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XXVIII - The ghosts of the past...

Esteban bounded up the stairs. It was Saturday. He didn't have anything planned with Jean for the evening but he felt certain if he didn't see her he'd go mad. He was carrying a long stemmed, red rose and he was in a great mood.

It wasn't even evening yet. Just late afternoon but he'd been walking around like a caged wolf for the past three hours and he'd finally decided to get a move on. Standing before the door he cleared his throat and knocked on the door.

Gabrielle opened after a moment, smiling when she realized who the guest was.

"Hey Esteban. Come on in. She's taking a shower. I think she was planning to get a hold of you for tonight anyway," the bronco said.

"Gracias," Esteban said and stepped into the hall, removing his coat after carefully placing the rose on the table. "How ees she doeeng?"

"She's feeling better. Her ribs aren't really bothering her all that much anymore. I think the part of her hurting the most right now is her ego. I took her clothes-shopping yesterday," Gabrielle giggled.

Esteban looked like a walking question-mark.

"She needs bras now, my lupine friend. Or she will very soon at least. And I did what I could to convince her to give you a nice view. It remains to be seen if she keeps her promise to do so once already tonight."

The wolf cleared his throat and fidgeted. "I hope she eesn't too upset. I was theenkeeng of takeeng her somewhere quiet where we could talk the night away," he said and smiled uncertainly.

"Oh don't worry. She'll be fine. I think you're just what the bruised-ego doctor ordered, Esteban. Hang on. I'll let her know you're here."

"Gracias."

Gabrielle walked over to the bathroom door, knocking hard. "JEAN...THERE'S A BIG, HAIRY CREATURE OUT HERE, ASKING FOR YOU! SHOULD I SEND HIM AWAY?" she called out, winking to Esteban out the corner of her eye all the way.

The water stopped running from inside the bathroom and the vixens voice was heard. "That depends on what creature. If it's who I think it is, please tell him to sit down and wait for me to get dressed."

Esteban nodded. "I heard. I'm seetteeng," he said and plopped down on the couch.

Gabrielle came over. "Can I get you anything? Something to drink while you wait, maybe? It'll take a while for her to get dressed and ready."

"I weell never understand why eet takes femmes so long to get dressed, potranca. Even weeth oceans of time, you still never have quite enough."

"It's a skill, Esteban. You're male, you'd never understand," Gabrielle chuckled. "Anyway...I've got some homemade lemonade in the fridge if you'd like a glass?"

"Oooh... *real* lemonade? I'd like that!" the wolf said and perked up in a big smile.

"Sure. I'll get you a glass. Where are you planning on taking Jean tonight?"

"I'm not sure. Somewhere nice and private. Just to talk. To learn more about each other."

Gabrielle opened the fridge and got the lemonade, pouring a glass, while listening to the wolf. Then she nodded. "Tell you what. I'll go and have a drink or two at 'Spirit of New

Orleans' and you two have the apartment to yourselves. And if I find the bed isn't done when I come home, I'll tease you mercilessly for the rest of your professional career, Esteban."

The wolf whined pathetically and sulked. "No fair. Jean and I don't do that sort of theeng. Not yet. I wouldn't hurt her like that, not before she's readee..." he began.

Gabrielle couldn't help laughing a little as she held out the glass of lemonade for Esteban. "Easy, easy, wolfie. I'm just teasing you. I know you wouldn't do that. Here you go, at least."

Esteban took the glass and sipped it, tentatively. Then he smiled. "Not too sour, not too sweet."

"I think the only 'too sweet' thing here will be you two when she gets out of that bathroom, my friend. I'm in danger of developing an acute case of diabetes from looking at you two sometimes. I'm going to get my jacket and head downtown. I'll see you later, all right?" Gabrielle teased and got up.

Esteban shrugged and smiled crookedly. It was hard to argue with facts.

###

There was no email. Miranda closed down the program and grumbled. She'd sent off an email the day before to the police in Denver, officially requesting assistance on ArseNicks whereabouts. She'd also emailed an old friend who worked as a Private Investigator in that city, asking if he could drop her a line or call if he found something. So far, no news. She did realize that it had only been little over a day, and it might take time. But she was hoping for a swift response. Most likely, there would be no response this weekend, she thought, and headed to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee.

Peter was still asleep. He'd been on the night shift. He needed his rest and she didn't feel like waking him up. She looked down herself and put a paw on her stomach and sighed. They had tried to have a baby for the last two years. She was starting to fear something was wrong with her, since nothing happened. She definitely knew Peter did what he could.

Sipping her coffee she padded across the room again to the computer, once more sitting down to check some information. What she wanted to know was a motive. She knew that that Engelbert Watson was dead, and why. He'd been killed to keep him silent, no question about that. Probably, it would also send a strong signal to Gabrielle Ryder, to

not cross her father or ignore his wishes. But why? What was so important about Gabrielle? That was what she hadn't figured out yet.

She sipped her coffee and thought about the facts of the case so far. She was snapped out of it by the phone ringing. She picked it up.

"Miranda speaking," she said and clenched the receiver between her cheek and her shoulder as she put her coffee cup down.

"Hey Miranda, it's Fred...I've got the information you asked for."

Miranda sat bolt upright. Fred was the P.I. from Denver and she paid close attention.

"Go on," she said.

"Well, your baboon arrived in Denver not long ago. He came in by Greyhound bus, and it took some digging to find out but he's definitely been here. He also left again. I haven't been able to figure out what he did here but I'm sure you're already onto that. This place is growing ugly, though. There's rumors of all kinds of nastiness about to break loose. The Yakuza are moving in, it seems. Don't expect to get any information from the official sources though. The police here are mostly in the pocket of a really nasty local mob-leader," Fred said.

"Let me guess. Theodore Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the Third."

"I can't even pronounce that name without doing some kind of damage to my vocal cords. But yes, that's the one. How did you know?"

"Because he's at the heart of this case. His daughter is here in Columbus and he tried to abduct her," Miranda answered.

There was a long silence. Fred finally spoke up again, but his voice was quiet and there was a note of urgency to every word. "Listen Miranda...be really, really careful about what you're going to do next. They call him Mr. Big in the criminal circles around here and there's a reason for that. He's not someone to be trifled with, all right? Everyone who gets on his bad side tend to end up with a severe case of death."

Miranda nodded and sighed. "I've noticed. But thanks for the warning, Fred. I appreciate this. Can you send me the information you have in hardcopy? I'll need it as evidence."

"It's already on its way, my friend. But I'm not going to be able to help you with this case any more. I'm just a small fish, and I could very easily vanish and never be heard from again. Okay?"

"I understand. Thanks for taking the time to do this for me. I really do appreciate it," Miranda said, earnestly.

They hung up and Miranda leaned back in her seat again. ArseNick had been placed at the scene of the crime and he'd been placed in the same city as the suspected mastermind behind this. That gave her a lot to go by. Now all that remained was to find the baboon. She sighed and picked up the phone again, dialing the home number of Captain Archibald. A line was established and a gruff voice on the other end spoke up.

"Archibald," it said, simply.

"Captain, it's Sergeant Miranda. I have just gotten word. ArseNick was in Denver very recently. The evidence is already on its way here. I need you to arrange that the airports keep an eye out for him. I don't want him to get out of the country. I'll try checking some of the major airports myself to see if he's already managed to escape. If he has, we're out of luck."

There was a moment of silence. "Very well. Consider it done sergeant."

"Thank you sir."

"Oh, and Sergeant..."

"Yes sir?" Miranda said.

"Good work. Keep it up," the voice of her superior said. Then he hung up.

Miranda smiled and leaned back. Praise from Captain Archibald was rare. She finished her coffee before looking up the phone-numbers for the airports she needed to call.

###

"Hey Paul. Can you make me a whiskey soda, please? You know how to make them just right," Gabrielle said.

The donkey turned around and smiled widely. "Hello again, Miss Gabrielle. Good to see you back. Certainly, hang on," he said and started on the drink.

Gabrielle looked around. 'Spirit' was almost empty, but then, it was only late afternoon. She took the drink Paul placed on the bar and sipped it, smiling. "I think my roomie liked this place too," she said.

"I do believe, Miss Gabrielle, that a big part of the reason for that was the company she brought that evening," Paul said with a chuckle.

"Don't bother with formalities, Paul. Gabrielle is fine."

"All right, Gabrielle it is then," the donkey answered.

"And anyway, I think you're right. But they do make a great couple, don't they?"

"Absolutely. They suit each other. You should've seen them on the dance-floor. They took the whole place by storm. Everyone else stopped dancing just to watch."

Gabrielle shook her head and chuckled. "And to think that Jean is terrified of dance-floors," she said, amusedly.

"Well, that didn't show. She was a little stiff at first but that was quickly overcome. That wolf is a very good dancer, may I add," Paul said and took out a glass and a dishcloth, wiping it to a shine.

"I believe you. Would you know...Jean was the victim of aggravated assault recently? Her muscles and tendons in her legs took some damage...it'll be months before she can run and yet, she got on that dance-floor," Gabrielle explained.

"Really?? That's terrible. I mean, not that she danced, but the assault. Was that why her arm was in a cast?"

"You don't miss anything do you? Yes, that's why."

Paul nodded, looking serious. "She's a very brave young femme then. To go out and have a good time, and dance, while injured. Give her my best wishes, please?"

"I will. I'm sure she will honestly appreciate them. She isn't used to kindness from strangers."

"How sad. She seemed like such an agreeable young femme," Paul said and sighed.

"She is...she's just taking the brunt of some of society's worst prejudice and bigotry," Gabrielle said and let it stay at that, sipping her drink again.

Paul nodded and didn't dig deeper in it.

###

Jean came out of the bathroom, drying her hair with a fresh towel. Esteban was still sitting on the couch, but his glass had been emptied several minutes ago.

"I hope it didn't take too long?" Jean said and gave her hair another good ruffle.

Esteban turned to face her and blinked. His eyes nearly fell out of their sockets. "Chica, I'd wait a verree long time for a view like that," he said, hoarsely.

Jean blushed and looked down herself. "It's nothing really. Gabrielle made me swear I'd wear this skirt at least once when you were around. She *made* me buy it yesterday, the evil creature that she is."

"Remind me to thank her properlee! Madre de Dios...do you have any idea what that does to a male?" he said and shook his head vigorously, as if trying to make sure his eyes really saw what they did.

"Shush. It's much too short," the vixen muttered and came over to the couch, sitting down and folding her legs up under her before she leaned against Esteban's chest.

"Eef you ask the greater part of thees world's males, chica, there *ees* no such theeng as 'too short'," Esteban pointed out and slipped an arm around Jeans waist. "Besides, you have fantasteec legs."

"Yeah, you *oughta* know. You see enough of them," she teased and prodded the wolfs ribs with a finger.

"I suppose, but all the more reason to take eet as a compleement then. I know what I'm talkeeng about. Aneeway...I was hopeeng we could spend a nice, quiet eveneeng, just you and me?" he asked.

Jean nodded. That sounded just fine to her. She noticed something and covered her muzzle, giggling. "All right, Esteban...I believe you meant it sincerely. I doubt your body can lie."

The wolf blushed and cleared his throat, crossing his legs. "Verree funnee," he muttered and tickled the vixens side a bit.

That made her jump and she burst out laughing. "HEY...no fair. Gabrielle tickles me too. NO FAIR."

But Esteban didn't stop. In fact, the squirming vixen just made him grin widely and use both paws. Jean tried to squirm out of his grasp but to no avail. Her giggles and laughter sapped all strength from her. Finally, she ended up on her back, heaving for breath, tried to stop laughing. Esteban had an arm on both sides of her, hovering over her.

"Do you surrender?" he asked, still grinning.

"Oh, I surrender...totally," she gasped and giggled again.

"Good," he muttered and lowered himself far enough that he could kiss her. She slipped her arms around his neck and held on, sighing happily into the kiss. Making it last for a long, precious moment. When he finally broke it, Esteban sat back upright but Jean shook her head, smiling softly.

"Lay here..." she said and sat up too, patting her lap.

He smiled and nodded, laying down with his head in her lap, looking up at her. "You know, I theenk I have the best view een Columbus right now," he murmured.

"Yeah right, as if," Jean chuckled.

"Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Put yourself down like that? Everee time I geeve you a compleement, you contradect eet. I don't understand," he said, sounding hurt. "Don't you believe me when I say eet?"

Jean bit her lips and sighed. "It's not that simple, Esteban. I believe you mean it. I don't doubt for a second that you're being honest with me."

"Then what ees eet? Please, tell me because eet's a beet hurtful."

She nodded. "I know. I'm sorry about it. I really am. I don't mean to hurt you. It's just become second nature to me...I'll really try to stop."

"Okay but...why are you doeeng eet een the first place, Jean? Look at me. Please. Look at me for a moment, no?" the wolf said, his voice turning warm.

She did, looking into his eyes.

"I love you. Eet makes no sense for eet to happen so soon. Eet makes even less sense for me to say eet on our first date. Eet makes absolutelee zeelch sense for you to put up weeth my job. But eet all happened. We are *good* together, Jean. I spend everee day at

work, waiteeng to get out of there so I can call you or come by to veeseet. That's the truth of eet."

Jean smiled. "I love you too. And sometimes, it's not about making sense. Emotions rarely do if you think about it," she said and ran her fingers through Estebans mane.

"Mmm...that feels nice," he murmured and closed his eyes. "But you said eet eesn't 'that seemple'. Ees eet sometheeng you want to talk about?"

Jean thought about that for a moment, quietly. Then she nodded. "If you'd like to hear, then it is. But it's probably going to sound really weird."

"Go ahead then," Esteban said, quietly.

"I suppose it's all just a major inferiority complex. My therapist said to me once that it's very common for furs like me. You see...psychologically speaking, we all have an 'ego'. Not just in the slang-sense. Gabrielle has a major ego, if you look at it that way. Hers isn't obnoxious, but she definitely has a big one. But an ego really means...a sense of self. You know who you are...what you are...where you're coming from and where you're headed."

Esteban nodded, staying quiet, listening.

"Furs like me...don't have an ego. Or more precisely, we do, but it's completely screwed up. If I were to ask you 'who are you, and what are you?', you'd tell me your name, that you're a male maned wolf, and that you're working at ZZ Studios. As well as a few other things. Those are the things that make up 'You'. Who you are and what you are amounts to the package called Esteban," Jean continued.

"Nice package too, no?" he grinned.

Jean giggled. "Very. You don't hear me complaining. But now, can you imagine what answers you'd get if you asked me that same question? You'd get a lot of 'Erhm, I'm not sure' and 'What do you mean by that?' in return. I look in the mirror every day, and I see the same face staring back at me that looked at me ten years ago. I know it's not the same face. I've grown, I've changed...everyone grows and changes. But we don't see the changes because they happen little by little, day by day. Not in sudden leaps. So...I can't see anything except the same face that looked back at me when I was 15 years old. I don't know who that fur *is*, Esteban. I don't know who the fur in the mirror is. The first question I ask myself every morning when I go into the bathroom and see that...creature...staring back at me from the mirror is 'who the Hell are *you*?', if you can

understand that concept. It's hard enough for me at times, and I'm the one living this life."

"I don't think I'm supposed to understand, but I can imagine that must be very difficult. Constantly have to ask yourself that."

"It is. It's horrible beyond words. When you're a teenager, you build your sense of identity. Who you are...what you are. The things that make up your ego. But when *everything* you do...no matter how ridiculous, no matter how small, from getting dressed in the morning, to taking a bath, to eating breakfast...everything throughout the day...is followed by the question 'Why am I doing this?' or 'Why am I doing this in *this* way?' you build up a totally overwhelming amount of doubt in yourself. I can tell you about it, I know it's there. I know it's strange, and I *can* see it, rationally. But it still affects me."

Esteban frowned deeply and nodded a little. "And that's why you can't take a compliment?"

"I'm *trying* to. I'm try to get better at it. But it'll take time and a lot of hard work. You keep telling me you think I'm great and that I'm beautiful. Gabrielle tells me the same things. I can't see it. It just doesn't make sense to me. I want to believe it. You've got no idea how badly I want to, but I can't bend my head around it. It's like...like there are these voices in my head, mocking me whenever anyone says something nice," the vixen said, quietly.

Esteban opened an eye and looked up at her. "Voices in your head, chica? That's serious."

Jean shrugged and smiled a bit. "It's not like that. I know they're not real. I also know it's just my imagination and that basically, it's myself thinking those things. My subconscious just gives them different sounds for some reason."

The wolf reached up and stroked Jean's cheek. "I suppose that explains a lot. I'll still give you compliments though. Otherwise you'll never get used to it," he said with a smile. "Now...there's one other thing I've been meaning to ask you. If it's too private, I understand..."

"Go ahead. I've got no secrets from you, Esteban."

"When did you find out...and how did you find out?"

Jean grimaced. She knew those questions would come up sooner or later. It didn't make it any less unpleasant having to deal with them. It brought up all the ghosts from her

past to think about them but she had said Esteban could ask about anything...and sooner or later, those questions would need answering anyway.

"Chica...are you all right?" the wolf asked in a concerned voice. "Eef you don't want to talk about eet, I understand."

The vixen shook her head, smiling a bit. "No, it's okay. It just...brings up so many memories. But you deserve an answer. And I need to stop hiding from it. It started when I was 4 years old. It's the earliest I can remember. I knew I was different, already then. I knew I didn't feel right. I didn't know how to put words on it. I mean...transsexuality is something you're born with. That's been established by science not too long ago. It's not a mental disease, like so many furs think, or used to think. It's a physical gender dysfunction. When you said it was a disability, you were actually right on the money. It is. But it's a little more complex since it's a physical disability with severe emotional and mental sideeffects," Jean explained.

Esteban nodded. "I feegured. Eet seems logeecal, really, eef you theenk about eet," he said.

Jean smiled and nodded. "More furs should think logically then. Basically, you may be born with it, but it doesn't really *happen* until you hit puberty. Before then...you just feel a lot of awful confusion about who you are. That happened to me too. When I turned 13, things started getting really painful for me because...deep down I did know what the problem was. One morning when I was 14, I woke up, and I just *knew*. I just had this startling realization of what was wrong. You can't imagine how horrible it was. Being 14 years old and thinking you're some kind of...of..."

Again, Esteban reached up and caressed the vixens cheek. "Don't say eet. I know what you mean. You're not."

"Thank you. That means more than you know. That's what happened anyway. I stayed home, pretending to be sick for two days, and mostly I just cried alone in my room. I thought I was really sick. That everyone would abandon me. Turn their backs on me. My family, my friends, everyone. I was so scared. I realized I had to hide it. Really, you know... *pretend* I was really butch and then no one would notice. So I did. And...it hurt. I tried killing myself several times over the next couple of years. I couldn't bear it. I *hated* myself. More than I can say in words. I really, really hated myself..."

"Suicide eesn't the way to go. Good theeng you failed," Esteban said and took Jeans left paw, squeezing it gently.

"I'm glad I failed as well. *Now* I'm glad I failed but...at the time it seemed the only way to escape the pain. I couldn't stand myself. Every time I had to go to the bathroom..." Jean said and shuddered. "That, may I add, is still a test of courage."

Esteban nodded and smiled reassuringly. "Eet's what's eenside you that matters to me, Jean, just remember that."

She nodded. "It wasn't until I moved away from home that I realized I had to stop living a lie. I was terrified of taking the plunge and getting help. I confessed to Gabrielle how I felt. She told me she already knew. She's always known me better than anyone else...for as long as I've known her. She'd figured it out long before I told her. She said she was just waiting for me to be ready to get help. She's been there for me ever since."

Esteban smiled a little. "You said eet brought up ghosts from the past. I guess I can see why. Eet must be like faceeng a part of you that you don't recognize everee time you theenk about eet."

"That's precisely the thing. It's like facing another fur, sharing my body, but who isn't me. I'm inside...and the shell isn't mine. It's someone else's. But I'm the *real* me. I know it sounds really strange."

"Jean...what you are suffereeng from would turn most furs stark, raveeng mad weeth despair and you are apologizeeng for sometheeng you theenk sounds *weird*? Chica, I *really* need to work on your self esteem," Esteban chuckled.

"I know. I'm sorry," Jean said and bit her lips.

"Don't. Stop apologizeeng and smile for me? Please? You have such a beauteeful smile. There's no one here but you and me, and like I said, eet's whats eenside you that matters," Esteban said and kissed the back of Jeans paw.

She did smile. Uncertainly at first. "You're so nice to me. I just...wish I could tell you how strange it is for me, with how I've always felt about myself, to realize I'm sitting here, in my living room with perhaps the single most handsome wolf in Columbus laying with his head in my lap...saying that he loves me. If you have any idea how difficult it is for me to just...*comprehend* that..." she said and looked away.

Esteban sat upright. "Chica...eet shouldn't be so hard to understand. I'm right here," he said and took her paw and put it against his chest. She could feel his heartbeat as he continued; "I would really like to stay weeth you tonight. Just like we deed last time. Just holding...sleepeeng together."

"I'd like that," Jean said, smiling a bit wider, snuggling up to Esteban again. "There's a lot more to tell. But...some other time, okay?"

He nodded and kissed her hair. "When you feel readee," he murmured and pulled her close.

###

"Saturday evening," Zig Zag thought, "and I'm going to bed early."

She smiled a little. The last week had been stressful for everyone at the studio. Her in particular, though. She was sitting in her living room with a glass of wine, listening to a little music. Vivaldi's 'The four seasons'. That piece reminded her of when she and James had just started dating. She took a sip of her wine and closed her eyes.

The phone rang. Somehow, deep in the darkest recesses of her soul, Zig Zag had just been waiting for that to happen. Something had to spoil the perfect moment she'd been experiencing. Turning the music down, she picked up the receiver.

"Zig Zag speaking," she said, realizing she sounded irritated.

"Hey Tonya. It's Alex," a baritone voice said on the other end.

Zig Zag blinked. She almost never heard her given name anymore and it almost sounded alien to her. But she recovered, recognizing the voice.

"Oh, hello Alex, long time no hear."

"Unfortunately, yes. I've been all over the world, after all. Frankfurt-am-Main isn't just around the corner from Columbus, Ohio," the voice on the other end chuckled.

"So that's where you've been hiding. Well, it's not as if the family wants to have any sort of interaction with me, after all," Zig Zag said, reproachfully.

"Ahem... *some* of the family, Tonya. Please don't count me as one of those who disowned you. I've simply not been in the neighborhood."

"It's all right, Alex. If you had been like the others, you wouldn't be calling me now anyway. It's good to hear your voice though."

"Likewise. Say...how would you feel if I happened to drop by briefly, this Monday? I'm passing through Ohio and I'm thinking of making a detour to visit my favorite second cousin."

"You'd be welcome. But are you sure? I mean...I'd be at the office most of the day," Zig Zag said.

"That's fine. I'll come by. I'm bringing this brand new cadet to Cincinnati. He's still wet behind his ears, but he's going to shape up fine, from what I can gather."

"Mymy...are you down to babysitting duties now, Alex? I thought you were an officer and a gentlefur."

The voice on the other end mock-growled. "That's Lieutenant Colonel O'Whitt to you, soldier."

Zig Zag laughed. "Sorry, I never joined up. I think I served the armed forces in other capacities."

"Ouch, that stung my sensitive ears, Tonya. That was more information than I needed," Alex chuckled.

"Oh come on, you're a big tiger. You can take it. Anyway, I'll see you Monday then. It'll be nice to catch up for a bit."

"Good. Be there at eleven hundred hours," Alex said, cheerfully.

They hung up. Zig Zag sipped her drink again and smiled.