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LVIII – Long haul

Six weeks had passed since Esteban's father had killed himself. Jean realized those had been the first quiet, relatively uneventful weeks in a very long time. Miriam had moved in at her new place in Columbus, and finals were over and done with. Everything had returned to a routine. The movie was coming along well as far as she could tell, although she only went to the studio when Zig Zag needed her to clarify something in the script now. Mostly that was dealt with over the phone, anyway. Gabrielle and Yohni were doing great as well. She had more or less moved in with Esteban herself. Officially she still lived with Gabby, and she did spend about half her time there, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that she would eventually move out to live with the wolf, full time.

Miranda and Peter had come by for dinner a couple of weeks ago. She had a feeling they'd both be seeing the squirrels a lot more in the future. They were very nice furs and despite Peter's terrible injury, he held no ill will towards either her or Gabrielle. Something she felt was very impressive. Deep down, the vixen questioned if she'd have coped it as well as Peter did. Probably not, she realized. She'd gone to visit Sergeant Otetiani with Gabrielle as well. He'd been let out of the hospital by that time, but Miranda had helped find his address and they'd dropped by. He was still recovering from his injuries and on sickleave from the force as a result. It had been a pleasant afternoon.

The mountain lion had said he'd taken worse when he was in the army, and they'd spent the afternoon chatting and making socially polite conversation.

William Pongo had dropped by one afternoon as well. He'd retired from the force. Something Jean was a little sad about, but she understood why, when it came down to it. The orangutan was getting older, and he wanted to spend time with his wife and children. As far as she understood, the first grandchild was underway, too. She hadn't asked, but she could make out that William was in his early fifties. Early for retirement but she felt pretty sure he wouldn't be idle for very long. Something told her he'd be busy with something else very soon.

In short, life was good. For once, life was treating not only her, but everyone she knew fairly well. Her father had started calling regularly, to check up on her, just to make sure she was okay. It was touching, really.

So yes, life was pretty decent, lately. She'd even done well on her finals. So had the rest of the SNF. Jean had noted with no small amount of pride that all four of them were in the top ten of their year. It had shut up a few of the established sororities good and proper. Lizzy had turned up for the last dance of the year wearing a T-shirt saying "SNF Rulez!" and camouflage pants, combat boots and a beret. It had been a laugh, amidst all the overdressed femmes wearing gowns that were definitely out of their normal price range.

And now...the convention was only a day away. Jean had to admit to herself she was feeling a little ill at ease about it, but the rest of the SNF had unanimously agreed to come along and Gabrielle could barely sit still in a chair five minutes in a row for excitement. Esteban had been to conventions before and took it all in stride. Somehow, she felt she was the only one who was slightly nervous about the whole ordeal.

"Easy, vixen. How dangerous can it be? It's just a porn convention. They won't *eat* you..." she said to herself and immediately regretted her choice of words.

Shaking her head, she went back to packing. They'd be gone for six days. The first day would be setting up, then four days of convention and then one day for packing up and going home.

Gabrielle entered the bedroom. She had the same enormous grin on her face that she'd walked around with for the last couple of days. "Are you ready, Jean? It'll be *fun*...come on, relax a little," the bronco said and sat down on the bed.

"I don't know...it'll be great to go to San Francisco, that's for sure. But it'll be a lot of hard work too and Zig Zag says she's going to need me to take part in several meetings with various distributors. I thought she meant she just wanted them to see who wrote the script but she's told me she wants me to actually get up there and TALK to these furs," Jean said, nervously.

"So? It's history, however you look at it and I don't know anyone who loves that topic as much as you, dear. You can make dead furs listen with interest," Gabrielle said and flopped back.

"Thank you. I hope you're right. Anyway...there's something I have to talk to you about..."

"Go ahead?"

"When we get home, I'm thinking of moving in with Esteban. Full time. Not right away but...soon. I know he would like it and it'll be a little closer to where Miriam lives, so it'll be easier when she has to pick me up for classes," Jean said, biting her lips and looking at her roomie.

Gabrielle sat back upright and nodded. She looked quite serious. "Then I'm very happy for you," she said, solemnly. "It's not as if it hasn't been coming for a while and I am very happy that you're going to take the plunge. You don't need me anymore..."

Jean spun around and looked at her friend. "Don't ever say that!" she snapped. "I wouldn't be ALIVE if it wasn't for you, Gabrielle. Don't EVER say I don't need you. I'll need you all my life. You're my best friend and you're the only reason I'm still sane today. All my adult life I've leaned on you for support, for help, for protection. Now it's time I try to stand on my own two feet. It's time I live just a little. And it's time *you* got a chance to live *your* life...without having me around to constantly hold you back."

"You've never held me back. I've done what I've done voluntarily, Jean. But thank you for saying that. You'll always have a second home with me if you want it. Any time, for any reason. I'll always be there for you," Gabrielle said after a moment.

Jean put her arms around the equines neck and gave her a fierce hug. "And vice versa. Now let us get something to eat...I'm starved and we have a late flight to catch tonight, so we won't have time to eat a lot later."

"That's true. The equipment has already been flown there, I think. Zig Zag's arranged for Kentiger to fly us all there and back again. Must be nice..."

"What do you mean?" Jean asked and zipped her duffel bag closed.

Gabrielle shrugged. "Having family with their own hangar full of airplanes."

"I suppose so. It's easier getting around at least."

Gabrielle nodded, and fell silent for a moment. When she spoke up again, her voice was quiet and somber. "I think in all honesty, she'd give just as much as the rest of us to just have a *normal* family."

"Funny you mention it. I said the same thing down in Mexico. That it seems like none of us have decent parents. I don't know about Zig Zag or her family life though..."

"Oh, it was just a thought. Don't worry about it," the bronco said and got off the bed again.

Jean didn't think more about it and quickly forgot about it. "So...let's get that dinner ready, shall we?"

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"You know you're welcome to come along, James..." Zig Zag said and leaned back in her enormous bathtub. She had her hair down, relaxing with a glass of chilled white wine.

James got a towel from the closet and brought it in, placing it next to the bathtub before climbing in. He shook his head and chuckled. "No can do. I've got two meetings in those four days...and even if there are others who *could* do them, I'd rather be present myself. It's pretty important stuff."

Zig Zag sniffed and stuck her nose up. "I see. It's *just* that you don't want to spend time with me..." she said.

For a moment, James worried that she might be serious, until she saw the twitch at the corners of her mouth. Then he nodded. "Oh, absolutely," he said in a gravely serious voice. "I have absolutely no honorable intentions with you and I'm only here for my own gratification."

"I knew it all along. You males are all the same!" Zig Zag said and then grinned widely. "Oh, I can't keep that act up for very long. Not with you. Anyway, I do understand. I've got plenty of meetings to go to there myself. I mean, it's not all signing T-shirts and body parts for me anymore. Mostly it's business meetings," the skunk said and slipped up against the coyote.

"Body parts? Do I really want to know about this part, Zig?" James asked, incredulously.

"Actually, if you think about it, it's very innocent. You see...unless we're talking about a hippo or elephant or one of those unfortunate Egyptian hairless cats...or even the odd chihuahua, whomever asks for a signature has to SHAVE that area first..."

"Now I'm really *sure* I don't want to know about the rest of it..." James said and looked cross eyed.

Zig Zag mock-swatted him and giggled. "Shut up and listen you...what I was trying to say is that I wondered for a long time why anyone wanted me to sign a patch on their upper arm or in the case of a few femmes, on the swell of their breasts...until I found out why..."

James couldn't help looking curious by now. "Okay, go ahead and tell me then..." he said, trying to not sound like he really wanted to know.

"A lot of them went straight to the nearest tattoo parlor to get it made permanent. You know how a tattoo'd area lose its fur. Basically, they'd walk around with my signature on their bodies forever. I have to admit that while I think it's touching in an odd kind of way...I can't help wondering what they'll tell the nursing home staff in forty or fifty years time," Zig Zag chuckled and sipped her wine.

"I'm so not going to guess on that!" James chuckled and took the wine bottle and the empty glass Zig Zag had brought for him. He poured himself a drink and sipped it. "Mmm...this is excellent. What is it?"

"Actually, it's just a cheap German wine. But I kinda like it."

"Just goes to show that quality doesn't *always* have to cost the tip of a commercial jet," the coyote said and sipped it again. His ears had perked up.

"I agree. I bought it originally because I liked the blue bottle," Zig Zag said. "I like the contents even more."

"No argument from me. Anyway...care to tell me a bit about what you've got planned for this convention? You've been all up in the air for weeks, Love."

Zig Zag smiled. She knew James was right. The last few weeks had seen her getting increasingly excited about the convention, she had to admit to that. Sipping her wine

again she put her feet in his lap under the water and purred. Her eyes half closed and she smiled a seductive little smile.

"What do you want to know?" she murmured, brushing a foot against James' stomach.

The coyote just swallowed heavily and blinked. "Errrrhhh...I forgot what I asked about..." he said and looked down at the waterline.

"Males...you're so easily distracted..." Zig Zag said and put her glass aside before slipping up to James and kissing him.

###

Yohni opened the door to the studio and went inside. It was rare for her to be there this late, but it was where they were all going to meet up before going to the airstrip. It was pretty quiet inside. She realized that while the studio was very rarely outright noisy during work hours, there was always some kind of sound. Sabrina typing on her computer. Doors opening and closing. Furs walking around. And if someone forgot to shut the door to the common room, generally the sound of two or more furs on the big bed in there.

Stress relief.

She ran a paw through her hair and hoped Gabrielle wouldn't be long in arriving. She needed some stress relief and right now, a hug from the bronco seemed to fit the description of what she was in the mood for. She put her duffel bag down and went to the common room, opening the door. Marvin was there. So was Esteban. And Wanda. No one else, so far.

"Hey girl, come in and have a seat. And a cup of coffee. We've got a long trip ahead of us," Wanda called out, waving Yohni closer.

"Yeah, I know...I remember the drives there. Those used to be fun too but frankly I can see the advantage of flying there. Driving from Columbus, Ohio to San Francisco...gahhhh, the idea is mind-boggling."

"I agree..." Marvin said and shook his head. "I'd have flown there anyway, even if it had meant paying for the ticket myself. No way I'd have survived that long in a stuffy car with four or five oversexed furs around. I'd be dead from pheromone poisoning before we hit the state line."

Esteban sipped his coffee and flopped one ear, looking at Marvin out the corner of his eye. "Eef you're haveeng problems weeth pheromones, Marv, you married the wrong fur. And you've chosen a weird place to work, compadre."

Marvin nodded. "I know. I'm suffering. I'm in absolute torment. Constantly. It's pure torture. And you're all such horrible, unlikable furs too," he said, deadpan. He sipped his coffee and slapped Esteban on the back of the head without looking.

"OW...awwww...mierda...now look at my *mane*..." the wolf complained and took out a hairbrush.

"I swear...he should've been a cat, with all that preening," Yohni said to Wanda and jabbed a thumb at the wolf.

Wanda nodded and poured a cup of coffee for the mongoose. "Here you go. All set then?"

"Yeah. It'll be strange to be in costume for that convention though..."

"We normally are..." Wanda said, shrugging.

"You're normally buck naked half the time..." Marvin pointed out.

"And your point is?" Wanda grinned and looked at the badger. "That's 'in costume' for a porn actress, y'know."

"Point taken."

"Eet's more like 'out of costume'. But that's steell normal for us, I guess," Esteban said, finishing with the brush.

"What I'm *trying* to get at is that it'll be odd walking around there, dressed like a Roman noblefemme," Yohni said and chuckled.

"How do you theenk I feel? I'll be sporteeng a net and a trident. I don't know how Zeeg Zag got the permits for eet. I mean, those are lethal weapons..."

"I think it's possible since they are theatrical props..." Marvin said and refilled the Jolly Roger-mug.

"Steell lethal weapons. Those swords may not be sharp but they're pointee!" Esteban noted.

"So's a knitting pin, Esteban. Do you forbid femmes to bring their knitting everywhere?"

"Ahh...so you're sayeeng eet's a matter of sharp edges, not pointy beets?"

"If it was about pointy bits, Esteban, You'd be a walking violation..." Yohni sniggered.

"Awww...stop peeckeeng on the lobo, no?" Esteban said and looked dejected.

Wanda couldn't stop herself from laughing at that. She got up to make a fresh cup of coffee just as the door opened. Sabrina stuck her head in.

"Just wanted to see if there was anyone else here or if I was the first to arrive. Is there any more coffee? I've got to do something with my paws before I go crazy," the skunk said.

"A little nervous, Sabrina? It's not your first convention..." Wanda said and waved the coffeepot around as if to say she was just making some.

Sabrina nodded and came in, sitting down. She sighed and folded her arms on her knees, leaning forward. "I know. But you know how I still feel about all this. It's not easy for me. I mean...you're all very nice furs, and Zig Zag is...well...she's incredibly hard to dislike, even though I wish she'd stop teasing me. That goes for all of you, incidentally. I mean this wasn't exactly what I had in mind, career wise, when I took my college degree."

Marvin looked sidelong at the skunk. "That's a bit glum, Sabrina. Are you thinking of quitting or something?" he asked, sounding slightly worried. "You know we'd all miss you, not to mention you do really great work."

"No, no...it's not like that. It's just that sometimes I wonder however I ended up here..."

"Eef eet's anee comfort to you, Sabreena, you could try talkeeng to Jean? I mean, she's een college now too. And I know she deedn't exactly have thees een mind either when she started out. Life's not always predeectable, no?" Esteban said, trying to keep his voice reassuring.

"That...might not be a bad idea. I'll do that, sometime. Thank you..." Sabrina said, perking up slightly. "Us learned furs have to stick together in this morass of depravity..."

"Depravity??" Marvin said and blinked.

"Sorry, just rehearsing. Remember last year?" Sabrina asked.

Wanda groaned and nodded. Yohni facepawed next to her.

"You're referring to the protesters, I take it?" the mongoose asked.

"Right on the money. Good grief. That was just...absurd," Sabrina sighed.

"You'll find those kinds of furs anywhere. Those who shove the bible under your muzzle without knowing what it truly says. Those who say that porn is degrading for femmes but fail to take into consideration that those of us working in the business do so of our own choosing and no one FORCES anyone to buy the products. Those who say that sex should happen in the dark, on Saturday evening, with the covers drawn up, after you've apologized for half an hour to each other for being so desperately lewd," Wanda said and shrugged. "In short, idiots will out. We can't change them...all you can really do is make up your own mind if you want to laugh at them or pity them."

"I have to admit I got pretty scared..." Sabrina said and shrugged. "They were very loud and very vocal. Perfidious even."

"Perfidious?" Wanda asked and blinked.

"Deliberately hurtful..." Sabrina explained.

"I know what the word means but did they shout anything at *you*??"

"Yeah...plenty. I was dumb enough to try to reason with them..."

Esteban winced and looked at the skunk. "Ouch...not the wisest move, Sabreena. I hope you won't try that again?"

"Trust me...if any of them come near me, I'll hammer them over the head with the manual for Windows 95!"

Marvin chuckled. "And they say *I* am violent when I tackle someone...forget the trident, furs, THAT's a lethal weapon that is."

Yohni glanced at the badger. "I remember what that table looked like after you tackled Gabby's dad. God almighty, Marvin, that one would've gone around the world if it had been in the Superbowl."

Marvin brushed his fingers against his shirt and beamed. "I'm just that good!"

The door opened again before anyone could respond. Zig Zag leaned on the doorframe and grinned.

"*There* you are! We're all outside, waiting for you. I figured you might've arrived early. Everyone else is ready. Come on."

The assembled furs got up and put away the coffee mugs. Wanda switched off the machine and poured the fresh pot into the sink. No time to drink it now after all.

"Let's go then..." she said and smiled, brushing her paws together. "Time to go make San Francisco a sexier place."

"I'll bet you ten to one there will be bible beaters ranting about Sodom and Gomorra, Esteban..." Marvin said and stood up.

"I won't take that bet. I'd loose," the wolf said. "I'm worried about how Jean we'll react to them..."

Yohni nodded. "Keep her in the middle of the group so she won't see most of them, Esteban. Frankly I'm more worried about what GABBY is going to do when she sees them."

Marvin stopped halfway out the door. "Oh Gawd...Gabrielle and a throng of bible beaters. That is just way too scary to contemplate."

Esteban nodded empathically and headed outside.

###

Alex O'Whitt looked at his co-pilot and nodded. "You take it from here for a while. I've got some furs to talk to," he said and left the cockpit.

The assembled group was larger than the last time he'd flown his second cousin somewhere and at least this time, it was for a less sinister reason. Half of them were asleep, or at least trying to get there. It wasn't very likely to happen. A few had found a deck of cards and were playing poker. Alex noted with no sense of surprise that several of them were getting increasingly undressed and the pile on the table wasn't made up of pennies or matches, but clothes. Then he took a seat next to Zig Zag. Across the table, Gabrielle nodded politely.

"Good evening, Alex, nice to see you again," the bronco said, smiling.

"And you too, Gabrielle. No "hubba" this time?" Alex asked, chuckling good-naturedly.

"Nahh...I'm spoken for now. No "hubbas" outside of work."

"Who's the lucky fur?" Alex wondered aloud.

Gabrielle nodded towards the snoozing form of Yohni on the opposite side. "Her," she said, a warm glint in her eyes.

Alex looked and nodded. "Good for you," he said and smiled, then looked at Zig Zag. "Everything okay with you?"

Zig Zag shrugged. "About the usual, I'd say. I'm doing okay though. I'm looking forward to this convention, at least. It'll be good to do something normal for a change."

"Normal...as in a porn convention?" Alex asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's normal in my line of work, Alex. Normal for you is doing pre-takeoff checks in the cockpit...and if that's a snigger I see building on your face, Gabrielle, don't!" Zig Zag said and tried to maintain a serious expression.

"Who me? Would I say something to that? Really, Boss, I don't know what you think of me..." Gabrielle said in her most innocent tone of voice.

Zig Zag pointed a single finger at Gabrielle's chest. "Anyone wearing that kind of T-shirt is bound to have a dirty mind."

Gabrielle looked down at her own chest. The T-shirt was nothing extravagant in itself. Black with pink print, showing the outline of a bird, with the word "**SWALLOW**" printed in huge, bold letters underneath.

Alex looked and shook his head. "Why am I somehow not surprised?" he asked and looked back to the skunk next to him. "Anyway, I'm glad you're doing alright. I worry, you know."

"Don't worry, it's just a convention. It'll be fun...even relaxing, compared to what has been going on these last many months," Zig Zag said and leaned back in her seat, getting comfortable. "You should come and have a look."

"Heaven forbid I ever set foot in such a place, but thank you for the offer," Alex chuckled. "I'm *trying* to stay on the straight and narrow of virtue, you know. And here you are, my own family, trying to lead me astray. Shame on you."

Zig Zag batted her lashes and put on a deeply sad and sorry face.

"Okay, alright, that's enough. Any more wet eyes, and we'll drown at an altitude of 25,000 feet," Alex chuckled. "No, seriously. Thanks for offering but I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you."

"No problem. I still think you should though, it'd change your perception of a few things, I'm sure," Zig Zag said and smiled. "You know, the United States is beautiful when seen from above at this time of night," she said and looked out the window.

"You can't see anything except the cities and major highways, I think?" Alex said, wondering what the skunk meant.

"Exactly. The lights make a nice pattern. Like a gigantic web. Somewhere out there, in the center, sits a very large, dark spider, watching her whole web every night. And all the little furs scurrying along have no idea that they're driving along the strings in her trap."

"I didn't know you had that kind of...poetry in your soul," Alex pondered aloud.

"You should see some of my movies then..." Zig Zag said, still looking out the window.

Alex cleared his throat loudly and looked uncomfortable. "I'd better get back to the..." he stopped himself and looked at Gabrielle who just whistled innocently again, looking at her fingernails. "To the job at paw..." he completed the sentence.

"Don't be like that, Alex. I didn't mean MY movies. I meant some of the things I've directed since I stopped acting. The one we're making now is going to get me even with some of the furs in Hollywood who wouldn't touch me with a ten foot poker, on account of my stripes. Think of it as me getting even for the family."

Alex looked cross-eyed for a moment. "Are you TRYING to embarrass me?" he asked.

"No...I'm not. Please, sit down again. I'm sorry, I am acting a little weird. I think it's just the relief that all the preparations are over and done with and we're finally *going*. I get like this every year at convention time," Zig Zag said, apologetically.

Alex nodded and sat back down. "I suppose that's understandable. I expect it takes a lot of work to arrange something like this. In that way, it's probably not that different from any company at an expo," he said and shrugged.

"I think you'd be surprised at how many similarities. We're there for four days of actual convention. Take a wild guess at how many meetings I have to attend in those four days?" Zig Zag asked.

"I have no idea whatsoever, but my guess would be a good few, at least. Six? Seven?" Alex asked.

Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head, before looking at her employer. She knew how many.

"Thirteen. In four days," Zig Zag said.

Alex blinked. "Okay, I admit that's not what I expected. Well, I'd best get back up front and take over the controls again before we start our approach," he said.

"Thanks for taking a little while to talk to me, Alex. I appreciate it," Zig Zag said.

"Any time," the tiger replied and winked, heading back to the cockpit.