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XLVI - Saturnalia II

The food had been an absolute success. Yohni was quite relieved that not a single dish had been left untouched and most had been very popular. Several plates were completely clean and most of the rest had only very little left on them. The sweetened, spiced wine had been a big hit as well. Overall, Yohni couldn't be happier with how things had gone so far.

The dancers had everyone clapping too. Right up to the point where she had stood up and announced that the idea was that everyone had to learn how to dance a simple Roman chain-dance. It hadn't been easy but the dance-troupe had helped and amidst much wine-induced merriment, they had managed after about twenty minutes. Fortunately, Malcolm had led the chain, and while he hadn't actually stood on a stage for years, he stayed fit and in shape, and he still caught on to dancing like others did to walking and talking. It had made things easier for everyone following behind him.

Of course, the trick had been that while everyone was working on the chain, no one had noticed that the empty dishes had been carried out and desert had been brought in instead.

Yohni looked at her wife and smiled. Gabrielle was clearly in her element as hostess of a party like this. She mingled with the guests, shared a few words with each, and stayed a moment longer here or there to reminisce...

She looked like she was having the best of times.

"This is a great idea," Leo said, coming up to Yohni with a wide smile. "And, I suspect, the whole Roman thing is really just an excuse to get all of us together in one place for a *pleasant* reason!"

"Guilty as charged," Yohni answered with a smile of her own. "I'm surprised everyone could come, though. It's not the easiest time of year to make traveling arrangements for."

"You gave plenty of advance warning. I think that made all the difference."

"We did. But your daughter managed to get it arranged on much shorter notice for herself, and without either you or your wife finding out, may I add."

Leo chuckled. "Yeah, she did. Lizzy is having a few choice words with her about the meaning of obeying one's elders, though."

Yohni shrugged. "Don't be too hard on her, Leo. Seriously...we should have let the kids in on this. They're old enough to travel to Ohio on their own. I'm sure they can attend a party without getting into trouble. After all, we wouldn't forbid them to attend their prom, and that's likely a lot wilder than this."

"True," Leo admitted. "Don't worry though. We're not going to give her too much trouble. In fact, I'm rather proud of her managing to do this so well on her own. But still, she didn't do what she was told."

Yohni nodded. That was true at least. "I can see your point. So...how are you going to punish her for it?"

"By grounding her for two weeks and raising her allowance," Leo said and sipped his spiced wine without missing a beat.

Smirking, Yohni nodded again. "I'll have to copy that with Kalen. Maybe only ten days in his case...given his nice little performance as he came in."

Leo snickered. "Zig Zag couldn't help herself, you know. She immediately started talking about possibly hiring Kalen."

"Depending on for what company, I'd either settle for smacking her or bleaching out her stripes, one by one, with pure lye," Yohni said, matter-of-factly.

Leo nodded. "I know. So does she. She wasn't being serious. You don't want Kalen to act in mainstream movies either?"

Yohni shook her head. "Not unless it's something he really, really wants to do himself. I know what fame can do to a fur. It's not always pretty. Kalen is much too nice a guy for that kind of world."

"That's a pretty dark point of view..."

"Maybe, but it's realistic. Kalen has so many talents he keeps baffling me. He loves his football, Leo...I mean, he really, *really* loves that sport. But if he doesn't make it as a football player, he could make it in any other walk of life he might choose. Somehow...I don't really doubt he'll make it to the big league, though."

"Nor do I," Leo said with a wink. "In fact, I think I can pretty much guarantee he will have a chance."

"How...?"

"If he doesn't get a Big Ten scholarship on his throwing arm alone, Yohni, there's no justice in this world. But if that should be the case, I will make sure he does get a scholarship to USC."

"You know, we do have a college fund for him. It's not like we're unable to send him to college, but...thank you. You're the kind of friend everyone should have, Leo..."

"You mean filthy rich and a bleeding heart?"

Yohni smiled and shrugged. "Those are just two of your many, many good qualities. You have too many to list though. Your wealth doesn't define you. It just gives you opportunities that most of us don't have."

Leo smiled and leaned down, giving Yohni a squeeze around the shoulders. "Thank you."

He finished putting desert on his plate and headed back to his seat. Yohni went back to looking at the guests with a smile.

###

Jean leaned back against one of the walls in the kitchen and took a deep breath, closing her eyes. Gabrielle found her like that a couple of minutes later. The equine smiled and leaned against the door-frame, folding her arms across her chest. She didn't speak. She just looked at her friend and reminisced a little to herself.

Finally, Jean opened her eyes again. "Oh...hi Gabby. Didn't hear you enter."

"Stealth-filly!" Gabrielle said and winked. "Are you okay? You look tired and the night is still very young."

"I'm doing great actually. Just catching my breath, really. I mean, look at them all out there. There are so many of them. I never knew we had so many friends!"

"Normally, one doesn't sit down to count them. That's why most furs are surprised when they do find out how many there are."

Jean nodded. Her friend was right of course.

"We've come a long way, haven't we, Gabby?" she asked, somberly.

Gabrielle nodded. She smiled warmly and pushed off the door, moving to the sink to get a glass of water. "We have," she said and sipped the cool liquid. The wine was making her slightly tipsy and she didn't want to end up drunk.

"And we did good. Both of us..."

"Oh yes."

Smiling, Jean took the glass out of Gabrielle's paw and put it aside. Then she gave her friend a long, tight hug. "Thank you," she said, softly. "For just being you."

Gabrielle was taken slightly aback, but happily returned the hug. "You too, Jean. And you've been drinking. You always get sentimental when you drink."

"I do, but I haven't had anything to drink yet, actually. I'm waiting for something before starting," the vixen said and let go of Gabrielle.

The equine raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Are you getting all sneaky on me?"

"Muahahah?"

"You need to practice your evil laugh...it's not quite there yet."

Grinning, Jean shrugged. "I guess that's because I'm not evil."

"There is that," Gabrielle said and picked up her glass again. "So are you going to tell me what your plans are all about or not?"

"I think I'll settle for 'or not' this time."

"Bugger!"

Winking, Jean headed back to the party. It was almost time.

###

The desert had been delicious. Fruit cakes of various kinds, fresh fruit and nuts had been just what the guests had needed after the huge amount of food they had just ingested. Steve felt sure he wouldn't need to eat anything for a week. Mostly, he wanted to flop down on the floor, spread eagled, tongue lolling out of his mouth while whining. He'd eaten way too much, but the food had just been too damned good not to.

Despite that, he wanted to have another go at the desert. There was a cinnamon and fruit-cake he hadn't tried yet and he felt horribly guilty about it. It stood there, on the table, staring at him...

At least it felt that way.

"Eeeeat meeee Steeeeve..."

He could almost hear it.

Closing his eyes and groaning, he staggered back to his feet. No cake was going to get the better of *him*! A quick glance at everyone else in the room told him that many of them felt much the same way as he did. Not finishing the food that had been so lavishly prepared would almost be criminal.

Not almost.

It would be *sinful*...and Steve wasn't even all that religious.

The wolf made his way back to the deserts and looked them over. That cinnamon and fruit cake was really going to get it! A few of the guests were also getting another slice or piece of whatever they felt like and Steve picked up a clean plate while waiting for them to finish.

Kalen came up to him, suppressing a burp. "I don't think my toga is big enough for all this food," he said, sounding groggy.

"Mine neither, and I'm half a times bigger than you to begin with," Steve answered and advanced a few steps on the evil cake-fiend.

Kalen nodded. "We should wrap up the crumbs from this table, you know...and send it to Benjamin Aureus."

"You can be mean when you want to," the wolf grinned. "It's a good idea, though. You think the food will keep?"

"Probably not, but I think Uncle Esteban took a few pictures of all the food. We could print out one of those as a postcard and send it to him instead?" Kalen suggested and picked up a couple of pieces of fruit.

Steve's grin grew wider. He nodded and finally reached the cinnamon and fruit beast, glaring at him from its position on the table. He flattened his ears and growled menacingly at it, before picking up a large knife and cutting himself a modest piece.

"HAH! Gotcha!" he exclaimed and put the knife aside after putting his slice of cake onto his plate. "So, how are you enjoying yourself, Kale?"

The equine chuckled at his friend's antics. "I'm having a great time so far. But this is still just the beginning. I'm sure there will be a lot more to come."

Steve nodded. "I think there will probably be some more entertainment, and then eventually, everyone will just socialize..."

"Probably," Kalen said with a nod. He patted his friend's shoulder. "Enjoy your cake, big guy. I'll settle for the fruit..."

He headed back to his table. Steve prodded his cake with a finger, growling at it again. It wasn't quite dead yet. He headed back to his seat with a spring in his step and a smile on his face. If everyone kept eating as they had until now, they'd be asleep by ten o'clock unless something happened. Knowing his new family and Kalen's parents, there was no chance of them allowing their guests to snooze off though. Something would happen. Probably something pretty spectacular.

###

"Are you ready?" Jean asked. She was standing between two large cars in the parking lot. No one could see her or the furs she was talking to unless they came outside. The guests were still blissfully unaware of what was going to happen next.

Four furs smiled and nodded. A badger with the body of a professional athlete scratched his cheek. "Haven't actually done this indoors yet, though," he said with a grin.

"There's a first for everything," another fur said. He was a panther, looking like he too had spent a considerable amount of time in the gym. His tail was swishing back and forth behind him quite lazily, revealing just how calm he was.

The last two were female and they were both in excellent shape as well. They were talking quietly between themselves, apparently agreeing on something. Jean didn't interrupt them. Whatever they were talking about was probably very important for what was coming next. She simply nodded to the two males and smiled.

"You look great. I am very impressed," she said, genuinely approving.

The panther smiled and bowed his head slightly. "Thank you, Domina. You strike quite a figure yourself."

Jean smirked. The panther knew the basics of Roman etiquette, but then again, she wouldn't have expected anything less. Besides, he had an actor hidden in his chest, that much was obvious. "I appreciate that. Now...the coast is clear, so you follow right behind me, and wait until I've entered and said what I need to say. You two will go first," he said, nodding to the males.

They smiled and nodded back and Jean looked across the parking lot again. It was completely empty, and she hurried across to the door, followed closely by the four furs behind her.

Once inside, she took a minute to gather her courage again. She didn't want to seem out of breath either when she entered. Instead, she nodded to the four furs waiting, and then slipped back in through a barely open door. The desert was almost dealt with and from the look on the faces of some of the guests, they could use something to keep them from dozing off after all that good food.

Smiling to herself, she checked her dress one final time before walking onto the dance floor again with long, sure strides.

"May I have your ATTENTION, please!" she said, loudly, clapping her paws together twice, sharply. She waited a moment for the general commotion to quiet down. Even her husband didn't know what this was all about, let alone Gabrielle or Yohni. She straightened her back and stood as tall as she could, looking slightly smug and very confident.

At last everyone looked her way and stayed quiet.

"This is the Saturnalia after all. This is more than a feast to simply celebrate the birth of a new year. It is also a cause for remembrance. For the year that is dying out, and for those who came before us. So in the tradition started so many years ago, I think we should allow ourselves some proper Roman sport, in honor of the dead."

"Why you sneaky..." Zig Zag said, rolling her eyes and looking like she had to fight hard not to laugh out loud. One or two other furs, mostly former ZZ Studios-employees seemed to catch on as well. Jean waited for everyone to be quiet.

"Incidentally, 'Why you sneaky' normally applies to the very same guest who just uttered those words," she said and winked. "In any case, I have taken the liberty of arranging two gladiatorial contests for us to enjoy. From the earliest days of Rome's history, when She still fought the proud but savage tribes of Latium...the Samnite...DRUSUS!!"

The Panther stepped forward, putting his helmet on and raising his sword. The 'crowd' was a bit uncertain for about half a second, before Rafe started cheering. He was immediately joined by Esteban, Alexi and all the rest of the old AVC-actors and actresses. The rest of the guests quickly got into the spirit of things and greeted the Gladiator with loud cheers.

"And his opponent...elegant and deadly, dangerous and strangely alien...armed with the native weapons of his homeland, the hooked sword and the square shield, I give to you...the Thracian...LYSANDROS!!" Jean went on, after the worst of the noise had quieted down.

The badger stepped forward, raising his hooked sword above his head. He too was greeted by loud, cheerful roars and clapping.

Jean smiled and waited for this to fade as well, before she looked at the two combatants. "Such passion from the audience. Show me proper Virtus, and I am sure they will be merciful. When my shawl touches the ground, you may commence the bloodletting!"

With that she stepped backwards and walked over to her seat. The 'bloodletting' was just a matter of play-acting of course. The gladiators were using dull weapons, but it would look impressive nonetheless. She'd gone to some trouble to find a group of reenactors in California and arrange this with them. It wasn't cheap...mostly since she had to pay their transportation back and forth...but if they were half as good as the snippets of film on their homepage had led her to believe, it would be a spectacular event.

She took off her shawl and smiled graciously at the two fighters, already lined up opposite one another, huffing and growling at each other in a very convincing show of mutual hostility. It was a bit like a Wrestling match. They had rehearsed every move in advance, but even she didn't know who they had agreed on should win.

She looked forward to seeing it as she let her shawl fall from her paw to the floor.

As the clang of metal against metal sounded amidst the first ooh's and aah's from the audience, Gabrielle leaned over from her seat and gave Jean a long look.

"I should have known..." she said, under her breath, while trying not to smile too widely.

Jean simply smiled and kept her eyes on the fight.

###

Leo adjusted his costume a little. He and Lizzy had decided to go with the Roman look anyway, although he had initially thought of alternatives. They just hadn't been able to come up with an alternative that had made much sense to either of them. Besides, Lizzy looked amazing as a Roman lady. He knew her reservations about skirts and dresses but even she felt comfortable in what she was wearing. The dress was made to flatter all her best features.

Leo was hard pressed to put a name on which ones those were.

He fluffed up his mane a little and turned around, nearly bumping into the tall form of Alex O'Whitt. For a moment, the two large felines seemed to try to come up with what to say, then both smiled politely and nodded.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I was far away in my own thoughts."

Alex shrugged and set his cane against the edge of the sink. "Not back in Iraq, I hope? Anyway it's alright. I must admit I was as well."

Leo chuckled. He had met Alex O'Whitt only a few times since their initial meeting under drastic circumstances back in Iraq, when the tiger had hobbled out of the desert with a broken leg. The fact that the tiger used a cane now probably had something to do with that old fracture.

"Not that far, no. In any case, I blame it on all that good food..." he said.

"...and the entertainment. I must admit, participating in a pagan new year's feast is a new experience for me," Alex said with a chuckle, before he went to work dislodging a piece of cake that had gotten thoroughly stuck between two of his teeth.

Laughing softly, Leo felt obliged to agree with the tiger. "The same goes for me. But there are no religious ceremonies involved and apart from Jean's few references to Roman deities..."

"Oh, it's not a problem," Alex chuckled and finally managed to remove what was stuck behind his incisor. "Ahh...what a relief."

Leo smiled and shrugged. "Not for me either. It's a fun idea, and besides, I'm secure enough in my beliefs that this isn't a challenge to them. Besides, I know it was never meant as one."

"Precisely my point. So you're a believer? We never had a chance to talk about that the first time we met."

"I am. I found my faith in Khyber Pass in Afghanistan, you might say. A few years before the whole thing in Iraq."

Alex nodded and smiled. "Ahh yes. You know, I met your daughter this summer at my cousin's place in Ohio. It was a great experience. All the kids were fantastic. I'm glad everything worked out...you know...with the shooting."

Leo smiled. "Thank you. Well, she did say she had met you and that you were a genuine war-hero."

Alex smiled crookedly and turned around to face the lion. "We both know that term has been applied to you both justly and frequently as well."

Leo shook his head. "I'm not a hero. I just did what I had to do. The real heroes are those who stayed over there."

Nodding, Alex smiled crookedly. "Spoken like a true soldier," he said.

It was impossible for Leo not to smile. Alex had a way of saying that which came across as a real and sincere compliment, and Leo took it as such, despite having left the army so many years ago.

"Maybe. But we both know it's true."

"Absolutely."

"By the way...I seem to recall that you're in the aviation business. What are your views on environmentally safe planes..." Leo said, striking up a new note in the conversation.

"I think that if we are to keep flying, it is the way we must and should go. Why do you ask?" Alex answered, adjusting his toga and getting his cane back.

Leo smiled widely. "Well, I may be here to celebrate a pagan new year's feast, but that's no reason why I can't find a new business partner, is it?" he said.

Chuckling, Alex shrugged. "No reason at all," he said. "Shall we head back to the party, though?"

"We should. The fights were quite extraordinary...but I don't think they have a lot more planned except socializing now."

"Probably not. But yes, they were. I found the femmes to be exceptional. Whereas the males stuck to bashing each other into submission in a very convincing way, the femmes avoided getting hit. It looked almost like they were dancing."

"Quite something, yes..." Leo said with a smile and waited for Alex to leave first, before rejoining the party.

###

It was just past eleven. While New Years eve was still a couple of days away, everyone was getting into the spirit of the party and they were looking forward to Midnight almost as if it did mark the turn of the year.

Jean smiled as groups of furs mingled. The kids were obviously having an amazing time. Everyone wanted to talk to them and get to know them. There was a lot of 'catching up' going on as well. Many of the furs in the room hadn't seen each other for many years.

Her gladiator-idea had been a spectacular success. Several furs had told her how convincing it had looked and how exciting...and scary...it had been. Including the kids. Nadia had confessed she had almost wanted to cover her eyes, even though she knew it was play-acting. Jean was absolutely satisfied. The reenactors had been absolutely worth every cent she had paid them, at least, and as long as the guests had enjoyed the show, she was quite happy.

'Lysandros' had defeated his Samnite opponent with a tricky move, using his downward hooked sword to 'cut' up over 'Drusus' back. The audience had been awed though, and had graciously granted the defeated gladiator his life. The two females had been so lithe

their moves had reminded Jean of Olympic gymnasts. They had ducked and weaved, avoided every blow while still fighting at a furious pace. It had been like a well choreographed fight from a high octane action movie. Even Esteban had been short of breath afterwards and he was *used* to filming that kind of thing.

The party would no doubt go on until the very early hours of the morning though some guests might retire a little earlier if they got tired. Some light snacks had been carried in and placed on the table but everyone was still too full to really eat much, and Jean could hardly blame them. Yohni's and Esteban's cooking had been in a league entirely of its own for this event.

The caterers had been amazing as well.

All in all, this was a party she would remember for the rest of her life.

Zig Zag came over and leaned in, pecking the vixen's cheek lightly. "This is an amazing idea. If it wouldn't be so terribly unoriginal, I'd steal it and invite all my business relations and see them squirm in badly made togas. Everyone here made such an amazing effort..."

Jean smiled. "I'm stunned by that myself to be honest, but not half as much as from the fact that no one cancelled. Every fur we invited is here. Every single one."

"That should tell you something about yourselves, Jean. Both you...and your husband...and Gabby and Yohni."

"It does..."

The skunk smiled and twirled around herself. "Even though it was terribly rude of you to host a period party for a time when there were no skunks around in the old world. Shame on you. I had to come up with a dress fantastic enough to steal the attention from what's inside it. Do you know just how hard that is?"

Giggling, Jean put a paw over her eyes and shook her head. "Only you, Zig Zag..." she snickered. "Only you."

"Well, I've got standards to maintain you know. Anyway, it was good to see you get up and speak in front of all these furs. I know how you feel about that kind of thing."

"It's weird, isn't it? I'm giving lectures at university every damned week, and I still have to convince myself it's not dangerous."

Smiling, Zig Zag shook her head. "I know actors and actresses...big, world famous names too...who still have to sit down five minutes before they go up in front of the camera, or pass out from stage-fright. It doesn't define their acting. What defines their acting is how they behave once they actually *are* standing in front of that camera. Same thing goes for you."

"You're right of course."

"I always am, Jean. You know that."

Jean groaned and rolled her eyes, but still smiled. "Yeah yeah..."

"You know though, just to be fair...we haven't actually heard Gabrielle say a word all evening."

"How do you mean?"

Zig Zag shrugged. "Oh, just that apart from whatever private conversations she's had, she hasn't actually spoken to all the guests at once. This is Gabrielle Ryder we're talking about. She's disappointing her star-struck fans."

"You mean like your cousin?" Jean asked, dryly.

It caught Zig Zag momentarily off guard. Then she looked at Jean with a raised eyebrow and a highly amused look on her face. "I am so telling *Alex* you said that."

Grinning, Jean took a glass of honey-water from the refreshment table and sipped it. "Well, I'm sure he knows Gabrielle was only joking around. Even all those years ago when she started."

"He knows. She's just a big goofball at times. It's part of what makes her unique and special. It's a good part of how she copes with the world, I suspect," Zig Zag answered and took a glass as well. "Ohh, this stuff is nice. What is it?"

"Honey-water. Romans used to drink it for refreshments. No Coca-Cola, you see..." the vixen responded, smiling.

Zig Zag nodded and sipped the drink again. "Different but...quite delicious. Okay, anyway...we can't leave Gabrielle out of this."

Jean just indicated for Zig Zag to go ahead with whatever she had planned. The skunk winked at her and headed towards the dance-floor, clapping her hands together a few times to get everyone's attention. Jean took mental notes for use in her classrooms.

There was something about the way Zig Zag commanded the attention of every fur in the room so completely effortlessly that simply struck her as amazing.

"Well," the skunk said and smiled. "It's come to my attention that we have a serious issue to deal with."

A confused muttering went through the various groups of furs. No one seemed to know exactly what Zig Zag had in mind. Some of them clearly thought more entertainment was due. In a way, that was probably the case.

"So to remedy that situation," Zig Zag went on, "I will take the liberty of asking Gabrielle to come over here and please say a few words to everyone gathered. She's left it to her old roomie to do the public talking all evening and frankly, as all of us who know Jean can attest to...that's not a fair division of labor. So Gabby, get your shapely self over here and say something."

Amidst clapping and cheering, Gabrielle walked up to her former employer, grinning ear to ear. "Very well then...what do you want me to say something about?"

Zig Zag pondered that a moment. "That's a good question really. But since we are all having such a brilliant time, why don't you say something about where the idea for this came from? Apart from inside Jean's wonderfully geeky brain, that is."

"Thank you," the vixen chimed in, "But as I recently told Yohni, I'm a happily married femme and flattery won't get you anywhere, Zig Zag."

The skunk found herself momentarily lost for words as everyone laughed out loud.

"Damned...how come you always knew how to do that, Jean?" she chuckled once the giggling had ended. "Anyway, Gabby...how did all this start?"

"How did all this start?" Gabrielle said, thoughtfully. There was a dreamy look on her face all of the sudden.

Jean smiled. She knew that tone of voice and that look on her old friend's face. She was really thinking...and remembering.

Gabrielle straightened up some. She took her shawl off and folded it between her paws. When she spoke, it wasn't in an amused voice or with a look of merriment on her face. She spoke with deep sincerity and looking absolutely serious.

"You probably all know the feeling that you would have liked to save something from some time in your past. It can be a favorite jacket or your first ever car...maybe a bit

more immaterial like your first kiss or the first moment you looked at the fur you love," she said, putting the shawl down on a recliner, before looking at everyone in the room again and letting her words sink in.

They did. Furs were nodding. There were a lot of thoughtful expressions on faces, too.

"In my case, it's probably going to sound strange. It's going...to make very little sense except to one other fur in this room, but don't worry, I'll explain it all. The one thing I regret having thrown away from my past...is an alarm clock. A broken alarm clock, to be precise. An alarm clock that had developed quirks of its own, and which would consistently fail to wake either Jean or me on mornings where we absolutely had to get up for something..."

Jean nodded. She knew immediately what this was about. She could even feel a sentimental lump forming in her throat, but she didn't say anything. She just kept quiet and listened.

Gabrielle went on after another moment to remember the details. "I remember when it all began. You want to know where all this started? It started one morning...way back in 1999, when I got out of bed, and realized that the alarm clock hadn't gone off. I was going to get fired from my job at the prophylactics-factory, and that I had to go find another job, somehow...somewhere. I remember getting up, while Jean was still asleep. I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror and asked myself what was with the long face..."

Smiling, Jean nodded again.

Gabrielle was right.

That was how it had all started...