite and the Hegemony, when I realized what they were DOING there, what my family had BECOME. But there was nobody to turn to with the truth, no
evidence to back up anything I might have said. You, above anyone else, should understand the
difficulty of trying to convince anyone of something incredible or terrible with little more than your
word and a handful of coincidences to point to."

As much as Honey wanted to disagree with the mammal in front of her on that point, she couldn't.
She still remembered plotting and planning for years against the Grand Sheep Conspiracy, numb to
the scoffs and eye rolls of those she tried warning; or, worse, their amused, condescending humoring
of her. Then Judy and Nick had blown the lid on Bellwether's part of the conspiracy, and suddenly
Honey couldn't even enjoy the "I told you so"-ness of it all because then had come the question of
what to do next.

Huffing, Honey turned and walked the length of the room to the doors, clenching and unclenching
her fists as she back, finally throwing her hands up in the air. "Okay! So, what, your whole life as
Gazelle, the pop star preaching peace and equality, the philanthropist mayor raising charities and
fighting crime, just you trying to fight Hite indirectly?"

Gazelle nodded, the anger in her eyes dimming to the same sort of weariness that Honey recalled
seeing in Judy that night she'd taken the rabbit home, her family missing and her leads gone. A sigh
left Gazelle. "Fighting to insure the ZPD remained Zootopia's primary law enforcement organization,
readying to take my life rather than let Savage blow up ZPD Precinct 1 headquarters, everything.
Desperate acts in our subtle war. Or, it was subtle once. But lately..."

She sighed, rubbing at her eyes before shaking her head. "I don't know. But please, believe that I
have never sought Zootopia's suffering, nor allowed it where I could at all prevent it. And if there
were anything I could do to bring this madness to an end, I would do it in a heartbeat!"

Honey did believe her. More than she would have liked, all things considered. For several long
minutes the pair sat there in uncertain silence, considering the situation and each other. Finally, after
what felt like forever, Gazelle looked up from where her gaze had fallen to the desk. "So, now you
know everything I can tell you. Hite, with Black dead and the NH ring stopped for now, will draw
back now and reassess the situation. What happens now?"

That was a good question. "I haven't the foggiest," replied Honey, taking her phone from its pants
pocket and considering, not for the first time, what Nick or Judy might do in this situation. "I could
call Bogo and ask if what you've said is enough for an official investigation into Hite, or I could call
Beth and see if she can dig anything incriminating out of the computers while she's... she's... still...
in..."

"Officer Badger? Honey?"

Honey looked up at Gazelle, found her standing and half-leaning over her desk in seeming worry.
Honey's thumb trembled, struggling to press the right buttons for Bogo's number. "Beth's down there
right now."

***

"I'm sorry, I think I misheard you. Start from the beginning. You want me to... what?"

Beth leaned from her right foot to her left on the tall-backed chair, clearing her throat to address again
the liger across the desk from her. It was not that it was a particularly strange request, Beth thought;
Director Hite was only a very... remote, boss. "Well you see, Honey, my girlfriend, and I are going
to go to the Nocturnal District courthouse later this week and get a marriage certificate. Something
nice and out of the public eye, like what Judy and Nick Wilde-Hopps did for their wedding. Along
with Chief Bogo of the ZPD, I was hoping that you might be there as one of the required witnesses.
"If it could fit in your schedule."

Director Hite blinked, slowly setting aside the folder she'd been looking through. She next removed her reading glasses, letting them hang by their string from her neck as the elderly liger steepled her fingers. "I'm... surprised. Considering how our last communication went before your coming here to finalize your departure from H. A. W. C. Hm. On that note, you're certainly going to be missing your HiteTech paycheck, I hope you're aware. Especially with a marriage in your future."

"I'm aware," said Beth, inwardly sighing, disappointed her once-boss was sticking to merely the nitty-gritty of the situation, but also relieved the liger hadn't strictly said "No" yet either. "But I joined H. A. W. C. in the first place because I felt it the best opportunity to make the world a better place, to keep my friends safe." To keep another Wolford from happening, she carefully avoided saying aloud. "It's probably incredibly selfish of me, thinking more of friends and family than Zootopia in general, but..."

Hite nodded, a ghost of something Beth might've called a smile on another mammal appearing among her scars. "Selfish, certainly. The sort of selfish I like, though. A different question now, though. Why would you possibly want me there to witness for you? There must be countless closer acquaintances among the ZPD. I believe Detective Wilde-Hopps still fit to walk around."

Now they were getting into less concrete realms. Beth took a moment to adjust her glasses and gather her thoughts, somewhat guilty for her reasoning now that the time had come. "I'm sorry if this is too personal for you, but... during the search for Miss Black, Judy set Honey to look into your past, to cover all our bases, and we found old news footage of your attempted marriage."

Hite went rigid, a noise sounding as her extended claws dug into her desk. Beth, having expected a reaction along such lines, still winced in sympathy. "Yeah... I can't imagine the pain, but I can say I'd never want to feel it myself. And I thought that, maybe, you'd like to participate in a marriage between a pred and a prey in another way, someday. As a... as a way of saying thank you. For everything you've done, fighting for equality. Honey and I wouldn't even be ABLE to get married, if not for you. So, um..." She coughed, adjusting her glasses again. "That's why."

As Beth spoke, Hite's expression softened and warmed, that ghost of a smile returning and a glint of what might have been tears of all things appearing in her eyes. Once Beth finished and went quiet, the liger reached up, rubbing at her eyes with a knuckle and loosing a hoarse, inexperienced chuckle. It was actually painful to Beth's ears, like an engine rusted-over forced to start up after many years. In that black and white marble room, cavernous to Beth but perhaps sensibly sized for a being of Hite's stature, it echoed and rolled and sounded all the worse. "You are probably the first prey mammal to ever say "thank you" to me before. It's strange. I've never thought about it like you've said. But, since you make such a compelling argument, I'd be happy to attend as witness. Despite my disappointment at your career choices."

Beth sagged with relief, nearly falling from her chair from the weight lifting from her shoulders. She smiled, starting to respond--

"Oh oh oh oh oh! Try everything!"

Beth could feel her cheeks burning from the embarrassment of her phone interrupting what was supposed to be a private, professional moment. Digging the Gazelle-singing device from its jacket pocket offering a quick apology to Hite, who looked strangely spooked by the ringtone, Beth looked down and smiled at Honey's name showing up as the caller. "Oh, it's just one of the mammals we were just talking about! Hold on, let me put this on speaker so you can hear her excitement too."

Leaning down to set the phone on Hite's desk, Beth hit the button for speakerphone. "Hey, Honey!
"BETH! IF YOU'RE STILL IN HITETECH, GET OUT OF THERE! WINONA HITE IS ACTUALLY MISS WHITE! YOU SEE IT IN HER NAME! THE ZPD IS ON THEIR WAY, JUST—"

A single one of Hite's extended claws hit the END CALL button, silencing the phone moments before the fist came down, crushing it. "I think," said the liger, her voice steel as she sat back, "that that's enough from Officer Badger for the moment."

Beth looked from the remnants of her phone to Hite watching her with a sudden hunter's intent, and then put all her willpower into not looking behind her at the sole door out of Hite's office and to the public areas of the tower, where there might be a modicum of safety. The distance between the desk they sat at and the door was 20 feet, fit for any mammal to move in. The chair she stood on had a high back, nearly as high as she was tall, meaning time wasted jumping over or ducking around. The door, too, would take half a minute to open—

"You could make it," said Hite, interrupting Beth's thoughts with a calm observation, sending a chill down Beth's spine at how easily the liger seemed to know what Beth was thinking. "You really could make it, Blaine. I'm an old cat, if you hadn't noticed. Old and with a bad leg. My chasing, brawling days are long behind me.

"Which of course," she continued, drawing a semi-auto pistol from the bottom of her desk and leveling it at Beth, the scratched and worn finish still gleaming in the neon light shining through in the windows behind Hite, "means I need to be a damn good shot. And I am. Trust me."

Beth almost laughed at the suggestion to trust the mammal in front of her, trust after what she had just learned. But laughing might anger Hite, make the liger trigger-happy, and Beth desperately needed to survive that office, for Honey's sake. And anyway, there was plenty despair, horror, and plain hurt to focus on. Because if Hite was Miss White, leader of the Hegemony...

"It's your fault," Beth just choked out, fighting back a sob as the full implications hit her. She shook, having to lean against the chair back to keep from slipping and falling. "Everything, it's your fault. The Wendigo Murders, Miss Black, Jack Sav... Savage... your fault Wolford's dead! You and... Grayson? Both of you!?"

Hite looked unmoved by Beth's screams, to the hare's further rage. "I apologize for your friend. I would have preferred for Wolford to live. He was... competent. But sadly, often the good and innocent must be hurt for the sake of progress. Just look at how Zootopia has changed since Jack Savage cleared the way for me... for Miss White, to take control of all the city's major gangs and crime families. Crime is down in all quarters. It is focused, efficient, direct. Fewer innocents caught in the crossfire. Fewer police injured in the line of duty. An economic spring comes to the Nocturnal District in my name."

"Oh yes," snarled Beth, settling for sarcasm to vent her rage, fists clenching until the nails felt ready to pierce skin. If she could keep the liger talking until the ZPD arrived, there might be hope yet. "Director Winona Hite, the Great Philanthropist. It must be God's blessing how all your noble acts just happen to help HiteTech so. And too bad, too, for all the Wolfords and Swintons and bat enclaves that get in your way."

"Well, it's as I told Jack Savage, once upon a time..." She grunted, gritting her teeth as she pushed herself up off to desk into a standing position, quickly aiming her pistol at Beth again as she tried using the opportunity to move. "No, stay. It's as I told Savage, once upon a time. It's all a matter of who gets in the last bite. Today, that will be me. Your vaunted ZPD will arrive and arrest me. There
is no evidence to connect me to the Hegemony, and nobody I can't bribe or threaten to keep quiet, save perhaps Gazelle. The ZPD case against me will collapse, and I will thoroughly drag their reputation through the media mud. H. A. W. C. will become favored, and finally, Zootopia will be mine to improve. From both sides of the law."

Beth didn't know how Mayor Gazelle might figure into things, but she did know that the mammal in front of her was insane. "It won't work. You can't bribe or threaten me into silence, not after the things I've done for you in H. A. W. C., the... the mammals I've killed. And if the ZPD are already on their way, then you don't have the time to kill me and get rid of the evidence, bloodstains or... or..."

Words failed Beth at the look of brazen, smug calm remaining on Hite's face. As if taking the silence as a cue, Hite began limping around the desk, circling to Beth's right like a hunter stalking its prey. "You won't be in a position to tell anyone anything. This pistol is modified to fire NH pellets, and it's plenty easy to dispose of."

Beth's stomach dropped, a fresh thrill of terror racing up her spine at the sight of the barrel aimed her way. She half-hopped, half-dropped off the chair, staggering backward and away from the following Hite. "No, please--"

"The ZPD will find you here savage, insane. A search of your personal office and locker will discover NH drugs confiscated from past raids. The bat that tried to take my life some days ago will name you as a co-conspirator for a lighter sentence." Hite's eyes burned as she backed Beth up toward the office's bar, the trembling of her hand holding the gun either from excitement or age. "Your testimony will be worthless. YOU will be worthless. Goodbye, Officer—"

"STOP!"

Beth, heart already racing from the snarling liger and pistol aimed straight for her, nearly had a heart attack at the sudden shout. She collapsed against the bar counter, clutching at her chest through her shirt as she looked past an equally startled Hite and to the right. Relief hit her all at once at the sight of Nick, the fox panting and unarmed but staring at Hite with utter conviction. "Oh thank God."

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"Detective Wilde-Hopps." Hite turned to face Nick, gun remaining trained on Beth as the liger's expression turned down in a frown. Nick could see the fingers of her free hand moving as she ran some numbers in her head. "I was not expecting... you're too early to be the actual ZPD response. You found out some other way. How much did you hear?"

"Enough." Nick glanced Beth's way as he spoke, motioning her to stay where she was for the moment as he handled this. IF he could handle this, he thought to himself as he dared a step toward Hite. The liger turned the NH gun his way and Nick froze, hands moving up in a placating gesture. "Woah, woah! Come on, Winny, friend, no need to get uh, get violent before I've said my peace! Come on, you're a smart ol' dame, you know you can't possibly explain both of us going savage at about the same time!"

Hite grit her teeth, aiming the pistol once more at Beth after a moment. "Fine. I kill you myself, say she did it in her savage state. You were onto her drug habit, or something."

Nick winced, his mouthed apology at Beth hitting uselessly against her glare. Turning back to Hite, Nick dared a second step forward and tried a different approach. "Okay, but, I'm willing to bet my life that somewhere deep down, you really don't want to kill me, or Beth, or anyone else. In fact, I bet you want to stop." He said willing to bet, but from where he stood, it was more a matter of not
From where she stood, Beth seemed to think this the dumbest thing she'd ever heard. "You're cussing kidding me."

From Hite's visible struggle between glaring and laughing, she seemed to share that sentiment. Nick shrugged and, keeping his movements nice and slow so as to not prompt the mammal in front of him to kill him, pressed the discrete button for his prosthetic arm's recorder's playback.

“Actually... I do have a... question. Are you two... happy?”

“Happy? I... I'm sorry, I'm not sure what you mean exactly by that.”

“I mean... Are you two happy... married? Everything is... good for you? A fox and a rabbit? A predator and a prey? The, the love... is there? It's all been worth it?”

“It's been absolutely worth it. I love Nick with my everything.”

“And you, fox? Even after everything Black said happened to you as a kit, after everything prey mammals have done against you, you can still love this rabbit? Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“... Good. Good.”

Hite looked like she herself had been hit by some Night Howler. The gun turned on Nick once more, shaking visibly with the liger's rage. "You dare... YOU DARE--"

"Damn right I dare!" shouted Nick, half-growling himself as he took another step forward. "You've caused the deaths of countless people here in Zootopia! Innocents and criminals, friends and strangers, allies and enemies! Jack Savage and Miss Black, and Delgado and Monahan, they all almost killed me, and Judy, and Alex, and so many others! Because, what, years ago you lost someone important to you!? News flash, EVERYONE LOSES SOMEONE!"

Hite actually snapped back from the force of the shout, anger muddied now by surprise. Nick, throat sore, began to take slow and measured steps to circle her, forcing Hite to turn to follow him, away from Beth. As he started talking again the hare edged for the door out, Hite's back to her. "I get it, I really get it, because everyone loses someone. I lost my dad, my mother her husband. Fru Fru Big lost her father. Beth lost so many of her siblings. Savage and Black lost each other. Most of those were because of YOU, by the way."

"I was strong," said Hite quickly, too quickly, Nick having to fight back his smirk. "I was strong and they were weak, they couldn't... stop me. It's a fool's errand to trust making a better world to anyone else. You're weak, and greedy, and stupid. Mammals hold grudges and cling to prejudices like spoiled babes. I can't... trust it to anyone else..."

"Hite," said Nick, then again, "Winona... The world's already a better place. Even with mammals like Bellwether still running around. Outside of a few weird looks and whispers behind our backs, Judy and I had NO PROBLEM getting married! We had rabbits and foxes and wolves and cheetahs and cape buffaloes at our wedding, and there were no problems! Judy and I are raising a wolf pup ourselves, no problem!" A few more steps, Nick's prosthetic hand reaching out, palm up, almost closing the distance between him and the liger. "We're living in a world right now where your husband would not be shot dead in front of you... It's okay to just let this all go now. I promise."

"You promise?" Hite's lips curled up in a snarl of disgust, but her grip on the pistol looked as
uncertain as ever as she looked back and forth between Nick and Beth. "You can't promise that. You'll break. Judy will break. Everyone breaks, eventually. Nothing ever gets perfect."

"Maybe," said Nick. Then, after another moment's thought, "Probably. But I can live with that. Because there are going to be mammals to take up the cause after Judy and me. Just like there are mammals to do that for you, right now, today. You just need to let it go. It's a relay race, not a free-for-all."

The following moment of silence seemed to stretch on forever, Nick's gaze locked with Hite's, Beth standing witness to the side. Then, slowly, the liger lowered her arm, the NH pistol dropping to the floor with a resounding clunk. Her whole body sagged, as if struck again by every minute of age told by her scars. "Good hustle, Detective Wilde-Hopps. Good hustle."

If Hite looked tired, Nick felt ready to collapse, almost doing so before Beth rushed to his side to prop him up. Yet as much as leaving the hospital probably well before he should have sucked, he couldn't stop the smile spreading from ear to ear. "It's what do here... at the... ZPD."
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Warmth. Warmth all around and in different forms. Warm, soft sheets wrapped tight but carefully around her, far nicer than the ratty old rags she was used to. The warmth of sunlight falling across her face and warming the sheets further, sunlight that was normally to be tolerated at most, but right then felt perfect. From somewhere a warm, cheerful voice telling the news; a radio, perhaps.

"As part of her efforts to counter the increasing HiteTech atrocities coming to light following Director Hite's arrest, Mayor Gazelle will also be meeting with leaders of Zootopia's local bat population. The purposes of this meeting will be to ascertain the full extent of the damages committed against them, and arrange suitable reparations. One possibility—"

Angela groaned and at once the radio's volume was lowered, followed closely by the squeak of a chair against the floor. Sitting up as best she could with the relative numbness of her right wing (and remembering all too well why that limb felt so bad in the first place), she opened her eyes and found herself in the middle of a hospital bed, surrounded by a surprising amount of flowers, balloons, and get-well-soon cards. Some from old bat friends and family, some from members of the Mystic Spring Oasis, and some even from the ZPD. Or, two, actually, and Angela could guess who easily enough.

And right there toward the foot of her hospital bed sat the little fox, Finnick, staring at her like an oncoming car, a phone in his hands. "Oh... Hello."

"Hey," he said back. A press of a button on the phone and the radio noise stopped completely, the fennec stuffing the device in a pants pocket.

For a moment, all the two did was stare at each other, Angela desperately wishing for a doctor or nurse or cop to walk in. When none came she sighed, flopping back to stare at the ceiling. "Sorry for getting you mixed up in all that... however long ago it was."

"Eh, it's alright. Been mixed in with worse." He glanced toward the closed door, frowning. "The cop that they got for ya, Fang-something, stepped out for the restroom a minute ago. Guess he'll be back soon."

Angela nodded. The cuffs securing one of her legs to the bed hadn't gone unnoticed. And well, she'd done some rotten things to make a living, following the demolition of the Nocturnal District Bat Enclave, running from the police being the least of it. You lived how you could live, after all. But if she'd heard right from Finnick's phone, then at least maybe it might all mean something. You couldn't have too many mammals testifying in court, could you?"

"Before your 'Fang-something' gets back... think you could catch me up on everything I missed?"

The dwarf fennec barked out a laugh, leaning back in his chair as his gaze turned toward the door again. "Oof, what you missed. Where oh where to begin..."

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"—marking the 10-year anniversary of the famed Night Howler Conspiracy. In other news, new developments in the mammalhunt for Doctor Elliot Grayson and former Assistant Mayor Yara Elloway have surfaced in emails newly recovered from the laptop of disgraced ZPD officer Calisto Delgato, himself one of the masterminds behind the New Wendigo Murders. The emails allegedly
point to undisclosed bank accounts in northern Pawdon. More information as it develops.”

“The new lead comes three weeks following the surprise surrender and arrest of Winona Hite, San Dingo native, CEO of HiteTech Industries and Director of private law enforcement initiative H.A.W.C. Hite’s claims to being the mastermind behind the New Wendigo Murders, Jack Savage and Miss Black’s days of terrorism, and the recent wave of NH drugs, was quickly verified by searches through personal and businesses computers. The investigation, still ongoing, also named Grayson and Elloway as co-conspirators, as well as several members of H.A.W.C.’s senior staff and select members of HiteTech Industries. Though there has been no official word on the matter, anonymous insiders say the investigation into the full scope of this so-named ‘Hegemony’ will continue for some time. Full assurances have been made, however, that this is most certainly the end of a long and troubled period in Zootopian history.”

“Also coming to an end is the long and illustrious career of ZPD District 1 Chief Mason Bogo, who will be instead taking over as Mayor Gazelle’s assistant mayor. Taking his place, both as Chief of District 1 and head of the Hegemony investigation, will be decorated ZPD veteran Lieutenant Carla Fangmeyer, who played a key role in both the arrest of serial killer Taylor Monahan and the putting down of Jack Savage. Fangmeyer will be making history as the first predator Chief of Police for Zootopia, with some wondering—”

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Gazelle looked up at the knocking coming from her door, a sigh of relief leaving her at the blessed break from the latest piece of legislation. She called for whoever it was to come in, quickly smiling at the sight of Mason Bogo, sans police uniform for once in favor of a plain grey suit and tie, stepping into the mayor’s office as if uncertain he should be there. It was the most vulnerability she could remember ever seeing from the aging cape buffalo. “Mason! So glad to see you! Please, come take a seat. I’m surprised to see you here. Your official retirement ceremony isn’t until this weekend, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” said Bogo, closing the door behind him and walking for one of the chairs in front of Gazelle’s desk. “Still, Fangmeyer has a good grasp already of her coming promotion, and I wanted to… get a look around, I suppose you could say. Quite a change from police chief to assistant mayor, I have to say.”

Gazelle shrugged, leaning back in her chair and discretely stretching her cramping legs out under her desk. “The people deeply need a sign of certainty and trustworthiness after the recent shakeups. Maybe the mammal who could get me more faith from Zootopia is Judy Wilde-Hopps herself, but…”

Bogo chuckled. “She would never go for that. That rabbit’s a born cop. They’ll have to drag her kicking and screaming into retirement.”

Gazelle chuckled as well, nodding in agreement. “I’m glad I never even asked, then. Still, thank you for saying yes. As well as for… well…” She cleared her throat, glancing half-consciously at the muted television mounted to the far right wall. The news was playing, showing at that moment the scene of Winona Hite, crisp white suit and coat traded for an orange jumpsuit as she was escorted by several rhino officers through jeering crowds into a courtroom. “… keeping certain minor details quietly unannounced.”

To this Bogo shrugged, hands folded carefully in his lap. “As you explained to Officer Badger in a completely off-the-record that was in no way part of any investigation, you had nothing to prove yourself anyway, and probably protected far more lives working as you did than if you’d come forward. That you might’ve been adopted by a particular mammal decades ago has no bearing on
anything whatsoever, as far as I can see.

“As for agreeing to the job, though…” he gave a speculative look across the length and width of Gazelle’s desk, from the multiple mounds of proposed legislation from the district managers to her right to the laptop to her left, as well as the stack of relevant papers for her personal project directly in front of her. “Well, it doesn’t look like all that much more paperwork than Wilde-Hopps usually gave me.”

Gazelle snorted, clasping a hand over her mouth to keep from full-out laughing. At Bogo’s raised eyebrow she shook her head and waved a hand, taking a moment to make sure she fully regained her composure. “Sorry, sorry… just needed that laugh. And no, you just came at a bad time. Most of this here in the center here only my personal… well here, give it a look.”

She shuffled through the papers for several seconds, eventually finding the page she was looking for and handing it out to Bogo. The cape buffalo took it and looked it over for a moment, that eyebrow rising higher and higher before he looked back up at her. “A new mayoral initiative? We’ve tended to shy away from those since Lionheart’s Mammal Inclusion Initiative. More for the mayor involved than anything wrong with the initiative itself, of course.”

“Of course, replied Gazelle, accepting the paper back. “But this is for the immediate placement and construction of a new Bat Enclave, for those hurt by Swinton’s and Hite’s actions there. To be funded by acquisitions from HiteTech Industries following Hite’s arrest. It won’t bring back the history lost by the construction of that eyesore of a building, and it won’t heal those hurt, but… it’s a start. That’s all we can do sometimes.”

Bogo nodded, looking down at the papers stretching across Gazelle’s desk once more before managing a smile that seemed to take 10 years off the cape buffalo’s life. “Well, where do we start?”

***

“Hey, Dad. It’s, uh, it’s Alex. I’m sorry I haven’t been up here in a while. Everything got… so much crazier than you’d ever believe. I don’t know if you were able to see any of it up where you are right now, um, wherever that is, but… yeah, really crazy. Someone should right a book about it, heh. Nick and Judy have been taking really good care of me. Really good care of me. That’s them way over there, at the car. Sorry they didn’t come over with me, but Judy’s still really banged up from saving my life. Plus, this is kind of something I wanted to do by myself. I don’t think she’s close enough to hear me… Sorry. Rambling. I think I’ve picked that up from Nick. The therapist didn’t act like it was anything to worry about, so…

“I miss you, Dad. I really miss you. I didn’t know anyone could miss anyone this much. You taught me it was okay to read, and cry, and like sports and animated movies, and, and, and I love you, Dad. I’m never not going to love or miss you. I hope… I hope you don’t mind, though, if the fox and bunny over there… if they become my new mom and dad. Maybe that’s why you trusted me to them. But they’re such good mammals, and I can’t remember ever having anyone else for a mom, so…

“Some of Ju… some of Mom’s family is visiting for the weekend, make sure we’re all settled and happy now that nobody’s in the hospital. Then the next week after that, we’re going to Bunnyburrow. Always fun there! Um, I’ll bring Bon… Grandma Bonnie over, maybe, if she’s okay with it. Introduce you. The Hoppses, they’re all nice sorts. I like them.

“I gotta go now, we need to be there when the train arrives. Bye, Dad. Love you.”
“Okay, let’s go over the list one final time. I don’t want to be an hour down the highway only for you to realize you didn’t pack any panties, or something.”

“ONE TIME, Beth! That happened one! Time!”

“Righty-o, let’s see. Computer bags?”

“Sigh… check.”

“House keys?”

“Check.”

“Toiletries?”

“Check.”

“Snacks?”

“Check.”

“Phones and phone chargers?”

“Check.”

“Wallets?”

“Complete with shiny shields of justice!”

“Suitcases?”

“Checkorino, bossorino.”

“Panties IN the suitcases?”


“Awesome!” Beth made sure Honey’s hands were clear before slamming the car’s trunk lid shut, following it up with a click of the lock button on her car keys. Sparing a moment to admire the luxurious red roadster (H.A.W.C.’s paycheck really had been something to admire), she tugged a wrinkle out of her red tee and turned to regard the badger beside her with a smile. So far she hadn’t needed her jacket to keep warm up there in Tundratown. “Art thou ready to embark upon our next grand adventure, Officer Honey Blaine?”

Honey’s wedding band shone like fire in the late-afternoon sun as she adjusted her bandana. “Born ready, Detective Bethany Badger.”

Still smiling, Beth slid on her yellow shades as she strolled around to the driver-side door and got in, keying the ignition as her wife got in beside her. “Four weeks before Hite’s official trial date. I’d say that’s two, maybe two and a half weeks for our honeymoon. Where sounds good?”

Beth watched as Honey at first glanced down at her phone’s map section, before after a moment shrugging and setting down in the cup holder. “You know what? Just find the first highway out of town and drive. Just… drive.”
“You know what?” Beth turned the roadster into reverse, looking back as she spun her way out of their Tundratown driveway. “That sounds perfect.”

***

Judy didn't mind the stares, out there on the Zootopia Central Station train platform. She minded the itchy casts still on her right forearm and left leg. She minded how Nick had insisted, despite her being more than able to walk around on crutches, that she use the wheelchair the hospital had provided at least for public travel. She even minded the wail of the train from Bunnyburrow as it pulled into the station. But she absolutely did not mind the stares, probably a first for her. The two most important mammals in her life standing beside her were some surprisingly good shields.

"I love you two. I hope you know that."

"Do I know that? Yes, yes I do. The wedding bands kinda gave it away."

"I love you too, Mom."

Judy tried hard not to get too teary-eyed at that, knowing it'd be no good for her mother and siblings to get off that train only to find her all wrapped in bandages and sobbing on the platform. So instead she reached out with her good arm and ruffled the top of Alex Wolford Wilde-Hopps's head. Not minding all the while the strange, even unsettled looks given them by most of the other people waiting for the incoming train. They were a perfect little family, far as she cared, and so much more than she could've ever asked for.

All her life, or at least since the moment she was old enough to have life goals, Judy had dreamed of becoming a police officer and making the world a better place. Somewhere along the way, that dream had been infiltrated by the idea that such changes for the better had to be big. Dramatic. Become the first rabbit officer. Find the missing mammals. Stop the Night Howlers. Save the city (however often that apparently needed doing). Nothing wrong with any of it, it all needed doing, but somehow she had forgotten the world could be made a better place in just as many little ways as in big ways, a mistake Hite and her Hegemony had made too. Work through your own prejudices, even if you can't anyone else's. Love the ones you love. Look for the best in others, not just their worst. Don't act like it's ever too late to change. If everyone could remember this, Judy thought to herself...

The train pulled to a smooth stop. Judy braced herself as the doors half a dozen bunny paces ahead of them slid open, taking strength from Nick's hand on her left shoulder. Then, there they were, Mom and at least a dozen of Judy's siblings, chatting among themselves and looking around with excitement as they emptied from the train with all the professionalism of a SWAT team emptying from an APC. Clara, who had helped Nick find his way around the burrow his first full day there. The brown and white triplets Melody, Octavia, and Cadence, each of them with a bunny kit of their own strapped to their front. Terrence, from Burrow Tech Support. Stephanie, still wearing that old, green jacket. Jackie, the burrow’s librarian, all to name the ones most important to Alex.

Judy had a moment to see every eye and ear swivel their way before she, Nick, and Alex were swarmed. So many hugs (careful of Judy's lingering injuries) and handshakes, questions and pets, nuzzles and pecks on the cheeks and forehead; it might have been terrifying, if it weren't so... Cuddly.

"Ohhh, my little bun-bun, always getting hurt on the job nowadays! Whatever are Nick and I going to do with you?"

"Collect the insurance money and flee to Nipony?"
"Yo, Alex my man, bring it in for a brofist!"

"Hey Sis, look, I'm still wearing your old deputy hat! Is this hipster in the city?"

"Dad sends his warmest regards and asked me to give you this big hug!"

"You know, I can't believe that for how long you've lived here, we've never thought to come and see the sights. Wait, Zootopia has sights, right?"

"Of course!" chirped Judy, inwardly sighing with relief as the group pulled away a touch by some silent signal, enough for Nick to take the handles of her wheelchair and start heading for the exit. Bonnie and the rest stayed crowded around as they followed, Alex being a good boy and helping them with their luggage. “There’s the sky trams through the Rainforest District, and some great parasailing venues in Sahara Square, the Mushroom Forest down in the Nocturnal District—”

“Savannah Central Museum of Art,” added Nick as they exited the station into the bright fall day beyond, the fox wearing what Judy might have called a look of innocence, if she didn’t know him so well. “They have this fascinating wing devoted to art by aquatic mammals. Absolutely a must-see.

“Ooh, and speaking of art!” Nick pulled to a stop a few feet from one of the tourist photo pillars filling the plaza between the train station, the Museum of Natural History, the ZPD, and City Hall. Judy couldn’t stop her blush as he leaned down until his head was level with hers, prosthetic arm pointing to the camera built into the sandstone pillar. “Everyone huddle in, family photo time. Come on, squeeze in there. I want to remember this moment forever.”

Judy could only sit there as Alex slid up against her right, leaning with forced, nervous casualness on her wheelchair’s right armrest. Bonnie took her left side, loudly declaring her enthusiasm for the idea. As the rest of her present family crowded in around her Judy sighed and shook her head, smiling despite herself. Turning her head, she planted a quick kiss on her fox’s left cheek. “You old hustler, you.”

“Aw, come on,” replied Nick, winking her way as her pulled out his phone to remote-activate the pillar’s camera with the tourist app. “You know you love me.”

“Do I know that?” Judy cast a glance at all those surrounding her, the amazing family she’d been born into and the parts of it she’d found in a world that was messy and mean and so worth fighting for, and turned her smile ahead. “Yes, yes I do.”

CLICK.

Chapter End Notes

Aannd that's the end of this story. Villains defeated, citizens recovering, those needing a family finally have one, the whole works. Thanks you all for reading, sticking with me through good times and bad. It was an honor to take part in such a diverse, intelligent fandom as the Zootopia fandom, and add my own little mark on it.

What comes next? Well, fairly sure I'm not writing anything like this ever again. Got an original writing career to focus on. And if I do, perhaps going into the final fates of Grey and Yellow, it won't be for a good while. Now that this is done, what you can all definitely expect is a return of my drabble series. Something small and fun to keep
involved with the site and the fandom.

Once again, thank you all, and have some good readings!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!