

Phantoms
By Xaqtly

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This story takes place over the late night and early morning detailed in Chapter 18 of Zig Zag the Story.

Zig Zag looked around and found herself standing on the edge of a cliff, hundreds of feet above the ocean's turbulent azure waters. A breeze was blowing, bending the dandelions and ruffling her fur. She felt a chill and started to slowly back away from the edge when she backed into something. She turned and saw a small black and white tiger striped girl looking up at her. She was wearing overalls with a flower sewn into the front of them and she had a red bow in her long white hair.

She looked up at her with an expression that Zig Zag couldn't quite place. It looked a little bit like sadness, but without so much of the pain normally associated with it. It could have been curiosity, or... no, it wasn't. It was hope.

"Hope?" thought Zig Zag. "Why on Earth..." Then the girl reached out her paw towards Zig Zag. Not knowing what else to do, she took it and felt the girl leading her back towards the edge of the cliff. "Look," said the girl.

"I... I can't," said Zig Zag with a hint of fear in her voice.

"Why, are you scared?" asked the girl innocently.

"I just, I just can't. I can't look. Please..."

"I can look. See? I'm not scared."

"You haven't been through what I have yet," Zig Zag thought to herself. She wanted to hold and protect the child, because she knew the path that lay ahead for her. So much pain and suffering that could be avoided, she thought. She sighed and rubbed her eyes slowly.

"Look down there."

Zig Zag looked at the girl, deciding whether she could overcome her fears enough to trust her own voice from so many years ago. She had forgotten what it was like to trust somebody after having her trust broken again and again in so many different ways. She decided there was nothing her child self would ever do hurt her, so she moved closer to the edge of the cliff.

"See, down there? On the beach?"

As Zig Zag strained to see what was down there, she saw something. Maybe it was a person, it sort of looked like one. Was it somebody she knew? She turned to look back at the girl but she was gone.

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"Where did she -" Zig started, when the cliff she was standing on crumbled and she fell into empty space. She screamed and felt her heart rise into her throat as she panicked, seeing the beach coming closer and closer. Then she saw the person on the beach and recognized him. It was James. She was falling directly towards him and as she got closer she could read his expression. He was terrified.

Time seemed to slow as she fell closer and closer to James, his arm raised protectively above his head. She could see his eyes now, and saw herself in the reflection. She barely recognized the look of pure fury on her face, and she saw the heavy crystal statue she was holding threateningly.

"No!" she shouted, and sat bolt upright in bed. She was breathing hard, her head twitching from side to side trying to get her bearings. Long seconds later she realized she had been having a dream and willed herself to calm down. "No, I didn't..." she began, when the memory of this evening started to come back to her.

"Oh, no. I did," she said ruefully. She shuddered slightly and pulled the blankets closer about her. She leaned up against the headboard and hugged her knees to herself. "I can't believe I did that," she lamented. "How could I have done that? Why do I always jump to the wrong conclusions?"

She thought back to the evening they had shared together and smiled wistfully. She had been so happy to be with James, and he was such a perfect gentleman. All she had wanted to do was show her gratitude to him for treating her so nicely. But what did he do? He refused to spend the night, that's what.

"Stop it," Zig Zag intoned bitterly. "We've been over this already." She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes, willing the anger to recede back to where it came from. "He wasn't ready and I shouldn't have pushed him. And I definitely shouldn't have threatened him," she added with a hint of regret. She thought for a moment and realized what she was doing. If James had been like any of her other dates she would be getting a good night's sleep right now, satisfied that she had been able to drive them off.

But James wasn't like any of her previous dates, was he? He treated her like royalty, and that look in his eyes when she caught him staring at her... it was unlike anything she had ever seen before. There was something significant behind those grey eyes, something meaningful. She didn't know what it was, but she decided that she wanted to find out.

She settled back down into her bed, pulling the covers up around her neck. She slowly drifted back into sleep, a smile lifting the corners of her muzzle.

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"What -" Zig Zag exclaimed as she sat up quickly and looked frantically around the darkened bedroom for any sign of movement. There was none, and she realized she had just woken up from another dream.

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"Damn it," she thought angrily. "Is a decent night's sleep too much to ask for?" She put her paw on her forehead and flopped back down on the bed. She rubbed her temples and felt her frustration slowly ebb away. It was replaced by exhaustion, but Zig Zag knew she couldn't go back to sleep again right now. She wearily forced herself to get out of bed, put on a robe and walk to the living room.

She sat on the couch, trying to put her thoughts in order. Was it guilt? That would probably explain the fact that she couldn't sleep. She felt badly for what she did to James, even though at the time she thought it was justified. But as she thought more about it, she had a realization. It was more than just guilt. It was fear.

"Fear?", she asked herself incredulously. "Of what?"

"Of losing James, Zig. You know I'm right."

"How can I be afraid of losing him? I don't even have him yet! We've only been on three dates!"

"You know I'm right," her inner voice repeated. "You know what that is behind his eyes when he looks at you."

Zig Zag snorted with contempt. "Yeah, right. There's nothing more there than there is in any guy's eyes when he sees a porn star in person." She looked at the floor bitterly. Even she wasn't convinced by her own words.

"You know that's not true, Zig," her inner voice persisted. "We both know it."

"Leave me alone!" Zig Zag shouted. "How am I supposed to protect myself when you want me to go running into James' arms like some clueless schoolgirl with a crush?"

Zig Zag stood up and paced around the room furiously. "I don't even know him! At least, not very well."

"Not yet," said the disembodied voice.

Zig Zag slowed and collapsed in a chair. "What do you want from me?" she asked weakly.

She didn't hear a response, so she closed her eyes and focused on her feelings for James. She did like him a lot, that was for sure. He treated her with respect and she enjoyed his company very much. She thought about what had happened that night, and she knew it was just a misunderstanding and she hoped no permanent damage had been done. She decided she would try to make things right between them, which was a first for her.

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Satisfied that she had thought things through to their inevitable conclusion and happy with the results, she got up and walked back to her bedroom, yawning in the darkness. She climbed into bed and was asleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

She looked up and there was James, holding out his paw to her, a smile on his face. They were on the beach, sun beating down and tiny waves gently lapping at the shore. Zig Zag smiled and took his paw, then placed her paw behind his head and kissed him deeply. He placed his paws around her waist and returned her kiss.

As she slept, Zig Zag smiled.