

Zig Zag is Copyright © Max Black Rabbit. Sabrina, Darke Katt and R.C. are Copyright © Eric W. Schwartz. James Sheppard, Marvin Badger, Rhonda Badger, Yohni, Alexi, Michael, Esteban, Mia, Wanda Vixen and Tamara Rabbit are Copyright © James Bruner. Jean LeBrun, Francois LeBrun, Marie LeBrun, Gabrielle Ryder, Theodore Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the Third, Roxanne Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg, Timothy Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg, Malcolm Grazer, William Pongo, Captain Archibald, Peter Spermophilus, Miranda Spermophilus, ArseNick/Nicholas Babouin, Mr. Hammond, Leo Leon, Vincent Leon, Sergeant Otetiani, Lieutenant Black, Julie Black, Miriam Redtail, Lizzy Doe, Emma Grey, Rowena Spyke, Professor Nutkin, Professor Moose Nicholson, Lance Gulo, Henry Hippopotamidae, John Ferret, Charles 'Mouse' Mombay, Paul Donkey, Harley Davidson (Not the motorcycle manufacturer, obviously) and Pethouse Magazine is © Joan Jacobsen, 2005.

Legal Notice: This story is Copyright © 2005 by Joan Jacobsen. This story may not be sold or used for commercial profit in any form or fashion. This story may not be modified in any way. This story may not be posted on a mirror site or any other Internet site without the written permission of the author. This story may not be distributed on print, magnetic, electrical or optical mediums.

Permission to use characters that are Copyright other individuals was obtained prior to the appearance of said characters.

This is an independent work of fiction with no connection whatsoever to Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, E.S. Productions or James Bruner and is in no way meant to imply any connection with Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, E.S. Productions, or James Bruner. This story contains characters created by Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, James Bruner, Tigermark and Silver Coyote. Events and characters occurring in this story should not be considered part of the storylines for either 'Zig Zag', 'Sabrina Online' or 'Sabrina Online - The Story'.

In fact, as far as 'Zig Zag', 'Sabrina Online', 'Sabrina Online - The Story' and 'Zig Zag the Story' are concerned, this story does not exist. The artists disavow any knowledge of and do not officially sanction the events in this story.

LXVII – Six ways from Sunday

Author's note: I would like to thank my very good friend, Silver Coyote, for his assistance with a specific section of this chapter. One I would've been unable to write convincingly without his help.

Zig Zag brushed her paws off against each other and smiled in satisfaction. The last box was packed and ready to go. The studio looked peculiarly empty. In a way, it was an eerie feeling and one she didn't hope she had to see again for a very long time, if ever.

Marvin stood next to her. Judging from the expression on the badger's face, he was thinking more or less the same thing.

"Penny for your thoughts, Marv?" Zig Zag asked, nonetheless.

"I'm just thinking that if we were ever to close down and go out of business, the place would look like this..." he said. "It's bad luck to think that way before undertaking something as big as this filming though..."

"I know, but I'm not superstitious," the skunk said.

"I am."

"You've been a football player, Marvin. If you weren't superstitious, I'd be worried sick. How many times did you have to hammer your helmet against that of a teammate before going onto the field?"

"Zig Zag...honestly...give me some credit..." Marvin complained and looked at his boss.

"I am," Zig Zag merely said with a crooked smile, looking at the badger out the corner of her eye.

"Damn it Zig...grr...no fair," Marvin mumbled. "Five times....and it wasn't one of my teammates, it was the wall in the tunnel."

"Close enough."

Marvin muttered something about needing coffee and headed out of the studio. Zig Zag sat down on the crate and looked around. The badger was right. IF the studio ever closed...and she sincerely hoped it wouldn't before she'd long since retired...the room would look like this. Empty. Lifeless.

That was the right word. Lifeless.

Normally, there was an organic feel to the place. No matter what sets were up, and no matter how the cameras were aligned, there was always life. Even when she came in as the first fur in the morning, before even Sabrina got there...even then, there was life here.

Not now though. Now it was merely a large, empty room.

Zig Zag smiled to herself. She'd come very far since she started the studio. Just a pawful of furs and a dream. At least, for her there'd been a dream. Now she was looking at a chance to finally make it reality instead of fantasy.

It had been very hard work. There'd been a lot of setbacks. Many defeats. A lot of pain and a lot of grief. And many, many more victories.

A voice spoke up next to her.

"You look like you're thinking of something nice," it said.

Zig Zag smiled and turned her head, looking at Jean. The vixen was dusty. She'd helped pack as well. Everyone involved in the production had been involved in packing.

"I am. I'm thinking of dreams...and of hopes...and of long, hard roads to get to them. Somehow, Jean...you know what I'm talking about better than anyone here, I think."

Jean smiled, shrugging a little. "Perhaps. Look...Zig Zag...a lot has happened since Gabby got a job here. Lots of water under a lot of bridges, and a lot of growing up for me at least. I just realized recently, that while we've seen each other a lot of times since we first met, it's always been work related and there's always been a lot to think about and do. Well, except that time you took me through a whole makeover and dinner with James and Esteban."

"That's true," Zig Zag said, still smiling.

"I just wanted to say I'm...more than just grateful for what you've done for me. I'm happy I've met you, Zig Zag. You're one of the nicest femmes I've ever met...and I don't care what anyone else has to say about it. I've faced prejudice the hard way myself so at least I know a bit about how it feels to be the one no one wants to be seen around. The one who's 'bad company'. You did something for me no one else ever did before. Not even myself," Jean said and sat down next to the skunk on the crate.

"What's that?"

"You trusted in me. You took a chance on me, and God knows I've worked very hard to not let you down. But the main thing is that you *took* that chance. Thank you. It means more to me than I can really say," the vixen said, quietly.

"You're welcome, Jean. Frankly, I think meeting you has been an educational experience for most of the furs here. A good one, I might add. Look at Esteban. Do you know how he was before you came into his life?"

"I've heard a thing or two. He does tell me if I ask him..."

"He had nothing to hold on to. His parents rejected him for his job here. Most of society looked down on him for being Mexican, even those who wouldn't say so aloud...and the rest looked down on him for working in the porn-industry. He dated a new femme every weekend and he tried to play the big macho wolf...and it was pretty obvious he wasn't happy. Now he is."

"You know...Zig...since you bring that up yourself..." Jean said, looking very serious.

"Go ahead?" the skunk said and crossed her legs.

"For the longest time, I didn't know why he said I made him happy and I didn't really believe him. Then one day he really laid it all out to me and I ended up ashamed of myself for having doubted him. I still am. But despite that...I don't understand why. Zig Zag...look at him...he's *gorgeous*. He's witty, he's smarter than he gives himself credit for

and he's certainly *wiser* than his years suggest. He's sweet and attentive. He's any femmes dream and...and he would be the worlds most wonderful father. And I can't ever give him the cubs he deserves," Jean said. There was a note of real sadness in her voice.

"I think you're right. He'd be a great father. But you know what? He knows you can't have kids...and he still loves you, and he still wants *you*. I think all your doubts should be laid to rest by that alone. Answer me one thing..." Zig Zag said, thoughtfully.

"Sure?"

"Can you see yourself, forty years from now, with him?"

Jean just smiled and got a slightly dreamy look in her eyes.

Zig Zag got up from the crate and ruffled the vixen's hair. "Ladies and gentlefurs of the jury...I rest my case," she smiled and headed out.

###

Joe looked up at the enormous form of Slam. He always felt dwarfed next to the puma-canid. It just couldn't be helped. Slam dwarfed anyone. Even those rare furs bigger than him seemed shorter. Joe somehow couldn't help thinking it was because of Slam's larger-than-life attitude.

"I'm going with ya, Joe!" Slam said, firmly. His arms were stuck akimbo and he had an expression of absolute no-nonsense determination on his face.

"Slam...I'm *telling* you, we've got it all well in paw. Once we get there, there will be ground crew present to unload it all. Randy's going with us too, to make sure it all gets dealt with correctly."

"Oh yeah? Randy gets to go an' I can sit back here, on my own? Yeah right. You've *gotta* be yankin' my tail, Joe. Not a chance! I'm goin' with ya!" the large fur grumbled, tapping his foot irritably.

"Look..." Joe tried, feebly.

Slam just raised one finger, swiftly...stopping Joe dead in his tracks.

"Oh well, alright. If you must, you must. But why?? I mean, you've flown with us dozens of times...why so eager now?"

"Because of the cargo, Joe...very simple."

Joe looked completely confused. "Erhh...a bunch of crates and sets for a movie-production? What's so special about that?"

"I've had a look at the paperwork this morning, Joe...I can see *you* haven't," Slam said, his face splitting into a wide grin.

Joe was about to answer. Then he felt like someone turned on a light in his head and he narrowed his eyes. "Ohhhhnoyoudon'tMattBarstock!!" he huffed and headed inside to find his boss.

###

Matt had his feet up and a mug of coffee in his paw. So far, the morning had been fair. No unexpected events. Even 'the Bitch', the company's most temperamental C-130, had behaved all morning. So far, so good. He lifted the mug to drink from it when the door was blown wide open by a Joe Latrans-shaped tornado, clutching some papers in one paw.

"WHEN were you going to tell me about the PASSENGERS??" Joe roared.

Matt went backwards. His feet described a perfect arch and the mug went sailing towards the left. A moment later he got himself upright and sighed, looking down himself. "This *was* a nice shirt. Now it's a nice, coffee soaked rag..." he mumbled.

"That didn't answer my question, Matt. *What* am I going to tell Annie?" Joe said. He did not look happy.

"How about you just tell her nothing? Look, it's just a couple of passengers."

"We're not transporting all of them. Clearly, there will be more than two furs involved in this movie production...thing...but we are only flying two of them. Why can't they go the same way as all the others?" Joe asked.

"Frankly Joe, I thought you wouldn't mind. You saved one of those two femmes. No doubt she's quite grateful. And look...they may work in the porn industry but I *sincerely* doubt they're going to start taking off all their clothes mid flight, performing unspeakable acts of carnal desire in the cargo bay..." Matt said, patiently.

"Please, God, don't let this be one of those ironical situations where someone predicts what's going to happen," Joe muttered. "Anyway, the problem is not the passengers. It's *my crew*."

"I am not entirely sure I'm with you here, Joe...what's wrong with your crew?"

"MATT..." Joe began and then took a deep breath and sighed, calming himself down some. "Randy and Slam are both coming on this flight...I'm sorry to say this in plain English but they're the two biggest horndogs north of the South Pole. How am I going to keep in-flight discipline with two porn actresses on board, along with those two?"

Matt grinned widely and patted his friend's shoulder. "I leave that in your very capable and experienced paws, Joe. I'm sure you'll manage beautifully. If nothing else, just close the cockpit door and you won't have to listen to what happens anywhere else in the plane."

Joe stared at Matt for a long moment. Then he groaned. "I'm going to go have a chat with Randy and Slam...about how to behave around ladies."

"That's more like it," Matt said and looked down himself. "Now, I'd better find a new shirt, because this one is ruined..."

"I dunno..." Joe mumbled on the way out, "Coffee suits you."

###

When it came to heavy lifting, Marvin Badger knew he could compete with most furs. But for once, he felt good that someone else had done all the heavy lifting for him. The crates holding all the camera equipment, costumes and props had been loaded onto the transport plane and now most of the ZZ Studios crew were on their way to their own flight.

He turned towards Zig Zag and looked at her. "Why didn't Yohni and Gabrielle come along?" he asked.

"Gabby asked to be allowed to fly with them, and Yohni wanted to stay with her. I think our filly wants a chance to talk to her rescuers for more than two minutes," the skunk said and shrugged. She turned a corner and muttered about the traffic.

Marvin leaned back and nodded. "I guess that's understandable. So what is the plan now?"

"Well the first thing we're going to do, of course, is *get* there, and get the camp set up. We'll be in Virginia for three weeks if all things go as planned. Then we start shooting, as the weather allows. But the forecast for the area is good for the next three weeks...so that shouldn't be a problem," Zig Zag said and smiled.

"We're really doing it..." Marvin said and smiled crookedly.

"I know. When I got that manuscript back from Jean, I didn't think we'd ever be able to make it. Not this soon at least," Zig Zag said.

"I hear a 'but' coming on," Marvin said and put his head to the side, looking at his friend.

"Oh, it's just that I'm going to miss James. It's a long time to be apart. I don't like it...but there's no way around it," Zig Zag said with a shrug.

Marvin nodded. That made sense to him. Three weeks away from his wife would drive him stark raving mad, he was sure of that. Rhonda was coming along for the trip but it wasn't possible for James Sheppard to pull three weeks out of his calendar to go to Virginia like that.

"It'll be fine Zig. The reunion will be all the sweeter when you get back to him. You're a good couple, you know..." Marvin said and reached out, squeezing his boss's shoulder.

"Yes...we are," Zig Zag said with a crooked smile. "Here we are anyway."

She parked the car in the long term car park and got out.

###

Emma bounded up the stairs. She was in a great mood...something she had been for a while. The convention had been a good experience and everyone had commented on how it had suited her to loosen up a little. So be it. Loosening up was on the agenda today. She knocked on the door, and waited.

A moment later, a lion opened the door. Quite a good looking fellow too, Emma noted to herself. He was wearing a pair of knee length shorts and a T-shirt. His mane was tied back in a ponytail. All in all, he could, with a pair of sunglasses, have been taken right out of any beach-shot.

She realized she was staring. "Ohhh...sorry, for a moment, I thought I had the wrong door. Is...Lizzy home?"

Leo grinned widely. "It's alright Miss. Yeah, she's in here. You must be Emma? Lizzy's told me about your little group...what was it again, the Society of Nerdy Femmes? Novel, certainly novel. Anyway, come on in, can't have you standing outside like that, gawking."

Emma blushed and nodded, entering the apartment. "Well, you're right...that'd be me. I take it you're Leo, then? The much-spoken-of capitalist, multi-multi millionaire lion with good taste in pizza?"

Leo laughed and nodded. "I suppose that's an accurate description, except I'm not a multi-multi-millionaire. My father is. So's my mother. And yeah, I have...a healthy allowance...but I'm extremely bad with money, myself."

Emma kicked off her shoes and looked over her shoulder at the lion with a raised eyebrow. She adjusted her glasses and frowned slightly. "Bad with money? I suppose that can't really make you popular with parents like that..." she said, sympathetically.

"Oh, it's no problem really. I've talked it over with my dad recently, and he's quite understanding. I'm better at spending than making money, and I tend to go soft on every conceivable charitable cause," Leo said and headed for the kitchen. "Anyway...something to drink?"

"Yes please, it's hot out there," Emma chuckled. "So, where's Lizzy anyway?"

The doe peeked out of the bathroom. "Ohhh...hey there Emma. Looking good today. Nice of you to drop by...now you have a chance to meet Leo as well," she said and smiled widely.

Leo had entered the kitchen and Emma just looked at her friend with a jab of her thumb towards the doorway, while mouthing "*Hot!*"

Lizzy grinned and nodded. "I'm not one to argue. Anyway...what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was thinking of grabbing a hold of you and going shopping. I've been giving things a lot of thought since the convention. I need new glasses, and fortunately, I've been saving up for them. And my parents sent me some money to get some new clothes for the summer, too. I am not really good at this kind of thing but maybe we could make a day of it?"

Leo peeked out around the kitchen doorway. "I smell a chance to spend obscene sums on a charitable cause!" he said and showed a dangerous amount of white, shiny, sharp teeth in the biggest feline grin Emma could remember seeing.

"Ooooh nonono...not a chance," the mink grinned. "I only just met you, I couldn't let you do that."

Leo came back into the room, carrying a couple of glasses of apple juice, with plenty of ice-cubes to keep them cool. He gave one to Emma and shrugged. "Then at least let me buy you two lunch while shopping. And I promise to behave and give you my opinion of what you pick out, objectively and politely, if you want me to."

Emma gawked and looked at Lizzy who'd now come out of the bathroom, wearing a robe. "Is he for real? A male...who's willing to go clothes-shopping? Who *volunteers* for it??"

Lizzy smiled widely. "Good looking, courteous to a fault, good taste...oh, and he's filthy rich but I'm thinking of that as a political challenge," she said.

Emma looked between the two of them again. Then shook her head and chuckled. "Of all the most unlikely match-ups in the world..." she muttered. "Well then, alright. You buy lunch then, Leo...we'll have a chance to get to know each other a little better while eating."

"In that case, I'd better get dressed. Shame that Miriam isn't here today. She'd have enjoyed this," Lizzy said. "It's a long trip though...we can't really call her now and ask if she'll come. She won't be here until well after lunchtime anyway."

"I tried yesterday, but she said she had a lot of things she needed done today. She sounded like she meant it too so I didn't push. But she did say she'd drive down tonight and we could rent some movies and make some popcorn or something, and just hang out? I told her that was a good idea so...she's staying the night at my place."

"Excellent!" Leo burst out. "I only had a chance to speak to her very briefly at that convention. I guess there's only one fourth of your quartet I haven't really met yet."

"Jean? Oh, I'm sure you'll get to meet her if you plan on staying around..." Emma said and nearly swallowed her tongue, as she realized she might've gone a bit too far in saying that.

Leo looked at Lizzy. Lizzy shrugged back at him with a wink. "Hey, it's not like you're costing me anything on the food budget. I'm saving money with you here, Mr. 'I-can't-let-you-pay-for-this'."

"That has to be one of the odder invitations to stay that I've received so far, but thank you," Leo said, sounding rather amused. "Well then, I suppose I shall simply have to prolong my stay for a while."

"How long for?" Lizzy asked and folded her arms across her chest, smiling crookedly.

"Ohhh...I don't know. When's Jean going to be available to meet?"

"Well, she's heading down to Virginia today, as it is...for three weeks," Emma said and sighed. "I'll miss her. She's fun to have around."

Leo nodded and began counting on his fingers, while mumbling to himself. "Well, three weeks for her to get back home. Give her a few days to get over the exhaustion of travel...and I couldn't POSSIBLY get to know her in less than two weeks from what Lizzy is saying...sooooo...shall we say another couple of months?" he asked, putting that enormous grin back on his face.

Lizzy reached out and grabbed the lion by the scruff of his T-shirt, with one paw, pulling him closer. "You...can stay as long as you *want*," she mock-growled, and kissed him.

Emma covered her eyes and modestly turned away. "Awww guys...get a *room*, for crying out loud," she giggled.

Leo looked dumbstruck. For about half a second. Then he just looked happy.

###

So far, so good, Joe thought. Takeoff had been easy enough. Randy and Slam both behaved themselves. So far, 'the Bitch' wasn't making a fuss. They were at 20,000 feet and still climbing. The trip wasn't a long one, but getting over the Appalachians, he'd rather have some margin for manoeuvre, given the way the aircraft had a tendency to make unexpected and often very volatile statements of temper mid-flight.

He looked across at Steve, next to him in the co-pilot's seat. The wolf had a sort of distant expression on his face.

"Hey...snap out of it. Concentrate!" Joe admonished.

"Sorry, Joe..." Steve blurted out and shook his head to recover his wits. He cleared his throat. "Fine day, this..."

"Erhhh...yeah, sure," Joe said and blinked, looking at his friend. "What's up with you? You've been zoning in and out ever since we took off. Bad night?"

"No, actually. I slept like a rock. It's just..."

"Yes?"

"Well, this is a rather unusual cargo...?" Steve tried and looked at his friend.

"What, movie sets??" Joe asked, shrugging. "I suppose so. We've got another load to haul, as well, remember that. There's a lot of bits and pieces."

"I know. It struck me...they must be hiring some contractors on location to do some of the set-building there. What we've got here is mostly decorations and such."

"I think that's commonplace, really. Not that I know much about movies or how they're made," Joe said with a shrug. "Now, be honest Steve...you're a really bad liar. You're not zoning because we're carrying a load of reproductions of Roman statues..."

"True. It's not often we fly passengers..." the wolf said.

"No...no it's not. Especially not...well...you know..." Joe began and cleared his throat.

"I'm a happily spoken for fur, Joe, you know that. And so are you. But I'm not blind either, alright? Daaamned..."

"Well, they do work in an industry where good looks are fairly important business assets, Steve..." Joe tried. "But yes...you're right."

Steve nodded and for a long moment, he didn't say anything else. He concentrated on the job at paw and checked various systems. Everything still checked out just fine. So far, no red lights or small flashing alarms. Then he sighed and shook his head.

"That top of hers, Joe..."

Joe groaned and nodded, rubbing his face. "I had hoped you wouldn't mention that. How much attitude must one fur have to wear something like that?"

"I guess one has to be a bronco," Steve mumbled.

"It's rather tight on her too..." Joe said, sounding mostly like he blamed himself for noticing.

"Very..."

Joe was about to answer when the door to the flight deck opened and the enormous form of Slam entered. He looked slightly flustered as he took a seat in one of the jump seats. He nodded to both the pilots and grinned crookedly, jabbing a thumb towards the cargo deck in a saying manner.

"WE KNOW!" came the chorus from both Joe and Steve.

Slam looked about to fire off a snappy remark when Joe groaned at something in his earphones.

Steve just nodded. Slam looked confused.

"What now?" the puma-canid asked and shrugged.

"That was air route traffic control," Joe muttered. "We have to drop to 15,000 feet to make room for two commercial airliners. I don't like that. Not going over the mountains."

"They could've given us a *bit* more warning too," Steve said, grouchy. "Let's take her down a bit..."

Joe nodded and began taking the lumbering form of the Hercules down to 15,000 feet as instructed. Slam fell quiet again. He was good at a lot of things but the actual flying, he knew to leave to Joe and Steve. The door opened again and Randy entered the flight deck.

"Hey, what's going on? Why are we dropping like that?" he asked.

"Unless you feel like getting a face full of 747, Randy, that's what we gotta do," Steve said and chuckled. "Two commercial airliners in our path up there. And as usual, air traffic doesn't tell us until the last moment."

Slam pulled out on the scruff of his T-shirt, some. "Is it just me, or is it gettin' hot in here?" he asked.

"It's just our passengers, affecting you, I think," Joe said, grinning a roguish, crooked grin.

"That's puttin' it mildly! Daaaamned..." Slam grinned.

"Stop stealing my lines, Slam," Steve grinned. "Hey...you're right. It *is* getting hotter in here."

"Check the A/C?" Joe said, starting to level out at the new altitude.

Steve nodded, dividing his attention between the air conditioning control system panel above Joe's head, the electrical control panel above his own, and the circuit breaker panel near his knees. He checked various switch settings and instrument indications and then ran a paw quickly over the resettable circuit breakers for the A/C systems as Joe steadied the aircraft. Behind Joe, Slam sat stoically in his jump seat, tongue barely visible on his

lower teeth, calmly waiting for an instruction or request for assistance from his crewmates.

"Eighty seven degrees," Steve muttered into the intercom, wiping a damp paw on the leg of his jeans. "It's rising, and fast."

"Damn," Slam replied.

A strange voice invaded the rapidly heating flight deck. "Intermountain fifty three, Huntington Center. You are leaving my airspace. Contact Shenandoah Center on two sixty nine point one two five, they'll be expecting you. Have a good flight."

Steve continued to try and decipher the dead A/C control panel as Joe's left thumb angled for the push to talk switch on his control yolk.

"Two sixty nine point one two five for Intermountain fifty three, see ya later," the wolf said and wiped the back of his forehead with his arm. The heat was still rising, and it was rapidly getting uncomfortable.

As Joe's left thumb lifted from the pushbutton his right paw was drifting to the radio heads on the panel between he and Steve's legs, below the throttles. He rotated a few knobs until the numbers 269.125 appeared in a small window. He then adjusted the headset and the microphone.

"Joe..." Steve said, sounding slightly worried. "I think the A/C's finally decided to kick the bucket. It's a total malfunction from what I can see and what's more...it's even hotter down in the cargo bay."

"Randy, can you go and see if you can find out what's gotten into the A/C? You might be able to figure it out..."

"Right you are," Randy answered and headed back out.

Joe wiped his forehead too and looked at the two others. The headsets of all three furs on the flight deck sputtered to life and Randy's voice came through it. He sounded uncertain. Not a normal state of mind for the raccoon.

"Slam...you've got to come down here."

Slam looked at Joe and Steve and shrugged, clearly not understanding. He did get to his feet though.

Steve frowned. "Sounded serious," he said. "You don't think some other system's getting fried down there, Joe?"

"We're not getting any more alerts, are we?"

"Joe...please remember what airplane you're piloting. For all we know, the alarm-systems could be malfunctioning. If 'the Bitch' really WANTS to kill us, taking us down on top of the Appalachians is a damned fine way of doing it," Steve said and looked straight ahead, taking a firmer hold of the controls.

Joe grinned widely. "Nahhh...she doesn't want to kill us. If she did, she'd have done so ages ago. She's just a temperamental old lady, and she likes to challenge us to make us really prove to her that we're still in charge, that's all."

The coyote reached out and patted the instrument panel affectionately. Then he leaned back in his seat and looked as content as the heat allowed.

"I still wish we had the worlds biggest ice-cream soda here with us, right about now," Steve chuckled. "It's at ninety-two and still climbing. It's going to get really, really nasty soon, if it doesn't stop."

Joe looked concerned for a moment. Then realization dawned on him and he slowly turned his head, something in between terror and horrified fascination spreading on his face as he turned the microphone up and away from his muzzle.

"Steve..."

"Yes Joe?"

"You said it was hotter in the cargo bay than up here?"

"Yes Joe?"

"We've got two passengers down there..."

"Yes Joe?"

"Steve, if you say 'Yes Joe' one more time, I'll swear I'll smack you."

"Sorry Joe."

Joe nodded and cleared his throat. Then he moved the microphone back down to his muzzle again and blinked a few times to clear his worries. He hoped...dearly, dearly hoped...that he was worrying for nothing.

"Slam, Randy, could you two please tell our guests that since it's probably unbearably hot down there, they're quite welcome to join us up here on the flight deck," he said into the intercom.

Slam's voice came back instantly. "Awww for CHRIST'S sake, Joe...JUST when it was getting REALLY interesting down here. No fair!"

Randy took a bit more time to respond. He sounded a little hoarse. "Sure Joe...certainly...definitely. Should I tell them to get dressed first?"

"WHAT???"

Joe narrowed his eyes and looked firmly ahead. Steve was staring at him as if hoping he hadn't heard the question over the intercom quite right, and that Joe could correct the misunderstanding.

The coyote flicked his thumb on a small control, and concentrated as a young, female sounding voice came over the radio.

"Good afternoon, Intermountain Fifty Three, radar contact three two zero, north west Shenandoah Field, how's the heat treating you guys?"

Despite himself, Joe felt a twitch at the corner of his mouth and he grinned as he answered: "It's getting hotter up here by the minute, I'm telling you..."

"Pretty close, huh?" the controller's voice asked, sounding like the femme was enjoying the banter.

Steve nodded vigorously and grinned a bit.

"Ma'am, you don't know the half of it," Joe chuckled and flicked the switch, ending the conversation.

The door to the flight deck opened. Yohni entered, followed by Gabrielle. Both dressed and smiling. Randy followed shortly afterwards. Then Slam, looking like he'd just seen through the gates of Heaven.

"Good afternoon Ladies. Sorry for the discomfort back there," Joe said and looked over his shoulder at the two femmes.

"Discomfort? I didn't notice any discomfort, Yohni? Did you? I was quite comfortable, really," Gabrielle said, innocently.

Yohni just smiled and nodded, folding an arm under her girlfriend's.

Slam mumbled something and scratched his neck.

"What was that, Slam?" Joe asked.

The puma-canid cleared his throat. "Oh, I just said that...well...I'd definitely say they were comfortable..."

Gabrielle tried to keep a straight face. "Hey, what did you expect? The thermometer was threatening to burst," she asked and shrugged.

"Oh, I'm not complaining, Miss...not complaining at all!" Slam reassured her. "Please, have a seat."

Joe shook his head and looked at Steve. "If you ever...and I mean EVER tell my wife about this flight, Steve..."

"NOT a chance, Joe. Trust me. Not...a...chance."

"Good."

Steve looked up at the control panel over his head again and frowned. "On a different note, Joe...whenever I switch from 'Off' to 'Auto'," and here he actually performed the operation, "the damn circuit breakers for the chillers pop."

Joe pondered for a moment as the flight deck temperature edged towards ninety four degrees.

"We'd better ventilate with outside air or we're all gonna roast. Ladies, take a seat and strap yourselves in."

Steve nodded as he sat back down in the co-pilot's seat and reached for the proper controls.

Everyone sat down in a spare seat, except Slam. He had to deal with the bunk. Judging from the look of sheer bliss on his face as he laid down, he could've gone to sleep on a bed of razorblades and been happy.

A moment later, the ramp started to lower. Fresh air flooded the cargo bay. A moment later, the temperature on the flight deck began to drop as well.

Joe grinned and patted the instrument panel again.

Another moment later, a new course was set. Somehow, the coyote doubted 'the Bitch' would give them any more grief on the rest of the trip.

###

Zig Zag looked at the countryside. It was early evening. The sun hadn't fully set yet. She was standing on a hilltop, looking down over seven other hills. A wide but quiet river flowed between them.

She nodded and put one paw on her hip and the other on Marvin's shoulder.

"Thank you," was all she said.

Marvin smiled and nodded. "You're welcome, Zig. Glad you approve."

"I don't even think Jean can argue against this place. It's perfect."

Marvin nodded and stepped back and moved back towards one of the trailers. He had to admit to himself...he was tired.

Zig Zag stayed on the hilltop, just looking at the view. A little smile spread on her face as memories began coming back to her. Memories of a young, striped skunk in Hollywood. Looking for any kind of break, no matter how minor, in the movie-world. Memories of failure. Rejection. Scorn.

Memories of laughter and pointed fingers.

Even worse...there were memories of hateful, speciesist remarks about 'halfbreeds'.

None of it could take the smile off her face.

A moment later, she could hear footsteps behind her.

"Hey Zig Zag...you look very lonely up here. Want a little company?" the voice of Jean LeBrun asked.

"Sure," the skunk said and looked back at the vixen. "Look at that view? Moments like these, I feel a little closer to God."

"I dunno, really," Jean said and shrugged. She sounded dubious. "I never really considered that you might believe?"

"What church would have me?" Zig Zag asked and smiled again. "Doesn't matter, really."

"Look not for me in buildings of wood and stone. Lift a rock, and you shall find me. Split a log, and I am there," Jean said, thoughtfully.

"Huh?"

"Oh, sorry. Gospel of St. Thomas. Heavily debated historical issue...not to mention theological," Jean said and smiled, crookedly. "I have a kind of pragmatic take on the whole God-issue."

"Mind sharing?" Zig Zag asked. This was a safe enough situation. She knew she could trust Jean, and vice versa.

"I don't believe in Him...in any way, shape or form," Jean said and looked at the sunset. "But I'll admit that moments like this one are epic. It's like...we're standing on the verge of something great, isn't it? Something truly monumental."

Zig Zag nodded. She put a paw on her friend's opposite shoulder and pulled the vixen against her for a friendly squeeze. "Sometimes, Jean...you have a way with words."

Jean just smiled. Zig Zag released her again and they stood there, looking at the landscape another moment, quietly.

"Mind if I ask a strange question?" Zig Zag asked after a long moment.

"Go ahead. I don't need to keep any secrets from you, of all furs."

"Why don't you believe?"

The gray vixen smiled and looked up at Zig Zag. The skunk regretted her question when she saw the distant, tired look in the Jean's eyes. The simplicity of the answer didn't make her feel any better.

Jean just shrugged.

"Would you?"