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LXV - Recognition

Jean looked at the bronco across the table. She smiled a little. This conversation had been coming for a while, and for a while, she'd dreaded it. Now, it felt like a natural thing to do. The only question was how to open up. Besides, Gabby looked like she had something she wanted to talk about as well.

"Gabby, I've got..."

"Jean, we need to..."

They both stopped and looked at each other, then giggles broke out. Gabrielle motioned for the vixen to go first.

"Thank you," Jean began and held out her paw, putting it on the table, so that the ring Esteban had given her was showing. "You remember before the convention, when I said I'd be moving in with Esteban soon? Well...that 'soon' has arrived. I'll be moving in with him as soon as it's convenient for you and we can get my things moved there. The rent should hardly be a problem for you here anymore, after all..."

Gabrielle nodded, looking at the ring. She smiled widely. "He took the plunge, did he?"

"Well, not like that. We can't get married. Legislation here doesn't allow it..."

Gabrielle blinked and looked confused. "I never gave that much thought really. But why not? I mean...when you're done with surgery, you'll be fully female after all?"

"I know. But the law doesn't take that into consideration. In the eyes of the law, I'll always be male. Meaning I can't marry Esteban. What REALLY sucks is that I couldn't marry a femme either. Either way, it'd be considered a homosexual marriage," Jean said and shrugged. She looked tired at the mere thought.

"You're joking??? No, don't start. You're not. I can see that. Good grief, sometimes I wonder if we ever really did move out of the dark middle ages. Land of Tolerance indeed. Bulllocks!"

Jean shook her head. "Don't. It won't change anything, Gabby, and I'm...resigned to it. Esteban knows this is the way things are. I love him. I want to spend the rest of my life with him. I want to make him happy. To give him...all I can. He's literally 'the one' for me. You know that. You also know I will always be your friend. We've come so far together, Gabrielle Ryder. So very far. I might be moving out of your home. I'm not moving out of your life."

"There's no chance in high Heaven or low Hell I'd LET you move out of my life, fuzzball, and you'd better remember it!" Gabrielle chuckled. "But I can't say this surprises me, and for the record, I'm very, very happy for you."

Jean smiled a little, crookedly, looking at her paws. "You know...I'm very lucky. Most femmes like me go through life without finding love. Most are scorned. Many have...barely any friends. Suicide rates amongst transsexuals are over four times higher than amongst the population in general. Mostly...because of loneliness and because there's a limit to how much hate and prejudice one fur can take before breaking apart. Look at me? For years, I pitied myself. Then one day...three furs beat me half to death, and I woke up in the hospital...and I woke up to life. Do I owe Lance Gulo and crew a 'thank you'? Is life really being that *twisted*, Gabby?"

"I don't think you owe them anything but scorn. They're not the reason you...woke up as you put it. YOU are the reason for that. It'd have happened anyway. Remember how you'd already faced down your parents. You were getting there. It's not Lance or any of the other you have to thank for this. It's yourself. But...I must say I'm glad you told me this. You see...something else has happened," Gabrielle said and sipped her tea. She looked quite serious.

Jean nodded and fell silent, looking attentively at her friend, as if to tell her to please go on.

"When I went by Yohni's place yesterday, I found her in the bedroom. To say she was falling apart would be an understatement. I honestly don't know what is wrong. I don't know what is going through her head, but no matter how much I try to reassure her I'm not leaving her, she keeps thinking just that will happen, and probably very soon. It's starting to hurt to witness. It's like she doesn't trust me. But at the same time, I know it's not about me. It's about her doubting herself and her own value."

Across the table, Jean bit her bottom lip and looked thoughtful. "I see. Sorry to ask a stupid question but...what does that have to do with what I just told you?"

"Fair question. I was going to tell you I'd move in with her if you wouldn't mind. I know I promised you to stand by you until your surgery was over, but...frankly, I don't think you need me in quite the same way anymore. It's not that I don't think you need me or my friendship. It's just changed, because *you* have changed. And that's a good thing. Take the last steps with your head held high, Jean. You know as well as me that you can do it."

Jean nibbled her lip a little longer. Then she nodded. "I feel strange right now..." she confessed.

"In what way?"

"I feel like I'm standing at one of those crossroads in life where you know that you have to turn either left or right, and there's no going back. You just have to take a chance."

Gabrielle laughed softly. "You can't seriously say that scares you. You've stood by the biggest crossroad any fur ever could and you made your choice then. Listen to me...you're my best friend, Jean. I literally owe you my life. And vice versa. We're bound together in a way even family isn't. And if you're not going to batter down my door at least four times a week, I'll be battering down yours, you hear me? This is part of life. It is a *good* thing."

"Why is it a good thing in particular? I mean...yes, I am looking forward to moving in with Esteban, but I'm not looking forward to moving away from you," Jean said. Then she looked cross-eyed. "That came out wrong..."

"I know what you mean though. But it is a good thing because this means that we've both grown. Maybe...even grown *up*. Neither of us would've been able to live apart from the other when we came to Columbus. It's a transition, Jean. A journey. From one point in life, to another. And the fact that we *ARE* moving and not stagnating...*that* is a good thing," Gabrielle said, quietly, sipping her tea again.

Jean smiled crookedly and looked at her friend. "You can be quite thought-provoking when the mood takes you, filly."

"I try..." Gabrielle said and winked. Then she lifted her mug and smiled. "To a brighter future? At least, brighter than our pasts."

The vixen clinked her own mug against Gabrielle's and laughed softly. "That won't be difficult to achieve. But yes, to the future."

###

Rhonda looked out the window of the car as the Virginia countryside passed. She smiled a little and rolled down the window, leaning out to let the wind whip through her hair for a moment. Then she leaned back in her seat and looked at her husband.

"You know...with a landscape like that, you understand why they called the state Virginia, originally."

"Yeah...it's quite a sight," Marvin said with a smile. "Good thing we don't have Jean LeBrun here. She'd probably start a small lecture about the first settlers and why they DID choose the name."

"Is she that bad?"

"Bad? No. She knows her stuff, but I admit there are times when she loses me totally. I think she loses more or less everyone at the studio, from time to time. Even Zig Zag."

Rhonda nodded. "It's probably nothing that can be helped. She loves what she does...and she's good at it from what you're telling me. Most academics tend to forget, from time to time, that not everyone understands what the hell they're talking about."

"Probably true. Anyway, we're nearly there."

Rhonda nodded and looked out the window again. "I'm grateful Zig Zag let us both go back here. I mean...it was a little stressed before the convention. And I know you have a lot of work to do. But there's a little more time to do it in, now."

Marvin nodded. His wife was right. There *was* a lot of work to be done. He'd gone over and over in his head, how to present the business offer to the owner of the land. But he had no idea how it'd be received. If things went badly, they might run into some ultra-conservative bible-beater. In that case, even Rhonda's dazzling smile and his considerable powers of persuasion wouldn't be enough.

And they'd never find a location as well suited as this again. It had to work out. Somehow, it had to.

He worried. There were so many things that could go wrong and much as he wanted to remain optimistic, life had shown a disastrous tendency to screw everything up for everyone lately.

"It'll work out, Marvin. Don't worry," Rhonda said, matter-of-factly.

Marvin shook his head and chuckled. "You know me far, far too well, dear," he said and turned onto a gravel road.

Rhonda smiled and shrugged. "I'm married to you. Honestly, I almost think you forget that once in a while," she said in a slightly teasing tone.

"Oh yeah? I'll just have to prove I haven't forgotten then!" Marvin responded, firmly but with humor on his voice.

"That's a promise I'm going to hold you to," Rhonda said and undid her seatbelt as Marvin parked the car.

They both got out of the car and looked around. They were quite far from civilization. At least fifteen miles to the nearest town. The entire area was made up of grasslands and lush fields.

And seven hills...with a river flowing between them.

Marvin stretched and turned towards the house, just as the door opened, slightly. A face peeked out.

"We're not buyin'!" a voice growled.

Marvin blinked and shook his head. "We're not here to sell anything. If anything...we're here to buy something."

"AHA! So that scumbag McNeish sent ya, did 'e?? Tryin' to buy my land again, is 'e?? Well, ya'll can go back an' tell Ol'e Snarfle tha' I AIN'T SELLIN'!!!" the voice snapped. The muzzle of an old front-loader was stuck out the crack in the door. "Now take a hike before I blow ya'll a new one!"

Rhonda swallowed and held up her paws in front of herself. "Oooh...kay. Listen, sir...we don't want any kind of trouble, alright? We'll be going," she began.

Marvin felt a fuse go in the back of his head. He'd just about had enough problems for one lifetime. "Look, sir. We'll go, but put that gun away. It's so old it's more likely to blow up in your paws and kill you than to injure us. We just wanted to rent a piece of land for a few weeks, but it's clear we can't do business with you. I have no idea who Ol'e Snarfle McNeish is. Good day."

He turned and opened the door to the car. Behind him, he could hear the door to the house being opened further. He looked over his shoulder, prepared to look into the business end of the front-loader. Instead, he looked at an elderly muskrat, leaning against the gun like a support.

"Nuthin' wrong with my gun! Served pa and grandpa admirable in two wars and five feuds, it did. Nuthin' wrong with ol'e Bessy," the muskrat grumbled. "Ya'll wanna rent some land? What land? And how long for?"

Rhonda swallowed once again and looked at her husband with a nervous expression on her face. She wasn't used to being greeted by a gun, no matter how antiquated.

Marvin turned around and nodded to the muskrat. "I'm sure she did," he said, diplomatically. "And I'm talking about the area with the seven hills and the river. I work for a movie-studio. We would..." he began and stopped himself dead in his tracks. He realized then and there that no matter what he did to avoid it, he'd have to explain what kind of movie. He felt a big pit open up underneath him.

Salvation came in the oddest of forms.

The muskrat's eyes widened considerably. "Marvin Badger...??? Blessed mother o'Jesus...MA, MA, PUT OVER THE COFFEE AN' BREAK OUT THE PUMPKIN PIE! MARVIN BADGER'S HERE!"

###

Timothy Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg leaned back on his couch and put his hooves up. He reached out and grabbed the remote control and flicked on the television set, zapping idly through channels looking for something interesting.

He yawned. One program was more absurd than the other. Or more tedious. Or both. Quality television was nearly impossible to come by anymore. He shook his head and flicked on to CNN. At least he could catch the news.

His stomach growled. He hadn't had any breakfast and it was nearly noon. It wasn't as if he had to be anywhere today. Nowhere except at home. That suited the young stallion

eminently well. He felt completely in the mood for a day on the couch, relaxing and doing absolutely nothing of any importance whatsoever. If he had to do anything, it should preferably involve pistachio ice cream.

That made his stomach growl again and he looked at it. "Oh very *well*," he mumbled and got up, reluctantly. "I'll put something in you and then you shut up the rest of the day and let me play lounge lizard. Deal? Good!" he said and headed into the small kitchen.

His apartment wasn't large, but it was comfortable. His parents had wanted to buy him something bigger. He'd refused. First of all, he didn't want to feel beholden to them. Secondly, it'd need cleaning, and he wasn't going to hire a maid. No servants. No more. He'd had enough of that kind of life.

New York was good for him. He felt at home here and it was far enough away that he rarely heard from his parents. He did know that something major had happened in Denver, though. Something that had apparently yanked his father's business away from under him.

Timothy didn't really care. He had left Denver to get away from the criminal circles he had realized his father belonged to. Well, that wasn't his only reason, but it was certainly one of them.

The door opened, and he looked out from the kitchen to see two shapes in the hallway. A short feline and a much taller equine.

"Hey there. Good of you to drop by...", he said with a big smile. "Who's your friend?"

The equine, a tall, dark and extremely good looking Arabian stallion, grinned. "This is Julie. She's from Ohio. Runs a place in Columbus called 'Satyr'. Just an old friend of mine."

Timothy blinked. "Ohio? Columbus? You're joking right?"

The feline, a panther, shook her head. "Not at all. Julie Black, pleased to meet you," she said and extended a paw. "Malcolm's told me a lot about you. At least...as much as one fur can possibly get told in the time it takes to get from Grand Central Station and to this place," she said with a slight smile.

Timothy chuckled and shook the offered paw. "Well, I hope he's just told you the good things then. No, the reason I'm so surprised is that I have a sister who lives in Columbus. I haven't seen her for some time, though...and I haven't really had any

contact with her either. Which is a crying shame and I should do something about it! *Shame* on me. Bad bronco."

Julie looked between the two stallions for a moment without a word. Just letting her eyes drift back and forth. "Heh...well that settled *that* unspoken question," she mumbled under her breath and chuckled. "Anyway, I know a godawful lot of furs in Columbus but I have to admit most of them are homosexual. Comes with owning a place like 'Satyr'. What's your sister's name, if I may ask?"

Malcolm took off his coat and looked at the other two. "I'll let you two get acquainted, while I make a cup of coffee for us all, hmm? Latté? Mocha? Cappuccino?"

Julie tried to contain a giggle, but couldn't. "And if I ever wondered if I had landed in a gay couple's nest, I think all doubts were just swept aside," she said and looked at Timothy again. "Anyway, if you'd rather not tell that's completely understandable. I'm just a curious, nosy feline. My brother's a cop. I guess it runs in the family to ask questions and wanting to know everything about everyone."

The bronco laughed softly. "Latté, Malcolm, thank you. As for my sisters name? Gabrielle Ryder. I'm really not sure what she's doing these days though. I've almost totally lost contact with my family, and for some reason, my parents won't talk about her. My mother sounds like she's ashamed of herself and my father sounds like he's ashamed of Gabby. I honestly don't know what's going on."

Julie looked blank for a moment. Then she looked around the room, inquisitively. She got down on her knees and looked under the couch. Not finding what she looked for, she stood up and inspected the lamp in the corner, closely. Then she checked behind the curtains.

Malcolm came out of the kitchen and blinked. "What're you doing?"

"I'm looking for the hidden cameras. I'm on 'Candid Camera', right?" Julie said.

"Erhh...no. You're not. Why do you think so?"

"Because Gabrielle Ryder is becoming a regular at 'Satyr', with her girlfriend. And she's the latest, big thing in the world of porn. She works for ZZ Studios...probably the most famous porn-studio in the country. Or should I say infamous. Now...where are those cameras hidden?"

Timothy shook his head. "Honestly...there aren't any cameras. But I guess you can say it really *is* a small world. Her girlfriend you say? Is that a short, gray vixen? They can't be dating, I'm pretty sure of *that*..."

"No, I'm not talking about Jean. She comes there with her boyfriend, regularly, though. Esteban. One of Gabrielle's colleagues and an old friend of mine. Gabby dates a mongoose these days," Julie explained, without looking completely convinced about the absence of cameras.

"How very odd...how interesting..." Timothy said and sat down, looking thoughtful.

Malcolm looked at Julie and chuckled. "Well...this is certainly a day of surprises."

"You can say that again," the feline answered and smiled crookedly. "Well, at least it's a fun surprise."

Malcolm nodded and reached out, ruffling Timothy's mane. "Hey...stop looking like someone dropped the sphinx's riddle in your lap. Your sister's dating a femme. So what of it? If homosexuality is an issue with you...you've got a *real* problem," he grinned.

Timothy shook his head. "That's not it at all. I'm just starting to understand why my parents won't talk about her. I still don't quite understand why my mother sounds like she's ashamed of *herself* though. They're just the types to condemn Gabby for doing something like that. God knows they gave *me* enough grief about being gay. Anyway, it's very, very unusual for two siblings to both end up homosexual. The chances are remote. Oh well, now I really do have to get a hold of her. I guess we've got a lot to catch up on."

Julie nodded. "Sounds like it."

Malcolm smiled to himself and headed back into the kitchen to get the coffee.

###

It was mid afternoon by the time Marvin picked up his cell phone to make a long distance call. He felt a bit heavy. The pumpkin pie had certainly been good. In fact, he couldn't remember ever having tasted one better, anywhere. Unfortunately, the pie had kept demanding that he ate another slice.

He'd had four.

And enough strong coffee to feel sure he wouldn't sleep for the next week.

It wasn't just strong coffee. If he'd dropped one of Gabrielle's shoes in it...he felt sure it'd have floated.

Rhonda was sitting next to him in the car. She looked like she felt more or less the same way.

"You know..." the female badger chuckled, "...if you can eat yourself blissful, I wouldn't mind it happening with that pie. That was fantastic!"

"I think that muskrat lady has had a lifetime of practice. Anyway...that went...better than I think any of us could've expected in advance, no?" Marvin said and chuckled.

"You can say that again. You know...I'm used to being stopped by ogling fans. And I know Zig Zag can't go anywhere without furs asking her for her autograph. But I admit...I haven't seen anyone stop *you* in a long time."

"I was just a linefur, Rhonda. It's not the most glamorous position on a football field. Furs remember quarterbacks, and really fantastic running backs and receivers. You don't see a lot them remembering those of us who take the big hits..."

"As I recall, Marvin, you were the one dishing *out* the big hits. You led your team in sacks and tackles two years in a row in college. I often wondered why you didn't go on to the NFL. I'm glad you didn't. I'd never have met you. But I do wonder."

"Because I got an offer to work with Zig Zag..." Marvin said with a shrug. "I've never looked back, and I'm happy I didn't join an NFL team. I have a very, very good life, Rhonda. I'm grateful for it every single day."

"Thank you for saying that, dear. But I mean, the big league is every football players dream, isn't it?"

"Put it this way, Rhonda...in college, you have to be really, really *good* at your game because in many cases, like mine, you're there on a scholarship simply BECAUSE you're good at playing. So you have to *stay* good. At the same time, you still have to pass your exams and get your degree. When you are done, and you have your degree...a whole host of scouts from the big league has been attending games and you go on to the draft, if you want to continue your career. There, you're put on display like some kind of...animal. You go to a dozen or more meetings and most of the time, furs talk to you like you're a total idiot. Then, if you're lucky enough to not be picked last, or maybe even not picked at all, you're still a rookie for a whole year. Rookies are generally looked down upon in that world, and can't really expect much playing time. Can you really imagine me,

inactive, on a sideline for a whole year?" Marvin asked and shook his head. "To make matters even worse...a doctor will come by frequently with a little pill glass and a syringe to administer injections of steroids or whatever else your team demands that you use to build up your body. Before you know it, you're unable to have kids of your own. It's a really *rotten* world. I've seen more than a few of my old friends from college...good sensible guys back then...degenerate into drug abuse or totally lose contact with the real world. I'm happy I avoided it. I have the worlds best boss, Rhonda...and I have the most wonderful wife any fur could *possibly* hope to have. I'm a simple fur in many ways. Why would I ask for more than that?"

Rhonda fell quiet and listened. Then she nodded. "I still think it was nice that they did recognize you."

"There are always some who like even the less glamorous players on a football team, my dear. A real fan of any given team won't mind if that team hasn't won a game in 10 years. That victory will always be "just around the corner". And he'll know every fur in the lineup, including their weight, height, bench press statistics and game stats, even if you woke him up at three in the morning and asked him to recite it. I think we just met one of those furs."

"You did win a lot of games, Marvin."

"It was a figure of speech, dear. Now...I'd better call Zig Zag and let her know that not only can we use the location, but we're getting it for a bargain too," Marvin said and entered the number.

Rhonda grinned and nodded. "On the condition that our two new friends get to watch some of the outdoor shooting. I think we'll definitely get our fill of pies."

Marvin stopped short of pressing the dial-button. He nodded. "I was pretty surprised how they reacted when they found out it was a blue movie. It didn't really seem to upset or offend them."

"I think you could've talked them into more or less anything, Marvin...true fans will usually do anything for their idols."

Marvin nodded and pushed the dial-button at last. Inwardly, he sighed. The real reason he didn't make it to the NFL was the fact that both his knees had given out. But he didn't like to think about it that way. It was easier when he rationalized it.

###

It was twilight when Gabrielle opened the door. Of course, twilight lasted almost two hours this time of year, but it *was* into the evening. She smiled a little and moved to hang her jacket on the coat-rack. Then she thought again and shook her head, instead keeping it on.

She entered the apartment, quietly. She could smell coffee.

"Yohni? Are you here anywhere?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm in the kitchen. I'm trying to decide if I want anything with the coffee," the mongoose answered.

Gabrielle's smile grew wider. Yohni sounded like she was in a good mood. "What's keeping you?" she asked and leaned on the kitchen doorframe.

"Calories, actually," Yohni said and shrugged. She turned around and looked at Gabrielle. "Why're you still wearing your jacket?"

"Well, I was thinking we should go out to celebrate," the bronco said, trying to keep an innocent expression on her face.

Yohni obviously didn't catch on and blinked repeatedly. "Did I forget your birthday? No...that's in November. What're we celebrating then?"

"Our first home together? I think that sounds like something to celebrate. All we have to decide on is which apartment to keep and which one to sell."

The sound of a spatula hitting the floor was accompanied by Yohni's loud gasp. "You're not *serious*???"

"Y'know...you can say a lot about me...for instance that I joke around with things others wouldn't...but even *I* wouldn't make fun of something like this, Yohni. I'm very serious," Gabrielle said and pushed herself off the doorframe. "I was thinking it's been a while since we visited 'Spirit of New Orleans', don't you agree? And I'm just dying for one of their Irish coffee's."

Yohni nodded, positively beaming. "To hell with waffles. Irish coffee at 'Spirit' sounds like just the thing!" she said, then stopped. "What about Jean?"

"She told me this morning she's moving in with Esteban. She barely beat me to it. I was about to tell her I am moving in with you. Now, though, we have a choice of which apartment to keep."

"Well, yours is bigger, but mine's more centrally placed," Yohni said with a shrug. "I don't think the placement is really all that important though. Space is a bigger issue. I'd say we keep yours. I like it there. A whole lot."

"You just like it there because it includes me," Gabrielle grinned and put her arms around her girlfriend.

"Guilty as charged," Yohni giggled and leaned against Gabrielle's chest. She sighed happily. "I didn't think you wanted to. I really didn't think you'd do this."

"Will you stop that already?" Gabrielle chuckled.

"Yes, Gabby...now I'll stop it," Yohni answered and closed her eyes with a happy sigh.

###

"Ryder/LeBrun residence...at least for a few more days...LeBrun speaking," Jean said, cheerfully, into the receiver.

There was a moments silence from the other end. Then a slightly confused voice spoke up. "For...a few more days? Oh...okay. Well, hello Miss LeBrun. It's Timothy, Gabby's brother. Is she home, by any chance?"

Jean blinked and felt stumped for a moment. She wasn't sure how to respond to that. Timothy was probably the only part of Gabrielle's family that the filly wanted any contact with, but Jean wasn't entirely sure what to say to the stallion.

"No...no not at the moment, Timothy. Please, just call me Jean. 'Miss LeBrun' sounds too formal. I must admit you're probably the last fur I'd expect to contact her..."

"Oh...yes, well, I know we haven't been very good at keeping in touch but...I guess both she and I had each our own battles to fight first? And somehow, I think you of all furs know how that feels," Timothy said, politely.

"Yes...I do. Anyway, Gabrielle isn't home right now. She's..." Jean began and stopped herself for a moment before continuing. "She's at her girlfriends place. They're moving in together very soon. I'm not sure if it'll be in this apartment or in the other one. Or if they'll find a completely new place together."

"I see. Yes...well, you see, the reason I'm calling is that fate came knocking on my door today, in the shape of a panther. Julie Black...I believe she's an acquaintance of my sisters?"

"And of me as well. She runs a nightclub here in Columbus. It's not like she's a close friend or anything, but I know who she is, certainly. You say she came to visit you today? How peculiar. It's a small world, I guess."

"That's what I thought. I figured I couldn't very well ignore *that* kind of hint. So...if you'd do me a big favor and tell her I called? And maybe give her my number? I'd really like to talk to her sometime soon."

"I'll make sure, don't worry. What's the number anyway?" Jean asked and took a pen next to the phone, scribbling down what Timothy told her.

"Thanks. I'd better go then. It *is* long distance after all," Timothy chuckled. "Take care of yourself."

"You too, Timothy. Bye..." Jean answered.

They hung up.

Jean looked at the phone-number on the pad of paper in front of her for a long time. Then she got up and put the pad on the kitchen table where she was sure Gabrielle would find it.

She smiled a bit and headed to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

The next few days would be hectic.