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XX - Back to business

Gabrielle was looking at Jean across the kitchen table. It had been a week since the near-abduction had been foiled. She'd been to work every day, except the weekend, and Jean had been bored half insane at home. Now the vixen had decided on a liberal interpretation of something the doctors had said.

"Ten days, Gabby. That's what they told me. I got hurt, was in the hospital for two days and then I got home. That was the day when your parents pulled that stunt on you. And it's been a week since that now. Ten days. I'm going back to classes. I'm allowed to read again and if I don't go do something, I'll go stir-crazy," the vixen said, firmly.

Gabrielle sighed. She felt she was talking to a wall. "I already heard that. What I mean is I'm sure they meant ten days after you came home."

Jean shrugged. "They said ten days and it's been ten days. I'm going out of my mind," she said and sipped her tea.

It wasn't unreasonable, Gabrielle knew. Jean had been very patient but she had clearly missed attending classes and having something to do. The week had been really busy at work for her too. The movie was coming along in leaps and bounds but it did mean she had to be out of the house a lot, and Esteban had been hung up on work too. Gabrielle didn't envy her roomie.

"Just be careful? If you start feeling dizzy, go home or at least go and rest somewhere. And be careful with your arm, too, and don't *run*," she said.

"Yes Mommy," Jean said, and chuckled. "I'll be okay. Miriam is there and it's all going to be okay, I promise. I just need to get back into the thick of it."

"Of course. Anyway...when did the cops say the preliminary court meeting was?"

"That's not until tomorrow, but the police already informed me, they're all going to plead guilty and ask for leniency," Jean said with a shrug.

"If they get it, I'm going to throw a major fit."

"It's hard to argue with a court decision, Gabrielle. When is your own first meeting? I know it'll take them a lot longer with yours since your father has so much more influence and clout."

Gabrielle nodded. He did too. She hadn't heard anything definite, yet, but the police had given her a rough estimate. "That won't be for another week or two. If I'm lucky, we'll manage to complete filming beforepaw."

Jean nodded again and finished up her toast. "Alright then. Well...who'd have thought? We're both going to be busy in court for a while," she said.

"Heh, and then some. And we both have work to do apart from it. Life's going to be stressed a while, my gray friend," Gabrielle mumbled.

"That reminds me, could you tell Zig Zag for me that I'm going to make a start on that proofreading today?" Jean said and got up, putting her mug and plate in the sink. "I have to get going. But I'll see you tonight when we get home."

"Alright. Take care today."

"You too."

Gabrielle watched the vixen get her coat and leave. She had plenty of time herself, before she had to be at work. Picking up her mug again she sipped her tea and smiled. Everything was returning to some semblance of normalcy. Even though she knew what had happened would leave permanent impressions on both her and on Jean, she also realized she wouldn't let it be a determining factor in her life. And she was certain by now, that Jean felt the same way.

She finished her tea and got up, going into the bathroom. A shower was going to help her put everything into perspective, she reminded herself. Picking up some of the laundry she slammed it into the washing machine and got it ready to start when she was done with her shower. She looked in the mirror.

"Hmm...not bad at all," she said and winked at herself.

The shower felt good. She took her time and conditioned her fur thoroughly. Her new job really had worked wonders for her sense of self, as well. It wasn't long ago she'd be insulting her reflection in the morning. But it was a bit difficult to keep telling herself she looked awful when she was making a living off her looks. She turned the water off after rinsing her mane and fur and reached out for a towel. Wrapping it around herself she stepped out of the shower and flicked the washing machine on. She wrapped another towel around her mane and went into the bedroom. She had just picked out her clothes for the day when someone knocked on the door. She went to open it, taking the towel out of her mane on the way.

Outside stood a young, male otter in a police uniform. His round ears flicked repeatedly and he fidgeted. Being faced with a very shapely filly wearing a towel for modesty wasn't what he'd expected. Sergeant Miranda hadn't warned him of anything like this. His mouth opened and closed a few times and he raised a finger as if to remind himself he *was* trying to say something.

Gabrielle couldn't help feeling slightly amused. "It's alright. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Kiss me?" the otter blurted out, then blanched and immediately covered his face with his paws. "Dammit...dammit, I'm...I'm so sorry, Miss. Please don't tell Sergeant Miranda, she'll give me Hell. I didn't mean to...I mean...I did...I mean..."

Gabrielle broke out in a laugh. "It's okay, I'm not going to tell anyone. But unless you really *are* here for a kiss, how may I help you?"

The otter looked a bit nervous and peeked out between his fingers. He cleared his throat and fidgeted again. "It's just...I was sent over to tell you that bail has been set for Mr. Engelbert Watson. Sergeant Miranda thought you should know. It was set at five hundred thousand since he's considered a real menace. But that amount was met in less than a minute, by a really tall rat in a designer suit. He oozed 'expensive lawyer' a mile away. Mr. Watson has been released as a result, Miss Ryder, the judge didn't listen to any arguments about him trying to skip town."

The bronco sighed and nodded, looking down. "It's okay. He's not going to skip town. He's not the type. I guarantee you he'll be there for every meeting in court fifteen minutes early, precisely. Every time. Anyway, thank you for telling me..." she said, clearly searching for the otter's name.

"Schwimmer, Miss Ryder. Joseph Schwimmer but...you can call me *anything* you like...", he said and blushed furiously. "Anyway, Sergeant Miranda said to tell you we'd park a squad car down by the front door twenty four seven while the trial is going on, if you wish. It's already been cleared with the Captain."

Gabrielle smiled. The otter was cute in his own way. She bent down and kissed his cheek, "Thanks Joseph. Tell Sergeant Miranda I really appreciate that and I'd feel a whole lot safer if you'd do that for me. But I'll still need to go to work."

The otter nodded, fast. "Yes Miss Ryder. But just in case he comes back to make another attempt...you know, waiting for you at home all over again, we'd better be here."

"Right you are. Thank you."

The otter bowed quickly and hurried down the stairs. Gabrielle couldn't help another giggle. She felt pretty sure it'd take hours before the blush came off the otter's face and he'd be grilled by every single cop at the station for details about why.

"That sold the first copy of the movie, I think," she told herself and headed back inside.

###

Watson was sitting at a restaurant. It had taken some effort to find one that served a proper English breakfast in Columbus, but he had finally managed. To his surprise, he realized the food wasn't even bad. Across the table, his companion hadn't eaten anything.

"Mr. Watson, Mr. Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the Third is not pleased with your performance," the rat said. One could cut cheese with that voice.

"I realize that I have failed my master, Mr. Neotoma," Watson said, evenly. "I will accept whatever repercussions he has in store for me."

The rat nodded, slowly. Watson was an enigma to him. Anyone would be trembling at the idea of being on the wrong side of his employer. But the dachshund looked as if he was perfectly ready to die if that was what was required. Either that, or Watson knew something he didn't know himself. That irritated Mr. Neotoma greatly. Watson bit into

a sausage and leaned back in his seat, looking at the lawyer as if expecting something more.

"Mr. Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the Third expects you to go through this trial. He will expect loyalty. And should it go against you, he'll expect you to take your punishment. Failure does not sit well with him. If the verdict goes your way, you will be allowed to return to the household in your old capacity...although he told me to let you know it might well be some time before he expects any sort of work from you apart from your duties as a butler," the rat said after a moment.

Watson nodded. That did not sound unfair to him. Many others who had failed his master had paid for it dearly. Even with their lives.

"Does my master send further instructions as regarding his daughter?" he finally asked.

The rat leaned forward across the table. "You need not concern yourself any further with her. She is no longer *your* priority, Mr. Watson."

The dachshund nodded and finished his breakfast.

###

Jean looked up at the building. It loomed. She'd never thought of it that way before, but this building really loomed. It looked menacing, all of the sudden. She didn't like the idea of going in there, but she knew she had to. She had a class to attend. Miriam wasn't there yet. She had planned on waiting for the red vixen before going in but now she was debating the wisdom of that.

If she didn't go in to face her fears, she might never really get over them. And she didn't want the assault to complicate things more than it already had. She slowly walked to the double doors and pushed them open. There were a lot of furs milling about, going to and from classes and for a moment, Jean wondered if they were looking at her. She shoved the thought aside, telling herself it wasn't important or relevant if they did or not. She had just as much right to be there as they had. There was no reason to duck her head again, she reminded herself.

Slowly, she made her way through the halls. Once in a while, a fur stopped and looked at her. She realized she was taking a detour to postpone facing the scene of the assault, and reprimanded herself for doing so.

"It's just a hallway, Jean," she told herself.

She changed directions and forced herself to walk more directly. Her legs felt heavy. They were hurting already. Walking as far as she had was unpleasant with the ligament damage she'd suffered. But she would have a chance to sit in class and relax for three hours. That was something to look forward to. She turned a corner and looked down the hallway towards where it had all happened a week before. It smelled of fresh paint everywhere.

"What did you expect? A big bloodstain?" she asked herself, lowly but out loud.

"I dunno...the rest of us had to look at it for three days before we convinced the janitor that he should paint it over. It wouldn't wash off the wall properly," a voice said beside her.

She turned her head and looked at a short, male lynx.

He grinned widely. "S'alright. I'm not going to give you a hard time at all. I think it was a big eye-opener for a lot of us. I hope they go to jail for a long time."

Jean nodded, slowly, turning towards the feline. "They probably will. One of them returned with a gun to kill me the day he was released on bail. The cops were waiting for him. They figured he'd try something like that."

The lynx blinked. "You're kiddin' me? They wanted to *kill* you? Sick furs, that's what they are. Oh well...they're behind bars and long may they stay there," he said, shrugging. "Anyway, my name's Charlie. And I owe you an apology."

"An apology?" Jean asked, confused.

"Yeah...I was one of those who spread all sorts of rumors about you. We all...had the wrong ideas. I'm sorry. I just thought I'd say so to your face. I don't understand what it is you're doing but it's your business. And I'm not going to give you any more hassle about it. Not behind your back either," Charlie said and scratched an ear.

Jean nodded again, just as slowly. "Okay. Well...thank you for being honest about it, Charlie. And I don't ask for furs to understand. I just ask them to accept that it's my choice and I have a right to make it."

"Gotcha. And if I hear anyone else start any grief about it, I'll make sure to tell'em to lay off it," he said and nodded in parting, heading down the hallway.

Jean blinked after the feline. That had been rather unexpected. But it did make it a little easier to face the hallway. She walked a few more steps, but her legs were really hurting. Then she felt a paw on her shoulder.

"There you are," Miriam's voice said, behind her. "I couldn't find you outside, so I figured you had already gone to class. Are you feeling okay? You're a bit pale."

"I'm okay. My legs are just hurting pretty badly by now," Jean said with a grateful smile, turning her head to look at her friend.

"Do you want to wait a moment? We've got a little more time before class. We can make it in time and anyway, I'm sure they'll understand if you of all furs were to arrive a minute or two late."

"I'll be fine. I don't want to be late and have to walk past the whole class like a cripple," Jean said.

"Understandable. Come on then, put a paw on my shoulder if you need support," Miriam said and began leading the gray vixen down the hallway.

###

Zig Zag looked at Marvin. The badger looked like he was badly in need of another four or five hours of sleep.

"You look like something someone drew as a joke," she said, concern on her voice.

"I'm sorry Zig. I had a rotten night," Marvin said, sleepily. "I hope that's okay? I really did my best to wake up."

"Of course it's okay, Marvin. But what's wrong?"

"Rhonda's out of town, as you know?"

"I know. She said she'd be back in three days, in time for her next photo-session with Mark."

"I'm not used to not having her there. I miss her," Marvin muttered and rubbed his eyes to try to wake up.

"It's alright. If you need the day off, Marvin, we'll manage. I didn't mean to pry, either," Zig Zag said, putting a paw on her friend's shoulder.

Marvin yawned, showing lots of sharp teeth. "It's alright. I could do with this to take my mind off it. It's only three days. I'm a grown badger."

Zig Zag nodded. She knew how attached her majordomo was to his wife, and how proud of her he was. That was also the reason she never felt bad about Rhonda no longer doing any acting. They were a good couple.

She looked around the set. They were doing some of the outdoors shots today. The weather was incredible. Sunny skies and only the faintest of winds. The sets were fairly impressive, if Zig Zag had to say so herself. She reminded herself they were absolutely tiny compared to what she had planned for the Roman epic that was coming up, but she still couldn't help feeling a touch of pride at the work that had been done. It had cost quite a bit too, but she felt certain it'd come back in, and with interest. The actors were already getting ready. The mood was high. They'd made better progress with the filming than anyone had dared hope.

Marvin was snoring quietly in a chair next to her. Zig Zag decided to let him sleep a little. He probably needed it. The actors were fooling around, doing pompous poses. Zig Zag had to admit that the costumes invited it. Besides, fooling around was always very good for the spirits around the sets.

"Hola Jefa. Sorree I'm a leettle late," Esteban's voice said behind her.

The skunk turned around. "It's alright. We haven't started yet. Whoa...look at you. If your little gray vixen saw you like that you'd have to use a sponge to collect her," Zig Zag said and grinned.

The maned wolf was wearing only a pair of cutoff jeans and a smile. He grinned and struck a pose. "Like thees?" he asked.

"Showoff! I've seen your six-pack before, Esteban. Save it for Jean," Zig Zag chided. "Anyway, what's got you in such a good mood today?"

Esteban wagged his tail and smiled even wider. "I'm goeing by her place when I get off work, and then I'm takeeng her out for deenner tonight."

Zig Zag nodded. Secretly, she wondered when she'd see Esteban in her office, resigning. She'd rarely seen anyone so taken with another fur. "I hope you intend to change into something a little more formal first, Esteban. No offense, but most restaurants won't let you in without a tie, and you aren't even wearing a *shirt*."

"That's fine. I'm not takeeng her anywhere formal for the first date, Boss."

Zig Zag was curious by now, despite herself. "Alright, spill it. You know I'm not going to stop asking until you do," she said and folded her arms over her chest.

"I'm takeeng her on a..." Esteban frowned, trying to find the right word "What ees eet again? A basket full of food and dreenk and a blanket and a nice sunset and so on?"

"Ah...a picnic. That sounds like a great idea. Very romantic, actually. Where are you going, then?"

"That, Jefa, ees between her and me," the wolf grinned and whistled innocently.

Zig Zag couldn't help laughing a little. "Okay. I won't ask any more then. And now you'd better get into costume. We start shooting as soon as you're done."

Esteban nodded and went to get changed. Zig Zag shook her head and smiled. She was in a good mood. Gabrielle had told her that Jean would start the proofreading that same day.

She clapped her paws together, sharply and called out as Esteban returned, fully costumed, already fighting a losing battle against his powdered wig.

"ATTENTION. Scene 30, take 1. ACTION!"

###

The huge mansion was quiet as Theodore made his way through the rooms. His servants knew well enough to stay out of sight unless called for. Besides, he had been in a bad mood for over a week in a row and it could be dangerous to cross him. At least Roxanne had done some excellent spin-control at the soiree.

"No, Gabrielle is unfortunately prevented from attending, despite our hopes that she would. She's away, representing her father on important business. No, of course she's not doing business herself. She's simply there as a member of the family. Our lawyers are taking care of everything."

That had been the excuse. Roxanne was quite good, Theodore had to admit, at speaking with a tone of finality that stopped any questions before they were spoken. If she had been on his payroll he'd have considered giving her a bonus. However, he was also well aware that it was going to be impossible to keep stalling for time. The soiree next weekend had been canceled. Officially because he, himself, would be in Central America on business. It hadn't been a problem arranging an inspection of the organizations facilities in Honduras and El Salvador on such short notice.

He gritted his teeth and adjusted his tie, and pushed open the carved oak doors to the conference room. His associates were already there. They all rose as he entered.

"Gentlefurs," he said and nodded, curtly, to all of them before taking a seat at the head of the table. "Watson will not be joining us today. He is detained elsewhere for the time being. For once, everyone will have to get their own drinks."

A general murmur of disapproval went up from the table. A single glance from Theodore silenced it, effectively. "Mr. Ursus, your girth is large enough to warrant some exercise in any case. As for the rest of you, if you are too lazy to get a drink from the cabinet for yourselves, perhaps it's time I reevaluate your commitment to this organization as a whole," he said in a clipped tone of voice.

Every fur present shut up, as if they'd been turned off.

"Good. I didn't think there would be any problems. Now, I want some figures on the table and I want them to be *good*," the bronco continued. "Mr. Ursus, since I've already addressed you, you may go first."

An obese bear adjusted his already straining jacket and nodded. "The East Denver area can report an increase in sales of PCP and Heroin, but the exact numbers aren't in yet. It should be a sizable profit, though. And my policefurs are staying out of the way, needless to say."

Theodore nodded. "That is good. Mr. Wheeler, what can you report?"

A thin weasel looked up. Everyone else at the table shuddered, apart from the bronco at the head of it. The weasel made everyone uneasy. Mr. Wheeler was known to be mentally unstable and completely unpredictable in his outbursts. They often turned violent.

"Only one of the gangs downtown is still resisting, Mr. B," he hissed. "If they don't fall into line by the end of the week...I'll start having some...fun."

Everyone except Theodore shuddered again. The weasel's idea of 'fun' usually involved a coroner and a mop and bucket.

Again, Theodore nodded. "See to it," he said in a businesslike manner and got up. He started walking around the long table. "Mr. Hammond, your report please."

The next fur in line, a heavy set bulldog nodded. "Su'ah, Mr. B. Ah' kin tell ya'll, dem Yukazi-furs ain't gonna git a paw inna door. Mah furs...heh...dey're all fit'n ready

t'rumble," he growled. Everyone had come to expect Mr. Hammond to growl. He seemed incapable of anything else.

Theodore detested the accent the bulldog spoke with. It was uncouth and unrefined, but he made an excellent drillmaster for his goons. "Yakuza, Mr. Hammond. It's called the Yakuza," he corrected the canid. "But if you say your furs are prepared for a fight, then I believe you. This is our ground. We shall not cede it to the Japanese."

There was a general murmur of consent. Theodore continued pacing, slowly around the table. "In fact, the Japanese are crafty, extremely cunning and very dangerous furs. We are all aware of this, are we not?" he asked, very calmly.

Again, general consent was mumbled and nods were added into it from several furs.

Theodore nodded, mostly to himself and came to a halt behind a chair. He put his paws on the shoulders of the fur sitting in it. A gaunt looking greyhound. "And knowing how crafty and dangerous these furs are, Mr. Gradus, I must express my profound sadness that you have chosen to accept their offer to take your branch of our little organization over to them," he said. He kept his voice perfectly calm.

Every fur at the table snapped around and stared at the greyhound. Fangs were bared. Growls went up everywhere. Mr. Hammond started rolling up his sleeves. Chairs were pushed back. Mr. Gradus swallowed and started to protest, weakly.

"Mr. Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg, I *swear* that isn't the case. I would never betray you," he whined.

The bronco smiled and patted the greyhounds shoulders. "Be a sport, Mr. Gradus. Accept that you gambled and lost. I do so abhor cowards," he said and adjusted his tie again as he nodded to the other furs in the room. "Gentlefurs. I will see you next week. Those present who did not get to make a report will be expected to leave a written report for me by tomorrow morning at ten. Good afternoon."

Then he walked out. He turned his head once he was outside he turned his head to the servant waiting right outside. "Darlington, make sure to pay the maids overtime and have the carpet replaced in the conference chamber tomorrow. If Mr. Hammond requires a clean shirt before going home, I expect you to attend to it," he said, calmly.

"Naturally, Milord," the raccoon replied, bowing deeply.

"Good. I expect you to deal with this discreetly, Darlington. There may be a promotion for you in the near future, depending on Watson's trial. Should he lose, I will require a

new furservant. Now, bring me a glass of sherry and today's newspaper in the red room. And summon 'ArseNick'. I require his services."

The raccoon swallowed at the mention of the name. It sent shivers down his spine...*and* back up again. "Very good, Milord," he said in a nervous tone of voice, bowing deeply.

Theodore sighed. The noises from the conference room were distasteful. But Mr. Hammond was nothing if not thorough, and that in itself was a valuable quality. He shook his head to clear his mind of the sound of Mr. Gradus being beaten to death and headed for the red room.

###

Esteban was walking down the street, carrying a basket. He was wearing the same cutoffs he'd been wearing to work and a white muscle-shirt. A pair of Ray-Bans rested on his muzzle. He was whistling, enjoying life. Filming had gone as planned. Only three retakes the whole afternoon. Zig Zag was starting to say they'd be done four or five days ahead of schedule.

That was rare. Most of the time, they met deadlines, but only just. Zig Zag ran a really tight ship, sometimes. He didn't even feel tired. Normally, halfway through a movie, he was a wreck when the day was over. Only fit to go home and collapse on his bed. Now he was a bundle of energy after work. He turned a corner and nearly bumped into a smallish, elderly gray fox wearing a beret, holding a broom. The resemblance to Jean was obvious. Besides, he'd been told about the bakery several times. The wolf looked up at the sign, then back down to the fox with a polite smile.

"Buenos dias, Señor LeBrun," he said.

"Bonjour, Monsieur le lupe," the fox replied, a bit confused. "Have we met?"

"No, not yet, Señor. But Jean has told me much about you," Esteban said and extended a paw. "My name ees Esteban. I'm the luckee lobo dateeng your daughter."

Francois extended his own paw and shook Estebans, slowly, while putting things together in his mind. "Ahhh, oui. Oui...she told me of you."

"I hope you do not mind, Señor? I mean, meexed species couple and so on?" Esteban said, politely.

"Not at all. Jean is an adult vixen. She can make her own decisions."

"Nonetheless, Señor LeBrun, I would like to offeeceally ask your permeeseeon to see your daughter. Eet seems only feetteeng," Esteban said. "Your blesseeng would mean a lot to me."

Francois smiled a warm smile. It made his mustache curl slightly. "You may, and you have it," he said. "On one condition."

Esteban nodded, apprehensively. He did want Jean's father to approve. It was important to him. He knew he wouldn't stop seeing the vixen if he didn't get it, but parental approval always felt better. And from what he could gather, Jean's mother was unlikely to give any kind of approval to anything involving the vixen.

"I want you to treat her like a lady, Monsieur Esteban. Not just any femme. I want you to treat her *right*. She's had enough to contend with in life already. Be good to her," Francois said in a serious tone of voice.

"You have my word of honour, Señor LeBrun. Your daughter ees..." he began and sought a word, "Es una zorra maravillosa."

Francois nodded and looked at the basket. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Si, probablee. I am goeeng to take her for a peecneec."

"Wait here a moment," the fox said and headed into the store. He came back out a few moments later with a small bundle. "I was taking these croissants home for my wife. She'll just have to wait. Young furs in love...heh, you deserve them," he winked and put them in the basket.

Esteban smiled. "Gracias, Señor LeBrun."

"Call me Francois. Now, off you go," the fox said with another mustache-curling smile.

The wolf nodded and waved, heading towards the apartment. He took the stairs in leaps and bounds. Then he remembered Zig Zag's words earlier and removed his shirt, tying it around his waist, before knocking on the door.

"COMING!" Jeans voice called out from the other side.

It took a while before she opened. Esteban realized her legs probably hurt a bit and he wondered if she'd feel up to going anywhere. The concern quickly faded when he saw the look on her face.

"Good *grief*, Esteban...do you...have the *faintest* idea what that does to my blood-pressure?" the vixen peeped out and swallowed. Her eyes were as big as saucers.

Esteban grinned widely. "Zeeg Zag told me I'd need a sponge to collect you. Ees that true?"

"You might very well have to. Wow...I can't remember the last time I saw anything that gorgeous," Jean said and blinked to clear her head.

"Well, I packed a peecneec basket. I was hopeeng maybe we could go? Just you and me? I know a reallee nice place, where the sunsets are worth waiteeng for."

Jean nodded. "My legs are hurting, Esteban. But right now, I'd walk to across the continent if that meant watching a sunset with you," the vixen said and looked up at the wolf's face.

He smiled and reached out, brushing a strand of hair from the vixens eyes. "It eesn't that far," he murmured and put his arms around her, kissing her gently.

And for Jean LeBrun, the world stopped turning for a few precious moments.