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Some goodbyes are easy

"YOU WHAT?!?!?"

The bloodhound momentarily felt taken aback. He hadn't expected a localized thunderstorm in his office when he turned up for work that morning. Now, however, he was certainly facing such a thing. It was squirrel shaped and he felt like he could nearly reach out and touch the thunderbolts.

He really didn't feel like trying.

Miranda was more than angry. She was infuriated and disbelieving. Most of all, she was gravely disappointed. The bloodhound behind the desk looked mildly affronted at her outburst.

"Bail was met, Miss Spermophilus," he tried.

"That's LIEUTENANT Spermophilus to you...your honor!"

"There's no need to take that tone with me!"

Miranda growled and leaned over the desk. "*Like Hell* there isn't! I have a young femme in the psychiatric ward, quite possibly for a very, very long time thanks to that piece of shit, and you let him out on bail to walk around freely, making sure her life is even more impossible when she comes home!"

The judge looked like a schoolteacher about to berate an unruly and ignorant child as he folded his paws carefully on the table. "Miss Spermophilus..."

"*Lieutenant!*"

"Lieutenant then...I must remind you that in this country we operate under a system that says that any given fur is innocent until proved guilty."

Miranda bared her teeth in an angry snarl. "I'll remember to tell that to the families of the next homicidal maniac you let go on bail, Your Honor. I'm bloody well aware of the principles we operate under. I also know that if a suspect is considered dangerous, he can be kept incarcerated until his trial. The same thing goes if he can hamper the investigation and this particular streak of piss *can!*"

The judge blinked. Then he narrowed his eyes a little and looked closely at the squirrel in front of him. "I may not be in my courtroom, but I can still hold you in contempt, Lieutenant," he reminded her.

"Oh I assure you, *Your Honor*, I feel nothing *but* contempt at the moment," Miranda growled and turned to leave before she said something worse.

The judge straightened up in his chair. "I'll have the fine sent to your Captain!" he barked.

Miranda laughed. "Please do, *Your Honor*. I'm sure he'll have a right good laugh at it, before I pay it. Now if you will please excuse me, I have to go arrange for protection for Emma Gray's home."

She left the office with an angry expression on her face. Captain Archibald got out of the chair he'd been waiting in outside. The wooden construction creaked in relief as the gigantic rhinoceros vacated it.

"I heard...raised voices," he grumbled. "What happened in there?"

"I was in contempt. You'll have a fine on your desk one of these days, no doubt accompanied by a recommendation that I be disciplined," Miranda said and stuck her paws in the pocket of her bomber-jacket, starting to walk down the hallway to leave the court building.

"Hold out your right paw, will you?" Captain Archibald said, ambling along next to her.

Miranda looked confused but held out her right paw. Captain Archibald turned it over so her knuckles were turned upwards, then very carefully slapped the absolute tip of her fingers.

"There. You've been disciplined. Judge Hunter is a prizewinning ignoramus, Miranda. Will he be presiding over the actual case as well?"

"I'm afraid so."

Captain Archibald nodded with a grim smile on his face, and a weary expression in his eyes. "I wouldn't put money on a conviction then. The fur is incapable of understanding that some scumbags shouldn't walk around in the street."

"You're about to call him a liberal, softhearted, useless piece of shit, aren't you, Captain?" Miranda asked, smiling crookedly.

Captain Archibald nodded and frowned. "Yup. You know me too well, Lieutenant."

"Just remember I vote for the democrats as well. Does that make me a liberal, softhearted, useless piece of shit as well?" Miranda teased.

The rhino grumbled some more. "Just makes you a liberal piece of shit. I wouldn't call you softhearted or useless if it's the last thing I do."

Miranda chuckled and nodded, sticking her paws back in her pockets. "Conservative old fart."

"Liberal softy!" was the reply.

It was good-natured though.

###

When Gabrielle got out of bed, it was already mid- to late morning. She'd slept in...although she wasn't quite sure why. She hadn't been particularly tired the evening before and she had even gone to bed early. Seeing her mother again had been somewhat of a shock, and perhaps the emotional strain was the reason she had needed the extra sleep. Roxanne had offered that she and Yohni could stay in the guest room, but Gabrielle had politely but firmly said no thank you. She preferred a hotel. Yohni had as well, as it turned out. It was one thing to face her mother without allowing herself to get hostile. Staying in the same house as her would be pushing one's luck, Gabrielle reasoned.

She scratched her mane and sat on the edge of the bed, stretching.

"I could watch that view all day long," Yohni mumbled behind her. "How are you feeling this morning?"

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder and smiled wearily. "Tired. A little uncertain, really."

"Do you want to go back today?"

"No. But I will anyway."

Yohni nodded and got up. She stretched and ran her fingers over her stomach, before looking at Gabrielle. "Do you think I'm getting fatter?" she asked.

Gabrielle nearly choked on a giggle. "You? Yohni, I don't think you have an ounce of fat anywhere on your body that isn't supposed to be there."

The mongoose smiled and grabbed a towel from the table, heading for the bathroom. Gabrielle ran a paw through her mane again, and thought of the day to come. Wasn't it easier to simply get on a plane back to Ohio?

Easier, certainly. But was it right?

There were no simple answers. She even had to admit to herself that her mother had been both kind and welcoming the day before. Only once or twice had Gabrielle felt any hint of Roxanne's old prejudices...and the older equine had always caught it herself, and apologized profusely, before either Gabrielle or Yohni could comment.

So was this change of heart genuine? It certainly seemed that way. Which just left the question of whether a change of heart was *enough*. Enough for what, anyway? Forgiveness?

Certainly not. Gabrielle had long since come to the conclusion that she would never be able to forgive her parents for what they had done to her.

A new start then?

Perhaps. That was a lot more likely.

She looked for something to put on. She'd told her mother that she and Yohni would come by after breakfast. She'd better keep her word. It was one of the things, she reminded herself, that made her a better fur than her parents.

###

Leo was an incredibly popular officer. Not only was he good at what he was supposed to do, but he had gotten his troops access to pornography...even pornography that no other fur had ever seen before. If anyone had taken a quick vote as to 'most popular fur on base', Leo would probably have claimed first, second and third place all on his own.

That kind of popularity came with a price though. He suddenly had a lot of furs very interested in his private life, and more than a few hopefuls who obviously tried to get on his good side in the hope that they might later benefit by meeting famous blue movie-stars.

He knew well enough how to weed the unwanted elements out, however. In the army, that was fairly easy. Anyone of lower rank than him he could simply pull rank on, and anyone of higher rank...well...so far no one of higher rank had tried anything. He was sitting in the recreation room, a towel around his neck and sweating. He'd just played two games of table tennis against Corporal Brock and won both, paws down. But he was still sweating. He'd also promised the corporal to meet him in the boxing ring later on...and Leo had no doubt he'd be counting sheep in a matter of seconds. Even though he was taller and heavier than the badger, Corporal Brock was company champion in his weight class, and Leo's understanding of boxing was...flawed.

Across the room, one of the tapes was running. The fact that Zig Zag had done the introduction had caused quite a buzz around base, and most furs outside Third Platoon had graciously been invited to see it, at least once. Just a few had said no thank you.

Even fewer had not been invited. Lieutenant Aureus being one of them. Leo kicked back and put up his feet, folding his paws behind his neck and stretching a little. He yawned, showing amazingly long and sharp teeth, before smacking his lips a few times. He closed his eyes to relax a little. Life could certainly be worse than this.

"ATTENTION!"

He snapped upright without thinking, coming to attention immediately. Judging from the sounds around the room, so did everyone else.

Captain Cervus entered, paws folded behind his back, looking critical of the whole situation.

"At ease, furs...at ease," he rumbled and looked around. "I am here to see Lieutenant Leon."

Leo blinked and saluted as the captain approached him. "Yes Sir...how can I be of assistance today?" he asked.

"I'm told you've got pornography in this barracks, Lieutenant Leon," the elk said, sharply. He spoke in a loud, clear voice to make certain everyone could hear him. A few barely disguised wincing could be heard behind him.

"No Sir. I can say with absolutely good conscience that I do not have pornography anywhere in this barracks, or in any other barracks for that matter," Leo said.

It wasn't even a lie. He hadn't kept any of it for himself. Everything had gone to his platoon. As a result, *he* didn't have pornography laying around. Captain Cervus seemed satisfied with that answer at least, but still continued.

"I trust you realize, Lieutenant, that the standing orders strictly and most vehemently prohibit importing pornography of any kind into Muslim countries, to avoid offending the locals?"

"Yessir!! I am aware of this standing order," Leo said. He hadn't imported anything. He'd received a package from a friend. It wasn't as if he'd paid for it...so by a broad definition of the word, he had imported nothing.

Captain Cervus walked around the lion, slowly. "Enough horseshit, Lieutenant Leon...and Corporal Twain you can wipe that dejected expression off your face this instant and stop pretending I can't see you...I'm an officer, I have eyes in the back of my head. Now...Lieutenant Leon, what movies would your furs be watching after their duties are complete? I hear rumors...!"

"Sir, they are watching educational nature videos, Sir! Occasionally, they watch tapes on anatomy, Sir...which may be very useful in combat situations, as I'm sure you will agree with, Sir...since it helps teach everyone except the medic about how the body functions, Sir!" Leo answered, keeping his eyes fixed on a spot on the wall and his face painfully neutral.

To his relief, none of his furs snickered or laughed.

"That's a lot of Sir-sandwiches, Lieutenant Leon. Are you pulling my tail, son?"

"I wouldn't dream of pulling anything on you, Sir...even a fast one."

Captain Cervus nodded, thoughtfully. "Very well. And what was it I heard about a striped package arriving for your unit?"

Leo had to think very, very quickly. "I'm sure that was a Christmas present, Sir. You know how many varieties of packing paper you can get these days...it's unbelievable, Sir," he said and inwardly winced. He'd have liked to come up with a better answer.

Captain Cervus seemed not to notice. "Alright. I've now taken care of the official part of this. Off the record, Lieutenant, I'll commend your decorum in not inviting any ranking officer to watch Zig Zag's return to celluloid. However, knowing how much that particular femme has done for the morale of the United States Army over the years I will keep my recommendation to you like this: Turn the fucking volume down in the evening, boys. I'm only two barracks away trying to sleep and the moans are keeping me awake, for God's sake. That'll be all. As you were."

The elk turned around to walk away. He did so to the cheers and clapping of the troops in the barracks. Leo more than happily joined in.

###

The Wolf pack had all kinds of material laying in front of them. Interview notes, newspaper clippings, a couple of tapes from the local television station that they had been allowed to borrow for their work. None of it was in order, and the three males looked rather weary already. They had agreed to take on the assignment, and the material they had gathered so far did look like it could form the basis for a good and important documentary. But it would take a lot of work, a lot of time and a lot of careful thinking.

"Dunno about you two, but I just don't get males who beat the femmes they date or are married to," Dione said and held up a video-tape that they had seen a few times. "Good grief. Hey, how about talking to the cops?"

"Forget it," Terence said and sighed. "They're always tight lipped. They'll never say a word about a case like this."

Dione shrugged. "Perhaps, but will you tell Mr. Luscus that at the exam table? 'Sorry, we didn't even bother asking the cops, because we didn't think they'd be cooperative'. That'll get us an A for sure..."

Greg nodded. "He's got a point. Maybe we can find a cop who's willing to speak. Or drop a hint. Or something. If nothing else, we can always get the 'no comment' on tape for the documentary."

Terence nodded in agreement. What his friends said was absolutely sensible and correct. He looked at a stack of notes again and tapped the tip of his nose, thoughtfully with a single finger. They'd have to get started early on, on requesting interviews. Just as importantly, they couldn't make interviews without Mr. Luscus' approval. So before asking, they had to think of all the furs they wanted to interview and then seek their institute-head's go-ahead. It was just a formality but it did mean extra planning. He grabbed a notepad and a pen and looked at his comrades.

"So...who are we going to interview? Let's see if we can't get the officer who investigated the case to say a few words? And his boss..." he said.

Dione nodded. "And the friends and families of both the deceased and the femme who pulled the trigger..."

Greg grinned. "I doubt the family of the male will be too interested in talking. "Oh yes, *of course* we vandalized her home afterwards, because *we* believe in taking the law into our own paws!" I can just see it."

"If they don't speak up to defend themselves, they're putting the gun of public opinion to their own temples and pulling the trigger anyway," Dione pointed out with a shrug. "Coffee, guys?"

"Yeah, that'd be good."

"Coffee sounds just like what we need."

Dione smiled. "Good. Go and make us some, Terence. My coffee tastes like sewage."

Terence blinked and looked about to protest...then he muttered a few well chosen and good-natured expletives at his friend and headed off to fill the coffee-machine. Dione looked at Greg again, thoughtfully.

"Who else? Obviously, we have to try to talk to Emma Gray herself...but that will almost certainly result in nothing at all since she's ill at the moment," he said, ponderously.

Greg had an ominous expression on his face as he nodded. "And if we ask her doctors...which we have to...they are bound by the patient-doctor confidentiality rules. So what do we have? A couple of cops who won't speak, a doctor who isn't allowed to speak and a patient who can't speak? That leaves friends and family. Good grief...some objectivity we can aim for here."

Dione nodded, grimly. "I think that's the challenge, to be honest. We have to be the ones searching for objectivity in all of this."

Terence came back to the table. The coffee machine was on the opposite side of the room so naturally he had heard everything. "It won't be easy..."

"About as easy as a Phi Beta Kappa..." Dione grumbled.

"Ouch, that's hard..." Greg whined. His ears flopped and he looked like the thought of Phi Beta Kappa femmes conjured up unpleasant memories of rejection.

Terence sat down, picked up the paperwork and began humming 'Son of a Preachermale' with a smile on his face. He didn't say anything...nor did he look at his friends to answer their puzzled expressions as he began to write down a list of furs to try to get an interview with, like it was the easiest thing in the world.

###

It was late morning by the time Gabrielle knocked on the door to her parent's house. Yohni smiled reassuringly, as if to tell her girlfriend that the day before had gone without incident, and that it'd probably be a similar experience this time around.

Roxanne didn't open the door, but Gabrielle wasn't going to let that stop her. She tried the doorhandle. The door wasn't locked, so she pushed it open and entered.

"MOTHER?" she called out. It felt strange to use the word.

A moment later, Roxanne turned up in the doorway from the living room. She looked like she'd been crying. Seeing the two femmes, she tried to put on a smile but it wasn't very successful.

"He won't live till nightfall. The doctor is in there with him now," she said, in a broken voice.

Gabrielle blinked. Despite herself, she felt a pang of sadness. She detested her father, there was no secret in that. But whether she detested him or not, she had to

acknowledge that without him...she wouldn't have existed. All that he'd done to ruin and control her life later on was what she could blame him for...but he *was* half the reason she was even alive in the first place.

Closing her eyes and nodding, slowly, she took a deep breath and looked at her mother.

"Is he conscious?"

"Barely."

"Then I want to go see him," Gabrielle said, in a steady voice.

Yohni blinked and looked up at the bronco. "You're sure of that? No offense, Gabby...but don't do this for the wrong reasons. Do it for the right ones."

Roxanne nodded in agreement. "Listen to her, Gabrielle...she's being sensible about this. You don't owe your father or me anything in this world..." she said, quietly.

"I owe you my birth," Gabrielle said, firmly. "You brought me into this world. I will see him out of it. After that, I will consider myself even with him."

The look of confusion on Yohni's face was unmistakable. "You're already even with him. More than even. What he's done to you..." she began.

"...doesn't mean I have to be the same kind of rotten dirtbag he's been all his life, Yohni. I can do the decent thing and stand by his bedside when he dies. Besides..."

Roxanne didn't even look like she disagreed. She just nodded for her daughter to continue.

"Besides..." Gabrielle repeated "If I see him dead...my nightmares might stop."

Sighing, Roxanne hung her head. Nightmares too. She felt the blame and she accepted it. She beckoned up the stairs to tell Gabrielle it was up there, then she turned around and headed into the living room again. Yohni nodded to Gabrielle, then followed Roxanne. This wasn't her time. It was Gabrielle's time. Alone with her dying father.

It left the younger bronco alone in the hall for a while. She took a deep breath, then looked up the staircase before ascending it. She counted the steps. Somehow, it felt as if there should be thirty of them. For purely biblical reasons. There were only eighteen, though, before she stood on the platform above.

There were a few doors there. The first one she checked led to a bathroom. It was a nice, stylish place. She wouldn't have expected anything else of her mother, anyway. The

fur dryer on the wall would no doubt have Zig Zag's grudging approval. The next door she tried led to what was probably the guest room.

Not surprisingly, it looked almost entirely unused.

Finally, the third door led her into the bedroom. She nodded, politely if curtly to the doctor. He was a middle aged feline, without any distinctive markings in his otherwise tabby fur. He packed his stethoscope away and nodded back to the femme in the doorway. Then he got up.

"I can only assume you're next of kin. You bear a resemblance to the lady of the house," he said, politely. "I would say 'please don't wear him out'...but at this time, it'd be an act of mercy."

Then he left.

Gabrielle looked at the husk on the bed. It couldn't rightly be called a fur anymore. There was nothing left of her father except fur and bones, and he looked like he was already dead. Steeling herself, Gabrielle approached the bed.

"Roxanne...?" the wheeze of Theodore's voice was awful. "You look...younger every day. I really must...be dying. You look...like you did when...when I first saw you."

"Probably because I'm not my mother," Gabrielle said, flatly. "I would say 'good afternoon, Father'...but that'd be a lie, wouldn't it?"

Theodore actually blinked in surprise. His face contorted. He wasn't sure if he should look angry or happy. "Gabrielle...? How...how did you...?"

"Mother wrote both Timothy and me. Since he isn't here, I assume he threw his letter away. In a strange way, I'm glad I didn't. I get to witness this."

"So you have...come...to watch me die, then..."

Gabrielle nodded. "I have," she said, matter-of-factly. "I have come to even the only debt I could ever owe you. I realize you could never repay me all the debts you owe me...even if you had been healthy and hale."

Theodore's smile was bitter...and pained...but it was there. "So much...anger and hate. You may...not like to admit it...Gabrielle...but you...are my daughter...every...step...of the way..."

Gabrielle shrugged. "I know I am. The difference between you and me, Father...is that while I have the capacity to be the cruelest, meanest, most self absorbed and cold hearted piece of shit on the planet...I choose not to be. Every single day, I make the

conscious choice to be a better femme than what you raised me to be," she said and sat down on the edge of her father's deathbed. "It isn't always easy. But I choose to."

Theodore swallowed a couple of times. Then he nodded, very faintly. "You know...how I feel about it," he said, wearily.

"And I don't care."

"My daughter..."

Gabrielle smiled. She couldn't quite make up her mind if she should be flattered or if what her father was trying to do was pathetic. Either he was actually proud of her, or he was trying to show her that she was 'a chip of the ol' block' after all and that she shouldn't have fought him so hard in the first place. Either way, his opinion wasn't important to her. The smile on her face was probably rather overbearing but she didn't bother disguising it. She was a better fur than the dying, decrepit equine in front of her had ever been. He'd had it all. Wealth, power, influence...and he'd used it for all the wrong things. He'd gotten it all in all the wrong ways, too.

What did she have? An international fan-base, who thought her bosom was the best thing since certain species decided to walk upright. And a life. And friends. Real friends. Furs she could count on.

And love. Real...honest love. The kind that made her blush and giggle, when she really thought about it.

"It won't be long now, Father," she said, after a moment's silence. "It'll all be over soon."

Theodore nodded, weakly again. "I know. What will you do then?"

"Go home...live my life as I want to. Have friends...have fun...get married."

"What's his name? Is...he from a good, respectable family?"

"She's downstairs, and she's called Yohni. I don't give a damned whether her family is respectable. Mine isn't. They're nice furs...even if I've only met them once or twice."

"I see."

Gabrielle shrugged. There was no fight left in her father. There was no need to be mean to him. No reason to. He was dying and he couldn't hurt her anymore. "I want you to know something, Father..."

"Do I want...to know it, dying as I am?" Theodore asked, smiling bitterly. There were tears in his eyes.

"I know why you did all this to me. I know what motivated you and why you treated me so badly..." the filly said after a moment's consideration.

"I gave you everything..."

"Except love...which was all I wanted."

Theodore sighed and slumped a little more. It was the one and only argument he couldn't fight back against. Why fight, anyway? He'd be dead in a few hours...if that long. Every breath made him feel a little closer to death. He could literally feel how his body was slowly giving up. It was an intriguing feeling in its own morbid way...

"Why did I do it then?" he asked.

Gabrielle smiled again. For some reason she didn't quite know, she reached out and took Theodore's paw in hers. For the briefest of moments, there was no hostility. No enmity. Just a dying father and his daughter.

A moment that passed very quickly.

"You did it because you're a coward," Gabrielle said. Her voice was calm. She wasn't angry. "You did it because the idea of your line dying out was more than you could bear. Like most equines...you're terrified of the possibility of our numbers diminishing even more than they already are. As opposed to most other equines, though...you'd go to any length, no matter how despicable to ensure that your family continued. In a way...Father...that is quite sad."

Theodore closed his eyes and turned his head slightly away from his daughter. "I..." he began but he never got to finish before Gabrielle interrupted him.

"I will make you one promise, however. I will have children...that much I promise you. I'll have children when my career changes. That should be within a foreseeable future...say three or four years at the most. I will do it because I *want* children. Not because you expected me to have them. I'll raise them to be good furs...and I will never tell them about you. When you die, Father...you cease to exist."

Theodore cringed. But nodded. "You are right..." he whispered. There wasn't much strength left in his voice. He was very tired and he wanted to sleep. Even though he knew he wouldn't wake up. Sleeping into death seemed merciful, and at least...he could die a little easier now.

The door opened. Roxanne peeked in. Gabrielle beckoned her over to the bed. The older femme approached and sat down on the edge of the bed, taking Theodore's other paw in hers.

"Sleep, Theodore...we'll stay here until it's over," she whispered. Her voice was cracking and her cheeks were matted with tears.

Gabrielle reached over with her free paw and gave her mother's shoulder a squeeze. For some reason, she had never felt as close to her...as at that moment. Roxanne seemed grateful for the little show of support and affection.

Theodore's eyes closed.

Both mother and daughter knew he would never open them again.