

Serenade

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‘Oh my god! He’s got a knife!’

Zig Zag tried to growl away the memory, but found it next to impossible. The scene played itself over and over in her mind. She wrapped her arms around herself to stop the shaking but it wasn’t helping.

This morning, she’d arrived at Double Z Studios as always, ready to start another day of running the most successful adult film studio in the U.S. Shooting on their latest film, *Horsin’ Around 3*, was due to wrap up today, at which point the editors and producers would go over the accumulated footage, slowly piecing together what would hopefully become another smash hit.

As she exited her car she was confronted by a group of furs who’d started picketing her place of business. At first she’d merely sighed; this kind of activity was nothing new. However, when she spotted a certain femme skunk co-worker being harassed by a wolf and a lion, her anger spiked.

Sharpened teeth bared Zig Zag stormed over to the pair, snarling and crudely shoving them out of her way. She grabbed the skunk – Sabrina – by the arm and pulled her away from the two bullies. Together, they pushed through the crowd of so-called ‘moralistic crusaders’ in an effort to reach the studio door and safety.

Zig Zag’s breathing became ragged as she recalled what happened next. She’d barely acknowledged the security guard who was keeping the crowd at bay. He was doing his best to keep the crowd from getting too close to the studio and was meeting with a fair bit of success in spite of his solitary presence.

Zig Zag, with Sabrina in tow, had gotten through the crowd and were maybe ten feet from the studio door when Sabrina looked back. The lion who’d been harassing her now stood, his hand raised above his head. The morning sun glinted off something in his hand, and Zig Zag remembered her gasping.

“Oh my god!” she’d screamed. “He’s got a knife!”

The world had suddenly slowed for Zig Zag. She pushed Sabrina out of the knife’s path, offering herself as its target. She knew that by saving Sabrina she’d basically condemned herself to death, as there was no way she was fast enough to get out of the way. She remembered wondering what it would feel like to have the knife strike her. Would it hurt right away, or would the shock of such an act dull the pain for a time? What would it feel like to bleed all over herself? Would it feel like someone pouring warm water over her fur, or something altogether different? Would the crowd all cheer as she lay dying, perhaps cradled in Sabrina’s sobbing arms? Would Sabrina even cry for her?

Would anyone?

At the last possible moment, as she readied herself for death, her vision was suddenly eclipsed by a massive, tiger-striped forearm. A hand reached out and nimbly plucked the knife from the air with the same ease as one catches a Frisbee. The hand held the knife there for a moment to absorb the momentum before finally pulling the weapon away. Zig Zag stood, unable to move. Death had been only inches away from her, and it had been denied this day...denied by that massive hand.

“Are you all right, Zig Zag?”

The tiger-striped skunk had barely registered Sabrina’s tugging hand. “I...” She’d turned towards from where the hand had come and saw the security guard she’d passed earlier. She’d hired this particular tiger about a month ago. He’d seemed friendly enough, and the fact that he was over 200 pounds of muscle on a titanic frame made him a perfect addition to the staff. Today he’d certainly earned his pay and then some.

She remembered the look in his green eyes...her own must have seemed so vacant to him. His eyes seemed filled with genuine worry...pleading for her to give some kind of positive sign. It was a look she’d never seen before...at least not directed at *her*. It had left her feeling warm, but at the same time confused.

“You two better head inside,” he’d said...his voice soft and deep. In spite of his suggestion, though, Zig Zag and Sabrina had remained outside as the tiger turned back towards the crowd. A demonic, guttural growl escaped his throat as he fixed his gaze on the lion who’d thrown the knife. Sabrina had gasped in horror as she saw the tiger’s eyes seemingly shift from a green colour to an all-encompassing glowing crimson. Zig Zag remembered her young friend comparing those eyes to those of her many Decepticon collectibles.

However, what followed was nowhere near the politically correct violence portrayed in the shows those collectibles represent. She still remembered the yowl the lion made as the tiger – whose shirt bore the name ‘Dalan K.’ on it – yanked him out of the crowd by his mane. The moment the lion stood up he was subjected to the worst beating anyone in that crowd had ever seen. Fists, feet, claws, and teeth were all used to reduce Zig Zag’s would-be assassin to a pile of quivering fur, bloody and drooling.

When it was over, Dalan had glared at the crowd, his teeth bared in a feral snarl of contempt. “Who’s next?” he roared, tossing the lion back into the crowd. “Any more would-be assassins out there, hm? Come on...step forth and take what’s coming to you!”

The crowd dispersed with all the chaos of a panicked mob, leaving a heavy-breathing, near-quivering tiger standing there alone, fists clenched, claws out, and teeth still bared. Zig Zag’s tail had twitched nervously for several tense minutes as she watched Dalan begin to calm down. His claws receded and his hands opened slowly. He shook his head, *chuffed* once in contempt, and then turned. To her and Sabrina’s combined relief, his eyes were their usual deep green.

“Hell of a way to start a morning,” he’d muttered, ushering the two skunks into the studio.

* * *

The day had passed in a blur for Zig Zag. By lunch time she’d sent Sabrina home; she was a nervous wreck and couldn’t focus on her work. Thankfully, one call to her boyfriend was all it took to bring him rushing to Columbus to be with her.

Zig Zag had spent the afternoon watching the final scene of *Horsin’ Around* get shot, only offering any pointers when asked. She’d basically hand-picked her staff, so she knew she could trust them. Still, her experience in this industry was always a great source of insight.

Instead of having the wrap party at the studio, Zig Zag arranged to have everyone head for one of the many nightclubs in the area and party until Monday if they wanted. It had been a hard day for everyone and they deserved a worthy celebration. Once the clock struck 7 the studio basically cleared out...all except for her.

Growing up, Zig Zag had often toyed with the idea of death...that one last hope possessed of the hopeless. Her odd fur pattern...the insults...the abuse...her father...for so long the only escape she seemed to have was that one, final escape...that last ‘screw you’ to the world as you left it. Some religions claim suicide is a sin and those who take their own lives remain in Hell for eternity...but at least she would have been away from *him*.

Once success became synonymous with her name, the threats against her were many. Rival companies, moral crusaders, religious zealots...all of them wanted their pound of flesh from her. Were they merely jealous of her success? Did they scorn her because of how she earned her money? Why should they care? Was her success...was she...such a stain on society that people would kill her?

Maybe you should have let them...

The voice of pessimism whispered in her mind. She snarled to keep it away, but it made sense. Today marked the first time in her life that anyone had actually acted on a threat to her. Death threats were common, but she’d never come close to experiencing

anything like today. For those few horrific moments, Zig Zag had faced the Reaper's blade head on, only to have Death's hand stayed by someone else...someone who...

She heard the rooftop door open and turned quickly. Her fear rose as a rather large figure passed through the open doorway, but the moment she saw his orange, white and black fur she relaxed. In fact, she smiled at the muscular tiger who stood there, a surprised look on his muzzle.

"Oh!" he said, looking up and seeing her. "Didn't mean to disturb you, ma'am. I was just getting ready to lock up."

"It's all right," she said. "Care to join me?" Dalan didn't hesitate and walked towards her. Zig Zag turned to lean out on the waist-high ledge again, staring into the night. "Hell of a day, hm?" she said, not looking at him as he sat on the ledge, half facing her.

"Certainly got off to an interesting start," commented Dalan. Zig Zag tried not to close her eyes. There was something in Dalan's voice...something deep, rich, and velvety that almost made her swoon. It was as if merely hearing his voice was enough to protect her. "Are you feeling all right?" he asked.

"Y...yes," she replied, again trying to keep her composure. "I guess I never did thank you for saving my life."

"At the risk of sounding nonchalant," said the tiger, "I was just doing my job, ma'am."

"Well, you're damned good at what you do," said Zig Zag. Dalan smiled and bowed his head respectfully, something that caught the skunk off guard. "So, what're your plans for this weekend?" she asked.

"Actually," Dalan admitted. "I've got tickets for the *Phantom* on Saturday." Zig Zag looked at him, her blue eyes wide in surprise. He looked back at her. "You don't believe me," he said.

"Well, what do you expect?" she asked, chuckling. "You drive in here every morning in a 69 Charger blasting some kind of heavy metal, and you're telling me you're planning to see *The Phantom of the Opera* tomorrow?" Dalan nodded, his face not indicating he'd been insulted. "How is that even possible?" she asked.

"I guess the show and the music I listen to have a lot in common," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Passion, drama, power...the kind of things that make one's heart pound when they hear it."

She could say nothing. His voice...so wistful it sounded...as if he were speaking from his very soul. Every word seemed to caress her as softly as the tender touch of a timid lover...no...not timid...tantalizing.

"I...I take it you're not one for nightclubs, then," she said, again trying to sound composed.

“Actually,” said Dalan, “I rather enjoy the nightclub scene...as long as the DJ does his or her job properly.” He chuckled. “I knew a place in Detroit and man, could that cat spin. Guaranteed that when the night was over, no one went home single.”

“Yourself included?”

Dalan fell silent, and Zig Zag feared she’d crossed a line. She felt her heart sink at the prospect. Here she was, doing her best to make the tiger who’d saved her life uncomfortable. Yet, instead of growling or asking her to drop the subject, Dalan merely sighed and looked out into the night.

“Detroit gave me a lot of things,” he said finally. “All the money I could handle, all the booze and drugs I wanted, and all the sex anyone could ask for.” He shook his head. “But it came at too high a price. I found myself looking in the mirror one morning and not recognizing just who I was. As wonderful as it was, it was getting toxic...I had to leave.” He sighed again. “But I still have a few fond memories of the place.”

Zig Zag felt relieved that she hadn’t offended him. She moved a bit closer...just enough that a hint of his scent wafted over her. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. It was a sweet, exotic scent but not overpowering. Like his words, she felt as if his scent was embracing her...making her feel safe and secure. She opened her eyes and looked at his massive arms. She’d seen them nearly destroy someone today, but she wondered how they would feel embracing her body.

The two sat in silence until the last of the sunset disappeared. The sky became a deep indigo of dusk, fading to black in the Eastern sky. Those stars bright enough to defy the light pollution of the city began to shine. The moon cast a silver light over the rooftop of Double Z Studios, bathing the two silent furs in its haunting glow.

Zig Zag closed her eyes, again trying to move past the image in her mind. The twirling knife, the shoving of Sabrina out of its fatal path...and that one, final moment of resignation when she was fully prepared to accept her fate. Her hands began to shake but instead of trying to snarl the feeling away she let her mind wander on its own. She could hear Sabrina’s scream over and over in her head. She could see the lion smirking as he threw the knife, so sure he would take her life this day. He wanted her dead...

He was going to kill her...

She should have died!

The magnitude of the day rocked her as sure as she’d been punched in the gut by her father. She winced as she doubled over, sinking to her knees and trying oh, so hard not to throw up. Her body felt cold and tears streamed out of her eyes. Her mind filled itself with Sabrina’s scream of warning...over and over until she wanted to scream as well.

Just as she was about to let it out...just as the scream of anguish was about to leave her throat, she felt two strong hands lift her up and turn her. She gazed up and

beheld Dalan's face staring back at her. His green eyes showed that same look of worry as this morning and Zig Zag felt the last of her restraint fall away.

She crashed into Dalan's chest, her screams and wails muffled by his shirt. Unconsciously her arms wrapped around his massive frame and she buried her muzzle in his chest. A few feet away, no one would ever suspect that Zig Zag was now screaming at the top of her lungs as the true horror of this morning's near-assassination drove home.

She shuddered as she finally felt those two, massive furry arms wrap around her and hold her close. At first she tried to resist...to prolong this self-destructive feeling she was experiencing. But as the arms held her, she slowly began to calm down. Her shaking subsided, her chills were warmed away, and her screams of anguish soon became naught but tearful whimpers.

Dalan looked down at the sobbing woman his boss had become. He stroked her back softly, comforting her. His deep, rumbling purrs radiated throughout his body, hopefully doing their part to ease Zig Zag's turmoil. His voice spoke softly, assuring Zig Zag that she was safe and that no one would ever harm her again.

Not if he had anything to say about it...

* * *

Zig Zag's eyes opened and she realized she was lying down. She moved her head slightly, feeling the fabric of a shirt under her cheek. She ran a hand over the shirt, recognizing the fabric as the one worn by her security guard...by Dalan. She breathed deeply, inhaling his scent and realizing that while she was laying on it, he was still wearing it. Instinctively she checked herself, surprised and relieved to see that her blissful sleep had been only that...sleep.

She looked up towards Dalan's muzzle and saw him looking back at her, relief radiating from his green eyes. "How long have I been asleep?" she asked.

"About two hours," replied the tiger. "You needed it, so I didn't want to disturb you."

Zig Zag sighed, resting her head on Dalan's chest again. "You must think I'm some kind of basket case," she said. "Breaking down like a little girl like that." She felt his hand slowly brush her hair away from her face as she looked back at him.

"In truth I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner," said the tiger softly. "You could have been killed today, Zig Zag...that's not something to take lightly. That you maintained your composure around everyone today shows a lot of inner strength." He yawned, his fangs almost gleaming in the night air. "But all the strength in the world isn't enough when facing something like that. I've seen hardened soldiers whimper like kits and pups when staring down the barrel of a gun. I've seen street-toughened punks wet themselves when they felt the press of a blade against their throat. Reacting the way you did doesn't make you weak, Zig Zag...it makes you alive."

Zig Zag stroked Dalan's chest absently as he stroked her hair. "Death threats I'm used to," she said. "Comes with the job...but until today I'd never...never really *faced* it." She moved upwards, resting her head just underneath his chin. In his arms she felt so safe...so protected. "It just makes me wonder if all of this is worth it now. All the headaches, the stress of running a company...the scrutiny of the press...after today it just all seems to not matter."

They lay in silence for a time, listening to the sounds of the Columbus night. Cars whizzed by below, and in the distance they could hear jets taking off and landing at the airport. The odd shout or screech of tires filtered up to them, but for the most part all they heard was each other's breathing. Neither wanted to move for fear of breaking whatever rhythm they had going right now.

The next time Dalan spoke, Zig Zag's eyes widened in surprise. It wasn't what he said that shocked her, but rather how he said it...in particular...how he *sang* it:

*Night-time sharpens
Brightens each sensation
Darkness stirs and wakes imagination
Silently the senses
Abandon their defenses*

She looked up at him expectantly, seeing his smiling face. Her heart fluttered with each note he sang. His voice was quiet, but every note was in tune, as though he'd been singing all his life. She felt his chest rise to take in another deep breath of air, and yearned to hear more of this enigmatic tiger's song:

*Slowly, gently, night unfurls its splendor
Grasp it, sense it, tremulous and tender
Turn your face away from the garish light of day
Turn your thoughts away from cold unfeeling light
And listen to the music of the night*

*Close your eyes
And surrender to your darkest dreams
Purge your thoughts
Of the life you knew before
Close your eyes
Let your spirit start to soar...
And you'll live as you've never lived before...*

Zig Zag felt another tear well up in her eye before it ran down her muzzle. First, he'd saved her from death, then comforted her as her mind tried to absorb the absoluteness of what nearly happened, and now here he was, serenading her on the rooftop of the studio, bathed in naught but moonlight.

Softly, deftly, music shall surround you

*Feel it, hear it closing in around you...
Open up your mind, let your fantasies unwind
In this darkness which you know you cannot fight –
The darkness of the music of the night*

*Let your mind start a journey through a strange, new world
Leave all thoughts of the world you knew before
Let your soul take you where you long to be...
Only then can you belong to me...*

Zig Zag's moved her tail up to cover the both of them. Her heart began to pound insistently with each note the tiger sang. He never took her eyes off her as he went through the lyrics, which told her that he was indeed singing to her, and not merely serenading the moonlight.

*Floating, falling, sweet intoxication.
Touch me, trust me, savour each sensation
Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in*

*To the power of the music that I write –
The power of the music of the night...*

There had been no music...no grand orchestra to accompany the words, but Zig Zag swore she could hear Andrew Lloyd Webber's majestic finale to the song echo in the wind. She felt her body begin to tingle as Dalan's hand ran through her hair again, gently scratching behind her left ear.

*You alone can make my song take flight –
Help me make the music of the night...*

Zig Zag moved up Dalan's body and kissed him. It was gentle at first, but soon the kiss evolved into a soul-searing exchange the likes of which romance novels spoke. Dalan purred deeply, his entire body vibrating as he held Zig Zag close to him. She moaned softly as she let the passion of the moment guide her actions.

Before the sun rose on the next day, Dalan had been given a first-hand demonstration of why Zig Zag's movies were the most sought after in the industry. At the same time, Zig Zag learned firsthand what true, raw passion was all about. They'd made love all night on that rooftop, taking and giving equal amounts of pleasure and passion. In between they would simply lay there, wrapped in each other's arms and savouring the sweet afterglow of each other.

* * *

Their relationship lasted for over a year, during which time Zig Zag's eyes were opened to experiences other than nightclubs and rave parties. Musicals, theatre, and other such culture-based experiences were shared by Dalan with her.

On nights when they didn't go out, Dalan would cook for her, or even sing for her when the mood was right. She also learned that he was a skilled guitar player and there

were many nights that found them on the rooftop, Zig Zag listening with delight as her tiger lover serenaded her in the night.

Alas, as with many good things, it came to an end eventually. Dalan learned that his beloved grandfather had been brutally murdered by some unknown assailant. He knew he had to return home and find out what happened, and Zig Zag understood.

On their last night together, Zig Zag confessed to Dalan that while she would cherish all the time they'd shared, he was not the one with whom she saw a future. Had it been said to make it easier on his parting or not, as he embraced her he whispered in her ear. "Dearest heart...don't let that which we've sparked together go out and leave you cold once more. You *will* find that someone someday, and when you do, don't worry about me."

The next morning, Dalan packed up his car and shared one final kiss with Zig Zag before he drove away...drove out of her life...drove to his destiny...

* * *

Two years had passed since that black Charger drove out of her life forever. Double Z Studios was riding its highest success wave yet, and the money and prestige was pouring in. Every title released with the Double Z logo had a shelf life of a few weeks before stores were ordering more copies. Online sales of videos threatened to crash their website on a near daily basis. Were it not for several hardware upgrades recently, not even Sabrina's technological savvy would have saved them.

To celebrate yet another banner week, Zig Zag had reserved another nightclub for her staff to go to and party until the sun rose. While normally she'd be right in there with the best of them, tonight she decided to remain at the studio for a while. She claimed it was to catch up on some paperwork, but in truth she felt the need to be alone...if only for a while.

She leaned out against the rooftop ledge, revelling in the distant silence of the approaching night. She felt content this night, as if for this moment all was right with the world. No vile memories of her childhood were pounding at her consciousness, and that nagging voice of pessimism was silenced for the moment. For some, such silence would be deafening, but Zig Zag drank it in and let it flow through her like a refreshing breeze.

She heard the rooftop door open and turned. Part of her expected a rather large, hulking tiger to step through it as he had so many years ago, but instead, a medium gray canine emerged, a smile on his face as he stared at her. "Thought I'd find you up here," he said. He walked towards her, and she noticed the gifts he bore with him: A bottle of wine, two glasses, and a bouquet of no less than two dozen red roses.

"James," she said, identifying the approaching canine as James Sheppard, the love of her life. They'd only been together for just over a year, but Zig Zag had opened up more to him than with any other lover she'd known. Amazingly, instead of being repulsed by her past, James seemed to love her more with each barrier that came

tumbling down. He went out of his way to make her feel as though no one else in his life mattered more than her. He'd risked his business, his family, and even his life to remain by her side...something no one else had ever done for her...

Save one...

The two embraced tightly and shared a passionate kiss that lasted several minutes. When she finally looked at him she couldn't help but smile...he always made her smile. She couldn't help it; one look at that muzzle and her heart fluttered with joy, which always made her lips twist into a grin. "I would have come down," she said, noting the gifts. "You didn't have to come looking for me."

"I know," said James. "And hey, if I'm intruding here I can easily go..."

"Oh no you don't," Zig Zag chided, pulling him close to her. "Gentleman callers bearing gifts don't get off that easily."

James smiled and presented the roses to Zig Zag. "Happy...um...evening on the rooftop day," he said, making her laugh. She graciously accepted the roses and buried her nose in them, inhaling their fragrance as ravenously as an oxygen-starved person would take in fresh air. "So, what brings you up here?" he finally asked.

Zig Zag told James about the enigmatic tiger who'd saved her life all those years ago, and about how he helped open her eyes to the finer things in life. James listened to the story as he poured his love a glass of wine. At first he thought perhaps he was being compared to this tiger, but the look in Zig Zag's eyes told a different story. While she did miss him sometimes, she never regretted his leaving, for that path finally led to him...her one true love.

"Sounds like he really cared about you," said James after a time. "Yet you've heard nothing from him in all this time?"

Zig Zag shook her head. "Not a word," she said. "I think it was for the best, though...he showed me what love could feel like, but I don't think there was any real love there." She took the wine glass handed her by James. "Deep down, we both knew we weren't meant to be, but for that time I guess we just gave each other what we needed."

They drank deeply of the wine, enjoying its fruity flavour. James watched Zig Zag and couldn't help but smile. Part of him wanted to thank that tiger for showing her how a lady should be treated, for it was far more than her looks that had made James Sheppard fall in love with her. Within her shone that rarest beauty of all...the kind of beauty most endearing to anyone:

The beauty of the soul.

Her wine finished, Zig Zag moved towards James once more, wrapping her arms around him and holding him tightly. On this rooftop, she'd begun a journey that had led her to this moment...to this embrace. Being here now felt to her as if everything had come full circle.

As she felt James' arms around her, Zig Zag thought she heard Dalan's voice as a whisper on the wind. She closed her eyes, her mind trying to remember that deep, all-embracing voice of his, telling her that someday she would find true, honest love.

He'd been right.

Tonight, the only serenade came from James' steadily beating heart. To her, though, it was the sweetest music she'd ever heard, because it was beating for her.

The End.