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## *XIII - Carpe Diem*

Zig Zag looked up from the papers she was holding. Last minute revisions to the script were always a bother. And they always happened. Someone came up with a bright idea...usually the writer...and carefully prepared scenes were suddenly changed. Even if it was in some minor change, it upset preparations. But if the movie came out looking better for it in the end, she could live with it.

Some furs thought making porn was just about sex on screen. Zig Zag knew that was the case with a great many other porn studios, but never with her own. She prided herself on making good movies that just went a step further than ordinary block-buster productions. Marvin was going around, making sure everything was set up right. It was at times like these she truly knew how valuable the badger was to the company as a whole and not just to her as a friend. He had an eye for details that even she lacked sometimes. And she prided herself on being a perfectionist.

The cast was arriving. Most of them were already in the dressing room, getting into costumes. The whole studio was buzzing with intensity. That was always the case just before shooting a new movie. Marvin nodded to one of the gaffers and stepped up to Zig Zag.

"So...are we all set?" he asked.

"I don't know. Are we?" the skunk asked back.

"I think so. We won't get any more set than this on this set," he grinned.

Zig Zag narrowed her eyes. "You had that one planned."

"Of course."

Zig Zag mused. She could probably have run the business without Marvin there, but it'd be a lot more work and a lot less fun.

"So...have you heard from James? I saw the news yesterday evening," Marvin said, changing the subject.

Zig Zag shrugged. "It was a CAT burglar, that's all I know so far," she said, deadpan.

Marvin looked incredulous. "You had that one planned," he muttered.

Zig Zag just grinned and gave him the script.

The badger chuckled and went off in search of a cup of coffee. The first actors were coming out of the dressing room. The costumes fit perfectly. Zig Zag noted with some relief that this was the case for Esteban as well. Since he been absent the day before, there had been no time to test if that was the case.

Gabrielle came out as well. Her costume wasn't done yet, but Lillian was already on it. It'd be delivered that same afternoon, leaving just enough time for last minute corrections to it, before the evening shot that would be the Broncos first real appearance before a camera. Zig Zag was grateful for Lillian's ability to work fast, at times. It made situations like these easier. Lillian Bishop had been her costume-designer for years and she'd never once disappointed Zig Zag's expectations. That sort of professionalism was hard to come by.

The bronco waited, not wanting to interrupt, but Zig Zag leaned over.

"How is Jean doing?" she asked, quietly.

Gabrielle smiled wearily. "She'll live. I went by the hospital on the way here but the cops had just arrived, so I couldn't go in. But the nurses said she'd slept soundly."

"That's good at least. I'm going to try to make it there tomorrow, if she's still there by then. How long do they intend to keep her for?" Zig Zag said, still keeping her voice low.

"At least until tomorrow. Probably until Thursday. She had a concussion and with her other injuries I think they want to make sure the worst is dealt with."

Zig Zag nodded. "I think that's probably wise. No sense in sending her home to collapse, after all."

"Precisely," Gabrielle said and smiled a bit. "Anyway...I'm going by there on my way home if isn't too late in the evening. I'll tell her you asked how she was doing and that you might drop by."

"Oh no, don't say I'll come by. It'll spoil the surprise," Zig Zag said with a grin.

They returned their attention to the set. The actors and actresses were getting to their positions. Zig Zag crossed her arms over her chest and smiled.

"HEADS UP, furs! Lights! Cameras rolling...? Alright. 'The Memoirs of Madame de Pompadour', scene 12, take one. ACTION!" the skunk called out.

The cameras started rolling.

###

"Jean LeBrun? I'm Commissioner William Pongo, second precinct of the Cincinnati police department. I'm sorry that this happened to you, but if you are feeling well enough, I'd like to take your statement," the orangutan said.

Jean looked him over. His clothes were sagging on him, but she had a feeling from looking at him, that even tailor made clothing would sag on him. He was one big sag, in fact.

"Of course, Commissioner. I have a question, though," the vixen said, still unable to sit up straight without major aches and pains.

"Naturally," the ape answered.

"I don't know why they brought me here. I study in Cincinnati. It's a long drive back here. Can you tell me why?"

"That's pretty simple, Miss. You were checked for head trauma and life threatening injuries on site, then taken to the nearest hospital where you were given a morphine injection to keep you out cold and then brought here right after that. This is closer to your home, your friends and your family. Your doctor thought it would be best that you

were near furs that made you feel safe, considering what had happened. And considering your...let's face it...unusual situation."

Jean grimaced and nodded. "That's true. Good thinking and...thank you for wording it so delicately, sir," she said, quietly.

"It's not my job to pass judgment, Miss, I leave that to the courts. It's my job to make sure that furs who break the law are placed before a judge to be punished. And the furs who did this to you are going to do hard time if I can do anything to ensure it. I promise."

Jean nodded as much as the pain would allow. She groaned.

"Go ahead, sir. I'll try my best to answer, but please bear in mind my head is still hurting," she said.

William Pongo nodded, taking out a Dictaphone.

###

Theodore Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the Third was an unhappy equine. He detested the word "bronco", thinking it to be a base and low-brow name for a noble family. Last night, he had stayed up after talking to his daughter. He had had a glass of sherry to calm his nerves, and he had decided that she would need to be taught to behave with respect towards her parents.

He was currently walking through his stately home. It was one of the many things he took pride in. Thirty-eight rooms, not counting the garage and the shooting range. Or the swimming pool. Or for that matter the tennis-court. Come to think of it, he didn't count the two small houses that the servants lived in either. He was a rich stallion. An influential voice in the community. How dare his daughter contradict him?

And that awful joke she had made about her new...job. Did she really think he'd fall for something so base? He scowled. She'd come home, she'd do what was expected of her and she'd *like* it.

"WATSON!" he shouted.

A dachshund appeared out of nowhere, dressed in black evening wear. Coattails and all.

"Milord called?" he asked and bowed respectfully.

"Pack for one night, Watson, you're going to Columbus to collect my daughter. She *will* come home when I tell her to."

"Yes Milord," the dachshund said in a calm, even voice, still remaining bowed at the waist.

"Was that protest I could hear in your voice, Watson?"

"Never Milord."

"See to it! And see to it as well that my daughter is brought here. Pack her things and have them ready for when she comes home. I don't care how you bring her. But you will bring her."

"Yes Milord. But may I venture...if the young Lady Ryder does not want to return with me, I will be physically unable to force her," the dachshund said.

Theodore Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the Third leaned forward until his muzzle was inches away from the face of his butler and sneered.

"Then you get some *help*. Do I have to think of *everything* in this house?"

"Very good, Milord. As Milord instructs," the dachshund said and backed out without even standing up straight.

The equine shook his head. Good help was hard to find and apart from being unimaginative, Watson was a good butler. He knew his place, didn't mingle with his betters and only spoke when spoken to. And besides, he wasn't being paid to think for himself.

His wife was walking down the hall towards him. He nodded, adjusting his tie.

"Good morning, Roxanne. Did you sleep well?" he asked, politely.

"How can you even ask that after last night and what Gabrielle said?" Roxanne answered, irritably.

Theodore nodded. He could sympathize with his wife and how she felt. He looked around the hallway. Every inch of it screamed wealth, prestige, class and breeding. Right down to the way the flowers in the pots had been meticulously arranged to not slouch. The paintings and mirrors were tasteful and classic. The plush carpet was guaranteed to be free of fluff. The three maids took care of that every day. Again, his own irritation started to rise at the thought of his upstart daughter.

"I agree. Did the heating get fixed in your room, incidentally?" he asked, trying to take the conversation in a new direction.

Roxanne nodded. She had slept with Theodore a grand total of three times in their marriage. It had resulted in two children. Gabrielle as the eldest, and Timothy three years later. There was no reason to sleep together apart from that. In her opinion, love was an irrelevant, short-term hormonal distraction and fortunately, Theodore shared that view. Breeding, social standing and wealth were constants. Love faded. They lived together as husband and wife because it was proper and because they mutually benefited from it. As it should be. It annoyed her endlessly that Gabrielle could not see the simple, basic logic and reason behind that.

"It did. I was getting tired of using the heat-blanket. Thank you for having it taken care of," she said.

"Don't mention it. I can't have you sniffing with a cold at the soiree this weekend. It's an important event. Gabrielle will certainly pick her mate then. Or I will pick one for her," he said.

"What about the one next week?" Roxanne asked.

"Irrelevant. After last night, I think we should move the wedding up till early December as well. The sooner she gets those ridiculous notions out of her head, the better," Theodore snapped and waved a paw dismissively.

"I agree. I will take care of it while you're at your meeting. Have the board members informed you if they'll be there yet?"

"Everyone except Darren Felis will make it," Theodore said with a shrug, calming down.

Roxanne rolled her eyes and sighed theatrically. "That lynx is unstable. He misses every third meeting."

"I know, but he brings considerable benefits with him in the shape of his organization," Theodore added.

"Perhaps. But I am not sure if he's trustworthy," Roxanne pointed out.

"Leave that to me to decide. You're female, you can't possibly understand how big business works," Theodore responded and headed down the hallway again.

Roxanne went in the opposite direction. She had contractors to call.

###

Gabrielle and Esteban were sitting by themselves. There was a pause in the filming while everyone got something to eat or drink. Yohni came over, groaning, and sat down.

"I swear, mongooses aren't meant to be corseted. How did they MOVE in these things back then?" she complained.

Esteban chuckled, "How do you theenk I feel een a powdered weeg? Weeth my mane eet ees nearly eemposseeble to keep eet on straight."

Gabrielle looked at the wolf. "Hey, I'm sure we can get the stylist to fix your mane up to look like the wig and we'll just powder that," she said, sounding quite serious.

She relished the look of absolute panic crossing the wolf's features. He waved his paws defensively in front of him and started blurting in Spanish. The mongoose covered her muzzle and giggled. A moment passed before the conversation was resumed.

Yohni looked at Gabrielle. "So, your costume arrives this afternoon, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. I kinda dread it. Playing a chambermaid is fine for a first role. Seriously. No problem. But I went home and checked Jeans books to see how they looked back then and they dressed in the same kind of dresses the nobles did. Mostly because the chambermaids of the higher French aristocracy at the time *were* nobles themselves. They wouldn't have lesser furs serve them, apparently. It was like a small, closed off world entirely of their own. And I am not entirely sure how my ribcage is going to react to a steel-reinforced corset," Gabrielle said.

"Can't be worse than a powdered weeg," Esteban muttered.

"Oh yeah? Let's see how YOU would like a corset then, wolfy?" Gabrielle teased.

Estebans ears went flat over his head and he whined pathetically.

Yohni started giggling again. She shook her head and looked at Gabrielle with a very saying glance.

"All right, I'll spare you," Gabrielle giggled and patted Estebans shoulder.

"Gracias. I don't theenk I'd look good een a dress either," he muttered.

"You know, I think you'd best leave that trick to Jean," Gabrielle agreed.

To her great surprise, the wolf blushed furiously. He looked like he wasn't sure how to respond to that. Yohni blinked and looked between the two of them.

"Erhm...I'm going to say something incredibly intelligent here, so...huh?" she asked, sipping her coffee.

"That's right," Gabrielle pondered. "You were never told, I think."

Esteban shook his head, confirming that Yohni had no idea what Gabrielle was talking about. He was pawing his cheeks as if trying to wipe away the blush.

"My roomie has a special...predicament that she is dealing with," Gabrielle explained.

"What might that be? I mean, I talked to her at the party and she seemed like a very nice fur. A little nervous but then again, she'd probably never set foot in a place like ZZ Studios before," the mongoose said, softly.

"She's...ahem...well, there's only one way of saying this so here goes. She's pre-op transsexual, Yohni. Hence the nerves. She's jittery around unknown furs because she's afraid they'll get nasty towards her."

Yohni blinked. Her mouth was hanging wide open. "You're not serious!" she exclaimed "You're not telling me she has a..."

Gabrielle raised her index finger towards Yohni to stop the mongoose from completing that. "She does. And it's not something she likes to talk about. I know she isn't here, but I'd prefer it if we kept it respectful, nonetheless," she said.

Esteban nodded, finally getting control over his blush. He still stayed quiet. Around the three of them, sound-crew was setting up for another scene while the sets were being changed. Gabrielle was quite astonished at the quality of the sets. They were really well made and she felt certain everything would come across as very authentic in the finished product.

"I'm sorry," Yohni said, quietly "I didn't mean it that way, at all. I talked to her for twenty minutes that night and I honestly didn't guess."

"Most furs don't but she still feels it's written in neon-letters across her face," Gabrielle said with a shrug.

"Why?" Yohni asked, sounding honestly curious "I mean why would she think that? I'd think that a certain amount of positive experiences would change that perception of herself?"

"I did ask her that once, actually," Gabrielle said and sipped her coffee.

Esteban looked back to the two of them. Suddenly the conversation had gotten very interesting again.

"What deed she say to that, then?" he asked.

"It's difficult to explain, I think. She had a great deal of trouble doing so, at least. But basically, it comes down to her having lived a whole life with that face. She can't see the changes the same way others who have known her for years but haven't seen her every day can. And admittedly, there haven't been that great changes yet. But she's started hormone treatment and that is going to soften her features quite a bit, most likely. She's still young enough that they'll have a pretty major effect from what I've been able to gather," Gabrielle explained.

"If that's how she's looked her whole life, I'd imagine she had some problems when she was younger, actually. You know, before all this started for her?" Yohni said.

"Not really. I knew her back then as well and believe it or not, she was so good at hiding what went on in her head that it even carried into her mimicry and facial expressions. She looked very different. If you saw a photo of her from back then and saw her again now, you'd still not think it's the same fur. Guaranteed," Gabrielle continued.

It was true too. She couldn't recognize the fox she'd befriended as a child, compared to the vixen she knew now. Her parents, despite their snobbery, had accepted that she saw Jean back then. Probably because it meant that Francois LeBrun would give them a discount on his bakery for whatever social occasion they needed something for, and he was the best baker in Denver. Her parents were stingy, even if they had piles of money. And the LeBrun family was French, which always counted for something with snobs, Gabrielle told herself.

They hadn't complained until they moved to Columbus and got an apartment together. It wasn't fitting, her father had said. Living with a male, and especially one of another species was unacceptable. When Jean had come out, both Theodore and Roxanne had thrown a major fit and demanded that Gabrielle come home immediately. She had refused, of course.

She snapped back out of her memories and looked at the two others. Esteban was thinking. The look on his face was one of deep contemplation, at least. Yohni was clearly mulling things over as well.

"I won't tell any of the others if you don't want me to," the mongoose said. "I doubt anyone here would have any kind of problem with it, though."

"I don't think anyone would either," Gabrielle said "But I'd rather keep it pretty quiet for a while."

Esteban nodded. "For her sake, I theenk that ees best. I know I don't mind, but I don't theenk she likes the world to know."

Gabrielle glanced sidelong at the wolf. "No I'd *say* you don't mind. You were in that recovery room with her for a good while. And you still won't tell me what you spoke about."

Esteban grinned wolfishly. "Well, probably because we deedn't talk about much."

Yohni looked between the bronco and the canine with confusion on every square inch of her face. This was clearly something she wanted to know more about but she had no clue where to begin asking.

Gabrielle shrugged and looked directly at the wolf. "All right. So you went in there, sat on the bed presumably, and you didn't say a word to one another for all that time? Come on, don't hold out on me like that! What did you do? Kiss her?" she asked.

"We deed speak a leettle beet, but si, I keessed her," Esteban said, honestly.

For once, Gabrielle Ryder, Brat Inc., couldn't think of a single snappy reply. She just sat there, staring at the wolf. She had been joking around with Jean about it. She'd even heard Francois LeBrun comment on it. She'd toyed with the idea a few times, and she'd warned Esteban not to hurt Jeans feelings, but she really hadn't thought he'd actually be serious.

Yohni sniggered. "Congratulations, Esteban. I think you just scored an equalizer," she said and lifted her cup in a sort of toast.

"No...not an equalizer. A zorra, si...an equalizer, no," he said with a little wink.

"Zorra?" Yohni asked.

"A...what ees eet again...a veexen? A female fox?" Esteban tried.

Gabrielle shook her head sharply to clear the confusion and looked at Esteban. "Hurt her, compadre, and I swear I'll find the hedge-trimmers."

The wolf immediately covered his thick mane with his paws and whined. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes.

"That isn't the part of you that I'd put them to use on."

The wolf blanched. "Gabrielle, there ees no need to be that way. I don't want to hurt her."

"She's not just some conquest? Are you sure, Esteban? I want the *truth* from you."

Esteban nodded, nibbling on his lips. "I promeese. She's not just a conquest. I really like her."

Yohni looked like someone had just tossed a bucket of cold water at her. She was blinking repeatedly, looking at Esteban with wide eyes. She didn't seem quite able to speak. She didn't seem certain what to say.

Gabrielle got to her hoofs and nodded. "Good. I believe you then," she said and looked over her shoulder. Someone was calling for her, waving a costume bag around.

As the bronco walked away to get her costume fitted, Yohni looked back at Esteban, clearing her throat briefly.

"You're serious about this, aren't you?" the mongoose finally asked.

Esteban just nodded.

"What about your work here?" Yohni went on.

"I have been tryeeng not to theenk about that," Esteban said, flinching. "I don't know eef she even really wants aneetheeng to do weeth me."

"Did she kiss you or did you kiss her?" Yohni asked.

"She can't seet up een bed. I keessed her."

"Did she protest? Try to turn her head away? Anything of the sort?"

"No. But I don't know eef I surprised her," Esteban sighed and looked at his paws.

"If she didn't protest and she didn't try to turn her head away, Esteban, that's a good sign. Good God, I haven't seen you insecure before. Ever," Yohni said and smiled crookedly.

She noticed that the wolf's paws were shaking a little and he was still nibbling on his bottom lip.

"I want to make her feel safe and eef she doesn't want to take eet further than a kess, I'll steell do my best. I'd settle for just holdeeng her, comprende? I'd be a happy lobo," he said, quietly.

"Wow...you really are smitten, aren't you? How long did you talk to her anyway? At the party," Yohni said, almost disbelieving her own ears and eyes.

"Not long. She was so scared. I just tried to tell her she deedn't look awful, like she theenks she does. I just took her paws and wanted to move them away from her muzzle when she covered eet to hide. And..." he sighed.

"...AND?" Yohni prodded.

"...and then she looked at me. She just *looked* at me. And I looked at those blue gray eyes and I thought 'eef I fall eento those, I'll get lost and I'd never be found and I wouldn't want to be'. She has such beauteeful eyes, amiga. She just looked at me, and I deedn't want to let go of her paws. But I deed. And I sat down and I behaved because Marv had said eef we deedn't..." Esteban said, his voice growing more and more dreamy with each word.

Yohni just nodded. "...he'd tackle us and that'd hurt," she said, completing the wolf's statement.

"Si," Esteban nodded "But also because I was confused. I deedn't want to get up and leave but I deed because eef I hadn't, I would've been unable to stop myself from making a pass at her. And I don't theenk she could've taken eet then. I'm steell not sure eef she really can."

Yohni nodded again. Mostly to herself. She'd never seen Esteban behave like this before, and she'd never heard him use that tone of voice either. It was quite strange.

"Well...what about her problem?" she asked.

Esteban shook his head. "She doesn't have a problem, amiga. She has an *eessue*. Gabrielle told me about that when we waited at the hospeetal yesterday. And she's getteeng help for her eessue, as eet ees."

"All right, what about her issue then?" Yohni corrected herself.

"Jean ees female, amiga. That's all that matters. I sat at home a couple of nights ago and really tried my best to theenk of her as male, just to see eef I could. And I couldn't. Eet just deedn't make sense," he shrugged. "Besides, geeven our line of work, are we really choosee about such theengs?"

Yohni shook her head and smiled softly.

"I think she's a lucky vixen, Esteban," she said, quietly.

"Actually, I theenk I'm a lucky lobo," Esteban said with a little smile.

"Another question that needs answering, my friend, is this: What will happen when you and Gabrielle end up in a one of the more explicit scenes together?"

Esteban flattened his ears and put his paws on his face, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Amiga...I'm weareeng a powdered weeg and pants that chafe my privates, and you have to ask me sometheeng like *that??*" he whimpered.

"There's a reason why that kind of pants are called 'fatherkillers', Esteban. That doesn't answer my question," the mongoose said, patiently.

"I don't know. I weell have to talk to the boss about eet. Maybe there ees a way to avoid that happeneeng. I don't know. I have been theenkeeng about that seence yesterday and eet ees really goeeng to be a problem."

"For you or for her."

"I don't know how she feels about eet. I haven't asked her. But..." Esteban sighed "...I weell have to find a solution."

"Would you leave the studio if that is what it took, Esteban?" Yohni said, putting a paw on her friends arm.

"Si. I would. Eef she can't cope weeth eet, then I would. Eet ees just a job. Notheeng more."

Yohni smiled slightly to herself. Yep, Jean really was lucky, she thought. She just hoped the vixen realized it too.

###

Jean was laying in her hospital bed, slowly growing increasingly bored. There was nothing to do. She couldn't watch television on account of her concussion. And the same concussion meant she wasn't allowed to read, either. There was no one to talk to. The nurses were all busy. The light had been dampened in her room, since her head hurt every time it was cranked up. Fortunately, the brightness was adjustable.

Visiting hours weren't over, but Jean doubted anyone would make it here today. She didn't blame Gabrielle. It was her first day of filming and no doubt she'd have much to tell when next she came by. Even if she kept it all strictly ballroom. Her father had visited briefly again. That had made her very happy. She wished Esteban could've come by too, but he was busy at work as well, she knew. Besides, the nurses had told her it was best if she didn't get exhausted by constant visitors anyway. She needed her rest, they said. At the same time, the surgeon who had come to check up on her arm had said that she expected Jean to be allowed to go home on Thursday.

She muttered something to herself about rotten luck. If she had to spend time in the hospital, she'd have preferred it to be for entirely different reasons.

The door opened. A red and white face peeked in. The rest of Miriam followed shortly thereafter.

"Hey there...I'm sorry I didn't come by before but I thought it be best to wait until I was sure you were awake and together," she whispered as she tiptoed across the floor.

Jean couldn't help giggling a little. "There's only me in here. You don't need to whisper or tiptoe like that, Miriam," she said.

Miriam got close enough to have a good look at her new friend. "Damned...Henry really did work you over, didn't he?" she sighed.

Jean nodded slightly. "He did, but he didn't kill me. I think that's what really counts in the end. Thank goodness so many others were around to stop the three of them," she said, weakly.

"Yeah. I'm sorry I wasn't there. I'd have helped. Somehow. I don't know how, but I'd have done something," Miriam said.

"Miriam, honestly. I don't think there was anything you could've done. They were big guys. Strong too," she said.

"I'd say! Tell you what. I had a word with Professor Nicholson today. And the other lecturers after him. They all agreed that this isn't going to be held against you. Take the

time you need to get better. I'll share my notes with you until you can get back. I mean, they broke your right arm so I'll keep taking notes for us both as long as necessary. You're not alone in this. The faculty is shocked. I think this really opened their eyes in a major way."

"Pity it had to take such an incident," Jean said and smiled crookedly again. "It's all right. I'm left-pawed. I can write when I can get back to class. But that may take a while. They say it'll be four months until I can run again. Probably another week until I can even think of going to class. My ribs are really hurting."

"How many did they break, if you don't mind my asking? All kinds of furs have been asking me how you're doing. I think...I don't know...but in a way, I think that this whole horrible mess may help you in the long run, Jean," the red vixen said, quietly.

"How do you mean? Pardon me for saying so but...heh...it'd be interesting to know how two broken and a bent rib, damaged ligaments and muscles, a concussion, a black eye and a broken arm can possibly help me!"

"I think they all realized that you're suffering. Joey came up to me today and said he had always thought you were a..." Miriam said and stopped herself.

"It's all right, Miriam. He thought I was a freak. He said so in class recently, remember?" Jean said, reassuringly. "I know you think differently. That's good enough for me."

"He said so, but then he said he realized that you weren't. Because if you got beaten up so badly, he said, you must've known there was a risk. And if you took that risk anyway, he said, then it must be for a really good reason and not just to provoke everyone. The faculty is talking about circulating a pamphlet to everyone in the building about your condition. They've said they'll formulate a real policy on the issue. They've just tried to avoid doing so. I heard the dean say that he was ashamed of himself," Miriam said and smiled crookedly.

"I guess that's all very nice but I'd rather they didn't circulate a pamphlet about me, Miriam. Can you tell them that from me? I would rather if the policy is made a general one. That they won't accept any minority being harassed. And then if anyone want to know what's up with me, they can come and ask me to my face. I don't mind," Jean said and coughed.

"Sure. I'll tell them that from you. At least they can put it off until you return to tell them yourself. Hey...are you doing okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just thirsty. Can you give me the juice on the table next to my bed, please?" Jean asked.

Miriam reached for the glass and held it to her friend's paw. Jean took it and sipped the juice through the straw. Then she reached out to place it back on the table. Miriam went over to pull up a chair by the bed in the meantime.

"Miriam?" Jean started "I'm happy I got to know you. Did you know that you were the first fur to try to really talk to me since I started my major? The rumor was out within a day or two, because someone on faculty staff said too much at the wrong place and time. Since then, every fur there treated me like a circus attraction or a leper. You were the first to break the ice...and I want to thank you for that."

"You're welcome. I wish I had done so before. I should have," the red vixen said. "I think the whole place knows about this by now though. And about you. And your issue. It spread like wildfire."

"My father was here this afternoon. He said something wise. He said that good arguments and facts never changes anyone's opinion, but that a good example does. So I'm going to set a good example. I'm going to stop hiding. I have nothing to be ashamed of, Miriam. Nothing. I've told everyone else for the last two years that I am 'good enough' but I never believed it myself. But I am. I haven't done anything wrong. I haven't done anything odious or malicious or illegal. I've *survived!* That isn't a crime. I've told others that before. Maybe it's time I started believing it myself," Jean said, her voice growing firm.

"So what are you going to do?" Miriam asked.

"I'm going to stop hiding who I am and what I am. I'm not going to wear a big painted sign over my head but I am not going to run from it either anymore. If anyone asks, I'll tell them the truth. If anyone wants to know, I'll explain. Calmly. Without all the 'Oh woe is me'-drama that some furs might expect. I'll just tell them how things really are. Then they can make up their own minds and you know what?" Jean said, her voice still growing stronger with each moment.

"No, tell me," Miriam said. She was pretty impressed. She realized that if she had been in Jean's position she'd probably have curled up on herself and hid away.

"If they can't deal with it, then it's not my problem. It's *theirs*. It's not my problem that Henry and his buddies are bigots. It's not my problem that I ended up in the hospital because of it. It's *theirs*. I'll heal. I'll be out of here, resuming my studies and I'll be no

worse a fur for this experience. But they're going to end up in jail, Henry's NFL career is in ruins before it ever started and he and his buddies can look forward to trying to get a job with a criminal record for aggravated assault. *I'm* not the one with the problem. THEY are," Jean growled.

"Whoa...easy there vixen. Easy. They're not here," Miriam said and gave her friends paw a pat. "I'm amazed at you. I think if it was me getting that kind of work over, I'd be looking for a really deep hole to crawl into and disappear. And you're going to come out fighting. What happened?"

"I got kissed," Jean said with a blush.

"Erhh...I don't understand," Miriam said.

"It's plain English, Miriam. I got kissed. By the most amazing wolf. You have no idea. He's sweet, he's attentive, he cares. He looks fantastic on top of things. I mean, honestly...did I win the lottery or something?"

Miriam grinned ear to ear. "All right. THIS I've gotta hear. Start talking. I'm all ears," she said and perked them up, just to make her point. She leaned back in her chair and smiled, crossing her arms and her legs, getting comfortable. This was going to be interesting.