Pack Street: The Next Generation

Summary

A generation after the Nighthowler crisis, Remmy and his pack have settled down, put down roots, and started families. In Zootopia, as the saying goes, anyone can be anything. Being a family mammal poses its own, unique challenges.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

Inspired by these pieces by the artists ReplyToAnons and InkyFrog:
"Hey, fluff, you outta come over right now," Betty called out from the bedroom. Her gruff tone had some joyfulness, even playfulness, to it. Even raising her voice quite a bit, that shone through.

Remmy slid his head to the side and perked his ears. He turned around but accidentally swung a hoof into the mirror, slamming it closed. The ram's eyes flashed over to his anxious, overcome expression. The mirror's dusty glass showed how the wolf's dingy bathroom needed plenty of TLC.

Boxes of unusual knickknacks bunched up haphazardly against the wall and lead out of the bathroom into the bedroom— where Betty had set up random spots of neatness, complete with shiny metal shelves and everything. The whole apartment served as a visual metaphor for Betty and Remmy's relationship. It evolved at a snail's pace from tense, alienating arguments to calmly hanging out while exchanging silly banter— ending up in long dates filled with wide-ranging discussions,
showing deep affection.

"Coming!" Remmy finally yelled. He resisted the urge to add a 'darling', 'sugar', or 'sweetheart' to that. Remmy thought about how he needed to feel things out with their individual boundaries, probably over the next date. As eventful as they had been, spaced out by weeks and weeks of turmoil in both of their personal lives, Remmy wished that he could've spent all his time with the bewitching wolf.

"Put some speed on it, you!" Betty's voice boomed out from the other room.

The ram arched his eyebrows while brushing his face, trying to build up his confidence. He then flipped his body around. "Yes!" He nearly hopped into the bedroom. "I know that I really have——"

"Our son!" Betty interjected. Remmy froze— only having taken two steps into the place— as he tried to process those words. Betty let out a low moan. "Fluff, you dummy, I can't even put it into words." The strong yet beautiful wolf, clad in just a long, blue nightgown, wiggled about across the gigantic bed. She then massaged her face against a pair of thick pillows and shut her eyes. Her paws migrated down her sides and clutched her midriff.

"My son," Remmy muttered. Pregnancy tests, doctor visits, and more should have made everything clear to him, hopes and dreams pressed deep into the ram's subconscious mind in a profound way. Yet he still found himself unable to work out what it all meant. Even if the ram and wolf's first night together had been eventful in more ways than one, he still felt like he was flying by the seat of his pants. "He's——"

"Feel, damn it!" Betty shot her paws out and gripped one of Remmy's hooves. Letting out a loud bleat, the ram found himself pulled forward and thrust onto the side of the bed. Remmy took a deep breath as he clutched the wolf's still fairly normal-looking belly.

"He's... kicking," Remmy murmured. He couldn't even begin to try and put the sensations into words. His hooves sensed little movements coming from inside of Betty that gently built up by the second. His eyes had gotten wide as dinner plates. The wolf took in his emotional expressions with a big smile, and she affectionately pressed her face against the top of his head.

"Proud of yourself, fluff?" Betty asked. Her tooth-filled grin and teasing lilt to her voice, even in such a snide remark, washed a wave of attraction over Remmy's senses. The ram took a gulp, not knowing at all how to respond. He just wondered why he'd taken so long to even have that first date — to finally give into his passionate feelings for the powerful wolf.

"I really am," Remmy answered. His words didn't have an ounce of regret, shame, uncertainty, or anything like that to them. He didn't just sound totally confident. He felt it deep in his bones.

"I did a bit of cleaning by the dressers, and I thought I might throw on the nightgown to surprise you," Betty said, sliding a paw onto the ram's shoulder, "but little guy decided to surprise me. I sure as hell need to take a rest."

"Hey, sure," the ram said, grinning, "what kind of pred chaser would I be if I didn't know how to take orders?"

The wolf groaned at the remark. Yet a sudden burst of sensation caused her to shift back on the bed, pulling Remmy even closer to her. The ram nudged his face tightly against his girlfriend's warm, coarse fur. He couldn't help but make a happy sigh.

Around a decade later...
"Dad, come on, will you even think about it?" Johnny moaned. The young sheep-x-wolf hybrid had gotten down on his knees.

"The answer's 'no'. I already I told you," Remmy replied. The ram waved a hoof passively in the air as he remained transfixed on the newspaper. Al may have sworn Remmy to the advantages of index funds months ago—the wolf pushing his neighbor to diversify the family's investments into utter safeness—but the ram's chronic nervousness forced him to follow financial news religiously. "And we both know that your mother isn't the kind of lady to take to 'begging tag' if you head back to her, either."

"Dad, please," the pup murmured. He leaned down even more. All of his paws pushed flat against the kitchen tiles. His tail loudly scuffed the array of potted plants by the kitchen door—nearly knocking a pot of rhododendrons over.

Remmy let out a soft groan. "I said..."

The ram made the mistake of looking over. As he witnessed the exact pose and expression that the little wolf made, the ram's heart couldn't help but flutter. He silently cursed how wayward Uncle Shepard Bellwether had taught the cub the 'puppy eyes' trick last week. The way that Jonny's soft, light grey fur seemed to shine in the afternoon sunlight looked like something out of a Hallmare card.

"Al, Velvet, and Vivian—all three of them—have said that it 'brings the family together', dad." Johnny put on his sweetest tone of voice. "Vivian's already here. Alex's coming over any second now."

Thankfully, Charlie and Marty's son hadn't yet mastered the power of eye-fluttering gazes. The delicately titled 'Alexander Oscar' spent so much time at the Cormo family house that he might as well had lived there too, and his chronic begging already tried Remmy's patience far too much. It didn't help how much the little mammal had taken to crossdressing while doing coming over, with the visits from 'Aunt Martina' always giving the androgynous 'Alex' more ideas.

Thankfully, both Vivian and her mother merely sighed at all of the 'doggo tricks' as they called them. The young mammal had acted pretty pleasant the entire morning so far. Neither of them were the 'begging type' as Al had put it. Yet Johnny had bought Uncle Shepard Bellwether's advice—hook, line, and sinker.

"Father," the young wolf said. The ram knew it had gotten serious: the 'other f-word' had been played. "I just would love—"

"Fine, fine." Remmy thrust down his newspaper with a frustrated 'smack' and chomped down the last few pieces of his cicada fries. At least, the sheep thought, his son had only pulled the cute gaze act twice that week.

"Yay!" Johnny leaped straight upward, almost swinging into the room's lamp fixture, as a big smile plastered all over his face. "I'll go get the outfits."

"Outfits?" Remmy didn't like the sound of that.

"Dad, of course, you're not going to be a level twelve healer if you don't have the robes on, silly!"

The ram sighed, knowing he would regret this.

A few minutes later...

"The elf grabs the door handle, but ten thousand volts shocks him! It's a trap!" Vivian cried out. The
tall, lanky deer-x-wolf hybrid waved her paper-mache wand in the air above her head—the prey mammal felt quite confident. "What does your party say to that?"

The father and son locked eyes. "I think the healer is going to... call the dungeon-master a manipulative clod," Remmy muttered.

"I absorb the energies from the elf's charred remains and store it as concentrated mana," declared Alex. The sleek fox-x-stoat hybrid clutched his robed paws together while putting on a demonic expression. The other mammals all got quiet. Remmy considered whether Alex's mother would have scolded the act or applauded it; Charlie's quirky streak seemed weirdly genetic.

"That's kind of... freaky, grabbing it off of my corpse when I'm still warm," Johnny whimpered, feeling overcome. Bits of sweat dripped down the wolf's young face.

"Waste not, want not," said the fox, grinning.

"No wonder you barely have any friends," Vivan muttered. She pulled that lanky prey act of speaking just loud enough to be heard yet just quiet enough to have plausible deniability about what exactly got said. Remmy and his son hated that act.

"Do not!" Alex shouted. He grabbed his paper-mache bow, bright sparks of magical energy drawn upon it in blue marker, and slammed it against the table.

"Do not... what?" Vivan asked, putting on one of the fakest smiles that Remmy had ever seen. Her gigantic eyelashes—bootleg-type plastic trinkets that even cheap dollar stores would consider beneath them—somehow made it even worse.

"Shut up!"

"You shut up!" Both the deer and the fox clutched at ends of the phony wand—they pulled with all of their strength. The mammals swung wildly around the table, the wand forcing them tightly close, as both children knocked down chairs, props, and plants without discrimination. Remmy and his son froze, feeling mortified.

"No! You shut up!"

"You close your stupid mouth!" Alex leaped up onto the table, making Vivian trip and almost knock the whole thing over. While the fox bared his teeth, the way in which the borrowed bath robe draped over Alex's face and arms looked so silly—cardboard stars falling off of his sides—that both Remmy and his son strained not to laugh.

"Come on! Seriously!" Remmy interjected, jumping out of his seat and waving his arms above the feuding kids. "This isn't—"

"If you tear my wand—" Vivan's eyes narrowed into little slits of hate. "You're not coming to Tricky Beans for lunch!"

Alex growled. Both mammals shoved their faces mere inches away. Remmy hovered a hoof behind the fox's robe, ready to grab him.

"Save your yard clippings for yourself, grazer!"

"Hey, kid!" Remmy exclaimed. Alex found himself picked up and lifted up into the air like an empty shopping bag. The fox let out a torrent of angry noises, kicking helplessly, before finally turning his face to the sheep holding him. "Yes, Alex, I think you should know by now the 'no speciest slurs in
"I'm... I'm sorry," Alex mumbled, rubbing his face against one of his arms.

"Huh, that's right," Vivan interjected, her hooves folded against her chest, as Remmy slowly lowered Alexander onto the floor.

"Oh, don't let us start about you," Johnny remarked, breaking his silence. He rolled his eyes before scooting himself out of his seat and heading to the refrigerator. "Who said that we were going to Tricky Beans? You know your parents can't afford it more than twice a month." He shot the deer a smug glance as he sipped down a carton of tomato juice.

"Hey, I just... I... well... wait," Vivan stammered. She stood up straight in her chair, gently nudged the phony wand into a side pocket, and locked eyes with Remmy. The ram stuck out his chin, dreading the question that he knew was coming. "So, well, excuse me sir, would it be alright if you took your son and I to Tricky Beans for lunch?"

A snicker came out from the fox tucked down somewhere under the table. "Hah!"

"Both Al and Velvet need to make it clear, one of these days," Remmy remarked, going for his own carton of tomato juice, "that just because I've graduated from 'hourly employee' to 'consultant' at the fish factory doesn't mean I'm made of money—"

"It does mean coming home smelling like halibut tacos," the fox murmured.

"Look, you can get from under there already, kid." Remmy slid a hoof against Alex's sleeves and slowly pushed the fox out onto the middle of the tile floor.

"Dad."

"What?" Remmy stepped over to the refrigerator door, shutting it. He dunked the empty container into the kitchen's recycling bin.

"Please?"

"Please... what..." The ram felt tense as he spotted his son kneeling down, about to do the 'puppy eyes' move yet again. He flung the D&D robes off of himself and made a frustrated sigh. "No, stop, please, once in a day is enough."

"So," Alex and Vivian both began.

"Fine, fine, Tricky Beans it is."

The children all cheered. Remmy pressed a hoof upon his face. He couldn't help thinking about the next payment towards the fund for his Fur Fighters custom edition drum-set— his magnum opus of working-class family life that he'd already set up the space for in his garbage. He'd already missed the first checking-to-savings transfer that month. He seemed set to miss the second.

"And wear your jackets for a change. None of you are catching cold, you hear me?" Remmy called out as the mammals scurried around him. An authoritative hoof, shaking in the air, succeeded in pushing the children to pick up their D&D accouterments off of the floor and pile them neatly upon the living room shelves. Thankfully, Alex and Vivian followed Johnny's lead in grabbing their bulky coats.

"Looks like your quirky quest is coming to a sudden end, then?" chimed in a voice from upstairs.
Remmy hovered next to a set of picture-coated shelves, glancing straight up the steps. He spotted his wife making her trademark look of smugness. Betty's smile showed off quite a bit of her teeth even as her bulky, butterfly-covered t-shirt belied any real snark.

"I'll be back in a few hours, honey," Remmy replied. Scratching his head, he tried to make sure that he'd grabbed everything. His bulky smartphone, long comb, and thick key-chain clogged up the pockets of his own puffy jacket.

"No 'happily ever after' outside of the dorky dungeons? Awww, at least there's a whole other box of the gear that you can open up next time," Betty remarked. However, she immediately brushed a paw against her face and made a happy wave. "Fluff, just take as long as you want. I'll see you later."

"Love you!" Remmy and his son both called out. They hurried out the door, Alex and Vivian bunched closely beside them.

Betty didn't show it, but she felt her mind floating on a cloud of bliss. The father-son bonding by itself always looked adorable, but the added touch of them wearing special outfits together as they played seemed almost too much. After the door slammed, the big wolf found herself letting out a 'squee' noise almost like a young pup.

For his part, the costs of going to the entertainment complex clogged Remmy's mind. He wanted that drum-set too badly to really put into words. Still, the ram thought as he fumbled his keys between his hooves, he could always wait some more. In the meantime, he could always surrender to pure middle-class mediocrity and buy himself another set of houseplants. Betty loved hoarding those things. He never did find out why. Al had joked that it was the wolf version of being a 'wannabite'. Remmy put those thoughts aside as he started his car. The young mammals eagerly piled in around him.

As he pulled out his long sedan, fiddling with the heat in order to keep the kids from freezing, Remmy's eyes returned yet again to his neighbor's house across the street. His eyes narrowed on Al's new license plate. The back of the older wolf's vehicle read: 'ASSMAN'.

Al had seriously amped up his snark streak after Vivian was born.

**An hour or so later...**

A carefully-constructed cacophony of glittering lights and chiming noises stretched out meter after meter inside of the entertainment complex. All manner of electronics promised whatever distraction that a young mind could possibly want— zombies got mowed down by yelling yaks right alongside roulette wheels spinning before drunken donkeys. Tricky Bean's food, catering to middle-class predator and prey tastes alike, also provided quite the experience. The downside, however, was that parents went through bucks so fast that they might as well be shoving them into a bonfire.

"Have you ever wondered what if those animatronics came to life?" Johnny asked, pressing his nose comically against an immense plate of glass. Just a few feet away, a faux dinosaur gripped a huge microphone and belted out a kitsch version of an old Gazelle hit. "What if, say, things got weird when the families all left— leaving them alone with some random night guard or something? Them wandering around?"

"That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard," Vivian declared. She shoved a hoof against the massive token dispensing machine. Her expression turned angrier by the second, staring down at the three small pieces before her despite the buck that she'd just put in.

"How so?" The young wolf's breath began to fog up the glass.
"Well, for starters, just why the hell would the company waste all of that electricity? The phony dinosaurs don't need to move at night, so they won't. Second, why would they even have a guard there in the first place? It's the 21st century. There are things called 'alarms' and 'cameras.'" Vivian paused, seeing that the machine hadn't budged. "Third, for crying out loud, the contraptions barely even work now."

She braced herself and shoved her entire side into the token-dispensing device. A flash of excitement came over her for a moment. It didn't last.

"They—"

Vivian held up a tiny washer. Her focused eyes looked as if she could almost melt the metal in between her hooves. "Stop fogging up the glass, idiot, and come on back to the Skee-ball lanes with me!" She flicked the washer into the air and grabbed the actual tokens from the machine's tray. "We agreed best three out of five!"

"I'm not fogging—" Johnny stopped as something small yet hard whacked him on the side of the head. When the young wolf pulled his body back from the glass, his eyes grew wide as saucepans. Johnny had breathed out a layer of wetness so wide that he covered the entire window pane, making it look like some kind of weird artwork with a predator-shaped indentation in the middle. "Oh..."

"Move it, howler!"

"Coming, coming!" Johnny turned and raced after the deer. He bumped himself through a group of wayward-looking sheep. He didn't notice their horrified expressions at his teeth-filled grin and clumsy moves— seeing him as just another domineering, potentially dangerous predator kid, despite his own origins.

The wolf only stopped when he spotted Alex sitting atop a phony throne— the plush seat covered in vibrant red and gold colors— in the complex's 'prize area'. Even then, Johnny just scurried on. He didn't even see Remmy there at the fox's side. The ram had on a flat, slightly irritated look as he tapped a hoof against a plastic case filled with video games.

"Okay, so what do you think of the 'Regal Relaxer'?" Remmy asked. The fox's grin was a good sign — the bratty kid seemed to have finally picked something he wanted. "With that jackpot, it fits perfectly at a cool five hundred tickets—"

"Oh, wow, there they are!" Alex shot out a pointing paw.

"There? Where?" Remmy glanced all around him. All of the trinkets stretching about from inside plastic cabinet after plastic cabinet had already gotten picked up by Alex's weirdly discriminating taste. "And what's they?" The ram scratched his head.

"Look up!"

The ram craned his head back. His eyes focused on the scattering of rainbow-colored balloons dotting the ceiling. They looked to be just part of the overall decoration at first. However, his roving eyes came across an embossed sign— the text listed them at a hundred tickets each.

Something odd about them derailed Remmy's train of thought. The ram felt the fox hop up off of the phony throne and suddenly grab his right arm. A change in the room's air system blasted the balloons with a gust of phony wind, and then they blew across to another corner of the ceiling. Remmy suddenly got it.

"They're... square?" Remmy brought a hoof to his chin. Sure enough, the angular-shaped balloons
appeared like something out of a comic book's bizarro world.

"I want all of them! All of them that I can afford!"

Remmy glanced down at Alex, who was leaping up and down. The ram thought that he hadn't seem a mammal that happy over anything in years. The fox's mouth had stretched wide open. Pure joy nearly dripped from all over his face.

"Sure, I... I guess..." Remmy motioned over to the room's bored-looking hare clerk. "It's just... an interesting choice."

"I wonder just how you make square balloons in the first place."

"Blow square breaths?"

"Okay, sir... Johnny's dad... Remmy..." muttered Alex, the fox suddenly getting serious, "I'm not an idiot. I know that you can't magically make air— oxygen, nitrogen, and other stuff all mixed together — stick together like that. And I—"

"Ready to check out, you both?" the hare asked, jumping beside them.

"Sure!" Alex exclaimed.

"Really, I've got to know," Remmy interjected, raising his big eyebrows as the hare scurried over in front of him, "how do you make them like that?"

"Make them like what?"

"Those?" The ram pointed straight upwards. The hare flung his head back, grinned, and then laughed.

"That's easy!" Both Alex and Remmy had their mouths slightly opened, hanging on the hare's every word. "Just blow square breaths!"

[End of Chapter One]
Chapter 2

[Chapter Two]

A few minutes later...

The cold winter weather battered down upon the parking lot. Despite that, the four mammals sauntering across the asphalt for one own particular green sedan felt in high spirits. As far as Saturday afternoons and evenings went, things had gone really well.

"And so what do we say," Remmy began, sliding into the car's front seat, "when we just enjoyed a thing that an adult did for no reason other than out of the goodness of his heart?"

"Thank you for taking us to Tricky Beans," chimed all three kids. The ram let himself relax for a moment, turning on the soothing heat, as the young mammals ambled inside the long sedan after him. He lived for those moments of unbridled respect, even if this particular euphoria came on the pricey side. Letting the younger mammal wear themselves out at the entertainment complex, at least, got them to calm down somewhat.

"I won't forget this, sir," Alex said.

"Mom will be glad to see what I got here," Vivian added.

Alex and Vivian wiggled themselves into the car's long backseat. Alex carefully arranged a group of five square balloons around himself, cuddling one in front of his chest. Vivian held up a hoof on the sedan's roof— looking poised to bat the rainbow-colored plastic like an angry kitten faced off against a ball of yarn. Alex's eyes remained as narrow as ever, making his mother look perceptive by comparison, and he let out a low growl. He defensively tugged the balloons over to his quarter of the car. Johnny, for his part, calmly leaned himself back in the front passenger seat.

"Alex, remember that I still need to be able to see out the rear windshield," Remmy remarked, the ram starting up the car, "so please keep all of those balloons as low as you can."

"Gotcha," the fox replied.

"Look at 'em," muttered Vivian, the lanky deer pressing her head against the window. She clearly felt cramped— not that the tall prey mammal had an easy time fitting in the Cormo family sedan in the first place.

Johnny glanced back as his father shifted the car into gear. "Look at what—"

"Alex had hundreds of tickets. Won the jackpot on that roulette wheel game— but what did you get as reward?" The deer rolled her eyes in the fox's direction. "No offense, but it's like— geez— a clown vomited on a pile of latex," Vivian said, raising her voice.

"We were all smiles a moment ago— what's gotten into you?" Johnny asked. The deer promptly needled a hoof into the backside of the young wolf's seat. He gripped a paw against the roof and grimaced.

"Just be quiet, already," Alex chimed in. The fox watched as Johnny looked deep in thought, the wolf preparing a defense of his friend's choices. Alex affectionately nuded his cheek against a bright blue-and-gold spotted balloon.
"It's bugging me," Vivian remarked, "like... what are you, Alex, six?"

"That's more than enough, kids!" Remmy called out. The ram hit the brakes as a wayward cyclist breezed beside the sedan. He sucked in a deep breath, eyes glaring at the rear-view mirror as he turned onto a different street. "We had a good time this afternoon. That's that, okay?"

Both Alex and Vivian stared out of their respective windows. They'd already scooted as far away from each other as the fabric seat would let them. Remmy checked his other mirrors and pulled the sedan onto the nearby main street. He glanced over to see his son fiddling with a custom-made mp3 player.

"Like you could talk, anyways, Vivian," Johnny murmured. He adjusted his earbuds and smirked at nobody in particular. "Little miss collectible Gazelle figurine back there... you know there's probably only fifty cents of plastic in that whole thing, right?"

"Hey!" Vivian called out, looking ready to rant. Yet the sedan abruptly hit a speed-bump. Every single mammal shook about. The deer let out a loud groan of pain; she reached up and rubbed a hoof on the back of her head.

"You going to say something, gigantor?" Alex quietly asked, smiling widely. He'd been perfectly cushioned among his several balloons.

Remmy sighed as he saw Vivian massaging her aching head and putting on a toxic expression. "Careful, back there! Also, quiet back there... please?" Still, the ram had to quickly turn his attention back to the highway on-ramp in front of him. Johnny simply leaned over and turned up the volume on his device.

"What you losers ought to know is that this—" The deer definitely presented the elegant-looking token from Tricky Beans in the air, holding it before her like a magical talisman. "Is a collectible. And it's an 'action figure'." Vivian flicked a tiny switch that made the miniature singer wiggle her posterior. "Not a 'figurine'."

"Literally the same thing," Alex piped up. He wiggled his body to look over at Johnny and Remmy in the front seat. "I guess we can add 'dictionary' to the list of things that your family can't afford."

"Back me up on this, howler!" Vivian pointed an accusatory hoof at Johnny's seat. "Both of us have a lot of be proud of, even if we've struggled a bit in those damn English classes—"

"No way, Vivian," Johnny interjected, "don't expect me to care about whatever silly point you're making."

The deer made a loud snort. "Well, I've seen your grades— outside of music, playing a 'C' after a 'C' after a 'C' isn't the point."

"At least that's passing," Alex remarked. He slipped his head in between two balloons— their psychedelic colors almost dripping off of them. "Way to break the 'dumb cervine' stereotype—"

"Hey, kids," Remmy interjected, "can I call mutually assured destruction in this snark-on-snark war, and then we call it quits? For good?"

"Look," Vivian groused, narrowing her eyes, "it's on this fuzzy tube here to let some things go. Before we get into this arty-smarty English literature debate on what is or isn't a definition—"

"That thing is the same as a 'figurine', and it's also the same as a 'doll'," Alex declared. He shoved a balloon over into Vivian's lap and brushed the miniature Gazelle— the deer fighting the urge to just
lock her hooves together and pop it.

"I'm sure your freakin' dad has taught you that there's different definitions that vary, hasn't he? He'll probably say that there's forty words for 'snow' plus a million different interpretations of 'Pretentious Jerk-off Doorstep Four' by Proust or whatever trendy garbage he's on about now—"

"Answer me this, track-team-star-who-thinks-an-athletic-scholarship-will-do-everything, how do you spell 'prestidigitation'?"

"The hell—"

"Or how do you spell 'establishment'? Or 'exploration'?" Alex kept on needling the deer. "Or, miss, can you spell 'cat'?"

"Hey, mister, can you spell 'shit'?"

Vivian grabbed a blue-and-white dotted balloon and poised herself to dunk it on the car floor like a football. Alex jumped out of his seat belt and extended his claws, positioning himself against the deer’s leg. He was ready to draw first blood if she even took a second look at his prizes. Remmy, for his part, groaned at how the traffic up ahead got thicker and thicker. He thought about how he should have stashed another bottle of aspirin in the glove compartment. At least, however, he had plenty of those Altoids that Betty sped through like lines of crack.

"Lamb of God! What are you two even talking about now?" Johnny asked, popping out one of his ear buds. He pointed a paw at the deer. "Hello? This is ground control to Major Tom, calling... what is it?"

"Do you guys have to flip from mood to mood like you're little weather-vane's?" Remmy muttered under his breath. He tensed up as he popped a pair of Altoids, one of the cars to his side nearly causing an accident.

"I'm... it's... and..." Vivian shifted in her seat a bit, taking in a little breath. "Oh, come on, it's not like I can hear 'gigantress' or whatever the hell it was and take that lying down." Sweat had already started dripping the deer's flustered face. "How is it my fault that Johnny's dad has such a short car?"

"It's a classic sedan, Vivian!" Remmy interjected. The kids froze as they took in the ram's irritated tone of voice. He changed lanes, slipping the group around an immense truck, and brushed a hoof against his chin. "A Toyota Camelry will last you decades upon decades— being solid as a rock! Perfect investment! Don't let your dad tell you otherwise, okay?"

"Huh!" Vivian's monosyllabic response, eyes shifting around evasively, showed both Remmy and his son that the deer had no response; yet she wanted to snark anyways.

"Good point, sir," Alex remarked, shooting a spiteful glance at the deer.

"It's true, but like," Johnny began, although he didn't quite know how to end the sentence. He glanced at his father and the two other passengers before leaning against the window, sliding his head over so much that he looked asleep. "Dad, seriously, you don't need to be so sensitive about it."

"It's just... just..." Remmy muttered, pausing for a while. He couldn't quite find the words to properly express his aggravation with the combination of stop-and-go traffic, the pre-teen bickering, and the fact that Altoids did nothing for his burgeoning headache. The sedan changed over to another lane—a cluster of tourist-filled buses ahead of them had slowed traffic quite a bit, pushing the Zootopia regulars into a dense pack on the highway.
"Oh, come on, it's alright to be upset that you're not the 'ASSMAN'," Alex piped up.

"Hey!" Remmy exclaimed. He shifted his entire body back in his seat, glaring behind him. "That's got nothing to do with—"

"Being the 'ASSMAN' is overrated," Vivian declared. She folded her hooves over her chest. "Seriously."

"It doesn't matter if it's overrated, underrated, sideways-rated, or whatever the hell else," Remmy said, slapping a hoof against the steering wheel, "I don't—"

"Don't get me wrong. It's plain to see— Al taking that two-ton SUV around the block— that he enjoys it," Alex went on, "but it's not like it really matters. And the goofy smile that he puts on when he waves at the mammals walking by, them not knowing, is just plain weird."

"It's only a license plate. Who cares if a bunch of sloths decided to dub Vivian's pop the 'ASSMAN'? In the eyes of God, destiny, Mom, and everyone else that matters, you'll always be the real 'ASSMAN'," Johnny said, rubbing a comforting paw on his father's shoulder.

"Are you kids even listening to yourselves?" Remmy opened up his eyes wide, trying his best not to sweat.

"Dad, I—"

"No, just, please, let it go. Let it all go," Remmy declared. The traffic had come to a standstill, giving him a moment to lean his head down upon the steering wheel. The ram let himself take a gigantic breath, clear his mind, and reach for the radio.

"Oh! Oh!" Alex's face lit up. The fox wiggled himself over a pair of balloons to pop his head in between the front seats. "Turn it to WRR, 101.1 FM, 'Classical 101'!" He nudged a paw against the air freshener plug-in and eyed Remmy. "They're doing an all-day special on Baach!"

"Ugh, are you kidding?" Vivian kicked the back of Johnny's seat once again. "I get enough of that smoothly-silky-stuff piped in at the mall! Turn it down a few notches— throw on some modern rock, some Fur Fighters!"

"Get your paws off of the entertainment system, please!" Remmy called out. He flicked through a few radio stations, stopping at one that simply gave a batch of weather reports. He couldn't help but munch on yet another pair of Altoids. "We can hold it on here for a moment."

Both the deer and the fox groaned. To the ram, though, the feminine cougar— or some other big cat, for all of his attempts at being anti-specist Remmy had a hard time telling the felines apart— had a nicely relaxing voice. Zootopian Public Radio was often the auditory version of creamy white wallpaper, but it did its job fairly well.

Vivian curled up her body against the back of Johnny's seat. Her hooves tapped against the plush fabric with the annoying regularity of a metronome. She held her tongue— though she looked ready to argue for hours over the merits of modern hard rock if anybody dared to defy her openly. The fox, for his part, slid back into his position in the back corner of the sedan.

Still, he gestured over to the young wolf. "Hey, Johnny, what do you think?" Alex asked.

"What do I think?" The wolf switched off his mp3 player and tucked it into a side pocket. "Well, what I think is—" He tapped a paw against the glove compartment. "If the irritating girl behind me doesn't stop shoving into me, then the only sound you all will hear is me starting a howl."
"Oh, come on!" Vivian called out. Johnny said nothing. He simply grinned as he grabbed his door's crank handle and rolled down the window.

The traffic hadn't budged at all. Remmy longingly eyed the next exit—the asphalt curve resting tantalizingly close beyond the next four cars. "Son, please, I need..."

"I *mean it*, Dad," Johnny declared. The young wolf brushed his paws against his shirt and stuck part of his head right out of the window, eyes closing.

"Vivian, for goodness' sake," Remmy said, turning around and glaring at the backseat, "please re-cram yourself against the window! Seriously, we only have a matter of feet until I can drop you and Alex off at Marty's office!"

"Fine! *Sheesh!" The deer shoved her hooves against the sedan's roof, rubbing them in a little circle as she rolled her eyes.

"Thank you," Remmy and his son said simultaneously.

"Oh, it's moving!" Alex interjected. Sure enough, the traffic up ahead had begun crawling down the highway. Remmy grinned from cheek to cheek as he popped on his turn signal. In just a matter of seconds, they had sailed themselves right down the off-ramp.

"Dad?" Johnny abruptly asked. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, what is it?"

Their sedan came to the road beside which stood the sprawling Penguin Publishers complex. All manner of neatly-trimmed greenery stretched out around various brown brick buildings. Somewhere inside, Marty was spending the Saturday sifting through various applications, the fox likely rejecting one after the other with some pithy remark.

"I, well," Johnny murmured. He leaned up closely to his father's side. Alex and Vivian in the backseat had poised themselves for escape—the mammals pressing their noses against the glass to bolt out of the car as soon as it finally stopped. "Between you, me, and mom, honestly, we kind of understand. And it's okay."

"Understand... what?" Remmy whispered back.

"It's going to be alright. We know that you wanted to be the 'ASSMAN'."

Remmy opened his mouth wide to reply, but stopped himself to make the turn into a slim parking lot. He barely even had time to begin to formulate a reply when he shifted the car and clicked the doors open. The ram glanced at all three of the passengers for a split-second.

"Thanks a bunch, sir!" Vivian quickly called out, making her escape.

"You're the best, sir!" Alex exclaimed, slipping out of the car. The fox did a peculiar kind of dance up and down the sedan's side—quickly seizing his special balloons. It only took a split-second before Alex sped out underneath a set of huge oak trees.

"Johnny, I... hold it," Remmy said, finally getting his mind back on track. He clicked to lock the doors yet again. "Well, alright then, they're gone." The ram switched off the heat and opened up the windows, trying to get some fresh air. With the pre-teens gone, he felt as if someone had lifted a backpack full of brick-like textbooks off of his shoulders. "Son, there's a fundamental thing here—"
"What's that?" the young wolf asked.

"Well, just look at that really tall and really skinny minivan to our left." Remmy's son duly glanced over. The green car had some kind of assigned parking sign, although neither of them could read the mangled writing on the cold metal. They couldn't quite make out the driver—a fox apparently engrossed in opening a bunch of cardboard boxes—either. "What do you think? Look at the back of it."

"It's... uhh... the van is green?"

"Yeah, I know it is," Remmy said, dismissively waving a hoof, "and they say that geniuses pick green. Just like my car."

"Dad, mom picked the color."

"And I picked your mom." Remmy cleared his throat. "Anyways, the point is: look at that license plate."

Johnny stared intently in that direction. Remmy did the same. The young wolf pressed a paw against his mouth, trying hard not to laugh.

The minivan's license plate read: '4NEKATE'

"See! There's an example of just a random jumble of letters and numbers!" Remmy remarked. He idly slipped open his door and wiggled his legs outside, sucking in the clean air as he smiled. "It's got a simple, easy look to it, right? Just a normal vehicle with a standard plate: a simplicity that looks purely reasonable. See that there's no bumper stickers on there too? Nothing fancy, nothing—"

"Dad, hold on—"

"What?" Remmy looked back at his son. The young wolf’s cheeks had already turned red, and Johnny was holding them in his paws—trying to keep a straight face with this fingers if not with his mouth.

"Dad, do you seriously, not... not get..."

"Son, what is it?"

"Dad, read the license plate out loud."

"Four... knee... Kate," Remmy mouthed. He scratched a hoof against the top of his head. "I don't see what you—wait? Oh... wait?" His eyes narrowed into little slits. "Oh!"

"Man, mom is so right about your 'sheep moments'," Johnny giggled.

"Fine, so there's another smarty-pants jerk-off on the road that's got something to prove. Counting Al, that makes two. Hey, it's not," Remmy said, "really—" He stopped when the door to the minivan swung open.

"Charlie!" Johnny and his father both yelled out.

"Oh, greetings," the older fox remarked. She clutched a purse against her big grey sweater and stepped over to the Remmy family sedan. "You just dropped off the scampering ones with Marty, yes? And how are you both?"

Remmy brushed himself against the side of the car door as he stepped outside. "I didn't know that
your van had—"

"Oh, that was my husband's idea." Charlie dismissively waved a paw in the air. "Dads! Am I right?"

"Uhhh..."

"No offense." Charlie opened her eyes quite a bit, gazing at the father and son, and that somehow made her devious-looking expression all the worse.

[End of Chapter Two]
Chapter 3

A few seconds later...

"I really have to ask, even if I remember what you've said about curiosity being more 'vice' than 'virtue'," Remmy began. The ram anxiously slid a hoof against his chin as he looked straight at the fox. "Why did you stop by here in the first—"

"Mom!" Alex yelled. Johnny and Remmy both flipped around, glancing in all directions. The noise appeared to cry out from the center of the earth. "They've finally set up the new sculpture! You have to see this!"

"Coming!" Charlie shouted. Some kind of sixth sense caused the fox to hop over onto the concrete sidewalk. One of her son's ears popped up from behind a batch of greenery, and she eagerly waved over in that direction.

Remmy slightly raised a hoof. "Oh, so, there's—"

"Bye-bye, then!" Charlie remarked. Without saying another word, the vixen scurried down the sidewalk into the publishing complex. Alex appeared to vanish without a trace. Remmy slowly lowered his arm. He turned about to face his son, who had gently snickered.

"I guess that's the answer."

"It's pretty freakin' late already," Remmy said, leaning up against his sedan's front wheels, "but do you want to check it out?"

"Eh, whatever you want," the young wolf remarked, brushing a paw against the back of his head.

"Marty's company is about to wind up all of this electronic publishing stuff, and I'm glad that they're rolling with all these weird internet trends— taking his advice about how stupid it was back in the day, thinking they could sue pirating kids into going away." Remmy let himself ramble for a bit as he stepped about in a circle. His hooves rapped along from concrete blocks over to grassy slabs, but he couldn't actually see anything.

"Yep."

"With all of this new-found expansion, the business' metal contraption probably looks really cool—"

"Dad, just stand up on your hoof-tips and look left."

Remmy duly complied.

"Dad, I mean... uh, my left?"

Remmy did an about-face. He looked over a patch of flower-coated shrubbery and spotted a gigantic sculpture of a pen. It poised in the air like a missile about to launch— its immense length coated entirely in reflective chrome and steel. The 'eraser' end seemed swollen somehow; it looked as if somehow had swapped it for a bit of cauliflower. A star-shaped layer of colorful tulips stretched out from all sides beneath the thick railings that held up the sculpture.
"It's very, uh," Remmy strained as he tried to think of the right word. "Phallic." The ram's eyes grew wide. "Oh, Johnny, hey—" He glanced back at his son. "That word means—"

"Dad, we have Zoogle Plus Instant Video. I watch enough sitcoms to know what sexual slang means. Besides—" The young wolf let his mouth hang open for a moment, grinning from cheek to cheek. "Lydia Lycaon says way nastier when we've made out."

The ram stepped back by his son, their bodies hovering mere inches from each other. He had lowered his head noticeably. Johnny watched this and halfheartedly did the same, though hesitating. Remmy didn't exactly know how to respond.

An urge to head-butt the young wolf in true 'way to go, brah' sheep fashion flashed through Remmy's mind over and over again. Yet he raised his body back, setting that all aside. The likely earful from Betty, anyways, meant that he'd only broached that talk with Johnny a few times. Still, he craved that father and son head-on-head bonding. It'll come, he thought, sooner rather than later.

"Nice," Remmy finally let out. He popped a hoof on the top of his sedan and put on a smug yet content expression. "Going for the 'girl next door', then? Pure-blooded wolves, living here for generations? Good luck, seriously."

"I guess this family has to do at least something conventionally," the young wolf joked, sliding his jacket open as he chuckled.

"You're still of the age," Remmy interjected, "where I would've expected—"

"Dad, come on," Johnny remarked, his eyes getting wide, "it's the 21st century. Morons yammering about 'cooties' while they pick their nose and eat the boogers— that way of growing up went out of style with the VHS player."

"Speaking of booger-eating idiots with overpriced gadgets, we've got to face off with some shoppers before it gets too late," Remmy declared. He kicked one of the tires on his sedan and leaned back. "All day tomorrow is booked solid. So let's just pop back in the car— heading to the mall on the way back home?"

"The mall?" Johnny's face went blank, a burst of worry flashing across his senses.

"Look, I'll confess that I'd much rather we be at home watching Iron Chef right now. But don't tell me you forgot about Mom's birthday present, did you? Or presents—" Remmy stressed that last sound like he had steam hissing from the side of his mouth. "Plural? I transferred us both an extra thirty-five dollars on Monday—"

"Dad," the young wolf interjected, "I... well..."

"Oh, really, are you kidding me?" Remmy remarked. He bent his body backward and sucked in a deep breath, feeling an expected but still unwelcome feeling of raw frustration.

"Okay, okay, I forgot." Johnny reached into one of his pockets as he let his head droop to the side a bit.

Remmy sighed. He leaned up against the hood and then motioned his son to get back to the car. "I got you that smartphone for a reason, you know? When I was a kid, that kind of computing power took a desktop tower as heavy as a book-filled backpack. The least it can do now is that little 'text reminder' thing every time something important is coming up."

"You can save the speech," Johnny replied, clutching the device against his shirt, "and, yes, I know.
"Hey, it's not really that," Remmy said. He reminded himself to go easy on his son. After all, he thought, he'd no particular reason to grouse, even if he felt pretty tired that evening already. "I just want to remain at a 'mammal' level. Being your personal trainer? Your coach? Your fellow magical adventurer? Respectable enough! I don't want to play the role of a big, fuzzy post-it note, okay? Or, even worse, a big, fuzzy ATM—"

"I registered," Johnny interjected, "with this—"

"You signed up for the Zoogle Plus drone-based delivery service. I know." Remmy cut his son off as he slipped into the driver's side seat. "I also know that you haven't completed any purchases on the service yet."

Johnny posed a quizzical look. He said nothing. Still, he slid into the passenger's side seat all the same.

"Son, remember, I'm the one that got you the debit card in the first place, right? You wouldn't get a stick of gum without me finding out in not too long." Remmy pulled out his keys and started up the car.

"Wow, I didn't think it was that late," Johnny remarked, crashing the ram's train of thought. The ram's eyes narrowed upon the dashboard's massive clock. They needed to quit jabbering and head out.

"We'll face crowds, but—at least—we're close enough that we could be 'in and out'." Father and son didn't say another word for a while; they both leaned back into their seats. Remmy slid the long sedan out of the parking lot and over to the nearby street.

In just a matter of minutes, they'd journeyed from block to block over to the immense 'Pack Street Commercial Center'—or 'PSCC' as the entrepreneurial-minded predators called it. Prey mammals winded up pronouncing that as 'pish' more than 'pisk'; the former of which had obviously unfortunate implications. As the ram parked his sedan in the middle of a pair of ludicrously tiny hatchbacks—probably from some wayward tourists who had little sense of protective space on the road—he tried to focus his mind.

Betty. The ram saw the wolf's odd tastes as quite the enigma when they'd started dating. Despite years and years spent in close proximity, getting inside of her head took a sustained effort. He'd confessed to his son a few weeks ago—under the influence of far too many wine coolers for his own good—that he felt like a sculptor tensely chiseling away at a massive granite block, finally finding the beautiful figure underneath, and then having to start over as soon as he left the studio. He'd then, of course, sworn his son to secrecy.

Slipping his keys back into his pocket, Remmy popped open his door and nearly leapt out of the car. The quick motion caused him to bump his head against the side of the upholstery. The ram let out a loud bleat.

"Motherfu—" Remmy suddenly shut his mouth. He rubbed all over his forehead as he eyed his son, standing awkwardly on the asphalt across from him. Johnny had heard far worse, naturally, but Remmy didn't have to stoke more coal on the fire. At least, Remmy thought, he'd snapped himself back to reality.

Betty. Any wistful navel-gazing about fatherhood could come later. They were on a mission. They needed to get something ASAP for his smoking hot wolf wife—who, of course, deserved the best
that they could fine.

"Speaking of wolves," Remmy whispered, reaching over to a side pocket.

"What?" His son cocked his head to the side, looking confused.

"Hey, please, hand over your cellphone," Remmy remarked, sliding his hoof over the roof. He nervously fumbled about to turn his own to 'airplane mode'.

"Dad, I swear," the young wolf protested, "there's nothing to worry about with this unlimited data —"

"It's not that!" Remmy interjected. He awkwardly scratched his nose and glanced away; his eyes traced along the array of sprawling evergreens in front of the mall's entrance. "It's that you've got Zoogle Plus 2.0 or 3.0 or whatever— with all of the bells and whistles— so we have to turn off the 'location tracking' software."

"Oh, yeah, it's after 5pm," the wolf muttered. He duly handed over his small black device. "Al's 'on the prowl... for sales'."

"And if he sees that we're around," Remmy added, heading across the parking lot, "he just will not... stop... texting. Lamb of God, have mercy! He might even trace our social app signal from store to store by the minute—"

"Damn, good point!" Johnny commented. As father and son came to the mall's entrance, the wolf let himself make a silly smirk. "You remember when mammals thought the internet would be for something beyond gaming, stalking, and showing off pictures of dicks?"

"I'm going to pretend like I didn't hear that last part." The ram's mouth shut tight, his eyes narrowing. The wolf merely shrugged back. Father and son silently stepped into the immense double-doors and found themselves in front of a set of ornate fountains.

Pack Street's commercial complex confronted them in all of its capitalistic glory. Scores of mammals filtered through the tall hallways. Layers of neat shrubberies coupled with long wooden benches and variously colored tulips stretched across meter after meter of commercial space. Remmy and Johnny stepped past a sprawling electronics store, big screen TVs that they couldn't afford without wrecking their credit blaring at them.

"Oh, there we go," the wolf remarked. He slipped a paw against his jacket and smirked yet again. Remmy, for his part, stared out to his side defiantly.

The massive sign at the top of the shop read simply: 'FLICK OFF'. To make the groan-inducing pun even more blatant, the text shone off in bright red neon shone even though the mall was already plastered in light. Remmy took a gulp. He looked over a group of wayward-looking otters— all of them sucking down tall mint sodas. Sure enough, Al head popped up in one of the store's windows.

"There we go, indeed," Remmy flatly remarked. The big wolf practiced what he preached in terms of putting on lots of 'flair'; buttons with all kinds of odd jokes and cliched movie references decorating Al's huge shirt. The red and white striped uniform was made all the worse by the wolf's thick black suspenders.

Still, Al had gotten to be assistant manager for a reason. Remmy, at the moment, could see why. The wolf marched on over beside a far smaller— and, frankly, more handsome— fox struggling to make a sale. The hare customer, giving in to ingrained instincts, appeared suddenly intimidated. Yet the fox abruptly swapped from an initial grimace to a tooth-filled grin, acting like the customer's 'big buddy',
while putting a paw on the wolf's chest.

This mutated version of the 'good cop, bad cop' routine was done as predictably as clockwork. Yet the surprised hare fell for it completely. Remmy kept on staring. Something about those wolf-based behaviors in terms of how they stood, how they walked, and even how they smiled still— despite everything— felt frustratingly alien to him.

FLICK OFF, as the name indicated, sold a variety of household products designed to save energy. The hare clutched an ultra-efficient toaster in his paws. The sale seemed about to close.

"Dad? Hello," Johnny murmured, holding up a paw in front of the ram's chin, "earth to sheep? This is ground control to Major Tom—"

"Thank goodness— he doesn't see us!" Remmy declared. He immediately stepped behind a plant, his son awkwardly following suit. "Quick, to the other side of the hallway: to the Hallmare Store!"

The ram put on some extra speed. The young wolf, feeling a bit surprised, kept up a brisk walk right behind him. It took less than a minute— passing by all kinds of dopey-looking shoppers engrossed in the various shiny displays— before they made it to their destination.

"Here we go," Remmy said, stepping inside, "this is simply perfect."

The ram found himself standing before a set of wooden shelves covered in signed baseballs. His eyes naturally slid upwards, and he finally spotted the World Series from the year of his birth. An eager smile flashed across Remmy's face. A glass case to his side featured a collection of bronze and silver miniatures. Directly across the baseballs, the shopkeepers had judiciously poised a set of tiny deer chefs holding out apple pies.

"This section is so 'homey' and 'kitsch' that I'm surprised they don't have a campfire going," Johnny murmured, "what with stale cans of baked beans and everything."

"Well, don't forget the sprinkler systems," Remmy remarked, chuckling for a moment. He wistfully held a Boston Red Sox ball between his hooves for a moment.

"Dad, seriously," Johnny said, stepping over to his father's side, "if mom even suspected that you'd bring that into our house, then she'd throw you out the damn window."

"A Cubs fan to the end." Remmy titled his head to the side, hesitating for a bit, and placed the baseball back on the shelf. He rubbed a hoof against his son's shoulder and lead the wolf over to the nearby glass case.

"Mom," Johnny began, "probably won't—"

"I'm not that clueless," Remmy remarked, making a gruff noise, "she won't want anything so fragile that she'd accidentally crush it by just freakin' stepping on it! No kidding! Sheesh, son, I'm only hovering around here for a moment because I'm thinking about what I might eventually get for myself; one of these days, you know?"

"Alright."

"On to the rest of the store."

Father and son made their way through a bunch of different aisles. Collections of various films—most of them of dubious plots featuring even more dubious 'stars'— looked rather unappealing. So did the displays featuring ornate cookware. Besides, both Remmy and Johnny agreed, something
about a purely domestic item smacked too much of the *Mad Mammal* era.

Gift cards seemed out of the question. That just meant admitting defeat and giving Betty an unwanted errand to do. Nobody in the Cormo household cared much for sewing either. That left a good quarter of the store sadly off-limits. While Johnny wandered about the back of the store, looking quite lost in thought, Remmy found himself repeatedly drawn to a rotating display of new CDs releases—the albums coming with holographic packaging and all kinds of fancy add-ons.

"You've really made the grade," Remmy idly murmured to himself, thinking to some tune that he couldn't quite place. A little noise, something like a chime, sounded off behind him. It somehow seemed to fit with the melody.

"Can I help you, sir?" asked a voice from behind the ram.

"The papers... they need to know," Remmy went on, gazing at the faux gold decorating the back of a Fleetwood Yak box set, "the shirts you wear." The ram strained to think of either the song title or the artist's name, yet he come up with a blank.

"Sir?" The ram felt a sudden pressing against his back.

"Oh, yes!" Remmy yelled. He flipped around and nearly knocked the CD display right over. He came face to face with an elderly llama.

She leaned back away from the ram. The llama wore a worried expression as well as a soft, pastel-colored uniform and cursive lettered name-tag. The writing appeared so fancy that Remmy couldn't even read it.

"I didn't mean to startle you, sir," the llama said, holding up an arm against her chest, "I simply wanted to know if you needed any assistance. To be honest, you've been wandering about the store looking somewhat... overcome, for a while now..."

"Oh, it's," Remmy began, awkwardly scratching his neck, "well, you know how it is! I'm getting a birthday gift for somebody important. And even if you know a mammal, you might not know them enough... you know?"

"I understand very well," the llama replied. She put on a big smile as she closed her eyes. Remmy noticed that the little chains leading from her glasses made a light chime as she moved—the same noise from a moment ago. "This store's selection is perfect for those with varied tastes."

"Exactly," Remmy said, smiling back, "but then things keep changing so much. Item after item on display here, for example, seems so nice—" The ram pointed at the array of CD box sets. "Still, I've no clue if enough mammals still actually buys music—versus streaming it, downloading it, or whatever else—for me to not look like a dinosaur."

"Oh, I know that feeling, as you can imagine," the llama remarked. She let out a little giggle. her glasses chain wiggled about as she tapped Remmy's shoulder.

The ram had little clue what to say back. He simply nodded, putting on a flat expression, and turned slightly around. The llama, however, abruptly leaned in close.

"Sir, I didn't want to say anything, well, out loud," she murmured, the ram listening in intently, "but I just had to warn you about something."

"Oh, uh, alright." Remmy's mind felt blank.
"Not long after you started going through these aisles, well, this strange-looking predator with the worst kind of expressions began to follow you." The llama's eyes narrowed. A wash of fear had spiked her voice. "He's been glaring—menacingly, with his paws shoved deep in his pockets—at us for the past several minutes now."

"Oh, that's... it's..." Remmy fidgeted as he tried to force himself to think coherently. The combination of confusion, tiredness, and a bunch of different emotions all pushed him into this slog, with the ram's body refusing to move. "I..."

"Just look at him over there, but be careful," the llama went on. She positioned her body over to the side, pulling the ram along with her, and they stood behind the massive CD display. "Oh, I'd bet the farm that the suspicions young predator is up to something—maybe even a mugging. They're dangerous in their various gangs, but even by themselves, you can't be too careful."

Remmy blankly stared over at his son. The young wolf hunched beside an immense movie poster—straining to read all of the tiny print along the bottom. The various other mammals from that side of the store had apparently wandered over to the checkout counter.

"Ma'am, please," Remmy declared, holding up a hoof and gesturing the llama to step away from him, "I can't believe—"

"Just say the word," she said as she stood up straight, "and I'll call the ZPD on that—"

The tension had finally boiled to the surface, and it came with a vengeance. Remmy felt his blood starting to boil as he raised his voice. "He's actually—"

"We don't have to be afraid of that ruffian. Not in our store."

"He's my son!"

Remmy had spat out that last word—defiantly thrusting out a hoof into the air. The ram stood up as straight as he could, his mouth wide open, and he realized moment by moment that every single mammal in the store had just heard him. The llama herself had half-collapsed upon the CD display, showing off an expression of pure shock.

"He's not... he is... he has..." she stammered. She looked over behind her and watched as Johnny slowly walked over.

"Yeah! It's the 21st century!" Remmy yelled. He stamped his hooves against the floor as he let out a loud bleat. "Hello? Ground control to Major Tom? Is it really such a big Goddamn deal for predators and prey to be family?"

The rest of the mammals remained completely quiet. Before Remmy could think of another world, the llama tried to get up and pull herself away from the aisle, quickly shoving herself forward. The sudden movement yanked her glasses chain along a group of Fleetwood Yak CDs—throwing them right off of her face.

The glasses whacked Johnny right in the neck—causing the wolf to slip. Before anybody realized what had happened, the display crashed down with a loud smack upon the hard floor. Remmy held his arms in the air along his sides, feeling incredibly tense, as he tried to think of what to say. The llama flipped about, facing away from the aisle, and sat flat on the floor, looking stunned.

"I... oh... lamb of God..." the llama muttered.

"Dad," Johnny mumbled, picking himself up.
"Uh... yes?" Remmy felt a set of perplexed eyes bearing down on him in all directions.

"I think I found something for mom."

"Whatever it is, sir, we don't want an even bigger scene," said a voice from behind Remmy. Father and son looked over to see a far younger-looking llama in a suit and tie. The prey mammal was simply horrified— sweat sliding all over his face. "As the manager here, I can assure you that I'll complete whatever transaction you have in mind."

"Uhh..." Remmy stared over at where his son pointed. An immense poster featured a flamboyantly-dressed hog with massive shoulder-pads, an eye-patch, and a colorful stripe across his face— the figure standing triumphantly beside a set of fireballs and zooming spaceships. "That's..."

"Piggy Stardust?" the suited llama asked, raising an eyebrow, "it's a hundred and twenty dollars. That copy is signed, after all. I'm surprised that we even have it— leftover item from the last manager, really doesn't fit our down-home atmosphere at all."

"Make it half-off," Remmy interjected, "and neither of us will tell anybody that your business is operated by a bunch of speciests."

"Oh, come on!" The older llama suddenly got up, pushed both father and son to the side, and stood in front of her manager. "You buying this?"

The suited llama narrowed his eyes. "Auntie, please—"

"Don't you 'Auntie', me, Claude," she retorted. She shot Remmy and Johnny death-filled glares as she leaned over for her glasses. "Why, just look at how suspicious both are them are posing, right now! I'll bet that this is some kind of scam! The younger predator made the unscrupulous sheep play along, and now they're—"

"Look, he's my dad, okay?" Johnny remarked, tapping a paw on Remmy's shoulder. "Nobody was talking to you, young mammal," the older llama seethed, "and even if you expect me to listen... well, prove it."

"What?" Remmy asked, hardly believing what he was hearing.

"Prove it!"

"Dad!" Johnny gripped his father's shirt and suddenly pulled the ram's body down.

"Wait, I— just— what are you doing?"

"You know what." Johnny positioned his head down and toughened himself. "Like you said in 'the talk' from last month— if we actually can manage it, then that proves things once and for all. To everyone. I'm pretty tired of mammals assuming that I'm just some random kid following you around."

"I still," Remmy began, stopping as he put two-and-two together. The ram's eyes opened up wide even as his body seemed to lean over on its own. "Son, I'm not sure if we're ready—"

Before Remmy could even another word, his son ran right into him. The llamas both screamed out in horror. Various mammals that had gone out for just a nice evening of shopping gawked at the scene, mouths held wide open.
Johnny head-butted Remmy.

Later that evening...

"Oh, Mister Cormo, you're awake?" asked a voice that seemed to boom out from the middle of the sky.

Various cold sensations flashed all across Remmy's body. The ram let out a torrent of bleats. Closing his eyes over and over again, he finally looked out right in front of him. All he could make out was a solid, featureless white.

"Where's—"

"Hey, there you are!" Johnny called out. The young wolf appeared off to Remmy's side. Aside from a large set of bandages going across his head, he seemed fine enough.

"Son, where—"

"Oh, you're at the hospital," said a hyena, popping up at Remmy's other side, "since you had a minor concussion. Health-wise, everything's going to be fine, although you gave the manager at the Hallmare Store as well as everybody else there quite a scare."

"I... oh, dear God..."

"Yeah, Mom's gonna kill us when she finds out!" Johnny interjected. He reached over behind him, fumbling about for a moment, and then pulled out the edge of something long. "I got to keep the poster, though!"

"Ground control, this is Major Tom," Remmy murmured, "can I never go back home? Please?"

[End of Chapter Three]
Some time later...

The ram slipped in and out of consciousness. His mind sparked with glimpses of a generic hospital room coupled with sudden images— the face of his son, waving curtains, rain slipping upon a window, and unknown animals in batches of conversation. I’m just tired, he thought, and it’s just fatigue.

The flat lights of the hospital room made telling how long he’d gotten plopped onto the bed like a pile of old laundry impossible. Sounds of scuffling and raised voices kept popping up outside his room had since he last floated back into reality. The door opened, and the voices pitched louder, only to be quieted again as a shapely ewe nurse stepped in. She looked vaguely familiar, even if he couldn’t quite manage to place her face.

"So, who knows?" Remmy asked, twisting his body to face her at least a little.

"About your hospitalization?" She fiddled with the papers at the end of his bed— not even looking up in reply.

"No, about my visit by space aliens and how their probing could lead to some constipation problems... of course, the hospitalization!"

"It's highly unusual, sir," she replied, Remmy's sarcasm rolling right over her without comment, "but, according to your wishes, we declined to inform your wife."

"Thank goodness," the ram murmured, falling back onto his pillow.

"We understand that you don't want to spend the night here, and you should able to get going in not too long. We really want to have those scanning results back to you first, of course."

"Has Johnny—"

"Oh, your son has gotten along with our staff famously," the ewe remarked, gracing him with a smile. She stepped back and held a clipboard up to the light, inspecting a chart. "For a mammal of his young age, he's rather interested in how our billing procedure works, and has honestly began to fight back on your behalf to round down the price of the ambulance."

"I... see, then..." Remmy trailed off. Even hearing the word 'billing' sent a painful spike through his insides.

"I was going to bring him in to talk to you, of course, but he refuses to stay in the waiting room.” She swept the paper on the clipboard up, focusing now on an x-ray. “I swear I’ve seen him in every place imaginable with that girl."

"Oh, really?" Being so vague to just say 'girl', Remmy thought, she might as well have told me he’s hanging out with 'a living organism.'

"This girl, a deer if it helps, was quite well known to your son. They came to visit, though," she went on, "when you were resting at the time. I'm not sure what exactly happened, but they’ve both been on the phone non-stop."
"I'm not sure if—"

"By the way, it's Alice Bellwether, at your service," the nurse declared, extending a hoof in greeting. Remmy didn't even think before taking it.

"Nice to meet—"

"Oh, speak of the goat!" She turned away from Remmy and popped over to a set of large grey doors. "I think... yes, that's your son and his tall friend now! Oh, there's somebody else — on the big side— with them!"

**A few hours before the Cormo family commotion...**

The storage room, like an uncountable number of other hole-in-the-wall shops all across the Pack Street Commercial Center, made up in clutter what it lacked in space. A fox salesmammal with a growing headache clutched a sleek metal blender. He then took in a deep breath.

It wasn't his day, and the fur on the back of his neck pricking up showed how he had the sneaking suspicion it wasn't going to be his week either. He turned to catch a glimpse of the massive, familiar figure lumbering towards him. Dread kicked his stomach like he had drunk molten metal.

"Hey, if you and the rest of the 'b-team' don't mind," Al said, stepping over to the far shorter — and, more importantly, far younger — fox, "I'm going to step out for a little while." He nudged one of his huge paws against the salesmammal's shoulder. "No worries: I'm just off for the sweetest smoothie that I can find, Slick."

"Sir," murmured the fox, awkwardly slipping to the side, "for the second time today: my name is 'Greg'."

Al glanced away, the conversation boring him already. His eyes scanned over a set of shelves crammed full of returned appliances, and he reached into his pocket. "I'll be back," the wolf continued, gesturing for a second, "in a jiffy—"

"Sir," Greg began again, "I'm rather uncomfortable with such a jovial and, frankly, stereotypically adolescent term such as 'Slick.' Perhaps if you would ask for a suggestion as to a preferred nickname, or my consent..." Greg added.

The previously pleasant-feeling wolf froze, holding a card-filled key-chain against his chest, and tried not to sigh.

"To insinuate—"

"Greg," Al interjected. The wolf idly twisted his key-chain in his paws for a moment.

"Your thoughts, sir?" Greg stood up straight.

The young fox had this pseudo-intellectual and vaguely distant tone to him all of the time — usually trying to pack as many syllables into his sentences as possible, no matter what the meaning that may've gotten lost. Al had seen more and more of that lately after his promotion to Assistant Manager. The 'post-Nick Wilde generation' of vulpines, as those talking heads put it on the programs that his wife loved so much, had often thrown themselves into higher education and do-gooding social causes. The most determined ones recoiled at getting perceived as 'sly' or 'smooth'.

"Do you wanna be the 'acting' assistant manager when I'm gone, or not?"
"Of course, sir!"

"Then... *catch!*"

The wolf tossed his key-chain into the air. The fox had to awkwardly fling both of his arms straight upward, but he succeeded, gripping the batch of plastic-coated metal tightly. Al let himself smirk.

"Sl-Greg, alright, I'll see you in a bit," the wolf said. He pulled up his pants a bit and turned around, heading for the little room's exit.

"I won't let you down, sir," Greg said, slipping a paw across his cheeks as he tried to make himself look extra professional.

"Just make sure that these freakin’ blenders get properly scanned and sticker-ed before they're back on aisle two!" Al called behind him.

The fox nodded. Realizing a split-second later that, of course, his supervisor could no longer see him, he helpfully yelled, "I shall make it so!"

It only took Al a few seconds to get to the other side of his store. He exchanged waves with the firm's manager. The skinny rhino barely looked up from his stack of paperwork, but Al had gotten used to that kind of nonchalant anti-socialism from him.

The desperately-trying-to-be-trendy 'FLICK OFF' name belied what was one of the most plain, even staid, companies that he'd ever worked for. It wasn't fun, it wasn't glamorous, and it sure as hell wasn't challenging. Still, he didn't just have a kid but the whole middle-class fantasy package: a nagging knee and a worse back plus a mediocre house that his beautiful wife somehow tolerated. So, he could stomach fake smiles and co-workers who read the thesaurus for fun.

He put those thoughts out of his mind as he slipped into a light jacket. The thatched grey and beige stripes would have looked like a particularly drab circus tent on a smaller creature, but it did its job of covering his managerial get-up when he stepped outside. Al never liked looking like an 'employee' when he was in 'customer' mode. The puffy gift from his daughter needed to see some actual use anyways.

Al stopped by a side door, slipping out his smartphone. The wolf scanned through a few messages. His wife had asked him to pick up more toilet paper. She'd then added something about more paper towels. Then, she chimed in about paper plates. In the end, Velvet snarked about Al chopping down an entire tree to lug home after work. He tapped the device back to sleep and lodged it deep in his pockets.

"Better get going," Al murmured to himself. He thought about how he shouldn't take too long— not when that teenage fox could get a sudden attack of 'workers of the world unite,' and push things below 50% off. The wolf popped out of the store and took in a short breath.

The comforting lighting and gentle muzak of the mall enveloped Al like a warm— though slightly nauseating— blanket. Various species filled the different floors pretty much seemlessly and went about their day in chipper states— the youngest of them might as well have burst into a musical number. The wolf's grin grew wider as he sauntered along the second floor balcony. He stopped at the fountain with the poorly-tuned nozzles to bask in the spray it produced. He hadn't gotten bored of this small pleasure despite months of working there.

Yet Al was still on a mission. He had to tear himself away from the cooling mist to look for a haggard looking llama. He stopped the old creature sitting lazily— to be specific, leaning back to the
point of nearly falling off onto a patch of fake flowers— on a long bench.

"Claude, my mammal!"

"Al, you big goofball, there you are!"

The two mammals slapped arms in a familiar embrace. After a moment of gleeful fraternity, they turned around and made their way to the food court. Thought a little past lunch time, the throng of shoppers that had gathered still looked impressive. Antelope, bison, stallion, and other prey mammals popped into view among the stream of predators. The average customer's taste got catered for by multiple bistros and other meat-centric joints. The ever expanding and intermingling population of prey in Pack Street had to choose from two potato-heavy menus, but that was major progress considering that there had been no vegetarian options at all just five years ago.

"You ever stop," Claude began, "and think about how BugBurga used to be the best of what Pack Street had to offer?"

Al let out a hearty laugh. "More than that! Ever remember how the block got so segregated that any poor prey guy that walked in might as well have had a giant neon arrow on his head flashing 'prey'?"

"Damn... yeah..."

"Eh, it's something I've learned to live with. It's hard for me, honestly, to get too wrapped up in that kind of thinking now," Al said.

"Sure."

"Especially when Vivian's getting to that, what's the freakin' word... 'tween' stage." The wolf made air quotes as he put on an exaggerated grimace. "Keeping myself alive in the present is hard enough."

"Hey, between you and me, you've got the senior rank. Whatever you say."

Al said nothing, simply motioning the llama to follow him. The wolf stopped at the back of an enormous line. *Le Gros Loup* didn't exactly serve fine cuisine, but their sauce-coated fish sandwiches—the teasingly tiny items being served on trays filled with five or more—made them the most popular place in the food court.

"You're eyeing that one with the sweet potato fries, Al," Claude remarked, "looking... almost like..."

The llama hesitated for second, "A mouse coming upon a rhino-sized block of cheese."

"Did Auntie help you with that one?" Al asked, putting on a teasing inflection.

"Lamb of God, don't remind me!" Claude remarked. The color seemed to drain from the llama's face, his expression making the wolf step back a few inches. "I swear, my mammal, she's going to be the end of me."

"That bad?" Al asked, rubbing his chin in confusion, "I know that you've said she's experienced, especially at 'homey' places like the *Hallmare Store* and all—"

"Listen, big fella," the llama interjected, tapping a hoof against Al's shoulder, "I spent thirty minutes—yes, half a freakin' hour—yesterday trying to calm her down after this weirdly-named antelope came in looking to buy authentic, frilly white pioneer dresses—"
"What's the problem with that?"

"Matching dresses for him." The llama held his head back, pausing for emphasis. "And his husband."

"Oh..."

"Yeah, 'oh' is right," Claude went on, "but, thankfully, one of my yaks came in— that fat one with the really Italian name, ah, that’s escaping me right now. Starts with an ‘F’, but then... a bunch of vowels in a row. You know who I’m talking about? You know what? Doesn’t matter. Point is: he came in to do the actual purchase."

"Hey," Al remarked, "as the saying goes around the PSCC: 'What ends in a sale means you didn't fail'—"

"Ugh, I get off shift to get away from that kind of talk!" Claude cried out. He had gotten so emotional that a group of hyenas standing in line ahead of them awkwardly shuffled forward. "I just—"

"My little hoofer, look!" Al interjected, shoving out his paws and twisting the llama around.

"Oh, we're only third in line!"

"And that late afternoon special is calling our names, ain't it?"

"Hold up," muttered the llama, "weren't we just getting drinks?"

"Hey, I thought that 'let's have smoothies' wasn't a ceiling," Al remarked, "but a floor."

"Nice hair-splitting!" Claude chuckled. "Being a salesmammal has really gotten to you, deep down, hasn't it?"

" Seriously, you should ask my wife," Al replied, reaching for his wallet as they came up to the counter, "I counted at least five times this week when we’ve bickered about the relative value of— I swear, it's been for getting this and only this— buying Velvet a bed-skirt."

"Let me guess," Claude said, "you're still trying to get on that one obese aardwolf's good side, and so you want to steer the 'loves of your life' to not just to buy a thick linen monstrosity but to specifically get it all at The Joy of Flax."

"Guilty as charged."

"You ready to order?"

"Of course," Al declared. Sure enough, the hyenas waiting for their order had made themselves scarce. The stoat cashier, proudly wearing the white powdered wig and frock coat that helped give Le Gros Loup its faux upper crust style, gave the wolf a happy wave.

"Hey, before this pile of thick fluff says anything," Claude said, slipping a hoof over the counter to point at the cashier, "I'm curious if T-Rex is still around."

"The manager?" asked the stoat. She awkwardly ran a paw against her bright blue jacket, looking lost in thought. "I've not seen him since three, sorry."

"Oh, alright."
"He said something about these 'Smashmouth' tickets, though. He was pretty excited about them. Which was something to see, I thought nothing phased him." The stoat giggled for a bit, covering her face. "Even the dishwasher breaking— which you didn't hear about from me— didn't change a thing."

"Anyways, one late afternoon special, please!" Al called out, cramming himself in beside Claude.

"What size?"

"Large."

"He's a growing cub," Claude remarked, pretending to punch Al in the chest.

"Ignore him," Al commented, "he takes in so much snark on duty that 'your brain gets smart but your head gets dumb,' as T-Rex would put it."

"Sweet potato fry sandwiches, by the way," Claude added, locking eyes with the cashier, "and if you could up-size the regular drinks to cherry smoothies, that would be great."

"Standard or sparkly smoothies?" inquired the stoat, tapping away at her massive screen.

"Huh?" Al and Claude both drew a mental blank.

"It's a brand new thing. For twenty-five cents more, we add this creamy foam with a bunch of sparkly bits, the whole drink being coated with it. It's just reflective sugary stuff, but it tastes fantastic."

The wolf smiled from cheek to cheek as he raised both arms in the air. "Well, as T-Rex would say—"

"Al?" Claude looked clueless.

"All that glitters is gold," the wolf smoothly sang, closing his eyes, "only shooting stars break the mold— the mo-whooa-whooa-id!" He acted as if he'd howl those last words, instead just putting on a bit of volume.

"Alright, sure," the cashier awkwardly remarked, putting in a few more taps on her huge device, "that'll be nine bucks even."

"Wolfie... seriously," Claude said as Al handed over a set of old green bills, "are you really that into freakin' Smashmouth? I know you're cool with T-Rex and he's taking your whole family, but—"

"I'm a dad!" Al called out. He waved over at both the cashier and the somewhat peeved-looking tigers waiting in line behind him. Claude duly followed him as he stepped over to a pair of trash cans beside the food court's entrance.

"So..."

"I'm required to love Smashmouth. If I didn't, I would be breaking the law of dads everywhere."

"Remind me to be nicer to Velvet and Vivian," the llama muttered, "for having to live with you."

Despite the hoof in front of Claude's mouth, the wolf heard things loud and clear, his ears perking. Al felt something rumbling in his pocket, and he sucked in a deep breath. "Speaking of," he remarked, reading the cover of his device.
Some hours later...

"Sl-Greg, I'm glad that you could stay after your shift," Al declared, holding a paw upon the fox's shoulder.

"I find it fascinating, sir," Greg said, shifting his body to the side in a way that caused Al's fur to slide right off of him.

"Yes?"

"These high-end food processors. Apparently, they're going to revolutionize the world. Just imagine being able to, with a few taps on your phone from anywhere with a signal, and have a made-to-order casserole, stew, or curry hot and ready for you when you get home," the fox said. He slipped his head above a pair of the large devices. Their shiny glass and bright white plastic perfectly matched the array of jacks and plugs on their sides.

"Or... you can call for a pizza," Al dryly remarked.

The fox's wide open mouth snapped shut. "Or... yes. You could do that either."

Al couldn't help seeing the devices' big, round ends— large black balls with a single fuze-like cord coming out— as old-school bombs out of a 1950s Looney Tunes cartoon. The associated price tags didn't help much either. Still, even as he prepared to leave the mall for that day, Al thought about how he'd have to sell them, one way or another.

"Sir," Greg interjected, turning to face the wolf, "if I keep on with this overtime, does it—"

"Lamb of God," Al groused, feeling a vibration in his pocket as an obnoxious metallic chime filled the room, "I'm really sorry. I thought I'd silenced this." He held up the smartphone and stared at the familiar picture of his daughter in her track team uniform. "I've got to take this."

"Extenuating circumstances do come about," Greg said with a shrug.

"Hey, honey!" Al exclaimed.

"Dad, don't put down the phone. Listen."

"I won't, honey," Al replied, "but I still—"

"Dad, it's really important."

"So—"

"I'm at the hospital."

Al's heart began to race. The wolf's eyes opened wide, and he pressed the smartphone tightly against the side of his head. He motioned at the confused-looking fox before him to leave.

"What happened—"

"It's not me. It's Mr. Cormo."

"Don't scare me like that! I'm glad that you're not hurt, but what do you mean Remmy—"

"Someone decided to headbutt him."
"Okay,” Al said, letting his heart stop racing. He paused for a moment as he shut his eyes, forcing himself to calm back down. “I'll do whatever I can. You just need to tell me what happened. Do we know who?"

"His son."

"It's going to be— wait, hold on— what?" Al slipped his head backward as he tried not to let out a frustrated groan.

"The whole situation's pretty weird. But I'm positive that you need to get here. Now."

"Well..." Al stopped, slipping the smartphone down to his chest. He looked over, and he saw that Greg had wheeled the cart of new appliances out of the storage room. He closed his eyes and let his body slump against the foam-padded walls behind him.

"Dad?" his daughter's voice called out as he held the device against his fur.

"Well... shit."

[End of Chapter Four]
[Chapter Five]

Meanwhile, several miles away at the edge of Pack Street...

Hugh Muskround rubbed his paw against his temple, letting the warm air blast at him from the nearby vent. "Ugh, it's getting dark, and that means it's going to get cold," he mumbled. He glanced behind him only to discover that the irritated-looking hyena secretary that he'd been talking to had vanished. "Fair enough, I guess. She's only getting paid to listen to complaints if you're a customer."

The skunk stepped out of the reception hall and wandered out of the office building. The revolving door slowly spun about behind him as Hugh found himself lost in thought. The late-night crew at the 'Yotsubishi' building barely seemed to understand what their company even did, let alone have the ability to help him. The skunk stared back at the slightly pretty yet bland corporate icon above the door— the four flowers glowing a pale green that looked more sickly than anything else.

Hugh then scanned the adjacent street. It all came to a peculiar end just a few yards to his side— asphalt petering off into an array of construction sites. From here he could see piles of mud and concrete mixed with stacks of wood and rebar. He stared down at the concrete sidewalk for a moment, and he then let out a small sigh.

"Excuse me," sounded off a sudden voice. A short wolf in a plain white dress shirt appeared from the growing darkness behind the skunk, waiting patiently to use the door. He stepped back as Hugh, without even thinking, moved to let him pass.

"Hey, wait," Hugh began, rubbing his black-furred paws together for warmth, "I—"

"Look, buddy, don't talk to me until I clock in. Just a warning," the young wolf interjected, his voice full of obnoxious irritation.

"You do work here... Rocky?" Hugh finally noticed the tiny name-tag that the wolf carried in his right paw. The skunk thought for a second about how badly he needed to practice his detective work.

Rocky put on a 'why-can't-you-just-get-to-the-point-already' expression, but he still nodded back.

"You happen to see the mammal in charge of the actual office? The 'assistant manager on the line' or whatever she's called?" Hugh asked, trying to lace his words with a layer of undeserved authority. Rocky's flat expression showed that it didn't work at all. "Or any of the bigger, more corporate-y kind of bosses lately?"

"Look, skunkie, I usually just clock in, put on some Ziggy Stardust, and move papers from desk to desk," the wolf remarked. Rocky held his paws in front of his chest in the stupidest looking way: for all the bluster, he'd break his elbows if he tried to throw a punch. Hugh wondered if Rocky would try to show how he'd crush Hugh's head like an overripe grapefruit next.

"Okay."

"If you've got a question actually related to delivering mail, or even just how to find the bathroom, or something like that... fine. Otherwise... goodbye."

"Fine," Hugh flatly replied. He straightened his charcoal grey suit and walked right past Rocky.
Hugh waited until he heard the door begin to revolve again before he cleared his throat, opening up his mouth wide as well. "Seriously? Do these douche-bags really think that adding 'ie' to anything makes it a good insult? What else would they use? 'Sheepie'? 'Goatie'? 'Foxie'? Would this moron go to somebody in a wheelchair and say: 'Hey, Charie'?"

The mammalhole cover in front of him said nothing. Hugh pretended that it agreed with him. After all, the warped metal had bent to the side in a way that made it seem to have a smiling face.

The skunk walked back down the same street he had taken to get there. Various mammals, almost all looking bright and chipper for the nocturnal equivalent of early morning, scurried about. Hugh tried to think back to when he'd gone from merely working on Pack Street to living there. Dates and names had gotten quite fuzzy, the place's cheap wines not helping his memory much anyways. Something clear as crystal in his mind, though, was how the crowds of mammals had gotten more and more mixed over the past several years. Prey after prey, the skunk thought, had crossed a psychological barrier without even thinking it through — walking into a predator-majority neighborhood meant as little as walking into the rain.

From a basic moral point of view, that was all the better. From the point of view of a process server, though, it made his job go from 'pretty tough' to 'goddamn impossible.'

"Alright, so there's a BugBurga to the left of me, and mostly empty parking lots to the right," Hugh murmured. He stepped idly down the still warm twilight street. "I can wander around for another hour, but the target is probably just holed up somewhere."

He had no reason to narrate things to himself, but doing it on the job helped feed his semisubconscious fantasy of being a tough-as-nails Mousey Spillane character. The skunk pulled his coat around his body, trying to stay warm, and double-checked that the large package he'd been carrying was still there. Percy Vison, a polecat that was one of Hugh's rare friends, had told the skunk that working a job where nobody liked you wouldn't end up being that hard. After all, most of the mammals that got served legal papers ended up being gigantic pricks. Having to act like a third-rate bounty hunter, though, and hunt down shady characters that would jump out fourth story windows if it meant not getting their papers, was something that Hugh hadn't really gotten the hang of.

"Excuse me," a skinny and particularly pretty ewe remarked, stepping away from Hugh on the sidewalk. The fact that she went out of her way, even stepping briefly into the street, made him wonder if he'd witnessed yet another moment of skunk-smell prejudice. At the very least, thinking that helped him rationalize gazing at the ewe's rear as she sauntered away. Her thighs pressed together tightly with each step, and what Hugh would do to—

"Watch it!"

Hugh jumped to the side as a long sports car sped by. He didn't see the driver, although the voice might as well have had 'big, bratty teenager' in floating cloud letters, but it didn't really matter. It wasn’t the red BMW that Hugh’s target drove.

Although, Hugh thought, a bright cherry BMW with a custom license plate doesn't exactly count as subtle. He had no doubt that the pseudo-criminal antelope slapped with this class action lawsuit also craved an aggressive amount of attention.

Hugh wasn’t stalking some two-bit idiot, though. The antelope had run circles around his little team for months— no doubt swapping out the vehicle weeks ago. He’d also probably stopped wearing his trademark real fur coats. Not even a prick like that could live that flamboyantly— looking like a thin-furred nudist in the middle of Tundratown.
"Hey, mom jeans!" Hugh called out, spying a familiar-looking female wolf. He resisted the urge to add a 'speaking of somebody that stands out' to that yell.

"The hell did you just call me?" The wolf flipped around in place and clutched a paw upon a nearby lamppost. The middle-aged mammal poised herself, glaring at the skunk.

"Are you, in fact, a mother, Mrs. Cormo?" Hugh asked. His grin was so utterly nasty that a dung beetle would've lost its lunch.

Betty knew where this conversation was going— that didn’t mean she had to like it. "Yes, but—"

"Are those, in fact, fifty-percent-off stone-washed jeans from J.C. Peccary's?"

She narrowed her eyes. "True, but—"

"Congratulations, Mrs. Cormo!" Hugh declared. He waved his long, skinny folder in front of his face like some kind of a royal scripture. "By the powers invested in me by the Zootopia Legal Association, I hereby pronounce you 'mom jeans', until death."

She groaned at the idiocy before her. "Just tell me what hell you want, 'stink twink', alright?"

"I'm looking for a big, nasty-looking antelope in sunglasses last seen hanging out with some shady goons."

"And this involves me how?"

"Any clue where they are?"

She shrugged, leaning against the pole as she idly brushed her breast pocket. "No damn idea where they live. But they've kept showing up at Bun's Electronics. Acting as if those stupid little plastic cables that they keep getting were baggies of cocaine, honestly."

"Huh."

"I've met some dumb criminals in my time, but these clowns have it coming," the wolf remarked.

"Probably pissed off about the quality of their merchandise— sure, customers get screwed, but the middlemammals expect their bootleg electronics to actually work, you know?"

"Whatever the hell you say, Sherlock," the wolf commented, pointing off in the other direction of the street, "anyways, the place is just a block in the other direction." She pulled a stick of nicotine gum from her pocket and tossed its little package into the storm drain, letting the water wash it right away. "So," Hugh began, "I—"

"You outta know," Betty interjected, "that my so-called 'boss' is that in name only, barely even walking through the door."

"Oh..."

"My nephew, little twerp, hasn't seen him in over a month. That antelope doesn't give a shit about our office so much that he doesn't even make more than me. He's the CEO... and has the same Goddamn salary. So, long and shitty story short, bug him and leave my mammals alone."

"I'll consider that."
"Consider this: *piss off.*"

The skunk held up a paw, ready to let out a bit of snark. He stopped, eyes growing wide, as he watched the wolf press her body against the lamppost. The metal began to bend as if its years of quiet strength meant nothing. The two of them locked eyes for a split-second.

"You have a good day, Mrs. Cormo," Hugh mouthed, turning tail.

"Goodbye," Betty flatly remarked. She stood up straight, letting herself put on a smug look of satisfaction, and stepped off in the other direction.

**A few minutes later...**

Betty made her way up the bus stairs and threw herself onto a bench. She wound up sitting in between a tall, heavy hyena and a stereotypically combative rhino. Both of them gave her plenty of space.

She couldn't help thinking that she should've done something to that insipid little skunk. The fact that she didn't laugh at Hugh's pseudo-formal outfit was already an unearned favor. Remmy may have considered the skunk a semi-friend, or at least a step slightly above 'acquaintance' territory, but she'd gotten sick of following her husband's lead on things lately.

A sharp melody started from inside her purse— derailing the wolf’s train of thought. She pressed the small black item against her chest and shoved her paws inside. Her smartphone had gotten stuck beneath a batch of napkins; she had to shake them off before pulling it up against her chin. The wolf idly listened to a few more seconds of the blaring song.

For someone who's been a mother for over a decade, Betty pondered, "Angry Chair" by Argalis in Chains probably doesn't work as a ringtone. Not that she cared what other mammals thought, of course, but something less manic could improve her mood. She considered swapping it back to "Dam That River" or "Sea of Sorrow"— although, those tracks weren't any quieter. Still, 'quiet' had never been her sort of thing in the first place.

"You going to answer that, missy?"

Betty glared at the bison sitting across from her. He had leaned up against the window with his eyes half-open, and the sharp scent coming off of him gave Betty the distinct impression that he was drunk. The wolf slid the smartphone against her ear, and she showed the bison her middle digit with her free paw.

"Yes, sweetheart?" Betty asked into the phone.

"Oh, I've been upgraded back to 'sweetheart' territory, now?" Shepard Bellwether's big laugh, something that she'd heard countless times before, soon followed. "I should visit the kids more often."

"You're my brother," Betty remarked, "I've almost got a moral mandate to flip-flop just what I call you. You play nice? I play nice."

"Speaking of mood swings," Shepard said, "has Remmy decided to change his mind on the floor tiles? Like I said before, what's the point of getting slick wood when you can get the ceramic stuff for way cheaper? Feels even better and looks the same at a distance—"

"Or when you're wasted." As if she was in a comedy routine, the bison across from her belched mightily.
"Yes, that too," Shepard replied, chuckling, "I'm still—"

"Honestly," Betty interjected, rubbing her neck for a moment, "I keep having these moments lately, especially with all of this routine household-type shit."

"What?"

"If you'd told me a decade or so ago that I'd be having pseudo-arguments with my preyophile brother and predophile husband about the proper kind of Goddamn tiles—"

"Would you rather be like your one cousin, crammed alone in her little apartment with dozens of pet crickets? Where everything's plaid and smells like stale apple cider."

"Oh, God no!"

"What about micromanaging every other thing with Avo, Marty, Ozzy, or the rest of your so-called pack from your lil' neighborhood? Even planning out their meals? Beating up whatever poor idiot gives them a hard time? Even having to shear somebody if they refuse to do it themselves?"

"Like I said," Betty replied, "you can't keep needling Remmy on that." The chuckling on the other end of the line caused Betty to groan out frustration. "It's just not his thing, alright? It's not even his fetish—it's the opposite of that when I'm the one holding the scissors."

"Don't get too peeved, okay? I know. I do have eyes, remember, and I can see the lump of his throat whenever I tell Johnny and the other kids those stories—"

"Maybe your sheep enjoys fluffing herself up, and when you get started she's all squealing and moaning—"

"Hey," Shepard interjected, "are you and I talking in public?"

"You know that I don't give a shit—"

"What the mammals at the bank, at the bus stop, or wherever else you are think of you. Yes, I am quite aware."

"Ugh, look, do you have an actual point in calling me?" Betty asked, letting the sound of her gum smacking around in her mouth bleed through the phone, "I get it. The pack is still the pack. We talk to each other constantly. Do things together constantly. But I don't have all of the burdens piled on one after the other, and I thank God for that just about every day."

"Then buy the damned tan ceramics, alright? Consider it an early birthday present to yourself."

"I... well..." Betty began, trailing off. She found herself feeling conflicted about something for the first time in quite a while. It was probably since what she put on the floor was completely meaningless in the grand scheme of things. The oddly calm, quiet passengers around her—save the boozed-up idiot across from her, but he'd already started to nod off—made the bus' steady moves and low hum incredibly relaxing.

"I passed the 'sweetheart' test a few seconds ago, Betty," Shepard went on, "so, I think that I won."

"Fine." Even though he couldn't see her, Betty dismissively swatted a paw in the air.

"And please," Shepard said, "tell Remmy that—"

"Shit!" Betty interjected. Various lights that she didn't understand flashed down the side of her
smartphone, and she tossed it from paw to paw for a second like a hot potato. A couple big icons burst across the top of the screen. "I got another call. Make that— ugh— two other calls? Damn it, look, I’ll call you back, bye!"

"I'll just tell him myself later."

"I said bye!" Betty called out. She clicked to hang up on her brother, and she traced a digit across the side of the device. "Now, then, God—"

"Mrs. Cormo?" asked a perky voice from the other end of the line. She sounded young and female. Betty's 'sheltered prey' senses tingled.

"Yes, this is me. Her. I'm her. Whatever."

"Thanks," the caller said, "I'm calling from the 'Zoogle Plus Mobile Banking' firm, specifically the central office in Sahara Square. From those of us at the 'ZPMB'—" She pronounced every single letter with the utmost confidence. "I thank you for answering, and we 'financial officers' are here to serve! Twenty-four hours a day and—"

"Hold up," Betty remarked, "there's no reason to give me the damned commercial when we're already customers. Tell me what the hell you need to tell me and cut the crap."

"Oh, uh, yes," the financial officer replied. Betty had made a slight dent in the caller's bubbly psychological shield. "Well, we've caught an out-of-the-ordinary charge on your shared bank account, and would like to verify its legitimacy. We're unable to reach your husband at the time, and so we wanted to contact you as soon as we could."

"It's real. Last couple times it was just a wayward gas station bill or something— still totally us," Betty said, leaning back in her spot. She glanced up at the bus' big clock and saw that she still had several minutes of riding to go. "Just gimme the details. You'll get the 'all clear' in a split-second."

"Ma'am, the charge is for several hundred dollars."

"Oh." Betty sat up straight, nearly shooting out of her seat.

"Five hundred and fifty three dollars plus fifty three cents, to be exact."

"Oh." Without even thinking, the wolf started gritting her teeth, bits of thick fur standing up along her back.

"There likely was some kind of mistake that will be automatically fixed. Yet I need to inform you that bill came from 'Brier Fox's Services'— a corporate holding company that did not include a memo. You’ve not done business with them before, so you can see our immediate suspicion."

"Cancel it."

"Ma'am, I still would like to say," the caller went on, "that I think that—"

"What are you— going deaf?" Betty yelled. "I said 'cancel it'!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Fight the damn thing!"

"Yes, ma'am!"
"I didn't need this, damn it," Betty groaned, slipping the smartphone down to her chest.

The caller garbled something back. She didn't care. Betty knew that she should care— should try to talk through things to get as much additional information as possible— but the wolf just couldn't.

Betty clutched her paws upon her temple and rubbed up and down, trying to calm down with deep breaths. The wolf had worked out their billing situation with Remmy long ago. Their monthly budget was like a demonic game of Tetris— finding a way to fill every single nook and cranny with block after block of funds from somewhere.

Somehow, someway, it'd all blown up in her face. The Tetris-playing computer exploding in a pile of plastic and circuits— like one of those shitty episodes of G.I. Mole that her son loved so much. The wolf slammed her head back against the cold bus window and shut her eyes.

"Ma'am, hello!" The caller had raised her voice to a level that was neither bubbly nor perky.

That succeeded in capturing Betty's attention, however, and the wolf clutched the smartphone tightly against her cheek. "Yes?"

"We make a rule not to discuss the private lives of our customers," the caller remarked, "but I believe that it's imperative that you talk to your husband about this as soon as you can."

"Yes, of course," Betty replied. Getting pissed off, she thought, didn't actually solve anything. Not yet, anyways.

"If your identities have been stolen, then he needs to look through his own personal banking records with a fine-toothed comb. We highly encourage the both of you to change passwords, and go through an identity security checklist on our website. If a very old debt, or other exigent circumstances, come up, then you both need to work be on the same page while dealing with this medical services company. We'll help you with that as well, like I said before, however, this could all just be some kind of mistake."

"I'm listening," Betty said, even though she still didn't quite process what she heard, "Wait, did you say medical services?"

"The full title started off with 'Brier Fox's' and went on," the caller answered, "don't worry. I'm forwarding the exact payment details on to you right now. Both through your e-mail and also through your texting service."

"Alright."

"Ma'am, I hope that—"

The smartphone went through its horrid cacophony yet again. Betty let it bounce about in her two open paws, acting as if it would leap out into the middle of the bus and turn alive, before tapping across the top of the screen. "Oh, come on!" The wolf opened up her mouth wide.

"Hello? Is something wrong?"

"Look, Ms. Perky Prey, you've been really helpful," Betty said, clicking away, "but I need to hang up now. Right now. I'll call you back later— after working this out."

"Oh, of course, ma'am. No problem," the financial services mammal replied.

"And I may mean 'taking a stab at' literally," Betty added under her breath.
"I hope," the caller said, "that it's someone—"

"It's my husband."

[End of Chapter Five]
Chapter 6

[Chapter Six]

Later, at the Sahara Square General Hospital...

The nurse leaned her head back as she cleared her throat. The office area's microphone poked out of a slab of complex-looking electronics— awkwardly jutting out in the air on the edge of the v-shaped counter-top. The nurse glanced from side to side, saw no one to stop her, and seized the opportunity.

"This is a call to patient May Jour-Tom, calling May Jour-Tom," Bellwether spoke out over the intercom, a sly grin on her face, "just a reminder to you as you're leaving to please: take your protein pills."

She crumpled up a small sticky-note and tossed it into a recycling bin. A pair of stressed-looking rams turned the corner into sight, but merely glanced over and nodded when they saw her. An elderly ewe in a lab coat didn't even pay her even the slightest bit of attention as she scurried from a patient's room to a stairwell. Still, the young deer walking into the hall— clear out of sight of the sheep— quietly snickered.

"How many times are you going to mess with the nurses like this?"

Vivian rested an arm against a water fountain as she turned back— eyeing the young wolf following in her wake. She let out a dismissive noise before taking a long drink. Johnny simply shrugged. The wolf pulled a rolled-up batch of papers from his jacket's big pockets and walked past her.

"As many times as I can get away with it."

Vivian finished her swig of water and followed behind Johnny. He stepped up to a pair of restrooms but halted by the door, tapping a paw against its large sign. The deer folded her arms in front of her.

"Besides, you heard how she cracked at the end, she totally got it this time."

"I guess," Johnny said, "it's good to know that they'll say anything if it's on a sticky note and in the right spot. Just like that one anchor-mammal with the fancy suits and big ratings over in San Diego, what's his name?"

"Well, before too long," Vivian went on, "expect her to say that the floor's getting a visit from Dr. 'Hunki Dori' of the Sahara town of 'Suffragette City'— not to be disturbed because he's 'under pressure'."

"Is this joshing me about the Ziggy Stardust poster? Or this you getting bored out of your skull from all the waiting?"

"A little of this and a little of that," she flatly replied.

"Sucks being without your phone. But, hey, it's better than a magazine," the wolf remarked. He held up the clump of paperwork and aimed it at Vivian's face. "Speaking of horrible reading: hold this for me, will you?"

"Alright."

The wolf popped into the bathroom. Vivian pressed the papers against the wall in an attempt to
smooth out the lines her friend’s nervous agitation had made in them. She held out a hoof— ready to stomp the curves out— but stopped with it still poised. Instead, she briefly flicked through a few pages. Johnny had lifted them through some combination of pleading and natural good timing, and he’d managed to acquire nearly all of his father’s medical documents.

Vivian gathered that it had to do with the older Cormo’s diagnosis, treatment, and payment plan. Yet only looking at a few lines of the dense, unhelpful language made her head hurt. The various scribbles on the margins meant that, at least, Johnny had gotten some insight out of looking at it.

Vivian slid a few inches away from the bathroom door and let out an angry sigh. As curious as she felt, her natural instincts screaming at her to help the wolf any way that she could, it still felt as if the documents could somehow infect her with its bureaucratic stupidity. Vivian pulled her head back a bit and spent a moment staring blankly at the ceiling.

Chill air reeking of lemon-coated antiseptic blasted straight down upon the various mammals across floor after floor of the hospital. It seemed to Vivian like the world’s worst smelling refrigerator. Even finding one corridor, oddly decorated with an array of flowerpots filled with glaringly fake tulips, where the odor was the weakest gave Johnny and Vivian something to celebrate. They both had wandered around a fair amount after their arrival— partly to trail authority figures for answers and partly out of self-preservation against the boredom.

"Thank you," Johnny said. Vivian didn't even look over as she felt the wolf grab the paperwork. She just stood there for a moment, her mind wandering. Finally, she headed for a nearby set of benches. Johnny plopped himself down beside her.

"If you're wondering where dad is," she said, getting back up just as quickly and starting to pace, "don't worry. He's downstairs in that big computer lab thing— making a bunch of calls while he keeps looking up websites. Seeing if the idiots at that Hallmare place have a habit of harassing predators, maybe? I'm not too sure.” She shrugged at her father’s actions, “But he thinks it’ll help.”

"I see."

"I see," she passively repeated, scratching idly across her face.

Vivian couldn't help but walk along the corridor. Some kind of a prey-type instinct from deep inside her told her to keep moving, no matter what, even if it was only up and down a group of featureless, identical hallways. Those impulses helped a lot in school athletics, pushing her constantly, but without a clear outlet she simply felt more and more irritated.

Meanwhile, Johnny looked calm enough— but it was a complete lie, and she knew it too. On the outside, his face looked as blank as tranquil lake, but his frustration had built and built since the attendants had started giving them the run-around. It was only a matter of time until someone got their head bitten off.

The bench had such freezing plastic that it hardly took two seconds for Vivian to sit down, shoot back up, and totally understand that Johnny’s behind must have already gone numb. And somehow, she knew, nowhere else in the hospital was any better. She closed her eyes moment by moment and slowly walked in a big circle.

The 'Cormo Room', as the two had quickly nicknamed it, was only a stone's throw down the hall from those benches. In it, his father patiently waited to see a thorny set of test results— a result of some doctor fretting about a 'strained nasal cavity.' Johnny bunched up and then smoothed out the paperwork on his lap over and over again. Vivian hovered in front of him— idly swatting a hoof through a set of plastic flowers.
"You know, if you accidentally cut those down, they won't grow back," Johnny dryly remarked.

Vivian let out a strained chuckle. "It'd give the 'Zootopian Health Trust'— or whatever the hell they're called— a reason to replace these ugly things."

"They probably can't use real plants," Johnny said. He flipped through a few pages with a weak, flat expression. "All these older buffalo, gazelle, goats, and all kinds of worried prey end up sitting on these benches because their wives are giving birth or something. They'd munch right through every stalk of the real McCoy."

"That's... probably speciest," Vivian remarked, slapping a hoof against the wall, "but also probably true."

"I saw it on ZNN," he murmured, "so blame them, not me. Or, I guess, blame dad for letting Alex and I watch it."

Vivian brushed a hoof against the last flowerpot. Sure enough, a pair of white-blue flowers fell off their stems with barely a touch. "Ugh! They might as well go to WoolMart and get something on sale that's 'homely ugly', instead of 'industrial-brand ugly'!" The deer crumpled the plastic wads in her hooves and dunked them into a nearby trash can. "It's like a soulless geek's idea of heaven. White flowerpots. White benches. White walls. White counter-tops covered by white laptops and white paperwork on white clipboards."

"I know," Johnny muttered, letting the papers slide out of his paws down onto his lap, "it goes with the white woolen sheep in their white outfits— all those plastic smiles, hiding how they don't know what's going on if you actually have a question."

He brushed his paws against his cheeks. His oversized 'Meles Meles' jacket— something Vivian hadn't just brought to him put had caringly wrapped around his shoulders— would normally have been enough to keep him warm. Yet now its chill, itchy cloth clung tighter and tighter as the minutes dragged on. Vivian stepped over to Johnny's side. She tapped her hooves reassuringly upon the wolf's shoulders. Still, flashes of raw emotion bubbled up inside of her.

"So, what the hell do they say about 'co-insurance fees' and all that crap now?" Vivian asked, snatching the paperwork from his unresisting lap and flicking through it, "I'd bet anything that there's a— oh, Lamb of God, could they make this print smaller? Ugh!"

"You said it."

"You'd need a guinea pig with a magnifying glass."

"Now that's speciest," Johnny’s jibe was without heart, his mind clearly elsewhere, “and probably true."

"Hey, you might be outnumbered, but me and dad are here," Vivian said, brushing herself closer to the wolf. Her eyes narrowed as she tried to put on the most determined tone of voice she could. "It's just what the bean-counters do. They can't put the screws in on your mom or dad right now, and you so bravely put yourself out there. You just had to swipe one credit card at one point for one charge— and its wolf season."

"Thanks, but it's not a matter of 'good guys' versus 'bad guys' here—"

"And then they make you wait even more! It's always the same, dealing with salesmammals— dad told me that!" Vivian exclaimed, stepping away from Johnny for a moment to give her more room to rant. A pair of animals turned the corner towards them and she brought her voice down, but she sure
didn't feel like stopping. "Look, half of them are compulsive liars, and the other half make up whatever they want when you ask them for a price. Yes, even in a hospital. You can't trust this medical 'Trust'. And you can take that to the bank." She sounded like she was quoting her father line for line.

"Maybe," Johnny closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. Vivian had sat back down on the bench during her rant, and she took the opportunity to slide closer.

"Johnny," Vivian began, leaning over to whisper right into his ears, "I should tell you. Once, my mom ran into weird cousin Ozzy at a pharmacy outlet, and this big, fat fox all the way from Bunnyburrow had just—"

"Seriously, I'm lucky to even have this," the wolf interjected, slipping out of the deer's grip, “since they told me they can’t print out the whole 'advisory cost analysis' jibber-jabber in the first place.” He smacked the roll of paperwork against the side of his head. "Not unless—"

"Shit..." Vivian murmured, her eyes getting wide.

"And it's legible if I cram it right in front of my face," Johnny went on, "but that's—"

"Shit, Johnny, just shut up!" Vivian called out, stamping her legs against the floor.

They both froze. Not five feet away was a pair of honey badgers in blue scrubs. One had a dollar clutched in his paw, the money half way to a vending machine. Both medical personnel were staring wide-eyed at the pair, and the silence was palpable.

"Oh, uh, sorry," Vivian said. She slipped her hooves under her neck and zipped up her blue and gold track-suit as high could go. "I know that you're not supposed to swear in a hospital."

"You kidding?" the shorter, wider badger practically laughed out the question. “No better place—swear all you want.” She popped the top on a can of grape soda and took a swig. "It's just funny coming from middle-schoolers, but there's no rule against it."

"Sir? Madam? Since you've got a moment," Johnny began, holding up a small notepad covered in numbers, "I need a—"

"Hell, I'll join you," remarked the skinnier badger. He took a long swig of his own grape juice and then cupped his paws over his mouth. "Attention, all orderlies: shit!" The other badger let out a bark of laughter. "Boobs! Damn!" He continued. A flock of sheep appeared around the corner—but not one gave them a second glance, all engrossed in a low murmur of important sounding conversation. Only one broke away from her discussion to dismissively wave as she passed.

"Hell! Damn! Fart!" The two badgers bonked their drinks together, forgetting the presence of the teenagers in their laughing. "Shit out the farts! Damn the shit boobs to hell!" They closed their eyes and wheezed in tandem, acting as if they'd said the funniest things in recorded history.

The young mammals watched as the badgers stepped into the stairwell. Their weird carousing echoed around even after the door sealed shut. Johnny took in a deep breath. Vivian scowled and snapped her legs together.

"God, like, were they high?"

"Probably sleep deprived," Johnny said, slipping his notepad back onto his lap, "to the point where — well— they might as well have been."
"You are such a nerd. Seriously. You can't just say one word: 'tired'. You have to use two words with as many syllables as you can."

"And you're just noticing that... now?" Johnny asked. His goofy expression showed that he was joking, and Vivian metaphorically grabbed at it as a jumping off point to lighten the mood.

"Speaking of stuff that's basically the same thing," Vivian remarked, stepping over to the vending machine, "have you made any progress at all in finding out why those blood draws were counted twice?"

"Wait, how did—"

"Last page. That's what I was shouting about."

Johnny flipped the stack over to double check the figures she'd pointed out. "It's not just that you've got to pay for the same test over and over again," Johnny replied, "but the seniority of the mammals doing the test makes a ton of difference. The 'specialists'—" Johnny closed his eyes and grimaced in time with his air quotes, "want to get paid like they're Gazelle giving a private striptease."

"Like I said," she commented, leaning up against the other wall, "this whole system is insane." She sniffed at the mere concept. "They should just scrap the entire system—burn it to the ground. All of it."

Johnny locked eyes with Vivian, putting on a worried expression. "I've got enough problems without —"

"Metaphorically, you dummy! And, look," she insisted, "my aunt way out in Bunnyburrow will tell you! The deer over there have this kind of underground co-op that the media doesn't want you to know about—"

"Vivian," the wolf interrupted. He certainly didn't need to hear rant from Vivian's oddball family about the mainstream media delivered second-hand— not again. He stood up, dropping the paperwork on the bench to free his paws. "It's not that weird of an idea. If you go to BugBurga and get three orders of potato skins instead of two, you should expect to pay for all three."

"Can I be honest here, Johnny?" the deer asked. For the first time in... as long as Johnny could remember, she had her eyes closed with her arms up against her chest. She was genuinely attempting to understand something new.

"As if you'd been holding back," he replied with a smirk. That got a genuine, if reluctant, smile out of her, the lights did nothing for her, but she looked a lot less like a tired corpse with a smile on.

"Alright, well," she went on, "I still don't know when your mom is getting here—"

"Yeah, the stupid phone's dead and still won't charge. And you left yours in the car."

"Your mom—"

"Really, she could be marching to his room this second," Johnny interjected, shrugging, "and we would have no way of knowing."

"And woe be upon the animal dumb enough to get in her way." Vivian’s smile only grew. Johnny thought that it looked like a pervasive brightness in the grey of the hospital. “She’ll want to see your notebook, the one where you did the math.” Vivian let out a little chuckle at a private thought as she scratched her neck. "No calculator app needed. I'm honestly impressed. Alex and I— our little pack-
Johnny smiled tiredly at another spin of Vivian's broken record. "If you're asking me to join your thing with Alex, I'm going to have to warn you off again. Packs have to take care of each other, and really you don't want to know in how much debt I'm going to be in." He pulled the addressed notebook out of his pocket and flipped to a sheet of figures with a final triple underlined total. "Of course, this number is assuming that the last charges they gave me were even close to accurate—"

"Just tell me!" Vivan smacked Johnny’s shoulder for emphasis. “And if those woolly nerds don't know what they're talking about, well, that means your dad could be coming out of here in a wheelchair and everything's screwed up completely. I couldn't let that happen. So, it won't."

"It's twelve thousand bucks."

The deer slid halfway down the wall in shock. She blinked rapidly as her head tapped the side of the vending machine, trying to make some sense out of the staggering. Johnny’s dad had been in the hospital for... less than four hours. She had no clue how somebody could even begin to justify a bill of three thousand bucks per hour. And it all got worse somehow given that Johnny didn't seem sad or particularly worried. He looked, through Vivian's eyes, worse than that— he was deflated, appearing as if somebody had taken a smiling balloon and let all the air out.

"Johnny, I'm so... I'm," she murmured, "that's... wow."

It hit her that all of the meekly supportive lines she could think wouldn't really make a difference. Things would've been far simpler if they were both the hugging type. The wolf sure was, but Vivian had made her bed on the other side of the personality spectrum— literally, given the skull-coated poster for Slayer's latest album towered like a monolith to the black god of metal over her pillows—and had to sleep in it. That left only one thing. Okay, she thought, it left two things, but she didn't like Johnny that way. The wolf... Vivian stopped and shoved the notion out of her mind.

"Holy shit! Damn it!" Vivian screamed into the abyss of the stairwell.

"I... yeah, I know." The wolf slowly moved over to the other side of the vending machine.

"God... this... just, all this shit!" Vivian sputtered.

"I know," he repeated. He let out another sigh as Vivian flipped half-way around and slammed a hoof into a nearby window. It bounced back, leaving a hard welt on her hoof that would no doubt sting later. It added insult to injury how she couldn't even see the city outside; the smog had kicked up, and the window was an almost perfectly uniform featureless grey. The deer and wolf locked eyes for a moment.

"I'll... well, I'm out of ideas, or even things to freaking say," she remarked, holding out an arm and sliding closer, "I can, at least, do this."

"What?"

"I can get us a freaking drink!" She reached for a side pocket as she tapped the big machine's touchpad.

"Vivian," Johnny murmured, "I think we've got a solid decade to go before—"

"Right, like they put brewskis in hospital vending machines," Vivian interjected. That brought a genuine laugh to the wolf. Hearing the same spirits that he'd had half an hour ago popping up again, she went on. "And, besides, by the time we're in our twenties we damn well had better have Zoole
Plus teleport the beers to us. Or toss it down via jet-pack."

"As if drunk driving isn't bad enough, imagine 'drunk jetting'," he remarked, moving over to the deer's side.

"Lamb of God," Vivian groused, smacking two hooves together, "it's bad enough to know that there's no soda. Hospital, I know. But do we have to have every freaking drink sold out, really? Nothing except that God-awful grape—"

"Be glad that Alex isn't here to hear that."

"I'd say that sort of thing to his face. You know that."

"I do. But I'm still glad that he's not here to hear that." He brushed his arms against his jacket and watched as Vivian finally found an option on the touch-pad that she approved of. "To, honestly, see and hear all of this."

"Hey, even if it was just coincidence for me to happen to meet you here," Vivian said, grinning as she popped in some change, "that's what friends are for. Support. I'd be doing that even if I didn't have all this 'being the alpha means blah-blah-blah in the dribble-dribble-dribble' weight on my shoulders lately."

"Thanks. Really."

"You need the energy if you want to support both yourself and your dad," she went on, "your mom’s going to get here and the shit’s really going to hit the— oh, come on, really?" Her caring expression melted off in a second as she stuck her hoof into the opening of the machine.

"It's like a bad joke, isn't it?" Johnny asked, pressing his head against its cold metal sides.

"Move."

"Huh?"

"Move!" Vivian called out, pointing toward the other wall.

Johnny held up his paws and stepped away. Vivian slid her legs against the floor, eyes narrowing, and took a stance that practically radiated strength. Her legs sprung open like pistons and she rocketed into the side of the machine, her head connecting with a loud crack. The deer tried to stand, but she had to grab the windowsill when her legs gave out beneath her. She looked dazed, but Johnny couldn’t see any blood, not that it made him feel any less horrified.

"Vivian, the hell," Johnny moaned, rushing over, "what did you—"

"Behold!" Vivian suddenly yelled. Johnny focused his eyes right where she'd slammed into the machine. The long section of metal didn't just have a noticeable dent in it, but a shiny, silver-colored can marked 'Amazing Apple'— once stuck in that awkward limbo between in and out that they'd both seen countless times— had popped into the tray by their legs.

"Damn, it actually worked!"

"Like my dad always told me: you can fix anything if you hit it hard enough." the deer declared, her face stretched in a gigantic grin though her eyes still looked a tad unfocused. “Course, he usually adds an 'except mammals' in there, in case mom hears him." She clutched the can between both hooves and brandished it in the air like an expensive trophy.
"Why am I not in the slightest surprised that your dad would say that? But that’s pretty cool that it worked," Johnny replied, "and I’m totally into how you just shouted 'behold'— without a hint of irony."

"Hey, I am a dungeon master, after all," Vivian remarked in mock offense. She gave the can over to the wolf and slid flat onto the ground. Johnny took a seat right behind her.

"Just as well," he said, taking a huge swig, "since we—"

Something inside of the vending machine let out a torrent of whirring, scraping noises. The two mammals scrambled away on all fours in sudden panic. In a split-second, the dented section of metal on the machine's side popped right off. They both watched as the whole device wobbled in place—the sound of gas escaped from deep within—and finally something in its backside gave way. The mammals didn't even have time to think.

The vending machine fell straight backward onto the nearby wall. The gap was only a few inches. Neither Johnny nor Vivian had a scratch on them either—except for the growing bruises on the deer's skull from the charge. Yet the noise from the fall was like somebody had driven a hatchback into a concrete wall.

"Kids! Lamb of God, are you both okay?"

Before the two had time to react, they felt themselves lifted from behind. Johnny managed to let out a soft 'ah' while Vivian merely sucked in a tiny breath. The deer seemed to naturally slink out of the grip, but Johnny found himself hugged tightly by somebody large and fluffy.

"Dad?" Johnny asked, squirming in place, "wait, how did you—"

"I swear," Remmy remarked, still pressing his son into his wool, "the next time you get the urge to headbutt somebody or something— you're going to end up either flattened like a pancake or popped like a zit, come on!"

"Dad, that's, uh, some interesting imagery." The young wolf managed to turn himself around, meeting his father face to face.

"I'm not kidding!" The ram stomped on the floor as he pointed over to the vending machine. "The next time a contraption like this—"

"Dad, listen to me," Johnny began, pressing his paws against Remmy's chest, "it wasn't—"

"Something might explode, don't ask me how, or maybe it—"

"Dad!" Johnny called out.

"What?"

Remmy stopped to watch the wolf's pointed look behind him. The ram slowly lifted his gaze to the deer standing awkwardly among a set of flowerpots. Remmy watched as Vivian waved at him, a set of fake petals escaping her clenched hoof. He then noticed that look of having just slammed your face into a metal box at over twenty miles an hour, on purpose, that he sadly remembered from middle school.

"Oh, I can't..." Remmy groaned, letting out an embarrassing noise of pain akin to a squashed whoopee cushion.
"Dad," Johnny began, "there's something important—"

"It's *bad enough* that the doctors keep sticking me with needles and keeping me for something this minor," Remmy's words trampled right over Johnny's. The sheep rubbed his head with his hooves, trying to banish the headache he could feel building there. "And it's adding insult to injury that I've got to explain to your mom how this all our fault— but, since I'm your dad, it's going to be *my* fault. *She's* already going to kill me when we get home. Now, heaven help me, I'll have *Velvet Roe* after my head?"

"Mr. Cormo," Vivian finally muttered, crumpling another plastic flower in her hooves, "it seriously won't be anything like that—"

"You!" Remmy thrust into his jacket pocket and pulled out a smartphone. "I'm calling your mother right this moment! She's going to hear about this from me directly before you try to spin some tale about falling down the stairs or something!"

"Calling for additional staff!"

The three mammals immediately froze. As one they spun in the direction of the office at the end of the corridor. None of them were able to really see from this angle, but a telltale waving arm and friendly voice made the situation clear.

"Calling the janitorial staff! Please look into the apparent breaking of our 'Allied Refreshments' unit! Looks like we've another malfunction again!"

"Good ol' Nurse Bellwether," Johnny muttered.

"No kidding, there has to be something wrong with it," Vivian chimed in, "there's no way that even a full *loosie-lump* would make a sound like a bomb going off."

"A... 'loosie-lump'?" Remmy repeated. He locked eyes with the deer. She merely shrugged sheepishly back. He was too old for this. "Oh, let me guess, it's some kind of weird 'life hack' things that Al keeps evangelizing? Save you some loose change but make you look like a total idiot?"

"Dad!"

"What now?" Remmy asked, groaning in raw frustration.

"Oh, *there* you are, Mr. Cormo! If you wanted something to drink, you should have called," interjected a quirky-sounding voice, seemingly coming out of nowhere. Johnny, Remmy, and Vivian all flipped around and watched as one of the scrub-wearing badgers from before popped her head out of a stairwell door. "Sorry, we should've warned you about these things— if they get close to running out of drinks, well, then they might as well be literally haunted."

"It's... alright." Remmy strained to find an answer, but he felt more than emotionally defeated already.

"Hey, but forget about all that," the badger said. She stepped out into the corridor and held up the Ziggy Stardust poster from the fateful mall trip. "I can't believe that you and your son nearly stepped out of here without *this* bad boy."

"Oh, *damn,*" Johnny remarked, "I can't believe it either." He sped over and clutched the poster tightly, carefully twisting it into a massive tube. Remmy simply watched.

"Your son got a preliminary version of the paperwork that we talked with you about," the badger
went on, "but, like we told him, the final version has some important changes. I'm positive that Alice Bellwether is going over it now as we speak. Even if you're ready to head out, I'm going to have to ask you to see her before you leave."

"With a name like 'Bellwether', I guess it's guaranteed to be good for you. Just do whatever she says, I'm sure it'll work out fine," Vivian softly murmured in the background, her sarcasm barely coming across.

The badger let out a hearty laugh. "Oh, you won't believe how she got raked over the coals for that, back when the sava-" He seemed to remember the company he was in and readjusted his coming sentence. "Back during the nighthowler crisis." He made a goofy kind of paw signal to Remmy and headed back over to the stairwell. "Her first shift started literally the day after her cousin got booked, and that was, whew. That was a hard time for everyone. But our Bellwether has always been such a good sport about it. Always said to me: 'Honey, just take it as well as you can dish it out'."

"Seriously, thanks for making sure that we got this," Johnny said, holding the poster firmly against his jacket, "and thanks for everything that you've done— helping out my dad."

"Nurse Bellwether, I've got to tell you," Honey went on, even as she'd literally put one leg out the door, "she got me a special birthday present two months later. It was, I swear, a gigantic, industrial-size package of diaphragms. Enough to last me for the rest of my life, maybe."


"She'd written along each of the box's six sides in that cute cursive writing of hers: 'for your honey-pot'!" The badger slapped a knee as she burst out in giggles. "Can you believe it?"

The other mammals didn't have time to respond before Honey slipped right up the stairs. As the door shut with a clang, Johnny silently retrieved the packet of medical paperwork on the adjacent bench. Vivian then stepped over to Remmy's side.

"I take it that I shouldn't ask what a 'diaphragm' is, especially not my parents," the deer chimed in, putting on a sly smirk.

Remmy gripped the papers against his midriff, shutting his eyes. He tried his best not to let out another groan. "No. Please, just... no. Wherever Al is, I'm already hoping that when we touch base again he doesn't notice that bruise—"

"Dad actually met me here. Since I was already around, I called him to come by, and we've only yelled at a distance, then texted each other, since then," Vivian said. She pressed a hoof against her face as her grin grew wider. "Didn't I already tell you that?"

"When you're lying in a hospital bed, freezing to death, with a billion needles in you, well, it's hard to concentrate on every little detail," Remmy dryly remarked.

Vivian merely shrugged before going on, "I should tell you now, then, that the point is: I can just say this little mark—" She touched the crown of her head, then winced, "is from my track and field practice with Harriet and Hopps. The bunnies' house is halfway between here and where Marty picked me up a few hours ago." She cracked her hooves and gave the father and son a dark grimace, "And they know deep to their scrawny little bones to confirm any alibi about anything that I feed them."

"Okay, fine," Remmy relented. He felt his son handing over the apple juice can and reflexively drank down the last of it. "But before Johnny and I check out, I still don't know how you got here before
your father did. You just popped out of the blue, phoning mammals, and—"

"Attention please!" Nurse Bellwether's charming voice called out. Without really thinking, all three of them glanced straight up. "Will Joshua Jay Cormo please come to the floor's main desk? Please, we would like Joshua Jay Cormo to be here at the main desk."

"Huh," Remmy muttered, "no trouble pronouncing the full, legal name. I guess she knows her Bible."

"Or," Johnny interjected, taking his father by the arm, "Vivian and I have spent the last half an hour or so talking to her."

"Fine," Remmy said, he knew Johnny and Vivian well enough that when his son said talking, he meant that the two young mammals had spent the last thirty minutes making the nurse's life hell. He also knew them well enough to know the futility of raising that point. "Well— let's go."

Vivian trailed slightly behind as father and son stepped across the corridor. They both made an awkward wave as they came upon the counter. Bellwether appeared to be the other staff member there at the moment— though they heard constant scuffling and frustrating sounds coming from the office area's half-open door. She closed her eyes and nodded before reaching for an immense clipboard.

"Oh, you're out and walking already? Well, it looks like you're almost all set, then," the nurse said as Remmy looked through the set of bold-lettered papers, "I've marked where you need to initial, and starred where you need to sign. It's like I told Johnny here— charges are always negotiable. I said the same thing to that big, tall wolf, your friend, and to my sister-in-law too."

"Sister-in-law? Should you be telling us about your personal business?" Remmy asked.

“Oh, Joshua,” her words were harsh, but she was trying hard to restrain a laugh, “I can’t believe you don’t remember me!”

"You're the ewe," Johnny muttered, "that Uncle—"

"In the wool!" Bellwether remarked, her voice squeaking with delight, "I know! I just told Mrs. Cormo— my surprise sister-in-law— how funny it was! I'd only realized it after I'd spotted my puppy's name in this legal document, can you believe it?"

"I believe it," Johnny whispered under his breath, pressing his body against the counter, "I just can't believe I was so stupid not to think of it before."

"Oh," I get my mind so focused on work— going through paper after paper, shot after shot, and the rest like a machine— that aliens could invade, and all I'd do is raise my head to go 'that's nice' before sliding right back to my laptop!" Bellwether exclaimed, letting out a batch of giggles.

"She’s here?" Remmy asked quietly, the color draining from his face.

"Betty? Of course, I just had to call her when I figured out who you were! We had the best chat in the flesh only a few seconds ago," the nurse replied, "and I told her that you and Johnny have to come to my parent's house at the edge of the Marshlands, one of these days. It's practically a mansion. Anyway, I told her everything little Johnny told me. After hearing details— that nasty speciest at the mall goading you both and then everything else— she said she's more than ready for some kind of a vacation. Did that right before she popped over into that side bathroom."

"I'll," Remmy began, taking a gulp, "I'll show her all of this paperwork before I sign the final line."
Thanks again."

He turned to face his son. Sweat was already forming on his bare face, his expressions looked as tense as a vixen prostitute in a church full of bunnies, and his son’s matched perfectly. They both slowly moved over, backs braced against the counter, as they focused on the massive ‘Restrooms’ sign at the end of the opposite hallway. Remmy brushed his hoofs against the floor tiles while Johnny gently tapped the rock star poster against his shoulder.

Behind them, the nurse gestured over to Vivian— both prey mammals stepping away from the office and chatting about something important. Father and son couldn’t have cared less. They only had to wait half a minute before the door slammed open. Yet it felt like days if not weeks.

"There you are!"

Betty stood as tall as she’d ever looked while she marched out the door. Her scowl appeared wide enough to permanently scar her big face. Arms out, shaking in the air, she took a wide stance right in front of her husband.

"Let me get this straight," she hissed, dropping her purse beside her as she locked eyes with him, "an ambulance brought you and Johnny here to my sister-in-law—"

"Yep," Remmy mouthed.

"After you headbutted each other, putting on his macho sheep display, all because some racist idiots harassed you in their store—"

"Yep."

"When you were just trying to get me a birthday present—"

"Yep." Remmy felt Johnny meekly slip the rolled-up poster into his hooves.

"But those bigoted prey profiled my little Johnny, and then a whole different group of prey kept jerking around with him here, of all places, with accountants threatening to bilk him for every little charge that they think of—"

"Yep."

"Remmy, you can say a word other than 'yep'," Betty remarked, bringing her paws down against her husband’s shoulders.

"Uhh... right."

"You!" Betty growled. Her eyes grew wide as raw emotion surged all across her sense. "You can’t ever know just how—"

"Honey, I—"

He couldn’t say another word. Betty thrust herself forward and lifted his whole body into the air—clutching the ram tightly against her chest. It took just a split-second before her arms scooped up Johnny right beside him. Father and son let out soft bleating noises as the massive wolf pressed their bodies together.

"How much it hurt!" Betty cried out. She pushed the two smaller animals upward and slid them onto the counter as the hug kept getting tighter and together. "I can’t tell you how Goddamn worried you
little fools made me!" Her warm fur felt like it enveloped every inch of them—her even making what sounded like a low, rumbling moan of affection.

"We're, uh," Remmy mumbled, his mind flashing thoughts of her squeezing so hard that his ribcage snapped under the pressure, "both fine, uh, honey." His voice shrunk to a squeak as he gasped for air.

"Thank God!" Betty yelled. She pulled apart her arms a bit and let them both slide out of her grip, lying on the counter all haphazard-looking like two giant bags of groceries. "You should both know damn well that I'm not letting this kind of thing happen again!"

"You're not," Remmy murmured, "going to—"

"Those Hallmare creeps will pray for mercy by the time I'm done with them," she declared, turning her paws into fists, "and don't get me started on those damned ambulance drivers—"

"Please don't do something that will make us end up in jail," Remmy whispered under his breath, "the hospital is bad enough."

"I got a call from this financial office even, badgering me about this co-insurance bill, did you hear about that? Something that they bugged Johnny about while you were out, and can you believe that shit?" Betty asked.

"Mom," Johnny interjected, "I was the one that insisted. I got so worried that I handed over Dad's emergency credit card, telling those guys to—"

"You're just a kid! No offense, but, damn it, they ought to expect that you'd do nothing more than ride along with drooling or something— not let you get involved with the paperwork!" Betty flashed a determined expression across her face as she stepped backward. "It's time for me to kick some preys' stupid asses—"

"Mom, wait! Don't move," Johnny called out, awkwardly trying to sit up, "you're stepping on the poster!"

"Oh, shit!" She lifted up a leg and reached straight downward. "It's— oh, hey— is this what you bought for me?" She whistled as she took in the dramatic posing and vibrant colors. Ziggy Stardust looked as truly god-like as ever, captured just like how the famous singer songwriter performed on stage.

"Look, please," Remmy remarked, grabbing his son's side and pulling them both together on the counter, "I wish you'd stop and—"

"Just a reminder!" Bellwether's voice suddenly piped in through the system. The three other mammals twisted over as the ewe waved, even though she only stood about six feet away, and then returned to the microphone. "The staff on this floor may get a visit from a traveling specialist: Dr. Hunki Dori from the Sahara town of Suffragette City. He's not to be disturbed, though, because he's under pressure."

Betty, Johnny, and Remmy all held in deep laughs. The nurse stepped over to the other side of the office, looking back in their direction, and cocked her head to the side. Johnny and Remmy both snorted as they wiggled off of the counter onto the floor.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," Betty piped up.
"Oh, there it is," Bellwether said, pointing over at the poster, "I'm glad that you didn't forget. It's a cool-looking character. Is that the one gay dude from that Mick Jaguar music video, where they get all close and wiggle around each other?"

"Uhhhh," Johnny muttered, scratching his cheek, "kind of?"

"Oh, my, I've got to run for a bit," the nurse said, suddenly looking over at the clock beside the restroom, "and see if Ms. Vivian Roe is done." She slipped right into the office's entrance.

"Honey?" Remmy asked.

"Yes?" Betty turned over and locked eyes with him.

"I'm sure that all of us would like to go home by now," he said, feeling himself shrinking in Betty's gaze no matter how supportive she looked, "and we'd just need to sign the last of—" He reached over for the big clipboard, knocked over onto the middle of the floor. "These papers."

"Let me see," Betty remarked, seizing it right out of Remmy's hooves. She narrowed her eyes as she took in page after page.

"With the co-insurance, co-pay, and everything else," Johnny whispered into his father's ear, "what I'd got was a solid twelve thousand dollars."

Remmy took a gulp. "Well, last thing I heard walking out of the patient room was that they'd bargained it down," he whispered back, "and the badger's exact words were 'by a lot', so—"

"Eleven thousand, five hundred dollars!" Betty screamed. She swatted the clipboard right out of her own paws as if it was a wayward mosquito. "Are they shititng us?"

"It's something, I guess," Johnny mumbled.

"I swear to God, my fist is going into somebody's jaw," Betty growled, grabbing her husband and son by their collars. She dragged them along the hallway like two heavy sacks of potatoes.

"Mom, seriously," Johnny began, feeling something rumble in his pocket. He pulled his smartphone out and read through the pair of texts. "Hold on."

"Look," she said, glancing down at her son, "now's not the—"

"It's Al!" Johnny declared.

"Before you put a boot into anybody's ass, just know," Al went on, not sounding phased in the slightest, "I've got the money."

"Betty? Is that you?" As loud as the big, middle-aged wolf at the other end of the line was, all the more when put on speaker, his tone of voice sounded more sleepy than triumphant.

"No, it's another wolf with a weird ram husband and a weirder hybrid kid," Betty remarked, "come on: who the hell else would it be?"

"Before you put a boot into anybody's ass, just know," Al went on, not sounding phased in the slightest, "I've got the money."

"Got the money," Betty repeated, leaning up against the nearby water fountain. Meanwhile, Remmy picked up the discarded clipboard.
"We have the money. All of it. It wasn't exactly easy, not in the slightest, but after ringing deer after deer, sheep after sheep, and wolf after wolf across Zootopia never is. But, hey, that's what you've got to do to get through a whole group of friends and family."

"All these years have gone by, and you're still 'acting the alpha', Al," Betty said, making a quick chuckle.

"Hey, big girl," the other wolf replied, laughing as well, "be glad that we're in the twenty-first century. If either one of us had to start a howl for help, Goddamn, we'd be waiting all night."

"I take it you're still somewhere downstairs? I've got my two goofballs with me, and we'll pop right into the nearest elevator. Ground floor?"

"Exactly. Vivian's walking over to me as we speak." Al hesitated for a moment. "You know what? Hell, now that I've brought it up: it's not as if you'd have rams and the like running to aid a howling pack member either, way back when."

"Oh, I don't know," Betty began, putting on a devious smirk as she lead her silent husband and son pair to the end of the hallway, "you should hear Remmy try to howl sometime. Three parts adorable, but one part powerful all the same."

"Honey, please," the ram whimpered as he tapped the elevator button. The wolf paused for a second. She then clung Johnny up to her chest, both of them having matching smirks, and went on. "Still awkward when he joins Johnny and I, playing along, after all these years? Yeah, but he's totally got the knack for it. I swear to God, Al, even a hundred years ago he'd probably come running at the sound. Some ancestors back somewhere just had to have hopped the fence."

"See you in a moment."

With that, Betty hung up, let the cellphone slide down her chest, and watched as Johnny caught it.

Remmy, for his part, let out a pair of weak bleating sounds before stepping into the elevator. Mother and son exchanged knowing glances before following right behind.

"Do I need to explain what the term 'hopped the fence' means?" Remmy quietly asked.

"Dad, come on," Johnny responded, "it's the age of Zoogle. I know that predators and prey both haven't necessarily cared about species lines, going back way into pre-history and all."

"I think," Betty added, "that what your dad tried to get at—"

"You mean the sex part? Yeah, round peg fits into both round hole and square hole, I get it."

The combination of his innocent tone of voice and interesting word choice made both parents make a loud snort. Smiling from cheek to cheek, they both tapped against his shoulders. Johnny closed his eyes for a second.

"Speaking of questions: would it be rude if ask what exactly Al did to get all of those mammals to lend to us?"

The parents scratched their faces as they thought about it. Betty simply shrugged. Remmy, for his part, brushed his head against the smooth faux-wooden wall of the elevator and grunted. A few seconds of silence passed.
"Son, I'm sure," the ram finally said, "it's the same thing that he did back the year when you were born." He looked up at his wife. She flashed a knowing, caring smile, and the ram went on. "Got Anneke, Avo, Ozzy, Velvet, and basically everybody in the entire section of the block that had ever talked to me to chip in. These drunken yahoos had bashed in my face— idiots getting all hopped up in that post-Nighthowler fervor against any sheep they could find. I didn't just need to get patched up. I missed badly needed work time."

"Wasn't complicated," Betty chimed in, "Al just persuaded everybody to open up with their savings. It didn't matter that this ram here had acted like quite the dense, uncaring yarnball for a while— he pushed himself into the pack. And that means... what, now?" She turned to Johnny.

"Pack is just a fancy word for family," the young wolf casually responded. That he said those words by pure instinct, not even thinking about them, was something that both parents felt proud of. "Doesn't matter if you're actually related. Family is family."

The elevator doors opened up. The three of them stepped out into a maze of hallways. While various doctors and nurses popped in and out of view around them, none of them looking willing for a chat about directions, Remmy finally spotted a secluded area filled with signs. Johnny pointed over to one that mentioned a computer-filled zone for visiting business professionals, and they all ventured through a skinny corridor.

"Speaking of things that don't actually matter," Betty remarked, separating the batch of paperwork from its clipboard, "I hope Al doesn't have a motivational speech about togetherness or some other freaking thing to give. All we really need to do now is exchange some cards and sign the last of this, and then—"

"We can finally *get the hell out of here,*" Remmy finished.

[End of Chapter Six]
A couple days after the Cormo family left the hospital...

"Vivian Roe, how do you play baseball with hooves?"

The words bounced around the inside of the tween doe's skull as she headed out the door with the other students. The cramped study room disappeared behind her, Vivian hunting for the nearby water fountains. It didn't matter that the history teacher—a clueless otter substitute clearly in way over her head—had zero intention of insulting Vivian. It didn't matter that the class had ended seconds ago. As the cool water bathed her lips, the doe couldn't relax one bit—the back of her mind spamming her senses with how take after take of that question had haunted her at the magnet school. The older a student got, the more likely they were to drop Vivian's name and then slip in a "the hell" or "the shit" or something R-rated between the "how" and "do".

Some mammals had asked it sincerely; plenty of small, hapless mammals came from isolated neighborhoods hours away from West Oak Middle School. Yet many others had laced the words with either a snarky hilt or a layer of outright contempt—worst of all being those predators who only walked through the prestigious walls of due to a lucky voucher number. Just like she did, the doe always reminded them, not that it mattered.

Vivian leaned up against the water fountain as she looked out the open doors leading outside, standing way off at the end of the hallway. Her mind began to wander. As long as most of school's prey took success at track and field events in stride, thousands of years of evolution giving a bunch of them the knack for sudden sprinting, her sweet victory in gym class after gym class felt hollow as time went on. Those classmates that mattered—those tough, working-class types that weren't the species to act naturally agreeable or inherently simple-minded or whatever else—still didn't give her the respect she deserved.

It didn't help that she'd wasted her time, at least at first, trying to mold herself into the West Oak's little species-based cliques. The attitudes on those pissed-off, pompous "true-blue hoofers", as Vivian and her real friends called them, shot out enough heat to fuel a power plant. Trying to actually get along with that crowd was like blowing her nose on sandpaper. Unfortunately, West Oak's wolves were pretty much clueless and always fighting among themselves—a lot of them in a halfway endearing, cute yet pathetic way through her eyes. She'd finally drifted apart from all those cliques enough to truly embrace her status.

The "Dolf and Proud" shirts that the Cormo family had made for her somewhat helped. Trying to reclaim those kinds of terms, though, only ever proved half-successful at best. When the douche-bags in the hallways saw her quit taking offense to "dolf", despite how much they played with the insult, most of them just switched to "weer". Only kicking their tails at the decathlon got them to shut up—at least, for a few weeks.

Yet that all felt less and less satisfying. Faux-gold trophies slipped off of Mr. Stoutwell and Mr. Wynn's skinny limbs to Al's big arms, the older wolf always grinning as he hugged his daughter tight. Those things wound up gathering dust on the living room shelf right alongside her mother's commemorative pie tins, for God's sake, Vivian thought.

Swapping sports had seemed like a genius solution. If real-life was a feature film, the doe knew, her first time stepping up to the rain-soaked mound on the baseball diamond lodged between the big
parking lots— the editors able to splice out all of the images of ugly, expensive cars in the final cut—
would've felt magical. Being not only able to catch the ball and throw it but to hurl herself from base
to base with utmost speed, making her a great all-around player even without paws, would've caused
jaws to drop. If only, she thought, she lived in a movie.

The mysterious coyote with the small, beady eyes and set of rectangular moles right above his blue-
and-white baseball shirt— the predator who kept staring at her from the bleachers minute after
minute— would've given her a friendly nod. He might even have shot out a high-five if the film was
cheesy enough. At the very least, Vivian thought, the weirdo would've allowed himself a good, long
blink. If gym wasn't held outside in broad daylight, she'd have sworn that the coyote was a vampire.
The black cloaks and matching dark nail polish that he wore outside of gym made him at least a
wannabe, and he'd be a shoo-in for the kind of simmering nemesis that a tween girl protagonist
usually had.

In real-life, however, predators and prey alike had simply looked at her. The catcher tossed the ball
over to the first basemammal after the tryouts ended. Wynn, the busiest of the gym teachers, made a
satisfied check mark in some box on his tablet computer. Vivian got out some kind of supportive-
sounding remark that she couldn't hear, and that was it— the doe waved off of the pitcher's mound
back inside. The short, fat fox relaxing against a mossy stone popped up to full attention and started
to clean the field. It was just another Wednesday.

Even after weeks and weeks of practicing— including genuinely trying a few times to 'work as a
team' with the morons Wynn had assigned to her little group, even ignoring how the shortstop's right
paw touched the inside of his nose more than the ball— and experimenting with various sly moves
on the mound, every Wednesday felt like every other Wednesday. If Johnny and Remmy Cormo's
hospital-bound escapades the past few days had taught her anything, Vivian thought, it was that life
was fleeting while fighting for yourself was eternal. The doe closed her eyes, stiffening her spine,
and prepared to march out the end of the hallway with gusto.

"Vivian!"

"Damn! What?" the doe asked, feeling like somebody had dumped a bucket of cold water over her
head. Without even thinking, her body hopped off of the water fountain over to the middle of the
hallway, the doe staring at the double-doors beside her.

Alex slipped past the hunks of grey metal and stepped to Vivian's former spot. "It's me."

"Yeah, I'm not blind, so I know!" Vivian snapped. She brushed a hoof against her face for a split-
second. "What the hell is it?"

The slinky stoat slipped a paw into the pocket of his plain red t-shirt and met eyes with the doe.
"First, Mrs. Wormwood instructed me to give you this—"

"Fine!" Vivian snatched the folded up paper right out of Alex's paws. "Look, I'm trying to 'psych
myself up' for something, alright?" The doe didn't realize until after she'd done it that she'd mimed air
quotes for those three words.

"Yes, that's the second thing," Alex calmly replied, "my mom's here, being a part of this parent-
teacher event at the last minute—"

"Why not? I'm happy to talk with Charlie again," Vivian interjected, letting her frustration die down
as her imagination piqued, "and if she wants to watch the pitching tests: that's cool too. Shit, with her
experience, I'll bet she could get that coyote douche transferred in from the Tundratown Cavaliers...
frame him for spit-balling? Dab some Crisco on his t-shirt when he's not looking?"
"Vivian."

"Rub it over his shorts and wave the—"

"I'm telling you because my mom's here with Mrs. Roe," the stoat interrupted.

"Wait, hell, mom's around here?"

"Yes, I heard that she's hanging around right by the bleachers."

"Mom's way out there already? Shit, I shouldn't be farting around here!" Vivian remarked, waving off Alex. The stoat simply nodded back as the doe sped across the hallway and went right outside.

"Need to tell them what's going on!"

"Third, of course, I'm thirsty," Alex announced to himself. He flipped his wiggling body up a nearby peg-board on the wall and leaned himself over, stretched half-way atop the water fountain, and switched it on.

A loud groan of raw, unfiltered disgust shot out from the outdoors. Alex paused for a second, wondering just what on earth that had meant. He shrugged, letting his eyes closed, and went back to sipping. He could swear that even the magnet school's pure, mineral-saturated water somehow had a posh-like taste— his dad had joked that they might as well put gold flakes into the pipes, given how much Marty had to pay for that private school.

Less than five minutes later...

The two deer locked eyes with each other. Even after leading her daughter to a semi-secluded storage space apart from the massive schoolyard area— tall bushes and a pair of storage sheds thankfully separating them from the happy families that made up the rest of the class— Velvet Roe still felt deeply embarrassed. Her daughter had taken the news with the enthusiasm of a polar bear lost in Sahara Square.

"A 'coffee break'! Really!" Vivian growled, clutching her blue-and-white cap as sheer frustration rippled across her face.

"I wouldn't have even dreamed," Velvet said, tapping a hoof against a stack of large plastic chair, "that you'd react like this. I—"

"That's how those morons are putting it, seriously? Adding insult to injury?" Vivian looked ready to squash the polyester between her hooves into a hat-shaped piece of diamond. "Oh, la-de-dah, I'm having a 'coffee break' after the pitching tests, how lovely! Time to put Reginald on the grand piano! Archibald is out there picking rose petals while Janice is here smelling her own farts!"

"After the gym teachers' measure up the team, which isn't that big of a deal anyways," Velvet said, firmly gripping a hoof upon her daughter's shoulder, "the parents are simply going to—"

"I know! I just heard you saying that! I have ears, alright?" Vivian slipped off to the side and hurled the hat onto the ground.

"And yet you keep acting so that I can't even tell," Velvet muttered under her breath.

"Look, I'll try to get across even half— honestly, even a tenth— of how bogus and totally disgusting this is, alright?" Vivian slammed her back against the nearby storage shed.

Her mother tried her best not to sigh, letting herself glance backward at the groups of parents and
children happily spending time together away from their secluded little spot. "Fine."

"Track and field games are one thing. Baseball is another thing. They're not only different sports, mom. Honestly, they might as well be played on different planets— different universes, even," began the young doe, "and I've told you and dad this, over and over again."

"I don't think you understand just how proud what you've done has made him," Velvet added.

"It's more than pride. It's standing up for yourself," Vivian protested, bracing her arms against the wall behind her, "and these idiots have spent weeks pushing me and pushing me. Game after game, all of the stupid stares, stupider yells, and stupidest gestures would be one thing, okay? It's not even pretending to be fair when six of the nine mammals on my time can barely do anything! I swear that they couldn't get a single guy past home if they were playing tee-ball!"

"Vivian, wait," Velvet said, lowering her voice as she laid on more of a motherly tone, "I know that you've heard countless times about how little winning really is, compared to what we learn from how we play."

"Mom, I can force myself not to care about us getting thrashed, three wins to thirteen losses, I really can! I might even be able to force myself not to care about how these lunkheads aren't even trying!" Vivian went on, her breathing getting more and more tense. She thrust her hooves in front of her face before forced out the remaining words. "But, God help me, I can't even begin to pretend that the pitching tests aren't... the biggest thing ever." She shut her eyes and locked her hooves together, forcing her emotional storm into words. "This is my moment. I finally get it all in writing— tested by a machine, not a mammal. Miles per hour? My numbers against everybody else's? Can't you see, mom?"

"Please," Velvet finally let out, stepping over to her daughter's side.

"Nothing held back anymore, you know? It'll be me, the balls, Mr. Wynn, and the machine— my real chance. Now you tell me that, if I blow it, I can't just slink away to study time and go home? Now, I'll get my screw-up rubbed in my face by every other mammal in the class with their parents? I'm sentenced to a whole hour in those pimped-up gardens with these old mammals sucking down nasty coffees while their moronic spawn screw with me? God, even death row inmates get an appeal or something!" Vivian finished.

Velvet quietly massaged her daughter's shoulders. She gazed straight down at the younger doe's face— Vivian pressed her chin against her hooves as her eyes narrowed to little slits. After thirty seconds of thankful, at least from Velvet's point of view, silence, the younger doe took in a deep breath and turned her head away from the big green field. Her mother put on a little smile.

"Look, I'm sorry for getting so pissy over this," Vivian remarked, standing up, "it's... I..."

"You used 'moronic' correctly in a sentence," Velvet interjected, "that's something."

The younger doe mimed hitting her mother on the chest. As they both smiled, Velvet turned herself around and brushed around the nearby bushes. Vivian stared for a moment, confused, but she nodded when her mother triumphantly held up the tossed-off baseball cap.

"Thanks, mom."

"Now go get 'em, girl."

Velvet felt ten feet tall as she firmly placed the cap upon her head, carrying herself as if it was a crown. She marched with steely confidence out of the secluded little bushy area out into the main
field. Various mammals practiced around the baseball diamond with their parents—a slender fox bouncing around third plate tossed a ball to a shaggy ram outfielder hoisted on his father's shoulders.

Most of them didn't carry themselves that seriously. The same fox tried to hop midair yet again and seemingly tripped over his own legs. He popped back upwards in a split-second with a goofy grain and a new array of grassy stains across his shorts. Vivian turned her attention over to the bleachers, seeing a pair of gym teachers engaged with a set of tween coyotes and dingos, and she held her arms against her hips.

"What are those buttheads trying to pull now?" Vivian asked to nobody in particular.

As if on cue, the tallest, widest dingo slipped half-way out of his seat and looked back at the determined doe. Fire seemed to blaze inside of the predator's big hazel eyes. Vivian stared defiantly right back.

"Hunter," Vivian muttered, feeling as if the two classmates were the only mammals in the whole school, "if you mess up my pitches, you literal son of a bitch, I swear I'll—"

"Oh, excellent!" Wynn exclaimed, the teacher popping up like a daisy right behind the doe. She tried to look over at his sun-soaked, grinning face only to awkwardly angle her head straight at the afternoon sun. "There you are, Ms. Roe! We're all ready, then!"

Before she even had time to think, the predator teacher tugged her straight backward. Vivian flailed her arms in front of her for a moment. She found herself half-flung against a group of tall metal carts crammed inch by inch with all kinds of sports equipment. The doe kept her mouth shut as she glanced from side to side. None of the classmates lined up just around her paid Vivian any attention—they all focused on the baseball diamond before them, a trifecta of teachers standing by the pitcher's mound.

"Great!" Wynn called out. He clutched his tablet computer against his light, blue-and-gold jacket like some kind of a precious treasure. Without even looking, he put down a few taps on the screen and pointed out over to his left. "In just a moment, most of you will be heading on over to Alpha Field for a practice game. No scores are being kept. No worries now since it's just for fun, alright?"

Noises of mild enthusiasm wafted from the group of the students. For her part, Vivian kept on looking about even as she tried to stay locked in place. A few additional mammals joined in on the edges of the big line-up. She wondered where exactly all of the parents had went off to.

"Mr. Stoutwell has already told you all," the chipper Wynn continued, gesturing at the older raccoon fiddling with a bicycle behind him, "about the ceremonial 'Coffee Break' this class will hold with participating parents as well as with select staff—a wonderful get-together, one that I can now confirm will have coffee-flavored ice cream for all for all of the students!"

Pleasant, supportive sounds popped up from the crowd. Vivian remained focused. That speed record would be hers, she thought, in less than half an hour.

"A 'Break' that," Stoutwell said, "will give everyone an opportunity after class to relax!"

The teacher's mood flipped with that last word—a kind of a blue chill of fear slipping across the raccoon's face. A bunch of the students, including Vivian, cast their eyes over to the particular supply cart that Stoutwell stared at. Hunter simply smiled back from his spot sitting on the metal—glancing at the ground and quietly whistling. His two dingo cronies sitting beside him did the same.

"Off the metal and stand up, please!" Wynn shouted.
The dingos complied. None of their classmates, as far as Vivian could hear, said anything. She squinted as she focused in that direction, the sun getting in her eyes.

"Put that back!" Stoutwell yelled.

Everyone heard a soft clanging sound as Hunter apparently dropped something back into place. The dingo's expression looked, however, as smug as ever.

"Please," Stoutwell said, lowering his voice, "for the love of the non-denominational deity or deities that you may or may not worship, do not touch those 'lawn darts.'" He shut his eyes as he made the air quotes. "Don't mess with them even as a joke. Those are going into surplus because— surprise, surprise— most adults at West Oak Middle School don't consider stockpiling sharp projectiles of unknown quantity within easy reach of children to be a good idea."

"I'll take care of that," Wynn interjected, slipping an arm on the other teacher's shoulder, "and stow it away." He gave the tablet over to the raccoon. "You can sort out the kids."

As Wynn sped over to the metal cart, a series of beeps coming from the raccoon's computer caused his eyes to light up. He glanced down, read a few lines, and then grandly guestured at the entire group of students. Aside from a few stragglers, they all looked right back at the teacher.

"Running a bit behind schedule," Stoutwell remarked, "so it's time to get started right now. Five randomly chosen students— done by an app, not by me, so no complaints please— will stay here, next to the smaller bleachers, as we go through the pitching tests. It's easy: you just throw the ball to the catcher with Mr. Wynn holding the machine. When those five are finished, they'll hop on out of Beta Field and join their classmates at the practice game, which all the parents will be watching. I'll get another five students to test, and everything repeats until class is over— it's simple."

"Crunch time," Vivian muttered to herself. She pressed her hooves against her uniform and took in a deep breath. "Arms don't fail me now."

"Starting off the five are," Stoutwell began, sliding a paw along his computer, "Mr. Leaps, first!" A slightly chubby hare with a flat expression and cheese stains on his shorts stepped out of the line. "Mr. Muskroura, second!" A skunk at the far beginning of the line, barely visible to everybody else, walked forwards. "Ms. Vulpes, third!" A nerdy-looking vixen with coke-bottle glasses and shiny braces hopped over to the teacher.

"Please, God, let me be in the first round," Vivian whispered, looking slightly skyward, "I know I can do this. I know I'll get at least bronze with this, and I'm ready. I just want it over with."

"Fourth is," Stoutwell started to say, hesitating for a moment, "Hunter Jacks!"

The muscular dingo flipped up his arms— getting high-fived by both of his lackeys. He was all smiles as he confidently marched from his spot at the tail-end of the line. Every heavy step pressed his paws deep into the grass. He came up to Stoutwell's place and dismissively cocked his head to the side— giving each of his three chosen classmates an individual, tailor-made smug glare.

"One moment," Stoutwell murmured. He leaned his body down and hovered a paw up and down Hunter's uniform, never quite touching anything. The confused-looking students— Hunter included — merely froze in place. "Okay, good, let's forget about those darts. No smuggled pointy things to worry about."

"Just like your wife said," Hunter snarked.

Stoutwell turned various shades of red. The crowd of students could barely help it, and several of
them outright exploded in laughter. Vivian was no different, although he loathed the dingo enough that it only lasted a second.

"And now!" Stoutwell exclaimed, putting his tablet up against his face as a kind of psychological shield. "The fifth student is: Vivian Roe!"

"Oh, hell yeah!" The deer pumped a hoof into the air as she trotted over to the pitcher's mound. The burst of raw joy felt strong enough that she could totally ignore the dingo for a few moments—Hunter standing out of place, beside the third gym teacher, anyways.

"Mr. Wynn," Stoutwell said, making an about face, "it's time for the testing."

The fox teacher simply nodded back. The five chosen students all gazed at the rifle-like radar gun Wynn idly held against his legs. Vivian could swear that it looked like one of the plasma weapons from "The Furce Awakens".

Stoutwell pointed out at the two dozen mammals still waiting, duly lined up at the edge of the baseball diamond. "Thank you all very much! I'll see everybody who's not being tested right now at the other field! Please head on out!"

Most of the students duly complied, heading on over to the other side of the schoolyard. However, a group of around five or so— all of them predators except for one nervous yet curious rabbit—remained. They slowly stepped over at the direction of the nearby bleachers.

"Hey, so we've got spectators?" Wynn remarked. He glanced over at the chosen five before idly waving and smiling over at the other mammals. "Sure, why not? It's a loose, easy-peasy sort of day, anyways!" The teacher turned his attention to the chosen five. "Please, take a seat a bit closer— head on over by first base! Oh, but not you, Mr. Leaps! You're up!"

"Sir," Leaps said, the chubby hare jumping out of the little group, "do I have to?"

"Do you," Wynn repeated, not quite understanding, "have... what?"

"Can't I just... not pitch? Ask anybody and they'll tell you: basically all I do is catch stuff!" Leaps protested. Hunter and Vivian knowingly snickered in the background, the doe idly tapping a hoof against first base. "And that's hard enough! I haven't really thrown the ball for like forever!"

"Son," Wynn said, happily brushing a paw upon the hare's baseball cap, "this isn't being graded. This isn't even really being 'scored' per se. I'm just giving you a number that you take home for your progress. It's like worrying about having somebody measure how tall you are— don't be silly!"

The hare simply let out a low whine. Wynn simply held up his radar gun and motioned Leaps to the middle of the pitcher's mound. The dejected prey mammal walked over to the spot.

"The catcher has the ball now. You throw it. This whole thing will only take a minute," Wynn remarked. He took his place just a few steps away from home plate and clutched the gun between his paws. "Alright, toss it over big guy."

The tiger behind home plate threw the ball over. The hare duly caught it, though his sad expression remained exactly the same. The spectators at the bleachers made some dismissive noises, but overall they stayed as quiet as the teachers. Feeling the pressure on him, Leaps shut his eyes and pitched.

The ball flipped up in the air and landed halfway between the mound and home plate. A second of total silence followed. A hyena burst out with a loud laugh, and most of the rest of the spectators immediately followed with their own chuckles and snickerings.
"Sir," Leaps began, looking ready to cry, "I..."

"Might want to try that again," the catcher flatly said, stepping over to the ball and tossing it back to the hare. Wynn took his eyes off of his radar gun and scratched his head, being at a loss for words.

"Can I... please..."

"You only have to get it over the plate for it to be a 'pitch'," Wynn interjected, trying to put on the most caring tone of voice he could manage, "and that's it. No worries. Just try again."

The teachers took their positions. The hare let out a long, pained groan. Yet he stood up straight, held his arms above his head, and pitched the ball once again.

It flew up in the air and seemed to do a kind of odd arc. The mammals all blankly stared without saying a thing. The ball fell right back onto the ground— landing in the exact same spot as the first pitch.

"Moooooooom!" Tears slipped down the hare's cheeks as he cried out. The tiger slipped out of his gear and ran over to the pitcher's mound. Wynn, for his part, leaned himself up against the chain link fence behind him and scratched all over his face.

Aside from Hunter, who let out a biting growl of amusement, the rest of the classmates quietly murmured among themselves and looked right at the ball. The seeming defiance of the laws of physics that they'd just witnessed struck them more than the comedy of the situation. Still, it only took a few seconds before their attention flipped back to the fox teacher.

"Alright, so it's perfectly within the rules for Mr. Leaps to decide to do his pitch later," Wynn said, stepping over to the four mammals waiting by first base. He gestured over at the tiger leading the hare off of the field, heading over to a pair of older prey mammals that were presumably Leap's parents. "He's voluntarily giving up his spot so that his classmates may proceed before him."

"Speaking of which," Hunter began, the dingo leaping up, "are there any objections if I go next?"

"Well, that's... presumptive," Wynn remarked, "to say the least—"

"Hey, why not?" the skunk muttered. He shuffled about a bit from his spot where the shortstop would normally be, the young mammal smacking his tail against first base. "It doesn't matter, does it? Just do it."

"Sure, what the hell," the nerdy fox added, though she immediately put a paw over her face, "I mean: what the heck."

It being three to one in her disfavor only made Vivian want to object even more. At the same time, she thought, she didn't want to look like a petty loser given that Hunter was fair-and-square chosen to go before her anyways. With all eyes on her, the doe finally chose to simply cock her head to the side and let out a dismissive: "Blah, it's whatever."

"Mr. Jacks!"

The tiger only allowed the dingo a split-second before he threw the ball over. Hunter seamlessly flipped his body to the right and caught it— the dingo not even breaking a sweat. He waved to the mini-crowd sitting at the bleachers— the mammals making wild noises of support— and hopped right onto the pitcher's mound.

"Ready," Wynn said, poising himself with the radar gun.
"It's magic time," Hunter declared.

"God, he's already got himself a catchphrase," Vivian remarked, being just loud enough for the nearby fox and skunk to hear.

The dingo put on an immense grin— looking to Vivian wide enough to eat an entire BugBurga deluxe sandwich whole. He wound up the ball. He pitched.

The ball hurled through the air and smashed upon the catcher's mitt. A noise like a firecracker going off blasted across the field. Before anybody on the bleachers could even react, the three pitchers in waiting flipped their bodies off of the grass and stood up straight, watching with wide open eyes. The dingo on the bound simply beamed.

"Eighty-five!" Wynn yelled, pumping an arm out into the air. He smacked the radar gun against his chest and whistled. "Nice! And without even warming up or anything? Wow!"

The spectators all cheered, with even the lone prey mammal on the bleachers getting in on the act. At the same time, however, Hunter let his huge smile fade. He made an odd sort of see-saw motion with his paws— something that caused the teachers to blankly stare back. Looking a bit peeved all of a sudden, Hunter shook his head and pointed at the dugout.

"Seventy-nine what?" the nerdy skunk beside Vivian whispered her.

"Miles per hour speed," Vivian whispered back, holding herself back a split-second from adding a "you freaking idiot" to the end of it.

"Look! Mr. Wynn!" Hunter suddenly called out.

"Yes?"

"I was signaling this" he declared, "I can do better."

Those words caused quite a stir. Even as the dingo started to visibly sweat, the smug aura that wafted over him that showed he totally expected it and relished it— bathed in the mammals' attention. Both teachers murmured something to each other, with every single one of their students watching keenly. Wynn then tossed the ball between his paws a bit before lobbing it over to the dingo.

"Like we said at the beginning of class," the fox teacher said, "everybody get two tries at minimum. And more if they need it."

"I won't need it," Hunter remarked. The burst of little howls from the bleachers, the young predators eating out of his paw, made him stand even taller— arms stretching over his head with his muscles gleaming a little in the sun.

Wynn shrugged as he took his position, aiming his radar gun straight ahead.

"Magic time," Hunter remarked yet again, though this time gritting his teeth.

Vivian had to respect the raw determination that flowed across his body, the doe looking him over intensely, even if she despised every inch of him. Hunter would up. He pitched.

"Eighty-eight!" Wynn called out. He hopped up and punched the air. "Damn, son, that's Major League Baseball level! And you're not even old enough to have a smoke!"

Instead of letting out some kind of crude, self-aggrandizing remark, Hunter simply replied with a
subdued, "Thanks."

Cheers and claps erupted. Two of the three pitchers in waiting made messages of congratulation. Yet the dingo's sincere tone of voice, the curious look on his face confirming that he didn't expect to do as well in his own mind, only made Vivian angrier. She glared at him as he stepped away from the baseball diamond and into the embrace of a pair of coyotes at the corner of the bleachers.

"Alright, then," the doe growled, stepping over to Wynn's spot against the chain link fence. The fox and skunk awaiting their turns on the mound followed along.

"Yes, Ms. Roe?" the fox teacher asked, surprise still etched across his features.

"Can I go next?"

"Well, it's not like things are set in stone," Wynn replied, resting a paw against his face, "but it's just that Mr. Muskroura and Ms. Vulpes have—"

"I'm not going after that," the skunk interjected, brushing a paw against the fence.

"Look," the nerdy vixen said, giggling, "I'm just here for the coffee-flavored ice cream. And because it's Wednesday and this period comes after chemistry."

"Ms. Roe!"

The exclamation caught all of the mammals off guard. Vivian barely had time to wiggle herself around before she felt a baseball lobbed against her chest. She thankfully had enough instinct to grab onto it without even thinking.

"Good luck," the catcher said, putting his helmet back on and walking over to home plate.

Vivian had rehearsed the next few moments in her head over and over again the entire day. Her fantasies included an inexplicably-placed close friend— maybe Johnny or somebody else from the Cormo family, it varied moment by moment— with an Mp3 pseudo-boombox sitting in the bleachers. A booming version of "Wild Thing"— neither the Troggs original or the terrible dance music remixes done decades later, but the female-fronted punk rock take from the movie *Major League*— then shot out over the entire field. She took the mound only to belt out a pair of high-energy fastballs at ease, barely breaking a sweat, and then hopped off the diamond to the growing applause of the stuck-up predators that finally admitted she could beat them at their own games.

When she took the mound in reality, it hit her how one of the most important parts of her fantasies—a completely passive audience— was something she took completely for granted. Thinking otherwise didn't come to her at all. And that complete surprise literally hit her in the face.

"The hell was that!" Vivian yelled. She dropped the ball between her legs and frantically scrubbed a hoof against her cheek.

"Is that a paper airplane? God!" Wynn remarked. He stepped over to the middle of the diamond and retrieved a small, boxy object atop the grass. "Ugh, is it wet? Did somebody blow their nose on a notecard before throwing it?"

"Are you freaking kidding me?" the catcher interjected, walking up behind the fox teacher.

"Look, it's," Vivian interjected, "all fine! I'm all fine!" She hurled her arms into the air in a mock windup and tried to look confident. "I can just pitch!"
The teachers glared at the mammals on the bleachers. Unfortunately, their blank expressions and total silence gave no clues. Eyes switched over to the spot where Hunter had stood. However, not a single dingo remained.

"Alright, look everybody, I'll deal with that later— and don't think that I'll forget," Wynn said. He motioned the other teacher back to his place and tossed the ball off to Vivian. "We're under a time crunch, here, so we can get on with it."

"It's time," Vivian declared. She tried to psych herself up, digging her hooves into the mound, and narrowed her eyes. She might not beat Hunter's record, she knew, but she sure had a good chance. She couldn't let herself blow it. The doe wound up. She felt the ball's stitches beneath her confident grip, and she prepared to pitch it.

"Like: good luck, weer!"

Vivian flopped the ball straight down. It landed on the grass with a weak: "Plunk!"

"You! I'd better not hear another word out of you!" Wynn yelled up at the bleachers.

A short coyote with pink-dyed hair and matching bracelets put on an expression of mock-indigation. The other mammals muttered slightly but did mostly nothing. The fox teacher held up his radar gun as if it was a taser, ready to shoot the sassy coyote.

"Like, chill out," she muttered back, "how you, like, know I didn't really mean it and stuff?"

Wynn glared at the species-based clique huddled around the boisterous girl— all featuring similar sorts of tacky hairstyles and sour expressions. The lone exception and one male in the group had this vampire-like aura that Wynn, like the other teachers, found offsetting. The coyote never smiled, never really opened his eyes, and never stopped stared intently at whomever had earned his contempt that day.

"You got this," the catcher interjected. He headed over to pick up the ball and calmly slipped it over to Vivian's awaiting hooves. "You'll do fine."

Vivian exchanged gestures with the fox teacher. Everybody returned to their positions in few seconds. The doe felt her confidence rising moment by moment. Glancing over at Wynn's focused expression, knowing that she could give him a nice surprise just as Hunter did, she wound up. She railed the ball through the air as fast as she could.

"Eighty-six!" Wynn exclaimed.

Vivian clapped her hooves together and jumped straight up. The pure bliss that shot through her senses seemed to make up for all of the humiliation of the past year. Her eyes met Wynn's, and the fox's warm joy made it all even better.

The catcher tossed the ball back. After holding it against her midriff and glancing at the tiger teacher's expression, she felt an infectious kind of sensation. The catcher looked devious somehow. Vivian knew it. She started to feel exactly the same.

"Sir!"

"You don't have to call me 'sir'," Wynn replied, chuckling, "this isn't medeval times, and you're not a squire."
"I'm not sure," Vivian calmly responded, practicing her wind up, "but I think... I can do better."

Wynn said nothing back, but held the radar gun back up and poised himself yet again. Vivian couldn't make out the catcher's face— something had made the sun shine in her eyes again— but she knew he had to have the grin of a lifetime. As badly as she wanted to show up Hunter, she had a profound sense that she was doing it for herself— proving things to herself, and herself only. She visualized a big nine and zero hovering in the air above the dugout— grinning as she pulled her head back. She wound up.

"Hey, weer-id!"

Vivian flipped the ball behind her. She didn't know how, but she could see it sliding across the grass over to third base out of the corner of her eye, at least. The doe gritted her teeth and tried not to scream.

"Hey, weer-id! Nice butt! Bet your grandpa was a two-by-four!"

Vivian didn't see which predator it was. She didn't care. She also didn't care what the teachers did, either, and she just let instinct take over.

"Hey, nice face! Bet your grandma was a Pigcasso!"

At that moment, it hit Vivian exactly who this new taunter was. Her eyes locked on those big, disgusting moles on his chest before pushing up to those small, doll-like eyes above his sunken cheek. It was him: the vampire wannabe. Somehow, he'd managed to smuggle outside a small canister of eyeliner or something outside to pass the time, with inky spots of blackness all smudged around his huge forehead.

"That's more than enough! My God!" Wynn cried out, pointing at both the doe and the snarky coyote spectators. The tiger teacher silently stepped up right behind him.

The doe slipped into the outfield and picked up the ball. Not even really thinking, she had a profound sense that she couldn't let the loser ruin her moment. She stepped back onto the pitcher's mound.

"This is a testing session, for crying out loud! We're not even in a real game!" Wynn went on. He seemed as infuriated by the low stakes of everything as he did his students' obnoxiousness about it. "We can do without the stupid little bantering!"

"Bantering?" the pseudo-vampire asked. The tone of voice made it seem like a genuine question.

"We're only a few minutes away from the whole 'coffee-flavored ice cream and whatnot break'," Wynn remarked, sighing, "and you're already poised for detention. Do you want to keep running off your mouth and get suspended?"

"Suspended for what?" the pseudo-vampire retorted. He raised his gravely voice once again. "I think she already knows about her—" He chanted out the next words as if casting a dark magical incantation. "Decrepit, bloodline-contaminating family!"

Vivian tried to shut all of that out of her mind as she rehearsed her wind-up. The tiger teacher returned to his place behind home plate. The doe shut her eyes and took in a deep breath.

"Hey, we've more than had enough!" Wynn had been a volunteer teacher long enough to know that the cardinal sin of dealing with grade-school children was to talk to them as if they were fully-grown, rational adults. "Think about what you're doing, throwing your whole education away!" He still fell into that trap time and time again. "You want to be suspended for—"
"Suspended! For bringing up her family of man-whores to this she-mongrel?"

A slamming noise echoed across the whole area with a loud: "Thud!" The vampiric coyote groaned and lurched slowly backwards. The spectators in the bleachers took a long look at him before turning their eyes over to the pitcher's mound.

Vivian panted hard, holding her arms out into the air. It took most mammals a few seconds before they realized that she'd fired her eighty-plus-mile-per-hour fastball right at the coyote's head. It took the two teachers even longer.

"Uhhhh, like, medic?" asked the valley-girl beside the pseudo-vampire.

**A short while later...**

"I haven't had coffee ice cream since I was your age," Nurse Bellwether remarked. She chuckled. "Goodness knows that I love this hospital, but I'll never get used to the limited variety of things that they serve here. I deserve... indulgence."

The ewe lovingly dipped her massive spoon into the wide bowl and slipped the metal around. Vivian silently watched as Bellwether let out a soft noise of anticipation. A big clump of the creamy mixture got practically inhaled.

"I'm glad that both of you, at least, are enjoying this coffee break," Stoutwell said, the raccoon slipping out of a pair of double-doors into their hallway, "especially when the students left back on the school grounds are bored out of their skulls, or so the vice principal just texted me." He locked eyes with Vivian. "Don't think I'm happy at all about how things are turning out. Yes, it looks like the administration wants to handle it all quietly. But I can't stress enough how lucky you are that the coyote lying on a hospital bed is going to be okay. And even luckier that his family accepts this whole thing as an 'accident'—"

"That's what it was," the doe coyly remarked.

"Right," the raccoon flatly replied.

"And the coyote has a week's 'voluntary leave of absence' coming up," the doe said, "with his family taking him on a vacation— for the same number of days that he'd be gone if he was suspended. 'Accidental' coincidence?"

"... right."

Vivian picked up her spoon from her own bowl. The mild, not-at-all-sweet-enough taste wasn't bad enough to stop her from nibbling some more down. She didn't, most importantly to her, want to give any of the teachers the satisfaction of thinking that she was the least bit apologetic. Thus, she prepared herself to enjoy every second. Resting on a couch in a comfier, much better climate-controlled floor of the hospital helped too. She made a little show of enjoying every last little smidgen of the ice cream right before the raccoon's eyes.

"I know, look," Stoutwell began, letting the mixed emotions bubbling inside of him boil over a bit, "how difficult dealing with all the species-against-species, tribal... how bad this pure crap really gets. Even if I wasn't there on the baseball diamond today. Believe me. I've worked for the ZPD, for—"

"Sir," the Nurse interjected.

The raccoon waved a dismissive paw as he tried to finish his thought. "Ms. Roe, even if I can't pretend that I don't empathize, that little trick with the fastball was still incredibly wrong. I don't think
you understand the implications of shooting out a thing some ninety miles per hour— in terms of physics, it's like you hit the guy with a speeding car. Yes, even if you proved a point... even if you got yourself out of a silly parent-and-student-with-teacher event... even if you and a bunch of friends are relaxing here, having a chance to get out of school... you still made the wrong choice. And I— along with the other teachers— will need to talk about it later."

"Speaking of that bunch of students that came over with you, Mrs. Roe," Bellwether began. Stoutwell and Vivian both turned their eyes over to her. "Where's that sweet little Alex? The slinky friend in the sweater that tagged along right behind you both?"

Neither of them liked the complex mixture of hallways and sudden corners that made up the hospital, and Stoutwell in particular loathed having to wander through them again. The raccoon scratched the side of his face, looking unsure. Vivian shrugged.

"Alex," the nurse said, "well... I'm hoping that she didn't get lost in here."

"Alex is a he," Vivian chimed in, returning immediately to her coffee-flavored treat.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," the nurse replied, "I think I just forgot."

"Don't worry. He forgets that too."

Stoutwell broke his facade of mock-anger at Vivian to chuckle. The raccoon felt a rumbling in his pocket and slipped out a smartphone, turning away from the sitting mammals. "Oh, Lamb of God, how did that fox get to the roof," Soutwell groused. As he stepped along the hallway, Vivian turned to face the nurse directly.

"Can I ask exactly happened to the coyote after he got here? After coming down with... uh... I don't know the medical term—"

"Fastball-to-the-face-itus?"

"That works," Vivian remarked.

"He was stable when he got here, having a bit of swelling on the side of his head but nothing that serious," the nurse said, "I just... well, it's so weird."

"Weird?"

"Oh, it's the strangest thing," Bellwether remarked, leaning back in her spot, "and it's his own medical history so I shouldn't blab. But, well, spirit of the 'coffee break' and 'indulgence' so I will."

The ewe reached over between her legs, picking up another small plastic container of coffee-flavored ice cream, before continuing. "He enters this floor, he leans over out of his stretcher, and he brushes up against my chest by accident. There on the opposite side of the hallway—"

"Huh."

"He was semi-conscious enough to start to apologize. But then the coyote gets an eyeful of the sight in the mirror: lying on the stretcher, a big name-tag on his shirt, with his face all nudged upon my chest, a big name-tag on my shirt. He immediately loses it. She slapped her knee as she finished off her treat. "Foam oozes out of his mouth. Curses shoot out under his breath. Limbs staggering against the sides of his stretcher. Everything... I had to join my colleagues in sedating him."
"Wow," Vivian remarked, "just what the hell did he—"

"I didn't put two-and-two together until the anesthesiologist quipped: 'now I know what happens when a von Heydrich learns he's going under the knife of a Bellwether!' And my jaw dropped."

"Are you seriously telling me—"

"Isn't that something? With how wild this job has been, I should write a book!" The nurse smiled as she kicked her legs together.

"That one of the predator's that's been on my case the whole damn year... comes from a family that fought for the Goddamn Axis?"

"Hi!" Alex interjected.

Both doe and ewe did a double-take. The young fox appeared to have materialized out of nowhere, emerging into the middle of the hallway from beside a tall potted plant across from them. The nurse, not even thinking, gave a friendly wave.

"If it makes you feel any better, Vivian," Alex began, holding out a grocery store bag crammed with tiny plastic containers, "I ate all of von Heydrich's ice cream."

"That literal son of a bitch." The doe shut her eyes, breathing grew more and more tense. All of what she knew about predator and prey history going back to the first and second world wars flashed across her eyes. Sitting next to the close relative and shared namesake of the sheep bioterrorist who almost started a third world war only made matters worse. Vivian couldn't help but let out a long groan.

"Not nearly enough caffeine in these, I think, even if the little cups sure are conveniently sized. Maybe we should go to a Snarlbucks when this is all over," Alex added.

"You apparently ate the rest of everybody's ice cream, sweetheart," Bellwether commented.

"True," Alex replied, jumping in the air and kicking the bag into a trash can, "but that includes the mean kids' ice cream too. Hey, it's the thought that counts."

[End of Chapter Seven]
Several hours earlier, in a Pack Street residential complex some distance away...

The old, plain-looking duplex looked like something out of a different time, and it genuinely was. Its walls full of red bricks and gardens full of yellow dandelions stood lodged in between a bulky grey apartment building and a huge white parking garage. The third floor of cramped vehicles directly overlooked the short, wide windows that led into the Roe family's master bedroom.

Within it, a large grey and black clock sat beside a long bed—the device having a big rubber Meles Meles logo on one side and a pointy smartphone charger on the other. After accidentally pricking a frustrated paw on the edge several times while hunting for the 'snooze' button, Al had stuck a thick Styrofoam peanut onto the electronic jack. That had worked out surprisingly well.

However, it didn't change Al's unfortunate morning habit of knocking around whatever happened to be on the table as he reached for the alarm, which he duly did that particular morning. Still, Velvet had always taken care of that by making sure that only soft things were in reach of the bed. Al shoved aside a wallet, a travel-size shampoo bottle, and two spare packages of gum before finally whacking the clock's Meles Meles logo.

That particular morning was the first time he'd truly experienced a good night's sleep since helping the Cormo family through their hospital shenanigans. Al slumped out of bed and leaned up against the wall, yawning a couple times. Not even really feeling his arms yet, he stretched them out into the air in front of him. He glanced at the tiny bottle that he'd snatched without thinking—something his wife had nabbed at an EconoLodge the first and last time they'd visited her weird cousins in the Meadowlands. His eyes moved to the flashing red screen before him. It read 8:19am.

Al sauntered lazily across the floor over to the duplex's biggest bathroom. The ancient fans hanging overhead made their metronome-like rattling as Al's softly mumbled a tune to the sound. Vivian had played the "Wild Thing! You make my heart sing!" track loud enough lately for at least the chorus to get blasted onto his subconscious—not that he didn't fall immediately silent, still not really thinking, when he stepped into the bathroom. He bumped the left-open door shut, switched on the light, and flung the shower curtain open.

Al was greeted by a large black spider, climbing straight upward along an invisible thread. It hovered in the exact middle of the shower—right where he had almost stepped inside. The wolf rubbed a paw against the back of his neck and let out a small sigh.

"It'll be another one of those days," Al muttered. Finally feeling somewhat awake, he paused for a moment before turning around and facing the sink. It took him only two minutes or so to brush his teeth.

The wolf glanced back over at the shower. The curtain—a boring yet practical gift that his daughter had given him last Christmas, along with a novelty toaster—had its blue and white poka dots sparkle in the powerful bathroom light. That same spider still wiggled along in the middle of the air.

"Sorry, but I can't wait," Al said, washing his toothbrush as he eyed the spider. The wolf shot out a paw and clutched the invisible thread. Yet the spider didn't fall—still hovering in place.

Al slowly moved his paw downward until the little black thing landed upon the shower's old, stained
marble bottom. Instead of scurrying away, the spider sat flat on a patch of greyness. It looked to Al as if the creature stared back at him, defiantly.


Nothing happened. The words fell on deaf ears—at least, Al thought, metaphorically they had. He'd no idea if spiders even had ears.

"I get enough day-to-day sass from Vivian, okay? Move." The spider didn't budge. Neither did Al. "You're so lucky that I'm not Anneke or Wolter or that really smelly guy—they'd consider you a free snack, you know?" Al quipped.

The wolf's eyes wandered for a moment, and he caught a surprise in an upward glance. He realized for the first time that morning that the long white shelf that usually held a change of clothes was bare—save for a lone, gigantic belt. Al snorted, scratching both cheeks, and made his way right out of the bathroom.

Al picked up a plain, slate grey t-shirt and lighter colored pants, almost forgetting the underwear. He hovered for a second before the bedroom door's mirror. Downstairs, he heard his wife cooking up something or another. The smell of fried soy fillets, doused with spices, finally wafted up to his nose. He couldn't put into words how glorious those moments made him feel, and those few seconds in the second floor hallway were no exception. It was one of the weekdays that Al didn't work anyways—his store at the PSCC kept shuffling through a group of new managers eventually supposed to partner with him, not that he worried about getting outright replaced since none of them could do the job any better. Al could take his sweet time that morning.

He still, though, had plenty to do before the day was through. He snatched his smartphone off of a nearby counter and swapped the pants for a pair of cargo shorts. Both Velvet and Vivian teased him about the couple of small yet clearly noticeable holes around the backside. Still, it hardly mattered—he hated throwing away anything that fit that well, especially when it seemed as if he could cram a whole backpack's worth of items into the pockets.

The wolf stepped into the bathroom and ambled into the shower. It didn't take long before he'd gotten himself completely clean—the wolf profusely rubbing himself with a pair of immense white towels. Al whistled to himself all the while. He only stopped after slipping his clothes on and accidentally bonking a leg against the marble shower basin.

For whatever reason, the tiny burst of pain shot his mind back to the spider—the little thing that he'd completely forgotten about for a few minutes. Glances in all directions followed. Al spotted nothing.

"Rest in peace, or run around in peace, wherever you are," Al murmured to himself. He made a mock-salute before sizing himself up in the bathroom mirror. He reached for a nose-fur trimmer before making another little remark. "And may you not get reincarnated as a cricket or whatever else they put in green Burga sauce."

A half-minute of little adjustments followed. He certainly looked all of his years—middle age being a bitch, he thought, no matter whatever any of his mall's silly advertisements said. Still, Al slipped on his belt and scratched off a bunch of nagging, itchy little areas of his fur. He looked presentable enough and felt as such. He certainly came across better than the bathroom rug—a torn up hunk of fabric that he'd vowed to find a Zoogle Shopping approved replacement for three weeks ago but kept putting off, and he'd likely have to put off even longer what with the big lift to the Cormo family.

The wolf rubbed a paw against his arm. He had to put all that out of his mind for once. The ever
growing aroma from the downstairs kitchen helped a lot. He made his way to the duplex's L-shaped patch of stairs. He rambled down three-quarters of the way before a cry came out from the kitchen.

"Al, don't smash your legs on the steps like that!"

"Sorry, dear," Al called back, freezing in place.

"I mean it!" Velvet lowered her voice a bit, but she kept the tone of pure authority. "I yelled at Vivian enough just about half an hour ago, so don't you start! God, one of these days that girl is going to shove a hoof straight through the wood!"

"Right, dear," Al replied. He carefully made his way down the remaining steps, tightly clutching the wooden railing. He paused by the house's tall brown door and tried to turn around.

Al immediately tripped on the edge of a wide vacuum cleaner— the black plastic sticking out between a pair of umbrellas behind him. A pile of twisting cord flopped out onto this legs. He grunted as his every move tangled them up more.

"Oh," Al yelled, "hey, there's—"

"If it's about the vacuum, then that's by the front door because it's going to the 'Multi-Pack Recycling Circle', remember? The neighborhood exchange with our co-op?"

"Don't we, uh," Al began, trying in vain to find the cord's plug, "need this for... vacuuming and all?" Inch after inch of his limbs got covered in plastic by the second.

"That's the old vacuum! We replaced the fat grey one with the skinny white one, remember? That was days and days ago!"

"Oh," Al muttered, freezing in place.

"Has it been a full two weeks since you've vacuumed yourself?"

"I... I plead the fifth!"

Velvet loudly laughed. Al shifted his body sideways, knocking the two umbrellas onto the floor, and focused on fixing the winding cord. He finally discovered the end, letting out a small yet happy sigh, and he swirled the rest of the cable around the vacuum cleaner like a lasso. Smiling, the wolf paused to look around the living room.

Thankfully, he didn't have to clean anything else. Still, however, the plain-looking, stereotypically 'bargain bin' items piled around the living room rug didn't look that appealing. Even the blue, black, and brown notched rug needed a replacement, especially with the far corners being visibly ripped up. The fact that it was his daughter, of all mammals, that had done that while learning to crawl, walk, and then dance made him particularly hesitant to get rid of the fabric. At least, Al thought, the long couch and thick easy chair had held up well enough.

"It smells heavenly," Al called over to Velvet, idly walking in a circle.

"I know! Hey, wait, you lost in thought again? I can hear you pacing!"

"I'm coming over, one second," Al replied. His eyes locked on the cracked laundry basket atop a plain white table. He reached up for the duct tape in the cabinet above the table— surrounded by a pair of odd Pigcasso-esque, abstract-looking paintings his cousins had made for him— ready to fix up basket right then and there. He halted with the tape roll in the air, however, and thought that he
should probably part with the six bucks or less to get a new basket. Like his daughter kept griping, he didn't have to act 'crazy cheap'— 'regular cheap' could do.

"If you're wondering why the vacuum is right by the door, in the way," Velvet suddenly called out, "that's because it's the only place where anybody would actually notice it and take care of it. Otherwise, it'll be locked in that one closet for another two weeks or however long until something happened... maybe until the heat death of the universe."

Al chuckled as he stepped across the living room to the kitchen. The family pictures that decorated the wall beside him— his wedding, Vivian's first few days home from the hospital, his ten year anniversary party, and a pair of rowdy events with the entire pack, wayward sheep included— always warmed his heart. On days where he didn't have a long bunch of shifts at work to prepare for, he still loved looking at them.

"Aren't we supposed to be burned by the whole red giant sun before then? Getting bigger and bigger?"

Velvet turned to face her husband. She had on her light blue apron— the 'kiss the cook, she doesn't bite... hard' joke one that he'd gotten her two years earlier— as well as her sugary, immense smile that Al could never get enough of. Since it was a real, middle-class kitchen and not a porno set, she still had on a set of clothes underneath. That didn't bother him one bit.

"Is that a clumsy put on?" she asked, holding a hoof to her chin.

The wolf put on what his daughter called the 'Mad Mammal male model face', arching an eyebrow with cheeks sucked in. "And I can do clumsier too, oh yeah."

"Yeah?" She playfully narrowed her eyes.

"For the right price," Al replied, leaning against the refrigerator before he slid a paw against her shoulder.

"Good morning, you," Velvet said. She giggled before she gave him a peck on the cheek. "How's that?"

"Good morning to you too, dear." He shut his eyes and kissed her right back on the lips. Both of his paws tightly gripped her shoulders. She knew that there was no way a little peck could've sufficed her big, strong predator, not that she minded one bit.

In a split-second, he'd pressed her against the refrigerator and started aggressively grinding his lips upon hers. Both of them let out soft yet blissful moans. He felt her hooves sliding against his thick fur, and he lovingly took in the raw emotions. She got slipped to the side— body leaned over upon the kitchen counter, with one of his paws rubbing down her chest— and she took in something not as pleasant.

"Oh, come on!" Velvet cried out, breaking the kiss. Al silently popped backward, not even thinking, as he watched her look frantic. "Speaking of— crap— burning!"

The deer shoved a pan to the other corner of the oven-top. She hopped back into place over the burners— switching on the fan by the ceiling— and fiddled with the oven's main knobs. Al merely froze in place, looking as sheepish as Remmy did in his most idiotic days.

"So," the wolf finally remarked, with his wife popping in and out of the nearby cabinet doors, "is it —"
"Al, we both know that you'd eat these even if they got charred into little black coal bits," Velvet remarked, letting herself smile again.

"I'm pleading out once again."

"Especially given how much these cost. It's not that bad, though, I just—hold on—" She pulled out two spice shakers and a group of three unlabeled bottles. "Let me apply a bit of these sauces, scrap around the edges to get them properly oiled up, and I think we're good to go."

"Wonderful." Al's eyes feasted on the piles of mashed potatoes alongside the sizzling faux meat. He knew enough, though, to remain still until his wife motioned him to come closer.

"They're roughed up, but they're not actually burned." She carefully placed the big plate beside Al's traditional spot on the kitchen table. "Take a bite, and they'll be addictive enough that you'll swear they can't be legal." She pointed to his legs and then to the chair.

"Know what?" Al grinned. "You're a miracle worker."

"Hey, the maternity specialists told me that—exact words—over a decade ago," Velvet remarked, emptying the still hot pan out into her own plate, "and I think I even got that in writing." She chuckled before emptying out the last of a yellowish, label-less bottle onto her own fillets. "This? Piece of cake. Or of, yeah, piece of faux-meat—"

"I'll have a seat," Al interjected, doing just that.

"Great, then you can go over your to-do list too," Velvet added.

"Yes, the list," Al said, his mood slightly dampened as he eyed the lined paper beside the napkin holder. He slid his paws along the tablecloth—prints of budding red roses covering every inch of it—and tapped against the salt shaker for a few seconds. "There's—"

"A lot, I know," Velvet declared, placing her breakfast-covered plate on the table opposite Al's place, "but every single thing is important."

"I'll get some groceries. I'll return all the library stuff. I'll fill the car full of gas. None of that's any problem," Al said, slicing off a piece of his sauce-coated fillet, "but it's just the...I don't know. Marty and his publishing mammals would call it the 'meta-irony'."

"Oh, say 'hi' to Marty for me later," she said, "I think it's been months since we've actually talked."

"Look," Al interjected, "I'm given a to-do list where one line says—" He gulped down several bites before putting on a quieter voice. "I quote: 'refer to supplementary to-do list on co-op topics'. What?"

"You should see what Vivian's doing in her programming class," Velvet said, munching on a small salad bowl that she'd seemingly produced out of nowhere.

"That? God, don't remind me." Al pressed his face upon a paw in disgust even as he gobbled up more delicious bites.

"Trying to get these applications to self-sort files into the right databases," she said in between bites of lettuce and potato, "creating formal 'lists of lists' and finally a master 'list of the lists of lists' that—"

"Look, even hearing that C++ and COBOL stuff makes me queasy. I'm eating here," Al remarked. He put on a melodramatic expression of intense pain, making Velvet chuckle once again, before finishing the last of his fillets.
"Just teasing, alright? After all, it's so nice to finally have some time together in the morning, isn't it? *Real* time?"

"Absolutely," Al declared. They locked eyes. Both of their faces had on knowing smiles.

"No throwing paper towels, purses, washcloths, and everything else at each other in the living room?"

"No little promises to text each other on our first break?"

"No literally pushing Vivian out the door since it's a test day?"

"You want to actually *do something* right now? Or would you rather keep listing things that we *don't* have to do?" Al asked, scratching along his neck.

"Well, this is actually kind of fun," Velvet replied, letting out a sharp laugh before finishing up her salad.

"No needing to ferry Charlie around because some scheme went south," Al continued.

"No needing to ferry Anneke around because some scheme went south."

"No bright and early calls to J.C. Peccary about returning something, knowing their hold takes forever."

"No sorting out what mail got delivered to the Lycaon family by mistake, just because their '117' looks like our 111'."

"And there's... no getting all the way to our car before discovering that we left the keys in the refrigerator?"

"Hey!" Velvet protested. She dropped a fork upon the table in mock indignation. "It's been a solid *two years* since that happened— when will I ever live it down?"

"Never." Al grinned from cheek to cheek.

Velvet shook her head but didn't say a word. After a few seconds, she got up to fetch a bunch of leftover dumplings— the strips of faux-meat not being enough for either of them. Al saw his opportunity and ran with it like a true predator.

The wolf playfully flung his paws onto her tail. She made the same cooing sound that she always did, even while she looked away. He gave her whole backside a nice, long stroke. Those little moments of raw happiness always added up, day after day, and they reminded him how silly it was to sweat the small things too much.

"It's... it's..." Velvet stammered, letting a burst of emotion shine through. Al took his paws off of her for a few moments as he looked up. "Usually you're right off to work, and that's after Vivian's off to the bus, and I can't pretend like it doesn't get frustrating—"

"I know."

"We're both only working part-time, but what does that really mean if both of us *have* to hold down a job, and I never get to—"

"I know."
His paws went over her outstretched hoof. The contrast of his worn yet wanting fur on her warm limbs always gave him a tingly feeling— something blissful yet familiar. They gazed at each other once again.

Even after she stopped to slide the dumpling-filled bowl over to his mostly-empty plate, neither of them wanted to keep themselves off of the other. And neither of them needed to say anything more. Al stood up from the table and enveloped his wife from behind— arms wrapped tightly around arms. She bent her head back an bit, and he didn't need an invitation to know exactly what to do. Their passionate kiss filled both of their senses up completely. He shoved his tongue deep into her wanting mouth, and her hooves lovingly clutched his warm fur in a way that made everything clear— she'd always be his, and nothing could ever change that.

Minute after minute of raw joy stretched on, but they both knew that they had lots of things to do. Al and Velvet sat back down and finished the last of their breakfasts. Al then flung his attention back to the hunk of lined paper before him. He'd gone over almost all of it before. However, something didn't quite feel right. It wasn't anything like the sensation of being in trouble. Nor was it having messed up. He simply had an inkling that he'd overlooked something big and obvious.

"Dear?"

"Yes?" Velvet looked back, much of her body buried deep in the dishwasher.

"You, wait," Al began. He stopped to get a good long look at his wife's incredible, curvy backside— he couldn't help doing that even if he wanted to, not that he'd ever want to. "You mentioned Marty? And the 'Multi-Pack Co-op'?"

"Oh!" Velvet called out. She dismissively waved a hoof in the air before returning to the batch of still dirty dishes. "Don't fret! Not one bit! You've got over an hour until you meet him at the Penguin publishing place— nice alliteration, hah— about the application and the rest of the whole co-op thing."

"Right," Al said, trying not to smack himself.

"Actually, I'm the one with the time-crunch," Velvet declared. She tossed a small blue packet into the dishwasher, clicked the door shut, and slipped her apron off. She marched about the kitchen and tidied up various things, still talking. "After the morning meeting with the social workers' counseling group— which will run long like always— there's a couple of important mammals I've got to ferry around."

"Good luck."

Velvet clicked the dishwasher on. "Then there's that whole 'coffee break' event at Vivian's school." Having hooves instead of paws or anything else didn't keep Velvet from making perfect air quotes. "Sure, I love mocha-flavored ice cream as much as the next mammal. But being caught in that silly parent-and-administrator thing—"

"Thanks again for taking that bullet."

"I've spent two freaking decades in social work, Al," Velvet remarked, giving the wolf a sudden cuddle, "and I've got it down to an art form. Dealing with bureaucratic types in love with the sound of their own voices? There's ways. Then they're droning on about research into learning styles, plus experiments with big data, plus the God-only-knows-what they do in—"

"Remind me again why we give those mammals a c-note every few days?" Al asked.
"Well, it's not supposed to go to them, now is it?" Velvet responded. She gently pushed herself away from Al and went for her purse. "It goes to the hoofball ex-stars, the engineers with bridges named after them, the hotshot ZPD gumshoes, and all of those gold-plated crowds that's teach real skills there, not to mention the West Oak—"

"Dear, I was joking."

"I know you," Velvet said, giving the wolf another peck on the cheek, "and that wasn't all joking. Not even half-joking."

"Three-quarters joking?"

Velvet rolled her eyes.

"What about three-fifths? Or do you want me to go into imaginary numbers here? Been practicing that 'new math' stuff enough to actually explain it correctly to Vivian, for once."

"Find me a spare phone battery, like the one that's supposed to be in my purse but isn't, Al, and I'll let you explain anything however you want."

"I'm forgetting what we're even debating in the first place... but, sure, let's do that!" Al shot her a pair of finger-guns before walking over to a metal crate filled with electronic odds and ends.

The deer looked at his goofy expression and giggled. She waved, making a heart symbol in the air, before returning to her purse. She shifted about a few things and made her way over to the front door. Al sucked in a deep breath, fumbling around in the crate, but he soon seized a small device that glowed a satisfying yellow when he squeezed it.

"Hey, I've got all that on my plate, so what are you all nervous about?" Velvet asked, holding open the door. Her eyes met with her husband, the deer having a playful bit of edge to her grin. "You've got the easy part. Marty and the vacuum with the co-op planning, right? Easy-peasy?"

"Hey, no nervousness here. The only '-ness' I deal with is curvaceousness, dear."

They made warm smiles to each other. "Al, flattery will get you... everywhere."

"See you later!" Al tossed the spare battery over to her.

"Bye!" She caught it perfectly.

After the door shut, Al stopped to brush his side with his paw. He slipped the little personal notepad that his wife had made into one of his short pockets and walked into the living room. His eyes drifted along the wall over to one of the biggest framed photos.

It featured all of his friends on Pack Street. Everyone from Anneke to Ozzy to Remmy and more had lined up against a patch of trees after an early evening outdoor barbecue. A stoat stood with arms shot upward, clutching a precious can of grape soda on the far left side. Getting almost squeezed in between Anneke and Wolter's legs— the aardwolves typically glancing at some character off camera — the stoat just narrowly kept his precious liquid intact even as he made a small smile.

"Yeah, I've got Marty."

**Meanwhile, many miles away in the commercial part of town...**

Most of Zootopia appeared particularly bright and sunny outside that morning. The building complex
that housed Penguin Publishing was no exception. The spacious floor that housed Marty's office, in particular, looked nice enough to the average observer—who likely knew nothing about either the publishing industry specifically or media companies in general.

Yet telltale signs of his middling, struggling status in the industry littered all across the neatly-arranged room. The portrait of Ratphael hung beside the tall black table had a chipped, sickly pale across its bronze frame. The faint aura of cigarettes, despite Marty's determined vow of non-smoking, wafted in the air. The large grey fan that slowly rotated from side to side had gotten its power control knob permanently jammed—leaving it with no setting between 'off' and 'high'. Charlie had remarked that the fan worked well as a metaphor for life.

It was who a mammal knew that always determined what author, editor, and publisher at the company wound up successful compared to those that remained stubbornly stuck in the same position year after year—as well as those that washed out enough to go back to cleaning BugBurga counters. Many social circles never changed. However, what kind of mammal one needed to keep in contact with kept mutating into a weirder and less logical list, horrific celebrities and corporate executives breezing in and out of Penguin's power structure, and the stoat didn't feel that inspired to push out of his journeymanmammal role. Marty was no fool, and he made sure to pay the bills for his wife and son, but he couldn't brazenly lie the way that the truly successful always did. His son once said that he was 'too decent to be successful'. Regardless of whether or not Alex was right, Marty sure wanted to think that.

"Time to get this autopsy started," Marty remarked to himself.

He stood up straight, running a paw against his plain grey suit jacket, and eyed the tablet computer before him. Despite its expense, it worked well as a paperweight, delicately arranged pieces of printed work nudged beneath it. Various binders full of other, office-related documents to go through sat beside the computer.

The stoat paused to let the nearby fan blow against his face for several blissful seconds. The computer's speech-to-text application beeped a little notice to remind the stoat that it was waiting for input. He couldn't put off things any longer.

"Program start," Marty began, sliding the tablet closer, "Mr. Johnson, we've looked forward to hearing from you. We at Penguin Publishing are glad to have received the revised physical copy of your work. The task has fallen to me, as Beta Division Co-Manager, to evaluate the piece as a whole. This includes your additional scenes."

The stoat shut his eyes. Even though he did this sort of thing for a living, evaluating work after work in an endless stream of text, the occasional piece brought his train of thought to an immediate halt. The fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on the perspective—named Buck Johnson had authored such a piece.

"If I were a fair mammal," Marty said, "then I would reply to your publishing proposal for the book 'Spice Likes it Hot: A Tale of Vixen Runaways' with a letter made up of the destroyed remains of the paper. Either a pile of ashes or a batch of confetti come to mind. However, I'm actually a rather unfair mammal. Thus, you will receive as much constructive advice as I can give, particularly given the...intriguingly open premise of your work."

A long sip of mocha gave him the fuel he needed. The stoat closed his eyes and waved off the rabbit poking her head through the open door. She duly leaned her head back as she waited in the hallway.

"I'm interested in how you take the lesbian-during-college stereotype applied to female foxes and try to actually go into the psychology involved. You also delve into homelessness within the context of
an otherwise economically developing Zootopia, which even marquee authors rarely touch on. The most fascinating element of your writing, though, is this: instead of describing the sex scenes using general, emotional terms, you chose to use heavily anatomical language in a oddly clinical, dispassionate tone. The precise, mechanical movements don't give off a sense of enjoyment. Instead, I've read something akin to careful assembly instructions to a set of furniture, only the wrenches were phallic monstrosities of vibrating silicon."

As if on cue, the loud bumping of heavy furniture scraping against a wall sounded off in the adjacent office. Marty stopped to let it disappear. He took the last sip of nourishing coffee from the side of his desk—the stoat felt glad, at least, that the insufferable middle-managers that were his floor's neighbors would leave soon enough. Marty clicked the tablet computer and started back up again.

"Your decidedly unromantic prose style during these sections of the story can generate significant reader interest if done right. It creates a disjointed jump from the classroom scenes described shortly before, which include vignettes about the French teachers that may appear witty with revision. I would push even more of the story-line into this detached mode. It could work to increase the alienation seen by the protagonist—a miss 'Spicey the Spice Vixen'. By the way, change the name. Now."

Marty clicked the application off and turned in his small, swiveling chair. He came face to face with his assistant, the concerned-looking rabbit brushing her paws against her frilly blue dress. Neither of them said anything for a long moment.

"Uh, sir," the rabbit said, walking over from the open doorway to the stoat's desk, "did you mean what you wrote? Sending him a reply letter with nothing but with ash?"

Marty remained silent. He simply pulled back from his chair. He pointed down to a small trash across from his desk—the metal filled with little black powders.

"I take it, sir, that's where Mr. Johnson's first draft, the physical copy, ended up. It was..." The rabbit visibly strained to think of the right word— aiming to drop some arcane part of the English language that might possibly impress her new boss. Her mind, sadly, drew a blank. "That freaking bad."

Marty flipped his head back and let out a sharp laugh.

"Sir..."

"Oh, that was perfect," Marty remarked, sliding a paw against the table, "but, seriously, I need you to head over to Vincent Vison and tell him to stop laying his smoking-related droppings into my trash whenever he hangs out in my office.

"Will do, sir. And I'll get you another mocha, sir."

"And, thankfully, he won't be able to do that much longer. But you don't have to remind him of that."

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, Maxine."

"No problem, sir." The rabbit made a little kind of hi-sign with her paws.

After the prey mammal scurried away, Marty considered whether or not he should correct her to just call him by his first name— dispensing with the 'sirs'. On the one paw, he hated empty little corporate formalities— hated them as much as anybody that'd grown up with only two pairs of shirts
naturally word. On the other paw, the world needed more basic politeness in it. And the company's new general assistant, more seriously, had a bad case of what Charlie would call 'resting bitch face'. The rabbit, Marty thought, needed all the help she could get on the sociable department.

"There you are!"

Marty hopped out of his chair at the sudden voice. He looked straight up, and he saw the familiar yet unexpected face of Al popping into view. Without even thinking, the stoat held up a paw that the wolf calmly yet firmly took.

"Good morning," Marty said, not exactly feeling in a good mood yet forcing himself to sound pleasantly reasonable, "I think... or 'good afternoon', I mean. Whatever it is, right?"

"I'll take a seat," Al said. Marty waved him over, the stoat shutting the door. Al plumped down onto the huge hunk of plastic across from Marty's desk. It'd apparently been made in 'generic large mammal size'— fitting him far better than the average chair in a big business office.

"I didn't buzz you in. So, before you say anything else, let me guess how you were able to get up here?" Marty asked, leaning himself against a bookshelf.

Al silently nodded. A slightly amused expression came over his face. He figured that whatever Marty wanted to say the stoat would say anyways— thus, the wolf thought, he ought to simply sit back and hear it.

"You used the move from Bun Notice— the one from the second series' first episode, where Jack Savage decided instead of breaking into an office complex that he'd just show up with a set of coffees and a ringing cellphone. Yeah? Offer the bored security guard one of the coffees while acting like you're delivering them to somebody in here that's calling you— damn, maybe you actually were rung by one of us, maybe Maxine— and that's a sure ticket to walk through a side door. Bingo!"

Al chuckled. "Simpler than that."

"Huh?"

"One of the janitors," Al leaned back a bit in his chair. "I helped him carry a group of boxes loaded with cleaning stuff. He didn't even ask anything. He barely said a word. He went inside, and I followed him. Got a simple grunt of thanks and made my way to the stairs."

"I don't know if Savage could pull that off. I'd be too—"

"Boring?" Al interjected.

"Yeah, that," Marty said, taking in a little breath, "but also I get the sense that the janitors we're talking about happen to be the only other wolves in this building."

Al nodded.

"Pack Street hasn't changed that much," Marty remarked, "at least, not as much as mammals keep freaking acting that it has. God."

"We do what we can." Al scratched his chin, wondering if the stoat planned to let loose with an angry diatribe, spit out some pithy quip, or change the subject altogether.

"Spoken like a true dad," Marty quipped, allowing himself a long sigh. He hopped back into his chair, bumping it into a filing cabinet, and he reached for a small black box. "Speaking of which, did
you look up that written proposal-type thing? About the multi-pack co-op?"

"I think I—"

"Don't worry, I didn't either," Marty interjected. He flipped a manila folder onto his desk.

"I'm sure that—"

"I'm familiar enough with what's going on to say, definitely: I don't like it."

The odd sense of irritation, with hints of pain, that came over the stoat made Al stop. The stooped body language conveyed a lot more than a standard 'Marty rant' truly could. Still, the wolf felt like he had to say something. "I'm... look, I'm absolutely supportive of having these different clans pitch in to give each other things," he began, reaching for a water bottle in one of his short pockets, "and I know it can make a huge difference."

"It can."

"Few things are more annoying than having a faucet snap off, a pillow ripped open, a vacuum conk out, or whatever else— if a good-hearted guy is around that can stop by to fix things, but just happens to be in a different pack, then there's every reason to have an way to do these things. Take the whole 'pack' principle and spread it out."

"Neither of us need to hear the pitch," Marty remarked, opening up the envelope, "it's— after all— just Zoober for favors beyond trips. Or Timber for actual adult friends— not the weird internet version of 'adult friend'."

Marty's animated way of making air quotes looked silly enough that Al almost coughed up his water in laughter. The wolf managed to restrain himself and finished the last of his bottle. He met eyes with the stoat and simply nodded.

"The problem with it is the same freaking problem that there always has been with these things," Marty declared, snapping the folder closed and pushing it away, "and it doesn't matter if your wife, my wife, and whatever gang of programmers have the best app in the history of computing on their side. Mammals just don't get along beyond species lines as much as we say that they do— as much as we hope that they do."

"You know that with Remmy's," Al started to say, "issues—"

"Forgive me for cutting you off," Marty said, placing his chin on his paws, "but— look— I've got a smartphone too. Who doesn't? I use the 'Multi-Pack Co-Op' app too. Who wouldn't, what with how nice it looks? Like the Jacks family said: it's as cool as an N64. Again, forgive me, but I've got to speak my piece here."

"Right," muttered the wolf. Al thought back for a bit. Around a decade ago, before getting married and having a son skewed his personality, Marty would've run off his mouth at a moment's notice, hardly caring about cutting somebody off. Marty still did that plenty of times, but he apologized for it — and, in an even greater change, appeared to genuinely mean that apology.

"It's just— damn it— there's this sense with technology," Marty went on, clutching his own smartphone above his head, "that it somehow can beat basic mammal nature. As if real-life problems are only glorified software bugs, you know? That we can bypass things the same way we would a website paywall or a parental control block— that groups of total strangers can work together without species history meaning anything? I don't buy it! I see the cracks everywhere, Al!"
The wolf murmured something unintelligible, making a response that he didn't even understand himself, before watching the irritated stoat frantically click through a bunch of things on the smartphone. Marty clutched it against his chest for a moment, closing his eyes, and then plopped it down at the exact center of his desk. His twisted face looked as if somebody had served him strawberry soda disguised in a grape soda can.

"For God's sake, Marty," Al finally said, straightening up in his chair, "the 'Multi-Pack Co-op' is nothing more than a grown-up version of the old 'Animal Crossing' thing, you know? Like how predators in small towns back in the '20s and '30s would put things up on a big village bulletin board — saying 'the aardwolf family needs this' and whatever. Or 'the coyote family can offer that' when —"

"Oh, don't get me started on the damn coyotes!" Marty exclaimed, angrily slamming a leg against the side of his desk.

"What?" Al flatly asked, face going blank.

"Do you actually look at the app, Al?"

"Come on," Al replied, taking his empty water bottle and tossing it into the trash can, "stop beating around the bush, Marty. Of course, I use it. The only reason I didn't raise all the funds for Remmy using some kind of software was that doing out money donations that way is a pain in the ass. And, don't forget, time wasn't my side— it wasn't on his side. I called mammals directly. You can still use one of these mini-computers in our pockets for actual phone calls, Marty."

"Al!" Marty's strained look showed that he needed to get something important across, but he couldn't quite force the right words out.

"You of all mammals know that Remmy's 100% family. Remember when those bigoted buttfaces attacked him, back in that old apartment, and you were literally the first one there to run to his side— literally holding his hoof?" Al asked, putting some strength to his voice.

"Of course, I do, but that's not the point!"

"If my uncle and I both have to miss dental appointments, if my wife's ready to put off buying the new fan she's looked at, if Wolter's pawning that video game thing he's getting bored with, and—"

"And I'm putting off painting my own son's room because of that yarnball, Al!" Marty hopped right out of his chair and headed for Al's spot. "It's not about the money! I'd rather be homeless without a freaking quarter again— and I sincerely mean that, Al— than without my pack!"

"Then, look, level with me!" Al got up out of his chair as well. "What is the point?"

"The point is: predators are not one big, happy family!" Marty jumped in the air and stood on the desk, his feet kicking away the papers. "You ought to know, with all that you've dealt with, that we've never been that! And, sad to say but it's true, what you and you wife keep working on isn't making things any better, can't you get it?"

"What? The hell do you mean?"

"See it for yourself!" Marty scurried to the spot on the desk where his smartphone sat, resting atop the group of papers from before, and held it directly in front of his face.

"Wait a minute," Al began, gripping the device out of the stoat's paws. He narrowed his eyes as he scrolled about a bit. The software covering the screen showed all of the comments made by a
particular group of coyotes— their pack having picked the telltale user name of yotes_r_yr_gd. 

"Am I right? Or am I right?"

"I'm seeing... that." Al let out a deep sigh.

The user pissed out a stream of vitriol across the pages of multiple families. The stereotypical spelling mistakes, total disregard of grammar rules, and love of long-dead internet memes aside, time and time again the user managed to start some kind of obnoxious argument in their wake about species' merits and detriments. An outright 'damn foxes', 'damn polecats', 'damn wolves', or the like was as easy to find in the comment chains as a hipster in a Snarlbucks.

"Al, that's just an appetizer! A little sampling of what happens when you mix long-time rival packs together," Marty declared, taking a position right underneath the wolf, "and I can't help but dread what happens if you and your wife get your way. If we have community meetings bringing together these families, already having to wade through all of this species-related drama online, to offline events with strangers meeting face-to-face."

"Marty, still, you can't..." Al trailed off, his mind going in a bunch of different directions.

"My biggest worry," Marty began, "is far beyond anything like a pissy coyote and a stuck-up fox getting into a brawl or something. Hell, you can see that crap at every other nightclub on the edges of Pack Street. What I'm most concerned about is... well, picture some buffalo guy with his smiling vixen girlfriend and her beautiful-looking kit that he's trying to adopt. He thinks that because his favorite rock band is mixed and that it's 2025—"

"You're a few digits off there," Al interjected, "just an FYI."

"Whatever!" Marty dismissively clapped his paws together. "Anyways, the buffalo thinks that species prejudice is a thing of the past— as dead as disco music and rotary telephones. He walks into the hotel lobby where this co-op thing is going down. Our prey guy sees families of snarling predators facing off against each other. Some of them might be screaming their lungs out."

"Marty..."

"He sees his de facto daughter possibly in danger and instinctively seeks to shelter her. This move makes some idiotic predator teenagers beside them teed off, and the whole situation gets even worse, with the prey guy then 100% involved. God only knows what this represents in his mind about—"

"Marty?"

"He's learned that disco is now 'synthwave' and with rotary phones 'there's an app for that'. And predator-versus-predator hate— or, God help us, predator-versus-mixed-family hate— is a ravaging undead beast like freaking Nosferatu!"

"Marty!" Al yelled.

"Yeah!" Marty called out back.

Al slipped his paws around Marty's sides and lifted the stoat up in the air. Squirming profusely but saying silent, Marty's eyes locked on Al's eyes. The wolf gently rested the stoat back on the latter's office chair.

"Don't forget who you're talking to, okay?" Al politely asked, letting himself have a half-smile.
"I'm not. Don't forget that I even pitched in when the Cormos made those 'Dolf and Proud' shirts for Vivian."

"Still can't believe how cool those look. Probably would win a runway award if Gazelle or somebody like her took up the fashion."

"Being really frank here, father to father," Marty said, slumping in his seat, "I must say: it's a paradox that actually makes sense. Being an alpha makes you softer than you really realize. And as a pack leader that's a dad, too? I'm being tactless and uncaring as all hell here, I know, but—"

"Marty," Al remarked, his smile growing. "I've known you for decades. The current you is so tactful and so caring compared to the nineties you— current you might as well be a literal church mouse."

The stoat let out an amused puffing sound, but he smiled all the same.

"You've got one of those ceremonial baseballs from Velvet's school, behind you," Al said, gesturing upward to a spot on a simple bookshelf, "just like what's in my kitchen. You only get one of those if you helped the school raise at least a thousand bucks for the Zootopian Cancer Society, am I right?"

"I'm not talking about... look... I just..." Marty stammered, feeling exasperated as he tried to force the right words out. He turned his chair so that he faced away from the wolf, glaring instead at the big vase full of phony yellow tulips, and that did the trick. "Speaking dad to dad, both of us have taken a level in kindness here where I don't think we really get how nasty and widespread species prejudice can be. Especially from one predator clan over to another predator clan, can't you realize that?"

"Wait... what? 'Taken a level up in kindness'? It's like you think of our pack as a video game, and I'm the big alpha with the mustache and giant hammer," Al retorted, letting out a deep laugh.

"With you, it's more like that one weird game at Newgrounds or whatever where the player is this living piece of meat—all soft like a giant marshmallow."

"I'm tempted to Zoogle that, but I probably won't. For the sake of my remaining sanity." Al laughed yet again.

"Yeah, hell, I'm basically ordering you what to do, and I shouldn't," Marty said, still directing his speech to the tulips rather than to Al's face, "but I've got to advise— not only dad to dad, but friend to friend— that you do these multi-pack things slowly, okay? Calmly, okay? Go at an easy pace? Constantly check on yourself?"

"I've got Velvet," the wolf said, his mind far away from Penguin Publishing and whatever pseudo-commercial things he, Marty, and the rest of the pack had gotten into, "and I can assure you that somebody's spending every other moment checking up on me." He wistfully looked out the window. "Wish I could literally tie her down and get her to take an easier pace, especially taking care of Vivian."

"Oh, yeah, speaking of baseball," Marty said, flipping his chair around so that he faced Al once again. His face lit up for the first time in a long while. "It's frustrating to miss out on that. But the pictures will be so great, weren't they?"

"The whole 'coffee break' event? The parent-on-administrator thing?" Confusion flashed over Al's features. "I'm saying that I'm somewhat that Velvet's going there instead of me. I'd probably fall asleep if."

"Oh, no, not that crap," Marty responded, "I'm talking about the baseball practice. Held right before the soiree, yeah, but it's way more important— I heard from Alex and one of his friends."
Al blankly stared.

"West Oak Middle School? Today? As we speak, they're holding this gym event where the teachers are using radar guns on the students for the first time. A bit of something freaking sweet before the day's boring schedule of things begins, isn't that great?"

"Oh!" Al exclaimed.

"I know!" Marty's pleasant smile, taking up the stoat's whole small face, stuck in the wolf's mind. Marty didn't let himself truly ease up and feel happy about something that often. "Alex's so damn fast, but it's one thing to simply watch it and eyeball those little moves! It's a whole other thing to get in cold, black-and-white numbers—electronically certified—that your son is setting records!

"I can't believe," Al started to mutter to himself.

"Of course, Charlie's there, and she needed to be for that pointless little coffee-themed soiree anyways," Marty continued, "but I so wish I could be there rooting for my son as well! Alas, damn it, all of this horrible work—" The stoat gestured to the edge of his desk where his tablet computer and stacks of binders sat. "Sorting through authors and the rest? Keeps me from the important things in life as usual—"

"Can't believe that I forget about that," whispered Al to nobody in particular. He felt like smacking his head with both of his big paws.

"Thankfully, my wife's taking a buttload of pictures. Hoping that she manages to record it too. And, of course, I'm positive that Velvet's documenting every last move that Vivian's making as well. She's getting into pitching, right? Alex's had a tough time, but I hear Vivian's easily into the right weight and height requirements for the 'Average Range Baseball' or whatever it's called?" Marty asked.

Al nodded, not being sure of what else to do. He'd followed his daughter's schooling fairly close. Yet with all of these other events sucking up his time the past several months, he wound himself forgetting more and more. The sensation of being out of the loop stung him—hurt him like a hornet zooming in on the back of his neck.

"I think," Marty started to say, sliding his chair over to the part of the desk with his binders, "that we—"

"Sir!" The assistant rabbit burst into the side of the office. "I apologize for taking so long! I brought extra coffees though, sir, and I made sure to get the point across in terms of your personal space to—" She froze, clutching a paper box with three tall cups in it in front of her face, as she finally spotted the wolf in the room.

"Al Roe, please meet Maxine D'Lapin. Ms. D'Lapin, please meet Al Roe," Marty quickly rattled off, waving the rabbit closer.

"Hello, sir," she said, placing the box carefully on the side of the desk.

"I don't work here," Al said, letting his friendless shine through his gigantic smile, "so, there's no need for the 'sir'"

"As you wish, sir," she replied, "I mean... Mr. Roe."

"I'm pretty sure that I won't need you again, at least for a while," Marty interjected, reaching for the first of the coffee cups, "so, please help what's-his-face with moving the furniture in the other room."
"Great idea, sir," the rabbit tensely replied. She politely nodded to both predators before making an about-face. It only took a split-second for her to scurry away.

"Well, I can tell that somebody is both badly mismatched with her current job and badly needs to keep it," Al remarked. He looked over at Marty to see the stoat motioning him to take one of the coffees for himself. "Godspeed, Ms. D'Lapin."

"If you weren't here," Marty began.

"You'd be unable to stop yourself, drinking all three of these huge coffees in a row." Al finished the sentence for his friend. He had to chuckle. "You'd literally bust a hole in the wall, wouldn't you?"

Before Marty could quip something back, a chiming noise appeared from somewhere beside the two mammals. They both hopped out of their chairs. They glanced out in various directions and scurried around, not seeing the source of the noise. It quickly rose in volume second by second— revealing itself to be a spirited version of "Push It!" by Salt n' Pepa.

"Same ringtone? Really?" Al and Marty both murmured, eyes locked on each other.

Finally, a set of vibrations wiggling the aforementioned fake plant caught Marty's attention. He seized his smartphone, apparently having vibrated itself off of his desk and then rolled upon his floor out of sight, and held it up to his face. Nothing happened.

Al, for his part, picked up his own device from behind the office's trash can. He flung it to the side of his head. Nothing happened.

"Oh, crap!" Marty exclaimed. He clicked the screen a couple times, a scowl flashing over his face. "This floor is pure balls— no reception anywhere! Oh, sure, somebody can call you— but fat chance of ever answering them! Zero bars, ever!"

"Yeah, same here," Al added. He scratched his neck as he tried to think. "And just what the hell is the Yotsubishi Financial Group?"

"Wait! I remember!" Marty called out. He turned to face the wolf. "They handle all of Penguin's IRAs, and, God help us, I think they do retirement stuff for half of the Pack Street Commercial Center. I'd bet anything they've got your IRA too."

"The no-name mammals who do that 'index fund' planning, and they've broken into all of these other investing things," Al said, starting to recall the various e-mails and snail mail messages that he'd gotten over the years, "yeah... damn it, I hope nothing's screwed up."

"After the little Cormo adventure, it'd be the worst time," Marty remarked, "at least the mafia only breaks your legs if they want your money." He gulped down the rest of his coffee.

"Marty," Al began, drinking some of his own cup, "isn't that the name of the company that—"

"Screw it!" Marty hopped upwards, grabbed the second cup, and landed beside the office's door. He turned to his wolf companion. "Looks like they've already called me once already, or tried to, and whatever the hell it is I plan to take care of it right now! I'm going to the lobby, only place you really have good reception, and I'm calling them myself— when I'm relaxing next to those big-ass indoor fountains!"

"Fountains?" Al walked up behind Marty.

"Big-ass fountains! Like indoor Yellowstone springs!" Marty gestured in the air. "You miss out on
those if you take some kind of a side door, Al."

"And I thought that your company couldn't look any more like drug dealers owned it..."

"Hah! They'd probably have decent health insurance, am I right?"

"So, heading downstairs?"

"You should do the same, Al." Marty tapped the side of his door.

"Actually, speaking of erupting fountains, I'm running to the john," the wolf quipped.

The stoat mock hit the side of the wolf's belly. "Have fun, then. I'll see you in the lobby."

A couple minutes later...

"Thank goodness, at least the south-side elevators here work," Marty remarked to himself, "and aren't clogged with movers." He slipped down a hallway past an empty water cooler and appeared in a dead end.

"Speaking of small things being clogged by grunting, sweaty mammals, hello Marty," Vincent Vison said. The tall, muscular polecat flicked a cigarette out of his paws into the nearby open window. His eyes seemed to burn two holes onto the stoat's chest.

Marty slowly stepped to the left, his back facing the window as his front squared off against the polecat. "Hello Vincent."

The stoat stared with pure defiance right back at the polecat. Seconds of raw tension, sweat sliding down both of their cheeks, followed. Marty wondered how many rent payments his wife could make with the ugly, cross-hatched grey suit that Vincent wore.

"Going somewhere?" Vincent asked.

"Simply stopping by the lobby," Marty replied.

"Very well," Vincent cryptically responded.

"And you?"

"The same."

Neither of them pressed any of the elevator buttons for several tense seconds. Marty didn't want to do some kind of a move that lost face, but he also had somewhere to go for good reason, so he finally turned. "Tell me," Marty began, pressing the 'down' button before turning to his colleague, "what have you been doing this morning?"

"What have I done?"

"Yes," Marty replied through gritted teeth. He didn't deserve this kind of seething condescension, he knew, no matter how little he'd advanced in the company. After all, he thought, he had more to his life than nonsensical corporate dick-waving before whatever mammal walked down the wrong hallway.

"I've done my work, and things have been fine."

"I see." The stoat wondered just what exactly was taking the elevator.
"Working occasionally with the floor's new main assistant."

The elevator doors mercifully opened up. Vincent motioned for Marty to step right inside first. The stoat couldn't help but hesitate.

"Oh, yes," Marty said, scratching his chin and playing things off as if he had gotten lost in thought, "what do you think of Ms. Maxine D'Lapin?"

"Well," Vincent began, deciding to let himself loose, "your new assistant wears noticeably scratched, older eyeglasses yet uses a relatively standard type of earbuds."

"This again," Marty whispered, noting that the doors started to close. He stepped forward and duly took his place in the elevator. The polecat immediately followed.

"This contrast becomes more given how the plastic nubs around her nose appear almost chewed off, does it not? Done by herself out of sheer neurosis— a sign of sustained stress without an easy outlet, possibly an aspect of having a difficult childhood— or possibly as a well-established bad habit due to having a poor set of friends?"

"It's rare to find somebody in the publishing business that actually has friends, I suppose," Marty quipped, glaring virtual burn holes into Vincent's terrible suit.

"Her manner of standing also includes a particular method of bracing her legs together, summoning up a great degree of potential energy even for a rabbit. In sum, her whole appearance gives off an substantial depression, possibly to the point of significant autistic symptoms," Vincent concluded, putting a tone of triumph to his analysis.

"Speaking of pathetically depressive acts, there shouldn't be any more cigarette butts and other nonsense dumped where they don't belong," the stoat remarked.

"As you wish," the polecat replied. He stepped out of the elevator, looked back at Marty with a blank expression, and made his way along a hallway to the lobby.

Marty flatly stared at the back of Vincent's suit for a few seconds. Somehow, the flat non-response from the polecat felt more insulting than a witty quip. Marty sucked in a deep breath and walked right out of the elevator.

"There walks a tube who's going to go through at least two divorces before he hits sixty," the stoat, watching as Vincent popped into a side hallway, declared to the lobby's marble statue of Lemmingway. The author's silent bust had a subtle but very real smirk. That made the stoat pretend that, somehow, the statue agreed.

Marty stepped along upon the lobby floor's fine tiles. He past the large receptionist desks, idly waving, and felt himself calming down. He flipped out his smartphone, but he paused as he came before the first of the lobby's immense fountains. A sign hanging in the air beside it advertised Penguin Publisher's e-mail alerts for the latest news in books and magazines.

"Oh, before I give the company a ring," Marty murmured to himself, "I should check their pair of e-mails that just loaded— " He shut his mouth as he glanced at the wall of text on the little screen. "The hell am I looking at?"

A great number of private schools in Zootopia had, despite starting under the protecting ageis of some large non-profit agency, wound up getting purchased by some finance-related corporation. Marty had read in the *Zootopia Daily Hearld* or some other dead-tree publication sometime that West Oak Middle School was one of those institutions. Apparently, Yotsubishi Financial Group had
gobbled up the magnet school right alongside Bun's Electronics and whoever put on *G.I. Mole*.

Such things didn't exactly bother Marty. After all, the stoat thought, Penguin Publishers made up only one star in the corporate constellation that was Avian Administration Ltd— their reach going into everything from breast implants to coffin construction. Or, as Charlie once put it to Marty's boss, the company worked "from tits to stiffs".

However, that didn't change Marty's hatred for parsing through high-level bureaucratic speak. At least, he thought, learning Catin or Sanskit was somewhat fun. "Okay, so the gist of the message is," Marty whispered, getting deep in thought, "they regret to inform me, a parent and prominent member of the 'West Oak Educational Family', of an unfortunate group of bullying incidents. 'Mistakes were made'— God help us, the corporation actually used that cliche— and apparently the 'involved students have received a temporary suspension'."

It all seemed sadly predictable. The bean-counting middle-manager mammals, Marty thought, who hardly know a thing about *learning* in terms of adults let alone the young simply *had* to react in a way that tried to hush up the whole affair. They thought in terms of assets and products— not flesh-and-blood individuals with feelings. Like clockwork, they'd punish the bullies *as well as* their victims. They had the unfortunately sound expectation that they could simply discard unwanted students off into the public school system anyways— acting like Vincent tossing his cigarette butts out the window onto some unfortunate, minimum-wage-earning groundskeeper down below.

"In other words," Marty said to himself, looking up from his phone back to the then far-away statue of Lemmingway, "the score is still: cynics 'infinity', optimists 'zero'. Just like you wrote." The stoat leaned against the marble ring behind him, letting the fountain dot his forehead with stray splashes. "Ugh... and I'm still left wondering one big thing. If *all* parents got e-mails and calls telling about this, which poor parents got the calls telling *their* kids were the ones suspended?"

A loud, pained cry shot out across the lobby. Marty shot straight upward— almost falling right into the fountain. He'd recognize the howl of that big, powerful wolf anywhere.

"*Oh, my God.*"

*[End of Chapter Eight]*
Chapter 9

A few hours later, in a large parking lot many miles away...

"This is the second time we've been in a hospital in the past month!" Velvet yelled. She didn't bother to look at either her daughter or her husband. She shoved her hooves up at the beady little streetlight — shaking them with anger at the world. "Nobody can tell me that this is supposed to be normal, you hear me!"

Al nodded. He let his wife march right ahead of him— stopping every few seconds to fumble around with her purse and fume. Al picked up his step a bit, eyeing his huge SUV at the edge of the parking lot, as his daughter silently walked to his side. He bent his head down, brushed a paw on his face, glanced around the smooth asphalt, and did everything else to keep from having to look directly at his daughter.

Vivian dropped a bit behind her parents. Her body still felt tense all over— stuck in raw anticipation of the next blow-up. She sucked in a deep breath, eyes on the back of her father's head. She'd gotten in trouble with one or both of them more times than she could count, but she couldn't remember ever getting that sick from it all before.

"I still can't put it all into words! You know that?" Velvet went on. She clapped her hooves together as she glared at Vivian once again. The older mammal narrowed her eyes by half and raised her voice by double. "It's not even that late! The day's far from over, but I feel like we've been drowning in embarrassment for years!"

"Yes... mom..." Vivian faintly muttered.

Velvet stepped up the Roe family SUV but hovered a few inches from the steel. She let out a frustration-soaked sigh. Al quietly appeared beside her and unlocked the doors. Several wary seconds of complete silence, everybody standing still, followed. Velvet looked over at her daughter yet again— the young mammal leaning up against the bumper.

Vivian ambled into her spot and crunched her body against the grey polyester. She stared at the empty soda cans at the bottom of the backseat as she buckled herself in. That expression on her mother's face, Vivian thought, might scar her memories for ages. It was one thing for Velvet to get upset. Deep confusion, genuine surprise, lingering worry, and all kinds of heart-on-the-sleeve emotions that Vivian had seen before were nothing compared to when the older mammal had learned the news.

Vivian's fastball-to-the-head trick had earned her a suspension. Not a sternly-worded letter to be taken home. Not a day or two taken out of class to think about what she'd done. Not a full afternoon's detention. Not anything that she had already shrugged before— without 'any real change in attitude' as a pair of teachers put it to her mother.

Suspension.
Vivian tightened her seat belt as she stewed in her own thoughts. No matter what her own parents decided to do to her, the school's administration had already sealed her fate seconds after that she'd thrown that fastball. It took her mother meeting her at the hospital— with raw, sheer disgust twisting across Velvet's face— for Vivian to finally get the gravity of it all.

She'd felt invincible at first. Her mother was only a stone's throw away with a bunch of senior teachers— waiting patiently for gym class to end for that whole 'coffee break' event— when everything came to a head with the bullies. Yet facing off against them was the last thing on her mind after she'd stepped off of the pitcher's mound.

She'd knocked the worst of the bigots right unconscious— in front of the whole class, no less— and felt an intoxicating rush from proving herself sloshing all through her senses. Getting split up from her classmates in all the commotion didn't kill that high. Even waiting alongside the hapless-acting Stoutwell and her weird-as-always friend Alex outside of an actual hospital room didn't snap her back to reality.

It took going eye to eye with her mother to do the trick. That finally snapped something in Vivian's mind— she had a deep, sinking realization in one big, sudden moment. It was like smacking a barely-fitting lost piece into a floor puzzle with a sledgehammer and then suddenly seeing the whole picture.

Vivian hadn't just shown her chops as a pitching wonder. She hadn't just proved a point to a group of bullies. She hadn't just forced a bigoted piece of crap to shut up.

She had screwed up, the young mammal thought, big time.

"Lamb of God! And this is the day that both the central air and the glove compartment breaks on this thing?" Velvet yelled. She shot her eyes back to the mammal in the backseat— Vivian reaching over the front, snapped out of her mental haze— but soon realized that neither of them had a clue. "It's so stupid, you know?"

"Yes... mom..." Vivian mouthed.

Velvet fiddled with a set of knobs and dials as she brushed her head against the roof. The SUV's air system finally sputtered to life. Still covered with raw irritation, Velvet slammed the passenger-side door shut and looked over to the open seat across from her.

Al still stood out in the parking lot, his paws gripping the driver's side door. His wife nodded at his direction. He nodded back.

"Dear, you know?" Velvet asked.

The wolf shifted his body along the door and turned his face over to the windshield. He said nothing. Vivian couldn't tell if he nodded yet again or otherwise made some kind of a sign. Her father's reaction to what she'd done— his lack of a reaction— somehow hurt the most out of everything.

"Anyways, let's get going, finally," Velvet declared, pulling her own seatbelt tight.

Velvet could never do the classic 'silent treatment'. The deer was born with the totally opposite personality. The first thing out of her mouth to her daughter in the hospital hallway was a sharp scream of 'Are you kidding me?'— that got followed immediately by slight variations of the same question, repeated over and over again.

Velvet had called out how much the month-plus suspension from the school disrupted all kinds of things— those worries got stuck in between shouts about how the family had already invested time
and money into the institution that 'they didn't have'. Velvet fretted about the injured coyote deciding to sue after all as well. Vivian had wisely stuck to a simple script of 'No, mom...' and 'Yes, mom...' as the three mammals walked through the hospital. Vivian knew that she couldn't stay like that for long, but that, at least, felt like something.

Against her father, though, Vivian seemed stumped. Jumping up and down in place, kicking a streetlamp, or even just arching an eyebrow would've given some clue from Al to his family about the wolf's real thoughts. Instead, Al stayed eerily quiet— Vivian could tell that her mother didn't exactly like it either.

Mother and daughter buried themselves in good into their seats, crossing their arms around their chests. Both looked blankly over at Al. He seemed to have gotten caught in slow motion. After a long, awkward move into a sitting position, the wolf began to reach for the ignition switch. He began turning his head as well, every slide of his huge body gently squeaking the upholstery, before the SUV finally roared to life.

"I," Vivian began, seeing her father's eyes finally locking on hers. Her mouth hung open as she braced her hooves against her legs. Al hadn't stared at another mammal with that intensely for as long as Vivian could ever remember. "I... Dad..." She hadn't come up with a single thing to say either.

"Why can't you be more like Remmy?"

Vivian blinked rapidly. She tried to force her mind to process those words— even though nothing up in her skull seemed to make any sense of it. "You... what? do you mean Remmy's kid?"

"I mean what I said."

Without another word, Al hit the gas and drove off. Vivian stared out a right window. Velvet stared out a left window. Nobody needed to say anything else.

**A little later that day, in a nondescript Zootopian office nearby...**

The wide space looked as blank, grey, and soulless as the average corporate floor. The only thing setting it apart was the diversity of mammals sitting at the various haphazardly-assembled cubicles. Hedgehogs and wolves answered phone calls admist hares and wombats, with few of them under any illusions about their lowly status.

"This is the Yotsubishi Financial Group! Amy D'Lapin is speaking, and how may I help you?" asked a tall rabbit in the far corner.

"Oh, great, this is the 'Systems Analysis Help-line', right?" inquired a nervous-sounding voice from the other end of the line.

"Yes, indeed," Amy answered. She reached for the last bit of her orange soda, trying her best to keep from tangling up in her headset's tight cord. She gazed longingly at the big black clock beside the water cooler across from her desk. Only five minutes separated her from the refreshment-filled break that she desperately needed.

"Hi there," continued the voice from the other end, "I'm calling from within the organization."

"Employee to employee," Amy went on, twisting an arm in the air as the precious orange liquid dripped onto her mouth, "tell me: what's going on?"

"Well, I'm in the middle of a dispute in terms of this charter school that we own, ma'am. I'm only a low-level worker but—"
"Oh! What kind of a dispute?" Amy's spirits lifted a little bit, the rabbit hoping to hear a story that might get interesting for once.

"There's a lot to it, ma'am. Oh, goodness, I'm worried that it all might blow up. The big thing right now is this: there are these two students that got suspended, and apparently all four parents on both sides want to challenge that decision."

"Oh, parents being parents, of course! That's what they would say, wouldn't they?" Amy flashed back to the mental image that haunted her and kept her going during the most boring days in Zootopia— seeing herself passed out on a Bunnyburrow bus station bench with a bottle of whiskey between her legs plus a hundred or so baby bunnies crowded around her. As she costantly told herself, he'd rather die as herself in the big city than live as somebody else's stereotype.

"Ma'am, I do think... well, one group of parents, at least, seem to have a point. They're a mixed-species couple with a sort of classic 'problem child', but the young one only blew up after getting pushed to the edge by bullying."

"I see! What exactly are you asking here? I sympathize, of course, but what do you need specific help with?" Amy balanced her soda bottle in between her huge ears, sipping down the last precious drops.

"Oh, I need to set up a group of administrators to take care of this. I've got to have three at bare minimum. I can't, though, get through to my immediate supervisor. Ma'am, I've tried again and again, not just phone calls but even messages on Zoogle Plus—"

"It's a 'communication gap' problem, then?" Amy asked. She didn't add how that fact made it yet another 'as boring as watching a carrot grow routine call' rather than anything interesting.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What about your supervisor's supervisor? Go right up the chain?" Amy scratched her neck.

"Chain..." the voice on the end repeated.

"It might feel presumptive at first, talking to your boss' boss, but it's still the best way to get through one of our bottlenecks. I'm telling you this one working-class mammal to another— the firm's got so many claws, hooves, paws, and more in so many pies that, sometimes, only a middle-manager type has the right picture."

"Ma'am, I do understand what you're saying, but—"

"It'll only take a moment to look up the right number," Amy interjected.

"My boss' boss doesn't even work in the same general industry. I think... well, ma'am, he probably hasn't set foot in a middle school since the Fur Fighters got together."

"Seems worth a try, doesn't it? I'm positive that he'll be able to help in some important way." Amy's subconscious mind started counting down the seconds until her break.

"We're all under that 'corporate umbrella in the free-market rain' or whatever line that they like to use in Tundratown... ma'am, I'm still wondering: what if I'm interrupting a manager doing something that's really important? Or really secret? Or... you know?"

"You're trying to fix something really improtant yourself, aren't you?"
"Yes, but—"

"I bet I can give you a direct line to him or her right now," Amy said, "or in a matter of seconds. Don't worry."

Her eyes slipped over to a pseudo-motivational poster stretching across the wall above the clumps of sweaty cubicles. The pastel-printed card-stock told the scattered workers that even the highest of the higher-ups had doors that were always open— let alone the mid-level mammals, who were portrayed as 'up for anything'. It was empty corporate propaganda, of course, but she felt like taking it seriously for a change if it gave her a chance to get rid of the caller.

"I'm still not sure, ma'am, that that's a good idea. Especially when this charter school problem has nothing to do with—"

"Nonsense!" Amy's face lit up as she saw her nearby tablet finally flashing all of the identifying information of the caller. She immediately spotted the perfect way to toss over the problem to somebody else— goal number one for anybody at any thankless call center anytime, even if she wasn't already itching to get out of her seat. "I can transfer you to a 'Mr. Pecora Jr.' right now!"

"Ma'am, I've decided that I'd really rather—"

A soft Baach concerto of holding music popped on the line.

"Not."

A few minutes before, in a posh community miles away from working-class Zootopia...

The grotesque figures of shimmering brown stretching across the roofs of the Pecora mansion meant that even complete isolation couldn't give a whiff of comfort. Every single glorified oil stain had some kind of religious bent to them. Just walking into one of the first floor bathrooms involved going underneath a hairy, blob-like creature with ten eyes and twenty sharp teeth held back by crucifixes. It looked as if, Ricky Pecora Jr. thought, Satan himself was condemning him for the horrible sin of having to take a piss.

The tall, haggard gazelle washed his hooves with the ludicrously overpriced soap. Its scent, Ricky discovered, made him smell as if he'd dumped a keg of grape soda on his arms. He took a blissful little moment to shove half his body into the wonderfully fluffy towels. That helped.

Ricky's stared at himself in the ornate mirror. He had whitened his teeth. He had gotten his face delicately peeled. He had on a shiny watch. None of that made his reflection any better— the tinted, concave glass appeared to suck some of the life out of whomever stepped in front of it.

The gazelle glanced at his watch. He didn't have to go anywhere. He still felt positive, though, he wouldn't stay for long. Looking at his arm's reflection made him think about how silly and illogical that obsolete bit of technology truly was. Every time he walked around the firm's manufacturing plants he felt idiotic wearing it— he genuinely loved their latest gadgets, none of them having the slightest thing to do with watches.

That didn't matter. Every Pecora had to wear one of those ugly golden machines— one of those ironclad family rules such as 'don't put spoons in the big drawer', 'don't wear socks that don't match', and 'don't bring back one of the preds for a girlfriend' rarely spoken aloud. His sort of gazelles, as the talk went, represented untouchable grace and virtue at its purest.

Love for your own kind, Ricky thought, counted somewhat as a genuine virtue. At the same time, no living creature could ever be virtuous enough for the monument to authoritarian chastity that was the
Pecora mansion. Only its two namesakes—the same Byron and Richard Senior who set the filibuster record at City Hall, ranting against the 'twin evils' of 'demon alcohols and demon unions'—ever came close.

Ricky pressed his small, silver-colored eyeglasses against his face. It felt cold. The door felt cold. The hallway beside the bathroom felt cold. The whole complex felt chill and damp as an oversize tree-house in some rural kid's backyard—not that he'd ever experienced that outside of watching a sitcom.

An open white box beckoned from atop an ornate table. Ricky straightened his plain charcoal-grey suit before seizing it. He took one last, depressive look around the mansion's main foyer before sliding the lid onto the box and stepping right out the front door. He didn't lock the mansion. He had mammals to do that for him. Of course, they wouldn't have let him do that even if he tried.

Ricky waved to the fat ewe at the guard station. He got a wave back—despite the attention-grabbing nature of the conspicuously loud porn on the middle-aged sheep's smartphone. The metal fence creaked open. It only took a matter of seconds for another ewe to let Ricky into the huge black sedan that had been waiting for him.

"Back to the East Office, sir?" the driver asked, tilting her head slightly. The angled light on the car's front side made her look like the femme fatale in some kind of noir movie—even if, though, Ricky had seen himself that she didn't have the strength to open a ketchup bottle.

"Yes," the gazelle murmured. He stared blankly out the window as the car made a few turns.

"Did you return what you needed to, sir?"

"Huh?" Ricky looked face to face at the driver for once.

"You did whatever you needed to do, coming back to the mansion?"

"No," he flatly responded. He paused, brushing a hoof against a cheek, and leaned back in his seat. "Well... yes and no." He cleared his throat. "I suppose."

"I see, sir."

"Good, because I don't," Ricky muttered.

In his mind's eye, the gazelle flashed through his long-running fantasy—something that he'd dreamed about since he'd gotten out of diapers—of surrounding the mansion with wrecking balls. A vacant spot in that part of town would've done some serious good. Make sure everything gets crushed enough flat enough and it would've been a perfect baseball lot. Nothing except for a small sign beside an outfield's corner would've remained to demonstrate the Pecora family's decade after decade of inherited wealth.

"Put the dugout right where the living room is, right where he shot himself," Ricky mouthed, barely even making a sound as he got lost in thought, "and, hell, put home plate on that exact spot." If he somehow managed to see it, Richard Senior would've smiled.

"We're not far from the party, sir. A few miles north and nothing more. We're ready to pop right over there after you stop by your office."

"Yes, I know," Ricky murmured. His boredom already stung him. Actually spending time with actual blood-relatives felt painful to the point of suffocation.
"You have a phone call, sir." Without even having to look, the driver pressed a button on the dashboard and toggled across a small screen. "It's work. Paul Swineland's trying to reach us from the Educational Division."

"Why the hell would the teaching guys call us at finance?" Ricky didn't even bother to disguise the frustration in his voice. "And why now? Aren't all of the charter school kids out running around at home by now?"

"Shall I politely decline to answer him, sir? Do you know Mr. Swineland at all?"

"Paul? Oh, he's a peon. Nothing more. I've only heard his name because he's another legacy hire."

"I see, sir."

"One of those on a list where we've got to give them all some position, so we stick them in lowly nooks and crannies where they don't matter," Ricky went on, "ironically enough too, hell! Owing any job to his aunt's pink pig pussy, Mrs. Swineland sleeping her way right into success... that's life for you."

"I'm preparing to drop him now, sir," the driver said, putting on a reassuring sounding voice. "Wait," Ricky interjected. The sedan pulled into a side road, coming to a stop. The gazelle shut his eyes and sighed. "I can't really— oh, hell, just answer it."

The gazelle never wanted it said that he lacked a sense of managial duty— never in a million years did he plan on becoming one of those businessmammals, who never actually did any actual work. The sheer desire to do anything distracting him from his boring schedule helped a lot.

At the same time, he had no plans to hold back from the piggy peon that he was both higher-ranked and in a bad mood. The sheep behind the wheel gave a little wave to the backseat. Ricky nodded.

"Hello?" called out a meek voice from the sedan's electronic system.

"Hello? Swineland?" The gazelle couldn't see the young pig, naturally, but he had little trouble venting his disdain into the small black microphone atop the backseat. The squiggling metal toggle atop the right speaker even looked like Swineland's little tail.

"Grand Director Pecora!"

"Yes? What is it?" Ricky scratched his nose while taking in a little breath. He couldn't stand his formal job title. It always made him sound like a Jack Savage villain when it got said out loud. Still, he didn't press the point.

"Sir, I didn't mean to go directly to you. I only—"

"Well, you are talking to me now, so: what's going on?"

"It's about West Oak Middle School, sir. I'm here— at the facility that's our most important of our three magnet schools."

"The company's charter operations?" Ricky racked his brain, thinking about recent business news that might apply to it in any way. "What can I and my merry, plus not-so-merry, band of economists do for you, Swineland? Is it that ZNN report? Drawing too many eyes to our budgetary snafu, especially that idiot leaking talk about scholarship cuts?"
"No, sir, it's not that. I—"

"Oh, let me guess: the Mayor's making good on the promise to finally cut those exploding contracts? But slashing the 'General Services for the Generally Serving' department— or whatever its Goddamn name is— drains funds from our sports teams?"

"Sir, well, it is an issue about our athletics," the pig said.

"I knew it," Ricky remarked, letting himself savor a little moment of intellectual superiority.

"But it's not really about money. That came up, but... well, one family brought up filing a lawsuit— though apparently not against us, I think— only they seemed to give that up shortly."

"Oh?"

"Yes, sir, the—"

"Can I be frank, Swineland?" Ricky didn't wait for a response before going on. "It would be a refreshing change to see one of these idiot leftists not only threaten to sue but do it and then win. Break that 'Honesty - 0, Cronyism - 50' perfect score, no? Ask the WWE, they're tell you: nobody likes a bland favorite who always defeats the colorful underdog."

"I, well, I hadn't expected a Yotsubishi executive... to be a wrestling fan..."

"Well, you learned something today. And, by the way, think hard about the metaphor."

"I'm trying. So, you're..." The thoroughly confused pig searched for the right words. "You're talking about City Hall versus us? Or... you mean us plus City Hall versus the mammals over in Pack Street and all of those other neighborhoods? I... or..."

"Swineland, wait a minute." The gazelle scraped his arms against the backseat's plush interior, feeling profusely bored. "I'm only thinking out loud here. I'm saying that City Hall could at least pretend to care about getting a good value for their money in the charters— rather than just blindly accepting whatever numbers get run past them, actual life for Pack Streeters and the rest be damned. Thank God that we actually expect results ourselves."

"Sir, I apologize. Our conversation... I've not given you the right impression at all."

"Look, Swineland, just spit it out," Ricky remarked, "why are you talking to me?"

"I'm not calling about anything financial, sir. At all."

"So, then," Ricky retorted, "what exactly is this about?"

The gazelle tried to tamp down his irritation. After all, Ricky thought, any excuse to get out of his cousin's housewarming party was a godsend. His mind flashed-forward to the solid hour of excruciating silence punctuated by barely-disguised begging about his inherited factory and its related fortune— the gazelle standing around ugly well-wishers wearing uglier clothes, everybody nibbling disgusting foodstuffs unfit even as insect chow. Simply picturing the scene caused him pain.

"It's about student bullying, sir."

"Student... bullying..." Ricky repeated, starting to process what he'd heard. A massive frown crawled across his face. "Are you freaking kidding me?"

"Again, I'm sorry, but if you'll let me explain—"
"Come on, Swineland, why is this being handled by anybody above the teacher level? Neither of us handle anything like that stuff. For God's sake, it's like ringing the ZASA because your model rocket didn't go off."

"Things have gotten hectic, and it's grown bigger than I'd thought. Multiple teachers are involved in this snafu. I'm genuinely not sure what to do."

"Swineland..." Ricky let out an angry sigh.

"A fiasco is brewing at West Oak Middle School, sir. What we thought would be a routine disciplinary procedure, just a pair of idiots feuding with each other, has turned out to be a species-on-species fight that's only the latest—"

"Hear me, Swineland..."

"Of course, following our 'zero tolerance' policy, we kicked out the two instigators. And now the parents of both the suspended are causing a commotion. Lopsided punishment helped one family give up their desire for a lawsuit, but that naturally made the other family even angrier. Merely handing things off to our standard arbitration process—"

"Paul, listen!" Ricky yelled out, bracing a hoof above his glasses.

"Uhh... sir, yes? Sir?" mumbled the voice from miles away.

"I don't get why you're coming to me— going neck deep in middle management, clear across town — rather than doing the right thing and working everything out with your immediate two supervisors. You know? Over in the West Office? With the West Oak Middle School under their purview?"

"Swinton's on vacation, sir."

"And it's not as if he's doing much of anything when he's here, Swineland. Let's be honest. The apple fell far from the tree with that one."

"Whatever you say, sir."

"I'm saying: talk to Mrs. Muskroura, for crying out loud! It's her administrative system! She's the one that's taken the spaghetti soup of rules and regulations and made some kind of corporate policy out of it— something for us to implement that's halfway decent, you know? No help from the Goddamn morons in City Hall, of course—"

"Sir, there's—"

"She's everything educational in this company! Not me! And certainly not anyone higher, God... you going to try to ring the CEO next?"

"I can't get a hold of her, sir! Nobody can! There's some kind of disconnect, with Mrs. Muskroura not even answering at her own place, and—"

"Oh, forget it," the gazelle remarked, realizing that he'd found some kind of a boredom cure at least in the short-term, "it doesn't matter at this moment why she's unreachable. The important thing is that she is."

"Sir, I—"
"Alright, look," Ricky began, clearing his throat, "I can tell you with almost absolute certainty: what your supervisors would say is to do everything by the book. No deviations. No experiments. No special favors. Simply follow all regulations to the letter."

"The parents of both suspended students are insisting that they push through the appeal process, sir."

"Then let them. We have a system there for exactly this, for God's sake," Ricky replied, "with the three or five or whatever independent-like mammals who look at some sort of discipline and decide if it's fair or not. And then there's the one judge-like bison or moose or whatever big prey dude who gets a side role on the top of that."

"Sir, I know the system," the pig protested, fear beginning to leak through the speakers, "but the incident from earlier today goes way beyond your standard silly student stuff. Throwing water balloons, throwing down banana peels, putting up 'kick me' signs, sticking gum everywhere—"

"Right, as if any of that stuff is still a thing, rather than going out with the Studebaker."

"We're talking about species versus species bullying, sir. It's both personal and political at the same time... I'm afraid that it could get radioactive."

"Then all the more reason to handle it buy the book," Ricky commented, grunting.

"Sir, if I can be honest," the pig began.

"So, you're telling me that you haven't been honest up until now?" quipped Ricky.

"Uhhh..."

"God, say whatever it is you need to say, Swineland."

"Sir, one of the students is a mixed... species... mammal. Of a family of wolves..."

"Yes, and?" Ricky let out another angry sigh.

"Her father is one of the scariest predators that I've ever seen. He's beyond tough. Physically. Psychologically. Emotionally. I mean... everything, in all of the ways... in all of the '-lys'. He poses like he got carved in stone, sir."

"Nobody here's dating him, Swineland. No reason to give a crap about what he looks like."

"You could grate cheese on his chest, sir."

"I'm repeating my 'Yes, and?', Swineland."

"Sir, I almost wet my pants when that huge wolf walked in. I'm not kidding."

"Well... alright then. Thanks for sharing." The sarcasm almost dripped from the gazelle's mouth.

"Sir, just one of his biceps is bigger than my entire head. And it's as if his teeth have pointy edges on top of the pointy edges." The voice grew fainter, the pig sucking in long breaths. "When he actually looked at me? At first, I simply thought that my thighs had a lot of sweat on them, understandable enough—"

"Driver," Ricky interjected, tapping the back of the front seat. 

"But I noticed when I stood up that he'd terrified me into actually—"
"Driver!" Ricky yelled.

"Yes, sir!" The sedan pulled into a deserted parking lot for a moment.

"Forget the office. Forget the Pecora residence. We're turning around and heading for West Oak Middle School. Now," Ricky declared. He straightened in his seat and brushed a hoof against the backside of the driver's chair. "Swineland, as for you, I want you to—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Instead of doing whatever instinct tells you, I— well—" Ricky tried to think of a good way of putting things. He felt too drained to have a nice, managerial way with words. "Don't. Whatever you want to do, don't do that. Do... absolutely nothing."

"Yes, sir!"

[End of Chapter Nine]
Chapter 10

About an hour and a half later, in the lobby floor of a commercial complex...

The six mammals hadn't planned on taking opposite sides of the table— the three charter personnel lining up across from the two parents and their only child. They'd all had several minutes of getting cups of coffee, exchanging introductions, and adjusting the conference room's central air. Any of them could've picked any of the twelve chairs. Things had simply ended up the stereotypical way.

Al slid his arms out on the table as he waited for his wife to do finished with her purse. He'd learned countless times not to judge based on appearances, but that didn't change the sinking feeling that he had about the mammals across from him. He barely related to any of them. Worse than that, each of them had the faint aura— a kind of persistent musk, really— of undeserved authority that he'd witnessed countless times before. The posh-looking gazelle that sat across from his wife seemed the worst of all; he felt it to point that it'd bring back bad memories from decades ago if he thought too hard.

At the same time, the Roe family's horrible situation made him sickeningly numb in the first place. His wife didn't feel much different. The three were well past the point where Al could simply say the right thing to the right mammal and somehow it all better— not that his daughter even deserved that in the first place.

The wolf's righteous anger at the school and the business that controlled it for letting the constant, terrible harassment go on— problems that he'd gotten reassurance after reassurance would change and wasn't that bad anyways— didn't alter how shocked he felt at Vivian. Putting another mammal in the hospital of all places, she was incredibly lucky to get nothing more than a suspension, No lecture he could give could ever truly convey that. Back when Al was growing up, Vivian's act would've gotten an out-of-pack species killed.

"We might as well click this thing on," said the petite-looking skunk by the room's double-doors, "since we're getting started and all."

She scooted her chair backward and slipped a paw along a small panel on the wall. A soft yet clearly noticeable electronic hum sounded off above all the mammals. A few eyes glanced upon her and migrated up at the plain, florescent-light covered ceiling. Velvet and Vivian both noticed the telltale grey knobs indicating built-in microphones.

"Big Brother is listening," Velvet remarked. She folded her arms around her purse and leaned back a bit in her chair.

"Given who's in charge of our Educational Department, it's more like 'Big Aunt is listening';" the skunk commented, putting on a little smile before she scooted her chair forward.

"Excuse me?" Al piped up.

"Yes?" the skunk asked, lighting up.

"So you're a..." Al began, but he trailed off as the gears in his head kept turning. Even if they were both predators, he still still didn't know what to make of her odd cheerfulness. "I'm sorry. What did you say that your name was again? I think I misheard you."
"Baby Muskroura." She brushed a paw against her sparkling blue dress and slid up her name-tag.

"Oh?" Al pulled his arms off of the table. At least, he thought, the last name seemed familiar.

"You mean 'B-a-b-y', Baby?" Velvet asked, finally placing her purse between her legs.

"Exactly." The skunk put back on her sunny smile. "Still says that on there, last time I checked." She made a little show of clipping off her name-tag and hovering it in front of her face. "Yep, still there. Can't wait to get rid of the picture with those braces though, my goodness."

"Normally," interjected the suit-wearing gazelle, looking directly at Al, "this kind of a meeting takes significant time. Evaluating a student's status and his or her family's viewpoint about an administrative action, especially in terms of the formal appeal process, usually involves several days of work. That's well after a decision had gotten made." He gestured to the skunk at his side. "It's quite fortunate that the West Oak school's own Chief Analyst Baby Muskroura—"

"That's a mouthful, and 'Baby' is too informal, right? We can just go with 'Ms. Muskroura.' Makes way more sense," the skunk chimed in.

"Anyways, it's extremely fortunate that both her and the overall department's Vice Secretary, Paul Swineland," the gazelle went on, leaning in the direction of the nervous pig with the thick eyeglasses, "could be here at such remarkably short notice—the same day of the initial disciplinary ruling, no less."

"We're glad," Al flatly replied, barely betraying his emotions. He turned to face his daughter. the young mammal had, consciously or subconsciously, slid her chair far away from the table over to a blank whiteboard on a wall. Her blank face and tight pose looked stiff as a doll. Al tried his best to stay in his own seat.

"The aforementioned student didn't need to come, true, but it's still great how all three of us on the administration side are here with all three of you. It's unusual to start things off so quickly, isn't it Swineland?" Ricky asked, turning his attention over completely.

Sweat slipped down the pig's cheeks. He'd taken the farthest spot possible from Al's seat, but the prey mammal still could barely even look at that direction. Feeling the eyes of the rest of the room on him, though, he awkwardly held up an arm and waved. He met eyes with the gazelle and hoped that those few moves would be enough.

"It's having Grand Director Richard Pecora Jr. here in the flesh. That's the biggest stroke of luck, Mr. and Mrs. Roe," Baby added. She closed her eyes and brushed a paw against the Ricky's side, the stoic-looking gazelle neither expecting nor minding the attention. "In terms of the corporate chain of command, you've gotten to skip up a level. Isn't that something?"

The couple didn't exactly look impressed. Since Ricky hadn't expected them to, the silent stares didn't mean anything to him, and he pulled up a tablet computer from the edge of the table. "Just... call me 'Director', please."

"That's fine," Al replied.

"Honestly, 'Richard Pecora' is my father's name. Never really been mine."

"Sure," Al and Velvet simultaneously said.

The wolf had dealt with enough family dynamics in his life, prey and predator alike, to know when a batch of old feelings still remained raw. The titling head and leg jerk from the well-dressed gazelle at
that moment spoke volumes. For his part, though, Al tried his best to looked guard. He had folded his arms and legs tightly against his big body. His wife, however, seethed with resentment—not focused on any mammal in particular, but ready to unleash it on the unlikable gazelle at a moment's notice. She looked ready to rant for a whole week and even follow the mammal home.

"Swineland there?" Ricky gestured back at the room's corner. "He's a mammal of few words a lot of the time." The gazelle didn't mention how he'd shoved a hoof into the pig's chest and demanded that it be so. "Don't be surprised if he only has a few things to say this whole meeting. He's still a great, valuable member of the team."

"Yes... thanks..." the pig murmured, letting his eyes drift up at toward the ceiling and stay there.

"Let's get this 'Arbitration Meeting' formally started. Ms. Muskroura? Mr. Swineland?" Ricky watched them both nod and tapped upon his tablet. "Now, then, I know that it sounds like an empty formality, but I genuinely want to thank you all for coming."

"Once again, I really... we really hope that we can talk things out. Beyond simply looking into... the suspension," the pig managed to choke out, still looking at the ceiling rather than any of the Roe family.

"Many of us, myself included, are not that experienced with the discipline review process." Ricky took a long swig of the coffee cup before him and glanced all around the massive table. "Thus, it makes perfect sense to take a moment to explain things in detail."

The mammals across from him nodded. Vivian was the lone exception. The suspended student had slipped out of her chair onto an awkward clump in the corner of a gigantic corduroy sofa. The normally talkative mammal looked like she was in the middle of an out-of-body-experience—the back of her head gently ringing the whiteboard behind her like a metronome.

"This is not a court of law. This is nothing at all like a court of law. There's no adversarial process. Nobody has a lawyer. Nobody is a lawyer," Ricky continued, "I might look the part, but I'm an economist—whole different story, I assure you."

Al and Velvet silently blinked. Vivian shifted around in the back, making a small crumpling noise against the couch. Ricky scratched his neck and went on.

"The first function of this arbitration is to find out what happened. The second is to make assertive but non-binding recommendations to the school's teaching staff about what to do going forward—regardless of whatever decisions have already gotten made. Those are our objectives."

"That's how it is," the skunk said.

"I'm lapsing into a lot 'corporate speak', I know, but the gist is this: we're interested in the truth. Even if we have a legal role within the company, we're not doing 'guilty' versus 'not guilty'. So, we'll start off by telling us what we've heard from the teachers. And then all of you can tell us what you think."

"Whatever comes to mind? Say it," Baby added.

"Makes sense," Al said. Unemotional as the wolf looked, Al still desperately hoped that the gazelle would act as logical and straight-forward as the well-dressed mammal sounded.

"It's an extraordinary circumstance to go at things so quickly, like we keep saying. And, really, I promise that I won't bring that fact up again," Ricky said, "with me only bringing it up again, right this second, to remind us all: the office hasn't interviewed any students yet. Understandably enough,
we need to talk things over with multiple witnesses in the future. We have discussed everything in depth with the two volunteer teachers who were there—a Mr. Stoutwell and Mr. Wynn telling us about what I hope that we can simply call 'the incident'."

"For lack of a better word," Baby remarked, "that makes things easier."

"While the broader context is surely important, the specific timeline of the incident appears to not be in dispute. Earlier today, a gym-related event gave an opportunity for classmates of Ms. Vivian Roe, including herself, to compare records with each other. Predictably enough, this fostered a general atmosphere of condescension, mocking, and poor sportsmanship in general—a bad situation outside of what Ms. Roe said, did, or underwent."

Velvet opened her mouth to say something, looking over at her husband. Both of them sensed that they ought to simply let the suited deer go on. Meanwhile, the skunk idly clicked a pen in her paws while the pig panted softly in the far corner.

"Ms. Roe's rivalry with a young predator named Mr. Hunter Jacks—himself subject to negative citation several times before with other teachers, although never formally disciplined—attracted a great deal of attention. All the while, the two teachers failed to maintain proper control of their students and simply did not provide for good sportsmanship—allowing disruptions of class activities not just to take place but to compound. Ms. Roe and the other students didn't experience the safe learning environment that they deserved. Instead, the teachers lost control, and that was a serious error."

Ricky paused yet again. A few brushes on his tablet made it appear that he wanted to keep going. Velvet glanced back at Vivian. The young mammal hadn't expected anything other than raw, painful embarrassment plus a complete railroading from the meeting; She showed a tinge of genuine surprise at how oddly reasonable the gazelle sounded. Mother and daughter both silently nodded.

"Ms. Roe's time on the pitcher's mound was not simply 'disrupted'. Things reached a crescendo in which the class itself came to a halt. This was profoundly unfair to everyone, especially Ms. Roe. While harassing actions had come from a variety of mammals, the worst interruption specifically came from a Mr. Eel—"

"Eel?" Al asked, leaning forward.

"I..." Ricky filled with his tablet for a moment. He scratched his cheek and shoved his face right up to the screen. "Oh, it appears that 'Eel' is actually a nickname. I thought that it was the coyote's actual—"

Vivian couldn't help herself, and she let out a stiff, sharp laugh.

"Anyways," Ricky went on, dismissively waving a hoof, "a group of coyotes had begun to verbally bully Ms. Roe. These classmates—" Ricky scrolled a bit on his tablet. "Yes, they have a history of prejudicial actions towards prey mammals. The rare individuals of mixed-species ancestry get the worst of it. During today's incident, the—"

"The student-otherwise-known-as-Eel," interjected the skunk.

"Yes, that coyote in particular separated himself out of the group with his singular behavior. Fighting with both Ms. Roe as well as the nearby teacher, the individual's body language and actual words crossed from harassment to implied threat—the other mammals present feeling a justified concern for their physical safety."
Al felt a sudden brush behind him. His head gently turning, he saw Vivian kneeling on the floor beside him and her mother. The young one had slowly stepped over to their side—probably without even thinking. The wolf wordlessly brought a paw down to his daughter's shoulder. Velvet remained focused on the gazelle's every word.

"It was at that moment that Miss Roe assaulted the coyote with her baseball."

"Yes." The softness of the word meant that the other mammals couldn't tell if Velvet, Vivian, or both of them had said it. Either way, it didn't matter.

"In the following commotion, an outright brawl between various species-based cliques nearly took place. However, the immediate intervention of a pair of buffalo teachers—who were not instructing any class but merely happened to be passing by—prevented that. Still, the confusion meant that different mammals broke off to go to different places. Ms. Roe wound up accompanying a group of six to the hospital, not that she intended to be there. There, the injured coyote received proper treatment."

"And that's where we are," Al declared.

"I understand that there's a bigger context. Some of those coyotes as well as other predators have been harassing Ms. Roe over the past several weeks, both in terms of snide remarks in the hallways plus inappropriate social media posts. The coyotes in particular have this, frankly, obsession with trolling other Pack Street residents online. Their face-to-face bullying of Ms. Roe only somewhat abated due to... t-shirts, were they?"

"Dolf and proud," Velvet said. She fumbled for her smartphone. "That's what the clothes say."

"Dolf," Ricky repeated, not understanding. He clutched the device that Velvet gave over and stared blankly at the photographs it displayed. "That's... oh! I get it!"

"Right," Al muttered.

Ricky realized that he looked stupidly proud over such a simple thing, and he went back to his plain, neutral-type expression. "Are there any of the facts that I've mentioned that you'd dispute?"

"Nope," Vivian replied, though she quickly got that Ricky had been looking at the other deer.

"I'm, well," Velvet began, motioning her daughter to sit back on the couch, "I'd like to be frank here."

"Go ahead," Baby chimed in, leaning up against Rick's side.

"My husband and were expecting a lot of dodging. Refusing to accept any responsibility and to listen to even the slightest criticism," she went on, "with that standard corporate line of... well, Al and I expected a whitewash."

"I haven't painted anything since my acrylics class, back in 2005. I tried to do a scene from The Fast and the Furryious, and I got a B+," Ricky commented.

The skunk grinned. The pig, meanwhile, glared off at Ricky's direction. He seemed frustrated by the fact that neither of his colleagues were as miserable as he was. Neither of them were anywhere near as sweaty.

"It is a pleasant surprise," Al chimed in, "to hear your company—"
"Yotsubishi Financial Group," Baby interjected.

"To hear... them," Al continued, the firm's name triggering a mental does-not-compute moment, "through you three, admitting to making mistakes? Not cooking up some story about a 'bad apple' student and her parents, causing all of your problems? Being all rational and reasonable instead?"

"Let me guess," Ricky began, narrowing his eyes a bit, "you've never actually met a mid-level corporate mammal before."

"Oh!" Al sat upright in his chair with arms braced against the table. "Oh! Are you kidding me?"

"Huh?" Ricky muttered, not moving.

"It's the exact opposite," Al declared, taking in a few breaths, "I'm the manager of this franchise at a mall. For crying out loud, I've spent a quarter of my time dealing with beady-eyed mammals in suits, and it's a big chunk of my life I'll never get back."

"Sorry to hear that, I guess," Ricky remarked.

"Knowing that this is a corporate-controlled charter school, even if I've loved so much about it," Velvet chimed in, "we've been afraid knowing how much free reign the city government gives you places. I couldn't help thinking that, well, you guys could shove kids in cages with leashes and water bowls, and you'd get away with because 'such is the will of the free-market'."

"You're one generation too late on that one. That's 'Richard Pecora Sr.' stuff." The gazelle shut his eyes and let out a deep, long sigh. "That and the wanting to burn females at the stake if they wear pants thing. You know... because the Gospels say to or whatever."

"I'm pretty sure that they don't actually say that," Al interjected.

"Yeah, me too," Ricky continued, "anyways... look, I digress. We digress."

"The point is, well," Velvet said, leaning over the table with her eyes meeting the gazelle's, "I prepared myself to hear something like that. And I'd know that West Oak Middle School, even if it's full of bigoted students and clueless teachers, would still somehow be less crappy then all of the nearby public schools. The whole system around Pack Street is that Goddamn bad. Trust me. I used to be a social worker."

"Ooof!" Both Baby and Ricky grimaced.

"I know."

"Mr. and Mrs. Roe, I still need to interrupt this little moment to get back to the arbitration matter at hand," Ricky declared, his arms going under the table. His words had a sudden sense of sullen finality to them.

The three mammals at the other side of the table braced themselves. Vivian slid her body right off of the couch, sitting flat on the floor against the side cushions. She didn't dare say a word.

"All of this is preliminary so far. Yet I can't help but recommend that the two volunteer gym teachers receive full retraining plus some kind of a reprimand, likely involving their salaries."

"I agree," Baby added. The pig nodded as well.

"I also recommend that the whole student body hold some sort of an anti-bullying seminar, with all
of the young ones getting a written statement about harassment. It wouldn't be legally binding at all, what with them all being minors, but making them have to sign it and be clearly aware of the sea change is important. It'll involve a lot of effort. However, we really need to set up stricter enforcement of our policies when it comes to not just hallway comments but social media posts as well."

"Yes," muttered the other two mammals beside Ricky.

"Teachers are going to get tough, and the moment they hear something out of line they need to immediately tell the perpetrator to cut it out. We will be thorough."

"Exactly." Baby tapped a paw against Ricky's arm.

"And... Vivian Roe's suspension stays."

"Director," Velvet murmured, leaning a bit more over the table, "please."

Vivian buried her face in her hooves behind her parents. Al remained quiet and stone-faced. Ricky, however, stood up off of his chair and stepped away from the table altogether.

"We can't forget that we're talking about assault, here," Ricky declared. He seized the leftover coffee and poured himself another cup. "In a different time, with a different student, this would be the sort of thing that teachers would call the police over."

"I know," Velvet said, her eyes watching the gazelle's every move.

"A big, solid object hurled ninety mile-per-hour or so, directly at somebody? Something that I can't exactly wave away, you know, even if I understand why it got thrown," Ricky went on, "and that's assuming that I'd want to wave it away, which I frankly don't."

"We," Al started to say, "heard how the—"

"Look, sorry to interrupt, but you didn't hear the half of it," the gazelle remarked, pacing a bit around the table, "the only reason why the coyote family decided not to sue either you or the school after Eel-who-is-actually-not-Eel got hurt is our decision. The fact that Ms. Roe has gotten such a by-the-book punishment— I can't look anybody in the eye and genuinely say that it's not deserved, you hear me?"

"We're hearing you," Velvet replied, putting everything into her pleading expression, "but, please, think it over."

"I have. I truly have," Ricky declared. He made his way back to his own chair, though he didn't sit down. "Morally, it matters that we're talking about hitting a bigot. How could it not? Acting in response to what seems to have crossed the line of free speech? Going up against a cloud of threatening harassment? I'm not putting Ms. Roe in a confession booth here. Legally, Mr. and Mrs. Roe, I'm doing what I've got to do. I'm acting on behalf of a public-private partnership, a government licensed organization with strict educational rules. We have to enforce the law. It's not a matter of opinion. It's just how things are."

The finality in the gazelle's voice, Ricky finishing with a gigantic swig of coffee, didn't change the wave of raw emotion going over Velvet's face. Vivian, meanwhile, curled up on the couch staring at the fabric. She looked like a shriveled up earwig about to get the last blast of BugBurga sauce.

"You can't just physically attack someone for being wrong, you know? No matter how much of a wrong, vicious asshole they're being," Ricky went on, "right?"
Ricky stepped over to Swineland's chair and gripped it's edges. The pig let out a soft squeak as the gazelle slowly leaned down. None of the Roe family said a word.

"I'm sure Paul here has had countless times where he's gotten shocked by the crap that he's seen coming from our upper management. I know I have."

"Actually," the pig whimpered, "I've... uhh..."

"My God, at least half of my father's generation or something like it have acted exactly like our pseudo-Eel did. And there's plenty of those mammals still kicking. Types that think that homosexuality should be a criminal offense and a predator whistling at a prey girl ought to get run out of their block. God help me, both my mother and my aunt are still as bad as ever," Ricky continued, twisting his hooves against the edges of his own chair, "and if they knew I was missing my cousin's housewarming party to help a dolf family... well, they'd be as steamed orange as the potatoes."

"Interesting image," Velvet muttered, her train of mental thought derailing.

"Mr. Roe?" Ricky stepped over to the wolf's side. Al's sitting down and the deer's natural height meant that the predator looked straight up at a prey mammal for a change. "You're getting what I'm saying, right?"

"I am." Al's knowing expression on his face matched the sudden deepness of his voice.

"Miss Roe committed an act of assault on school grounds. I can't pretend that I don't understand why she did it, nor am I ignoring her long record of suffering through things that she never should have. Yet I can't pretend either that I can simply throw away the law. 'Zero tolerance' politics are what's on the books Zootopia-wide. Nobody can just walk away from an act like this."

"I understand."

"Throwing the book at her, which would be well within our power to do?" Ricky stepped around a bit, arms dragging against the edge of the table. "That would be bringing her to Juvenile Hall. Us giving her a six week suspension? That's already some serious leniency. De facto the punishment is literally 'please go somewhere else and come back later'. If I do anything else, anything that's lighter, how does it not become naked favoritism? And how does it start becoming fundamentally unfair for all of the other students— especially the one that ended up in the hospital, of all places?"

"Director?"

"Yes?" Ricky took one of the empty seat, putting himself on the Roe family's side of the table.

Al paused for a moment, clearly looking deep in thought. Velvet had poised herself to go on a mixture of pleading and ranting— something that she could've done until she literally passed out— but she trusted her husband to do her more than one better in a fraction of the words. Vivian rocked back and forth on her spot away from all the adults.

"What my daughter did was absolutely wrong. No question." Al slipped himself a bit away from the table, managing to look both at Ricky as well as his two colleagues. "She absolutely has to have some kind of a fair punishment. No question. She'll be punished at home. She'll be punished at her school."

"Right," Ricky said.

"That's as it should be."
"Mr. Roe?" the skunk wandered a bit along the side of the table as well.

"I'm not asking for her to avoid having anything bad happen to her. She has to learn. She's learning now, already. This is important. What I trying to get across to you, Director," Al said, weighing his words carefully, "is that the West Oak Middle School has been a cornerstone of her life. All of her success at track and field, coupled with everything else that she's physically put herself to, means the world to her. I couldn't be more proud."

"Neither could I," Velvet added.

"She doesn't have that many real friends, honestly. The closest mammals that we're to, and that she's to, is a fox named Alex and a wolf named Johnny as well as their families. They're families that have lived on Pack Street as well for more than a decade. They're both tied to this school. And even if they don't always show it, I'm positive that they're rooting for my daughter has meant so much to her as well."

"I can't just wipe away this suspension," Ricky said, "and it's more than fair. It's policy. It's reasonable."

"I'm not asking you to wipe the slate clean. I am asking you to let her play. Don't keep her away from the weeks and weeks of practice she needs, let alone the big events coming up next month. Please."

"I know," Ricky replied, "that she'll be missing a lot."

"There has to be some kind of an additional compromise," Al went on, "with some way for her to work things out... it would be devastating to miss two months of everything."

"Mr. Roe," Ricky began, "I—"

"I got it!"

The other mammals froze as the pig triumphantly shoved his body upward, bursting out of his chair. Swineland's bright pink body appeared to glow. Ricky twisted himself around and raised an arm in his colleague's direction.

"Yes?" the gazelle asked.

"Dolf! It's actually so simple! Deer plus wolf!"

"Uh," Baby and Ricky muttered, "yes."

"I just got that!"

Baby rolled her eyes. Ricky, however, sank deep in thought. The gazelle flopped onto one of the previously empty chairs and titled his head back. The Roe family waited in anticipation.

Seeing all eyes coming right off of him, the pig slumped back down onto his seat. Acting by instinct, he reached over for a fresh cup of coffee and pushed it over to Ricky's new spot. The gazelle had shut his eyes and mouth, but he gripped the drink and inhaled deeply all the same.

"Mr. Roe?" Ricky asked.

"Yes?" Al felt his wife clutching his side.

"If Ms. Roe was ten years older, working in some regular place doing the regular stuff," Ricky
began, sliding his eyes open a bit, "then it's still a matter of assault, but then she would be given a lawyer and would be put before a judge. And a judge has various options available to him or her that don't come to mind—at least, not at first—when we're talking about a minor student."

"I'm not... following," Velvet said, glancing up at Al. The wolf, though, sensed that something was coming that he might find interesting.

"Besides just letting somebody out, which is rather a problem if he or she is actually guilty," Ricky went on, "there's the three main options. Jail? Everybody thinks of jail. That's what they make movies and TV shows about. But—" The gazelle opened up his eyes completely and gulped down his drink. "The two key options are the alternatives that mammals don't about even if they do a lot of good. First, there's 'community service'. Second, there's 'probation'."

"Student probation? Wait... what?" Baby interjected, looking totally confused.

"I take back what I said," Ricky declared, suddenly seizing his tablet computer, "and I recommend that Ms. Vivian Roe be placed into one week of 'traditional suspension' coupled with four weeks of 'administrative suspension'. That is: 'probationary suspension with strict community service'."

"Does that," Velvet started to say, "mean that—"

"As a manager, I'm able to make any word mean basically whatever I want to mean by adding the term 'administrative' in front of it," the gazelle remarked, crumpling up the coffee cup, "here, though, I'm playing things straight. It means the strictest school experience that you can imagine. No full classroom participation. No recess or anything like it. Just one-on-one studying and teaching to the textbook, separated off from everybody else, mixed in with isolated practice outdoors and certain, specific competitions."

"I'm sure," Baby interjected, "that we can count on Ms. Roe's full co-operation through all this."

"And, most importantly of all," Ricky finished, "all of the time that she would've spent in regular class or having regular lunch or getting into regular shenanigans in the halls or whatever else will be spent at the Pack Street Community Gardens. Period. No if, ands, or buts. Trading bullies for buckets and snark for seeds."

Velvet locked eyes with her daughter. The younger mammal had little idea how to respond, idly rubbing her back against the wall, but the older deer felt filled with joy. "Thank you," Al simply replied.

"After committing to do all of this work, day after day for several weeks, cleaning up the land outdoors across from our school, she won't just have an opportunity to provide community service. She can vent her frustrations out on the dirt instead of her fellow mammals," Ricky concluded.

"We won't forget this," Al said, stretching out his arms. He took Ricky's offered hoof and gave a firm, knowing pawshake.

"It really is the ideal solution," Baby chimed in, "especially since an 'administrative suspension', letting her continue with some sports and all, wouldn't have to go on her permanent record the same way a normal suspension would."

"We thank you all," Velvet said, grabbing one of Baby's paws without the skunk even realizing it, "so much. It's especially something to hear it now, the same day that all of this unfortunate... all of these things happened."

"I'm glad," Baby replied. She happily shook Velvet's hooves right back.
"It's, uh," the pig muttered from the corner, "something... nice. I see. I agree. Agreement is achieved."

"Swineland?" Ricky asked, stepping away from Ricky.

"Yes, sir?"

"You can go early," Ricky began, "if you need—"

The gazelle didn't even complete the sentence before the pig sped out of the conference room's door.

"Well, I'll be," Baby remarked.

Al and Velvet hugged each other. The gazelle and skunk stepped a bit closer as they both glanced at the tablet computer, clicking through a few sections in the forms that they needed fill out. The deer and wolf turned and faced their daughter.

"Did, wait," Vivian muttered, tapping her hooves anxiously upon the floor, "did he seriously say 'community service'? Did he seriously say seeds? And buckets? And dirt?"

Not too long later...

Sun bathed the patches of muddy land as a group of mammals stepped across it. Two particular gardeners stopped beside a tall oak tree. The older one gave the younger one yet another of his goofy grins.

"Do you want my big friend to say 'hello' to your little friend?" asked the fat wombat with a set of tight plaid overalls. He rubbed his grubby paws upon one of the ends of the huge fern, stroking the greenery. "Aw, look, I think my guy likes your guy." The wombat pursed his lips together, joy dripping off of his face as much as sweat, as he poked some of the fern's edges onto Vivian's pot of dandelions.

Velvet glared at the nearby pile of bricks, still waiting to get sorted into the adjacent wheelbarrows, without giving the wombat the slightest attention. Still, it only took a few seconds of the former country mammal's goofy noises for her to flip herself around. Vivian resigned herself to holding her hooves and clutching the dandelion pot, helping its flowers in the fern massage.

"I'm positive that your guy will love all the manure that you shoveled into his new home! It's like you stocked his pantry and refrigerator in good, hah!"

"He'll be thrilled," Vivian replied in a soft monotone.

"Be sure to talk to him just as much as the rest of the dandelions, remember," the wombat went on, "it's that 'essence on essence bonding' that's the heart of both farming and gardening, as my grandma used to say. Speak to the plants. Sing to the plants. Tell them your true feelings, little lady."

"He will... feel my essence."

"Yep! And now, little lady, it's time to lay those bricks!" The wombat gripped one of the dusty concrete blocks and tossed it at Vivian's legs. "I'm heading in for a fresh bottle of concentrated pickle juice because I'm parched! You want something?"

"Some water would be nice."

"You sure? You can really taste the pickly goodness in every green sip!"
"I... look, water... please??"

The fat gardener gave an eager wave before marching across the big field. Vivian watched him step away and slowly turned back to the first potted dandelion. Letting out a deep sigh, she bent down over the plant.

"Well, guy, I think that I'd rather have been expelled."

[End of Chapter Ten]
Chapter 11

In the Pack Street community garden on a particularly sunny morning...

Vivian snatched the cold bottle of ginger ale with the speed and intensity of a spider pouncing on a trapped fly. She shoved it onto her face and gulped it down. A giant cooler packed with drinks would've been best, but the old, beat-up backpack that the teachers from West Oak Middle School had brought did fine.

Still, that didn't change how agonizingly boring all the gardening— or 'applied learning in cultivating local flora and fauna' as the glossy brochures shoved into mailbox after mailbox claimed— truly was. It astonished her how many young mammals voluntarily headed over to wander among the piles of ugly dirt. She'd only spent three days at Pack Street Central Gardens. It'd already felt like three whole months.

As far as actual 'learning' went, she'd developed quite a knack for stewing in her own deep thoughts. Like an old CD player with the buttons all stuck, her mind replayed the scenes of her screwing up and having to deal with the consequences. Dealing with what father had said when he finally pulled her aside after that weird partner-x-teacher-x-student conference absolutely hurt the most, but her subconscious couldn't let those fateful words go.

It helped to dream up activity after activity that she could otherwise be doing. She did her best to actually take the planting seriously as well. That posed a difficult challenge.

The first day, Stoutwell had brought Vivian and a few other mammals to PSCG and given a little speech about community that nobody really remembered. The one thing that stuck in the students' minds was that the raccoon pronounced the area's name like 'piss-sick'. The expression that flashed across his face made it clear that Stoutwell regretted his words the exact second that he'd said them.

Vivian grunted at the thought: it was too damn true. Half of the garden consisted of nothing more than patches of dirt— eventual promises of something edible in the distant future, appearing pretty ugly at the moment. Besides, even an area like the nice looking stretch of apple trees beside her might as well have had irons and shackles around their trunks. She could've had over an hour of track and field practice before cooling off watching silly memes on Zoogle Video. Instead, she'd wasted half her morning checking those trunks for nibbling parasites— all because she stood up to a schoolyard bully.

A burst of radio static sounded off above her. The garden's music apparently cut off, Vivian stared across the hole-covered field she had to fix up next. She caught a glimpse of the gangling moose with a name she kept forgetting— it rhymed with 'guitar', Al had reminded her before dropping her off three hours ago, not that it helped— in charge of the mid-afternoon batch of students. The moose let out a loud grunt and kicked a stack of metallic grey boxes, gangling wires poking all across its sides. The contraption petered out a soft, sputtering noise but did nothing else.

Vivian leaned against a box full of wooden tools and took in the glorious moment of blissful silence. The gleeful wombat who'd trailed Stoutwell and started off the morning's so-called 'agricultural instructions' had a taste for classical tunes, which she honestly didn't mind much. After all, Vivian thought, she'd gotten used to that kind of stuff playing when she hung out with Alex and Johnny. Yet the moose teacher, on the other paw, wouldn't know 'music' if the guys from Slayer bit him on his big, chunky butt. Vivian crushed her ginger ale bottle into plastic mush between her hooves and
froze as a little breeze brushed across her face.

The happy moment didn't last very long. The sickly smell of the chalky goop that the gardeners in charge used as fertilizer wafted back up through the air. Vivian tensed. It still ate at the back of her mind too that she had literally hundreds upon hundreds of places that she'd rather be— locations where mammals could actually breathe the freaking air.

"All because I stood up for myself, like a true alpha always," she began to murmur to herself. She froze as the sound of father's growling burst out from deep within her subconscious. Vivian brushed a hoof against her temple and tried to shove the memory down.

She had to stop thinking about 'alpha this' and 'alpha that'. Otherwise, she'd give herself a headache as throbbing as when she'd accidentally drank her mother's wine cooler thinking it was just juice. Blinking over and over again, Vivian turned her eyes off into the far distance.

A pair of weasels— twins with some stupid, faux-cute names that Vivian had also forgotten— leaned up against a concrete embankment in the garden's entrance. Having apparently finished with their big patch of dandelions, they rubbed their heads against each other and gawked at the angry-looking teacher. The weasels made some kind of a mumbling joke in between themselves.

Their goofy faces lit up before they let out a bunch of giggles. The way in which they spat into the air with their huge teeth made Vivian want to smack the back of their heads with a shovel. She grabbed one from the toolbox but actually used it to chuck her crumbled-up bottle into a nearby recycling bin, which leaned on its side beside a clutch of oak trees.

"Now then, kids, we still have to plant all of the tomatoes before we call it a day! Don't forget," called over the moose. He slipped off his dark grey jacket and tried to bend his contraption's antennae with it.

"Yes..." Vivian began. She stuck her neck out. "Sir!" She almost had to choke to force that last phony-friendly word out.

The moose forced a smile before patted the knob-covered top of his Doctor-Frankenstein's-lab-like radio machine. "No slacking off, no sirs! No ma'am!" He pointed right at Vivian. "I mean it— this is a genuinely educational experience, after all!"

The teacher had kept a keen eye on Vivian for a while. It didn't seem the least bit fair. So, she thought while angrily clutching her shovel against her chest, she'd made a badger cry with her genuinely funny quip about the local mafia burying bodies beneath the maple trees. It was the little moron's own fault for taking things too seriously. Besides, after all, everybody knew that the all bodies were in either Tundratown ice flows or Marshland sewers.

"This is Z105, your Dream Station," the radio blared out, back from the dead, "bringing you the best electronic music from the lands of ice and snow! No matter where you are now! Up next is the Cocteau Twins' track 'The Thinner The Air's Fluffy Tufts', a smooth sensation!"

"Ah, what a classic!" The teacher's face shone out with raw joy. As loud warbling shot all through the air from the contraption, the vocalist of the group sounding as if she'd had a stroke, the moose slapped his legs together. He began to murmur along with the electronic tones. "You hear this, little trees? Little bushes? Little saplings?" He pointed at various clumps of greenery as he sang.

"Not that I don't appreciate being told I've a knack in getting stuff to grow... but you should know that hell will freeze over before I'm singing along to a bunch of branches, okay?" Vivian asked under her breath.
The teacher didn't hear a word. Not waiting for a response, Vivian stepped to the garden's entrance and eyed the gigantic metal crate of supplies on the sidewalk— all crammed full of things that the teachers had brought over. Velvet had bought a bunch of materials with a charity-managed debit card that the older mammal coupled with a few more items. The shovels were donated to the Pack Street community group 'on behalf of the Roe family'.

Yet nobody in the Roe family particularly cared for tomatoes. It seemed totally random— not that Vivian, on thin ice with her parents to say the least, wanted to press the point. Besides, Vivian thought while looking at the many seeds, it wasn't like she could tell any of the tiny brown globs of biological whatnot apart in the first place.

The prey mammal felt a brush of fur between her legs. She watched as the weasels, their smooth white fur shining in the sunlight, sped up to the last of the six bags of seeds. They both leaned down. They promptly bumped their heads together. They leaned upward and gazed at each other with those awful, clueless expressions Vivian wished that she could look away from. She couldn't. The weasels immediately leaned down and clocked their heads together yet again.

"This is Z105 here!" The radio reminded them all.

"And you've got 105 IQ points, max," Vivian muttered to herself, "you Goddamn tubes."

Vivian sucked in a deep breath. She marched over to the final seed-bag with her shovel swung up onto her shoulder. She then let out a sharp cough.

The weasels made little jumps to the side, and Vivian braced her shovel against her belly. She scooped up a big clump of seeds. She then carefully dropped them out of the big bag into a long fanny pack. Zipping that halfway up and slipping it upon her midriff, she sensed a light nudge on her back. Vivian blinked and glanced behind her.

"You like tomatoes, Vivian?" one of the weasels asked, looking a bit eager.

" Eh... hell, they're not that crappy if made into ketchup. Or salsa, either," Vivian replied, scratching her neck, "I guess? But don't get any ideas about me enjoying all this, even a little, okay?" She raised her shovel a few inches into the air and then thrust it back down. "I could've halfway beaten that alien autopsy game by now, you hear me?"

Neither of the weasels made eye contact as they nodded. That brought a little flash of contentment in the back of Vivian's mind. It had only taken a few minutes earlier that morning, she thought, for the losers to show her the proper respect— cooling it with the pointless questions and other bits of stupid chit-chat they'd sprung on her. The weasels had gotten more or less tolerably weird since.

Vivian made her way back to the empty field. She stepped over to the first of the row of muddy holes in the smooth black soil. She seized a wad of seeds and spiked them forcefully onto the ground. After a moment's hesitation, she whacked clump after clump of soil into the hole and let out a deep breath.

The prey mammal had no clue if the seeds were supposed to be buried in widely-spaced bunches like that. Yet she guessed that, probably, planters weren't supposed to crumple the seeds together and hurl them downward at full force like Bellwether after getting a Hopps-x-Wilde wedding invitation. She barely cared.

Vivian repeated all the motions for the next two holes. Nothing about working in the Pack Street garden felt like 'fun'— the whole area had the atmosphere of an open-air prison camp to her. The last part of the whole planting spiel, though, had enough physicality and strength to it that she could, at
least, get some sense of 'satisfaction' at being all done. She could thank goodness, Vivian thought, that she had been told by Al that a friend of the family would come to pick her up after her 'community service' ended. She expected either Betty, Charlie, Marty, or Remmy to show up, and those mammals were persuadable to grab an ice cream or otherwise do something genuinely nice.

A stone's through away, the weasels had begun planting at the other end of the big field. The teacher got them engaged in some silly little conversation that she couldn't quite hear. Vivian didn't bother even thinking of them. She walked up to yet another hole.

The music stopped once again. Vivian let herself breathe easy as she silently thanked the goddess of cosmic radiation or whomever else had apparently jammed the radio signal. She didn't really have that long to go, she thought, before she got back to her normal day's routine either. She thrust a hoof into her fanny pack.

The remaining seeds had assembled themselves into something like a frowning emoji. Vivian stared blankly, her hoof hovering a few inches above in the empty air. She couldn't help flashing back to all of the adults that'd made gigantic frowns at her over the past several days. Vivian brought both hooves to her temples and gently massaged them, wishing badly that she could shove all of those thoughts into some dark place where they'd never return.

Yet she simply couldn't do that. Repeating the planting motions in almost total silence, the wind having grown to a mere whisper, Vivian's mind flashed back to all the time that she'd lately spent with her father. She'd already gotten the versions of 'the talk' that teachers mentioned in regular classwork. The first covered the simple things about sex that she'd long known, living in the internet age and all. The second covered the powerful contrast between regular mammals, especially predators, and the cops, especially prey officers, that she'd suspected though still felt disgusted to hear out loud. Nearly all of her classmates had gotten some version of those.

The fateful 'alpha talk', though, was something that her father had put off as long as possible. Yet her escapade at the baseball field had given the wolf no choice. Vivian knew that Al's choice of the night before her first day of 'community service' spoke volumes already. What the wolf then actually said, in fact, rung throughout her ears with a force like a prairie dog popping up just underneath a jet in takeoff.

She'd braced herself against the pillows on her long bed when her father had come into her bedroom, a look of open warfare between different emotions flashing across the wolf's face. "I don't know how this Goddamn talk is supposed to go," Al had confessed, coming to a seat right beside her on the thick comforter, "but I know the screwed-up version that my father gave me backwards and forwards."

Vivian stopped planting entirely, letting out a sigh. With no other mammal's eyes on her as well as the afternoon breeze starting up again, she sat flat upon the ground. Her memory shot waves of irritation across her body like stings from torrents of invisible mosquitoes. She couldn't help but keep thinking back.

A bunch of horrible cliches about life as a predator had flashed across her eyes ever since she was old enough to turn on a television set—everything from one-liners in action movies to weird memes in Zoogle Video comment sections had left its mark. At the moment of truth, guessing what her grandfather had said during cub Al's 'alpha talk', Vivian's mind had puked out a bunch of the cliches. To make matters even weirder, they'd somehow came out in alphabetical order.

From to "just kick ass" to "never let them see you sweat" to "no pain means no gain" to "winning is everything", each catchphrase had rolled off of Al's face like little drops of rain down a stone statue. When Vivian had finally stopped, she'd snapped backward and fantasized that she could get sucked
into the thick blankets, never to be seen from again. Her father had remained silent for what felt like days and days.

"Are you done?" he'd finally asked.

"Yeah," she'd muttered, her face rubbing against a group of pillows.

"What my father gave to me? God, I spent a lifetime figuring out how to be the exact opposite of him," he'd declared, putting an arm upon his daughter's shoulder, "but that doesn't mean a Goddamn thing when it comes to explaining to you how to be an alpha. What I can tell you is what an alpha's life actually is."

"Dad?" she'd asked, her ears perking up. Vivian had scooted over onto the edge of the bed and locked eyes with her father.

"I can tell you this much: it doesn't mean being the one in charge. For every time I tell someone what to do and they do it," Al had said, "there's ten times where someone comes to me with a problem and I solve it. That crap with Remmy and his kid? You think keeping those mammals from breaking his woolly neck was a minor little inconvenience or something—a one-off keeping me from strutting my alpha stuff all around the street? News flash: every single Goddamn day of every single Goddamn week there's always several of those 'somethings'. And you have to sacrifice and take care of it."

Vivian's blank stare back at her father had triggered something deep within Al's psyche. The wolf had turned his body to the side, slipping his arm off of his daughter's shoulder, and sucked in a deep breath. He'd lowered his voice to a stern growl before going on.

"Yeah, there's the part of it where if anyone dicks with me and my pack," he'd declared, "I put them down. Being the alpha means showing them exactly who the hell they're messing with." Al had rubbed a paw upon the wad of comforter between him and his daughter. "Don't tell your mother I said this, but you nailed that part. What you need to get is that there's more. A big—and I mean Pacific Ocean like, literally-hurts-your-brain-to-think-of-it level huge—part of being the alpha is taking your lumps for doing what you had to do. God, there were times when I might have ended up in prison because of all the crap I did to protect my pack."

To Al's chagrin, Vivian had quickly taken the little expression of pride to heart. Her look of delight at the mere mention of various ballsy activities that Al used to do before he settled down then soured Al's mood even further. None of that struck her at the time. A couple days later, though, Vivian felt pained by the echoing words of disappointment. Sitting before a hole filled with seeds for a crop that she didn't even like in a half-comatose state of deep reflection did wonders for her sense of proportion, even though she hated to admit that to herself.

"Listen to me," Al had mouthed, "and think: you should count your lucky stars that all you've got to do is waste a bunch of time dickering around with plants. The part about looking tough and knocking heads in, yeah, that's what little morons with junk the size of thimbles fetishize about. You've got to be smarter than that. You need to be smarter than that. So much more to being alpha, okay?"

Vivian had nodded. Back then, she'd started to sweat while hoping that Al's little speech would end soon. Thinking through the memory, Vivian wanted to strangle her previous self.

"It means if anybody or anything screws with your pack," Al had went on, "you deal with it. I don't know who your pack is going to be—maybe Marty's kid plus Remmy's and some other mammals you've not even met yet—but I'm sure one day you'll get one and start to understand. 'Alpha' means more than putting some douche bag in the hospital. It means crap like going to the store at 2am to
buy diapers with the last of your money— going hungry until payday because a stoat you can barely
stands needs the favor. It's missing a date you've spent two weeks planning because some idiot
locked herself in a porn store. It's coming home after a long, stressful day and wishing you could
sleep for a month, but you throw yourself onto your bed—" Al clutched his smartphone and held it
up in the air right in front his daughter's face. "And you've got thirty voice-mails worth of other
mammal's problems crying out for attention, having to listen to all them."

"Listen to all them," she'd blankly repeated, the young mammal clearly not getting it.

"To every. Single. One." Al had slipped his smartphone back into his pocket before sliding
completely off of the bed. "It's like a job. It's like the crappiest, ugliest job in existence. The only
reason it's worthwhile is because the pack— your pack— is one hundred percent worth the
sacrifice."

"Dad," Vivian had began, searching for the words to convey her dense mix of emotions, "I think—"

"If you've got it in your head that 'alpha' is an esteemed Goddamn title or something, like being
crowned 'king of the block' or 'emperor of the streets', then you're dead wrong." Al had leaned
against the door handle while lowering his voice even more— his eyes narrowing into tight slits.
"And if, God forbid, you've got the notion you can be a violent thug and call yourself an 'alpha'
because of it? Let me rip that notion right out of your brain right Goddamn now."

"Dad... yes, I understand," Vivian had mouthed, transparently lying back then.

"If you're willing to sacrifice everything you want— and then, God, everything that you have— for
the sake of everyone you love, then you'll have my support all the way. Even when you almost get
expelled for screwing up some kid's head."

The smacking of an arrant branch upon her leg, the wind starting up at full force, finally snapped
Vivian out of the vivid memory. She felt angry. It wasn't the specific sense of rage that she knew
really well— directed at an individual mammal or even some general situation. She felt a sickening
feeling of anxiety-soaked malaise that made her want to pick up her shovel and smash plant after
plant.

She didn't know what she had expected. Yet she still didn't get what she'd thought she'd get at all.
She'd heard rumors about lions, tigers, wolves, and other so-called 'dangerous predators' telling their
young everything from special martial arts moves to quickly incapacitate opponents to hidden areas
in the big city where weapons got stored to secret bank accounts connected to traditional mafia
families. She'd gotten none of that. Instead, her father had sliced her emotionally in two— making a
ninja like move that didn't actually hurt until hours upon hours later, when it agonizingly stung.

"God, there's got to be a way to think positive about all of this crap," Vivian remarked to herself,
clutching her shovel and idly smashing it upon the dirt, "think... like... pick something out of what
dad said and work on it."

"Hey, Vivian," called out a voice from behind the young mammal.

She quickly spun around. She witnessed one of the lackadaisical weasels stepping towards her with
paws waving in the air. Without really thinking, Vivian waved right back.

"One of the surplus crates fell backward into this big hole, right? One that had been reserved for an
oak tree next week. It seems pretty stuck, getting wedged into the dirt in this weird way," the weasel
said, pointing off behind a trail of bushes, "so, like, can you force it out? Maybe?"
Vivian felt the urge to tell the tube mammal exactly what he could force into his lanky body. Instead, she held up a hoof in silence. The weasel looked on with a look of happiness via blissfully ignorant expectation.

A little voice popped up all of sudden from deep within Vivian's subconscious, crying out for attention amidst the general cacophony of her mind. It somehow managed to crawl into her frontal lobe. A split-second later, it skipped down and jumped right of her mouth.

"Ten times somebody comes to you with a problem and you solve it. 'Mr. or Mrs. Fix-it' or whatever... the alpha is the problem solver. That's what makes having one worth the trouble to everybody else," Vivian muttered, the young mammal barely aware of the words passing her lips.

"What is the what in the what now?" the weasel asked, scratching his cheek.

"Oh, right, well," Vivian stammered, delicately setting her shovel down against a pile of bricks, "I mean: that sounds like an annoying problem. We can fix that. I can fix that. Let's go."

She stepped behind the weasel as the smaller mammal slithered past a set of bushes. Vivian sucked in a little breath. What had just happened over the past few seconds actually hit her. She shrugged. It made the most scene to go on and decide that her mental auto-pilot actually worked for once.

Vivian stepped over the bushes and eyed the scene before her. The wooden crate had gotten wedged in deep. She stared at its handles and focused on the ugly layer of dirt that coated the metal. Without even looking to her sides, she gestured out at the weasels with her hooves.

"Teamwork, and... yeah," she muttered, raising her arms a bit. She opened her mouth wide to say something profoundly motivational, but she simply didn't seem to have that in her. Instead, she fell back to her instinct to merely give orders. "We have to do this together. Get over here, and be ready on the count of three."

"One!" She made a slight tug. "Two! And three!"

"Thanks a bunch," the two weasels said in unison.

"Don't mention it," Vivian quickly rattled off. She leaned down and looked at them face to face. "Okay, so we're just about done, right? Now's the ideal time for us to make our afternoon special style end of scene, fading to black, and with the planting essentially finished—"

"Hey, the clock over there says that we've got a full hour to go," one of the weasels interjected.

Vivian spun around. She glared at the small electronic device, sitting upon a tiny mound of fertilizer bags, with enough focus that she thought she might shoot fire out of her narrowed eyes. It didn't help. The hunk of metal and plastic stared right back.

"Back to the tomato seeds, then," Vivian groaned. Shutting her eyes, she felt the smaller mammals running through her legs. Their little bodies seemed like sandpaper curled up into tube shapes and then rubbed all against her flesh. Vivian lowered her voice to a whisper. "Well, God, I don't know if..."
you exist. But I know that dad does. I'm taking those lumps, dad. I'm taking those lumps.”

[End of Chapter Eleven]

[Note] I made some significant revisions to this chapter, feeling rather unhappy with the characterization and other details in the earlier version that this website had. I changed versions in July 2018 and, hopefully, this revised chapter not only flows better but works in the context to make the story better.
Chapter 12

[Chapter Twelve]

In the Pack Street community gardens a few days later...

Vivian constantly recalled how mammal after mammal that had run into the Roe family labeled her as "ambitious", "headstrong", "spirited", and other diplomatic terms at first before slipping into more snide language when they stupidly thought that she couldn't hear. She came to admit, though it physically pained her, that despite being ninety-nine percent full of crap they still had that one percent of a point to make. She *hated* taking orders from anybody. Even listening to family and friends grated on her.

Those semi-random adults that simply called out commands were something else. Yet the process of gardening meant operating by "strict parameters of specific delegation" as Stoutwell had put it. The area had to get cleaned up with supplies put into place. Somebody or some group of mammals had to dig rows of holes. The actual planting of the seeds took time and effort. And all that went on.

The sheer efficiency of the process appealed to Vivian's logical side. She'd understood, anyway, that keeping somebody from doing something wrong by distraction and diversion always wound up being easier than using brute force— whether done outright or set up as a kind of accident. As she'd overheard her father once saying about pack-on-pack relations, a slicing scalpel's approach worked better than that of a charging ax.

Thus, Vivian simply convinced her classmates to do the slow-paced work that what she didn't want to do, and she took on the most calorie-burning stuff for herself. She still felt sickened by missing out on all of the fun things that Alex, Johnny, and her other classmates did during their spare time. At the very least, though, she'd managed to embrace the raw physicality of gardening.

Swinging her fanny pack around her sides, marching from hole to hole, thrusting the clutch of seeds into the dirt, knocking a clump of material into the hole, and so on became exercise when she made a regiment out of it. One particular morning's stroke of luck as her moose teacher put on a type of electronic music that she actually liked turned everything into a full blown 'exercise session'— using the terminology of her track and field coach. All of that cardiovascular energy that she spent setting up rows of cauliflower, green beans, tomatoes, and the like had to have some kind of positive. She felt sure of that.

Hearing her father's voice in her head didn't bother her as much as past days either. Vivian had plenty of reasons to feel optimistic and did. However, stepping around various plots with the twin weasels— mammals whose names she still couldn't recall— revealed a subtle sense of foreboding that seemed to seep out of the saplings around her. Her mind periodically returned to this newfound sense of guilt at having burdened her parents. She thought about just how much it, and all the other intra-pack troubles, weighed on them both for the first time.

Still, she walked across the gardens and grabbed a bunch of material for planting potatoes with a little bit of a smile on her face. The clock on the pile of fertilizer bags said that she didn't have much time left before the gardening finished. With both parents being busy, they'd planned on sending a friend of the family to pick her up— that likely meant a chance to do actually something fun or, at least, *interesting* that afternoon. Her mother had even hinted as much directly.

Vivian went through a row of freshly dug holes. A gentle breeze slipping across her face, she narrowed her eyes a bit and decided to move a bit slower. She finished up with the potato seeds and
slipped her fanny pack onto her chest, reaching in for the last things to plant on that part of the gardens.

A sudden crunch sounded off. Vivian felt a nasty, warm feeling of something slimy on her hoof. Her head twitched.

"Oh, what the hell," Vivian muttered, looking straight down. Her eyes quickly widened. "What in the crap is this red stuff? Were these ... a former bag of Skittles? Or some cheap knockoff Skittles, really, and they're all melting or something? God!"

Vivian rapidly brushed her hoof against the sides of the fanny pack. That only made the red glop stick to her wobbling limb even more. She groaned. She stared at the remaining objects clumped inside. Even somebody who regularly got 'Ds' in biology could tell that something funny was going on with these last 'seeds'.

"I can't believe it! Who's in charge of the quality control here!" Vivian yelled. She flipped the fanny pack up to her face and inhaled deeply. It had the acrid, licorice-esque smell of discount candy that she knew well. "We got our seeds 'cut' like they were freaking lines of cocaine? Who are the idiots that stock our supplies? 'Keep Pack Street Beautiful' of all mammals shouldn't make this kind of mistake, Lamb of God!" She kicked a hunk of dirt into the air, snorting loudly. "Damn it!"

She wiggled her stained hoof in the air and marched out of the hole-covered field. The crushed bits of pseudo-candy had somehow re-solidified, looking as if it had seeped itself inside of her actual flesh. She grunted in raw disgust and ran her hoof through the leaves of a nearby bush. It didn't help. She squished her hoof into the mud and brushed it along a tall tree's thick bark. The horrible goop somehow stuck on her even tighter.

"Where's the freaking hose?" Vivian asked to nobody in particular. She scanned across the horizon. Spotting a set of wiggling orangeness sticking out from nearby bushes, she grinned and quickly headed over. Somebody had left the water running enough to leave a small trickle. Vivian eagerly shoved her hoof out. To her dismay, the crushed pieces clung to her body like some kind of living parasite.

"Okay, look, I'm overreacting. I don't deserve this crap, especially when we're wrapping up with all the gardening," Vivian muttered to herself, forcing her frayed nerves to calm down, "but it's fixable. 'Anything that's done can be undone' like dad says. I just have to find where in the hell the teacher wandered off to."

"Uh, sir? Hey!" Vivian screamed. She glanced in all directions. Both the young weasels and the middle-aged moose appeared to have vanished. "Hello!"

Without even thinking, she reached out to grab on to a tree and climb up to a sturdy-looking branch, hoping to get a better view of the whole complex. She accidentally yanked the trunk so hard that the whole tree got halfway un-buried. Leaves shot out into the air.

"Come on!" Vivian yelled, starting to feel her frustration building up again.

"Young lady, please! Listen to me," the moose moaned, popping out of nowhere to Vivian's side. The younger mammal turned around and glared, causing the teacher to slide up both arms in a pleading motion. "Whatever it is, surely, we will—"

"Take a look at this," Vivian demanded, standing up as straight as she could. She shoved her stained hoof onto his chest.
"Ah, your arm! Are you bleeding?" The moose cocked his head.

"This caked-on weirdness used to be a bunch of tiny red globs, mixed in with some of my bona-fide seeds," Vivian explained, withdrawing her hoof, "and it's not just that I want it off of me ASAP. It's that Murphy's law applies for the whole freaking garden."

"Come again?" the moose asked, leaning back a bit.

"Sir," Vivian began, trying not to vent her irritation upon an innocent mammal, "if we've gotten things that aren't seeds mixed in with the seeds due to some boneheaded mistake, well, who's to say that half or more of those entire Goddamn plots are never going to grow? I don't want to inspect somebody else's row full of potential potatoes and find a bunch of buried like— freaking, you know— lug-nuts! Pencil erasers! Used batteries! You get me?"

"Get... you," the teacher muttered. He scratched his head for a long while. "I don't think you've anything to fear."

"Fear," Vivian repeated.

"Oh, this is crushed up discount candy, is it not?" the moose asked. Seeing Vivian's frantic nod, he went on and let himself make a tiny smile. "I know exactly what to do to get it off. You start with half a jug of kerosene—"

"Kerosene!" Vivian shrieked. The force of her response almost made the teacher fall right over. The younger mammal thrust her caked-on hoof behind her head and let out a deep groan. "Nobody's turning me into their own personal bonfire!"

"Young lady, wait," the teacher pleaded, leaning down a bit, "I only—"

"Besides, where in the hell are you expecting to get that in the middle of a residential neighborhood in today's Zootopia— right in the middle of the 21st century! You expecting us to waltz on over to the Cormo family's place, knock and say: 'Excuse us, but we're looking to see if you could fork over some of the extra fuel for your Model T'? Really?"

"I understand that you don't want to hear anything more about that method, and that's fine," the moose said, "so—"

"So?" Vivian repeated, her eyes burning into the hapless moose's flesh.

"Maybe the weasel twins have an idea? Let's go get them," the teacher went on, "since they're probably still by the—"

"Look, while I've still got you," Vivian interjected, raising her clean hoof to stop the moose mid-step, "I really want to get a handle on who screwed up our supplies. Even just a name, you know? Then, I can tell somebody in my pack— or, uh, my parent's pack— and have them take care of it."

"It's nothing you need to worry about, young lady," the moose replied, a confused expression flashing across his face, "since everything's guaranteed by this double-checked process. The planting supplies, from the tool crates to all the—"

"Not the tools! Not the crates! Screw all that, I'm only asking about the things going in the freaking ground— tell me! Who supplied the material that we got for today— spill it!" Vivian had totally lost her patience at the teacher's verbal wanderings. She grabbed a nearby shove and braced it against her side, locking eyes with the moose.
"There's, well, and it's," the moose muttered, reaching for a small notepad in a jacket pocket. He backed a bit away from Vivian as he flipped through a few pages of his scribbling. "Oh, I see!" He fumbled for a pair of reading glasses in another jacket pocket. "Half of today's seeds came from the local grocery store— purchased by a certain Roe family for us, using our debit card's discount. I hear that the Roe family are—"

"I freaking know who the Roe's are! I'm—"

"Oh, my goodness, so you are!" The moose forced out a chuckle as sweat began to dot all around his face. Vivian pressed her body right tightly against his, anger burning in her eyes. "How silly of me!"

"The other bunch of seeds!" Vivian yelled.

"Yes, the bit with the squash and potatoes with the rest! It was helpfully purchased by," the moose read, pushing his thick glasses firmly against his face, "a 'Mrs. Charlie'! The last name, huh, appears to be spelled in a cursive that I can't quite read, my apologies... but I do recall this vixen! A delivery employee of 'Keep Pack Street Beautiful' that I believe got started last Wednes—"

"The hell? Can I see that name?" Vivian clutched the backside of her teacher's notebook. The moose half-surrendered it, letting the two of them hold opposite sides of the papers.

"Delivery made," the moose started to read aloud, "and then—"

"Oh, come on!" Vivian shrieked. The force of her voice caused her teacher to stagger backwards onto a pair of apple trees, the moose clutching the notebook tightly against his neck. "Seriously!"

Vivian grabbed her shovel and prepared to fling it right over her head. Instead of being that melodramatic, however, she stabbed the tool's edge back into the muddy soil. Her hooves gripped it tight enough that the wood creaked.

"You're the last mammal that ought to be screwing up deliveries, aren't you? My God, what's next?" Vivian stepped into a little circle as she ratted off her remarks. "Are you dropping off packs of wine coolers to AA meetings? Boxes of condoms to day care centers? Wads of 'Get Well Soon' cards to mortuaries?" Vivian gritted her teeth. "I know you didn't mean it, but an accident with a charity? Ugh, and I've got to keep this from mom and dad since they're in such beyond bitchy moods, too!"

"Bad language makes for bad feelings, young lady," the moose declared, sternly wagging a hoof in the air. The younger mammal's facial reaction immediately shut him back up.

"Fine! I know that I'm being rude with you, and you're only trying to help— it's still that—" Vivian suddenly popped her eyes open and shut her mouth. She stood up straight, her stained hoof braced against her chest, and looked over at where her shovel had landed. "Enough talk! It's time for action! I can contact Charlie, let her know about the mix-up, and then ask her We know things. We know what mammals are in what situations that are possibly dangerous to the pack, and that necessarily involves keeping tabs on every member of the pack, which is honestly rather easy given portable digital media."

"Lamb of God," Vivian said, rubbing her temples.

"It's exactly in concert with what your parents do. If anything, we're sort of like their secretaries lately. Didn't you know that?"

"Look, I've only gotten one 'alpha talk' in my life so far," Vivian replied, "and I'm sure that there's a lot more material that needs to get run by me."
"Oh, I don't think you even know the half of it," Alex remarked, reaching for a pocket.

Before anyone could even think of the next thing to say, a long station wagon pulled up to the mammals' curb. The hunk of boxy steel had some of the ugliest green and yellow coloring that Vivian had ever seen. It made her think of the broccoli-coated glop that her cousin had puked out two Easters ago, back when Velvet was still gun-ho about 'imitation cheese'.

"We're here." An elderly wolf wearing a huge black cloak complete with clerical collar stuck himself halfway out of a car door. "And we're ready to pick up those weasel rapscallions." He ambled onto the concrete, clutching the streetlamp's sides tightly, and sucked in a deep breath. "Their day is done, indeed, but Father Jack and I are there to assist with the afternoon's planting."

"Oh, Reverend Blair, I'm sorry!" The moose instructor dashed over and helped the wolf up. The hooves sliding up the elderly predator's back got Blair at least halfway straight. "I should've helped you right out of the car, what with your—"

"Ah, don't talk like that, my good mammal." The reverend held up a waving paw and managed to finish standing up all by himself. "I've heard more than enough about my back, thank you very much." Various little bits and pieces of his dark grey fur looked almost white in the sunlight shining over him. "With all of the metal blocks I've gotten clamped in there, why, I might as well count as bionic. The least I can do is hobble under my own power."

The moose and wolf uttered a few quiet remarks to each other. After some mutual chuckling, the prey mammal delicately led the reverend off into the middle of the garden. Both of them apparently forgot about the young ones for a bit, leaving them standing on the sidewalk. Yet Vivian was the only mammal that looked confused.

"He mentioned 'Father Jack' by name, interesting," Alex murmured to himself, "but it's odd that the reverends are so late." The little mammal wrote something in a miniature pocketbook that Vivian couldn't make out.

"We'll see you," began the first of the weasels, sliding around where Alex and Vivian stood.

"Both later," finished the second weasel, moving just a split-second behind.

"Bye, Benny! Bye, Denny!" Alex yelled, waving with a big smile popping across his face. The tube mammals scurried completely around the station wagon. The car's driver, meanwhile, started sliding down the front window.

Vivian didn't know who to expect behind the wheel, but she still felt a bit surprised at the huge rabbit ears that suddenly poked out. The driver seemed pretty familiar, but Vivian couldn't really tell. The black plastic gear that let the small bunny stretch those lagomorph limbs out enough to steer such a metal beast of a car— making the rabbit look more like an X-Wing Fighter pilot than anything— seemed too distracting.

"Alex?" Vivian asked, lowering her voice as she slid herself downward.

"Yes?" Her friend still kept on his happy-looking expression, apparently having stowed his light-gun contraption away.

"What the hell is going on?" Vivian slapped her arms against her sides and let out a quick sigh. "Whatever little project you and your freaking family have at the moment, do you know that I'm forced to be here? Gardening against my will as a matter of 'community service'?"

"Yeah," Alex replied, "of course, mom and I know that."
"That actually makes me even more interested in making sure that the planting goes well. So," Vivian said, "can you make a little electronic order to buy actual seeds—"

"Right," Alex commented, reaching for his smartphone and tapping upon the screen.

"To replace the bogey ones," Vivian went on, not skipping a beat, "that your mom accidentally mis-delivered this morning?"

"Done!" Alex looked up from his smartphone with a smile on his face.

"Oh, and don't forget getting somebody else to double-check all of the other deliveries that your mom did," Vivian began.

"Already done."

"This morning," Vivian muttered, scratching all across her neckline. She stared as Alex silently nodded a few times. "What... already?"

"And a mammal's coming over to do the actual planting that couldn't be done before. I set all that up while you were distracted earlier," Alex concluded, turning around his smartphone to show Vivian various glowing icons, "like... I mean, like I just said, we live in the age of portable digital media and all."

"If all of these troubles are taken care of, then I guess it's my cue to exit," Vivian said, deciding to shove her desires to yell in unresolved frustration deep inside.

"Sure, I guess," Alex replied, shrugging, "but do you want to hang out?"

"Well, my stupid shift is well and over, apparently, so please let Jafar and the other 'Keep Pack Street Beautiful' guys know that I'm taking the back route out of the garden first. Tell them that I'll be back next week," Vivian declared. She stepped over to the station wagon and tapped the driver's side door. "Excuse me, can I ask you to drive me—"

"Hey, Maxine," Alex suddenly called over, shooting a paw into the air.

"Look, kids!" The bunny behind the wheel grimaced and whacked an angry arm on the upholstery. "I know that I work for your dad! I know that you know that! I know that I'm on thin ice right now with him! I know that you know that too!"

"Maxine," Alex continued, stepping up and leaning against the car's hood, "I only—"

"But the least that I'm going to ask, for the love of everything holy," the rabbit declared, popping her head out of the window with her eyes narrowed into tiny slits, "is that if you're both harassing me at my second job that you have the decency to call me 'Miss D'Lapin'! Capisce, you brats?"

The bunny's fluffy arm wiggled against the big 'Zuber' sticker on the car's windshield. Vivian stood in place for a moment, being uncharacteristically silent. D'Lapin glared, seething, at the young mammals before her. Alex blankly looked back, his flat face showing no emotion.

"Okay," Alex finally remarked. He shrugged. He then looked over at Vivian.

"Okay," she repeated, not sure what to think, "I... so..." Vivian scratched two hooves against her neck and tried to get her train of thought back on track. "Look, Miss D'Lapin, I just wanted to ask if you're driving past the arcade—"
"You and your brother, please," the bunny interjected, looking only ten percent or so calmed down, "call someone else about that, alright?" She gestured to the overweight fox sitting beside her. The snoring predator spread himself sideways across the passenger seat, sweat pouring across his group of chins. "I still need to get Father Jack here to the Church of Saint Vulpes over in the Marshlands, and that's not before he's due at the Zootopia City Council."

"Me and my 'brother'," Vivian repeated, still trying to process those words, "I've only got—" It suddenly hit her. "Oh, no! God, no!" The color drained from her face as her insides seemed to turn to jelly. "Even thinking about that makes me nauseous!"

"We'll just see you later, Miss D'Lapin," Alex interrupted, idly tapping his paws upon the edge of the windshield, "good luck with the driving."

"Thanks, then," the bunny flatly replied. The contempt almost dripped from her words.

"Watch out," Alex went on, pointing down the side streets at the end of the sidewalk, "for the construction there. In my little project, I've seen that it's worse than predicted. Out past where Rex's original BugBurga meets Weaselton's 'Malts & Original Drinks'—"

"Drink!"

The sheer force of the shout knocked both Alex and Vivian a bit backwards. They stared out into the inside of the station wagon. The seemingly ancient hunk of orange and grey fur flailed about—the fox's mouth cranked wide open, showing half of his teeth gone.

"Feck! Drink!" The fox scraped his paws against the roof. "It's past feckin' time we stopped for another bottle! Ya got wax in those ungodly huge ears of yours, ya hippity-hoppin' arsehole?" The predator's huge body curled over the bunny's little figure. "I said: it's time for 'drink'! And now, ya feckin' loon!" The fox lunged for the accelerator, the prey mammal just barely keeping him off of the pedals. "Move this shiet-box!"

"You just had to say the 'd-word'," D'Lapin growled.

Before either Alex or Vivian could say a thing, the window snapped shut. The station wagon roared to life and ambled itself down the street. Vivian sucked in a deep breath and stepped back over the lamppost. Alex followed right behind her. Both of them heard shouts of "Drink!" as well as "Arse!" and "Feck!" still coming from inside the station wagon, only coming to an end as it disappeared across the faraway intersection.

"I'm going to try and push all of that crap out of my mind," Vivian declared, leaning down and meeting Alex eye to eye.

"Sure."

"And I'll level with you, completely."

"As you wish."

"I just remembered something that I'd rather not have remembered," Vivian began, "and it seems obvious now, though. So, your mom is the 'friend of the family' that my parents asked to drive me back from my gardening session, and hanging out with both of you is the 'fun' that I've been looking forward to all this morning."

"I... yes," Alex answered. He shut his eyes and rapidly nodded several times. "That's a flat 'yes', Vivian."
"Oh, joy," Vivian said. The flat sarcasm of her words sounded thick enough that even diamonds couldn't cut it.

[End of Chapter Twelve]
Chapter 13

A few seconds later, in that same entrance to the gardening complex...

"Let me check my phone," Alex said, quickly typing on the little screen, "and it looks— oh! Mom's less than five minutes away!" One of his typical grins that always irritated Vivian popped across his small, fluffy face.

The deer blankly nodded back. Boredom already trickling down her brains into the rest of her body, she avoided looking at Alex and simply stared at the gentle cover of clouds high above. She could still hear the little mammal bobbing around in place in front of her— Alex engrossed in trying to set up the various items into proper place into his side pockets. The strange machine that he'd recently showed her— essentially a focused flashlight with sniper rifle like shooting ability— got carefully put into place around his other things.

"I guess that we should talk about you and your mom, like in terms of plans for the afternoon," Vivian said after a solid minute of silence.

"Oh, I'm sure that we'll get something to eat first," Alex replied.

Vivian glanced downward, finding to her dismay that the fox featured the same sickly-sweet smile as before. "Thank goodness."

"There's a lot that mom would like to do for you and the Roe family, like," Alex went on, "she's set to go from store to store, finishing off these family errands." He stepped a bit down the sidewalk and posed directly in front of his companion— his eyes opening up a little bit for once. "I heard—"

"Gah, I know that dad's the 'alpha', but I can't think that we need that much in terms of household stuff," Vivian interjected, "and It feels like too much 'tribute' or whatever the hell it's called now—"

"What are you talking about?" Alex asked. The fox appeared genuinely confused. "Mrs. Roe told Mom that you need a bunch of things. Shower curtains—"

"Eh, probably," Vivian remarked, "but—"

"Nails and screws to hang up things—"

"I suppose so." She scratched her chin for a second.

"And apparently you broke a toilet seat trying to—"

"Okay, enough!" Vivian exclaimed. She stepped backward and leaned her shoulders upon a concrete slab. "Yeah, I'm game for doing a bunch of typical errands with you and your mom. Fine."

Alex nodded back. A soft noise coming from his pocket immediately distracted him, however, and Vivian took the opportunity to take her eyes off of him yet again. She scratched all over her nose as a sudden burst of ideas broke her train of thought.

"Alphas expect 'tribute', right? But what the hell would I actually even expect to get? And what would be fair?" she whispered to herself.
The question opened up not just a can of worms but a bucketful of squiggling, nagging notions that crawled all over her brain. Al's little speech had enough gaps in it, to Vivian, that it might as well have been written on Swiss cheese. Thinking things over more as she waited and waited for Charlie's damned car, Vivian figured, kept spurring on tough questions.

"Hey, Alex," Vivian suddenly called out.

"Yes, what is it?" her companion asked.

"I'm bored enough to check and see who exactly's replaced me as the next seed-sorting serf," Vivian said, gesturing over to the middle of the gardening complex, "I'll be right back."

"Sure." Some series of texts had begun to suck up the little mammal's attention.

The deer turned and hopped over a concrete slab. She stopped to scratch her nose, her eyes closing, as she headed into a small gravel path. That tiny motion caused her to walking right into a face full of leaves, Vivian tripping right over into section of bushes.

"Ugh, I can't wait until the big pack leader," she grunted, kicking branch after branch, "the capo! The underboss! The boss! I could order all my lackey mammals to stomp into pieces something like —" She glanced around to get her bearings a bit better. "Some bits of shrubbery that idiots planted two yards too south!"

A nagging thought surged to attention. It rocketed to the top of her mind from deep in her subconscious with the speed and force of a spacecraft launching into orbit. Vivian's eye twitched as she forced the words out.

"Who the hell is actually going to be 'my pack'?"

She had expected to enjoy a lot of perks— especially after being fed a diet of movies, television shows, and video games where pack leaders controlled whole territories through reputation alone. Her father hadn't quite gotten that out of her head. She also had gotten warned to fear a lot of tough consequences— having been sentenced to monotonous gardening for standing up for herself represented just a sign of the sacrifices to come. At the same time, the nuts and bolts of actually starting and growing her own pack hadn't even occurred to her.

Vivian sat flat in the middle of a grassy knoll and stewed in her own mind. Far too many things needed to get taught to Alex and Johnny for them to be anywhere near the level of competing for her 'beta'. Neither of them, she figured, even had the knack for throwing a decent punch yet. Johnny's little trip to the hospital with Remmy proved a headbutting ability, but Vivian had little clue how the wolf would react to an outright attack. Betas needed to be always on his or her toes.

"And Alex?" Vivian asked herself. She needed to spur on combative spirits deep inside both mammals, but even the mere thought of the slinking fox in combat made her chuckle to herself. "Goodness..."

At the same time, nonetheless, things had simply worked out a certain way. Family and friends positioned her where the new pack—her new pack— seemingly had to have Alex and Johnny in prominent roles. Of course, she could try at the very least to teach the two about the brutalities of life. She already looked out for them both more than either of them knew. Besides, Vivian thought, keeping somebody from doing something wrong by distraction and diversion always wound up being easier than using blunt orders or, especially, brute force.

"Oh, Alex, do you even want to be in a pack to begin with? Not yet?" Vivian pondered. She picked
herself up and headed over to a nearby path out of the gardens.

Hybrid DNA aside, Alex truly was his mother's son. Naturally enough, Vivian thought, spending more time with Charlie then presented an opportunity. She had already figured out quite a lot just by comparing and contrasting.

As a preteen living in a working-class neighborhood, Vivian had to simply had to grin and take it constantly when it came to weird decisions by her parents. Al and Velvet Roe did silly things such as buy huge boxes of elephant-sized clothes only to patch and snip them down to regular items that they all could actually wear— albeit with some embarrassment for the ladies, but Al in particular seemed to embrace the awkwardness. Until she got old enough to actually move out, Vivian thought, she had to learn to just swallow a lot.

Charlie's logical personality, though, meant that she'd just up and buy or otherwise obtain whatever she needed— exactly the right item got picked up exactly when she needed it. Vivian admired that. And she did, Vivian admitted to herself as she walked, want to pick up a bunch of household-related things. For his part, Alex could very well grow up in that direction, personality-wise, and that reasonableness would make him a valuable addition to a future pack.

Stepping past a discarded branch covered in cotton fluff immediately made Vivian picture another set of mammals. "Ah, the Cormo family," she murmured, "where do they fit?"

They featured their own pattern of weird behavior where they'd constantly show some burst of sharp, independent-minded curiosity that hurt bad in the short term while somehow working out fine in the long run. It never made any sense to Vivian. Along with her parents, she had constantly found herself having to go and help with whatever shenanigans those three mammals got themselves into. Yet she didn't mind nearly as much, deep down, as it looked as if she did. It fought against that typical Pack Street boredom.

Honestly, Vivian figured, Remmy seemed fine enough as far as dads went. He had to get graded on a generous curve from his weird background. For all of his in-your-face oddness, Johnny actually made for a good friend as well. It helped most of all, Vivian thought, that she saw a ton of herself in Betty Cormo. Johnny could be a fantastic beta, Vivian figured, if only given half a chance.

Vivian popped out of her trance-like mental state to see Alex wandering idly around the nearby bushes. She had apparently made a big circle without seeing anybody else in the gardens. "Eh, screw it."

The smaller mammal tapped the screen of his cellphone over and over again. The clicking sounds felt painfully annoying by themselves. It somehow felt worse when Vivian noticed that Alex had gotten sucked into exchanging messages with his mother.

"Let me guess: Charlie's not going to be able to be here anytime soon?" Vivian asked. A shade of irritation flashed all across her face, the young mammal's ears flicking about.

"Oh, actually, she's making a turn that'll bring her here in approximately fifteen seconds," Alex replied.

A dark grey hatchback slid down a side street and pulled up to the entrance to the Pack Street gardening complex. Alex scurried right over to the vehicle. Vivian hesitated, bobbing a hoof in front of her on the sidewalk.

The hatchback picking the young mammals up looked suspiciously like one of the Woolgreens supply chain vehicles that 'criminals with backgrounds unknown'— as the local TV news had put it
— had nabbed two weeks ago. Vivian held her tongue, but she stepped over without much more hesitation. Exchanging polite glances and nods with the vixen in the driver’s seat, Vivian noticed how Charlie's plain blue sweater and black shorts even vaguely matched the color scheme of the car’s interior. In terms of attitude, though, Charlie’s soft, reflective calmness contrasted completely with the images of tense little rodents scurrying about— displayed by the back seats' ugly upholstery.

"She's in a good mood. What's a little grand theft auto between friends, eh?" Vivian whispered to herself.

Charlie exchanged a quick, quiet set of remarks with her son, who happily hopped into the front passenger seat. Vivian leaned up against the hatchback’s rear windshield. They both made eye contact.

"Hold on, please," Charlie started to say, nudging her body out from the driver's side seat, "this one has something like a one-in-four chance of the automatic door mechanism breaking when you trigger it. I apologize." The midday sun shone brightly off of the fox's big sweater as she stretched onto the passenger’s side seat. "Let me step over you, sweetheart! Wait, Vivian!" She finally lobbed herself into the back of the car. "I've got it!"

"You know," Vivian interjected, tapping a hoof upon one of the tires, "you could've simply gotten a car with working locks."

"Like my Marty always says, 'All of the 'could've' and 'should've' moments of history will always run away from just one little 'did', and that's that'," Charlie murmured, a bit of amusement creeping onto her previously flat expression.

"So, can I get in?" Vivian asked, twisting around in place before casually swinging an arm out into the air.

Without saying a word, Alex reached for the panel of knobs and sliding controls beside the front passenger’s seat. He wiggled about a little grey plastic piece that slid both of the rear windows of the hatchback down completely. The little fox then leaned back a bit and pointed with a paw at the door where Vivian stood. As Alex’s gesture indicated, the door's telltale black piece beside its window was in the 'unlock' position. Charlie, for her part, silently glanced around at the little scene with a light smile.

"Okay, then," Vivian commented, flinging the door open. She slid on in as Charlie wiggling her arms upon her midriff— the fox nudging her body back into the exact middle of the driver's seat. "I'm ready."

"So am I. Vivian," Charlie began, "I hear that you're needing to look at a lot of things."

Vivian nodded back. She remained uncharacteristically silent as the hatchback pulled into a big, nearby street. It only took her a moment to realize exactly where where they all were headed. The few minutes' passing gave Vivian's mind the chance to speculate a bunch of scenarios for what her future pack might look like.

Charlie's eyes crunched back into little slits as she went through a few turns. Vivian shifted about uncomfortably in her seat. The deer thought about how Charlie and her son could choose to radiate off these vibes of emotional detachment that caused constant irritation and made their real agendas hard to read. It made sense when applied to those outside of the pack, but the ability to turn the rhetorical cannons inward and use them on their neighbors freaked Vivian out.

Charlie's behaviors— from her peculiar posing with her long limbs to her unusual facial expressions
and especially that trick with her eyes—never became normal to Vivian no matter how many times the preteen saw them. The young mammal genuinely fantasized using one of those 'A Clockwork Orange' machines to hike open Charlie's eyes permanently. That, the deer figured, would finally let Vivian match wits with the fox as pupils locked on pupils.

"You feeling anxious? Oh, of course, you just finished with some boring-as-hell gardening work," Charlie piped up as she changed lanes, "I promise you that you and my Alex will actually have some fun as we go out." Somehow, her tone of voice had one parts playfulness and three parts raw authority.

"Sure," Vivian flatly replied. She began glancing out the window and the other cars and tried to calm her bubbling stew of various, contradictory thoughts. If Alex grew up like Charlie, Vivian concluded, then that fact would have both positives and negatives like basically everything else in life.

The hatchback pulled into a huge parking lot and two mammals got out. Charlie and her son stood together for a moment, letting the shifting clouds move to block the midday afternoon's sunlight. Shortly behind them, Vivian hesitated. Not really having any options other than lying on the seat and whining like a spoiled toddler to drive someplace else, though, she ambled out of the car and carefully stepped around a growing pot-hole in the parking lot. Vivian watched as mother and son felt a few seconds of total contentment without a reaction.

The deer's eyes soon slipped over to the big entrance to the Pack Street complex that she'd gotten quite familiar with the past few years. Although far from the sort of girl who took yet another trip to the mall to as anything to get that excited about, Vivian forced a half-smile. She might as well, she figured, step into the complex sans frown.

"We really should grab a bite first thing. Where do you want to eat?" Alex asked.

It took a full five seconds before Vivian realized that he'd lobbed that question in her direction. She mouthed out something unintelligible first and then stepped to the little mammal's other side. "Someplace that we rarely go to, please," Vivian replied, "that's newer too... maybe?"

"Spanx?" Charlie asked, leading the two younger mammals to the mall's side entrance.

"Spank... and... that's," Vivian muttered, her train of thought getting detailed.

"It's a ton like Rex's place, but there's this gimmick," Alex began to explain, "first, there's nothing insect related. Second, everybody who actually works there is a complete douche bag. They make fun of you. They make fun of what you order. They make fun of each other. It's all vaguely sort of PG-13 though? That make sense?"

"No," Vivian flatly replied.

"Instead," Alex started to say, "there's always—"

"I didn't mean 'no' as in 'no, I won't go there','" Vivian interjected. She stepped in front of her two companions and hoisted open the door. "Okay?"

"Okay."

Vivian noticed a soft smile creeping across Charlie's face before the vixen made her way inside. The other mammals quickly followed. Inside the mall, it only took a pawful of little turns and a ride down an escalator to make it to the newly renovated restaurant.
Charlie stepped up to a thoroughly bored-looking lynx with messy hair and an outfit vaguely similar to a bathrobe, complete with towel-like white scuffs below the hole for the head, and held up a paw. The lynx remained still. Vivian glanced around inside the restaurant. Table after table looked empty, but those select mammals who had stepped in appeared to have ordered plate after plate of nice-smelling items.

"Can I get a table for three?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know. Can you?" The lynx shut both eyes and stretched out his arms, yawning profusely.

"Can we sit," Vivian began, pointing below the big cat's legs, "at the corner... maybe?"

"Whoa, I'm not talking to either of you little brats, now am I?" The lynx's eyes shot open as he made a gigantic frown. "Yes, we've got plenty of room here. You've got eyeballs, ma'am. Now that you've stopped with that perpetual squint of yours, you can clearly see that we're badly short on customers."

"Thank you," Charlie calmly replied.

The lynx made a half-step in the direction of a long table surrounded by tall fish-tanks. After Charlie, Alex, and Vivian went to sit, though, the big cat froze and just swung the three menus in the over to the hungry mammals. Vivian duly caught all three and gave them out as she took her seat.

"Thanks for coming again," the lynx remarked. He quickly returned to a little video game system that he had perched on the edge of his podium at the front of the restaurant. "Zootopia needs more assfaces like you."

"Interesting, so far," Vivian muttered.

"There's nothing but shit on right now, even on Nutflix," remarked a fat wolf with a huge overbite and a shabby-looking grey suit seemingly older than Alex and Vivian combined, "so, what the hell, I guess I'll be your server for this afternoon."

"Nutflix?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, it's the best thing. It's like Netflix, but it's clips of mammals getting whacked in the balls," the wolf responded. His huge smile showed off his immense teeth.

A tigress in a tight-fitting pink dress, sitting at the table opposite of Charlie and the two young mammals, suddenly waved an empty beer bottle in the air. The wolf flipped around. He posed in place— seemingly prepared to jump out and maul the big cat. Instead, the wolf started to yell.

"Listen, you sack of crap over there! I'll have another lager ready in a few seconds! God!"

"Hell yeah!" A group of similarly drunk tigresses curled up against their companion on that table. The tigers sitting alongside them— both of them clearly expecting to get lucky with their slutty girlfriends later that afternoon— burst out with chuckles.

Vivian stood up straight in her seat and sucked in a little breath. It suddenly occurred to her that she must be one of the first prey mammals of any kind— hybrid or no— to have set hoof, paw, or anything else in Spanx. That fact likely caused the easy availability of free table space. And that fact caused a burst of uncomfortable sensations— akin to a hug by a plushie made of sandpaper— to shoot through her senses. Despite over a decade's worth of progress, businesses that compromised to prey audiences in Pack Street did a ton better than those that held the line and only got freaks of the Remmy Cormo mold to stop by.
"Okay, I guess I need to dignify you two brats with names," the wolf interjected, snapping Vivian out of her little world, "what are they?"

"Vivian! And can I have a cherry soda?"

"Alex! Ad can I get the same thing?"

"Quick with the demands, you little douches," the wolf remarked, letting out a melodramatic sigh. He turned to Charlie. "You... I know you."

"Charlie."

"And you just had to show off the paw with the wedding ring when you say that name," the wolf went on, "so there's no chance I can hit on you with a clear conscience again."

"Like you care, Bas," some mammal yelled from the kitchen area.

"Get back to work, Snapper," the wolf snarled.

"I'd like a sweet iced tea, Bas," Charlie declared.

"Take your sweet time looking at those menus, all of you," Bas said, taking a step away from the table, "because... well, as you can clearly see, the mounds of shit in charge of this place might as well start begging on their knees to customers. We need 'em that badly."

"Thanks, Bas," Alex and Vivian said at once.

The wolf scurried away. Charlie slipped out her smartphone and placed it on the side of the table. Alex, for his part, shifted a bit closer to Vivian's spot. She had no idea why, but she quickly realized from the blast of cold air shooting down above them that the slippery little mammal had the instinct to try and stay warm. Vivian fought hard to allow the slinky fox to rest his head upon her side.

"You little cub asshats about to s-snuggle or what?" drunkenly murmured one of the tigresses, her eyes slipping all around Alex and Vivian, "just r-remember that you're too young to kiss with tongue..."

"Oh, come on," Vivian groaned, trying not to move since Alex seemed comfortable enough to fall asleep.

"Hey, shut your mouth hole and leave 'em alone," a toned panther from a far corner of the restaurant remarked.

"Wait a minute," chimed in one of the tigers, wiggling his tail against the still amused-looking tigress' side, "I'm the one that says what that hole's for! It's my call!"

A bunch of mammals, including servers with batches of used plates, whooped and hollered.

"I'm still kind of iffy on this place," Alex finally murmured.

"Just wait until Bas Snaith gets back, and we can order those fried strips of chunky almonds," Charlie calmly said, clicking away at her smartphone, "with cinnamon sauce, sweetheart."

"How'd you remember the wolf's full name?" Vivian idly asked.

"Would you forget a monkier like 'Bas Snaith'?" Charlie inquired, shifting up those eyebrows of hers.
"Good point."

The wolf appeared right behind the vixen in a split-second. The three other mammals all looked up. They each clutched their particular glass full of libations with happy grins. Bas clutched a small notepad.

"I could give you all Goddamn day to decide, but our stuff is so great that you honestly could just order at random, you know?" Bas brushed a big pencil through his teeth for a moment. "Whatever the hell I think, of course, means nothing in the big scheme of things... any of you have any clue of ordering anything so far?"

"Fried almond stakes with extra potato skins," Charlie ordered, snatching up all three menus, "for all three of us."

"Three orders of that?"

"You must be more retarded than you look if you think we could just share one, single order," Charlie remarked.

"Ouch," Bas muttered. He let out a bunch of giggles as he took the menus and jotted down a few symbols onto his notepad. In another split-second, he was gone.

"I wonder if Snaith's pack are distant cousins or something to dad's pack," Vivian muttered, the young mammal not really expecting a response.

"The app says, wait a moment," Alex interjected. Vivian glanced over as the slinky mammal typed a few lines. "Ah, he's either your fifth cousin four times removed or your fourth cousin five times removed. I think."

Something about the tone of Alex's voice made the genealogical tidbit even more creepy than otherwise. "So, that's like an ancestry program, right," Vivian began, scratching her cheek, "but how does it work with all of the privacy rules— especially when we're talking about a random stranger?"

"Did you say 'random'? Oh, don't be silly," Charlie interjected. The fox leaned forwards a bit— her arms folded upon the table. "All wolves are related at some level. That goes double when it comes to the same sub-species. The interlocking nature of pack-on-pack territory lines coupled with lineage traditions makes sure of that."

"It's fascinating," Alex remarked.

"Okay." Vivian looked over to see Charlie's slightly amused expression and then went back to staring at the middle of the table. Vivian began to simply reflect for a few moments while she sipped her drink. The chattering nonsense from the big cats sitting around the other parts of the restaurant merely went in one ear and out the other.

"So.. well..." Vivian began, though she quickly trailed off. She racked her brain to gather what exactly she knew about Alex as a mammal— for all of the time that they spent together and as quickly they'd call the other 'friend', his interests from art, food, music, sports, and more were nearly a total blank to her.

"So?" Alex naively asked.

"Played any, eh, good video games lately?" Vivian kept staring downwards as she thought back over the past few weeks. "For me, been off-and-on hanging out in Mewfia V. I'm late to the party, I know, play the hottest thing from back in 2020... but since I finally got my own well-dressed panther
made an underboss I've been able to really make the city bleed."

"Ah..." Alex muttered, thinking his response over.

"I just got the achievements 'Stormbringer', for enough kills with stabbing fun things, plus 'Burn', for enough flamethrower kills, and 'Give Me More Time', for enough kills made with less than ten percent health left," Vivian counted off as one hoof clapped against another, "but I'm still working on 'Still of the Night', for completing enough nighttime missions, and... huh." She let out a loud, long laugh. "Checking out enough hookers to get 'Love Ain't No Stranger' just feels gross. But I want the achievement, so there you are."

"Hook... ers," Alex mumbled, confusion almost dripping off of his face.

Vivian felt like kicking herself. As mortified as she felt, though, Vivian got immediately calmed by Charlie's blank expression and otherwise lack of a response. The deer went on.

"Otherwise, ah, like it sounds," Vivian said, sucking down some more of her soda, "all of the achievements are named after hard rock songs. Plenty of Deep Purple and Whitefang, like those four, especially—"

"Oh, speaking of bands," Charlie interjected, putting on a light tone of voice, "I've heard that both you and Alex require a new jacket. There's that nice new store here— 'Galaxy Hollywood', I think it's called— and they've got all kinds of branded hoodies, pants, shirts, sweaters, and more."

"Oh, cool!" Vivian felt genuine happiness for one of the few times that day.

"I thought that you and Alex could make a game out of it," Charlie went on.

"A... game..." Vivian leaned back. "You mean like try to find the coats by walking less than a certain number of steps in the actual store?"

"Oh, that sounds like fun," Alex interjected, "or like—"

"Or we walk through the store fine, but we've got to keep our eyes closed after we pick up the items and fumble to the cashier blind-folded."

"Not sure about that one, though." Alex loudly sucked down the last of his drink.

"Or we have to... ah... help me out here, please," Vivian muttered.

"What about this," Charlie began, waving her paws in the air, "you both need jackets, right? Same thing for shower curtains— those being over at the WoolMart? How about: I'll purchase two copies of whatever it is, but you both have to agree on the one item that it is?"

Vivian's mouth shrank. She could sense that her mother had asked Charlie to have some kind of a 'learning experience' for her at the mall— and, to Vivian, this situation screamed that so much that she might as well get filmed for a Zootopia Public Broadcasting after-school special. Of course, as a preteen getting driven around by a friend of the family on thin ice with her parents as-is, Vivian had little choice in the matter.

"Sounds great," Alex replied.

"I... okay," Vivian murmured.

Before Charlie could say anything back, Bas appeared with three huge plates of fried almond steaks
— the sizzling bits of goodness all poised next to globs of cinnamon-flavored frosting. The three mammals at the table froze as the wonderful scent filled their senses. The big wolf slapped the plates down and sucked in a deep breath.

"I'm here to save you three assholes from all of the mindless chattering that I'm sure you've gotten sucked into," Bas remarked, smiling as he stood up straight, "and you're more than welcome not to say a word about how Goddamn long making this took, please."

"Oh, thanks," Vivian started to say, the deer feeling hardly able to even think. She reached out for one of the freshly-cooked pieces and dunked it into the frosting. It all seemed to float on clouds full of hearts right into her mouth. "Oh... holy shit..."

"Be prepared to take a piss soon, all of you, with how fast you've sucked down these drinks," Bas commented. The wolf slapped the three mammal's cups on another tray and headed away.

Alex and Vivian practically inhaled their first pieces of fried goodness. Charlie looked on for a moment, the fox remaining still. She only started eating when Vivian was halfway done.

"Maybe this trip won't be so bad," the deer whispered to herself.

**Around fifteen minutes later in that mall's WoolMart...**

"Look, what about butterflies?" Alex asked, the young mammal looking ready to toss the shower curtain all around Vivian like mummy wrappings.

"There's no chance in hell," Vivian responded, waving her arms around as her eyebrows narrowed, "that I'm going to drag myself out of bed in a horrible, tired haze some morning and head to the bathroom feeling desperate— only then to see a bunch of fluttery yellow pests greeting me!"

"Really? 'Pests'?" Alex repeated. He slammed the box back onto the nearby shelf. "Do you even know what that word means?"

"Don't start," Vivian began, stomping in a semi-circle around the slinking fox, "or—"

"Or what? You'll throw that 'C' report card from biology at me?" Alex asked, angrily brushing his paws together.

"Ugh! I can't believe this trip!" Vivian called out.

[End of Chapter Thirteen]
add later, so I'm marking the piece as open.

(I also should add a little note stating that I went ahead and revised the first six chapters after uploading them, with the changes being mostly minor. When it comes to the eleventh chapter, though, I felt rather unhappy with its first version and decided to do a significant change in context, hopefully improving the story.)

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