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XIX - Peace and quiet?

Zig Zag growled across the table. "You're not going to get away with this!"

Gabrielle smiled triumphantly. "I already have, Boss. Too bad!"

Esteban was grinning widely and Jean was facepawing and sighing wearily.

"Oh, you're so going to pay for this. I swear," the skunk muttered.

Gabrielle leaned back in her seat and smiled, completely content with the situation, watching as Zig Zag counted out a large sum and passed it along. Then she picked up the dice and rolled them. Then she groaned and Zig Zag grinned widely.

"Seems the coin has flipped, eh? Pay up. Two houses on that, let me see...yep, you owe me 2 grand!"

The four furs were sitting around the living room table, playing a game of Monopoly. Dinner had gone down really well. Everyone had enjoyed the meal thoroughly and Esteban's cooking had been praised so highly that the wolf had barely been able to eat anything himself for embarrassment. Afterwards, Jean had suggested they retreat to the living room to get started on the cake that her father had donated. Since the meal had

originally been meant for three, no one was so full they couldn't eat dessert. Tea and coffee filled various mugs and the board game had been broken out.

The mood was quite relaxed despite occasional growls and whines when someone landed on an expensive area owned by another fur. A joke now and then helped lighten the mood for everyone too. The nastiness was fading into the background. No one had said a word about what Gabrielle had gone through. The general, unspoken consensus seemed to be that when and if the bronco needed to talk about it, it'd be talked about. Otherwise it would be discreetly left alone.

The dice passed around the table. Zig Zag was slowly building up a major lead. The stacks of money was growing on her side of the table.

"I'm telleeng you, she's too good at makeeng money. Even eef eet's just a game," Esteban complained and paid up once again as he landed on yet another Zig Zag controlled area.

"A skunk's gotta do what a skunk's gotta do!" Zig Zag pointed out, matter-of-factly, shrugging.

Jean picked up the dice and landed on one of the few still-available areas. She paid for it and picked up the deed to the area, before passing the dice to Zig Zag again. "It's nice to have you here, Zig Zag," she said and tried to get comfortable, despite her injuries. "Is it okay if I ask you a question? If it's too private for you to talk about, feel free to tell me to shut up."

"Well, you can always try," the skunk replied and rolled the dice again.

"How did you get your stripes? It's a really unusual pattern, I think. You look absolutely *incredible*, don't get me wrong. But I just wondered if you had a tiger in the family?"

Zig Zag felt a knot in her stomach starting to build. She didn't like talking about her family for a whole number of reasons. Jean had no way of knowing that, though. She reminded herself of that and nodded, after a moments pause. "My grandfather was a Siberian tiger," she explained, quietly.

Jean nodded. There was a note of something indefinable in Zig Zag's voice and she realized she'd probably gone too close to something very private. She reached out and patted her employer's paw gently. "Well, anyway, I know that a lot of furs make fun of

anyone who doesn't look like a totally ordinary member of their species. I just wanted to say that I think it's very beautiful," she said, quietly.

Zig Zag again realized that a compliment on her looks, coming from that particular angle couldn't possibly carry any sort of hidden meaning or suggestion. It made her feel good. Usually when someone complimented her, they were trying to get something. It'd taken her long enough to get used to James telling her something nice, without her wondering what he was trying to gain. But the vixen across the table had literally no interest in anything sordid. If she said something like that, she meant it as what it was. A compliment. Nothing more.

"Thank you, Jean. That's very nice of you to say."

"You're welcome. Don't mention it," the vixen responded.

They all realized the dice hadn't been rolled for some time. Three pairs of eyes turned to Gabrielle.

The bronco was staring at her paw, fixedly. It was shaking badly, holding the dice so hard her knuckles had gone pale, even through her fur. Her eyes were wide open and sweat was pouring down her forehead. "I could've been killed," she wheezed, barely able to speak for emotion. "Those creeps could've killed me. Or even worse...I could've been in Denver right now. Instead of here, with you. I could've been locked in a room in my father's mansion and I would've been totally at his mercy."

Esteban's ears flattened over his head and he looked worried. Jean got up and went around the table. She put her paws on her roomie's shoulders and turned the bronco around, slowly, to face her. Then she hugged Gabrielle. "I think it's my turn to be strong for the both of us, just for one evening," she whispered.

Zig Zag nodded to Jean without saying anything, gesturing towards the door with a questioning look on her face.

"It's okay Zig Zag. I'll make sure she gets to work as soon as she's able. I promise. I think she'll be fine tomorrow," the vixen whispered, rocking her roomie a bit.

Zig Zag nodded and got up. She gave Gabrielle's mane a tussle as she passed her on the way to the door. "Don't worry, Gabby. They're not going to win," she said.

Esteban looked at Jean with the same questioning look on his face and again, the vixen nodded. It was probably best to be alone with the bronco right now.

The wolf got up as well and followed Zig Zag out. "I'm amazed, Jefa. Eef that had been me, I'd have been a wreck seence I came home. And she deedn't react unteell now?" he said.

"I know. And what's more, I think we'll see her at work tomorrow without her even showing any signs of this having affected her. I wonder where she gets that strength from," Zig Zag answered.

"I don't know...but I theenk the reason ees huggeeng her right now."

Zig Zag thought about that. "You mean like she's drawing her strength of Jean?" she asked and started down the stairs.

Esteban followed. "No...not like that. I theenk that she keeps findeeng new resources because she has someone to be there for. What I worree about ees eef she ever loses that part of her life."

"I'm pretty sure we don't have to worry about that possibility, Esteban. I've rarely met a fur like her before," Zig Zag said, quietly, once they stood on the curb.

"And you have met a *looooot* of furs, no?" Esteban chuckled.

Zig Zag swatted him good-naturedly and grinned. "Behave and take your mind out of the gutter, Esteban."

He smiled widely and nodded. "You take care, too. I'd better start getteeng home."

They waved and parted ways. Zig Zag got into her car and drove off and Esteban headed in the opposite direction, down the darkening street.

###

Lance Gulo was standing under a lamppost waiting for his ferret friend. He'd been waiting half an hour and he was getting bored. There was a light on in the apartment in the building in front of him, so he was pretty sure that the freak was home. At the very least, they'd be able to trash the place completely, but he did hope he'd find that fox up there. It'd be really messy. He just needed John to come back with the goods.

The ferret came hurrying around the corner, head tucked down.

"Did you get it?" Lance asked once the ferret had reached him.

John nodded and held out a gun. "Cost me a small fortune to get on such short notice, y'know. You owe me!"

"Shut up, John. We're going to be in jail in a week. Who cares about the rest of this month anyway."

The ferret growled. "I'm tired of you telling me to shut up all the time."

"What? Are you starting on me too?" the wolverine asked, spinning his head to look at the smaller fur.

"Me? No...sorry, Lance. Didn't mean it that way," John said. He'd gone very pale.

"Didn't think so. Now, are we going to finish this or what?"

"I dunno. Beating someone up is one thing. I know what I said earlier but I was angry then. I mean *murder*?" the ferret said and fidgeted.

"What are you? Soft on that little faggot, John? Don't tell me you're backing out of this. Henry turned out to be gutless, but I didn't think you'd be," Lance growled, angrily.

"I'm not gutless! But killing someone? Come on...it's bad enough as it is. I hate that creep just as badly as you do. But I don't want to end up in jail for life because of him, all right? It's not how I intend to spend the rest of my years," John complained.

"Fine. Suit yourself. I'll kill him myself. Ferrets never had a stable spine anyway," Lance said and snapped a magazine into the pistol. He stuck it in his pocket and started across the street.

John was shaking all over. Three hours earlier he'd been so angry he was ready to kill the fox if he ever laid his eyes on him again. Now he wasn't so sure. Getting out of that holding cell and being able to walk around freely again had really made him think. It wasn't worth it going to jail forever just to clear the world of one faggot.

He tugged down his head again and ran down the street, to get away as fast as possible.

Lance had reached the apartment building. His paw could feel the cold metal of the gun in his pocket. It was going to be really sweet and easy. He put a paw on the front door and he was just about to enter when he heard a click and a voice behind him.

"I'd stop right there if I were you, Mr. Gulo. Paws in the air where I can see'em."

Lance turned around, slowly. His paws stayed in his pockets. Across the street, right in front of a dark alley only a few yards away from where he'd been standing a moment ago, a black panther in a police uniform was pointing a gun at him.

"I said paws in the air, Mr. Gulo. I know exactly what you just got from your buddy. If I don't see some empty paws reaching for the sky in three seconds, I hope you know the name of a good undertaker," the panther said.

Lance slowly took his paws out of the pocket. He felt stupid. He should've known that the police would be waiting here. He felt his rage dissipate. He knew he'd lost. Slowly, he raised his paws towards the sky. Another voice spoke not far beside him.

"There's a good fur, Mr. Gulo," the voice of commissioner Pongo said. "Did you really think we wouldn't keep an eye on this place for a few days after you three got out? I must say...you just landed yourself in a far bigger mess than what you were already in. Planning to commit murder? Tsk tsk..." the orangutan said and walked up to the wolverine. He took the gun out of Lance's pocket and looked at it.

"I wasn't going to do anything. Honestly. I was just going to go up there to apologize," Lance said.

"Mr. Gulo, if you tell me one more plain-faced lie like that, you're going to trip over several gutterstones on the way back to the station, you hear me?" William Pongo said very calmly. Then he looked across the street. "Did you get it, Lieutenant Black?"

The panther lowered his gun and went into the alley again. He came out with a camcorder and nodded. "All of it, sir. And the sound is good. You can hear every word that was said. Courtesy of the Columbus Police Department. Glad to be of service, sir."

"Excellent. I think it will be really hard to convince the jury, Mr. Gulo, that you were just going to go up there to apologize. I suggest you drop the act."

Lance gnashed his teeth. "Commissioner, be *reasonable* for crying out loud. You know what kind of *thing* lives up there. How the Hell can you stand there and defend a faggot like that," he growled.

William Pongo just smiled the sort of smile only an orangutan could smile. Very widely, showing incredible amounts of yellow teeth. Lance didn't see the long arm of the law until it crashed into his face.

"Oops. I think Mr. Gulo just tripped over a gutterstone," the commissioner said and shook his fist as he leaned down towards the stunned wolverine. He picked up a knocked

out tooth and held it before Lance's eyes. "Because, Mr. Gulo, there's no faggot living up there. Just two young femmes who's already been through enough crap because of you. And because even if there *was* a faggot living up there, homosexuals are protected by the exact same laws that protect you from having me doing exactly what I would like to do to you right now. Now get up, you sorry excuse for a fur, and if you make any sudden moves, I'm not going to see Lieutenant Black here feeling 'physically intimidated' by you. And I'm certainly going to see you reaching for your gun. Am I making myself really...*really* clear?" he said, and stood upright, taking out a cigar and lighting it.

Lance groaned. He'd never been punched like that before. The orangutan looked like a sack of blubber in a poorly fitting suit, but that blow had felt like someone had taken a steam-driven hammer to his jaw. He slowly got up. "I'm going to get out of this, you know. Hitting me after I surrendered?" he said.

Lieutenant Black came over, grinning. "I don't think so, Mr. Gulo. There's no one here except the three of us and *you* were resisting arrest," he said.

William Pongo smiled and blow a cloud of smoke at the world. "Book him, lieutenant. Good work. I'll make sure this'll go in your papers for the next evaluation."

The panther grinned and pawcuffed Lance. "Lance Gulo, I'm arresting you on charges of planning to commit murder. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. As we discuss this matter, you have a right to stop answering my questions at any time you desire..."

Lance barely heard what was going on around him. It was over, and he knew it.

###

It was morning. Gabrielle was headed towards the studio. The police interview had gone easily enough, and it had only taken about an hour and a half. Sergeant Miranda had been very professional about it all, and very meticulous. Gabrielle felt pretty sure, while she was answering all those questions, that Watson was going to get away with it. But she didn't really care. She knew, by now, that Zig Zag had a plan to help her. A really good plan. She hadn't said anything about that to the police, of course.

The drive was a welcome distraction, though. She took a detour to clear her head of the questions before arriving at the studio. Jean had been a marvel the former evening. It had been like the tables had been turned. Instead of her listening to the vixen gushing out her heart, it had been the other way around. She felt bad about Esteban and Zig Zag having to leave but she realized it had probably been for the best at that time. She was, however,

very grateful that they had been there all evening until then. It had really helped her a lot.

It was five minutes to eleven when she pulled into the parking lot of ZZ Studios and got out. She locked her car and smoothed down her skirt. It was short enough that Jean had been blushing like an overripe tomato all morning. But Gabrielle realized that if she'd been in Denver, she'd be dressed in whatever her father wanted, and that meant something so conservative she'd feel like something taken out of 'Pride and Prejudice'. Time to make another statement, she had thought and picked her shortest skirt from the closet that morning. Along with a very small, red top. She liked that top quite a bit. She rarely used it, since it really did show off her assets quite blatantly. Across her bosom, it read:

"Bronco inside, paw contents at your own risk!"

Sergeant Miranda hadn't even commented, which Gabrielle was pretty grateful for. It wasn't in order to get a reaction out of the cops that she dressed that way. She did it solely to feel free. Knowing how much her father would hate it was all the reason she needed.

She pushed open the door and went inside. Sabrina was sitting behind her computer with a smile on her face.

"Good morning, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle nodded to Sabrina and smiled back. "And you too, Sabrina. Are they all in yet?"

"Oh yes, you're the last one to arrive but Zig Zag has been telling them all to go easy on you for a few days and not ask too many questions."

Gabrielle nodded, feeling a deep sense of gratitude towards her boss. The last thing she needed would be every fur at the studio grilling her for what had happened. It wasn't like she remembered most of it anyway. She swished her tail behind her and smiled. "I'd better go and get ready then."

"Sure. Good to see you're doing well," Sabrina said and went back to work.

Gabrielle went to the sets. She wasn't due on for several more hours and she didn't feel like changing into a robe just yet. Opening the door, she stepped inside. The lights hadn't been cut yet. Everyone was still setting up and getting ready.

Zig Zag came over. "Hey Gabby. Damned, looking good today. How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm all right. Ready to make a movie," the bronco answered with a smile.

"Good! I knew you wouldn't let them get you down," the skunk answered and patted Gabrielle on the cheek.

Gabrielle smiled and went to take a seat at a table with some of her colleagues. Yohni was there. Michael as well, and Alexi, a good-looking male Siberian husky whom she'd only met in passing so far.

Yohni looked up and down Gabrielle as she approached. "Holy...wow. You look good enough to eat!" she exclaimed.

Gabrielle grinned widely. "I might just take you up on that during the break."

Michael held out a paw towards Alexi, who groaned and held out five dollars. The ferret grinned widely and took them. "Thanks. See? I told you. Gabrielle is tougher than shoeleather."

"I wouldn't hope so. Shoeleather isn't very cuddly," the bronco said and rapidly batted her lashes at the ferret.

Michael opened his mouth to respond, raising a finger. Then he clamped shut and groaned.

Alexi leaned back and laughed. "The joke's on you this time, Michael," he snickered and extended a paw to Gabrielle. "I'm Alexi. We haven't really had a chance to meet and get introduced before now."

Gabrielle shook the offered paw and smiled. "Better late than never. What scene are they going to shoot next?" she asked.

"The king being opposed by his council and turning to Madame de Pompadour for support," Michael said. He played the lead as the king.

Gabrielle nodded. "I see. Well, some heavy drama in that one," she said.

Alexi chuckled. "And then some. Anyway, rumor around the studio has it that you're going to get a lead in the next movie, already. That's fast work, Gabrielle."

"Rumor?" Gabrielle asked, smiling crookedly.

"Okay, okay. Zig Zag told us this morning. For my part, I think it's great. She's been talking to most of us about what parts we'll be playing."

Gabrielle smiled. It was nice to know no one was upset that she got a lead so fast. "I don't know much about it yet. Jean has asked me to help her read the script so she can check it. Zig Zag hired her as a history-expert for that purpose. She's feeling a little overwhelmed by it, I think."

"Well, it's set in Rome as you probably know," Michael explained "From what I can gather it'll be about spectacles in the circus or Colosseum or some such."

"Yeah. We'll get to dress in armor and hit each other over the head," Alexi grinned "Any males dream for a movie role."

Gabrielle couldn't help giggling. Jean would probably have a field day with the manuscript. "I see. And the female lead is...?"

"The wife of a roman senator, I think," Yohni answered. "I'm not sure exactly who gets to play the other parts yet but my guess is that *that* part is going your way."

"Cool. I can't wait. I'm pretty sure it'll be fun."

"Gabrielle...this is *Rome* we're talking about. I don't know a thing about history, but I do know what Rome was famous for. Hedonism and decadence as an art form. You'll be so sore you'll prefer to stand for a week after the shooting is done, I guarantee you," Yohni giggled.

The bronco beamed widely. "Well, at least I'll be sore because I've had a good time," she pointed out.

Alexi looked at Yohni with a smirk on his face. "Is she always this way?"

"Pretty much. Don't you just love it?" the mongoose answered with a big smile.

"Well, it's certainly hard not to like," the husky replied. "Anyway, I'm on in a few minutes and so are you, Michael. We'd better get ready," he said and stood up.

The ferret nodded and followed, leaving Yohni and Gabrielle alone at the table. They were both quiet for a moment or two before Gabrielle broke the silence.

"You don't have a problem with me getting a big part that early, do you?" she asked. She didn't want the mongoose to get upset.

"Not at all. I think it's great, actually," Yohni responded with a smile.

"That's good. I'd hate to make anyone think I got special treatment or something."

"Gabby...everyone here likes you, if you haven't noticed," Yohni said, matter-of-factly.

"I know, but still. I've only just joined the cast here. But thanks. I'll put my own doubts out of my mind, I promise," Gabrielle said and smiled.

"On another issue...you really are looking good today. But if that skirt got any shorter it'd be illegal," Yohni grinned.

"I know. I don't care if my father can't see me, Yohni. I want to *feel* like he wouldn't approve of how I dress."

"You know...I really can't blame you."

###

Jean was bored. Her head was hurting. Clearly, last night's game and the laughter, not to mention the seriousness it had ended with, hadn't done her any good. Her temples were throbbing. She was sitting on the couch, quietly. The police had called and told her that they'd re-arrested the wolverine that had been involved in the assault, on more serious charges. And that he wasn't going to have another chance to go near her. She felt a slight sense of relief, but then again, she *had* expected the police to deal with it all.

She leaned back and closed her eyes, breathing slowly and deeply to help still the pain in her head. The phone rang again and she looked at it, pondering whether she should pick it up or not. She decided to do so despite hurting.

"Ryder/LeBrun residence, LeBrun speaking," she said. She'd long ago picked up on Gabrielle's phone greeting.

"Hey Jean, it's Miriam. I just wanted to check up on how you're doing. You're not missing out on anything. Classes are so boring it brings tears to my eyes," the voice at the other end said.

"Hey Miriam. Good to hear your voice. I've got the most *amazing* thing to tell you..." Jean said and got comfortable on the couch again.

"Oh really? What's that?"

"Well, I told you about Esteban when you came by the hospital to visit, remember?" Jean said, her smile getting wider by the second.

"That wolf? Hon, you didn't tell me about him. You fawned over him for fifteen minutes," the red vixen giggled on her end of the line.

Jean blushed. "Well, I've got some more fawning to do. Guess what happened last night?"

"I'm sure you're gonna tell me."

"He called himself my boyfriend," Jean said.

"Whoaa....you guys are moving a wee bit fast, wouldn't you say?" Miriam asked with a touch of concern on her voice.

"I know. But...it just came up. He really shared something private with me. I don't know, Miriam...he really treats me well. I like him. Oh, and he asked me out for our first proper date."

"So...run this by me again. He's already saying he's your boyfriend and you haven't gotten past FIRST date yet?" Miriam asked, sounding incredulous.

"I know how it looks but...we are really taking it slow, I promise. I'm not doing anything stupid. Nor is he," Jean said, patiently.

"Well, so long as you know what you're doing, vixen, I'm not going to stop you. Anyway, I was thinking if I should copy my notes down and email them to you, so you know what incredibly *interesting* things our lecturers have been telling us," Miriam said. The sarcasm on the red vixen's voice was so thick Jean felt she could use it to beat a whale to death.

"Sure. Go ahead. You got my email, right?"

"I sure do."

"Oh...before you go, Miriam...I got a new job," Jean said, grinning.

"Okay. Am I going to like hearing this?" Miriam asked.

"I'm going to proofread a manuscript for ZZ Studios," Jean said.

The silence on the other end of the line was almost deafening. Finally, Miriam spoke up again. Very patiently. "ZZ Studios. A manuscript. You. Proofreading?" she said, slowly.

"Yeah. Set in Rome. Zig Zag said she wanted someone to look it over for inconsistencies and it pays well."

"Jean, it's a blue movie, okay? What're you going to check for? If they have sex the historically correct way? I'm sorry, but apart from a few mosaics, there's no evidence of how they went about it, and I *sincerely* doubt they procreated differently than modern furs, back then."

"Miriam, will you put your bias aside for a second? They make good movies there, they just don't 'zoom to the fireplace' when things get intimate."

"So you're saying it's a serious movie-studio that just lets furs see the sex that every other movie studio fade away from? Yet your roomie walked in and got a job off the streets. She's hardly an educated actor," Miriam pointed out.

"So? Lots of big stars are 'discovered' by accident, you know. And if you've ever seen Gabrielle really unroll her whole attitude, you'd know there's a lot of acting talent in her," Jean said.

"All right, I believe you. But still...are you sure you want to do this? I mean...why?"

"Because it'll be good fun and besides the money is good."

"Ah well...I'm sure once I get used to the thought, I'll want to hear a lot more about it, Jean. Anyway, I have to go for now. But I'll talk to you soon and I'll get that email off," Miriam said, chuckling.

"Sure thing. Talk to you later." Jean said and hung up.

She got to her feet and went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea for herself. There wasn't a whole lot else to do.

What she really wanted was for Esteban to call or drop by. She smiled, realizing that just thinking about the wolf made her feel better. She knew Miriam had a point and that things were going really fast. But at the same time, they were going incredibly slowly as well, and both she and Esteban had a great deal of respect for what limitations the other might have. And on the limitations-issue, she realized, she was definitely the one with the most of them.

The kettle wouldn't boil. It never would when one looked at it, Jean reminded herself. She took some ice cubes out of the freezer and wrapped them in a dishcloth, sitting back down at the table. She put the ice-cloth on her forehead and sighed, promising herself to read until her eyes fell out as soon as she was allowed to.