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XXIX - Go, go, go...

Monday morning, Zig Zag went to work early. She figured it would be better, since Alex was going to come by at eleven. It'd be best to get some work done before that.

She let herself in, being the first one to arrive at the studio. Punching the code for the alarm, she smiled and stretched. A good nights sleep had done wonders for her. She wasn't feeling tired like she had most of the past week. She flicked on the lights and picked up the mail, then headed to her office.

She sat down and turned on her computer. The phone rang and she picked it up.

"ZZ Studios, Zig Zag speaking," she said in a professional tone of voice.

"Zig Zag, it's Anna. Wasn't sure if you'd be in yet," the voice of the beaver said on the other end.

"Oh, good morning Anna. Actually, you just caught me. I got in a minute ago."

"Great. I've got the script done. I'll be faxing it to you right away. I hope you like it."

"I'm sure it'll be great. I'll go and get it right away. Talk to you later," Zig Zag said and smiled.

"Sure. Call me if there's anything you need clarified," Anna said.

Zig Zag nodded. "Will do. Take care," she said and hung up. Then she left her office again. She went past the common room and started the coffee. While it was brewing, she went to the fax-machine and picked up the papers as they came out.

Anna was dependable, reliable and she had a way with wit. The skunk greatly appreciated her skills as a writer, and she found herself skimming the first few pages while waiting for the rest.

"Teddy Hobnob-Fartville van Schwanzstadt?" she asked aloud, giggling. She shook her head and thought about what that might do to a certain Denver bronco's ego. At least it was unmistakable.

Finally the fax droned to an end and she collected all the pages and headed back to the common room for the coffee. She could hear the front door opening and she went out there, papers under one arm, a cup of coffee in the opposite paw. Marvin was taking off his windbreaker. He grinned and nodded to his boss.

"G'mornin' Zig Zag. Damned, you look good today. Any particular reason?"

"Thanks Marv. Well, I have some family dropping by at 11. I thought I'd better look my best."

"You always look great, boss. But family, you say? That's unusual, isn't it?" Marvin said and smiled.

"It's my second cousin, Alex. He's headed for Cincinnati with some young fur. It'll be nice seeing him again," the skunk explained.

"Ahh, I see. Well, I hope it'll go down well. What's that paper under your arm anyway," Marvin said and came over. "Ooh...coffee. I neeeeeed coffee."

"There's a fresh pot in there. Why? Did Rhonda keep you busy last night?" Zig Zag chuckled.

"Thanks...you're a lifesaver. Actually, it's not Rhonda's fault. I just couldn't sleep," Marvin said and headed into the common room behind his boss to get himself some coffee.

"I'm not going to stand here, believing Rhonda didn't at least take advantage of that, Marv."

Marvin grinned the widest, most innuendo-laden smile Zig Zag had seen in a very long time but he stayed quiet. She chuckled at the badger and sipped her coffee.

"Anyway, the paperwork, since you asked, is the new script. I'm going to proofread this one myself with Gabrielle. After all, she's the expert on her parents," she said, smiling.

"There is that, there is that," Marvin agreed and downed most of a mug of black coffee in one gulp. "When's she coming in?"

"Oh, probably around noon or so, I think. I think she needed to drop Jean off somewhere today."

"No problem. Want me to drop by the sets-furs with the manuscript later?"

"Yeah, that'd be nice. I'll start by checking the specifics for the sets with Gabby and then you'll get it," Zig Zag said and sipped her coffee again.

"No problem. What's a majordomo for if not the practical stuff?" Marvin said and finished his first mug of coffee, pouring himself a second.

"You gotta be galvanized on your insides, Marvin. You go through that stuff like soda."

Marvin grinned again. "Stainless steel innards, Zig. Lifetime guarantee or a full refund," he joked and took a seat by the table. "So, have you had a chance to look at the script at all?" he asked and took a more moderate sip from the mug.

"Yeah. It looks like Anna's up to her usual good writing. She's calling Gabrielle's father 'Teddy Hobnob-Fartville van Schwanzstadt'," Zig Zag giggled.

Coffee spurted all over the table as Marvin burst out laughing while drinking. "You're serious? *Ouch*. He's going to have a cow."

"Well, I think he'd rather have a bronco but he's not going to get her."

"Touché, Zig," the badger chuckled.

Zig Zag winked and went back to her office and sat down, reading.

###

Jean woke up late. She opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder at the sleeping shape of Esteban. To her delight, he was still holding her against himself.

"This is a Kodak moment..." she muttered and yawned, slowly waking up.

Esteban muttered something in his sleep about cameras, apparently responding to the Kodak comment. Jean pondered getting up but she decided against it. She felt perfectly comfortable where she was. It didn't take long before Esteban stirred though. She could feel his muzzle against her neck. His breath in her fur. It felt nice. Safe.

She put a paw over his, squeezing gently. "Good morning, Hon," she murmured.

"Mrrr...pancakes weeth cheese and duck," he muttered and opened his eyes halfway.

Jean started giggling. "That wasn't exactly the answer I'd expected."

"Huh? Ohh...hey, chica. Deed you sleep well?" Esteban asked, softly, nuzzling her neck with his nose.

"I slept like a rock," she said and turned around, looking at the wolf. "I hate having to get up. But...I've got a lecture and it's not even at campus today. Gabrielle is going to drop me off."

Esteban nodded. "I understand. No problemo. Where ees our favoreete bronco aneeway?"

"I think she slept on the couch. I heard her come home and I noticed she checked the bedroom. She was smiling when she walked back out so...I don't think there's going to be any problem," Jean said and brushed her fingertips through Esteban's mane.

"Phew...she said what she'd be doeeng eef the bed had been slept een when she came home," he said and looked relieved.

"She's like that. She jokes around with that sort of thing, you know that."

"Si, I know...but I'd steell hate to get on her wrong side for real, chica," he chuckled and kissed her lightly.

"I could get used to waking up like this," she murmured blissfully and got up.

Esteban modestly looked away. She noticed and tilted her head to the side.

"Esteban...you don't need to do that. You've been holding me all night. It's all right," she said and reached over, turning his face towards her.

"I just deedn't want to make you feel bad. I know how you feel about aneone catcheeng a gleempse of you naked," he said, smiling apologetically.

Jean felt warm inside. Not many furs would be so considerate and she knew it. She stroked his cheek and felt herself blush just a little.

"I'm wearing a t-shirt at least, dear. I'm not actually naked," she said.

"I know. But steell...I deedn't want to reesk makeeng you uncomfortable."

She took his paws in her own and started tugging on him. "Come with me?"

He got up and stretched, yawning. He scratched his mane and smiled at the vixen again, sleepily. "Where are we goeeng?" he asked.

She gently kept pulling, without another word, through the living room where Gabrielle was indeed still asleep on the couch, until they were in the bathroom. Then she turned around and looked at him. "Here," she just said and got the water running.

Esteban blinked. "Are you sure of thees?" he asked, quietly.

"I've never been more sure," she said and slipped the T-shirt off over her head.

Esteban smiled and nodded, getting out of his boxers as well. He didn't say a word, just put his arms around the vixen again and kissing her hair.

Jean smiled a little and looked up at the wolf. Then she took his paws again and pulled him into the shower.

The hot water washed away what few doubts there might have been.

###

Miranda knocked at the door to her captain's office. The gruff voice of the rhino told her to enter and she pressed the door open, peeking in.

"Captain, I have some news," she said.

"Then let me hear it, Sergeant. I could use some good news," Captain Archibald replied. His sleeves were rolled up and his shirt had its top button undone. He looked extremely weary, Miranda noticed.

"What's wrong, Captain?"

"I've had some very influential furs on the phone all morning, Sergeant. It seems that your little request for information on ArseNick from the Denver PD didn't sit too well with some of them."

Miranda winced. "I'm sorry Sir. What do you want me to do?"

"That depends *entirely* on what news you have for me, Sergeant!" the Rhino said, flatly.

Miranda nodded and sighed. "I'm afraid the news isn't good. I've manage to track ArseNick. He's in the Cayfur Islands. We have no extradition agreement with them. He got away, Sir."

The enormous fist of Captain Archibald slammed into the table so hard papers and coffee-mugs flew everywhere. He looked so upset that Miranda felt moved to sympathy.

"It's just what we needed. I've been told that unless I nail this case, Miranda, I'm going to be in a *lot* of trouble. You've set a ball in motion that can't be stopped. Either we win this one or you and I will be looking at a lot of very, very angry furs with a lot of power."

The squirrel swallowed hard. "Captain...I'm so sorry. I had no idea this'd be the result. You're a great cop...I'd *never* do anything that I knew would jeopardize your position."

"I know Sergeant. I know. I'm not blaming you. You did your job and you've done so very, very well."

"How serious is it?" Miranda found herself asking.

"Sergeant...let me put this in as modest terms as I can. If we don't get ArseNick and get him to talk, we might very well be sleeping with the fishes soon. And we're in Ohio. There aren't that many fish around," the rhino said, wearily.

Miranda nodded and set her jaw. "Sir, I have three weeks vacation coming up. I'd like to request taking them *now*. As of this moment."

Captain Archibald looked at her for a long moment. "Is this a sick joke, Sergeant?" he asked.

"No Sir. I'm deadly serious. I hear the Cayfur Islands are nice this time of year, *Sir*."

The rhinoceros smiled and looked at the sergeant over the tip of his horn, putting elbows on the table, and his fingertips together. "I don't know what you're going to do, Sergeant. You hear me? I can't jeopardize the whole precinct over this."

"I understand Sir. Just tell Peter the truth. If I tell him, he'll try to stop me and he'll succeed," Miranda said.

"You have two weeks, Sergeant. That's all I can give you. More than that and it'll be too late anyway. I'll make sure there are tickets waiting for you in Cincinnati."

The squirrel nodded. "Yessir. I'll get going right away," she said and turned around to leave.

"Sergeant!"

"Yessir?"

"Be careful. I don't want to lose you. You're a damned fine officer, Lieutenant Spermophilus," the rhino said.

"Erhh...Lieutenant, Sir?"

"Cat Galveston is retiring."

"I know he is, but I'm not up for promotion yet. What about the review board?"

"PISS on the review board, Miranda!! I'll SIT on them until they promote you if I have to. Now get a move on. The clock is ticking already," Captain Archibald snapped.

Miranda saluted and hurried out.

###

Gabrielle looked at the clock on the dashboard of her car. It said eleven forty seven AM, and she was only a minute away from the studio. She had dropped off Jean where she needed to go and had returned to Columbus. It had been an hour and a half since she left home. Esteban had to be at the studio earlier so they had dropped him off on the way. Neither of the canids had said anything, but they'd kept looking at each other all the way, holding paws and occasionally stealing a kiss on the back seat.

She felt she'd been sitting on needles all morning. She had no idea what had happened before she woke up, but she wanted to know.

She parked her car and got out, closing the door. Then she noticed the Humvee taking up two parking spaces a bit further down the line. She hadn't seen that one before and she wondered who it belonged to as she went inside.

Sabrina was in, and Gabrielle smiled to the skunk. "Hey, is the boss in yet?"

"Yeah she's in there but she's got some guests."

"Oh, who?"

"Dunno really. Never seen them before. A tall, white tiger and a shorter cat of some kind," the skunk said.

"Well, let's hope it's just the army placing a big order for next year's shipment of tapes," Gabrielle said with a wide grin.

"Army?"

"There's a Humvee parked outside, and it's got military registration plates," Gabrielle explained.

"I'm pretty sure I don't want to dig deeper in that," Sabrina said, shivering. "Anyway...they've been in there for some time. I don't think it'll be too long before you can go in."

"I think I just heard the door. Talk to you later," the bronco said and waved, heading towards Zig Zag's office.

She nearly bumped into a tall, white tiger in his forties, and a short, younger feline on the way.

"Excuse me, ma'am," the tiger said, politely, tipping an imaginary hat. "Didn't mean to barge into you like that."

Gabrielle smiled. "It's all right, Sir. No problem, I could've watched where I was going," she said.

She noticed the cat was being quiet. His eyes were rather large, but she put that down to his particular species.

The tiger continued down the hall, and the cat followed him, close behind. Gabrielle noticed the cat's tail tip was swinging nervously. Then she headed into Zig Zag's office and closed the door.

"Nice timing, Gabby," the skunk said from behind her desk and smiled.

"No problem boss. Who were those two furs that just left your office?"

"The tiger is my second cousin, Alex O'Whitt. He used to be a lieutenant colonel in the airforce. One of the few members of my family who hasn't disowned me. He's retired from active duty now, but he's doing one of his old friends a favor and bringing the other

one down to Cincinnati for some reason. I think he's a cadet. His last name is Dagaz. I didn't catch his first name, anyway."

"I see. Your second cousin? Hubba hubba..." Gabrielle said and grinned widely.

Zig Zag raised an eyebrow and chuckled. "He's in his forties, Gabrielle."

"As I said...hubba hubba!"

"He's family, Gabby, I don't really *look* at that sort of thing, you know?" Zig Zag said but she couldn't keep a smile off her face.

"He's still hubba hubba. Take my word for it, boss," Gabrielle said, smiling widely.

"One more hubba out of you, filly, and I'll have to smack you," the skunk giggled.

"Ohh...okay. Well...erhm...yumm?" Gabrielle tried, doing her best to look perfectly innocent.

Zig Zag facepawed. "Enough already," she said and broke down giggling. "He's a good looking tiger, definitely. Now, can we get serious about work for a moment? I have the manuscript. Anna sent it this morning and we need to go over the sets in a hurry so Marvin can bring a copy of this to the right furs."

"Of course boss," Gabby said and sat down, adding a 'Yumm!', just for effect, ducking as a roll of tape came flying at her head, accompanied by a loud laugh from her employer.

###

Alex O'Whitt straightened his polo-shirt as he stepped outside. Behind him, Cadet Aramis Dagaz was swallowing heavily.

"Sir, did you see that bronco?" the young cat asked.

"I did, Cadet. What of her?" the tiger responded.

"Did you notice..." Cadet Dagaz said and swallowed nervously "...her skirt?"

"I am not in the habit of looking at the skirts of young femmes, Cadet!" Alex said brusquely.

"But Sir..."

"Yes, what?"

"It was really short, Sir. I mean...*really*, *REALLY* short. And she had very...shapely legs, too," Aramis said, looking helpless.

"Is that really any concern of yours, Cadet?" Alex asked, calmly.

"Not really Sir, but...but..."

"What is it?"

"Sir...I'm eighteen years old, all right?" the cat said, looking like he *badly* wanted a cold shower.

Alex felt a dime drop, mentally. He felt sorry for the young fur. He pushed out his chest and set his jaw. "ATTEEEEN-SHUN!" he roared.

Cadet Dagaz snapped to a stiff and very proper attention immediately.

"YOU are a Cadet in the United States Air Force. I expect you to behave with all the decorum and modesty that comes with that. You WILL control any such urges. You WILL think of engine schematics, if you need to take your mind out of the gutter. You WILL remember to treat ladies with respect and courtesy. You will NOT have unseemly thoughts about any femme you come across. You WILL behave like a GENTLEFUR, Cadet Dagaz!" Alex snapped. Deep down he felt bad enough for the young feline. Aramis was catholic and he was clearly having some problems with the direction his thoughts had wandered in. It practically oozed out of him.

Aramis looked relieved, "YES SIR!" he responded, loud and clear. The telling-to had snapped him out of his misery.

"Very well. At ease, Cadet," Alex said, his voice growing more friendly.

"Thank you Sir," Aramis said and relaxed again. "I definitely needed that."

"It's all right, Cadet. We all need a good dressing-down sometimes," Alex said and turned towards the Humvee to hide the grin on his face.

Aramis mewed pathetically and went right back to looking miserable.

###

The door closed behind Roxanne as she entered her husband's office. Theodore was sitting behind the desk, looking stressed but calm. The top button of his shirt was open,

he wasn't wearing a tie and his sleeves were rolled up. Papers were stacked around him and he'd had an extra phone moved into the room.

"Theodore, you need to eat. You're not going to be able to win a war on an empty stomach," she said, quietly.

Theodore looked up. For a moment it seemed he would snap at her, but instead he shook his head. "I know. But until I hear back from Hammond and Wheeler I can't leave."

"Then I'll have something brought for us. I'll keep you company. Don't worry, I'll be quiet if you want me to," she said.

Theodore nodded. "Very well. Food in here for once. Don't worry about keeping quiet. Your advice is usually sound."

Roxanne nodded and sat down. She had already arranged with Darlington to bring the food in unless she gave other instructions. She reached over and brushed a lock of hair out of Theodore's face. "You're going to win, Theodore. They are no match for you."

"I know," he said. Then he sighed. Roxanne couldn't remember the last time she'd heard that.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No. I'm just thinking that one misfortune never comes alone. First Gabrielle is being obstinate, then Watson fails me, my board of directors is being bought off by my enemies and now the Yakuza are attacking. Mr. Ursus at least reported favorably. But we're in for a long haul, Roxanne. They're not going to probe and fade into the background this time."

"Have you considered moving to safety?" Roxanne asked. "There is always that option. You can direct this war from a distance too."

"No! I must make a stand here. Here, I will face the enemy, or here I will go under. I will not consider leaving at this time," Theodore said and clenched his fist, tightly.

Roxanne smiled. "And they think they can defeat that sort of dedication?"

"You should get away from here, though. I will arrange for you to go south, to safety," Theodore said, smiling a little.

"No, you know I won't do that. I'm not leaving you. I'm staying here. With you," Roxanne said, softly.

Theodore smiled and leaned back. "Thank you," he said, quietly.

Darlington pushed the door open and entered. He was carrying a tray with a light supper arrangement for two, which he put down and left again, just as unassumingly as he had entered.

Roxanne got up and poured a glass of wine for herself and another for Theodore, bringing it over to him.

"To victory," she said and clinked the glass against his.

"Indeed. To victory," Theodore replied and smiled. "The Yakuza made a mistake. They took all the small fish on my board. I can replace those. But Wheeler, Hammond and Ursus are the backbone of my whole organization."

"I know. And soon, you'll see your daughter married off to a suitable stallion, and you will have heirs aplenty, my dear. I'm not even worried," Roxanne said and sat back down.

Theodore sipped his wine. He wanted to say he wasn't either. But a voice deep at the back of his mind was telling him that the one single wild card in the whole equation was his daughter. He'd feel safe when she was in Denver. Not a moment sooner.

###

Miranda had checked in her luggage. She hadn't packed much. She'd hurried as much as she possibly could, and she was running late for the flight anyway. She was legging it, as fast as she could, through the departure-terminal.

A voice came out over the loudspeakers.

"Final call to Flight number 534 to the Cayfur Islands, departing from gate three," it said.

Miranda hissed between her teeth. "How do they sound so cheerful while saying that?" she growled and ducked around a group of tourists. She could see the gate up ahead. She waved her boarding pass around and sped up just a little more. The gate was closing.

"WAIT..." she shouted, and tossed the boarding pass to the flight attendant, letting herself glide under the closing gate.

She got to her feet and bolted down the tube towards the Airplane. She could see they hadn't closed the door yet. She waved to the fur holding the door, wheezing for breath.

The purser held the door for her as she jumped in. She tried to catch her breath, resting her paws on her knees. "Thank you. I was afraid I'd miss the flight," she wheezed.

"No problem, Ma'am," the purser said with a friendly smile. "Please, you need to get to your seat. We'll be taxiing for takeoff in a moment."

Miranda nodded and gasped for air another few times before moving down the length of the plane to find her seat. She let herself fall into it, next to a young lion. He turned and grinned toothily at her.

"Close one, eh?" he rumbled in a deep bass voice.

Miranda chuckled and nodded. "Yeah. And believe me, this is one flight I can't afford to miss."

"Oh? That sounds serious. Going to the islands to do some business?" the lion asked, extending a paw. "I'm Leo, nice to meet you."

Miranda shook it and smiled. "Miranda. And yeah, I'm going on business. You?"

"Oh, I'm just going to have some fun. Lounging on a beach with a really tall drink with a paper umbrella in it, and surrounded by beautiful furs. Perhaps some surfing," Leo answered.

"Sounds nice. Well, I wish I'd have time for that kind of thing."

"Well, hang out with me and you just might," the lion chuckled.

"Nahhh...can't do that. I'll be pretty busy. Besides..." Miranda said and tapped a finger against her wedding band "...I'm spoken for."

"Hey, can't blame a lion for trying. Take it as a compliment, it's meant as one," Leo said and leaned back in his seat.

Miranda chuckled and fastened her seat belt as the light came on, telling everyone to do so.

The voice of the pilot was heard over the intercom. Miranda noticed it was female.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlefurs. My name is Captain Vivian Fox. I will be the pilot of this flight, number 534 from Cincinnati to George Town. The flight time is

scheduled for two hours and thirty minutes, and we'll be flying at twenty two thousand feet. The weather in George Town is presently sunny, with temperatures of 95 degrees. I ask everyone to please pay attention to the sign, asking you to fasten your seatbelts and to please familiarize yourselves with the emergency instructions in the holder in front of you. On behalf of the crew, I wish you all a pleasant flight."

The squirrel smiled and closed her eyes. ArseNick awaited.