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LXI - Quoth the raven ... Evermore

Esteban woke up. He tried to stretch, but he felt stiff. He'd have to soak in the bathtub for a whole hour before he'd be able to move his limbs properly again, he thought. That was okay. He felt like inviting a certain vixen to join him in the tub, but that was probably pushing her limits a little too far, still.

He rolled over on the side and, with great difficulty and considerable pains, swung his legs over the side of the bed, sitting up. Rafe was a better stage fighter than he. No wonder he could count his muscles by counting the aches. He rubbed his neck and scratched his mane, getting up.

He looked across the living room. The door to Rafe's room was still closed. He felt pretty sure the bigger wolf had brought a femme with him last night when he came back to the room.

Esteban chuckled. Those days were definitely over for him, and quite frankly, he didn't miss them. He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around himself, heading into the bathroom to hopefully reconnect with his muscles. It'd be a long day today as well.

The water washed away the last of the fuss left over on his brain. This was certainly a different kind of convention, compared to what he'd attended before. The aches and pains started to fade as well. Somewhere in the living room, someone was moving around. Esteban smiled and realized Rafe had gotten up as well. He'd better hurry so the other wolf could get to the bathroom.

Turning off the water, he stepped out and wringed his mane. Then he flicked on the fur dryer, and enjoyed the sensation of warm air blowing over him, ruffling him. He'd probably end up looking like a French poodle, he realized. At least until he brushed the mane back down.

He allowed himself a few minutes longer than was strictly necessary, enjoying the sensation of drying up fast. Then he wrapped the towel around himself again and headed back into the living room. Rafe was up. He looked like he needed another two hours of sleep, but at least he was ambulatory.

"So, how deed last night go?" Esteban asked, grinning widely.

"Ow," was the only answer.

"Ow?"

"Yeah...have you ever brought home a femme...this really beautiful little number, after spending hours flattering her on her looks...and then you realize that her idea of a good time involves spurs and a bullwhip?" Rafe said, looking miserable.

Esteban shook his head. "I can't say I have tried *that*, no. Not off screen aneeway. I deedn't hear any noises from your room though..."

"Then you must've been comatose, Esteban. Ye gods...ow ow ow..."

The maned wolf tried to keep a straight and sympathetic face. His friend really looked like he was in some amount of pain. "Why deedn't you tell her you weren't een the mood for that?" he asked.

"Who said I wasn't?" Rafe asked, innocently.

"Then you made your own bed, compadre. Lay een eet," Esteban grinned. "Go take a bath and loosen up some, at least."

Rafe nodded pathetically and headed into the bathroom at a shuffling pace.

Esteban went to get dressed.

###

Zig Zag was sitting at a table in the restaurant, having some breakfast. She looked at the plate in front of her, and then to the table next to her. An obese feline was stuffing food in his mouth so fast it nearly nauseated the skunk.

She shuddered and tried to concentrate on her own meal. It wasn't easy. The sounds from the table beside her were quite penetrating. She sighed and felt close to giving up on breakfast at all. She put her face in her paws. Deep down, something told her this was going to be one of *those* days.

Someone sat down opposite from her and she looked up to see Marvin. The badger looked well rested. He was wearing a muscle shirt with the company logo on. Rhonda would have been all over him if she'd been there, Zig Zag realized.

"Good morning, Zig..." the badger started.

"No it isn't..." Zig Zag answered and shook her head.

Marvin blinked and tilted his head to the side. "What's wrong with you, my friend? You look miserable."

"A bad night and frankly I'm losing my appetite because of that feline next to us..." Zig Zag said, lowering her voice and leaning over the table.

Marvin looked. His face twisted for a moment in revulsion and he nodded. "I see what you mean."

"I mean...what happened to table manners?" Zig Zag said and shrugged. "And having to face down the protesters too, going to the convention hall this morning really isn't my idea of a good morning, you know. We can't expect Gabrielle to come up with a stunt like she did yesterday one more time."

"...even though that'll keep me laughing until Christmas," Marvin chuckled. "That femme has absolutely zilch inhibitions."

"Valuable trait in her line of work," Zig Zag said with a smug look on her face, "I just can't stomach another brush with religious zealots right now."

Marvin sighed, deeply. Zig Zag realized he looked dejected.

"I know what you mean..." he said. "I consider myself a reasonably good Christian. I go to church...even if it's not all that often, I believe in God, and I take the bible seriously

in as far as it's a valuable book for lessons in ethics and morals, even if some passages are rather outdated. But I don't go around slamming it into other furs' faces like that. I think they misunderstood something quite essential."

"I never realized you were a believer, Marvin? How long have I known you for now...?"

"Years, Zig. And no, you probably didn't. Because I don't go around flaunting it all the time. Those furs in the picket line over there...they really haven't understood the basic principle," the badger said with a shrug.

"I think you're probably right. I did notice that you knew what that Bible passage was about immediately. I *had* been meaning to ask..." Zig Zag said and sipped her coffee.

"Now you know. It's always been one of my favourite passages. The big issue, to me, is that the crowd Christ addressed, had the courtesy to sneak off after he said that. The ones out there? They just shouted even louder when Gabrielle pointed it out."

"I think that was because of her second stunt."

Marvin nodded and poured himself a cup of tea. "I miss my mug...these coffee cups barely hold a gulp," he muttered.

"That's because you've got a big mouth, my friend," Zig Zag said and grinned.

"HEY!"

Zig Zag just looked innocent and went back to eating.

###

The fur looked at the clock. Second day of the convention. Today...he'd get it done. He'd find her. There was no doubt about it. The first day had been too stressed. Too many furs who were there for the opening. It'd probably be the same on the final day where all those who wanted to go but hadn't gotten around to it yet, realized it was their last chance.

Today or tomorrow were his only chances. And he wasn't going to wait until tomorrow. He'd find a way to get to her today.

Then things would be as they should. He'd waited long enough for it. He looked at the photograph in his paw again and smiled. He'd recognize her anywhere, of course. This picture was an older one, anyway.

He ran a paw through his hair and looked up at the entrance to the convention center. Apart from the protesters, things looked quiet enough. Not nearly the same rush as they day before.

Good, he told himself. That was a good thing.

He adjusted his shirt and stepped through the doors.

###

Miriam looked sidelong at Emma. Again and again, the mink had surprised her the day before, and it just continued. Emma was a little bright ray of helpfulness and smiles. She'd even gotten out of her usual baggy shirts and put on one of the ZZ-studios tank tops.

The vixen smiled. It was nice to see her friend being more of an extrovert for a change. Then she looked back to the fur coming up to her at the stall.

"Yes sir? How may I help you?" she asked.

"I'm just wondering when I might see Zig Zag here...I'm hoping to get her autograph," the fur said and smiled politely.

"She's very busy while we're here but I know she takes time to sign autographs. If you see her around the place, by all means ask. She does take time to sit down and sign for a whole line occasionally."

"Well, if she's that busy I might as well not add to the queue," the fur said and smiled politely. "I'll see if I can't find her somewhere. What's she doing right now?"

"Right now?" Miriam asked and looked in a timetable. "Right now she's at a business meeting. She should be out in...ten minutes time. It's over there. You might catch her as she comes out?"

"Thank you, Miss...I'll definitely wait there," the fur said and tipped an imaginary hat, heading off.

Miriam smiled. "What a polite gentlefur," she told herself and looked over at Emma again. The mink was flicking through a catalogue with a customer, looking for something.

Wanda opened the covers and stepped into the booth. She was in full costume again. "Hey there. How's work going today?" she asked Miriam.

"Very well. A lot less stressed than yesterday. I guess the big push is on the first day..."

"And on the last. You'd best be prepared for it. It's worse on the last day. But at least you've gotten used to what it's all about then. Are you enjoying yourself here, anyway?"

"Very much," Miriam said and smiled. "It's a lot of fun. Very nice furs, in fact. I just helped a gentlefur who wanted to see if he couldn't get Zig Zag's autograph. She hasn't acted for a while and she's still a big hit."

"There is only one Zig Zag, Miriam..." Wanda said with a smile. "She's unique."

"I agree. I mean...when Jean came to me and said she was doing that rewrite, I nearly had to pick up my jaw from the floor. I had all kinds of preconceived ideas about how you all were. But you're all really nice furs. I guess what Jean told me while I helped her find the right books and so on in the library took the worst of my nervousness out of me."

"You helped her?" Wanda asked. "Have you told Zig Zag that?"

"No, no...not like that. You see, I'm not a Roman specialist. She *loves* antiquity...while my interests lay in a different area. But it was while her arm was broken, you see. And she couldn't lift the map-books and so on. I just helped carry them to the table and look up certain things."

"Still, Miriam...if you don't mind, I'll make sure Zig Zag knows this. I don't think Jean meant to omit your help in any way, don't get me wrong...but if you helped, you helped and I know Zig Zag feels awful if she can't at least say properly thank you."

"Well...if you really think so..." Miriam said with a little smile.

"I do. Now...have you seen Gabrielle yet?"

"If I have seen her? God...Wanda...that femme is like a fish in water here. Do you have any IDEA how many furs ask for her?"

"I can guess..." Wanda grinned. "It's the attitude. She comes across forcefully, but in a good way. And in this job, it's a definite bonus. We all have our fans, believe me. I've signed at least fifty T-shirts yesterday, and about as many anatomical parts. So did Esteban and Rafe and all the others. But Gabby is...different. She's brash. She's "in your face" and furs notice that. Beside, she probably did the best possible self-promotion yesterday morning..."

Miriam giggled and nodded. "Agreed. If anyone here *hadn't* heard of Gabrielle Ryder, they definitely did after that."

"You bet. Oh...hey, look..." Wanda said and pointed to the gigantic screen on the wall.

Zig Zag's face came up on the screen. She smiled. It was a live broadcast, clearly.

"Hello there, ladies and gentlefurs of San Francisco!" she said.

The background noise of the convention center faded noticeably as everyone turned their attention to the screen.

"YESTERDAY, you had the opportunity to see some live acting from the upcoming movie, *Amat Victoria Curam*, on the various stages around the center..." Zig Zag continued. "Now...I want to treat you to something special. Would anyone here like to see the first trailer for the movie?"

The roar nearly took the dome off the centre.

Zig Zag laughed on screen and nodded. "I'll take that as a yes then..." she said and winked. "Then here you are. You're the first to see this...it hasn't been released anywhere yet."

The trailer started. Miriam had to admit it looked epic. The camera work was impressive too.

Wanda grinned widely. "The other companies here really...really... *really* hate us, you know..." she said.

"Why?" Miriam asked, nonplussed.

"Miriam, look at the screen. That's *class*. All they can show is sweat-movies. We're something else. And we're stealing all the attention. They might as well rename this convention 'ZZ Studios Annual Convention' and be done with it."

Miriam nodded and smiled. "I see what you mean. Zig Zag does love center stage too, doesn't she?"

"Don't tell anyone I said this, but I think that secretly, Zig Zag is slapping herself for not giving herself a part in this movie. Not one that includes any sweat scenes. That she's all done with. But I really think she'd have liked to be back in front of the camera for some of the more laudable scenes in this one."

"It's her movie, Wanda...she's doing a damned good job at it too. She'll get all the publicity she could want for, from this."

"I know...but it's still...ohhh...hey look at that..." Wanda said and pointed to the screen again. "Did Sabrina make that? On that little computer of hers? Nooo...must be some CGI company."

"Probably."

Another fur came to the desk and Miriam turned her attention back to that.

###

Zig Zag put down the microphone and smiled at the camera one last time. She flicked her hair back and turned towards Jean.

"That went well, I think," she said.

Jean winked and gave the skunk two thumbs up. "I think you just sold a few thousand copies..."

"Let's hope so. You're looking less stressed out than yesterday too. Getting used to the meetings?" Zig Zag asked.

"Yeah, it's not too bad. Mostly I just sit there and smile after all. The few questions I'm asked are easily answered. Nothing to worry about. And if it's something financial, I just say I don't know about that part and refer them to you."

"That's good," Zig Zag said with a smile. "Then you won't mind taking the next one on your own?"

Jean blinked and gawked. "Yo...whuh...ack..." she began.

"Don't worry. It's with a company called 'Van Arnhem prints'. They're going to mass produce the covers and the posters. Here...I wrote down some figures for you. If their offer exceeds this, say no. Try pushing them a little on the price. A dollar saved is a dollar earned after all. You'll do fine. And YOU are the one who knows what to PUT on the posters. Sabrina already made the basics, after all."

"ZIG...you're throwing me to the mob here!" Jean protested.

"Nonsense. You'll do great, my friend. I'm confident that you'll do very well indeed. Now...it's through that door in five minutes time and I really can't make it. I have somehow managed to double book, you see. Please? Do this for me?"

Jean sighed and sagged, but nodded. "I'll do my best."

"That's all I ask," Zig Zag said and patted the vixens cheek.

Jean nodded and headed to the meeting. Zig Zag turned around and left the room as well. She walked down the hallway towards the door to the main convention hall. She smiled. Things were going extremely well.

She opened the door and looked into the convention hall, before entering. She could see Gabrielle signing the back of a weasels T-shirt. And she could see Rafe and Esteban demonstrating stage fighting in slo-mo for a couple of young males, looking very interested.

Yes. Things were going well.

"Hello Tonya..." a voice said, beside her.

Zig Zag felt the blood in her veins curl up and freeze to ice. She knew that voice. She knew it only too well. She could hear footsteps. Thundering in her ears.

She turned her head and looked at the fur.

###

Gabrielle grinned and put a swirl under her name for the weasel, before giving him back his pen.

"There you go. Enjoy!" she said.

"THANK you, Miss Ryder. I've been hoping to get your autograph since yesterday," he said.

"Quite a few furs have told me that very thing..." the bronco said and winked.

She looked around and noticed Esteban and Rafe doing a sword-and-trident routine very slowly for a few interested viewers. This was probably not what normally took place at a *porn* convention...but then, Zig Zag had never been conventional, in the first place. She headed towards the two canids to get a closer look.

Rafe finished his move and smiled. "Hey Gabby. How's life treating you?"

"Quite well. The showing of the trailer really was a hit wasn't it?" Gabrielle said.

"Si. Eet was. Try lookeeng over there?" Esteban said and discreetly pointed.

Gabrielle looked in the direction Esteban wanted her to, and saw two stalls for other companies. There were furs there, but not as many as the throng cluttering up around ZZ Studios' stall and tables.

"We have the best boss in the business, guys...and if we ever needed proof of it...we have it right there. What say you we have a drink after hours today? I'd like to bring a toast to her, for one. I found my niche in life because she gave me a chance."

"I think that's a fine reason to have a drink," Rafe said and nodded. "Count me in. The hotel has a great bar...I saw it yesterday."

"I'd say you deed, amigo. You pecked up your femme there, I theenk."

Rafe looked panicky. "Don't mention her! I had JUST forgotten the ache..."

Esteban shook his head and chuckled.

"Where is Zig Zag anyway?" Gabrielle asked.

"She had a meeting to go to...with 'Van Arnhem prints'," Rafe said.

"No...no, no...she had a meeteeng, but eet was weeth 'Erotica Inc.', to get the order een for the next batch of lubreecants and such..."

"Two meetings at once? I know she's talented, but that's impossible even for Zig Zag..." Gabrielle said. "Let's see if we can't find out what's going on..."

The two others nodded and followed her towards the meeting rooms. It didn't take long to find a rather irate looking executive beaver standing in a doorway.

"You three!" he said and pointed to the group. "Can you tell your Boss she has five minutes to get here or I leave?"

"Sure, sir...we were trying to figure out where she was, ourselves. You're with...?"

"'Erotica Inc.', Darryl Oakdam," the beaver said, grumbling.

"I see. We'll figure it out. She's managed to double book her meetings. Do you know where 'Van Arnhem prints' have their meetings?" Rafe said, politely.

"Down the hall to the left. But I saw someone enter. It wasn't her. It was a gray vixen. But she was alone..." Darryl Oakdam said.

Gabrielle blinked. "Jean? At a business meeting? Alone? Damned...now I *have* seen everything. Pigs flying won't surprise me anymore."

"That's an insult to any swine pilots out there," Rafe pointed out.

"You know what I mean, Rafe..." Gabrielle chuckled. "Anyway...that means Zig Zag has actually missed a meeting. That makes *no* sense. She's very punctual and diligent about this kind of thing..."

"Si...I've never heard of thees happeneeng before. When was the meeteeng supposed to start, señor?" Esteban asked the beaver.

"Seven minutes ago..."

Gabrielle shook her head slowly and looked at the others. "Something's wrong..." she said. "If she sent Jean to that meeting alone, she did it because she wanted to **MAKE** this meeting herself. Sir, we'll figure this out. Please give us five minutes. If we can't find her, we'll send Marvin...he's the major-domo. He can complete the deal too."

Darryl Oakdam nodded. He looked slightly worried. Clearly the three furs in front of him were concerned.

Gabrielle looked at Rafe. "You run and find Marvin and bring him here immediately, Rafe...we can't let Mr. Oakdam wait any longer. Esteban, you come with me. We'll go and find Zig Zag."

"Gotcha..." Rafe said and bolted down the hallway, to find Marvin.

Esteban nodded too and headed off with Gabrielle. "What do you theenk has happened?"

"I don't know, Esteban but...I just have a bad feeling about this. Zig Zag is the kind of fur who goes to the lavatory ten minutes before a meeting to be sure she's there on time..."

"Lavatoree?"

"Toilet. Sorry. Damned my upbringing," Gabrielle said, keeping her eyes focused ahead of her. She was walking so fast Esteban had to break into a slow jog to keep up.

"We should spleet up out there, amiga. We'd search the place twice as fast."

"You're right. We'll divide it. The half to the left when we enter, I'll take. You go right. She isn't hard to spot with those stripes. Meet back here in fifteen minutes if we haven't found her. Then we'll get the others to help."

"Good idea," Esteban said and bit his lips. "You're really worried aren't you? I mean, she might just ... "

Gabrielle broke him off. "Esteban...she's my FRIEND. She's more than my boss, okay? Zig Zag is a friend. And for her to not be at a business meeting about something as vital in our business as *lubricant*...you don't seriously think she just forgot after sending Jean to another meeting by *herself*?"

"No. You're right. Okay. Here we go," Esteban said and turned right once back into the convention hall.

Gabrielle turned left and broke into a jog. She ducked left and right, around furs standing around. Occasionally she stopped to ask if anyone had seen Zig Zag but no one had.

Finally, she saw a known face. "ROWENA...Hey...over here. I need your help!" she called out.

The porcupine smiled widely and came over. "Hey there. Glad to help. What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Zig Zag's gone missing. We don't know where she is, and she was due at a meeting a while ago. She didn't show up. That's NOT like her. Have you seen her?"

"Actually...yeah. I saw her and another skunk. They were heading outside. She did look a bit beside herself. Is something wrong?"

"Tell me...quickly, how did this skunk look?" she asked.

"Well...he was in his mid fifties...wore fairly plain clothes. Now that you mention it...I think there was a slight resemblance except for the stripes. They had the same nose..."

Gabrielle felt icicles stab her spine. "You're *certain* of this?" she asked. "What way did they go? What exit?"

"The one right over there..." Rowena said. Gabrielle had already broken into a run. Not a jog this time, but a flat out sprint.

###

"Don't worry Tonya. I won't harm you. I love you. I'm your father, after all..." the fur said and looked at the stricken Zig Zag next to him. They were heading across the parking lot.

Zig Zag tried to answer. Her tongue wouldn't obey her. She wanted to extend her claws and rip him to shreds. But something stopped her. In her mind, she was just twelve years old again. It was night-time. And she could hear footsteps by her door. Terror was gripping her.

"Speak to me!" her father said. "Say something. We have been apart for too long. Don't look so sad. You should be happy. Finally, things will be the way they're meant to be again."

"They..." Zig Zag began, but her voice faltered again and she couldn't finish her sentence.

"Yes?"

"You..."

"Go on?" her father said.

"I don't want...to go with you..." she finally managed to get out. "Let me go."

"Now, now...don't be silly. Of course you're going with me. Things will be just like they were when you were a child. I love you, Tonya. Remember that..."

Zig Zag felt her world spinning. All her nightmares...all her fears...all her worst fantasies were coming to life. They'd never find her. She'd never get out of this. She couldn't fight it. She tried again to force herself to extend her claws. To fight *back*. To do SOMETHING. But she couldn't. She felt like her knees were filled with jelly. There were so many furs around. All she had to do was scream for help. But she couldn't. She couldn't do anything. She knew it, that instant...how helpless she was. How little it all mattered. Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

Someone was running. She could hear that. But the world was turning black around her. All she could hear was her fathers footsteps. His breathing. The smell of his breath filled her nostrils. Then she folded up and collapsed on the ground in a heap.

Her father bent down to pick her up. He never made it. He was hit, full force, by a fully armored bronco, hammering him up against the side of the van next to him.

"You miserable *shit*..." the equine fury snarled at him. "What the FUCK are you doing here?"

He tried to answer. He realized his feet weren't touching the ground and he couldn't speak for the paw around his throat. He tried to signal he couldn't breathe. The vision of the enraged equine in front of him was scaring him. He hadn't seen that kind of hatred in many years.

"I don't give a flying fuck if you can't breathe. If I strangle you, I'd do the world a favour, you abusive *bastard*!" Gabrielle growled. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't test the point of this sword on your genitalia. JUST ONE GOOD REASON!!!"

"She's my daughter..." he managed to choke.

"She stopped being your daughter the first time you laid a paw on her, you sick sonuvaturd!" Gabrielle said and drew her sword with her free paw.

"Gabrielle...don't...don't..." Zig Zag's voice came from behind her. It was very weak...very scared. "Don't do this. If you do, you'll go to jail. Don't...please."

"I don't give a damned, Zig Zag. You saved my life. I'm not going to let this *creep* take you."

"He won't..." Zig Zag whispered. "He won't take me. Not now..."

"Oh you're right about *that*, Boss. I'll make damned sure he doesn't."

Zig Zag's father felt the paw around his throat tighten a little more. An unpleasantly pointy sensation in a very tender area told him where the sword was pointed.

"I don't want you to get in trouble, Gabrielle...please...give me the sword..." Zig Zag said, softly. Trying to stay on top of things.

Gabrielle slowly let go of the weapon, passing it into Zig Zag's paw.

"If you ever...and I mean EVER...show your face around her again, no amount of words will stop me..." Gabrielle growled.

"But I love her..."

Zig Zag's father never saw the fist coming. Gabrielle's paw curled into a tight ball and crashed into his face so hard three teeth rolled over his tongue.

"Don't *sully* your filthy mouth with that word again, you child-molesting piece of distended rectum! Now LEAVE. If we hear from you again, or if I see your sorry face again, I will make sure everyone in that convention center knows there's a paedophile around and WHO it is," she sneered. "And if I see you in the future, or hear you've been contacting Zig Zag...I swear, no amount of words will stop me from castrating you. MYSELF. With a pair of *dull scissors!*"

Zig Zag put a paw on Gabrielle's arm. "Let him down, Gabby. He's not worth spending several years in jail over. He doesn't exist anymore," she said, quietly.

Gabrielle looked at her employer and blinked. "Why are you protecting him...?" she asked.

"I'm not, Gabby. I'm protecting *you*. Come on...let him down and we'll go inside. I don't think he'll ever try contacting me again," Zig Zag said, still very quietly.

Gabrielle looked back to the mauled skunk and dropped him. "I'm sure you won't. Isn't that right? Now *piss* off before I forget that I don't want to go to jail over slime like you. Zig Zag's my friend. She's got a *lot* of friends. And each and every one of us will protect her from you...mark my words. Do not *ever* show your face within a hundred miles of her again. Ever."

She turned to leave. A voice behind her spoke up.

"You can't keep me from what's mine. I'll have her back. She's my daughter and I love her..."

Gabrielle's vision turned deep red. She stopped thinking rationally and she swung around. Her fist came out again, describing a beautiful, perfect arch. It hammered into the skunk so hard he was knocked off his feet and out of his senses. He ripped the side mirror off a car as he collapsed, nearly unconscious.

Gabrielle put a hoof on his throat. "Remember..." she hissed, "...that all I had to do was to step down, and your neck would've snapped. Next time you get a hard-on thinking about her, you *remember* my hoof on your throat, and you tell yourself it'll be *right* back there if you don't take a cold shower. *Immediately.*"

Then she turned around, put an arm around Zig Zag's shoulder, and led her friend back to the convention center.

###

"James Sheppard speaking..." James said into the receiver.

"James, it's Gabrielle. Please, take a seat. I have something to talk to you about," the voice said on the other end.

James took a deep breath. The equine sounded very serious and he could only think of one reason why she'd call. Something had happened to Zig Zag. He swallowed and tried to keep his voice steady. "I'm seated," he said. "What's happened?"

"I'm in San Francisco right now. In Zig Zag's hotel suite. If you get on a plane, how fast can you be here? She needs you. I mean she *needs* you, James..."

"Erhh...don't hold out on me like this, Gabrielle. What's going on?"

"Her father came to the convention today. If I hadn't been lucky that someone had seen her being led outside, I would never have found her in time. She was fine for about an hour afterwards but then the whole thing came back and hit her in the face. She's an absolute mess. Jean is here as well. So's most of the crew. We're thinking of packing up the whole convention thing and going home prematurely but Zig Zag won't hear of it. I don't know what to do except to call you. Can you possibly come? I know it's a lot to ask for you to fly from Ohio..." Gabrielle said.

"Her *father*...came *there*...to find her???" James said. His voice was filled with a mix of loathing, worry and anger.

"Yes. He won't be back. I knocked several of his teeth out. Zig Zag had to stop me from...from going to extremes..."

"How much do you know about her past, Gabby?" James asked.

"Not a lot. I guessed most of it after a conversation we had once, but I don't know any specifics. James, she needs you here. Please, can you pack for a day or two and come out here to be with her? Marvin has already told her he will take care of the rest of the meetings, no matter how hard she protests. But she is sitting in the living room right now. She goes from catatonic to crying her eyes out to incoherent and back again, constantly...."

"I'm not going to bother packing. I'm going to call a few furs on the way to the airport, but I'll be right there, I promise."

"Thank you. I'll try getting a hold of her cousin too. He's been a little hard to find. His company is closed for the day. It's good of you to come, James. Please hurry."

"No, thank *you* for calling me to let me know this, Gabrielle. I really, really appreciate it," James said.

They hung up. James got to his feet and looked for his car keys. He'd buy himself a clean shirt in San Francisco, and get some socks on the way as well. Right now, he just wanted to get out of the door. Zig Zag's father...the thought just kept pounding in his head. What if he'd been successful?

What would've happened to the femme he loved? He should've been there, he told himself.

He should have been there...