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Animal Café

Chapter 9 - A Multitude Of Pets

"Asha! I'm super tired... You must let me sleep!"

It was 2 am already. Vix was deep asleep next to me on my bed, but Asha just wouldn't leave me alone. She was still on a high since the movie night and the unexpected sleepover at my place, but I needed to get some sleep as I was working tomorrow. The snow leopard wouldn't stop cuddling me, and I didn't know what to do anymore.

"Why don't you listen? You won't be able to wake up tomorrow, either."

Nothing worked. As much as I tried to explain Asha we needed to sleep, she climbed on top of me again and wrapped her paws around me. I was exhausted, and she pushed me to my limits. Lucy's words then echoed in my head; I needed to take charge.

As much as Asha was the cutest and sweetest thing in the whole universe, she was such a disobedient pet. She wouldn't sleep, she wouldn't wake up, she got in the shower even if I said no... It became clear to me that she wouldn't listen to me tonight either.

"Asha... Enough! Come!"

I got off the bed and wrapped my fingers around her collar. Despite her attempt to resist, I dragged her to the hallway, where I retrieved her leash.

"You'll sleep on the couch... until morning."

After clipping the leash to her neck, I dragged her to the living room and tied her to the coffee table's leg; her cushy rubber paws would prevent her from untying herself. It was mean, but at some point, she had to listen. I couldn't afford to stay awake all night.

The little snow leopard just stared at me, making me feel all guilty, but she left me no other choice but to take this harsh measure. I heartbreakingly turned around and returned to my bedroom.

I rejoined Vix and pulled the blanket over both of us. The latex fox was so warm and soft; I got closer to her, and we spooned for the remainder of the night while SLEEPING!

I felt something pushing me in the flank...

"Mmm?"

When I finally cracked my eyes open, I saw Vix, kneeling next to me on the bed, trying to wake me up; that was unusual behavior. Vix was more the type to cuddle with me gently until I opened my eyes.

"Vix... Let me sleep more... I'm... tired."

The cute fox girl shook her head and kept pushing me, a little bit stronger this time. Then she pointed at my cellphone on the nightstand.

"My... phone? What about it?"

I stretched my arm to grab it, and the first thing I noticed on the screen was the time. The blood drained from my face. It was 10:15 am, and I was supposed to be at work at 11 am today. I would barely have time to get there because of the slow public transport. On top of that, I had to make the pets eat and bring them back to the café; this alone would take me almost an hour. There was no way I could leave them here, starving all day when they should be at the café with Lucy.

"Vix... I'm in trouble... I will miss work..."

Then my phone vibrated... I rechecked it, and this time it was a message from Lucy. "Where are my pets? We are opening soon!" I started to panic. I couldn't lose my job; it had been hard enough to find one because of my communication disorder. The company I was working for was so big that they wouldn't hesitate to fire me or put a negative mention in my profile. Trembling was the only thing I was good at when the time came to deal with stressful situations.

"Viiiix... What do I do?"

Based on how she cocked her head sideways and brought her paw to her chin, the poor pet girl wasn't too sure either. She had warned me I was late as soon as she could after waking up, but she, too, went to bed very late because of Asha's bad behavior.

Then out of nowhere, she tapped on the back of her neck with her cushy paw...

"Vix?"

She tapped again and motioned her other paw, asking me to hurry.

"You... You want me to... take off your... suit?"

The fox girl nodded energetically and tapped on top of her wrist, meaning that I didn't have time to argue.

Two days ago, I met Trixie out of her suit, and it had been a very special moment. It went fairly well, but it had also been very strange. Doing the same with Vix would be even more bizarre because she was my favorite pet so far. She was the one I was always going to for comfort because her hugs were just magical. If I learned what she looked like as a human, it would probably change things... For the best or for the worse... that remained to be seen.

Then a paw poked me in the forehead, pulling me out of my negative thinking loop. Vix tapped again on her wrist and motioned her paws some more. I guess there was no other option anyway, and Vix was pretty convinced that she wanted to go through with this.

"O... Okay. Stay."

I got off the bed and went to get her key that I had left on the kitchen countertop last night when we got home. It was easy to tell which one was her key because it dangled from a rubber keychain shaped like a fox's head; this was as adorable as the pet itself.

I made a quick stop to the living room, where Asha was still asleep on the couch, and I unclipped her leash from the coffee table before vigorously shaking her shoulder.

"Asha! Wake up! Wake up! We have to go now!"

That side task completed, I headed to my small bathroom to retrieve a wet towel. Remembering my experience in a pet suit, I roughly knew what to expect, and wiping Vix's face after removing her mask would be the right thing to do.

When Vix saw me returning to the bedroom, she turned around to expose the lock behind her neck. I knelt behind her and tried to figure out how to unlock this little metal block covering her zipper tabs.

"... Okay, Vix... Don't move..."

Just as I was about to insert the key in the small hole, a spotty rubber paw smacked my hand, way harder than any pets had done before, and the key went flying to the carpet. The snow leopard separated me from Vix and pushed her fox friend to the wall.

"A... Asha?"

Vix tried to struggle out of Asha's grip, but she was not strong enough. What was going on? The pets were always so cute and funny, why were they fighting now? I didn't like to see this... Was it my fault? What did I do? My eyes welled up, and I wanted this to stop. The stress disrupted my speech again, making me sound like an idiot.

"A... Asha! ... Stop! ... I... I... STOP! ... WORK! TIME!"

Asha pushed Vix away one last definite time, then walked to me with determination... She turned around and slapped herself on the neck.

"Y... you want... out? Instead of Vix?"

She nodded. Vix was now in the corner, curled into a small fox ball, and lowered her head. Something was very fishy here. It was as if Asha tried to protect Vix from something. Usually, the pets never wanted to get out of their suit, but now there was a battle for it. It made no sense.

I had no choice and no time; I needed to leave for work as soon as possible, so I ran back to the kitchen to grab the snow leopard key and came back to let Asha out of her suit.

After removing her lock, I started unzipping her mask. The first thing that struck me was how contrasting her shiny black hair was in comparison with her snow-white suit. As more of her humanity revealed, I saw her coffee-colored skin, making me wonder what her genetic heritage could be.

I did the same as Lucy had done with me; I stood behind her while I pulled her mask forward and immediately cleaned her face with the wet towel as I pulled out her nose tubes and mouthpiece.

"Bleeeh! Grooosss!"

As she complained, I recognized the same voice that had spoken to me at the mall a while ago. I had decided not to look at her back then, but now, there would be no way around it.

It was not fair. Asha had seen me countless times so far, so she wouldn't be surprised by what I looked like; but me, on top of all this morning commotion, I would have to absorb the shock that the identity revelation of a new pet accompanied, something I wasn't too keen on doing.

Asha turned around, and my heart skipped a beat. She was a pretty Indian looking girl, something I had not expected one bit as she didn't have a different accent than mine. My prejudices tricked me.

"Oh! Hi!"

"A... Asha?"

"Haha. Yes, it's still me! Help me take off those paws. Then you have to go to work... I'll take care of Vix."

"B... But... Vix..."

"Calm down, Clara... It's all good. Vix will be fine. She is just a bit sad right now because of what I did. I'll talk to her."

As I was tugging on her cushy mitts, Asha took a quick look at the depressed fox girl sitting in the corner of the room.

"I have my reasons for doing this... I prefer you to see me rather than her, at least for now. I'll explain later. It's all going to be okay, I promise."

"Are... Are you... sure?"

"Yes. Now go to work. Just leave me your apartment key. Oh, and can I borrow some of your clothes too? You can pick them up at the café tonight."

"Yes."

"Oh, and Lucy is going to be furious too, but I'll try to calm her down before you arrive. Go now. Go! You'll be late."

All of this was not fun. As I was rushing to the bus station, I was beyond confused by what had happened—bringing two pets home, punishing one of them, seeing them fight, seeing Asha as a human, all of those things for the first time. It was way too many emotions. I hoped that my day would change pace quickly because I wouldn't be able to endure too much more of this.

My workday dragged but was finally over. I took the bus back to downtown because I wanted to drop by the café before going home.

In a rush, I forgot my umbrella this morning, so it was a wet walk from the station to the café. I wished I had a latex skin like the pets; I would not have felt as miserable in the rain as I was right now. But I hadn't, resulting in me being cold and sad.

Arriving at the Pets & Cake, I paused in front of the door for a moment, trying to make sense of my chaotic day. Vix prevented me from getting fired, which was great, but I didn't like what happened after. If I were to enter the café, I certainly would have to talk about this with either Asha, if she were still out of her suit, or Lucy, who would have certainly heard about the whole story.

All this excitement was not why I liked coming to the café. I didn't want problems. I didn't want to explain things. I was simply coming here to cuddle and improve my life in a safe environment. I

didn't want those pets to feel as if they were humans to me. I just wanted them to be pets and nothing else.

I was aware that the real world was not made of cakes and cuddly pets; I knew that. But I liked it. My life was not easy, and this place was my escape. It was a world that didn't remind me of my problems, poverty, or social isolation. Was the recent chaos I experienced with the pets a sign that I was about to lose it all through mishandling and familiarity? The thought was like a set of claws shredding my heart.

The door opened, and Lucy poked her head out.

"Clara? What are you doing standing in the rain like that? Come inside right away before you get sick!"

"..."

Lucy couldn't see me crying as my tears merged with the rain, but as usual, she was an expert at reading the body language of beings who couldn't verbally express themselves. She walked out to meet me on the walkway and pulled me in her arms.

"Heeey! What's wrong, Clara? Why are you so sad?"

"I... I don't... know."

"Are you afraid?"

"... yes."

"Asha told me what happened this morning... Things are going a bit too fast for you, uh?"

"... yes."

"I know... I know. Those pets can be very intense. Come inside... There is no client. I know what will make you feel better. Come. I'll take care of you."

Lucy's presence was always reassuring. I saw her almost like my second mother at this point because she always knew what I was going through and always knew how to cheer me up.

Before I knew it, I was sitting in my favorite booth and had a cheesecake piece and a delicious hot chocolate in front of me. To my left was Asha, who was back in her suit, and to my right, Vix, who was still looking down a little bit. Lucy had told them just to sit there and not attempt to cuddle with me. Still, Asha dared to lean her shoulder on me to get a bit of warmth.

Her minimal display of affection was probably not authorized, because as soon as the lounge door opened, she pulled off me, perhaps fearing to be scolded by Lucy. The owner came to sit with us with her own hot chocolate mug.

"So, I closed early today... now we can talk to my pets quietly. Come here, Asha girl."

The snow leopard didn't hesitate and transferred to the other side of the booth to lay down on Lucy.

"You are so cute, Asha... But, you know you scared Clara this morning, right?"

Asha nodded.

"And you know that it was Vix's decision to take her suit off... right?"

Asha curled into a ball.

"Ashaaa... Answer me."

Asha reluctantly nodded.

"Good... You have to stop being so protective. Vix can think for herself. So no more of that, okay?"

Asha nodded again.

Lucy's gaze turned to Vix as she kept petting the now pacified snow leopard.

"Now, Vix... What you did was very brave."

Vix shrugged and lowered her head.

"It was! You were ready to do something very challenging for you to prevent Clara from getting into trouble. I'm very proud of you."

Vix leaned on me and grabbed my arm.

"Do you want me to tell Clara why it was so brave of you to ask her to remove your suit?"

Vix shrugged again.

"Vix, you know we discussed this before. It's part of you, and you need to trust your friends. I'm not going to force you, though. But you know what my opinion is."

Vix nodded and let herself fall on top of my laps, like a potato bag. I couldn't help but wonder what Lucy was talking about. What secret could Vix be hiding behind her cute fox mask? I lowered my hand on her lower back and began to pet her.

"So, Clara, Vix needs your support. But, seriously, I don't even need to tell you because you are already best friends. So, the reason why Miss Asha, here, prevented you from removing Vix's suit this morning is that she wanted to protect her."

"... From... me?"

"Hehe. No... from shame."

"Shame?"

"Yes. Shame. Our little Fox, she has a big scar on her head and face. If you ask me, it's really not that bad. But it's there, and Vix always had a lot of trouble accepting it."

"A... scar?"

"Yes... When she was little, she got attacked by a big dog, and it caused some damage. Kids made fun of her a lot and bullied her because of it. But now that she is an adult, she slowly understands that it doesn't matter... Right, Vix?"

Vix shrugged some more.

"So, anyway... Vix was ready to let you see her out of her suit just to help you mean a LOT. She really likes you, Clara. It's the first time she does something like this since she is my pet."

"..."

"See, my pets helped you a lot since you started visiting us, Clara, but did you realize how you are helping my pets too? They learn what it means to take care of someone vulnerable and that, sometimes, they have to put their own fun aside to do that."

"..."

"But it's not perfect, right, Asha? You kept Clara awake until late at night because you wanted to cuddle? And that is why you are not going to her place for the rest of the month."

SLAP!

That was unexpected. Lucy landed her hand somewhat hard on Asha's butt, who also had not apprehended this. There was probably no real pain due to this, but based on the pet's reaction, it looked like it was the first time Lucy did such a thing.

"Surprised? Alright, go play with the others now."

Lucy pushed Asha off the couch, and the pet went to sit with Trixie right away. Those two were definitely good friends.

"So, Clara. Do you want to sleep here tonight? In one of the capsules? It's raining too much to walk back home."

"... Yes. With Vix."

"Haha! Of course, with Vix. And because of all the trouble that those two caused you, do you want to do something special? Do you want to be a pet again for the night so you can play with your friends? I think you could use some pet time."

"..."

All the pets in the lounge turned their head in my direction. That offer certainly caught their attention... and mine. A wave of excitement coursed through my body. My usual lack of self-confidence made me tremble a little bit.

"Haha! That face! I'll take that as a yes... Come with me, I'll dress you up."

"... Which... costume?"

"AH! Not telling you... It's a surprise."

I was not even in costume when Lucy started to treat me as her pet. She grabbed my wrist and led me upstairs to the costume room, eyes closed. It didn't take long for her to undress me; for some reason, I wasn't as shy as my first time. Then, the shapeshifting process began.

Before I knew it, comfortable latex covered my body, cushy paws took away the usage of my fingers, and an amazing mask covered my face. The nose tubes and mouthpiece didn't feel nearly as awkward as when I was Trixie. Perhaps wondering what kind of animal I would be this time around was a higher priority for my mind. I could barely remember which pets were in the lounge today. I noticed Vix, Asha, and Trixie, so I knew I wouldn't wear one of those costumes, but I kind of forgot who the others were.

After locking my back zipper, Lucy turned me around and blushed at the result.

"Aaawww! You are sooo cuuute! Look!"

She led me to the full-length mirror. Seeing my reflection made me stop breathing. This time, I was a small grey wolf with fluffy latex ears and tail. This was one of the pets I didn't interact with so far, and I didn't even know its name.

As usual, Lucy couldn't understand that I was still Clara in the suit... She was not even trying.

"Come, Accalia! Let's go back downstairs... The others will be thrilled to play with you."

Accalia? What a cute name! That was adorable. I turned around and jumped in Lucy's arms for a hug.

This animal café certainly was a magical place for me.

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