

Travis couldn't move. He was staring at the future he'd chosen for himself and he needed to have everything in order before he walked up to Mr. Big. How should he introduce himself? Would he have to offer the cannoli first or try to spin himself as a humble waiter first? Better yet, what sort of job experience would he even have to offer? He wasn't a thug or a wily enough charlatan. Most he could do was spam observant facts on the fineries of harvesting hibiscus and the proper manner in which to farm insect protein. Raymond's plan put Travis in the presence of the most powerful animal in Tundra Town but he never got past what Travis was supposed to do after putting the cannoli in front of Mr. Big.

A paw clamped around Travis' arm. He turned, eyes wide and whiskers twitching, staring at Gideon Grey.

"Where're you going with that Trav?" Gideon demanded.

Travis was taken aback at first. Then he had to remind himself that Gideon was supposed to be back here, was supposed to be wearing the too tall hat of a pastry chef, baking sweet cakes and pastries for the richest mammal this end of Zootopia.

"I can't talk now, Gid. I gotta get moving. Mr. Big's waiting!" He insisted, but the red fox's fingers dug into the fabric of Travis' uniform.

Gideon held up his other paw and presented—a salt shaker? No, more like a pepper grinder. "Can you just let me see that cannoli really quick? I think someone did something to it." He gave the grinder a shake, frowning. "You just wouldn't put pepper on a cannoli. The hecks in here anyway? It's some kind of flake—" He sniffed at the bottom of the grinder and scrunched up his nose at the strange odor.

Travis narrowed his eyes and tried to yank his arm free from Gid's grip. "Gideon, I don't need you braining crazy theories. It's probably just 'cause he has some weird recipe from his grandma or something. I didn't come this far just to give up and let all my time in Zootopia go to waste." He started walking, finally tugging his arm out of the fox's grasp while awkwardly balancing the platter. He pushed through out of the kitchen and marched out into the floor of the reception room.

"Yeah, but he would have told me about something like that." Gideon protested, his voice growing fainter with each swing of the door.

Travis kept to the wall and moved with as much official posture he could manage for a ferret. Straight back, upturned tail, attentive ears; all while keeping the platter level to his head with one hand. It was going to short work getting to Mr. Big. The three polar bear bodyguards wouldn't be a problem. Raymond had sent word ahead and they'd part for a small fry like Travis. He began running the plan through his head, stepping with a more confident stride towards the table of Mr. Big.

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Gideon Grey started to panic. His hunches weren't always right, but considering the types of animals he and Travis might be dealing with he ought to dig in and do something. He tossed off the tall poofy hat he'd been wearing all day and charged out into the reception hall. He was tempted to simply tackle Travis and put an end to whatever was happening, but by doing that he would just ruin Travis' chances and make a big scene

that'd embarrass Mr. Big in the process. Still, it was better than the alternative if he was right about something bad getting into the cannoli meant for the big boss of Tundra Town.

"Kitchen staff aren't allowed to disrupt the reception. Get back in there."

The baker turned and was startled by the hulking presence of one of the numerous polar bears leering down at him. Gideon suddenly saw a way out of this whole mess. "You're one of Mr. Big's bodyguards, right?" He asked, frantically pointing at Travis as the ferret closed in on Mr. Big's table, trying to shout over the music that the wedding guests danced to. "I think that cannoli that ferret's delivering has been poisoned! It's going straight to Mr. Big! You gotta stop him!"

The bear's brow lifted, but rather than look distressed, the bodyguard appeared to mull over what Gideon had declared. "You don't say." He said, taking a step forward and pushing Gideon back into the swinging door with his weight.

Gideon gaped up at the bear and dug his heels into the floor. "Hey! I'm telling ya, there's something wrong with that-" The bear's huge paw suddenly clamped over Gid's muzzle. He suddenly found himself scooped up with the bear's other arm and lifted up off the ground. He kicked, confused and appalled at what was happening.

"I'm thinking you need some fresh air, fox. Maybe it'll help clear your head. Lucky for you, I'm here to remind you when to shut up and stick to decorating cakes." The bear pushed through the kitchen, getting several wary eyes from the staff, but none moved a paw to help Gideon as he was tossed out a back door and into a snow covered heap of garbage.

The fox scrambled, sneezing as he tried to push himself up out of the snow. He watched as the polar bear's white muzzle split into a long grin. "Don't you worry about Travis. I'll be taking good care of him." The bear jabbed a thumb towards himself and laughed, slamming the door shut.

The cold air made the fur stiffen on Gideon's bare arms as he fumbled out of the unstable heap and threw himself at the door. He yanked and twisted the doorknob, hissing with every cold breath that seeped into his lungs. Locked. He whirled, kicking the snow covered ground in frustration as he started to run through the garbage alley. It might take a minute, but he was certain he could bolt around the building and make his way back to the reception hall. Gideon only hoped that Travis might take an extra long while to make his pitch before Mr. Big took even a nibble of his cannoli.

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"Excuse me? Mr. Big?" Travis said, trying to lean past the intimidating presence of the polar bears that encircled the head table where the boss of Tundra Town sat. "I'm here with compliments from the chef! It's a, uh, cannoli." He tried to get a handle on the tremor in his voice. If only he had a mirror to assess his posture and his expression. This was the moment that might make or break whatever future he hoped to make for himself and he couldn't even see the man who'd make it possible.

He heard a snap and a mumble from behind the immense bear in front of him and Travis saw the small table where Mr. Big sat. Another shrew in a

suit was there as well, laughing before he noticed the ferret. Travis saw the puzzled look that suddenly arose on Mr. Big's face, but he felt his chances rise when it simply turned to a gaze of indifference. "Let him through." Mr. Big muttered to the bear in front of Travis and to the ferret's delight the huge ursine stepped aside.

Travis eagerly stepped forward, his spring-like spine pressed tightly into a straight, rigid stance as he approached the table, lifting the small plate with the pastry delicately. He saw the other shrew start to wiggle and squirm. "Oh! Oh, you're getting cannoli! No wonder you passed on another slice of the cake, Uncle Big."

"I'm old fashioned, Benny. It won't pass up your great grandmama's recipe, but it's good enough." The shrew grumbled towards his nephew, glancing curiously from the cannoli to the mustelid who had delivered it. "What's your name, son?"

This startled Travis. He was suddenly the attention of everyone at the table; Mr. Big, a newlywed nephew, and a host of bears that could rip his tail off like it was paper. "T-t-travis, Mr. Big." He forced himself to widen his smile, careful to keep his canines from jutting out of his muzzle.

The shrew grunted and kept staring, fidgeting with the fork and knife that sat beside his plate. "Thank you for your service." He paused, digging the utensils into the cannoli. Travis watched, suddenly realizing that he was expected to walk away now, out of Mr. Big's life. He opened his mouth to say something but Mr. Big's nephew suddenly let out a gust of laughter.

"What are you doing!" The groom guffawed, pointing at his uncle's tiny hands as they dug into the pastry.

"I'm eating dessert."

"With a fork? You could scarf this thing down with your bare paws, why bother?"

Travis suddenly felt his voice rise up from his chest. "Excuse me, Mr. Big," He felt their attention swerve back to him and he felt the bear's follow suit. "I could-ah, get your nephew a clean set of utensils if he'd like some as well?"

The bushy eyebrows rose and Mr. Big seemed to hesitate.

Before the older shrew could say something, Benny reached out and grabbed the cannoli, rolling his eyes and giving Travis an apologetic look. "Don't worry about it, sir." He said towards Travis then turned back to his uncle. "Maybe it's time you forgo your old fashioned ways. Live a little. Get your-" He took a thick bite of the cannoli, the creamy crunch filling his whole mouth. "Paws dirty for once."

Mr. Big rolled his eyes, turning to Travis once more. "Could you spare me a napkin, son. Then after that I won't need anything else from you."

"Sure thing sir," Travis said, beaming as he dug in his pockets for a spare piece of cloth barely bigger than his finger. Now was the time to dive towards the question, right when he was being of use. "But if you don't mind I was wondering if you might have a spare job available for someone after the wedding reception is over?"

"No, Mr. Blackfoot." Mr. Big said sternly, calmly taking the napkin from Travis' pinched claws.

The ferret felt his mouth go dry at the sound of his last name coming out of an animal he just met. "I'm sorry?"

"I know who you are and I know what you're looking for, kid. You won't find it here. Go job hunting somewhere else instead of encroaching on a families celebration." The words were direct and merciless. "I'm not going to swoop in and pull you out of whatever oven you've crawled into. Take responsibility for yourself and you'll go far. Good day." With that the shrew turned back to his nephew offering the napkin.

Travis felt his arms clutch at his fine clothes, the claws digging into the fabric as he stood there, speechless. He'd barely gotten a word out before he was turned down. The sound of the revelry and upbeat music battled against the ferret's guts as nausea rolled about. He felt foolish and abandoned. Raymond had made it sound so easy. Travis began to back away, knowing at this point it was futile. At the very least he had tried.

"Benny. Take the napkin. You're a mess." He heard Mr. Big say this in a rough tone, but an instant later he heard a stab of worry in the old rodent's voice. "Benny? You choking? That's why you cut the thing, now swallow it whole."

Travis glanced up and saw the young shrew doubled over the table. His face was still and the ears sagging low as his eyes bulged, red with tears and strain.

"Benny?" The hesitation in Mr. Big's voice made Travis shiver. The hunched over form of the young shrew shook as each breath suddenly became a heaving struggle. "Are you choking?"

No words came out. Only a weak rasp as Benny braced himself against the table, trying to stand and dragging the table cloth with him. The tableware scattered onto the floor and Mr. Big shot a look to the largest bear among them. "Koslav, get a car and a driver. Take him to a hospital. Just do one thing before you go."

The bear looked stunned. He reluctantly parted from Mr. Big's side. He reached down and scooped up Mr. Big's nephew in his huge paws. "What do you need?"

"Send someone to grab the baker. Make sure the other bears are on the lookout for anyone trying to run outside the hotel." The shrew's panic was stifled, for the moment. Travis' wasn't, however, and he jumped back as the shrew cast a look that might have burnt the bushy fur prickling below his brow. "Kevin, grab the ferret."

One of the bears snatched Travis up, grunting. "What're we doing with him, boss?"

Mr. Big's seemed to chew over the question for a second before he said with complete resolve. "I want to ice him with the baker. I'll meet you at the manor after I disperse the reception and ensure my nephew is in good hands."

"Wait, you're going to what?" Travis exclaimed, letting out a sharp cry of surprise as one of the bears snatched Travis up. He opened his mouth to try to yell for help but for his muzzle crushed shut in Kevin's mighty paws as he lumbered away from the reception hall as the guests began to notice the huge ursine bodyguard's rushing to respond to the instructions coming in from the radios in their ears.

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Travis tried to whip his head around to get an idea on where he was being taken, twisting his spring-like spine in the bear's vice grip.

"Quit it." Kevin mumbled. The bear was efficient at his one job: keep the ferret from escaping. A door opened and the bitter cold of the outside nipped at the ferret's body as he gasped. The hot tears streaming down his muzzle only made it worse. He caught sight of long, black limousine waiting for him on the streets. It looked and felt more like a hearse though.

"C'mon, don't do this!" He squealed as the door opened. The bear didn't respond, merely dipping his huge frame into the vehicle and dropping the ferret in the middle seat.

The other end of the car suddenly opened and to Travis' dismay it was blocked by another bear's large bulk. What he wasn't expecting was Gideon Grey being dragged inside, barking and yapping his mouth off. "Ya ugly slug-munching git! I'm not the one you need to be grabbing!" He was cut off as the bear tossed him inside, slamming the door closed behind him.

The fox landed on Travis, making both of them let out a pained 'oof!' that was quickly interrupted with the rev of the limousine's engine. Travis wriggled out from under Gideon and yelled up towards the driver. "This is a mistake! I didn't do anything." He fell back into the seat cushion as the vehicle suddenly kicked into gear and started driving away from the hotel.

"Fat load of crap that is," Gideon barked, gritting his teeth out of frustration. "I told you someone messed that thing up and you took it to Mr. Big anyway."

Travis clutched his ears, his clipped claws still digging in hard enough to leave red lines under the thin fur. "This isn't my fault!" Travis whirled at Gideon and he was startled at the sight he saw. The fox's left eye was half closed, already swelling and the skin under the red fur curdling into a boiling purple color. Blood crawled down his nostrils and his white pastry chef clothes were stained with dirt and covered in snow. The ferret cast a glance over to the polar bear beside Gideon and shrank back. "This is my fault." He said with sudden certainty. He remembered the panic and the terror that had spread over Benny's face after he ate the poisoned cannoli Travis had hand delivered. He might be dead right now. He'd banked on Raymond's word instead of Gideon's and this is where it got him. "This is how it's always going to be isn't it?"

Gideon watched the ferret shrink into himself, folding his limbs to his chest and staring ahead of them, out the front window where the snow pelted the limousine. He wiped his nose with his sleeve. "Naw, that ain't true." He tried to push back against the bears that sat on either side of the two boys from Bunny Burrows. "You two mind making some room?"

The two growled and the one called Kevin leaned up to the driver. "Drive faster."

"We're supposed to ice those two, not the whole limo." The driver grumbled back. "Besides, Mr. Big wants to talk to them before they take the plunge."

Kevin snorted and sat back in the seat, glaring at Travis. "Least he

won't have to wait long till they sink to the bottom. Little runts like this don't last long."

"I didn't know it was poisoned!" Travis pleaded before the bear cuffed him across the muzzle.

"Save it for the boss. Not that it'll matter. I want a nice quiet ride back." Kevin shifted his harsh gaze towards Gideon and the plump fox eventually dropped his defiant glare, gritting his teeth as he stared down at the floor.

"Rotten way to kill someone. Poisoning MY pastry. Disgusting." Gideon chewed on a claw, trying to needle out a plan to get both him and Travis out.

The ferret could only sit in stunned silence. He had to find a way to spin this back onto Raymond. Turn the tables out from him and Gideon. How could he do that without making him look all the more guilty was the question.

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The room was decadent and smelled of crisp charcoal, despite the cold air. The manor they were in was laden with the same atmosphere. It was a welcome change of scenery from the limo or being lugged around. At the very least Gideon had his feet on the ground. That hardly set him at ease, however. He was flanked by two bears, biggest brutes he'd ever seen. Despite growing up as one of the bigger kids with a mean streak, he finally began to feel the fear and danger he must have inflicted on other kids. One glance over to Travis twisted his stomach in worse ways than the thugs did. The ferret's eyes were bleary and the fur around them was damp. The wiry arms twisted around each other, the dainty paws wringing over one another feverishly.

"Hey," Gideon whispered, his voice making Travis flinch. "We're gonna get outta this, alrighty?"

Travis began to tremble. "This isn't the police we're dealing with, Gid. These are dangerous, really unsavory, people."

"Just leave the talking to me."

"Gid, you failed the public speaking course back in high school. You don't know who you're dealing with. Just leave this to me, I got someone I can throw under the bus for us."

"We don't got to work hard at this, just got to tell Mr. Big the truth. I'm sure he'll let us go." Just then, the door at the far end of the room opened and a bodyguard ducked through, carrying the shrew in his immense paws.

Immediately, Travis blurted out, "Mr. Big I can explain!"

Also immediately, Gideon protested, "I would never bake a death cannoli!"

"Show them the ice, Koslov." Mr. Big said impassively. "Let em' know how little patience I have."

Gideon felt the harsh grip of the bear's claws on the back of his neck. He was roughly lifted by the arm and the rug he was standing on was pulled away from below, revealing a latch that was quickly yanked up by the the polar bear who had brought in Mr. Big. Gideon felt his breath catch in his chest and he began to jerk as the reality of what was ahead of him settled in. Below Gideon and Travis was a small drop into an ice pool. Barely any room to properly tread water and the surface let off a cold chill that made Gideon's bare feet curl in panic.

"Now, just ease up a minute, sir!" Gideon said, not able to look up from the drop below that was certain to be the end of him.

"Let me make something clear," The shrew got up from his chair, his bushy brow pushed down into a fixed gaze. "If my nephew were dead, you two would be down there now. I want to know who is responsible for ruining this happy day, just to get a swipe at killing me. I want explanations."

"Sure, sure! We'll tell you whatever you need! Just ease up a little!" Travis said, kicking and twisting his slinky body against the grip that held him above certain death; cold, slow, and wet death.

"If I'm to understand the events of this evening, I was about to eat a poisoned pastry meant for my mouth alone. You hand delivered it to me." Mr. Big said, pacing back and forth, struggling to retain the manner of politeness he was accustomed to. "There's no reason for me to 'ease up' on this situation. In all rights, I should do away with the two of you right now."

"No, no! Don't! Please-just-c'mon-aaah!" Travis squealed as that huge paw squeezed then relaxed, as if the polar bear was trying to gauge what gesture from Mr. Big would be the dramatic curtain call for the ferret to take a deep, dreadful plunge.

"My nephew ate your the cannoli and now he's fighting for his life on his wedding day. You kindly allowed me to sample your work last night, Gideon." The shrew steepled his fingers together, breathing deeply. "Did you change anything concerning the recipe?"

"No sir!"

"Go on and share your account." Mr. Big said, gripping the arms of the chair as he seated himself. "We'll give your 'friend' a moment to calm down."

Gideon tried to speak without the collar inhibiting his voice, nor allow it to tremble at the predicament he found himself in. "Mr. Big, I made everything the same way I did yesterday, honest. The recipe didn't have one ounce of anything different." The fox's tail had flipped up between his legs, fluffed out with fear and panic. "Someone on staff in your kitchen came by with a pepper grinder, some big sheep fella, and twisted something onto the cannoli."

Mr. Big nodded, his mouth barely concealing the spiteful downturn of his teeth. "My nephew is dying from whatever that was. That is what you're implying, Mr. Grey."

"It sure wasn't pepper!" Gideon shouted, and felt the bear loosen his grip on his arm. The pudgy fox slid a couple of sharp inches before that paw tightened again. He felt his breath go still in his lungs.

"I'm severely short on patience." Gideon heard Mr. Big's impassive

tone, realizing this was the man who had hired him, not the wealth businessman he'd taken Mr. Big to be. The baker from Bunny Burrows gazed down into the icy pool below and began to consider whether he would ever be able to see Stu or Bonnie again. Did anybody know they were here? Maybe Nick and Judy were trying to find them after they were abducted?

Mr. Big heaved out a heavy sigh. "Is this all you can offer me? An anonymous sheep and a discarded pepper grinder?"

"All I know is that a sheep grinded something onto the cannoli. He was dressed up like one of the staff so I didn't start questioning it until I saw it get handed over to Travis."

The shrew's hand came up to his brow and saw the slightest crack in his hard expression. "Why didn't you do something?" His voice strained, trying to retain that malevolence, that stern strength, but it was failing him just from the emotion that threatened to tear him apart.

"I tried to stop him but he didn't believe me." He saw the wide eyed stare Travis shot towards Gideon, appalled at what was being uttered. He began to sputter and speak quickly. "I told you Mr. Big, didn't I? I told you someone was just trying to use him. Someone's trying to pin this on us!"

The polar bear holding Gideon up suddenly gave the fox a shake, rattling him harshly and his words turned into grunts of discomfort. He felt as though his arm might pop loose from its socket if the bear shook him any harder. The ferret beside him squirmed, his teeth chattering. "Mr. Big, he's right! I was just trying to ask you for a job! I wanted to be apart of the family!"

The shrew chewed on his cheek, grimacing. "Pretty ironic, huh? You're getting a first hand experience at how my family works." Mr. Big stared hard at the ferret, his tiny claws digging into the fine wood of his chair. "Is this everything you expected? Is this what you want to be apart of?"

Travis couldn't meet the rodent's gaze. All he could manage was stare down into the icy pool below. His head gave the smallest shake, still denying what was in front of him.

"Apparently, you did. Just with someone else running things, huh?" Mr. Big's expression curled down into a deep-seated frown. "Was that what you were told?"

"No, Mr. Big! That wasn't what I was told at all! Just let me go, I didn't know someone wanted to kill you!"

"Pathetic." Mr. Big muttered, rubbing his forehead with a groan.

"How did you come to work as a waiter for this wedding, kid?" This time it was Koslov, the massive polar bear standing behind Mr. Big, who asked the next question. He frowned, glancing down at his boss who was clearly beside himself.

"Raymond set it up. He promised I'd belong to the family if I did this favor for him. I just had to deliver dessert to you and that'd be my chance to ask for a job." Travis said with chattering teeth. "I didn't think it'd hurt anyone, I swear! I just wanted a job! If I did anything wrong it was because Raymond told me to do it!"

"Whoa, hold on! There's a Raymond fella involved in this?" Gideon spoke up, twisting his body to look over at Travis. "Trav, I was running



out there to yell at some of the big bears to stop you and one named Raymond dragged me back through the kitchen and threw me outside in the trash heap when I told him about the poison!" He spoke in a stumbled rush, trying to get all the information out of his mouth in one breath. "That's where the pepper grinder is! He took it!"

The expression on Mr. Big's face flashed with bitterness. He leaned his head into his palm, grimacing as he gestured for Koslov to come closer. "Did Raymond leave his security post?"

The large bear nodded. "He relayed that he was getting rid of a guest that had wandered into the reception hall."

"Mr. Grey, I'm split on what to do with you honestly." The old rodent steepled his fingers, thinking deeply. "What you are saying implicates my own employee Raymond and your dear friend Travis in this twisted plot on my life. Your only saving grace is that you were recommended to me by Raymond on account of his knowledge that you'd be in support of my nephew's wedding. Not merely for your rural nature, but because he had confirmation that you were a homosexual."

Gideon tilted his head as best as he could in this awkward position he was held in. "I don't follow, sir. I don't see what that, um, trait has to do with all this."

"What is your relationship with Raymond, ferret?" Mr. Big didn't even look towards Travis, merely adjusting his tone to one of annoyance and restrained hate.

Travis began to scan the ground around the square trap door. Maybe there was something he could cling to, crawl up and dart for an exit? "H-h-he paid me to, uh," The ferret felt his stomach turn now at the thought. This was what Raymond had in store for him all that time. Travis felt nauseous at the fresh memory of last night. "He'd give me money for sex."

"Did Gideon Grey ever come up in any of your encounters with Raymond? Even in passing?"

Travis began to shake his head, but in an instant he felt the blood drain from his head as one memory suddenly stuck out to him. It felt as though his sinuousness body was being weighed down by an anchor. "We were talking about Raymond's ex. He was pretty pissed about it. He wanted to know if I had anyone like an ex-boyfriend." Travis felt like throwing up. It had come back around to him and, like always, he'd been the one to screw it all up. His eyes shifted over to Gideon nervously.

"I'm sorry, Gid. I just told him that you and I fooled around once. Raymond looked up your name and the bakery turned up. He wanted to laugh about it." Travis couldn't continue. That memory was still fresh in his mind. Raymond certainly wasn't the first fella that Travis had whored himself out for some cash, but it was the first that he had realized just how far he had fallen compared to everyone in this horrid city and all the people he'd grown up with in the country side. Everyone else, even the bear who was just teasing and taunting him to get his rocks off, had found success. Why did it seem like Travis would ever get that same happiness?

He didn't deserve it, Travis had thought to himself from that moment onward. It was the only response that he could muster.

The blank stare he got from Gideon was complex. He didn't seem understand the significance of it all. Then, suddenly, his ears gave away that moment of insight. Someone had told Mr. Big about his bakery,

especially the fact he was gay. The fox never would have gotten the call from Mr. Big if Travis hadn't blurted out about the fox's closest secret, one he'd been carrying all through his childhood and onward. He'd left the familiar safety of Bunny Burrows and walked right into the lion's den, so to speak.

"You were the one who warned me about this ferret, Mr. Grey. I would not have taken much notice of him unless you alerted me to him." The shrew said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "I might suspect you yourself have a part to play in this if I knew you didn't have the police on your side when you confronted me about this whelp trying to work for me."

"Mr. Big, don't do anything rash." Gideon said quickly. "Judy and Nick were looking for him too! The police are going to be on this like fly tape if you drop us in there."

"Don't assume I don't know how to make people disappear, Mr. Grey. Don't ever assume I'm never willing to do the worst in the name of family." The boss of Tundra Town paused and in that fraction of a second, Gideon was certain he'd let them both fall. "You have a point, though. The police were hunting for him. His warrant disappeared, didn't it?"

"That's right! Maybe this Raymond fella of yours did something to make him look less suspicious. Just enough to let him take this job and," The fox swallowed hard, his mouth dry. "Give Travis enough credibility to get the waiter gig and deliver the poison to you. Make him invisible and such!"

Travis tried to crane his head over to look at Gideon as best he could. "I had a warrant?"

"Is Raymond responding?" Mr. Big asked.

The massive bear behind him frowned. "No."

"That's not good." Mr. Big glanced up at Koslav, his brow furrowing as the bear's face darkened. "You think you can find him?"

"Easy enough."

"Well, Gideon Grey," Mr. Big said with some strange relief. "You have a life to get back to. You're a dear friend to my grandson's godmother whom I hold great respect towards. Not only that, but depriving Bunny Burrows of their very successful fox baker would be a crime I would have tremendous difficulty in hiding. Go home; forget about all of this."

The fox felt his insides tremble with relief. It was a feeling unlike anything he'd felt before. Death was literally waiting for him with open jaws and the tightness of the bear's grip on his arm left him with some hope. "Thankya, Mr. Big."

The shrew raised and gestured towards the bear holding Travis. "Ice the ferret, Kevin."

There was hardly a second for the gasp Travis breathed in to turn into a scream. One moment he was in the bear's grip and the next there was a soft, crackling splash down below. Gideon Grey felt his blood turn to ice and an instant later he felt it burn, outrage arcing across every nerve of his body as he snarled and barked, "You killer! Travis, no!"

The pudgy fox swung and kicked. Despite the weight he carried, it was nothing compared to the bear who held him aloft. He could see their expressions. There was an amusement on both of their faces and the sly grin

on Mr. Big's face said enough that this was enough satisfaction to tide him by until he dealt with Travis' benefactor. The only one who met the water drowned scream of the ferret below as the bear known as Koslov who clutched a necklace, bowing his head and frowning deeply with some reverence that Gideon could only feel more enraged by.

"Trav-HOLD ON," Gideon twisted himself around, pulling himself up as his free paw came up and clamped down on the bear's wrist. The baker from Bunny Burrows seemed gone now. That bully was back and his teeth were bared and his tail was swishing violently underneath. The fox's claws came out, digging into the bear's thick fur and carving out a red line for each nail. The sharp teeth began to snap and bite at the bear's stubby fingers.

It was a frightening display. Suddenly, the whole room was abuzz with uncertainty. Gideon's captor yelped with surprise, perhaps more at the wild barks and growls between each bite and swipe of his claw. It quickly got what Gideon wanted; the bear let go and Gideon felt himself falling. He banged against the side of the hole as he fell and the next instant he was sinking into the icy water.

The fury that had overtaken him was gone. Now he was surrounded by a seething cold that bit and gnawed on his body. Gid came back to himself after fighting through the initial shock. He had to find Travis. He opened his eyes, gritting his teeth despite the sting of the icy water. The hole wasn't wide but its depth was a frightening sight. He could see a shape, long and lithe, wriggling helplessly, fighting against the weight of his wet uniform and the weakness that had overtaken him in this tiny pool. Gideon swam down, scooping both arms around the ferret and pulling him against his chest.

Swimming to the surface seemed impossible. The fox's muscles seemed frozen. He willed them to push against the chilled water, but he could sense that they were sluggish and slow. Gazing up, it was hard to tell if he was even making progress. Worse, his chest was tight and he began to feel the strain of his lungs, begging for air. Gideon kicked out his legs, scrambling with find purchase with his toe nails and shifting Travis under an arm. To his horror, he felt his claws scrape downward. He was right; the two of them were sinking, despite his efforts. With his one free arm and two feet, he began to kick and pull, digging his claws into the icy walls until he felt as though they'd fall off.

The surface of the pool was growing brighter, however. He suddenly realized there was still that chance that the light of the room above was only a deceitful victory. Even if he swam up, would he have the strength to climb out? What was stopping them from closing the trapdoor and dooming the two outright? That intense terror was flexing in Gideon's every muscle and he tried to shake it off. There was no point in guessing what would happen until he got there; if he got there. He couldn't let them just decide they were already dead. He had to break the surface.

Gideon's heart was racing. His claws scraped along the ice walls and soon he felt his body start to give out. The top of the pool was right there, the chunks of ice floating about aimlessly as Gideon's paw pushed out through the frozen rim of the hole. He dug his digits into what he could, thrashing now that he knew they were nearly there. Lungs screaming, he kicked furiously with what strength he had left. Air was a terrible thing for him suddenly. He needed it, but every breath he took brought a chill that made every movement all the more painful.

Travis. Had to get him up. He couldn't feel that arm though. Went numb. Horror suddenly hooked into Gideon's brain as he glanced down, coughing and sputtering, praying he didn't let Travis slip out from under

him in their climb. He felt a pull on one of his legs and saw the ferret was still under, clutching the fox's pants and using his claws to scramble up the fox's thick figure that took up most of the rim. Gideon couldn't even feel the sharp nicks he expected he might have otherwise felt. It was simply too cold, his body trembling all over as he struggled to keep himself up.

Travis' arms shot out of the water, wrapping around Gideon's shoulders and the little ferret clung on for the life of him, teeth chattering. Gideon sputtered, trying to call out, to see what was happening up above. All he could see was the ceiling.

"Mr. Big!" Gideon shouting, his voice cracking. "Let us out!"

He treaded the water best he could. There wasn't an answer.

"Mr. Big, your nephew wouldn't want this! Please, you know this is wrong!" Gideon pleaded. He felt his claws skittered weakly on the icy edge he was clutching. The shrew was shrewd. He felt safe, convinced he'd gotten everything he could out of the two. Clearly he would have liked to spare Gideon, but no way was Gideon going to let Mr. Big let them drown and keep his consciousness clear. "We're the only ones who know what happened that aren't on your payroll! If Raymond set this up, how do you know he's the only one who wants you dead! We're the only ones you can trust!"

Another long, deadly silence haunted them both in this moment. Travis simply quivered, tiny arms wrapped around Gideon's neck, while the big fox could only kick and slap his claws at the wood above, trying to get a grasp onto freedom.

Suddenly, the immense bear Koslov leaned over the hole in the floor. He crouched down, his face struck with a remorseful grimace as he looked down on the two near frozen mammals. Gideon half expected his paw to be slapped away or the trapdoor to slam shut on them, but instead Koslov reached down and dipped his arm into the icy water. His huge, warm paw grasped the fox and lifted him up with the ferret tightly clasped against his chest.

The weren't dropped back down onto the floor. Instead, Koslov shrugged off his large coat and bundle the two in it, glancing warily at the two bears who had held Gideon and Travis before their plunge.

"Take 'em to one of the master bathrooms." Mr. Big muttered, still seated in his chair. He stared down at the floor, his mind riddled with doubts and regrets. Gideon didn't have time, nor the strength, to say anything. All he could do was clutch Travis as tightly as he could as the two of them were carried out of the room.

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The tiled floor was wet from the steam that filled the whole room. Both and Gideon were still shivering, bunched up together in the thick coat of Koslov. The polar bear finally turned off the nearly overflowing bathtub. He shook his head, sighing as he spoke. "It is best if you two undressed and let the steam coax you back to health. Do not get in that tub." He pointed with a sharp jab, as though he was setting down a law for children. "This has to be a slow process."

Gideon nodded, teeth clacking together. He found it terrible to get himself out of the thick, no doubt, expensive coat. Worse was trying to keep standing despite the stiffness in his legs. He could barely feel them. He leaned down, trying to help Travis down. "Come on, down we go." He muttered, trying to pry the ferret's frozen arms from around his neck. He'd been stricken with terror when they were carried to the bathroom. Travis had been so still and he had been so numb he couldn't tell if his best friend had made it out alright. To his relief, the ferret's bristly arms slid off and he collapsed onto his rump, his legs giving up under him.

"I'll leave you two be for now. Don't leave the room." Koslov crouched down and retrieved two thick towels from under the sink and placed them beside the smaller predators. "Try to relax. Get warm. I'll talk to the boss."

"Thankya," Gideon said as he tried to pry the frozen shirt from his thick frame. "Ya saved our hides, mister."

The bear paused, his bulk taking up the entire doorway. "I suppose I did." Mr. Big's right hand bear shut the door firmly and Gideon got to work on the undershirt that was stuck to his fur. It peeled off with a crackle of ice that was slowly melting in the growing steam that began to build into a fog.

The fox hissed as he started to wiggle out of his pants, breathing harshly. "Bet he's a sweet fella when he's not making popsicles out of folks." The laugh he forced out was trembling. As hard he tried he was still struggling with a pit of fear in his heart. They'd almost died. Hell, Travis was expected to die. Gideon glanced over at the ferret and saw him struggling to drag the nearby towel around himself.

"Here, let me help." Gideon said, crawling over and pulled the soft towel around the mustelid's shoulders.

Travis kept his eyes fixed on the tiled floor. He was still trembling all over.

"You gotta get those clothes off you, Travis."

"I c-c-c-can't-," He said in a gasp. "Maa-moo-ove."

Gideon nodded, forcing a bigger smile as he rubbed the ferret's head with the towel. He had to get Travis warm. "Ain't no surprise. You made quite the splash." Gideon arms snaked around, fiddling with the several buttons for the vest and shirt Travis wore. "Hell, least we would've died dressed nice if they didn't pull us up!"

The ferret arms were limp as Gideon shuffled the shirt up and over Travis' head. He tried to dry the ferret's head, the warm humid air finally making him feel at ease. Travis still seemed struck dumb with everything that had happened.

"You need help with your pants?" Gideon asked.

Travis shook his head slowly. He reached down and fidgeted with the button. It felt like he should be running. Like there was an urgency that he understood had no outlet considering he couldn't feel the tips of his fingers. He saw Gideon start to move around to help and Travis pulled the towel over his whole body. "Can you just," He spoke with a harsh stammer. "Stop helping? For a second?"

The fox's eyes widened a bit in surprise, then glanced away quickly.

"Yeah, yeah, sure-sure."

Gideon hung his own towel around his body, turning his back to Travis. He rolled his thumb around, hunting for the zipper. Every sound in the room echoed and the slow, awkward silence that followed the lowering of his zipper made Gideon wince. He remembered back when they were kids when getting naked with Travis wasn't such an awkward ordeal. He kept looking over his shoulder, trying to gauge how Travis was doing under the thick towel, before he finally pushed his pants down, underwear too. He opened the towel a bit, trying to get some of the hot steam under the makeshift cloak he had wrapped around him.

"Are you okay?" Gideon asked. He had to know.

Travis didn't answer immediately. He was still struggling with that one button on his pants. "Naw," He muttered. "We almost died."

"Yeah."

Travis could feel his throat growing full with a deep sadness he hated and despised. It was a deprecating self-pity that he knew had no place here. Gideon had almost died when it should have been just him. The most selfish thing he could be doing was feeling sorry for himself.

"Do you need help with your pants? You ain't gonna warm up unless--"

"I got 'em." Travis said with a grunt of frustration. He scooted them down his legs and he started to feel the harsh pain in his testicles. He felt a soreness spreading across his body the warmer it got. He kicked his clothes across the floor away from him, curling up and pulling the towel over himself, trembling.

"I hate to sound like a stupid porno, but I think we oughta get close and hug or something. To get warm faster."

"I'm okay."

"You're shaking."

"We almost died. Why wouldn't I be shaking?"

"I just want to make sure you're okay."

Travis finally turned to glare at Gideon. "Can't you just accept that sometimes there's nothing you can do to help, Gid?"

"Nope. First thing I kind of learned when we were kids was that I could make other kid's day just the worst. I got a kick out of it, knowing I had that kind of power. Ain't no reason why it can't be the other way around. I know you're scared, but we got to work together. I don't blame you for what happened at the wedding."

"All I wanted was a chance at getting a career I could be proud of. I don't know how-no, I know how all it got this bad." Travis brought the towel closer, his teeth still chattering from the cold in his bones. "I just feel like all this is hopeless. Some part of me doesn't even want things to get better. I don't deserve anything good. I'm tired of trying. I'm tired of letting people down."

The sound of Gideon's feet stepping softly behind him made Travis stiffen. He didn't know if was ready for whatever was about to happen. Yet, the instant he felt Gideon's arm encircle him, pulling him closer to the

fox's plush front, he could instantly sense the warmth that simply radiated off the fox's bulk. Gideon settled his muzzle over Travis' shoulder and made a gentle hush. "I wouldn't have dropped myself into an icy pool if I didn't think you deserved to be happy. You're gonna get better."

Travis felt the warm words meld with the soft pressure of those arms, the towel, and the steam billowing around them all coalesce into something that he couldn't quite explain.

Even if everything outside the door was just more misery and more danger, he was certain this was good. Gideon was good. For once, the smile he wore wasn't burdened with a promise he had to keep or an obligation that would ruin. All this was unconditional.

"You're going to be okay, Travis."

"Thanks, Gid."