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## *LXVIX – Mus*

The busses were arriving. So far, eight full busloads of extras had arrived. Many were locals. Many others were from Ohio. One busload in particular had drawn some attention. Jean was already there. Zig Zag as well. The main reason everyone concentrated on that bus in particular was that no one had hired the furs in it.

Yohni looked at Tamara next to her and folded her arms across her chest. They were both in costume already. The mongoose grinned crookedly and shook her head as if at some private joke, beckoning towards the bus.

"It's like giving a kid the keys to a candy-store, isn't it?" she asked.

Tamara nodded and tried to keep a straight face. "Poor Zig Zag...I think she's in severe danger of being infected, you know..."

"Eh? What with exactly?" Yohni asked.

"Well, have you ever seen her this interested in a history piece before?"

Yohni shook her head and shrugged. "Hardly, but let's face it, this isn't your run of the mill porn-movie either. She's got a lot of money tied up in this. I don't want to know *how* much either. Alright, none of us are getting Hollywood wages for this, since we're on

contract, but the amounts of costumes and sets...it must cost quite a few million dollars. I never knew she had *that* much to spend before."

"Neither did I but you know, I don't think she does, either," the rabbit said, thoughtfully.

"You don't mean she's actually spending money she doesn't have??" Yohni asked, worriedly.

"Oh...no, nothing of the sort. Never with Zig Zag, she's too careful for that. No, what I mean is I think *she* is fairly well off. Even rich. But not *this* rich. I do, however, think the studio has a lot more funds than either of us really realized. Our movies are popular, Yohni. The money must go somewhere. And while Zig Zag lives comfortably, she doesn't exactly pull a Hugh Heifer or Larry Flynt, does she?"

"I see what you mean. Most of the money all those movies and byproducts have brought in has gone into the studio. That makes sense. And...well...it's not as if we don't make a nice income, either. We may be on contract but she pays us very well, nonetheless."

Tamara nodded and looked at the bus again with a wide grin spreading on her face. "You know...neither you or I are academicians by trade, I think that's *fair* to say..."

"Oh, I don't know really," Yohni grinned, "...I think I'm perfectly versed in the anatomy of at least two dozen different species'."

The rabbit looked sidelong at the mongoose next to her. "Gabby is rubbing off on you, Yohni. Big time," she said, chuckling. "What I MEANT was that neither of us are supposed to be great thinkers, but there *are* times where I envy Jean. Look at her tail go over there. What is that pole they pulled out anyway?"

Yohni looked away, fighting a losing battle to keep her face straight. "You didn't just say that. Tamara, you didn't just ask what pole someone pulled out...around a porn actress?"

"Oh good grief. I'm going to kick Gabrielle when I see her," the rabbit giggled.

"I have no idea. We could go over and find out?"

"I think we'd be flatly ignored right now, my mongoose friend. I think the wisest thing we can do right now is sidle off towards the makeup van and get ready for the shooting."

Yohni nodded. "How were we to know there was a historical reenactment society like that in Virginia anyway?" she asked and shrugged. "How many would you say they are?"

"On a rough estimate...seventy or eighty. It's a big bus. Thereabouts. It was packed full too."

Yohni nodded again and grinned. "Hey, I just remembered something. Come on, we have work to do, you and I."

"What's that then?" Tamara asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Weeeeeell...we promised to do something special for Zig Zag, at the convention, remember? I think we'd better get started."

Tamara smiled and nodded, rubbing her paws together. "Ahh good. A party. Finally something I'm really *good* at!" she grinned. "Let's find Michael and Alexi. I think Rafe is getting ready for a scene."

Yohni nodded. A moment later, the two of them were headed towards the trailers to find their colleagues.

###

Jean couldn't stop her tail from wagging, no matter how hard she tried. As it was, she didn't try very hard. She was looking at some high quality reproductions of Roman armor and military equipment. She'd seen better reproductions, admittedly. Those that the studio had paid for were top notch. But the quality was great, and certain individual items amongst those she had seen so far were easily as good as the studio items. She looked up at a tall, tabby feline wearing sunglasses and a leather bomber-jacket next to her and nodded, excitedly.

"This is excellent, really. You've made a real effort on most of this," she said."

"Well, it's a lifestyle," the cat answered. "Plus some of us have grown pretty good at leather- and metalworking over the years. You should've seen the first stuff we made. It was awful. Anyway, I take it you approve?"

"I don't think I have a right to *disapprove* of any of this. It's very good quality. How many are you exactly?"

"An entire Centuriate. We're exclusive, really. We only take in the exact number needed," the feline grinned. "And to join, a fur has to prove he knows his history."

"I must be dreaming. Someone pinch me and tell me I'm awake," Jean mumbled and turned over a silvered eagle in her paws. It was clearly made to fit atop a pole of some

kind. "This is a fine reproduction of an Aquila-standard. It must've cost you a fortune if this really *is* silver."

"It isn't silver all the way through but it's silvered. We all forked out some for it. Took our metalworker five attempts to get the form right. We were all biting our nails on that last attempt. It was getting pretty costly. Anyway, I should introduce myself. I'm Charles Mombay, but my friends call me 'Mouse'," the cat said and extended a paw with a smile.

"Strange nickname for a feline. Is there a story to it? Anyway, pleased to meet you, Mouse. I'm Jean LeBrun. Jean will do. I wrote the script for this. And frankly it's still a little unreal to me that it's actually being filmed," Jean answered and shook the paw offered.

Mouse smiled and shrugged. "Isn't there always a story to a nickname? Some other time maybe. It's long and boring. Anyway, I take it you can use us?"

"THAT is really Zig Zag's call, but if she can't find some way of fitting you in, I'll probably kick her all the way into the new year. You *do* realize this is a blue movie, though, right? I don't want to you sign up for something you don't fully know what is," Jean asked.

"Okay...Jean...let me ask you a couple of really easy questions?" Mouse retorted.

"Go ahead."

"How many males do you see around this bus?"

"Well, a Centuriate consisted of 80 fighting furs, plus officers and non-combatants. I'd say you're around a hundred, which would also fit with a Centuriate's full compliment."

"Bingo. One hundred furs precisely. Looking at them, what would you say the average age is?"

Jean looked over the assembled group. There were a few furs who were pushing fifty rapidly. But most of them weren't that old. She stretched her neck to be sure she had seen everyone, then looked back at Mouse.

"Early thirties, I think...that'd be the average. With your requirements when it comes to equipment, I'd say most of you had to fork out a nice spot of cash too. A lot more than one spends on an ordinary hobby. Your weapons have real weight. Your armors are made from good quality metal and leather. The officers have excellent muscle-armor

reproductions as well. All in all, I'd say most of you, if not all of you, work fairly good jobs that allow you to have an expensive pastime like this."

"You're sharp, vixen. Very sharp. Many of us own our own businesses. Small stuff, really, but still. The rest are furs with good incomes, indeed. Taking out several weeks of your calendar to do something like this...well, you need to have a firm financial background. Anyway, if you combine those things...early thirties on average, with good incomes...what does that tell you, if you think carefully?" Mouse asked, playfully.

Jean looked like her brain was going to short circuit from thinking. She squinted and groaned. "Ohh damned that's a hard one. Anyway...I figure most of you won't have families. This is not the sort of hobby you just do every once in a while whenever you have time for kids and wives. You'd be single, most of you..."

"Good grief, why aren't you a cop...?" the feline asked and blinked. "Spot on. Anyway...a large group of furs, averaging in their early thirties, with money to burn...and you're *really* asking me if we *know* this is a blue movie?"

"What do...ohh..." Jean said and felt stupid. She looked past Mouse and saw the familiar stripy curves of Zig Zag talking to four very wide-eyed males. The skunk looked like she was signing T-shirts. Jean just nodded and looked up at Mouse again. "Okay, I'm officially dumber than a brick now. Sorry. Well, I'm glad you're here, and I'm pretty sure Zig Zag is too. We'll need to arrange a number of purple capes now, however..."

"Purple?"

"Yeah...some of you would sure be useful as Praetorians."

Mouse grinned. "Ave, Imperator," he said and winked.

Jean couldn't conceal a wide, toothy grin. "Zig Zag had better hire you all!"

Mouse winked and headed back to his comrades. Jean turned the silver eagle over in her paws a few more times and smiled.

Her tail had never stopped wagging.

###

Malcolm was sitting in the deepest, most comfortable chair in the living room. His hooves were up and he looked like life was incredibly good, overall. He was wearing a pair of cutoff jeans and a black tank-top with a rainbow pattern across the front. He had the

apartment all to himself. Timothy and Julie had gone out to make the nearest five malls decidedly unsafe places to be. Armed with credit cards, too. He felt happy he wasn't along for *that* particular outing.

He ran a paw through his mane and ruffled it. Much as he loved Timothy, there were times when the bronco was just too limp-wristed for him to keep up. He reached out to get his cappuccino from the table when the phone rang. He groaned and reached for that instead.

"Aaaand you've reached the most infamous den of sin and depravity in the Greater Tristate Area. Kindly leave inhibitions, morals and prejudice at the door. This is your entirely politically incorrect host, Malcolm, speaking," he said, cheerfully into the receiver.

There was a very long silence from the other end. So long that Malcolm ended up looking quizzically at the phone in his paw, wondering if it was a wrong number. If so, that might not have been the best greeting. He put it back against his ear again, just to make sure.

There was a giggle at the other end. "I see. Well, don't worry, I have no inhibitions, my morals are alternative to put it mildly, and prejudice can suck something private on me for all I care," a female voice said. "Gabrielle Ryder speaking. I take it you must be my brothers better half?"

"Ahhh, hey Gabby. Good to finally hear your voice. Timothy's told me a lot about you these last few days. Frankly I'm not sure if I'm his better half or if he's mine. Anyway, what can I do for you?"

"I'm not sure, really. Thing is...you see, I have a close friend who's going to need a bit of a network and a place to stay for a night or two in New York, and I don't know anyone there except Timothy. I was hoping he could either help me out or at least help find a place for her?" Gabby said at the other end.

Malcolm reached out for his cappuccino with his free paw, and sipped it, thinking. "Well...as for *myself* I'd be happy to help out. From what Timothy's been telling me, you're a remarkable femme, and one I'd like to get to know. If this is a way to get started on that, hey, count me in. But this friend of yours...well...is she aware she'd be nesting with a gay couple for the duration? I'd just rather not see any problems arise from that, if you get my drift."

Gabrielle couldn't help a slight laugh. "Oh, *believe me*...that won't be *any* problem. None whatsoever."

"You sound quite sure of yourself there," Malcolm chuckled. "Well then, may I ask what your friend is coming to New York for? Just so I know if I need to arrange a guided tour or something?"

"A sex-change," was the simple answer.

Malcolm's cappuccino got stuck down the wrong side of his throat and he coughed, hard, sitting upright. His eyes were tearing up from choking on the hot drink. "No shit?" he croaked.

Gabby waited for the stallion on the other end to regain the full use of his senses and voice. "I'm quite serious. She's due at John Husky's in just over five weeks. Can you help out then?"

"I'd need to ask Timothy of course, but I'd have no problem with her staying here for a few days. Will you be coming along as well?"

"Not at first. But I'll come to New York shortly thereafter. I intend to stay until she's ready to go home. But I'm probably going to find a hotel or something."

Malcolm nodded and wiped his nose and muzzle off, coughing lightly again. "Let me ask you then...how long is she going to spend in the hospital?"

"Two weeks at least. Maybe more if there are complications," Gabrielle answered.

"Then you're staying here. No arguments, filly. I'm not letting Timothy's only decent family pay out the nose for a hotel for two or three weeks when she might as well stay with us."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Decent? Me? You talkin' to *me*?"

"Heh...alright, Julie did say you were the latest hot thing in the world of porn or something. The only NICE family, then, is that better?" Malcolm laughed.

"Much. Okay. I'd better go. This is long distance on a cell-phone. It's costing a fortune. Anyway, could you run it over with Timothy? I'll call again tomorrow or the day after at the same time if that's okay with you?"

"That's fine. You take care, Gabby. Good talking to you at last."

"You as well, Malcolm. You as well," Gabrielle grinned.

They both hung up. Malcolm looked at his mostly empty cup and sighed, then got up to get a refill.

"Just the right amount of foam too..." he mumbled and shook his head with a grin.

###

Zig Zag opened the door to the trailer she used for her office and ran a paw through her hair. Today was turning out to be quite good. Those volunteers were certainly going to be useful. Judging from Jean's enthusiasm, their equipment was good enough to pass inspection too. That was important. She didn't want substandard items to show up on screen.

She took a seat and opened the small fridge she kept next to the desk, taking out a bottle of mineral water. She uncapped it and took a long sip, leaning back in her chair, picking up some papers from the desk to look over.

There was a knock on the door and Marvin peeked inside. "Hey Zig...got a moment?"

"Sure, come on in."

The badger entered and took a seat with a smile. "Well, I suppose we're allowed a bit of luck. I wonder how they heard about this?"

"From what I understood, many of them are regular on the Studio homepage, Marv...and we did put up information about this entire trip there."

"Ah, I see. Well, that explains that," Marvin said and looked at the water-bottle. "Got an extra? I'm parched."

"Sure..." Zig Zag said and took out an extra bottle, passing it to the badger.

"So what's next?" Marvin asked and took a long swig of water.

"Thirty five minutes until we start shooting for today. We've got the Forum Romanum fights to deal with. All of them. We may as well get them done as fast as possible, since we can send some of the extras home after that. No need to keep them here longer than necessary," Zig Zag said and smiled.

"Good. Most of them have brought tents, like they were instructed. A few of them said they'd be sleeping in whatever bus brought them here. That's fine too. All in all, we've got

it covered. I've arranged for food too, but it'll be a mess the next days, until we've gotten those scenes done, Zig. There are a lot of furs out there who need feeding."

"I'm sure you've done an admirable job, Marvin. You've *never* let me down so far," Zig Zag said. Her smile grew warmer.

"Thank you. I do my best," Marvin said and sipped his water again.

"Marvin, don't be so modest. I couldn't run ZZ Studios without you. At least nowhere near as effectively as I do now. You're a major factor in every success we've had. You're methodical, effective and fast working."

Marvin blushed furiously and looked at his water-bottle as if willing it to fill again. "Aww shucks..."

"Most importantly, though, I'm glad you're my friend. You know, I have been thinking a lot, lately. We've all changed a lot since we started, haven't we?" Zig Zag asked.

"I should hope so? Experience and age, Zig. It's natural. We've learned from the blunders we made in the past. There aren't many blunders anymore. You run a sound business. This is the first really major chance I've seen you take in a long time. But somehow I can't see it fail. I just can't," Marvin grinned.

"You know it won't fail. We have a huge fan following already. Plus this is a damned good story. The sex is there, sure...but it's not as hardcore as most of the stuff we make. Though it's certainly still explicit. Anyway, we got the Via Salaria scenes done. We'll take care of the Forum Romanum fight scenes first, then the market-scenes and general milling about for editing in where needed. I'm hoping we can send about eighty percent of the extras home in five days."

"That sounds doable. The sets are coming along well as well. I talked to the foremale before coming over here. They've managed to catch up some of the lost time. We're doing well, Zig. We're walking an unknown path here...but we're doing alright."

Zig Zag smiled an enigmatic smile and nodded, sipping her water again. "You're right. We are walking an unknown path, and we haven't done that for years. Isn't it...nice? Just...*nice*? To jump into the unknown, arms out...swan-diving and hoping the water is deep enough somewhere under you?"

Marvin blinked. Then he lifted his water-bottle in a toast and drank again. "You're glowing, Zig. I haven't seen you this way for years. Not when it came to work."

"How do you mean?"

"You look like you just came off the phone with James Sheppard. Or Monday morning after spending a whole weekend with him. You're happy. And you have no idea how good that makes me feel to see."

"Life's a journey, Marvin. A long series of choices, and each choice we make sends us down a new direction. We can't undo what we've done. We can't unsay what we've said. All we can do is live, and make the best of it..."

"That's deep, Zig Zag."

The skunk looked thoughtful. "I've thought a bit about when it all started. At first I thought it was when I hired Gabrielle. But it wasn't," she said, putting her water-bottle aside.

"When was it then?" Marvin asked and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and cradling his bottle between them.

"It was when I took her out for lunch one day about a month or so after she started working at the studio.. This isn't Gabrielle's doing, though. That's the important thing. I can't give her credit for what's come over me. But I can give her credit for starting me down this road. Deep down, I did this to myself. And that's important."

"Come on, don't hold out on me, Zig?" Marvin chuckled. "You've got me all curious now. What happened at that lunch appointment?"

"It wasn't an appointment really. It was more an impromptu thing. I wanted to talk to her. Because everything was so unusual about her. Her roomie, her life, her parents...everything. I wanted to know a bit more about her because I'd gotten myself in knee deep already then," Zig Zag said, letting her mind wander back.

"Makes sense really. I suppose something happened though?"

"Oh yes. She said some things...things I don't think I should really repeat. They were meant for me to hear and me only. But what I realized was...that she'd only worked for me for a month, but she wasn't looking at me like an icon of lust or...Zig Zag the Porn Star or *anything* of the sort. She just saw me as a fur like any other, and someone she enjoyed spending time with," Zig Zag explained and smiled slightly.

"Yes? Zig...many of us feel that way about you. Me included," Marvin said, confused.

"I know. But I wasn't really prepared to see it then. The thing about Gabrielle though is that she's *pervasive*. She...how do I put this...she comes across. She just *comes across*. She always manages to get her point out in plain view. Even blind furs can see it. And I've been blind for a long time."

"Blind?"

Zig Zag nodded and sighed. "You're one of my oldest friends, Marvin. You know me better than anyone else, I think. I think you know what I mean if you really think about it."

Marvin thought for a while, then scratched his neck. "This is getting very serious, Zig. Are you sure you want to continue? It's quite private and I don't want to dig too deep."

"See? That's the entire point. Right there. RIGHT there," Zig Zag said and sighed. "I just had to realize that I don't need to shield myself off from *everyone*. Just *some*."

Marvin nodded. "I guess I see you point. You're changing Zig...but I think it suits you."

"Life's a journey, Marvin. A series of transitions."

The badger smiled a bit and opened his water-bottle again and emptied it. "Fifteen minutes until we start shooting."

"You go ahead. I'll be right there," Zig Zag said.

Marvin nodded and got up. He tossed the empty bottle in the bin and left the trailer.

Zig Zag looked at the papers in front of her and smiled to herself a little.

###

The roar of the crowd was deafening. Positively deafening. Hundreds of furs were watching as the two femmes circled each other. Clearly, none of them wanted to attack first.

Then the first lunge was made. And a parry. A sidestep. A riposte and a dodge. Again, the two combatants circled.

Each blow had made the crowd roar louder. No one took any notice of the look of concern and worry on the face of one of the fighters. The other one was stumbling. It wasn't really a fight. A feline wearing a toga with a wide stripe around the rim and down the center of his chest shook his head and shouted out loud.

"KILL HER and get this charade over with!"

One of the fighters raised her weapon.

"I'm sorry...it should not end this way..." she whispered.

The cameras zoomed in on her face.

"AND CUT!"

Zig Zag got up from her chair and clapped her paws. "That was brilliant. Rewind that and let me have a look," she said to the nearest camerafur.

The actors and actresses relaxed and sat down on the sand. Marvin nodded towards the group of extras and smiled. They started spreading out.

"I'm tired," Gabrielle chuckled. "I can't remember the last time I've been this physically exhausted."

"I can," Yohni said and walked up to the filly, sitting down next to her, leaning in. "I could give everyone here the juicy details."

Gabrielle grinned. "The last time *I* was this exhausted or the last time *you* were?" she asked.

"Both of us."

Gabrielle looked like she was trying to remember something. Then she facepawed. "Oh don't you dare, Yohni..." she giggled. "No way."

"YES! WE WANT TO HEAR!" came the unanimous roar from the rest of the cast.

The mongoose looked up at Gabrielle with a big smile. "So...should I tell them or would you rather perform a reenactment?"

Gabrielle half lidded her eyes and looked at the shorter femme next to her. "Well...a reenactment would be good but we couldn't really have an audience."

"That's true...well, they'll just have to guess, won't they?" Yohni chuckled.

Gabrielle nodded, getting to her hoofs. "That sounds about right," she said and led the mongoose away from the sets.

Michael looked at Rafe and shook his head. "And to think Gabby worried if that relationship would work out, initially," he chuckled.

The wolf shrugged and grinned crookedly. "Zig Zag should consider starting a dating service...seems half the cast is getting involved with someone...or each other."

"I think that zoundz like a *capital* ideah...*really*," Alexi's voice came from behind the two.

They turned around to look at the husky. Rafe looked about to ask what was up with the lisp, but he never got around to it before Alexi continued.

"I mean, that would *finally* mean I had a chance for a date with you, big boy!" he said and fluttered his lashes.

Rafe looked entirely uncertain. "Errhhhh..."

Alexi flipped his wrist over and sighed in exasperation. "Oh deah...he doezn't look too interezted. I'm *heartbroken*. Michael, what *shall* I do for comfort."

Michael managed to keep a straight face. He'd guessed where this was going. "You could start by finding Mia. She's been complaining about an itch all afternoon. Maybe you could scratch it for her?"

Alexi clapped his paws together and grinned widely, returning to his normal tone of voice. "Hot diggety...I *was* starting to wonder when *I'd* see some action around here..." he grinned and went off in search of Mia...tail wagging.

Rafe looked like someone had slapped him across the face with a very big fish. "I'm going to quote Esteban now, okay?" he mumbled.

"What do you mean?" Michael asked and looked up at his friend, still managing to keep a straight face.

"Geeve the lobo a break, no?" Rafe whined.

Michael just laughed and shook his head, heading off to change into some regular clothing for the evening.