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LXVI – Boxing Day

It was blistering hot. The kind of day that no sensible fur would spend more than ten feet away from a cold drink at any given time. The heat was causing the air above the asphalt to shimmer. Six feet above the asphalt.

Zig Zag couldn't remember the last time a scorcher that bad had hit Columbus. It was one of those days when she was really happy that the pornmobile was a convertible. Even so, it was still too hot.

If Murphy's law was going to hold true, the air conditioning at the studio would be overloaded and break down sometime today. And they'd run out of cold drinks. And then the fridge would break down.

She shook her head. "Don't be a pessimist, Zig. It's just the heat getting to you," she muttered and turned left.

The studio was coming up, ahead.

She parked her car and got out. A couple of passing males sent a wolf-whistle her way. She grinned to herself as she flicked her hair back, craned her neck and swayed her tail, walking inside.

Sabrina looked like she was about to melt into a little black-and-white puddle behind her desk. She had two fans going full tilt and obviously it wasn't enough.

"Hey...why not turn on the ceiling fan, Sabrina?" Zig Zag asked. "I mean, it might not be enough but it'd at least help..."

"I tried, but something's wrong with the electricity, I think. When I turn that on, my computer shuts down. If I turn it off again, I can turn the computer back on."

"I think Murphy's coming by anyway..." Zig Zag muttered.

"Who's Murphy?" Sabrina asked and wiped her forehead.

"Oh, just an incredibly annoying legislator," Zig Zag said and waved it off. "I'll get someone by to look into that electrical problem. Any news so far?"

"Yeah, there was a fax this morning when I came in. From Marvin. He writes that he's tried calling yesterday but that no one here answered and he didn't want to disturb you at home. But that the deal is concluded...provided we don't mind ... what was it he wrote again..." Sabrina said and took out the paper with a slightly confused expression on her face. "Oh yes...provided we don't mind huge amounts of pies, two elderly muskrats and a lot of questions..."

Zig Zag squinted. "I'm going to have to get a hold of him and ask him what *that* means. The pies sound okay though. Anything else?"

Sabrina looked through her paperwork and shook her head. "Nothing right no...oh....yes, I need you to take a look at this and sign it if you agree with it."

"What's that?"

"The order for our new firewall software. I'd rather not have someone infect the computer with viruses again."

"Sabrina, this is peanuts. You sure that's all it'll cost?" Zig Zag asked.

"That's it. Your boyfriend's company makes good offers," Sabrina said with a smile.

Zig Zag narrowed her eyes a little and looked suspicious, crossing her arms across her chest. "Am I hearing a Gabby coming on here?"

Sabrina looked completely innocent. "Who? Me? Never! It's hardly for me to comment on fringe benefits, is it? I'm just the resident bespectacled computer-geek, right?" she said in a voice so sugary Zig Zag felt sure she could've broken candy-canes off it.

The skunk opened and shut her mouth a few times, then shook her head. "I'm going to have a word with that filly. She's infecting my staff..." she chuckled and headed to her office.

###

"You know. Eet just HAD to be thees kind of weather, thees ONE day of the year, chica!" Esteban complained.

Jean nodded and wiped her forehead off with the back of her arm. "I know. It's ridiculous. It's almost as bad as in the car, driving towards the border."

"It's just inland climes," Gabrielle said with a shrug. "It's either blistering hot, or bitterly cold...we all know that."

Jean eyeballed her friend. "...said the filly who came with an inbuilt fly swatter."

Gabrielle swished her tail with a big grin. "I wouldn't dirty my tail with that, Jean...it's disgusting."

Esteban shook his head. "Femmes..." he mumbled and picked up a stack of books. "Let's conteenue...the sooner we're done, the better."

"Agreed. Not that I'm complaining too much..." Jean said and smiled crookedly.

"You wouldn't, vixen...you get a whole day with Esteban wearing no T-shirt..." Gabrielle pointed out and resumed packing.

Jean smiled one of those "Who me?" smiles and put a few more books in a box. She didn't say anything though. Again she wiped her forehead with her arm and realized it was a lost cause. She shook her head and headed into the bedroom.

"Where's she going?" Gabrielle asked, surprised.

"Not sure. Aneeway, pass the duct tape. Thees box ees feeneeshed," Esteban said and smiled widely.

"Just a few dozen left. You know...when she leaves, this apartment is going to look devoid of books!" Gabrielle said and passed over the roll of silver tape.

"Start readeeng, potranca. Eet's good for you."

"Oh, you mean like the stories in Playfur and Pethouse?"

"That's educateeonal readeeng een our line of work," Esteban shrugged. "I was theenkeeng more along the lines of poetree."

"Good grief. Most poets are so full of themselves it's impossible to see what they're trying to say except "Woe is me, the world is a deep morass of infinite hellish drudgery, and you should all pity me for being such a pathetic fur". I think I'll stick to something else."

"You never read Poe? Shame on you, Gabbee. You'd like eet. Aneeway...some of the beeg classeecs are a good read too. I'll drop Don Quixote off one day. I have an engleesh translateeon at home. You'll laugh yourself to beets and pieces, I'm sure of eet."

"Wasn't he the fur fighting windmills?"

"Si. Apart from haveeng a lot of weesdom packed eento eet...it's seemply a heelareeous read, Gabbee."

"Oh very well, I'll give it a go," Gabrielle chuckled and blinked as Jean reentered the room.

Esteban looked up too and blinked as well, then looked at the filly.

"What're you two staring at? It's hot! I'm not going to walk around baring my bosom to the world, y'know!" Jean said.

"Well, good point," Gabrielle said and smiled. "Looks good on you too. How big are you?"

"Nearly a B-cup...not quite but...it's getting there fast," Jean said and shrugged, adjusting her bikini-top and making sure her sarong was secure around her waist.

"And you expect me to work under thees condeeteoons?" Esteban complained. "I'm male, you know."

Gabrielle whistled innocently. "So we can tell. You're one step away from a lolling tongue, and your tail's about to knock over the lamp."

Esteban whined and squirmed some. "Geeve the lobo a break. She looks good! Eet's natural!"

The bronco just smiled and headed into the kitchen. "I'll get us some lemonade, shall I?"

Jean smiled crookedly. "I know...it's hardly what I normally wear..." she said and blushed.

"Eet's about time you deed, then. You look really nice like thees, chica."

"You're biased, but thank you," the vixen said and kissed Esteban's cheek.

"We should have the others comeeng by een a few hours to peeck up the furneecture," Esteban said.

Gabrielle came back out from the kitchen, carrying a pitcher of lemonade an three glasses with plenty of icecubes in them, all on a tray. She smiled and put it down on the table and shrugged, looking in Esteban's direction.

"It's not like there's *that* much to move after all. It can easily be done in one day," she commented and poured a glass of lemonade for everyone.

"I know...it's still a little odd, though," Jean said, smiling almost apologetically. "I don't think any of us had really thought we'd be living together forever, or in this apartment for as long as we have...but it's still strange."

"Eet's always strange to move," Esteban said and sat on a box of books. "But at least you're moveeng to a place you already know. That should make eet easier. Eemageene how I felt when I came here from Mexico?"

"That beats coming here from Denver, I agree. And yes, at least Jean knows the place she's going to quite well by now," Gabrielle added and looked at the vixen with a grin. "You've practically lived there the last few months anyway."

Jean took her lemonade and sipped it, nodding. There was no point in arguing that.

"Weell Yohni be breengeeng her theengs over here, then? Or were you goeeng to look for sometheeng else, together?" Esteban asked, looking at Gabrielle.

"I think we agreed to move her things here. If it's too small or we decide to find something else for some other reason we can always do that later. There's no need to rush into anything before we've seen how it works out with us living together full time anyway."

Jean looked like something clicked into place. "Oh...damned I forgot. Gabby, someone called yesterday, wanting to talk to you. I took down the number. Let me go and get it..."

Gabrielle nodded, looking a little surprised. "Sure. Who was it?"

"Your brother," the vixen said and headed back to the bedroom to find the slip of paper.

"What?!? Timothy?? Whoa...that's kinda out of the blue. Well...great! I'd love to talk to him but I wasn't sure if he wanted to talk to *me*."

Esteban looked like he was concentrating. "Uno momentito, potranca..." he mumbled and scratched his neck. "I remember seeing your parents. And a reallee annoyeeng raccoon weeth the worst manners...and a few cowed servants...but that ees all. I deedn't see aneone who could've been your brother."

"He wasn't there when we...visited...my parents. The thing is...Timothy and I were pretty close while we grew up, but we grew apart later. Not actively but...we just...I dunno, we lost contact when I moved out. I think it was mostly because he still lived with my parents and I was trying so hard to distance myself from them," Gabrielle said with a sigh.

"I see. Well, perhaps thees ees desteenee knockeeng on your door?"

"Maybe. I'll get a hold of him and we'll see how it goes."

Jean came back out with a slip of paper. "Here you go," she said and gave it to the filly.

"Wait a minute, this isn't a Denver number?" Gabrielle said and looked at it.

"No. It's from New York..." Jean said and shrugged. "I wondered too so I checked."

"New York?? Well, I guess he escaped Fortress Farthington then..." Gabrielle chuckled. "Good for him. I'll call him once we're all done here. Did he say what it was all about?"

"Actually yes. He said he'd met Julie Black...you know, the panther who owns 'Satyr'. You can probably guess the rest from there," Jean said and began putting books in another box.

"Yeah. Well...small world, I guess. Oh well, I hope he's settled in nicely, at least. At least if he's got his own place he won't have to sneak out for dates anymore..."

Jean nodded. "Let's not go down memory lane, Gabby...your parents are waiting on the opposite end of it and there's no point going there," she said.

"You're right, as usual. Well, let's get this packing done, and we'll be ready when the others get here..." Gabrielle said and put her glass aside.

###

Leo looked up at the sky and grinned. The air was clear, and the weather was blistering hot. At least heat didn't bother him. He was used to it from the Cayfurs and other exotic spots. Occasionally someone would ask him why he'd never visited the Himalayas or something similar but he told them every time that he wasn't much for snow and ice. He preferred heat. Lots of heat.

He removed his tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons in his shirt. His father wasn't here and he didn't care what gossip-reporters might be around. It was hot enough that he felt sure most of them were running around in shorts and T-shirts. He rolled up the tie and put it in a pocket, carried his jacket over his shoulder and set out towards the exit.

His luggage wasn't even that heavy. He'd long ago learned to pack what he needed most, and buy the rest where he arrived. Now all he needed was to find a taxi and get to Lizzy's place.

"You're not right in the head, Leo..." he chuckled to himself. "You could have any femme out there you'd like...your choice of starlets and heiresses, and you go and fall for a Marxist history student from Ohio..."

Somehow, the very thought was heartwarming to him. He shook his head and smiled. Perhaps it was because Lizzy was so different. At least he knew he liked the fact that he could have serious conversations with her and get some ping-pong responses. He also rather liked her honesty. Not that many would stand by political views like hers, after all.

Again he shook his head. He'd gone over those thoughts a hundred times or more already. What really mattered was that he looked forward to seeing her again and he'd like to see where this could lead. Even if it was only going to end up with a good friendship, he'd consider himself privileged.

"You want a little more than that, though, Leo. Be honest..." he said to himself and flagged down a taxi.

He smiled and nodded. No sense in denying it.

A cab rolled up and Leo got in. He gave the driver the address and leaned back in his seat, getting comfortable.

###

"ZZ Studios, Zig Zag speaking."

It was getting into the afternoon and Zig Zag was more or less ready to go home. Of course, the phone had to ring just then. She felt certain Murphy had shown up.

"Hi, it's me...what're you doing this evening?" the voice of James Sheppard said through the receiver.

Zig Zag felt a sense of relief come over her. The coyote might be just what the doctor ordered. "Nothing I can't cancel in a flash if it means seeing you instead," she said, wearily.

"What's wrong? You sound like you've had a bad day," James said, sounding worried.

"The worst. It's just been one of those days. The ceiling fan in the reception area gave out today, and with this heat, I had to send Sabrina home early...asking her to sit in front of a computer without something to cool her down would've been sheer murder. So I've been alone here all day, and of course, today's the day when everyone decides to call me to ask me all kinds of stupid questions."

"Such as what you're doing this evening?" James asked with a chuckle.

"Not that, no. That's the first good question I've had anyone ask me for three hours, James."

"Good. Well, why are you alone there anyway? Where's Marvin? And all the others?"

Zig Zag smiled a bit and ran a paw through her hair. "Marvin and Rhonda are in Virginia. Seems they managed to negotiate their way onto a perfect little piece of landscape for the movie-set. Which is good. All the others have the day off...nothing much to do right now. But those furs at the sets-production company have called me about a dozen times asking for all kinds of details and damnit, James...much as I'm an intelligent femme, I am not an expert on Roman topography or buildings two thousand years ago."

"You've got many talents...but no, I agree, that's not one I've seen you display, my dear. So...why haven't you gotten a hold of Jean? She's the one who could help with this, isn't she?" James asked.

"Yes...the problem is she's moving today."

"Moving?"

"Yeah...she's moving in with Esteban, and Yohni's moving in with Gabrielle in a few days, and...honestly James, I feel like the local den-mother all of the sudden."

"Now, now, Zig, next you'll be telling me you feel old. None of that, please. Tonight then? Your place or mine?" James said, reassuringly.

"I think your place. I could do with the fresh air and the scenery after today," Zig Zag responded, running a paw over her face. She felt tired.

"I'll have something special made for us for dinner then..." the coyote said. "See you there as soon as you get off work?"

"That'll be in half an hour then...about the time it'd take for me to drive there because I'm getting OUT of this office..."

"Sure. No problem with me."

Zig Zag sighed and shook her head. "No...on the other paw, I'd better swing by home first and change. I'll see you soon though."

"As soon as you feel up to it, Zig. You sound like you could do with someone paying attention to *you* right now," James said.

"I'm going to hold you to that unspoken promise, Mr. Sheppard! Now I'd better run. Take care until I get there..." Zig Zag said and hung up.

At least the day looked like it'd *end* on a good note. She looked at the stack of notes she'd written down through the day. Questions she couldn't answer off-paw. She sighed. Then a vicious little smile spread on her lips and she nodded to herself.

"Sometimes Zig, you're just too keen for your own good," she murmured and got up, taking the whole stack along.

###

Gabrielle put her hooves up. She felt tired, but in a good way. The apartment looked like someone had brought a whirlwind through it though.

A rather orderly whirlwind. It had picked up a lot of things and left everything else neat and tidy while carrying off the loot.

It'd take some time getting used to Jean not being there, but at least the empty spaces would soon be taken up by Yohni's furniture. Much of the mongoose's stuff was nicer and of better quality than her own. But she'd made one thing clear. She wasn't getting rid of the couch. Yohni's was a really nice designer thing, but it was about as comfortable as a brick.

Yohni hadn't complained. She'd bought the couch for its looks and she'd said flat out she wasn't happy with how it felt when sitting in it, or laying on it. Besides, it was too short for someone as tall as the filly to lay on, in anything but a fetal position and it'd get a little unpleasant rather fast that way.

It was going to be a quiet couple of days, though, until Yohni got there. She leaned her head back and smiled. Moving things out had gone really fast. Michael, Rafe, Alexi and Esteban were all fit furs and she wasn't exactly a slouch herself. It hadn't taken more than a couple of hours to get everything moved to Esteban's apartment. She felt sure that Jean was already busy unpacking her books.

Gabrielle chuckled at the thought. No doubt, Esteban would be whining about a break...and for once he'd really have *deserved* one. Somehow, she felt sure he'd manage to convince Jean that there were PLENTY of things to do on their first day of living together, rather than unpacking. All of them strictly ballroom, of course.

It amazed Gabrielle how courteous Esteban was about the whole sex-thing when it came to Jean. It was pretty obvious that he wouldn't mind going a lot further, but he also understood perfectly well why it couldn't happen...yet.

Not a lot of males would be that considerate, the bronco thought. She'd often thought that. Esteban was special in many ways and she was very happy for Jean. They were a good couple.

Frankly, she felt like she'd won the sweepstakes in the lottery of love herself, in any case. Just thinking about Yohni moving in made her stomach do somersaults and she found a smile creeping onto her face. Who'd have thought it? She smiled a little.

"Both siblings ending up in homosexual relationships. What are the chances of *that* happening?" she wondered.

She remembered something and leaned forwards to get a scrap of paper from the table. It was the one with Timothy's telephone number on it. A New York number...

Gabrielle nodded to herself. It was good that her brother had gotten out of Denver too, in time. But she hadn't really had a chance to talk to him for almost four years. She missed him. She often did but she knew that contacting him would've been next to impossible while he lived in Denver. She wondered what kind of fur he'd grown into over those four years.

She giggled. Timothy had always had a tendency towards limp wrists and a slight lisp for as long as she could remember. It had royally pissed off her father, when it dawned on him. It had resulted in a series of emotional explosions at the mansion in Denver so fierce that at times, Gabrielle had wondered if the old idiot would do something stupid and *hurt* Timothy.

She'd probably been the only fur to protect him during those years.

She sighed again. Much of her attitude...much of her rebelliousness had come from that. She'd tried to protect Timothy...and the only way to do so was to get her fathers attention moved from her brother to herself. She'd never thought about it that way before, but it was pretty obvious to her in retrospect.

"Well, Gabrielle Ryder...it made you the femme you are today and *no bad thing!*" she told herself. It was just new for her to think of the reason why she'd turned out that way.

Timothy had needed someone to protect him, and the bronco in her had rebelled fiercely against the way their parents had treated him. So what if he was gay? He was still their son. He was still her *brother!*

She felt a surge of anger boil up in her. But she quickly becalmed herself. It was pointless to get angry about her parents. They were no longer a factor in her life.

But what about in Timothy's life? Were they still a factor in his?

Only one way to find out. Gabrielle reached out and picked up the phone.

###

Zig Zag pulled over the car and got out. She picked up a couple of packages and checked inside a bag, then nodded to herself and got out with a grin.

This was going to be *fun*.

And after today, she needed some fun. She felt pretty sure she'd get plenty of that when she got to James' place, but that would have to wait just a few moments. She needed a good laugh, and this, she felt sure, was going to provide it.

She smoothed down her skirt, got her packages secured in her arms and headed up the stairs. Knocking on the door wasn't easy and she didn't want to put anything down. Eventually, she managed to knock, using a knee.

A few moments later, the door was opened by Esteban. He blinked a little and looked at Zig Zag in confusion. "Hola Jefa...what can I do for you?" he asked and smiled.

"Oh, actually nothing. But Jean can. You see...I have some work for her. A lot of work in fact. The phone has been glowing red hot all day at the office, mostly because the furs at the sets production place can't figure out how to get it right without being held by the paw and guided through it. I'm not an expert so...I figured Jean needs to look into this."

"...erhhh..." Esteban said, looking dumbfounded. "...she just moved een. Does eet have to be today?"

"Absolutely, Esteban, I can't possibly put this off."

Esteban sighed but nodded. He didn't look happy about it but he stepped aside to let Zig Zag enter.

The skunk moved to the living room and put her bags on the table. "Jean? Are you here? I've got some things for you to look at," she called out.

The vixen came out of the kitchen, wiping her paws.

Zig Zag smiled and motioned for the bags. "Some paperwork for you Jean. It's pretty important so if you could take a look?"

Jean looked about to protest for just a split second, then she nodded and sighed. "Sure...but it's not the best timing, y'know. I'm cooking and it's my first day here and all. Are you *sure* this can't wait at least until tomorrow or the next day?"

"Believe me, Jean, if you wait with this for that long, it'll start to stink..." Zig Zag said and smiled enigmatically.

The vixen looked confused and shrugged. "Very well then, let's have a look," she said and looked into the first bag.

Then she looked up. And laughed. Loud and clear.

Esteban clearly didn't understand what was going on. He looked between the two femmes.

Zig Zag looked like a vision of innocence.

"What ees goeeng on?" the wolf finally asked, giving up trying to figure it out on his own.

"Well, she's right about this going to stink if we don't look into it *now*," Jean said and took something wrapped in paper out of the bag.

A bottle of wine, apparently, wrapped in little pawscribbled notes.

"How ees that goeeng to smell eef we don't deal weeth eet now?" Esteban asked although he couldn't help smiling.

"Not that, you big lug. THIS!" Jean exclaimed and took out a fish...also wrapped in Zig Zag's notes.

"I figured salmon would be a suitably luxurious first meal for your new home together?" Zig Zag chuckled. "But of course, Jean said she's already cooking...but if you put it in the fridge it'll be just as good tomorrow."

"I'll go and do that right away. I'm not sure I'll be able to read most of the notes though," Jean giggled.

"Well, take them off now, and wrap it in something else then," the skunk said.

Jean nodded and went to get something else. Zig Zag smiled triumphantly and looked at Esteban in the meantime.

"So, was it so bad?"

"No...sorree Jefa...I should've known," the wolf said with an apologetic smile.

"No harm done. Anyway, I'll be sure to bring a proper housewarming present later, but for now, I have to go. I have a coyote waiting for me with a surprise meal and...well...I want to be surprised," Zig Zag said with a wink.

Jean came back with an old newspaper. "Time honored fish-wrappings..." she said and grinned. "Leaving so soon, Zig Zag?"

"I have to. I have a dinner date with James and frankly, I wouldn't miss it for all the tea in China."

"That's a lot of tea..." Jean said and smiled. "You'd probably get an allergic reaction around that much of it. Take care and have a great evening. And thank you for the wine and the salmon. I'll make sure to make something of it tomorrow."

"Oh no you won't, chica. I make a *mean* baked salmon weeth spiced bread, small potatoes and hollandaise sauce. My turn mañana!" Esteban grinned.

"Oh alright. I'll just have to deal with that. It's not as if it's making my mouth water already..." Jean said and visibly swallowed, grinning.

Zig Zag laughed and waved as she headed out. "I think I'd better leave you two lovebirds alone. See you soon. And Jean, if you CAN find time one of the next couple of days to look at those notes and let me know...I'd be ever so grateful. Take your time though," she said with a wink.

Then she was gone.

The salmon ended up in the fridge...but a minute later, the sound of two glasses clinking together could be heard from the apartment.

###

"HEY...Joe...look at this!" Matt Barstock called out across the room.

Joe Latrans looked up from his coffee mug and his newspaper. "What is it, Matt?"

"Well, it's something I *think* might interest you. Or at least I'm pretty sure it'll interest Slam and your crew in general," Matt chuckled.

Joe raised an eyebrow and looked at his mixed-canid boss. "It's too late in the evening for that, Matt. Don't play games with me now...please. I'm going home to Annie as soon as I've finished my coffee and I hope she can do something about my sore feet. I've had to listen to 'Randy' being...well...randy...all day after seeing some long legged femme at a bar yesterday, and when he and Slam get going, the testosterone in the Bitch gets so thick you need a damned industry grade laser-cutter to get through it. It's those times

that I'm glad we don't have a female crewmember or we just might see a second unblemished conception right there in the plane!"

"Talk about nearer to God..." Matt said and scratched his neck with a slight chuckle. "Anyway...here...take a look."

Joe took the paperwork that Matt gave him and looked it over critically. "You're joking right? You have *got* to be joking. Please tell me this is a really bad attempt at humor? Annie's going to KILL me!"

"I'm sorry, Joe. They asked specifically for *you* and 'the Bitch'. Isn't that the place where that femme you saved works?"

Joe groaned and chuckled. "Yeah, it is. ZZ Studios. She was kind enough to supply us with that video laying around somewhere that is already rapidly being worn out by every unmarried male fur when not out flying..."

"Oh. *That*..." Matt said, gravely. "I can see what you mean. Will it help any if I tell Annie about this?"

"What? You mean go home to my place, knock on the door with your hat in your paw and say "Sorry Annie, I have some bad news. Your husband has been commissioned to fly for a porn-company for the next few weeks"? Now I KNOW you're joking. No, I'll deal with that myself. I'm sure I can make her understand."

"Where should I send the flowers for your funeral?" Matt grinned.

"To my church, Matt...to my church," Joe said and got to his feet with a chuckle. "Naw, I'm sure it'll work out. Somehow. Even if I may be eating burnt-to-a-crisp food for a week and sleep on the couch until retirement age."

"She isn't that bad, Joe...she'll understand. You're just doing your job."

Joe smiled warmly. "Oh no...she's not that bad at all, Matt. Not that bad at *all*."

The coyote left the hangar and Matt scratched his neck again, grinning. "You're a lucky fur my friend..." he said, knowing that Joe wouldn't hear him.

Then he went back to finishing up the day's paperwork.