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XXVI – Pressure

Every fur working at ZZ Studios except Gabrielle was gathered in the common room. It was a bit crowded, but it couldn't be helped.

Zig Zag was waiting for everyone to stop talking and turn their attention to her and what she had to say. She was sitting on the edge of the table in the middle of the room. Finally, the buzzing of voices started to fade and she stood up.

"Do I have everyone's attention? Good. Now listen to me. We've got a problem. Or rather, Gabrielle has a problem, and because she does, *we* do. All of us. I want to know if there's *anyone* in this room who has any kind of issue with her. I know she's outspoken and that she can be blunt. If any of you have *anything* to say against her, I want it out now."

Everyone looked at each other and a lot of heads were shaken. A few statements of denial were heard. Zig Zag nodded, looking around the room.

"Good. Just making sure up front. Her father is giving her grief again. You all know about the abduction attempt by now. The fact that he failed hasn't stopped him. In fact, he sent a hitfur to deliver a message to her. That murder you probably heard about on the news at a hotel here in Columbus was that message. She's been told if she doesn't return in time for a party on midsummer's eve, *she* will be next in line."

A collective roar of resentment and anger went up. Zig Zag smiled. That was exactly the reaction she'd hoped for.

"Are we going to let some gangster do that to one of us??" she asked, flatly.

"NO!!" was the answer. It went up as with one voice.

"Boss, I think I speak for everyone here when I say we'll do anything we can to help Gabby. She's one of us," Yohni said. A lot of nods backed her up.

"That's good. Now...I'm going to tell you what we need to do. I expect each and every one of you to be quiet about this. It's her life on the line and we are probably the *only* furs who can help her," Zig Zag said and looked around at everyone in turn.

Everyone paid close attention.

"We're going to make a movie. The script is already being written. Seven weeks from yesterday, that movie *has* to be done. *Completely* done. Including editing and mass production. It's going to mean overtime for everyone. What's more, it won't bring in a dime for the studio. It won't *be* distributed. It's going to be used as leverage against her father. It's going to ridicule her family so completely that if it ever *did* hit the market, Gabrielle's father would be the laughing stock of his social circle for the rest of his life. It's going to cost everyone a lot of hard work. I know it's something we've never done before. I know this isn't a charity organization, but I want to ask you who's still willing to help," Zig Zag continued.

There was a general murmur of agreement. No one backed out.

Esteban raised a paw. "Boss...I am not goeing to take payment for thees. I have set aside enough to leeve a few months and then some on eet. I don't want you to pay me unteel thees one's all done," he said.

Yohni nodded. "Make that Esteban and myself. I may not be very good at saving up, but my bank does set aside a bit every month. I'll be fine."

A few other furs made similar statements. Zig Zag raised her paws. "I don't want anyone to feel any kind of pressure here. We all have to pay for food and most of you have rents to pay too. I'll pay you your regular wages for the duration of this. It leaves us very little time to learn lines and almost no time to rehearse before shooting starts but it has to be convincing. It has to be good. I know you're capable of it. Now...everyone, let's go back to work. We've got a few more things to do, and the sets and script will be done in thirteen days. That's when we'll start in earnest. It leaves us five weeks to get things

done. That's one week for rehearsals, two weeks for shooting and two weeks for editing. We've *got* to make do with that time. We can't delay this a single day."

Again, everyone nodded and started vacating the room. Zig Zag sat down on the table and looked at Marvin, smiling crookedly.

"Am I growing soft, Marvin?" she asked when the room was empty apart from her and the badger.

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"I want to help Gabrielle. But this *is* going to cost us a lot of money and it's not going to bring anything back in. It'll eat a part of our funds without anything to show for it."

Marvin sat down next to Zig Zag and smiled, putting a paw on her shoulder. "Does that upset you?"

"Not for a moment."

"Then why do you ask me if you're growing soft? If anything, Zig...I think you're tougher than ever. All I can say is I'm *really* happy I'm your friend. I'd *hate* to be your enemy," the badger said.

"James said something similar, you know..." she murmured.

"You're scary when you get angry. You don't pull punches."

"I'm pretty sure Gabrielle's father won't either," Zig Zag said quietly.

"So what? You're going to have him by the balls," Marvin chuckled.

Zig Zag made a face in disgust. "Normally, I'd make some kind of quip about not saying that at a porn-studio, Marvin. But in this case I think I'll just settle for being thoroughly grossed out."

Marvin's smile spread into a wide grin. "He doesn't stand a chance. He's underestimating Gabrielle and more importantly, he's underestimating *you*, Zig."

"That's what I'm counting on," Zig Zag said with a smile. A menacing glint glittered in her eyes.

###

Jean entered the university library. She'd not really wanted to go back there after her hospitalization. It'd be like looking at a lost job, and it wasn't a pleasant thought. But she needed various books for the rewrite, and this was the place to get them. She headed up to the desk and nodded to the librarian on duty.

"Good morning, Susan," she said to the ermine in front of her, "I need to find works on gladiatorial games, on Emperor Caligula and on Roman social structure during the early empire."

The ermine looked up and smiled. "Hey Jean. Good to see you walking about. We were wondering when you'd come back to say hi? I'm sorry that we've had to employ someone else in your place. I really hope you understand."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I know how much work there is to be done around here. I can't ask you to wait for me to be able to work again. Besides, I got another job already."

"Really? That's great news. What kind of job is that?"

"You promise you won't start a scene and throw books around if I tell you?"

"That doesn't sound promising," Susan said and raised an eyebrow.

"I proofread scripts for ZZ Studios. Plus I'm doing a rewrite for them. That's what I need these books for. The owner wants to be the first to do it right."

"You went to work for a porn studio? Jean...are you serious?" the ermine asked, blinking rapidly.

"I'm not acting, Sue...and I'm not going to. Not in a million years. But yeah, I work for them. Zig Zag is not what anyone expects," Jean said, smiling crookedly.

"I don't really know what I expect, Jean. But I'll definitely take your word for it, over loose rumors any day of the week. Now...I have just one question to ask?"

"What's that?" the vixen said, softly.

"Can you get me her autograph? I've had a crush on that skunk for the last five years."

Jean's jaw dropped. "You're not kiddin' are you??" she finally managed to ask.

"Not for a moment," Susan said with a slight smile.

"Well, I suppose it goes to show. Never tell a fur by its fur," Jean smiled. "I'll ask when I talk to her, certainly. Now...I'd better find those books."

"No problem. You know where the Roman section of the history-collection is, anyway. You of all furs in this university should know."

Jean winked at the ermine and smiled, heading into the library. One by one, she gathered up the books she needed. The problem was, she couldn't carry a great deal with her broken arm. She looked for a table to put things down on.

She was about to turn a corner when she heard a couple of voices. She didn't recognize them but she noticed the topic and froze in her tracks.

"Yeah, I know. It's back. And the teachers are telling us all to treat it nicely. It's ridiculous. They should expel that little freak before it infects the rest of us with something weird," the first voice said.

"I know. It's disgusting. I *swear* I'd like to pat Henry's back and tell him what a good thing he did. Pity he didn't hit just a little harder anyway. Now we've all got to smile and make nicey-nice. I'm thinking of transferring to another university. I'm getting nauseous from being around that creep. Being gay is bad enough but looking like *that??*" the other one responded.

"I agree. I've been thinking much the same thing. My father says if I ever talk to it, he'll disown me. It's against Gods law, he says and I agree. It's undoing what the Lord created. He created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. It's *gross*, it's unnatural and it's perverted."

"Well, at least we won't have to look at him running around the library anymore as if he owned the place. Did you notice how he always undressed every male around with his eyes? Yuck. That's always the same with fags. They think of nothing but sex."

Jean stopped listening and took a few steps back. The voices in her head were howling in triumph. Laughing. Telling her how foolish she'd been for thinking anything would really change. She slipped in between the shelves and found a quiet corner with a table.

She sat down and put her face in her left paw, resting the elbow on the table. Tears were pressing their way to the fore. She fought back, but it was useless. She closed her eyes as the first one splashed against the table.

###

Miranda was sitting at her desk. She had a cup of coffee in front of her, and the file on the Ryder-case. She was looking over it one more time, while waiting.

A voice called out. "Sergeant Miranda, I've got time to see you now."

She got up and sipped her coffee once more, before adjusting her uniform and heading to the captain's office. She went inside and closed the door behind her. In front of her, behind the massive desk sat Captain Archibald. The only rhino Miranda had ever met. Presumably there was a Mrs. Archibald somewhere too, but Miranda had never met her to find out if she was a rhino too. She'd often wondered how a rhinoceros made his way to Ohio, but Captain Archibald was not someone you asked a lot of questions.

"So, Sergeant, you had something you wanted to talk to me about?" he said.

"Indeed sir. It's about the Ryder-case. I think I have a workable theory on who's behind this. Who ordered the hit on the kidnapper, that is," she said. She didn't sit down. The captain hadn't told her she could.

Captain Archibald raised an eyebrow and looked at her over the tip of his horn. "Go on, Sergeant, but make it *good*. I'm not looking for a wild goose chase."

Miranda felt her heart rise to her throat. Captain Archibald was probably the best cop she'd ever known but he was a hard-liner and very proud of it.

"Well, I went by the old maxim that if you eliminate the impossible, the only thing possible, however improbable, has to be the truth, sir," she began.

"Always a sound way to move along with an investigation that's stalled. So what do you think is impossible and what is the possible, if improbable option?"

"We know the hotel staff did not poison the food. This means it wasn't poisoned when it left the kitchen. Since the maid took it out of the elevator and took it to the victim directly, that leaves only one option. That it was poisoned *in* the elevator," Miranda said.

"Sergeant, remember what I said about wild goose chases? We both know that elevator couldn't hold even a very *small* fur," the captain said, gruffly.

"Yes sir. We're in agreement. I am not talking about the elevator itself. I'm talking about the elevator shaft."

"What?? You're saying a fur would be waiting *in* the elevator shaft, administer the poison in the split second the elevator passes him or her by and then escape unseen? This isn't improbable. It's impossible."

"I will venture that it isn't, sir. You'd need someone who's extremely good at climbing. Fast. Preferably someone with four prehensile paws. Four thumbs, so to speak."

"You're talking about a monkey?"

"Something along those lines. I checked the police databases from home, sir. Look what I came up with?" Miranda said and passed over a few pieces of paper.

Captain Archibald looked them over. When done, he looked back at the squirrel over the tip of his horn. "Is this some sort of sick joke, Sergeant?" he asked.

"No Sir. It's not. That's his actual calling name. ArseNick, a.k.a. Nicholas Babouin, citizen of Senegal, fluent in five languages and suspected of numerous assassinations. He's never been pinned to one though. He's a good climber from nature, sir. And he knows exactly what he's doing. He almost always uses arsenic. Only times he's not done so, it's believed it's on specific request. Sir...he fits. If I can place him in Denver or in Columbus within the last two weeks...we may just have the lead we've been looking for," Miranda said. She kept her voice neutral despite feeling a certain sense of excitement.

"And what're you planning to do now, Sergeant?" the rhino asked, putting the file on ArseNick back down.

"I'd like to go back to the hotel and look at the elevator shaft, sir. If I'm right, there may be some shred of evidence to be found in there. Something to link ArseNick to Columbus. If I can do that, I'll try linking him to Denver. If I can do *that*...I'll find him, and I'll get some answers."

"You're dealing with someone who's obviously a very dangerous criminal here. I don't want you to take any kind of unnecessary risk, Sergeant. But all right. We're at an impasse anyway. This might be the last chance we have of doing something with this case apart from filing it under "Unsolved mysteries". Very well. Keep me informed of what you find. Dismissed," Captain Archibald said and leaned back.

Miranda nodded and headed back out. She got her coat and left the building. All she could do now was hope she was right.

###

Gabrielle pulled up. Zig Zag had told her to come to work an hour or two late so she'd have a chance to talk to everyone else first. She felt a little nervous. She parked the car and got out, checking that the doors were locked, before going inside.

Sabrina wasn't there, Gabrielle noted. She'd gotten used to the bespectacled skunk being the first face she saw every morning at work.

The bronco headed to Zig Zag's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," came the answer.

Gabrielle opened the door and entered, shutting it behind her and smiling a little at her boss.

"Hey boss. I've got something to tell you before you say how anything went this morning," she said.

Zig Zag nodded. "Sure."

"I went home after visiting you. I called my parents. And I told them I'd be home by midsummer's eve."

"Gabrielle...don't *do* this to yourself..." Zig Zag started, wearily.

"Please, hear me out, boss. It's important," Gabrielle said and smiled a little.

"All right. Go on then."

"I talked to my father, specifically. I pretended to give in and let him win. Zig Zag...I'm telling you this right now...right here..." Gabrielle said and walked up to the skunk's table, leaning over it, putting her knuckles on the wood, "...I'm going to die before I let him get me. But if I didn't do that, we'd have every henchfur in his employ watching my every move. We'd never be able to finish this movie in seven weeks that way. And you'd be in a lot more danger. I'm not going to cave in. He's not going to get me. I believe in you, boss. I *believe* in you."

Zig Zag nodded. There was such complete conviction on the bronco's voice that she felt bad about having thought she'd given up. She smiled, narrowing her eyes and leaning forward until her nose was an inch from Gabrielle's.

"Good filly. Now you're talkin'. Let's do this then. You've bought us peace to make this movie. I've made sure *everyone* here will help you. The Roman epic is on hold until further notice. Jean can finish the rewrite, and I'll keep it in my desk for future use. I'll need to find a lot of money to make it, anyway. A lot of money I don't have. All attention at this time is directed at *your* problem. Every single fur at the studio is with you. Some of them offered to do this without being paid," she purred.

"You're putting a lot of money on the line for me. I know you keep saying I'm almost family because I work here. But tell me something...and please tell me the truth...it's not just that, is it?" Gabrielle asked.

Zig Zag hotly debated with herself if she wanted to tell the bronco the truth. "No, it's not all. I'd help any of the furs working here, don't doubt that for a moment. But there's something in you...and there's something about the fight you're having pushed on you that is so unreasonable...so *wrong*...that I have to involve myself. I've got my reasons. I don't like talking about it, but believe me, I *do* have my reasons. You're not alone, and I'm going to make sure you come out of this a free filly, with a father cringing at the thought of even talking to you again," she finally said.

Gabrielle nodded. It was obvious she shouldn't go deeper and she didn't want to. She smiled a little. Then she stood back upright and went out to join her colleagues.

###

"You want to go *where* and do *what*, Sergeant?" the maitre d' of the Columbus Hilton asked, disbelief on his voice.

"I want to go into the food elevator shaft and look for evidence for the murder. It won't take very long. It's part of the investigation and I'm *sure* you'd like this crime solved so it doesn't loom over your hotel, don't you?" Miranda answered, patiently.

"Very well. It's simply an unusual request, that's all."

"It's an unusual crime."

"I wouldn't know. I don't really deal much in that," the maitre d' said, noncommittally.

"I would hope not, sir," Miranda said and headed to the kitchen.

It wasn't going to be easy, she realized, but if she managed to get on top of the elevator itself and had it run up really slowly, she'd have time to look. She might have to take a few trips up and down but it'd be worth it if she found anything whatsoever.

She looked at one of the chefs when she got to the kitchen and quickly explained the situation. To her surprise, he didn't even look surprised.

"Of course, ma'am. Not a problem. That's how we check for problems with the elevator anyway. You're not a heavyweight so...it'll hold. Hang on, I'll get it down here for you," he said. He was a skinny French poodle with large, blue eyes. His accent was very local though.

Miranda nodded and followed the chef to the elevator. He pushed the button and waited for it to come down. Then he forced it down so that Miranda could climb up on top of it.

"Do you have a flashlight, ma'am?" he asked, helpfully.

"Actually...now that you mention it, I forgot one. Do you have one around?" she said.

The poodle held one out for her and smiled. "Here you go, ma'am."

"Thank you. All right. Ready when you are. I might have to go up and down a few times," she said and held on to the wire, tightly.

The elevator started ascending.

Miranda flicked the flashlight on and scanned the shaft. It seemed empty at first glance, she had to admit. She felt her heart sinking a little. She had been so sure of this. She reached the top and to her surprise, the same chef opened the hatch and looked at her.

"I took the regular elevator up, ma'am," he said, seeing her expression. "I figured I might as well help. Anyway...need another go?"

"I'm afraid so. I didn't see anything the first time. If I don't see anything in two more passes, I'll assume there's nothing to see," she said and smiled.

The poodle smiled and nodded, and she started descending again. She was halfway down when she saw it.

Something against the opposite wall, coming up towards her. She reached out swiftly as she passed it and grabbed it.

It was a tuft of black fur. She nearly screamed with elation before telling herself it wasn't even necessarily fur from a baboon. The chef had said this was how they usually checked the elevator shaft for problems and it could be any black-furred employee at the hotel that had left it there. But somehow, she didn't think it was. She quickly put the fur in a zip-lock plastic bag and shoved it in her pocket.

The elevator came to a halt. The poodle looked in at her again. "I haven't ridden an elevator this much in years, ma'am," he grinned. "Any luck this time?"

She jumped out and nodded. "Indeed, sir. The Columbus Police Department thanks you for your assistance," she said, cheerfully and waved as she ran out. She had to get that tuft of fur to the forensic labs immediately.

###

Roxanne opened the door. Darlington was in the kitchen going over next months finances with the staff there, and she'd been right next to it when the bell rang. Outside, the squat form of Mr. Hammond was waiting. Inwardly, she groaned, while putting a cordial if rather cool smile on her face.

"Mr. Hammond, what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Ah've come t'warn ya, ma'am. An' Mr. B, o'course. There's sumthin' afoot an' it ain't pretty," the bulldog growled.

Roxanne raised an eyebrow. It always took her a moment to translate from Hammondish to English. "I see. And what is this...thing...that is afoot?"

"Rebellion, ma'am. An' no mistake about tha' neither, I guaran-damn-tee ya!" Mr. Hammond answered. "Them thar jappos...them's buyin' up all th' members o'Mr. B's board, one bah one, an' 'es gonna be facin' a real showdahn sometahm soon."

"I see. But not you, Mr. Hammond?" Roxanne asked.

"No ma'am. Nevah! Ah'm loyal t'the end o'this. But them thar yakuzki boys, them's been makin' some purty serious offers. Can Ah come in? Ah've got some info'mation an' suchlahk."

"By all means. My husband isn't home. But I'll deal with this in his absence," Roxanne said and stepped aside, letting the bulldog through the door. She hadn't expected this. She detested the vulgar, squat canid and his mannerism, but for the first time she saw a glimmer of the loyalty that her husband valued so highly.

She led Mr. Hammond to the red room and sat down, crossing her legs. He took off his coat on the way. Roxanne saw muscles bulging under his shirt. The bulldog was in his early fifties, Roxanne realized, but he was fitter than most furs in their prime. Probably fitter than Theodore and that said quite a lot. She nodded for him to continue.

He sat down. "Pah'don me fer buttin' inta yer pers'nal affairs an' all, ma'am, but a lotta furs were askin' some purty serious questions after yer party abaht th'young Lady an' her not bein' thar."

Roxanne nodded. "I see there's no fooling you, Mr. Hammond. Well, since you are so obviously someone my husband trusts, I will as well. My daughter will be here for the midsummer soiree. That has already been taken care of and it is set in stone this time. Nothing can go wrong this time."

"Ah think tha' may be yer savin' grace, ma'am. Ya see...lots o'them bellyachin' li'l snotnosed *punks* tha' made their way onto th'board...them's thinkin' tha' Mr. B may be losin' 'is touch, y'see. If'n 'e can't control 'is own *daughter*, they say..."

Roxanne sighed and nodded. "I see. What's your part in all this, then, Mr. Hammond?"

"Ma'am...can Ah' be perfectly honest with ya?" the bulldog asked.

"I'd prefer it if you were."

"Ah at this point, th'only ones tha' Mr. B can really trust are Ursus, Wheeler an' me. Th'rest are bein' bought off quicker'n a roadrunner with a bum fulla TNT."

Roxanne grimaced at the mental image, but she nodded, listening.

"Ah've been comin' t'yer house fer...how many years, ma'am? Twenty Ah think. Ah remember th'young lady. She's a wild one, tha' one. An' well...let's face i'...her brother's actin' a bit weird. Ah'm an ol'e dog an' Ah smell these thangs, ma'am. Now...there are those furs sayin' tha' Mr. B's the *past* ma'am."

Roxanne nodded. "Actually, Mr. Hammond..." she began, sighing slightly "That is why Theodore is so set on getting Gabrielle to return home. He knows that if he can't keep the line going...well, let's just say it's never good to be the *last* fur in a dynasty of power. But, as I said, it's under control. Seven weeks from now, we'll have our midsummer soiree, as planned, and my daughter will be introduced to her future husband. That is unavoidable."

Mr. Hammond nodded. He looked rather relieved. "Tha's good. Tha' will bring th'doubters back in lahn, ma'am and those tha' already sold out...well...Ah'll take care o'those. Mah way."

Despite herself, Roxanne felt a sense of relief. She could see why her husband valued Mr. Hammond now. He was a problem-solver. The kind any fur in Theodore's line of business needed.

Darlington entered the room. "My pardons, Milady. I did not know company had arrived. May I bring Milady and her guest a refreshment?" the raccoon asked.

"Indeed, Darlington. Bring me a gin and tonic, and let Mr. Hammond have a double scotch. The best we have in the house."

"Ya sure know how t'make an ol'e bulldog happy, ma'am," Mr. Hammond growled with a smile.

###

Esteban opened the front door and started up the stairs towards his apartment. It'd been a long day and he was looking forward to a hot bath before calling Jean. His feet were sore and his neck was aching. But the last corrections to the movie had been shot today. There would be no more scenes to do before the script was ready and rehearsed for the next one. The one Zig Zag had told everyone about that morning.

To his surprise, Jean was sitting on the stairs outside his apartment. He could see she'd been crying. Several books were stacked on the stairs next to her.

She didn't seem to notice him.

"Chica...are you doeeng okay?" he asked and crouched in front of the vixen. He felt stupid for asking. She'd been crying. Of course she wasn't okay.

She just shook her head slowly.

"What happened? Come on...let's get you eenside. Tell me what's happened to make you feel thees way," he said, quietly, helping her to stand up.

She nodded. Esteban realized she wasn't thinking about the books. He helped her inside and quickly grabbed them and brought them in as well, placing them on the desk in his hallway. Then he helped her to a seat and sat down next to her. She felt oddly stiff when he put an arm around her. It got him worried.

"What's goeeng on, Jean?" he asked, quietly.

"I just heard some furs talk in the library today. They thought I wasn't anywhere near them but they were talking about me," she whispered.

"What deed they say?" the wolf asked.

"D...do I really have to repeat it?" she whispered and looked up at him. "Esteban, I'm not gay. I wouldn't mind being called gay if that's what I was but I'm not even *male*. I can't help how I was *born*. Why are they so blind? Why do they have to be so mean about it?"

Esteban frowned deeply and a growl rolled over his tongue. "You don't have to repeat aneetheeng, chica. I can *guess* what they were sayeeng. Eedeets. Look, there's absolutelee notheeng wrong weeth gay furs. But you're right. You're not one of them."

She looked down and swallowed. It felt like she was going to cry again.

"Eet's okay, Jean..." Esteban said and put both arms around her, pulling her against his chest, gently. "Eef you want to cry, I'm right here. They're beegots. They don't know what they're talkeeng about."

"One of them did," Jean whispered "He sounded like a real biblebeater. The kind who talked about not undoing Gods creation and he called me an "it". I didn't know what to do so I just backed away and found a table and I cried a whole lot."

Another growl emerged from deep inside Esteban. "Eef I ever get my paws on that fur, I'll show heem a theeng or two. Jean...leesten to me. Please?" he said and rocked the vixen in his arms.

She just nodded, not saying a word.

"You are not male. I don't care what you were born like. Some furs have three neepples when they're born. Or a hunched back or a club foot or sometheeng. You have a pheeseecal deesabeeleete. One that can be *feexed*...modern medeeceene has taken care of that. You're *my zorra*. My girlfriend. Okay? My *girl*friend, Jean," he muttered.

"Thank you."

Esteban smiled softly, putting a paw against her chest. "And eet ees all about what ees *een here*," he began and kissed her hair "...and up here. Aneeone takeen five meenutes to get to know you weell *know* you're a femme, okay?"

Jean winced a little at his touch but nodded. "Ouch..." she muttered and squirmed a little to get comfortable again.

"What ees eet?"

"It's the hormones. I'm reeeeaally sore, Esteban. Growing breasts in six months is going to be excruciatingly painful at times."

He blinked and smiled and kept his paw where it was. He could feel something. A little swelling.

"You're already starteeng to show, chica," he said, proudly.

"I'm not pregnant you know," Jean giggled. She couldn't help herself.

"Oops. No, but you know what I mean. Aneeway...don't let some releegeeous eedeet get you down. Or hees nazee friend, okay? That kind of fur just seets around weeth others of their kind, wheeppeeng each other eento a frotheeng frenzee on Friday

eveneengs, because they have notheeng else to do. And all the while, furs like you and me go out, have fun, dance and enjoy life, no?"

She nodded and snuggled. "I'm going to have to deal with this all my life, Esteban. There's *always* going to be someone around who won't listen to reason. Who won't see anything but their own prejudice and to whom facts are irrelevant," she said, quietly. But her voice was calm and determined again.

"Then we'll deal weeth eet together. I'm not goeeng to leave you."

"Thank you. You know what?"

"No? Tell me?" he asked.

"I am not going to have anything done to my face. I've been considering all kinds of plastic surgery, but I'm not going to anymore."

"Bueno! I don't theenk you should either. But what made you change your mind?"

"I'm not going to run from what I am or who I am, Esteban. If I do, the jerks win. If I have to hide behind a face that isn't *mine*...then I'm hiding from those I should be facing down. I can't hide from my battles. But I'm going to need you...and I'm going to need Gabrielle...and my father...to lean on," Jean said. Her voice was clearer and stronger.

Esteban smiled widely. "*That* ees my zorra speakeeng. You're stronger than anee of those. They only have beegotree and hate to offer the world. You've got truth. I theenk I know what I'd choose anee day."

"I know. But many won't choose as you do."

"No. But those are just the other beegots. Don't try to change them. Eets a waste of time and breath. Conveence the doubters, Jean. Those who *don't* know what to theenk and who *don't* know what the truth reallee *ees*. Like Francois. You changed hees opeeneeon. That ees what you need to do to a lot of other furs too."

Jean nodded and looked up at the wolf. Slowly a real smile crept onto her face. Then she leaned her head back against his chest again and sighed happily.

Let them come, she thought. I've got all the backup I'll ever need. Just let them come.