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## *LXIII - Packing up ...*

Gabrielle looked around at the convention hall. She was aching in a lot of places. The last four days had been tough on her, physically and emotionally. A lot of new experiences and that terrible situation with Zig Zag's father. She realized it had been a lot worse for her Boss. At least yesterday, she'd gotten to meet Leo. That had been nice. She felt better knowing she had thanked him for his assistance.

Now, the convention center was empty. At least...devoid of guests. The place couldn't be called empty, quite yet. For one thing, untold amounts of garbage littered the floor. That, at least, wasn't her responsibility to clean up.

Yohni came up to her and put her arms around the filly, resting her head against Gabrielle's back. The bronco smiled. That felt nice. Warm and secure and comfortable. She put her paws over Yohni's and made a content sound. A few moments of relaxation before packing up to go home.

"So much for my first convention, my dear..." she said, quietly.

Yohni nodded and sighed wistfully as Gabrielle held her. "Yeah. I hope you enjoyed most of it."

"I did. It was fun. Lots of new things to see and do. Running around in armor for three days being one of them," Gabrielle said and smiled. "Have I told you today that I love you, by the way?"

"Actually, no. You don't do that very often but...it's okay. I know you do. The way you behave towards me shows it," Yohni mumbled.

Gabrielle thought about that. It dawned on her that the mongoose was right. She didn't actually say it very often. She wasn't used to expressions like that being used lightly. She'd have to learn how to loosen up about it.

"I'm sorry. I'll definitely try to get better at it," she said, quietly.

"How's Zig Zag doing, do you know?" Yohni asked.

"I think she's recovering. Anyway...let's not talk about that..."

"No, you're right. Anyway, let's get to work shall we? There's a lot of stuff to pack before we can go home."

"Indeed. I think it's nice of Zig to give us three days off after this, to recover..." Gabrielle muttered.

"Absolutely, but you do realize it's for a reason, right? We're going to Virginia soon...and she's most likely going to arrange everything in those three days, so that everything is ready to go in a couple of weeks."

"Join the army, see the world..." Gabrielle chuckled. "It should've been "Join ZZ Studios, see the world."

"Well, we haven't been overseas yet."

"I think that's only a matter of time, Love..."

###

"So...what was he like?" Jean asked. She could barely sit still in her seat for excitement.

Lizzy just smiled crookedly as she sipped her morning coffee. She didn't look like she was in any hurry to answer.

Miriam looked at Emma and shrugged. The mink clearly didn't know anything either. They both turned their eyes back towards Lizzy.

"Come on, Liz...you can't hold out on us like this! You went out on a date with a handsome, filthy rich, dashing young lion last night and you didn't come home until two thirty in the morning. What *happened*!?" Jean asked, trying again.

"Well, you said it yourself. We went on a date," Lizzy answered with a wide smile.

Jean groaned and put her head in her paws. "This is going to be a long haul, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. Do you expect me to just tell you everything?" the doe said, smile growing impossibly wide.

Miriam shook her head and kicked Lizzy under the table. "Be good. Jean hasn't kept anything from the rest of us..."

"And that from the femme who didn't tell us about HER boyfriend until she was ready to move in with him?" Lizzy chuckled. "Oh alright. We went out to dinner. Nothing fancy. I mean, he could've bought most of the restaurants in the city, I'm sure...but instead we went for a pizza. A real pizza, mind you...properly done. In a tiny little place owned by an old Italian couple. Only three tables in the whole restaurant...if you can call it that. It was soooo cozy."

"Not to mention so romantic it nearly defies description..." Emma said, wistfully.

Jean smiled. "It sounds great so far. Go on...tell us more."

Lizzy finished her coffee and shrugged. "We spent nearly two hours there. Just talking. About politics of all things. I think he rather enjoyed not having his parents beliefs rammed down his throat for a change."

"You're telling me...*seriously*...that you went out with that hunk and you only talked about politics? I don't buy it!" Emma burst out.

"Not *only* politics. We started out with that. Then he started complimenting me...he was *good* at it too, let me tell you," Lizzy said. Her eyes grew distant for a moment.

"Ooooh my...I know THAT look. I see it every time Jean starts talking about Esteban," Miriam grinned. "You've been hit...hard!"

"I have *not*!" Lizzy protested. "He's just...nice. You know...and very handsome...and he's got good taste and he's intelligent and..."

"...and you're hit," Emma giggled and nodded. "Definitely hit. So...are you going to see him again?"

"We fly home today. He's the son of one of the richest furs in the United States and I'm a Marxist history student from Ohio..." Lizzy began.

"Yeah...I agree. Barbara Cartland couldn't have done it better," Jean said and poured herself a cup of tea. "So...when's your next date?" she teased.

Lizzy groaned and shook her head. "You three are hopeless."

"Naw, we're just teasing you a little," Miriam said with a wink, leaning back in her seat.

###

The door to the office closed. A middle aged tiger turned around and looked at the other furs in the room. He looked like he'd just been hit full force in the face by a tropical hurricane. He looked like he could fall over any moment.

"What happened in there, Billy? I thought I heard...erhhh...*raised voices*?" a female lynx behind a desk asked.

"We were just going over next week's schedule...and then his phone rang..." the tiger answered.

"And...?"

"He picked it up...and he started out being all smiles. I think it was about his cousin. He's going to pick her and her entire group up in six hours time in San Francisco. Anyway...he started out being all smiles, and then he looked like someone had just shoved a peeled lemon in between his teeth and forced him to bite down on it. Then...I'm not entirely sure what happened but...well...he got angry!!"

"Not at you, surely?" the lynx said.

"No, Loni, not at me. At...someone else. Not even the fur he was talking to. I *think* it was his cousin, anyway. I didn't catch a lot of it. I just got out of there," Billy said and shook his head. He still looked badly shaken.

"Wise choice. I've never seen Alex angry before," Loni said.

"Take my word for it, pray *hard* that you never have to see it!"

"That bad, eh?"

"You need to call the interior decorator...that's all I have to say..." Billy said and shuddered.

"Sure...but why? What happened?"

"Let's just say his claws are really sharp. I mean *really* sharp, and his table WAS made of wood. Right now it's just so much kindling..." Billy said and rubbed his face. "I need a cup of strong coffee."

"Let me get that for you. Sit down, you look like you're about to fall over."

"Thank you, Loni...I appreciate it."

###

In his office, Alex O'Whitt was pacing back and forth. His immediate rage was dissipating, but only just. His table was, for lack of a better word, obliterated.

So Zig Zag's father had showed his ugly face at the convention. Deep down, Alex wished he'd been there. He knew it'd probably have resulted in bloodshed, but he couldn't help feeling guilty that he hadn't been there to protect his cousin. As far as he could understand, Gabrielle Ryder had been in the right place at the right time, but much as he liked the bronco, she wasn't family.

And this...most certainly...was a family matter. He snarled for the tenth time since he'd hung up the phone. He tried to retract his claws but he couldn't. His adrenaline was pumping too fast. He punched the wall to try to let some of the steam out of his system. It only resulted in sore knuckles. What was more, he knew it would be a really bad idea to fly for the rest of the day, being that upset.

He'd have someone else take his place, but there was no chance he wasn't going to San Francisco himself. He had to make sure for himself that Zig Zag was alright. She had precious little family that she could rely on in the first place.

"If I ever lay my paws on that...that...*slime*..." he sneered, but stopped. He couldn't think of anything that was quite painful enough.

He rolled up his sleeves and opened the door. He had to arrange for a different pilot to fly the Gulfstream.

###

James put his arms around Zig Zag from behind and kissed her neck.

"Are you okay?" he asked, gently.

Zig Zag nodded. "I'm fine. He got really angry when I told him. I didn't expect him to react quite so...explosively."

"Can I ask you something? I mean...feel free to tell me to shut up if you don't want to answer..."

The skunk leaned back against her boyfriend. "Go ahead."

"Why didn't you just...tear your father limb from limb. You're a very fit femme...and I've seen and felt your claws, myself. They hurt. You could've taken him apart...quite literally," James said, keeping his words soft.

Zig Zag didn't answer for a long time. Finally, she turned around in James' embrace and looked at him. "I froze up," she said, quietly. "I have gone over what I'd do to him thousands of times in my mind. How I'd hurt him. How I'd make him beg for mercy. How I'd..."

James nodded. "You don't have to go into details, Zig. You don't need to."

"Thank you. Anyway...I've had those thoughts so many times. And then I heard his voice. I could smell his deodorant. And...I was ten years old again. Please, James...don't make me speak of this anymore...please."

"Shhhh...don't go on if you don't want to," the coyote said and pulled the skunk closer, holding her in a warm, loving hug.

"Alex will want to find him...I've got to make sure he doesn't. It'll end in murder and I don't want Alex to go to prison..."

"We'll talk to him. All of us. Don't worry. Don't think any more about this. It's already in the past. It's history, Zig. Right here and right now...I'm holding you. And I love you. That's all that matters."

"Yes. Yes, that *is* all that matters," she answered and leaned her head against James' chest.

###

Alex O'Whitt waited for his second cousin and her entourage. He was leaning against a fence, trying to keep his mind occupied with something pleasant. His tail gave away his mental state though. It was twitching back and forth behind him, constantly. One of the ground crew of the airstrip had come over at one point to ask him a question and to Alex' shame, he had snarled at the fur. He realized he needed to apologize for it. He'd get it done before taking off. But for the moment, he wanted to see Zig Zag, and make sure she was okay. At least as okay as the situation permitted.

Again and again, he went over the phone conversation with her, that same morning. He didn't know why. Perhaps he was hoping to glean some secret clue as to where he could find Zig Zag's father.

He shook his head at himself. If Zig knew, she'd let him know. He was almost certain of that. And at the same time, he knew she probably wouldn't. The whole situation was driving him nuts.

A couple of taxis arrived. A moment later, a few more rolled onto the parking lot. The various furs of ZZ Studios got out of the cars. Alex scanned them to find a striped tail in the throng as he headed their way.

"Zig Zag...mind coming over here for a moment?" he called out.

Zig Zag looked up and said a few words to those around her, then headed in Alex' direction. Seconds later she found herself engulfed in her cousin's tight hug.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Alex whispered.

Zig Zag realized his voice was shaking from emotion. She nodded and hugged him back. "I'm going to be just fine, Alex. Just fine. I promise."

"Just tell me where he is. I'll find him. I'll make him pay. He isn't going to get away with this!" Alex whispered, without letting go of the hug.

"He didn't get away. I think he nearly pissed himself in terror when Gabrielle had her hoof on his Adams apple. Let him be, Alex. He isn't worth it. He really isn't worth it."

Alex sighed. "You know...I always thought you'd literally leave him spread out over a whole football field. When I...heard about it and after meeting you and all that. I really thought you'd tear him to bloody pieces."

Zig Zag nodded. "James said almost the same thing. You always imagine what you will do in a given situation, Alex. You imagine what will happen and go over it, again and

again in your head...and when it actually happens, you realize you're just as unprepared as if you'd never gone to the trouble in the first place. He isn't worth it. Spending time in jail over him...would mean he's won. He tried to destroy me. But look around you. Just...take a moment to look around and tell me what you see?"

Alex did. Finally letting go of the hug, he looked around. "I see an airstrip, your employees, the taxis, the Gulfstream...I see...wait...wait a moment.." he mumbled. It looked like someone had turned a light bulb on over his head.

Zig Zag just smiled a bit. "I see you understand."

"I see your friends, I see your family. I see the employees you have because you've come out on top and because you've created your own success against all odds. Heh...you're right. He really isn't worth it," the tiger said, a smile spreading on his face.

"No he isn't. He can't take these things away from me if I don't let him. And I'm not going to. What does he have? A sick fantasy and no one left in the whole world? A constant fear that someone might recognize him and make good on what Gabrielle at least only threatened to do with her sword? Or worse? He's a ghost, Alex. A ghost of the past and you know what?"

"No, tell me."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Zig Zag said and smiled warmly, patting her cousin's cheek.

Alex chuckled. "Excuse me a moment. Ghost or not, there's someone I have to talk to."

"Of course."

Alex straightened his shirt and headed towards the waiting group of furs by the taxis. He walked up to Gabrielle and extended a paw.

"I owe you one," he said, solemnly.

Gabrielle took the offered paw and shook it. "No you don't. But thank you anyway," she said with a smile. "I only did what any friend would've done."

"Well, I think I do. And I don't forget debts. Thank you, Gabrielle."

The bronco smiled and didn't contradict Alex any more.

###

Zig Zag closed the door to her home behind her and locked it. She turned around and looked at the familiar surroundings. Suddenly, it seemed different to her. She shook her head and sighed. Four days and one traumatic experience was all that had passed since she was here last. But it felt like a lifetime. Reaching out to her side, she flicked the light switch. She didn't move. Just stood there and looked at her living room. She couldn't really figure out what her feelings were at that moment. James had offered to go with her, but she had wanted a little time for herself, without anyone else around. Some time to think and settle in again.

Settle in.

She thought about those two words and shook her head. Since when had she needed to settle in, in her own home? This place was *safe*.

There was nothing for it, she told herself. She headed into the kitchen and made herself a cup of strong coffee. She brought it into her living room and sat down, putting her feet up on her table. She wriggled her toes and looked at them as if seeing them for the first time. The realization made her giggle.

She sipped her coffee and took a deep breath, smelling the scent of her home. Another few moments went by in silence. Something at the back of Zig Zag's thoughts nagged her. She couldn't figure out what it was.

She put her cup down and got up to get a specific book. She sat down with it again and opened it. Her scrap book. At least, one of them. The first one. She flicked through the pages, but it was hard for her to concentrate. That nagging feeling kept distracting her.

Finally, she sighed and picked up the phone.

It rang a few times.

"Hello, James Sheppard here..." the voice at the other end said at last.

"Hey James...it's me. I'm sorry to call on you like this after saying I wanted some time alone, but right now, my thoughts are racing and I can't really make heads or tails of them. You're always so blessedly levelheaded...I thought maybe talking to you would help me put things into perspective," Zig Zag said.

"Blessedly levelheaded...I'm going to have to remember that one at work. I'm sure it'll make a few furs there choke on their bagels in the morning. Anyway, you know you're always welcome to call," the coyote answered.

"Thank you. It's just...you know, when I came home and opened the door, it felt like I was stepping into a home that was brand new...even alien. And at the same time, safe and well known. I'm looking at my first scrap book right now and there's something going around in my head that I can't put a claw to. It's...a little annoying to be honest."

"I can believe that. Tell me though, right now...are you nervous...relaxed...comfortable? How do you feel?" James asked.

"Actually, I feel..." Zig Zag began and realized that wasn't an easy question to answer. She frowned and tried to find a way to formulate her thoughts. "I guess I feel like a gold bar in Fort Knox," she finally said.

James went quiet for a moment. "I think you're going to have to explain that one," he said after a while. "I can't figure out exactly what you mean by that."

"I feel safe. I feel like no one can get to me. At the same time...no one can *get* to me..." Zig Zag said, quietly. "I'm my own guard and security system. No one can get near...because I'm well protected. But it does mean that all I have is that safety."

"Erhh...Zig, I gotta admit I'm starting to feel a bit lost here," James said, sounding confused and worried. The skunk was sounding strange.

"I don't think it's that complicated, James. I've built so many walls around myself...and I've grown so used to always keeping my distance...that..." she began and sighed again. "I think the most important...dramatic thing that happened these last four days wasn't that my father turned up..."

"Okay, now you've got me interested. I'd say that was a pretty big and important event," James said, quietly. "Please, go on."

"I think the most important event was...that I realized how lonely I am," Zig Zag said. Her voice broke.

James fell quiet on his end of the phone for a moment. He blinked and felt uncertain how to answer. Finally, he took a chance. "You're not lonely, Zig Zag. I love you. I'll always be there for you, for as long as you want me to be. I just hope that you'll want me to be for the rest of our lives. You've got *me*. And if these four days proved anything...I think it's how devoted to you your own employees are. How much they care for you and for your safety and your happiness. I don't understand how you say you're lonely..."

"I know these things, James. I don't know how to explain this, properly. Think about it. I'm an *actress*. Or at least I used to be. I've put up this facade to the whole world that I'm

not only happy, but that I'm completely in control. Not that many furs have ever seen behind that facade. You have, because I let you in. Gabrielle more or less battered down the front and looked behind it out of sheer, bloody-minded curiosity. Jean has seen a few glimpses. Marvin knows me well enough that I'm sure he has long ago figured all this out. But...James...the terrible thing I think I'm coming to realize is...I've managed to convince *myself* too..."

"You mean to say that you put up that facade to protect yourself, and now that some of us are allowed to see behind it, you're beginning to realize that you've been deluding yourself?"

Zig Zag sighed and nodded to herself. "That's exactly it. I'm not always that strong, James. No one is. I try my best. I really do. But suddenly...I saw how much others really care. I've kept telling myself that I had to be strong because NO ONE would be strong *for* me. Because I had only myself to rely on..."

"You know the expression "Each fur is an island"?" James asked and sighed. "It's a load of garbage. *No* fur is an island, Zig. I think Alex told you that too, not too long ago. You've got friends...furs you can lean on and rely on. Not just me. You saw how your own employees rallied around you. They cared. You're important to them. Not because you're the source of their income...but because you are *you*."

Zig Zag fell very quiet a moment. The thought at the back of her head pulled itself to the fore and hit her, full force. "Oh bloody hell, James..." she muttered and rubbed her nose. "I should've realized this sooner. It's been right there in front of me."

"What?"

"I have to get a hold of Esteban. It's important. I'll call you tomorrow okay? I love you. Thank you for listening..."

"Any time, Zig...*any* time," James said, softly.

They hung up. Zig Zag got up again and found her notebook. She flicked through it until she found what she looked for, then she picked up the phone again.

"Hola, Esteban speakeeng..." the voice said on the other end.

"I've told you before, Esteban, you don't even need to introduce yourself by name," Zig Zag chuckled.

"Ahhh, but eet'd be terreblee eempolite, jefa," the wolf grinned. "What can I do for the world's best employer today?"

Zig Zag stopped dead in her tracks and blinked. "Esteban...can I ask you something?"

"Uh oh...thees sounds sereeous. Of course you can."

"Why do you always call me that?"

"What? The worlds best employer? Because you are...eesn't eet obveeous?" Esteban said. Zig Zag could hear the honest confusion in his voice.

Zig Zag didn't answer for a moment. She thought about what the wolf had just said, and more importantly, how he'd said it. Finally, she ran her free paw through her hair and sighed. "I'm sorry...I've just had a lot on my mind since coming home. Anyway...I have a reason for calling you."

"Thees sounds more and more sereeous. Ees evereetheeng okay? Should I get someone to come by your place? I know Gabbee knows where and Marveen and..."

"No no...it's okay. It's fine. I just remembered something a few moments ago. I remember you asked me recently, if there was some way you could keep working for me after Jean is all done with her procedure."

"Si? I'd very much like to, but I realize you can't just hire me weethout haveeng sometheeng for me to do..." Esteban said, uncertainly.

"I'll find something, Esteban. That's a promise. And thank you," Zig Zag said.

The wolf was very quiet at the other end of the line for a couple of seconds. "Gracias. That really means a lot to me. I'd...very much like to keep workeeng for you..."

"I know. And now I know *why*. And I'm sorry I didn't see it before," Zig Zag said. Her tone of voice was quite serious. "I'll see you at work on Monday, Esteban. Don't worry...there's still going to be a job at ZZ Studios for you when Jean is out of surgery. You have my word."

Then she hung up. She leaned back and sipped her coffee again. It was getting cold but she didn't care.

Zig Zag beheld the world and how it opened up, like a rose in bloom, before her mind's eye.

Then she smiled.

###

Esteban looked at the phone in his paw and blinked. He felt utterly confused. He knew something good had just happened. Even something monumental. But he wasn't quite sure *what* it was. At least not yet.

He sat down again and looked around his apartment. He already missed Jean. He got up and headed to the bathroom, undressing. A long, hot shower would be good. If nothing else, it'd help get him tired and he'd sleep better.

The water washed over the wolf and he let his thoughts wander. The last few days had been strange. Not because he'd been running around at a porn convention in costume. He'd done that before, although usually the costume consisted of even LESS than a loincloth and a trident. No...it was more the things that had happened there.

Jean had been going to all kinds of meetings. That was strange in itself...but not when he thought more closely about it. Zig Zag's main project was AVC at this time, and Jean was the expert...it made sense to bring her to all those meetings. Then of course, there'd been that situation where Zig Zag had gone missing and he and Gabrielle had gone off to find her. He replayed the whole situation on the back of his eyelids again, as he spread shampoo in his mane. It was no use. He couldn't figure out what had happened, except that Gabrielle had gotten very nervous, which in itself was unusual...and the next time he'd seen Zig Zag, she'd been a complete wreck.

She'd recovered well, and now this phone call. What had she meant by "And I'm sorry I didn't see it before," anyway? He couldn't figure it out. He had never made a secret of how much he liked working for Zig Zag. She was the kind of boss everyone should have.

Mostly, he missed his vixen. Now that he knew he'd have a job after Jean's surgery, he realized he had some planning to do. A lot of planning, in fact.

He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around himself and picking up another one to dry his mane.

Next stop, he thought, would be Virginia. It was a little strange to think...that this would be his last movie with ZZ Studios. Two weeks...then they'd be going off to Virginia to shoot the scenes needed there. That'd take between two and three weeks of hard work. Then they'd be done.

He chuckled to himself. "Eet's a sereeous movie, lobo. You could get deescovered from thees!"

He shook his head and smiled, heading to the bedroom to get a t-shirt. He didn't care if he got discovered. He wasn't leaving Ohio or the studio.

There were so many reasons to stay.