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LXII - Original sin

Rafe sat in the bar. He was nursing a drink and despite the obvious interest of quite a few femmes...and even a couple of males...he stuck to polite rejections. The frown on his face was so deep it made him look like a walking version of the Grand Canyon. That day had been hectic. Stressful even. Something awful had happened. But he wasn't exactly sure what it was. Clearly, Gabrielle knew. So did Marvin. But they weren't telling. Gabrielle had called Zig Zag's boyfriend, but she'd done so in another room and made sure the door was not only closed, but locked. Marvin had flatly refused to say what was going on. But Zig Zag had been a complete mess all evening.

It was very late now. Very. A little past midnight. Zig Zag was asleep...in her boyfriend's arms. Everyone else had gone to get a drink or get some sleep. He just felt like a very confused wolf.

Esteban and Tamara came up to him and took a seat on either side. Judging from the looks on their faces, they were just as confused, and just as worried for their boss.

"Hey..." Rafe tried, but the tone of his voice betrayed his concern.

"Hey Rafe. You look like you've got the same things on your mind as us..." Tamara said and flagged down the bartender.

"You bet!"

Esteban ran a paw through his mane. "You know what I am theenkeeng?" he said.

The two others looked at him and shook their heads.

"I am theenkeeng..." the wolf began, "...that we should count our blesseengs that eet was Gabbee who found her. Eef eet had been one of us...what would we have done? We don't know what ees goeeng on. Clearlee, Marveen and Gabbee has some eenformateeon we don't and we would've been useless."

Rafe sighed. "That very thought has been going around in my head like a kaht in a tumbler all evening, Esteban," he said, quietly.

Tamara got the bartenders attention and placed an order, then looked back to the others. "You know...we won't really get anywhere this way. I think what really matters is that we are all this strongly affected. Think about it. What does this say about our relationship with our employer?"

"Eet says that we all care very deeplee for her happeeness and we don't like to see her upset or hurt..." Esteban said, matter of factly, getting a drink as well.

Rafe nodded. "That's a given. Zig Zag has...literally saved a lot of us. Look at Darke? She lived in a back alley in a card board box before Zig Zag found her..."

"Look at me..." Esteban said with a shrug. "I'm Mexeeecan, my educateeon steenks, and I have no formal job traineeng. Now I have a job weeth the nicest skunk anee of us ees likely to ever meet...I have a wonderful girlfriend, and I have a life to leeve."

Tamara nodded. "You know something, guys? We are not going to get any wiser about what happened today, and I think the worst any of us can do is try to guess what it was. I think we should be happy that everything apparently worked out in the end, and then, I think we should all show Zig Zag how much she really means to us."

The two males looked at the rabbit, not sure what she meant.

"I have a few ideas. Let me give it all some more thought, and I'll talk to Wanda and Mia about this when we get back as well."

"Oh, it's a femme-thing," Rafe said, trying to understand.

"Not at all. I'll need you guys to help me as well. Everyone at the studio in fact. I'll let you know when I get it all fleshed out, alright?" Tamara said and sipped her drink again.

"That's a deal. Anything to make her feel better."

They all looked into their drinks and a sense of hope and relief seemed to wash over them. They were going to do something instead of just sitting with their paws in their laps.

###

Yohni sat on the bed, crosslegged. She looked both confused and tired. She'd been complaining about a headache, but that would pass, at least.

What wouldn't pass was her enormous sense of confusion. And Gabrielle wouldn't tell her what it was all about. The filly was clearly incredibly uncomfortable about the situation, and Yohni hated having put her girlfriend in that situation.

"It's okay, Gabby. You don't have to feel guilty. Believe me, I understand. If it is something Zig Zag doesn't want everyone to know about, then I am sorry for having asked in the first place."

Gabrielle nodded and sat down next to the mongoose. "I don't feel good about keeping secrets but...I know Zig Zag doesn't want anyone to know about all this. She just wants to put it behind her and move on."

"Then that's what we'll all help her do. You realize something, I hope?"

"What's that?" the bronco asked.

"This has made all of us realize that Zig Zag is not just a good employer. We all like her. We've all known for years that we like her. But I don't think anyone really thought of her as "a friend" until today. She's always been strong, and she's always kept her cards close to her body, metaphorically speaking. She doesn't let many furs into her confidence. I think it made some of us think she wasn't interested in being friends. But she doesn't do it to keep *us* at arms length, does she?" Yohni asked.

"No. She does it because she can't bear to talk about it. It's not about everyone else, or about trust. It's about her not being able to deal with all this herself."

Yohni nodded. "That's what I'm starting to understand. I'm not going to try guessing what happened today because it could've been half a million different things. But whatever it was, it upset her, and that upsets *me*. It upsets everyone that works for her. I just hope she realizes that whatever this was...it earned her many, many new *friends*."

"I think she does know, Yohni. I really do," Gabrielle said with a little smile.

Yohni nodded and laid back on the bed, pulling Gabrielle with her. She cuddled up and smiled happily in the bronco's arms. "I'm a happy femme, you know. I have a great job, a great boss, a great income, a great girlfriend, great friends...in fact, I think my whole life is great."

Gabrielle didn't answer her, she just kissed Yohni's hair and held her.

###

Zig Zag looked at James across the table. It was morning. Breakfast was going down unusually slowly. The coyote had a look of unbridled concern and worry on his face. The skunk had to admit she felt like something the kaht had dragged in. For the twentieth time in the last few minutes she rubbed her face and tried to clear her thoughts. She was happy that James was there. She hadn't expected him to be able to drop everything and rush to California to be with her like that. But she just couldn't get yesterday out of her head. At least not yet. It was too soon.

James reached over and took one of her paws. Just holding it, as if to tell her she wasn't alone. That he was there. It made her feel better, she had to admit that.

"Do you want to go back to the room, Zig?" he asked. "You know I'll do whatever you feel like today. And for as long as it takes for you to feel better."

Zig Zag nodded. "I know. You know it's...it's silly. He didn't get to do anything to me. Gabrielle reached us just as he was about to open the door to the van. She was a sight to see, I tell you. I've never seen anyone that angry before."

"I have. When you thought I was still married..." James said and shuddered. "I still remember your claws. Ouch."

Zig Zag winced. "I'm sorry James. I really am. Please, don't rip up on that story..."

"I didn't mean it that way. Don't apologize. I'm the one who should for mentioning it," James said and gave her paw a squeeze. "Come on. Let's go to the room again."

"Yeah...just for another hour or so. Marvin is dealing with all the official business today. I don't even have to be at the convention center."

James nodded and smiled warmly. "That's good. Then we'll spend as much time in the room as you'd like, and if you feel like going out later, I have an idea or two for where to take you."

"Oh? That does sound slightly intriguing..." Zig Zag said with a smile.

"Weeeell...we *are* in San Francisco. You don't really find better seafood restaurants on the west coast than here. And I know how much you like seafood," James said and winked.

"James Sheppard...have I told you lately that I love you?" Zig Zag said, relief in her voice.

"Frequently, but I never get tired of hearing it," James answered and got up, helping her to her feet.

"Good. There's no chance of me stopping, I assure you."

"Good. I love you too. And I think I owe Gabrielle a thank you when I see her next time," James said and kissed Zig Zag gently.

###

Rowena looked at the line in front of the table. She'd improvised a table next to the ZZ Studios booth, in order to sign up members for Gabrielle Ryder's new fan-club. None of the ZZ Studios furs had complained. In fact, they seemed to think it was an amusing way of doing it. Now, Rowena felt dwarfed. The queue of furs in front of her table stretched out quite a long way. At least the fanclub would be off to a good start, she thought. But it'd take forever and a day to get all of them signed up and some might get bored of waiting in the queue. She could of course settle for just getting their names and addresses, but she wanted to hear a bit about what ideas they had since it was a brand new thing. It'd take a while.

Well, she'd have to deal with it as it happened. She shook her head, making her spikes rattle a little, and started up. The two furs in the booth next to her, a red vixen and a mongoose, kept an interested eye on her.

Miriam looked at Yohni and chuckled. "I think she's in for more than she bargained for."

"I'd say so..." Yohni replied, smoothly. "I do think it's a nice thought though. Gabrielle deserves a fan-club."

"You're biased, Yohni. She's your girlfriend."

"True. But even if I try to put that aside, she's good on the screen and she has an attitude that many furs find attractive."

"I don't know her very well, but from what I do know, I think you're right. But I pity that porcupine. She's going to have a lot of work on her paws before she's done."

"Go and help her," Yohni said. "It's okay. I'll hold the fort at the booth for a bit and if one of the others drop by I'll ask them to stay here."

"Actually, I think it's better if you go and help her out," Miriam answered. "Gabby is *your* significant other, and you know more about her than I do as a result."

"Good thinking," the mongoose said and filled her coffee-mug. She filled a fresh mug as well and brought it over to the table where Rowena was sitting. Then she pulled up a chair and sat down to help.

Rowena looked grateful. Miriam noticed how she and Yohni exchanged a few words, before continuing. It did speed up the movement of the queue considerably that there were now two furs taking down names and information.

A young male raccoon came up to the booth and smiled at her, politely. "Hello Miss. Can I pre-order the new movie here?" he asked.

Miriam tore her attention from the fan-club table and nodded with a smile. "Certainly sir. I'll need your name and address though."

"Great!" the raccoon said. "George Fisher, seventeen Redwood Ave...that's in Boston."

Miriam blinked. "Boston? Daaamned, you've come a long way for this convention then."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"I'll make sure you get it, Mr. Fisher," Miriam smiled and nodded to the raccoon as he headed off.

A handsome young lion came up a moment later. Miriam couldn't help noticing that he was in fact very good looking. His mane was pulled back in a tight ponytail and he was a very snappy dresser. He didn't look like the kind of fur you'd expect to find at the convention. Except maybe in the meeting rooms. Looking over the convention hall, one

wouldn't see a great many Armani suits. Probably only the one currently on that particular lion.

He nodded, politely and smiled a dazzling smile. "Good morning, Miss. Can you tell me where I might find Gabrielle Ryder?"

Miriam shook her head with a chuckle. "If it's for the fanclub, the table next to this booth is taking down names for it," she said.

"Oh no...no it's not that. It's just that I'd very much like to talk to her about something. You see...not too long ago, I helped a very nice young police-officer with something concerning Miss Ryder. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Leo Leon."

"Pleased to meet you then, Mr. Leon. I'm Miriam Redtail. I believe Gabrielle is currently signing autographs on the other side of the convention hall with Esteban, Rafe and Wanda, but not for much longer. If you wait here, she'll be over in ten minutes time."

"Thank you. I very much appreciate it."

There were no more furs waiting for the moment so Miriam picked up a coffee-mug and looked at Leo. "Want a cup too?"

"Don't mind if I do, Miss Redtail. Thank you for offering."

"Call me Miriam, everyone else does."

"Fine, but only if you'll call me Leo."

Miriam nodded and gave Leo a mug. "So...tell me...you said you helped the police with something?"

"I did. It was in the Cayfur Islands. Apparently, Miss Ryder's parents were trying to blackmail her into returning home to an arranged marriage. It was a nasty story, really. I helped a policefur track down a hired killer, and we got information out of him that incriminated Gabrielle's parents, which she could then use against them. I still keep in touch with that policefur. Miranda Spermophilus...she's a lieutenant in Columbus."

"Ohhh...yeah, that whole story. Gabrielle got out of that beautifully. I'm sure she'd be very happy to meet you so she can thank you for your help. It's not often you see furs helping out total strangers. Especially not when it's potentially dangerous."

"What are hopelessly spoiled, rich kids going to do for fun if not something like that?" Leo said with another of those million-dollar smiles.

Miriam chuckled. "Don't ask me. I'm just a penniless student."

"Really? What are you majoring in?" Leo asked, with what seemed to be honest interest.

"History. Gabrielle's roomie is my best friend. That's why I'm here, you see..."

Leo looked crosseyed. "I don't think I follow."

"Well, Gabby's roomie, Jean LeBrun, is a history nerd the sort of which you'll probably only meet once in your lifetime. She's also an extremely nice femme and I'm glad I met her! But Zig Zag hired her to read over a script for a movie, and Jean found about two thousand faults in it. Zig Zag responded by asking her to rewrite the whole thing...and she did. So...Jean got involved with the studio as well, and when they went here, she asked that three of her friends...myself and two others...could come along. She'd feel safer. Zig Zag agreed, on the condition that we helped out in the booth and such."

"Ohh, I see. Well, that's rather convoluted. Are you enjoying it here then?"

"Very much so, actually. Ohh...there's one of the others. Lizzy, over here please. Come and meet Leo."

Lizzy smiled and came over. "I think the actors are happy to not be in full armor today..." she noted to Miriam. "Just this one day out of four."

"Yeah, they'll be fully armored tomorrow for the big finale, again," the vixen replied.

"Armored?? I thought it was a porn convention..." Leo said and blinked.

"The upcoming movie is set in Rome, and they're playing the parts of gladiators," Miriam explained.

Leo nodded in understanding. Lizzy picked up a mug and half filled it with coffee.

"We need to make more. That was the last of it. Where are the filters?" she asked.

"I'll do it," Miriam said. "I think we've run out. I'll go and get some. You two talk a bit."

The vixen left. Lizzy adjusted her T-shirt and smiled at the lion.

"Is there anything I can help you with, sir?"

"Call me Leo. It'd be unfair to ask your friend to do that and not you. And it's alright, I'm just waiting for Gabrielle Ryder. I want to meet the femme whom I helped save recently," Leo said with a crooked grin. He was looking at Lizzy's T-shirt with interest.

"You know, you don't have to stare that openly at my bosom," the doe grinned.

"I'm not. I'm staring at your T-shirt. You don't see many in the United States willing to flaunt those political sympathies that openly."

Lizzy looked down herself. The print showed the Soviet Union flag fluttering proudly in the wind, over a bunch of raised arms, holding tools. She shrugged. "I don't see anything wrong with being a communist. I do see something wrong with being a Stalinist, though. Big difference. Karl Marx would've hated the U.S.S.R., but I kinda like the look of their flag."

"Nice to see you know of it!" Leo said and grinned. "Communism is a nice thought but unachievable. So long as furs are greedy, someone will always want more than their neighbor."

"Precisely. But that doesn't mean it's not worth striving for," Lizzy said. The lion was fascinating. He knew a thing or two about politics.

"So, do you work for ZZ Studios too, Miss?"

"Call me Lizzy. I can't have you calling me Miss, if I have to call you Leo. And not usually. I just help out at the convention. But I take it as a compliment that you think I look good enough to work for them."

"Phew. Some would've taken that as an insult. I could've easily stuck a foot in my mouth there...gotta learn to be more careful," Leo said and shook his paw in front of himself.

Lizzy grinned. "Heh, you stand out a mile here. Who *are* you anyway? I mean, you're here to see Gabrielle, saying you helped save her...merely knowing about that story means I tend to believe you. And you look like something that just stepped out of a multimillion dollar company's boardroom. Tsk tsk tsk...capitalist," she teased.

"Guilty as charged. But the boardroom belongs to my father. Fortune 500 fur, the whole shebang...blah...send me to the land of Nod. But he does expect me to at least dress reasonably well, and I suppose if that buys me a little peace from him, then I will."

"Doesn't really answer who you are, though. Although it does place your FAMILY up there with the sort of furs I *should* vehemently dislike," Lizzy grinned.

Leo shook his head. He couldn't help chuckling. The doe had some self irony and he liked that. "Yeah...well, my name is Leo Leon, and my father owns half a dozen companies and is a major shareholder in a good few others. I'm the rebellious son, who thinks money is very nice when you have it but...well...suffice to say I've seen enough furs *without* any to know the flip side of the coin."

"Heh...seems we'll make a good little Red out of you yet," Lizzy snickered and winked.

"Nahh. I'm not that leftist, but I'm certainly not blind to the plights of others. So...who are you?"

"Lizzy Doe. Just a history-student. Not really anyone important, I guess," the doe said and wondered why. She was rarely that modest.

"Everyone's important, Lizzy. Everyone," Leo said with a smile.

"Damned, you should tell that to another friend of mine, Emma. She needs to hear it frequently," Lizzy said with a chuckle.

"Maybe I will. Ahh...there we have the much vaunted Miss Ryder, approaching now. So...shall we say seven o'clock at the hotel, Lizzy?"

"Duhhh..."

"Good then. I'll pick you up then. Considering I don't think you're the ball-gown type, I'll take us somewhere informal, hmm?" Leo said and smiled a toothy smile.

"Why do I have the feeling I've just been hunted down by some predator, and I'm currently in the process of being devoured?"

"Well, I *am* a lion..."

"Gahhh...okay, I walked into that one. Fine...seven. Jeez," Lizzy said. "I've never been courted like that before."

"Well...maybe it's time someone did!" Leo said and tipped an imaginary hat at the doe, before turning towards the approaching filly.

###

The meeting room felt stuffy. Jean had a clear idea in her mind that it wasn't normally stuffy, but that the occupants brought the stuffiness with them. Somehow, before all this began she'd had a mental image of the porn industry as being populated entirely by scantily clad, sex obsessed weirdo's with big hair and raging libido's. Well...Esteban had big hair but that was about it. And alright, a few of them were sex obsessed. But the top brass generally thought in terms of money. Bottom lines and fiscal outcomes.

The ones in this room were definitely all about fiscal outcomes. They looked like a group of undertakers. They were mostly old enough to NEED a group of undertakers, too.

Marvin looked just as blasted as she felt, she noted. The droning voice of the rabbit at the head of the table was enough to kill anyone with boredom.

She looked at the figures in front of her again. It made very little sense. Today's meetings had mostly been like that. Terribly, terribly boring. From the itinerary it didn't look like the last meeting would be any more interesting. She was pretty sure Zig Zag didn't really need her at THESE meetings. They had nothing to do with the movie. But she was not going to approach the skunk and ask her. Not with the condition she was in after whatever had happened the day before.

So she bit it down and endured. Went to the meetings and if nothing else, she told herself, she kept Marvin company. The poor badger looked like a fish out of water. He knew what he was doing, clearly, but this obviously wasn't his natural element.

The rabbit at the head of the table closed his briefcase and got up with a nod. Marvin did as well. They shook paws.

Jean sighed deeply and rubbed her muzzle. "I think we both need a cup of something hot to get over the last hour and a half, don't you, Marvin?"

The badger nodded. "Good Lord Almighty, I never knew it could be this dull to listen to presentations of new condom types. How Zig Zag does this time and time again is...well, let's just say it's a feat of strength that I don't think I'd be able to do."

"What'll you have?" Jean asked.

"Huh?"

"What'll you have? Coffee? Tea? Something else?"

"Ohh...oh, yeah, right. Sorry. For some reason my mind is circling around pink, nobbly woohoos and banana flavored dingdongs...that is just disturbing. Sorry, let's go get a cup of coffee...or whatever you'd like. Thank you for coming to these meetings. I know you must feel totally out of place."

"I do, but Zig Zag is my friend and she needs help. Of course I'm here," Jean said, smiling.

"I'm grateful for it. My brain would've melted and started seeping out of my ears if I hadn't had someone else here, I'm sure of it. How dull can you make condom presentations anyway???" Marvin whined.

"*That* dull, apparently."

Marvin nodded and got his jacket. "Just one more meeting to go today...just one."

Jean nodded and got up. "We'll get through it. What's the next one?"

Marvin sighed. "Public relations meeting with three European porn magazines."

"That doesn't sound *too* bad?"

"Jean...Europeans have a different attitude towards pornography than we do. They like...different things. Which is their choice, but just be prepared for a god-awful amount of really *stupid* questions, okay?"

"Really? I'd think procreation happened roughly the same way everywhere. Anyway, I'm sure they'll think our answers are just as stupid as we think their questions are," Jean said and shrugged.

"No doubt about it. Absolutely no doubt about it..."

###

"You have a WHAT??? With a WHO?? Who's a WHAT???" Emma said and blinked, looking at Lizzy.

"I have a date...with a lion...who's a millionaire," Lizzy said, patiently.

"Yeah...right...and I'm Phillinos..." the mink said and shook her head.

"Hello old-timer. I have a lot of questions about those Roman/Carthaginian treaties you wrote about," Lizzy said without losing a beat as she riffled through her meager

selection of clothing. She hadn't brought much, and certainly nothing meant for a date. "Damned, if I had known that I was going to be asked out, I'd have brought something a little more neutral."

"Lizzy...you don't *own* a neutral top. Your whole wardrobe is made up of political statements."

"Hey, I happen to be firm in my political beliefs," the doe said and winked.

"I noticed. Well, is he cute?"

"He's definitely a looker, that's for sure. He's also brash, and frankly I found that even more attractive."

"Goodness gracious...who'd have guessed. You falling for a capitalistic, bourgeois pig..."

"Lion. And that's a speciesist remark, Emma," Lizzy grinned.

"Come on...when have you ever met a pig that wasn't a pig?" Emma asked.

"I haven't. I guess it's just in their nature. But it's still speciesist. They've got a right to be pigs."

"I agree. They do. Sorry about that. But I do know that's an expression that was used rather often during the revolution in Russia...I *was* just trying to illustrate a point," the mink said with a shrug.

"True. Now...how about this?"

"That's good. It's only got that little 'Red Storm Rising' thing on the back...ALL OVER THE BACK..." Emma grinned. "But you're right, it's the best one you have for this purpose."

"Well, he did say he'd take me somewhere informal. I gotta be nuts. I'm going out with the king of predators, and I don't even know a thing about him."

"Ahh love at first sight," Emma snickered.

"I ought to smack you around with a pillow," Lizzy chuckled and picked up a skirt.

"I wonder if I'll ever find someone..." Emma said, suddenly a bit serious.

"Are you kidding? We've seen a side of you the last few days that none of us thought *existed*, Emma. You've been outgoing and friendly to everyone and frankly...if you were

to change your style just a little and get a new pair of glasses that don't look like hopscotch stones, you'd be quite good looking. You'll get plenty of chances."

"You think my glasses are too thick?" Emma asked.

"They are. Hey, what say you to this...when we get home, we'll take Jean and Miriam along and go on a shopping spree...and find you a few new things? You'll see I'm right."

"Hmm...maybe. We'll see, okay? I've got to think about that."

"That's a deal. Alright...I think I'm just about ready..."

"Lizzy?" Emma said with a wink.

"What?"

"Drop the beret."