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Fear of Flying by Nicolai

"James," Zig Zag said, as she cuddled up closer to her coyote, "what is it you want to ask me?"

James started, surprised at her words, then relaxed and held her closely. "How did you know that?" he asked. "You reading my mind or something?"

"Or something," she replied. "Now, what is it?"

"I don't want to get you upset, that's why I was hesitating. It's about flying, and why it bothers you so much. I've been thinking about it, and I have some ideas. Both about why it bothers you and what we might do about it."

Zig Zag tensed, briefly, then forced herself to relax again, not wanting to spoil the mood. "Okay, we can talk about it. I'm not very introspective, as you know, and I tend to avoid thinking about things like that. I'm not really sure exactly what it is, or why, but you know how much I dislike flying."

"Oh, yeah," James said, "I know, and I've been thinking about it a lot. I have a couple of theories that I think are pretty close, and I'd like to talk about them. Let me just talk for a moment and then we can put our heads together. First, I think your claustrophobia is a big part of it; you're in a closed space that you can't get out of, and you can't see what's going on outside, at least not very well. So that gets you wound up, and since you know it's coming, you get tense before you even get there. So you're all tight and worried when you get on the plane, and then, when they close the door, you're locked in and can't get out. That gets you really tense and might even cause a panic attack, right?"

"Uh huh, you got that right," Zig answered, starting to tense up again despite her best efforts.

"Then, to compound the problem, you're totally dependent on the pilot for everything, including your safety, and he's someone you don't know and probably have never met," James continued. "He's totally in control, and you don't know or understand what he's got to do, or how he does it, or anything. Plus, he's behind closed and locked doors and there is no way they'll let you talk to him. So you've got to bottle everything up inside and it can really get bad then. I'm pretty sure that having to give up the control and your lack of knowledge about what a pilot does really contributes to getting you upset. This really conflicts with your desire for control. The combination makes it awfully tough on you. How'm I doing, so far?"

"You know me too well," Zig Zag said, pursing her lips. "I am a bit of a control freak, and I really don't like letting someone else have that control. I hadn't thought about it, especially that way, but you know, you're right. The claustrophobia I don't think we can do anything about. The pilot is the same way, I'm afraid. I just *don't* like flying, and that's all there is to it."

"Well, being in a limo is very, very similar, except that you aren't up in the air. And being in a limo doesn't seem to bother you at all. Right?"

"Not a bit, and that really is something to think about, James."

James chuckled, "Well, I may have a solution for both of those flying fears. Have you ever been up in a small plane?"

Zig barely hesitated before answering, "No, I haven't. I'm not sure I want to, either."

"How would you feel about being the pilot, yourself? You would be the one in control, and you'd be able to see everything from the cockpit, so no more closed in space. It would be more like driving a car. Hmmm?"

Zig Zag squirmed around so she could look at him. "That's a great idea!" she squealed, "I never even thought of that. What do we have to do?" She turned and climbed on top of him, moving up to smother him with kisses, before he could answer.

Later, after thoroughly kissing her back, James said "You'd have to start off with ground school and then flight school. There's one over at the airport, we can check with them this weekend, if you want. I do know that many schools offer a free trial flight, and that will let you know in a hurry if this idea is worth pursuing. It does take some time and effort to get the license, you know, and to work up to the type of plane we'd want for traveling will take even longer. Probably wouldn't be a bad idea if I got a license, too. That way we can trade off pilot duties. If one of us is tired or needs to work, the other one can fly. We'd lose all the fancy stuff, though. The attendant, the in flight drinks, the restroom, that kind of stuff. Think it'd be worth it?"

"It might. Depends on the circumstances, I guess," Zig mused, "but if it gets me over some of my problems, it'll be worth it. It might help on the other flights, too. I do like the charter flights a lot better than those cattle car flights. I detest those."

"I know, I know," James laughed, "I just thought this might be an even better option. And since you like the idea so much, I'm glad I thought of it. Now, let's see if we can get some sleep. We've both got to go to work in the morning, we need our rest."

"James," Zig asked coyly, "are you really going to sleep? You've gotten me all excited again..."

"You know I can never resist you, gorgeous," James whispered, while pulling her closer and running his paw down toward her tail, "what do you have in mind?"

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As they approached the airport on Saturday morning, Zig turned to James, "This is such a neat idea, Sweetie. I can't wait to try it."

"Patience, my beautiful skunk," James laughed, "the school isn't going anywhere. We'll be there in a few minutes."

As they pulled up to the Mid-Ohio Flight School, Zig was bouncing in her seat, impatient as a teenager to get started on her new adventure. Going inside, the attractive rabbit receptionist looked up at them, and asked, "May I help you?"

"James Sheppard, I have an appointment this morning with the flight instructor."

"I'll call him for you, just have a seat, please," she said, eying them both, and paying a bit more attention to Zig Zag, seemingly distracted by her stripes, so unusual on a skunk.

A few minutes later, a middle-aged squirrel approached them. "I'm Tom Oaktree," he said,

introducing himself, "chief instructor for the school. You must be James Sheppard. And you, of course, are the famous Zig Zag," he continued, "It's nice to meet you both." While he had obviously given both of them a look-over as he approached, he did not linger on Zig Zag, even though he obviously recognized her. The courtesy and discreet manner did not escape James or Zig Zag, and impressed them both. "Lets go back to my office and we can discuss why you're here and what we can do for you."

In the office, James and Zig Zag informed Tom of her problems with flying, and James' ideas about learning to fly as an approach to dealing with those problems. Tom sat back in his chair and thought about what they'd told him.

"You know, this is a novel approach to the fear of flying. What made you think of it?"

James answered him, "If you could see her car and the way she drives sometimes, it just might occur to you, too. The car is a customized, high performance version of the Viper, and she can do some amazing things behind the wheel."

Tom was taken aback by the concept of a "high performance" Viper. The stock Viper was mighty hot performer to start with. An upgrade version seemed just a bit daunting.

"Well, in that case..." he said thoughtfully, "this might just be a good idea. Now, since you only reserved one trial flight, I assume that it is for Zig Zag. What about you, James?"

"If Zig likes it and wants to go for her license, I'll sign up, too. I enjoy flying anyway, and the free flight wouldn't really make any difference in my decision. We'll do the ground school together and then arrange the flight training."

"Okay, Zig Zag, let's get you set up for your free flight. Are you ready?"

Zig Zag bounced to her feet, "You bet, I can't wait to do this. What do we do?"

Tom looked at her and grinned. "First, we should get you calmed down. Flying is a precision skill, and distractions are to be avoided whenever possible. But, being that this is your first flight, I suppose you're allowed."

Zig Zag giggled, "There is no way you're going to get me to calm down right now. It just isn't going to happen."

He escorted them back to the lobby, and James took a seat to wait for Zig Zag's return, after giving her a quick kiss and wishing her good luck. He took out the paperwork he'd brought with him to occupy the time and got started on it.

As they walked out to the flight line, Tom turned his head to Zig Zag and commented, "You know, if you go through with the flight school, I'd really recommend that you wear jeans and a shirt, not a dress. For one thing, there won't be any 'inadvertent exposures' as you climb in and out of the plane, and for another, there will be times when you need to have some protection on your legs. While I doubt that you'd be that embarrassed, it isn't considerate to the other furs around here."

"I'll remember that," Zig replied. "Although it will probably be slacks and not jeans. I don't even own any jeans."

"Believe me, jeans will be the better choice. They're a lot more durable and easier to clean."

"Okay, I'll think about it, anyway."

"Good," Tom replied, as they approached the Cessna. He began his instruction immediately, explaining the pre-flight inspection while he performed it, why it was necessary and what was involved. Then they got into the plane, and the instruction continued, with explanations of the controls and instruments, and the continuation of the pre-flight procedure. After Tom got the engine started and warmed up, he fitted Zig Zag with a headset, explaining that she should just listen to the exchanges between him and the tower, and that the headset would make it much easier for them to talk to each other. He then got permission from the tower and taxied out to the runway. As they stopped at the end of the runway and prepared for take-off, Zig Zag was amazed at how much she was enjoying herself, and didn't even realize that there was no fear or tension in her at all. The takeoff roll down the runway was exhilarating, and the takeoff itself felt like an amusement park ride.

As they climbed into the sky, Zig realized that she was having a ball and that she had none of her usual symptoms of flying. "This is great," she thought to herself, "I can't wait to begin the school. And James is going to get a very special thank you for thinking of this, too."

During the flight, Zig Zag got to take the controls for some straight and level flight, and instruction in some of the basics for simple maneuvers. Then Tom took the controls back and they returned to the field. Zig Zag tensed up as they came in to land, but Tom touched down gently and her fears eased immediately. She knew that landings were going to be one of her more difficult challenges in this, but she was really looking forward to earning her license.

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Tom sighed heavily as he looked at Zig Zag. "Zig, you have a problem. And it showed up big time today. You know what it is, don't you?"

Zig Zag looked down, abashed. "I took a chance today that I shouldn't have. It just seemed like a good idea at the time."

Tom just looked at her, without replying for several moments, as she sat staring at the floor. "Zig, it's worse than that. You have a real daredevil streak, and it got loose today. If you can't control it, I am going to have to reject you as a student. Do you remember what I said in ground school, about old pilots and bold pilots?"

"Yes," Zig replied slowly. "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots. But there are no old, bold pilots."

"There are *no* exceptions to that rule, Zig," Tom answered, "and there never will be. If I hadn't been with you today, you would be dead right now. I will not have a bold pilot graduating from this school. I refuse to have a student of mine die, and possibly kill others, because I knew that they were a 'bold' pilot. I just can't do it and live with myself. If this happens again, it will be the last lesson I ever give you. This was the only time I will allow you to get away with this."

"If you want to kill yourself, and probably James and who knows who else, that is your choice. But I will not allow you to do it as a student or graduate of my school. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Tom, I understand," Zig replied, dejected, and ashamed.

Tom waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he told her, "Zig, you have the potential to be an outstanding pilot. But the daredevil has no place in the cockpit, and you have to be able to leave that part of yourself on the ground, every time. No exceptions. Can you do that?"

"Yes I can," Zig answered in a determined tone. "It isn't going to be easy, but I *am* going to do it."

"Good. Now scat, you have a boyfriend waiting for you. What has been said in here will stay in here, unless you tell. Get out of here and I'll see you for your next lesson."

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Zig Zag sat back and relaxed as the celebration continued around her. She had just successfully completed her solo flight, and reaching that milestone in her flight training felt absolutely wonderful. She would receive her license soon, and she had asked Tom to delay the presentation so that she and James would receive theirs together. James had been wonderful, delaying his own solo until after hers, allowing her to bask in the limelight of her success. She knew that he had been ready to solo for a couple of weeks, and his consideration was going to earn him a nice surprise tonight.

She sat, thinking about the hard work that had been required to get this far, and the goals still to be reached, in their quest for the freedom of their own plane. There was still the multi-engine certification, the IFR training which she was not looking forward to, and then the certification for their own plane. They were looking at several that met their needs, and were discussing which one to buy. She was leaning toward the Rutan design, and James was not certain, as it was the most expensive of the models they were considering, and he felt that some of the others might be better. No matter, there was still time to make the choice, and she didn't need to dwell on it now. Shaking her head, she rejoined the festivities with a smile on her face and joy in her heart.

The greatest benefit of all, though, was the disappearance of her fear of flying.