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## "Is this justice?"

It was very early morning when Leo woke up to the sound of keys being inserted into the lock of his cell. He rubbed his eyes and got to his feet, just in time to see Captain Cervus enter. The lighting in the cell was subdued, but having just woken up, Leo still felt it sting his eyes. His first reaction was confusion, but then he remembered where he was. The captain looked like an Atlantic hurricane in full force. The guard was dismissed by a clipped order and the elk looked back at Leo, who saluted smartly.

"What is this all about, Lieutenant Leon?" Captain Cervus asked, anger in his voice.

Leo saw no point in lying. Instead, he straightened his back and looked straight ahead. "I've been arrested for insubordination, on Lieutenant Aureus' orders. I am therefore incarcerated while awaiting my court martial," he answered.

Captain Cervus narrowed his eyes a little and took what looked like four pieces of paper out from his back pocket, holding them up under Leo's nose. "Don't give me that official crap, Lieutenant! I came to work twenty minutes ago to find THIS piece of *garbage* on my desk. Four *fucking* pages of Lieutenant Aureus' heartfelt lamentations about your gross insubordination and his request that you be put before a court martial to be dismissed in dishonor and sent back to the United States. What the FUCK is this about, Lieutenant, and if you give me some smartarse reply again, I'll probably let the damned court martial take place!"

Leo nodded. At least now no one could fault him for having tried the proper approach. "I followed your order, Sir. That's all. I followed your order not to salute him."

That seemed to mollify the elk quite a bit, and he nodded, slowly. "I thought so. He doesn't say exactly what your insubordinate behavior was, but I could make a qualified guess. Very well, do you have witnesses who can corroborate this?"

"No, Sir...but neither has he. Oh wait...wait...the two MP's might have seen what happened as they approached. I don't think they heard anything, though."

"Give me the whole story, Lieutenant."

Again, Leo nodded. "I came across one of my soldiers in the mess hall, Sir. He was exhausted, to the point of barely being able to stay awake. Put it this way...he doesn't drink coffee...he detests the stuff...and he was on his fifth cup when I found him. He had to go on guard duty, but he had been up since six thirty and working non-stop. He's my medic,

Sir, so I figured it was better if I gave him the night off. I was going to take his watch myself..."

"How generous of you," Captain Cervus commented, dryly.

Leo chuckled and shook his head. "Not really, Sir. You see...my whole platoon was weary after a long day, and I figured it'd be stupid to risk the safety of the base by putting an exhausted fur on guard duty. I was still fresh so...I thought it was the prudent thing to do."

Captain Cervus thought about that for a while, before nodding. "That makes sense, Lieutenant. Continue, please."

"Well," the lion started "I didn't have all my gear with me in the mess hall obviously, so I was heading back to the barracks to get it, when I came across Lieutenant Aureus, who seemed to be going through some paperwork. I nodded, politely...since saluting was out of the question...and he immediately stopped me and demanded that I salute as he had instructed me to before."

Captain Cervus nodded. "You told him, of course, that I had given you expressed orders not to do so in a combat zone, Lieutenant?"

"I tried, Sir. He kept interrupting me and eventually shouted in my face that you would never give 'such a ridiculous order', I think was his exact choice of words."

"Oh, so I give ridiculous orders now, do I?"

Leo shrugged. "Not in my opinion, Sir," he said, truthfully. "Next thing I know, he had two MP's clap me in irons and take me here."

"Irons? Pawcuffs? Did you resist arrest in any way??" the elk asked, incredulously.

Leo couldn't help laughing. "No Sir. I specifically said I'd come peacefully. The MP's were quite surprised at...well, shall we just say Lieutenant Aureus was quite audible about his demand that I be cuffed."

Sighing, Captain Cervus looked at the cell again and shook his head. "Well, these are not quarters commensurate with your abilities, Lieutenant Leon. I refuse to endorse the request for a court martial, and I would like you to bring third platoon to the mess hall in one hour, precisely. I'll inform the rest of the company that they are expected to be there as well."

Leo nodded and saluted again. "Yes Sir!"

Captain Cervus turned around and left without another word. Leo picked up his jacket and slipped it on, before rubbing his face. One hour...that barely gave him enough time to get washed and to trim his sideburns before getting his troops together and to the mess. On the other paw, he didn't want to turn up for whatever was about to happen a stinking mess, just out of jail.

Nodding to the guard, he smiled a little. "Thanks for the lodgings tonight," he chuckled and left the building.

###

Miriam put her bags down and opened her arms, giving Lizzy a big hug. She was all smiles and fancy colored beads, much as Lizzy had expected. In the background, a small airplane took off. It was nearby though, and the roar drowned out the doe's words as she welcomed her friend back home. It was very early morning and the sun hadn't come up over the horizon yet, and there was a definite chill in the air. Lizzy could see her own breath turn into mist in front of her nose whenever she exhaled. Fortunately, she was wearing a warm coat and a scarf to keep her neck warm. It'd be winter soon. Real winter, probably with heavy snowdrifts and lots of hot chocolate and days spent indoors.

Now Fox and Miriam were back from their honeymoon and the unenviable task of telling them everything that had happened while they were gone had fallen to Lizzy. Jean was probably already on her way to an important meeting...at least that's what she had told the doe, and Emma was, for lack of a better word, indisposed. Lizzy wasn't quite sure how to broach the news to her friends.

"How are you, deer?" Fox asked and grinned, hugging Lizzy as well.

"Good grief, won't males EVER get tired of that joke?" Lizzy chuckled and hugged Fox back. "Would you have done the same thing if I'd been male, with huge antlers?"

Nodding, Fox smiled even wider. "Probably. It's too good a quip not to use. How are you, anyway?"

Lizzy smiled crookedly. "Ever the shrink, Fox...always asking how people are feeling. Anyway, I'm doing okay. I'm getting used to Leo being away. I'm back to living on my own...Emma found a place to live. And a job, too."

Still smiling, Miriam picked up her bags and made to get moving. "That's great news. Sounds like she's recovering too then."

Lizzy sighed and rubbed her neck. "Well...she was. But...you see, there's a reason she isn't here today too, to welcome you home. Late last night, she got admitted to Our Lady of Mercy. She was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and needed help...immediate help, friends. Jeremy's family is *still* after her."

The smiles on both Fox's and Miriam's faces vanished immediately. They walked in silence almost a hundred yards, before coming up on where the taxi's were waiting to take furs around Columbus. Finally, Fox stopped and put his bags down again. He looked distraught, more than anything else. Like he was trying to tell himself he couldn't have been there...

Lizzy caught on and reached out, giving her friend's arm a squeeze. "You couldn't have done anything. Miranda was there...you know? The cop we've met a few times at parties? She was there by pure chance, really. But Emma is in a bad state and needs help. I think if anyone can help her now, Fox, it's you. She trusts you and frankly, I doubt most of the males at the hospital are going to get anywhere near her."

"How about her job?" Miriam asked, quietly. "Are they willing to let her stay if this is a prolonged thing?"

Lizzy nodded and smiled a little. "I think that's the least of Emma's worries, to be honest."

Fox ran a paw over his hair and seemed to zone out for a moment. Whatever was going through his head, it was obvious that he needed a few moments to think.

"I'll go there directly. Miriam, can you take the luggage home?" he asked, at last.

Miriam shook her head. "Don't give me that. She's my friend and I'm coming too!"

"No you're not. If she's in this bad a state she needs professional help first and foremost. Please, love...let me do my job. I promise I'll call you and let you know if it's okay to come."

For a moment, Miriam thought about protesting. She wanted to go see Emma, and show support and that she cared...but at the same time she could hear the wisdom in Fox's words. Finally, she sighed and nodded. "Alright...as long as you promise that," she said. "I'll get a cab home."

Lizzy looked uncomfortable. "I didn't mean to ruin your homecoming, but...I thought you..."

"Don't even start!" Fox said and lifted a finger at the doe to shut her up "If we'd come home and you'd pretended everything was hunky-dory when Emma is in such a state, I'd have been gravely disappointed with you. You haven't ruined anything. Now, I'll go to the hospital and see to her. If you'd be so kind as to help Miriam home with all the luggage, I'll call as *soon* as I have news. Okay?"

Lizzy and Miriam nodded and picked up the suitcases. Fox bent down a little and kissed his wife, gently. Then they split up, Fox looking for a taxi to take him to the hospital, the femmes looked for one to take them back to Miriam's and Fox's home.

###

The whole platoon was gathered in the mess hall. So were the rest of the furs from Dog company. No one seemed to have the faintest idea what was going on. The only two furs who were absent were Lieutenant Aureus and Captain Cervus. Scratching his cheek one final time to make sure he'd trimmed his sideburns enough, Leo looked at his troops. Most of them were obviously confused. Sergeant Pardinus looked like he would very much like the explanation he'd been promised. It'd have to wait until this was all dealt with.

The door opened and the entire room snapped to attention as Captain Cervus entered. The elk looked at Leo and nodded approvingly, as if to say he was satisfied with the lion's appearance. Somehow, Leo felt like he'd passed a presidential inspection. The captain turned to look at the rest of the company, and every fur present saluted, smartly. Even Corporal Twain, Leo noticed, gave his best salute.

"At ease, troops," Captain Cervus said in a grave tone of voice. "I believe none of you are aware of the reason why you've all been gathered here at this hour. Allow me to explain."

Leo stood at ease and tried to relax. It wasn't easy. He knew that somehow, this was all linked to his arrest and while he was certain Captain Cervus was on his side, he wasn't sure what would happen now.

The elk stuck a paw in one pocket and rubbed the tip of his nose, thoughtfully, with the other. "I have been placed in an awkward situation, gentlefurs," he said, ponderously. "An unenviable position, in fact. Dog company has always performed well. However, one of your officers has failed to understand a basic principle of proper military behavior on several occasions, and it now falls upon me to shed light on the whole matter."

Leo couldn't help notice that Lieutenant Aureus, standing next to Captain Cervus, had a smug look on his face. A nagging doubt gnawed at Leo. While he wasn't going to face a court martial, who knew if Captain Cervus had decided to teach him a lesson in a less

severe way, anyway? He tried to force the thought from his mind. That wouldn't make any sense, given the things Captain Cervus had said to him so far.

The elk continued after another momentary pause. "I must repeat...and stress...that when you are in a combat zone, certain rules of conduct apply. One of these rules...one of the most important ones...is that no soldier will ever, under any circumstance *whatsoever*, salute a superior officer except indoors and then only in rooms with no windows, or with closed windows."

A general look of confusion appeared on many faces. This was basic knowledge. Why did the captain feel it was necessary to rehash these things? Leo tried to fight back a little smile. Lieutenant Aureus looked a lot less smug and a lot more uncomfortable, very suddenly.

"Lieutenant Aureus has, on several occasions, flaunted this general order by demanding that Lieutenant Leon salute him despite this area most certainly being a 'combat zone'. He has thereby endangered not only himself, but Lieutenant Leon as well," Captain Cervus continued, his voice growing firmer "Such behavior is naturally completely unacceptable in an officer. However, I would prefer to keep this mess within Dog company, without taking it to a court martial. As the rule is, that if an officer screws up, his entire unit takes the fall with him, I am hereby imposing midnight inspections on all of you for the next four days. Your platoon commanders will take inspection and I will expect complete reports on the results on my desk every morning at o-seven-hundred. I hope this punishment will teach Lieutenant Aureus the importance of not demanding salutes from his subordinates while in a contested area."

The growls were noticeable. Not many of the soldiers in the room even tried to hide their anger. Captain Cervus dismissed the company without further ado, and left the room. Lieutenant Aureus looked like someone had slapped him across the face.

"Great work, dickhead!" someone growled in the ranks. "Thanks for nothing!"

"Yeah, thanks to you we won't get enough sleep for four stinking days."

"Who the fuck do you think you are? The president? Demanding salutes in combat zones...*fuck you!*"

Leo stood back to attention and looked straight ahead. The mood was ugly and he had to put a stop to it before it got out of paw.

"THIRD PLATOON...ATTEEN...SHUN!"

The furs behind him came to attention immediately. There was still a bit of growling in the other units. As far as he could hear, none of it was directed at him. Lieutenant Aureus was trying to beat a retreat, only to realize that the door he had entered through was now locked. He had to pass between the angry furs in the room. The look of humiliation and barely contained fear on his face was unmistakable.

Leo didn't wait to see the jackal walking the gauntlet. He marched his furs out of the room and back to the day's work.

###

Jean was up and about early that morning. She'd been up and about earlier than she had wanted to, but it was impossible for her to sleep any longer. She had too much adrenalin going around her system. Too much anger.

She had managed to get out of bed without waking up Esteban, and after a quick breakfast consisting of a boiled egg and a couple of slices of toast, washed down with her usual three cups of tea, she'd left a note on the table for the wolf, saying that she had a lot of things to take care of, and that she wasn't quite sure when she'd be home. No doubt, Esteban wouldn't mind. She had told him a bit about her plans the night before.

As she walked down the streets of Columbus, paws in pockets and head tucked down between her shoulders to shield her against the early morning chill, she tried to keep her thoughts focused. She needed to talk to someone with contacts. The head of the media institute at the university was such a fur. She had to seem self confident about this, even though she kept reminding herself that this was a wild goose chase. If it didn't work, she'd have to come up with some other way of helping Emma, but this really was the best and most obvious way.

So what would she say? What would she do to win a willing audience for her cause? She honestly didn't have the answer for it. All she knew was that she had to strike while the iron was still red hot. While she could still count on the public remembering the case from the newspapers or radio broadcasts.

Would Emma hate her for doing this? Emma who had always guarded herself and been so intensely private? Maybe, but Jean reminded herself that even if that was the outcome...she did this to save her friend. Her health...her sanity...even her life was in danger if something wasn't done to stop Jeremy's family.

She turned a corner and walked on another few hundred yards. She'd be there soon. She had an address and she'd been told to be there early. Well, it didn't get much earlier than

this. Pulling her jacket closer around herself, Jean mumbled something about the cold and how Christmas...rapidly approaching as it was...was undoubtedly more pleasant in Australia. She didn't like the cold. While she absolutely hated overly hot summers, really cold winters were only marginally less annoying. Spring and fall were just about right, temperature-wise. Shuddering a little, cursing her own inability to deal with the cold, she headed into a Starbucks. Perhaps another cup of something hot, to sip on the way, would help keep her mind focused

A few moments later she was back walking down the street, now with a paper cup of steaming hot tea in her paws. It did help a little, she had to admit to herself. The warm liquid helped her keep her thoughts on the matter at paw. In another fifteen minutes she had to convince a stranger to help her help a friend.

Maybe it'd work.

She hoped so, at least.

###

Gabrielle yawned. The kind of yawn that'd make a canid curl his or her tongue and a feline stretch his or her back while extending claws. For an equine, the equivalent was a little less dramatic...merely a quick shake of her head and a flick of her tail. She needed several more hours of sleep before being ready to face the day. Unfortunately, she knew getting more hours of sleep was out of the question. She did have the day off, but falling back asleep after waking up usually resulted in nothing but nightmares, and Yohni complained empathetically whenever that happened.

"You're a lot bigger than me. It hurts whenever I get your elbow in my ribs, Gabby," or something similar.

Gabrielle shook her head again. Maybe a cold shower would do the trick. A hot one would just lead to her drowning in her sleep. She opened the mailbox and picked out the junk mail that filled it. Junk mail and a couple of bills. The electricity bill, for one thing. She opened it and nodded. It wasn't any bigger than she had expected. There was an invitation to the local church rally the following weekend. Gabrielle smiled crookedly...no doubt that one had ended up in her mailbox by mistake. The local church was Methodist and she was perfectly well aware that they would rather burn down the church building than allow her and Yohni to set foot...or hoof...inside. She put that at the bottom of the pile.

There was a letter from ZZ Studios, too. Gabrielle opened it, curious as to the content. Reading it, she smiled and nodded to herself. Trust Zig Zag to make such things official. She'd have to sign this and give it to her boss when she went back to work.

"Gabrielle Ryder, designer of attitude wear..." she muttered to herself. It didn't have a bad ring to it. She ran a paw through her mane and was just about to throw the rest of the mail into the trash-bin when a small, nondescript envelope fell out and landed on the floor.

She opened it and blinked. Her first thought was to throw it away anyway, but something told her to keep reading. Morbid curiosity or indifference...she didn't quite know. But she did read it.

*My dearest daughter,*

*I know you most likely don't want to read this...and I won't blame you if that's the case. I won't even blame you if you haven't gotten as far as these words, before throwing this letter away. I'm still going to continue writing though, on the off chance that you might still...be reading this.*

*It's been over two years since you last saw your father and me. Those have been two very long years. Very difficult and often painful for both him and me. I assure you, however, they have been painful for different reasons. So much has happened here. We had to sell the mansion. The organization your father ran is a shadow of it's former self, and on my insistence...we left that world behind after you were here. Not because of...of that movie you had made. I did it because of what I read in your diary. I swear, Gabrielle, I never knew. I was blind...and stupid and wrong on every level. I was conceited enough to think that I was the only one who could be right. That whatever I said was automatically the truth, so help me God. I realize now...as I realized that day when I read the diary you had bled in, that I was so terribly wrong. Nothing I do...or say...can ever make up for the childhood I never gave you, or the love you never felt. All I can do is apologize. Say that I am sorry, over and over again, until maybe...maybe one day you believe me. If you never do, you'll never hear me complain about it. I don't deserve to be believed. I lived a lie. As did your father.*

*It is ironic that he and I, who had everything, failed to give our two children the one thing they needed more than anything else. Love. It was like a dirty word in our household, and I realized too late what a grave mistake that was.*

I'm sure you're already growing weary of reading these words, as all I am really doing is saying the same thing again and again, with different words. I am sorry, Gabrielle. I doubt I will ever be able to look myself in the mirror again, without seeing a monster. I gave birth to you and to Timothy...but I was never a mother to either of you, and a greater crime I can't imagine. It is one thing to ruin the lives of complete strangers. That is bad enough. It is another to ruin the lives of your own flesh and blood.

I've kept your diaries. All of them. I've read everything you ever wrote, from day one. I know diaries are private, but they are the reason I've come to understand why I was so wrong, so...at least I hope you will forgive me that one last transgression into your privacy. I hope that no matter what you might otherwise think of me, that you will give me credit for trying. It is a small thing to ask for...and yet I know I've already asked for so much I have no right to ask even for that.

I write to you for another reason as well. I have tried to avoid doing this, because I don't know how you will react.

But I must.

Your father is dying, Gabrielle. I have written Timothy as well, but I don't know if he will read the letter either. He and I haven't spoken since he moved out...your father never mentioned him. Our line ends with our generation...and somehow, I think that is the greatest punishment your father could ever endure. Right now, he's on his bed in the next room. I don't know how much longer he will live. It could be that when I wake up tomorrow, my first act will be to close his eyes and call the mortician. It could be that he will linger on for another week...maybe two. No longer than that.

Just in case you wonder what is killing him, it is a simple thing to answer. He was diagnosed with a cancerous growth in the liver, three months ago. Since then, it's gone down hill very rapidly. I can barely recognize him anymore. He's lost nearly sixty pounds of weight already. I'm including our new address...in case you want to know where you can find him. It is ridiculous of me to suggest it, because I already know you won't want to come and say goodbye. Why should you, after all? What has he ever given you, except pain? At least this may bring you a little peace in the knowledge that you will never again have to worry about what he will do. I could...tell you stories of how I had to

*foil his ideas for punishing you after you came home that time...but I won't. It doesn't matter now. Nor do you have any reason to believe a word I'm saying.*

*But...nonetheless...I include it. Throw it away if you wish. I promise you one thing, at least. After this letter, you will never hear from me again unless you yourself express a desire to.*

*With the love I've been so negligent in giving you before*

*Your mother"*

Gabrielle swallowed repeatedly. Her eyes wouldn't focus properly and she fell into a chair, staring at the letter with wide open, disbelieving eyes. Inside her, anger and rage and pain boiled up and threatened to overwhelm her. She wanted to rip up the letter and throw it away. She wanted to hit something. She wanted to turn back time and not open the letter in the first place.

She wanted to cry.

She still wanted to cry almost an hour later when Yohni, now finally awake, found her at the kitchen table, still sitting there, staring at the letter.

**###**

"Hey Emma...it's me, Fox..."

Fox felt like kicking himself. So much for five years of university studies. He could've picked a better opening line. Or could he? The point was that while he was a medical professional, he was Emma's friend first and foremost. He wanted her to know that.

The sight that met him was a sorry one at best. Emma looked haggard and like any ill chosen word would make her break down and cry. She moved skittishly, whenever she did move a few inches. Clearly, she didn't like to meet his gaze, either. Fox knew she had realized he was in the room, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she looked like she had to convince herself it wasn't necessary to hide.

Taking a chair, Fox sat down on the opposite side of the room.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Emma. I'm one of your friends, remember?" he said, smiling what he hoped was a disarming smile. "Do you want me to leave?"

Emma didn't answer. She looked afraid of speaking and Fox just nodded. "Just shake your head or nod...you don't need to say anything if you don't want to."

The mink shook her head, very slowly. She swallowed, too. Fox was here and that was good. But she was still afraid and she couldn't make the sense of panic go away. The sound of a window shattering kept ringing in her head, over and over. Every time she blinked, she saw words painted on the wall in blood red paint.

Whimpering a little, she tried to hide her face against her knees and her shoulders began to tremble.

Fox was on the verge of tears. It was bad enough to see any other patient in this state, but Emma was a close friend and he wanted nothing more than to help her. He got to his feet and opened the door ajar.

"I need to talk to the doctor who admitted her yesterday," he said, quietly. "It's urgent."

Then he closed the door again and stepped closer to Emma, very slowly. Finally, he crouched down in front of her and held out a paw to her, palm up. If she wanted to take it, it would be her choice to make contact.

Every fur had a breaking point. He knew that better than most furs. Seeing how Emma had not only reached hers but gone over it caused him more hurt than he had thought possible. He thought he had the training necessary to face such a situation and remain calm...but his tears wouldn't listen to such rational thinking. They just wanted out. Slowly, Fox's cheeks grew damp, matting his fur to his skin.

"I'm right here, Emma. I'm right here, and I'm your friend, and I won't let anyone hurt you anymore..." he whispered. It wasn't what he knew he should say, professionally speaking. He shouldn't be making such promises. Right now, he didn't care. All he wanted was to show the mink she still had furs she could rely on, a hundred percent.

###

Jean sat down on the kitchen chair. She was in a large, comfortable home, done in a distinctly European classical style. It looked like something out of a book on early 20th century society homes, in fact. The vixen knew she should be relaxed and comfortable, and

truth be told, her host had done nothing to make her feel unwelcome in any way. She was still ill at ease though.

The reason was simple.

Her host was a physically large, male wolverine.

All kinds of bad memories were trying very hard to assert themselves in her brain, but she wouldn't let them. Lance Gulo was long dead...long gone, she kept telling herself. The wolverine in front of her wasn't even related to that particular family. She tried to smile in a relaxed way, looking at her host who brought a pot of tea.

"So, Miss LeBrun..." the large male rumbled in a good-natured way. "I'm told you need to talk to someone who has contacts in the media world?"

Nodding, Jean took a deep breath. Both to relax and to explain. "Indeed, Mr. Luscus. I'm grateful you'll meet with me on this issue. I mean...I'm nobody of any real importance. It's nice of you to take a morning out of your calendar for this."

The wolverine laughed warmly. "Nobody of any real importance? Tell that to Erica Belge, will you? She made it sound like you were the best thing since the invention of the printed word."

Jean blushed furiously and tried to come up with an answer, but failed miserably. Instead, she cleared her throat and smiled shyly.

"Hardly. Mrs. Belge is much too kind. I'm just a Ph.D. student, who teaches critical thinking and historical method, that's all."

"Well, whatever or whoever you are, Miss LeBrun, you made an impression on Erica. Now...what *can* I help you with?"

Jean was grateful for the chance to get off the topic of flattery. She felt ill at ease when someone spoke that highly of her...especially since even if she knew she was good at her job, saying she was 'the best thing since the invention of the printed word' was such an exaggeration that she didn't know how to deal with it.

"One of my friends...someone I met and befriended while I was still a student...was recently acquitted in a murder case down in Cincinnati. It was in most of the newspapers and it got mentioned a few times on local television broadcasts and on the radio. But even though the evidence was so overwhelming that the court rejected the case when it was presented, the family of the deceased won't accept this, and they've taken it into their own

paws to get even. The latest development sent my friend to the hospital last night, with a nervous breakdown. Her home has been vandalized...twice. Even though she moved, her new home was vandalized instead. She's been threatened. And we're talking about a femme here who only got out of an abusive relationship because she was forced to shoot her boyfriend when he tried to strangle her or beat her to death."

Mr. Luscus thought about it for a moment. Then he nodded, very slowly. "I think I can guess what case we're talking about then. Well, it certainly had public interest for a while...so what's your idea?"

"My idea is...well, wouldn't there be television companies out there...media groups...willing to do a documentary on what happens to those involved in such cases after it's gone to trial? Using that particular case as an example?"

Mr. Luscus scratched his chin. "To be honest with you? No. But I have an alternative suggestion...if you will bear with me."

Jean felt her heart sink, but she clung to the hope that Mr. Luscus would have a good suggestion instead. "Sure...let me hear it?"

"I have a fine batch of students this year, Miss LeBrun...and they need to start working on their final projects soon. After Christmas, in fact. I have a group of three students who would probably be perfect for making such a documentary. Now...before you protest and say that a university project doesn't get airtime...I should tell you that the best three documentaries will be shown on local television here in Columbus, and if it's good enough, others might buy it and show it elsewhere. It's probably the best I can do."

Jean closed her eyes and drew a sigh of relief. "I think that sounds like a great idea. If those students need any help or information..."

"...Then I'll send them your way. Count on it. Now, would you mind telling me everything you know about this case, from the start? I don't know much, myself. I'd like to make sure I have as much information as I can get, before letting the students on to this. You also realize that your story will naturally be biased and that I'll have to tell them to seek confirmation elsewhere as well."

"Please, Mr. Luscus...you're talking to someone who teaches Critical Thinking..."

The wolverine smiled and poured the tea, nodding. "Very well then. Let me hear."

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By the time Gabrielle got to the studio, she was at least more or less together. It had taken her several hours to recover, even with Yohni's help. The mongoose had been absolutely adamant that Gabrielle should not make any decisions without talking to some furs she trusted about the letter, and Gabrielle had, reluctantly, agreed. It wasn't an easy thing for her to do, but the deciding factor was that she honestly felt torn between either disregarding the letter altogether, and rushing off to Colorado to find her parents.

The latter surprised her.

If someone had asked her five minutes before opening that letter if she'd ever want to see either of her parents again, she'd have laughed in their faces. Now she didn't know *what* she felt. In the end, Yohni had suggested that they go see Zig Zag about it.

Whatever the skunk had to say, it was at least advice Gabrielle would value.

The bronco was still holding the letter in her paw. She looked at Yohni and sighed. "Why did she have to write me? Everything was...I don't know...it's turned my world on its head..."

"Gabrielle, they're your parents. Even if you have every reason to hate them, they still put you into this world and if for *no* other reason whatsoever, I at least owe them a big thanks for that. You have no reason to go and see them...and I'll back you up if you choose not to, but if you do, I'll be right there with you if you want me to, as well."

Gabrielle nodded and ran her free paw through her mane. "Why is the world so complicated, Yohni? Why has everything gone belly up like this? Have I done anything to deserve parents like the ones I got? Did Emma Grey deserve a boyfriend like Jeremy Mustela? Did Jean deserve to be born in the wrong body? Is this justice, Yohni? Is this...is this *fair*?"

"Life's a bitch, Gabrielle..."

"And then you marry one..."

Yohni smiled and slipped her arm under the bronco's. "Nahh, I'll just marry a filly, if it's all the same to you."

It made Gabrielle relax and she turned her head and kissed Yohni's hair. "I love you. Come what may, and no matter what anyone else has to say about it, Yohni...I do. Just promise me you won't ever forget that."

"After all the trouble I had even getting you to go on a date with me? No chance I'll ever let *you* forget that you love me!"

"I really do think my attitude is contagious," Gabrielle chuckled and pushed open the door. To her surprise, the front room wasn't empty. It had been since Sabrina had left. Admittedly, it had only been a short while, but she was still surprised to see Zig Zag there, talking to someone behind the desk. The skunk moved slightly aside as she looked over her shoulder to see who entered, thereby revealing the fur at the desk to be a beaver in her best age.

"Anna??" Gabrielle asked, blinking. "Well, I'll be..."

"You have to admit, Gabby...I'm qualified. Very few furs know as much about Zig Zag's movies as I do," the beaver chuckled. "Good to see you again. It's been ages."

Zig Zag smiled, looking slightly surprised at her two actresses. "I thought you two had the day off? Not that I don't appreciate the eagerness, but I really think you could both use some rest," she said, turning to face the bronco and the mongoose.

Yohni nodded. "You're absolutely right, Boss, and I assure you, there's nowhere I'd rather be right now than back home, under my blankets, thoroughly entangled in bronco. But something has happened."

Zig Zag changed demeanor from playfully amused to deadly serious in the blink of an eye. "Why do I have this feeling that 'something' isn't 'something nice'?" she asked.

Gabrielle didn't quite know how to answer that. Instead, she held out the letter. "I think you'd better read this, Boss. I could use some advice. I'm not sure it's bad...that's just it, really. I don't know if this is good or bad..."

Zig Zag took the letter and began to read. She looked up almost immediately, with a look of uncertain disbelief painted on her features. "From your *mother*??" she asked, incredulously.

Gabrielle just nodded. "Please, do read on..."

Zig Zag did.

By the end of it, she let her paws fall limply down her sides as she stared at Gabrielle.

"Good God..." she whispered. "What on Earth are you going to do, Gabby?"