

Zig Zag is Copyright © Max Black Rabbit. Sabrina, Darke Katt and R.C. are Copyright © Eric W. Schwartz. James Sheppard, Marvin Badger, Rhonda Badger, Yohni, Alexi, Michael, Esteban, Mia, Wanda Vixen and Tamara Rabbit are Copyright © James Bruner. Alex O'Whitt is © Tigermark. The B-Team is © Silver Coyote. Jean LeBrun, Gabrielle Ryder, Timothy Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg, Malcolm Grazer, Doctor Fox Jones, Peter Spermophilus, Miranda Spermophilus, Dina Spermophilus, Leo Leon, Miriam Redtail, Lizzy Doe, Emma Grey, Professor Moose Nicholson, Professor Erica Belge and Pethouse Magazine is © Joan Jacobsen, 2005. All other characters appearing in this story, except where otherwise specifically noted, are likewise © Joan Jacobsen.

Legal Notice: This story is Copyright © 2005 by Joan Jacobsen. This story may not be sold or used for commercial profit in any form or fashion. This story may not be modified in any way. This story may not be posted on a mirror site or any other Internet site without the written permission of the author. This story may not be distributed on print, magnetic, electrical or optical mediums.

Permission to use characters that are Copyright other individuals was obtained prior to the appearance of said characters.

The author, Joan Jacobsen, hereby asserts moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

This is an independent work of fiction with no connection whatsoever to Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, E.S. Productions or James Bruner and is in no way meant to imply any connection with Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, E.S. Productions, or James Bruner. This story contains characters created by Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, James Bruner, Tigermark and Silver Coyote. Events and characters occurring in this story should not be considered part of the storylines for either 'Zig Zag', 'Sabrina Online' or 'Sabrina Online - The Story'.

In fact, as far as 'Zig Zag', 'Sabrina Online', 'Sabrina Online - The Story' and 'Zig Zag the Story' are concerned, this story does not exist. The artists disavow any knowledge of and do not officially sanction the events in this story.

Birds of Mercy

Jean was barely able to breathe. Miriam, Emma and Lizzy had all offered to be present but she had told them not to. Instead she had asked them to worry and to concentrate on Leo's homecoming. In truth, she would have loved to have her friends there, but she knew she'd be unbearable company all day. That's why she had left home early, while Esteban was still asleep. She'd left a note on the table saying she'd let him know as soon as she knew how her exam had gone.

Right now, she was carrying her notes for her presentation and her completed PhD in a bag over her shoulder. She wanted to read up on it, but she couldn't concentrate. And if she didn't know her material by now, it would do her no good trying to catch up a few hours before the exam.

Far better be it, if she could find some way to relax. Take a few deep breaths and calm down. That would be the thing to do...certainly.

She was exhausted, too. She had barely closed an eye all night. Instead she'd been tossing and turning and Esteban had been quite worried for her. In the end, he'd managed to get some sleep of his own, and it was well earned. Jean felt bad for having kept him awake until sometime past three in the morning, but she couldn't help it. She'd been near a mental collapse from nerves before she'd taken her exam on her thesis, but this was different. This was the big one. Unless she actually went for a Professorial down the line, this was the last time she'd have to take an exam. If anything, it made her want to shove her head in a bush and hide from the whole world.

What if she had made some stupid mistake?

What if she'd forgotten something vital?

What if she froze up and the proverbial kaht did a runner with her tongue?

She stopped and leaned her head against a tree on campus. It was several hours until the exam actually started.

What had they been *thinking*, anyway? Scheduling her exam to start at half past one in the afternoon. Why not during the morning, instead of leaving her wandering around for half the day? She was nauseous and she hadn't had anything to eat since last night. What she'd eaten then had come back up during the night after a frenzied run to the bathroom.

Poor Esteban, she thought. Having to put up with that kind of behavior. She'd have to make it up to him somehow, even though she knew he probably didn't see it as a problem at all.

She did.

There was no point in wandering around any longer anyway. She saw a bench and sat down on it, looking at the notes beside her. She picked them up and looked through them. She knew it all by heart. Why bother reading it again?

It passed time, if nothing else.

"Mrs. Lopez?" a voice said.

Jean looked up. A distraction to take her mind off her work and worries would be good.

"Hello William. How are you doing?"

"Very well, thank you," the mink said and smiled. "May I join you?"

Jean nodded and shuffled over on the bench, making room for the student. "Of course. You're settling in nicely with Emma, I take it?"

William positively beamed and nodded. "We got the new apartment almost completely furnished. It's a really nice place. How about you? Emma told me this was a big day for you."

"It could be the worst day of my life too...it depends on how it'll go," the vixen said and sighed.

"Got the jitters, eh? Don't worry about it, Mrs. Lopez. You've been a great teacher and you know your stuff."

Jean nodded again. "Thank you...but my abilities as a teacher are not on the exam today, after all."

William shrugged and folded his paws in his lap, leaning forward a bit and looking straight ahead. "Maybe, but..."

"But what...?"

"You know what many furs say about history, right? 'It's all about dead furs' or 'It's all statistics of who died in what battle'. Or even the all time favorites 'it's like watching paint dry!' or 'Why should I care about the past when I've got to live in the future?'"

Jean nodded. "Of course. Tends to get me irked when I run into that kind of ignorance."

William smiled, putting his elbows on his knees. "When I was a teenager, I used to love movies, y'know. I really did. I used to love it when Hollywood churned out some big, big smash hit production. Like...dare I say it...Gladiator or Braveheart. I would watch them again and again. I went to the cinema five times to see Gladiator, for instance. I thought they were so cool and I really thought I learned what history was all about..."

Jean just made a face and tried very hard to hide it by looking away. She knew William probably caught it out the corner of his eyes. "Oh good grief..." she muttered. "At least you got wiser."

"I dare say I did, Mrs. Lopez. Because one day I got into a debate with someone who actually knew something about Roman history...and I was so sure I knew everything, that I got seriously offended when he laughed at me for my ignorance. I went to a library, and I picked up a book on Roman history and I opened it, just to be vindicated, y'know. I just wanted it to tell me what I already knew...and guess what...?"

"It didn't tell you what you already knew. It told you what your friend already knew."

"Exactly right. I was totally stunned and I realized that the movies I had thought were my easy road into the world of history were in fact telling me lie after lie after lie. So I decided to pick up more books...to learn the truth of things, really."

"Laudable and commendable, Young Master White," Jean said in her best 'old, wise teacher'-voice.

William laughed softly and shrugged. "I started paying attention in history classes, too. I mean, before that I'd been one of those who said 'why bother listening? I'll just go home and watch a movie about it. Better special effects and it's more interesting..."

"And eventually you signed up to study history at university. I wish more furs would think the way you did, William. Seriously. Besides, the special effects aren't better. It's a matter of imagination," Jean said and smiled.

William nodded. "Completely true...but here's the sixty four thousand dollar question, Mrs. Lopez...what does it take to spark the imagination?"

Jean chuckled and nodded. "Good question indeed. If you have someone teaching you who isn't interested in what he or she teaches, then it becomes dreary no matter what the topic is. Be it English Literature, Nuclear Physics or the Complete and Definitive History of Shoelaces."

Again, William laughed. "I daresay the history of shoelaces would be boring no matter what...but that's just my idea of fun, I guess. Anyway, you're right, but there's more to it, isn't there, Mrs. Lopez?"

"How do you mean?" Jean asked and smiled. Her interest was certainly piqued by now. William wasn't saying anything she hadn't thought a lot of times herself, but it was always interesting to hear why a fellow historian thought it was an interesting course. Or what made it interesting. As a teacher, that was very valuable knowledge.

William rubbed his face momentarily, before putting his elbows back on his knees, looking straight ahead again with a thoughtful smile. It was a nice day, although it was getting cold again. At least the air was crisp and clear and he couldn't quite see his breath yet. In another month he probably could. Furs were walking past, some looking like they were late for class, others at a leisurely pace.

Campus was a little world within a world. Any university was. He liked it there. He liked that special mood one only found in such a place. Of higher learning and wisdom. He didn't much care for those 'hard scientists' who would espouse a view that history was something one studied if one was too stupid to study a *real* science. But snobs and idiots would always be around. If one had a brain for biochemistry or nanotechnology, then that was the way to go. If one had the mindset to study psychiatry or law, then that was obviously the thing to do. And if one had the kind of mindset that found sociology or history interesting, then that was the way one should go.

It wouldn't do to have a world populated entirely by chemists and physicians. It'd be like having a nation of hairdressers. Everyone making a living from cutting everyone else's hair.

He smiled a little. Mrs. Lopez had asked him to explain and he would try, but it was difficult to find the right words.

"When you have a teacher who is interested in his or her chosen topic, that goes a long way towards making those listening interested too. Lack of interest shows, I think we agree that far, yes?" he asked.

Jean nodded and smiled. "Absolutely. Can you imagine someone explaining Paul Revere's ride through town, shouting 'The British are coming, the British are coming...' in a complete monotone?"

William groaned and nodded. "Oh dear God can I imagine..." he muttered. He cleared his throat and when he spoke again he did so in the most uninterested and flat voice he could conjure up. "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all furs are created equal..."

Jean's smile grew a little wider. "Precisely what I meant," she chuckled. "Not many furs could even quote the first line of that, incidentally. Do you know the whole thing by heart?"

"I'd like to think I do," William said, shrugging. "I think it's one of those texts any good American ought to know, because it should remind us what is worth fighting for...and what isn't."

"Good thinking," Jean said, slightly impressed.

"Thank you," the mink carried on. "Anyway...what I was getting at, Mrs. Lopez, is something along these lines. You can have an interested teacher who does make history sound incredibly dull too. Those who think that 'Interesting' and 'Academically sound' are mutually exclusive. Those who think that in order to be a good teacher, you must never smile, you must never crack a joke and you certainly never move more than ten feet throughout a class. And God help you if you ever change the tone of your voice by more than three or four decibels, because you'll certainly fall into the category of 'circus clowns'."

Jean giggled and nodded. "Oh yes...well, I can't speak ill of a fellow teacher, you know that..."

"You don't have to, Mrs. Lopez...we all know how you and Professor Nutkin feel about one another."

"Oh what an interesting cloud formation..."

William grinned. "My point is, Mrs. Lopez...that you're a good teacher because whenever you tell us something...you tell a *story*. History, without the Hi. You get enthusiastic. You gesticulate and you run half a marathon in front of the blackboard. And each of us sitting there...we can *see* the scenes you describe. I swear, I could just see the Earl of Essex walking through the streets of London, waving his rapier and shouting to all and sundry to join him in rebellion...and what's more, I could just see the Londoners go 'Jesus Christ, what a fruitcake!' too."

Jean suddenly found herself blushing deeply. "Oh...thank you, William. That's very nice of you to say..." she said, meekly.

Shrugging, William turned his head to look at the vixen. "Don't mention it. I'm not the only one who feels this way. I swear...your rendition of Queen Elizabeth I speaking to her army, saying she was only a weak and feeble femme but that she had the spirit and heart of a male...I could see her. The white face, the enormous gown, the works. That's what history should be like, Mrs. Lopez. That's how you spark the imagination. You make those listening to you imagine the scenes you describe so vividly."

Jean blushed even deeper. She cleared her throat and fidgeted. "You know, I don't even do it on purpose...." she said.

William shook his head. "No. You do it...because you see those scenes in your own head as well, and that's what you describe. Because you love what you do. With passion, Mrs. Lopez. That's what makes you a good teacher. And that's why you'll do really well today. You'll go in there...and you'll make them see it all. Just like you did for your students all of last year."

"Thank you," Jean said again, once more feeling very humbled and meek. "I'm...glad you think I did so well. I'll be sorry to leave this place, you know."

"And we're sorry to see you go," William answered and reached out, giving Jean's shoulder a squeeze. "Good luck in there today. You'll do great. I'm sure of it. And I know a few of us will be there to watch. A PhD defense is open to the students, after all. As long as we keep quiet."

He got up and started walking away. Jean felt warm inside. It was always nice to be complimented but...William was one of her students and when he said she was a good teacher it did count for more than if Gabrielle said it. He actually had to deal with her in that capacity, after all, whereas Gabrielle didn't. Not that she didn't appreciate the bronco's compliments. Of course she did.

"William...?" she asked, getting up, herself.

The mink half turned and nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Lopez?"

"Emma's very lucky," Jean said and smiled.

William grinned crookedly. "Oh I think we're both lucky, really."

Then he turned back around and walked away. Jean took a deep breath and looked at the notes on the bench. She picked them up and tucked them securely under her arm.

There was plenty of time before it began. And she was hungry. And thirsty. There was time to go get some very late breakfast.

###

Leo turned around and looked at his troops. The company was lined up, all in their dress uniforms. Behind them, a barrier was set up and behind that, a horde of furs were waiting. Families. Loved ones. Friends. All waiting for him to dismiss the company so they could welcome home a son or a husband or a father. He wanted to dismiss them. He was heading back to Columbus at last, and he could barely wait to get out of there himself, but he did need to say a last few things before he let his troops off the hook. The last few days had been so hectic he was surprised he wasn't fast asleep. Everything had been packed up. The troops obviously had packed their gear and their private souvenirs from the campaign. There had been speeches. Good God...all those speeches. By one fur after another. General this-or-that and Colonel so-and-so had been around, talking about the bravery of the regiment and the outstanding soldiers in it, yadda yadda yadda...

After three repetitions it had all grown a little tiresome. Finally, they had jumped on the transports home. 'Mercybirds' Lieutenant Cross had called them. Carrying them out of Afghanistan and back home to the United States of America. Carrying each soul away from death and back to life.

It was an appropriate term, Leo thought. He knew it would stick with him for life, at least.

He looked at the soldiers in front of him and smiled a little. They all looked like they could barely contain their eagerness to go to their families on the other side of that fence and he didn't want to keep them waiting too long, either.

Yet another speech. At least, he hoped, this one would mean more to them than what some general who hadn't bled with them and fought with them had to say.

"COMPANYYYY...ATTEEEEEEEEN...SHUN!" he roared.

The company snapped to attention so quickly and so perfectly Leo found himself nodding in approval. For a moment, he thought he even saw some of the furs on the other side of the fence stand up straight. They were close enough that he could hear their shouts. They were quiet now, though. Even the families of his soldiers were waiting for him to speak.

"This is it, boys," he finally said. "This is American soil under your boots. It's not Pakistan. It's not Afghanistan. And the noise you can hear is not the roar of our M198s or shells from our own batteries on the way to their destination. The noise you can hear...or could hear a moment ago...was your families and friends, waiting to welcome you back home. Waiting with a hug or a kiss and probably a lot of loving, happy words. My guess is more than a few tears of relief and joy as well."

He spoke clearly and loudly, without shouting. Slowly, he paced along the front line of the company. The faces of the troops he'd come to know so well...come to respect and care for almost as if they were his own brothers, in the flesh...looked back at him.

No. Not almost. These furs were his family. His brothers in arms, and he was proud of it. Proud of every last one of them.

"I am going to have to ask these good furs to wait a little while longer before they can welcome you back home. I have a few things to say first. And a last thing I want to do, before I let you go," he said and stopped at the end of the line, before turning to head back. He nodded, very briefly, at Lieutenant Cross and Lieutenant Pardinus who were standing side-by-side at that end.

He could see a few American flags being waved by children on the other side of the fence. Still, the furs back there were all quiet, waiting and apparently listening.

Leo smiled and straightened up fully. "It's been a Hell of a year, boys. The Artillery isn't meant to be front-line troops. By definition, we're behind-the-line troops. But no one taught the Taliban how to fight according to Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, and we've seen our share of bloodshed. *More* than our share. And I say to you now, that I'm proud of you. Every damned last soul here has earned my respect this past year. When we went over there...we were young...and full of ideals...and

carefree. We've all changed a lot in the last year. We're older now. Not just a year older but...well, you know what I mean. Just older. I was just a second lieutenant, in charge of one platoon. One battery. Now I'm your commanding officer, and it falls to me to dismiss you. But I can't do that so easily..."

Not one fur said anything in the line ahead of him. They all simply kept looking straight ahead. Expecting him to go on.

"Dog Company..." Leo continued, clearing his throat. He was feeling a little emotional and a small lump had formed in his throat. "For those we left behind, and for those I did manage to bring back home alive and safely...I salute you."

He did so, slowly and deliberately. Smiles spread on the faces of the troops. Then as one...they returned the salute.

Leo lowered his arm at last and nodded, thoughtfully. "Some of you I'll see again when you are done with your leave. Some...I won't. Some of you are leaving the army, to go out into a different kind of life. To those who won't return, I wish you Godspeed and the best of luck. To those who do...well...I can assure you, I won't work you any less hard back home in the US than I did in Afghanistan."

A few chuckles rolled through the ranks.

Then the lion extended his paw and approached Lieutenant Cross. "I will let you go in a second," he said. "But first...I wish to shake each and every fur here by the paw. I'm sure there have been better artillery-units in the distinguished military history of this nation...but I mean it when I say, I still commanded the finest."

Lieutenant Cross took the offered paw and shook it with a smile. Leo continued down the line, shaking each fur solidly by the paw. It took a while but he had to do it. Finally, having shaken the very last fur in the very last line by the paw, he went back to stand in front of his troops again.

"DOG COMPANYYY..." he roared. Then smiled warmly and lowered his voice to his normal tone. "Dismissed."

The explosion of joy nearly knocked him off his feet. The reaction was almost overwhelming as furs took off their caps and tossed them into the air to celebrate.

"ALRIGHT, YOU SORRY MAGGOTS!!" Lieutenant Pardinus bellowed in a momentary pause in the shouting and hollering. "TO THE CAPTAIN...WHO PROMISED TO BRING US HOME ALIVE AND WHO DAMNED WELL DELIVERED! CAPTAIN LEON...HIP HIP..."

"HOORAY!! HOORAY!! HOORAY!!"

Leo actually blushed slightly and looked down for a brief moment, grinning, putting his arms akimbo. "Aw shucks, boys...go kiss your girlfriends already," he grinned.

He didn't need to say so again. The rush to the gates in the fence was fantastic to witness. Lieutenant Pardinus came up to him and smiled.

"I'll see you soon, Captain," he said. "It's been an honor."

"And you, Lieutenant. You take care of yourself now."

Lieutenant Pardinus nodded and patted Leo's arm. "You need to go catch your plane back to Ohio, Sir. There's a hummer behind all the happy furs here, with a driver, ready to take you to the airport. I've made sure your private belongings are already loaded onto it."

Leo nodded in return and gave the lynx's shoulder a squeeze. "I wouldn't have made it this far without your help, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Pardinus smiled. It made little crinkles around his eyes, reminding Leo that for all his prowess, his friend wasn't as young as many of the troops. "Glad to have been of some assistance then, Sir. Now get...or you'll miss that plane and your girlfriend will skin everyone in the unit alive if that happens."

Leo laughed. That was true. He nodded and waved as he ran towards the hummer.

Finally, he was going home.

###

It wasn't the first time Lizzy was waiting in an airport. Leo had managed an extremely brief call on the way to the plane, from the airport, telling her he was making it back on schedule. He hadn't managed more than a few words. It was long distance after all...from an airport pay phone. Still, as she was standing there, waiting for him, she

couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this relieved. He'd gone through so much, and he was finally coming home to her.

He had changed, she knew that. He wasn't the same lion she'd sent off to Afghanistan, but then again, she wasn't the same femme either. Her job...her experiences with that and with being alone for a year, waiting for her boyfriend who was off fighting in a different country...

It had put some things into perspective for her. Leo had strong moral values. Moral values she *liked*. She knew from his letters that he had argued with the regimental commander about her political past, and she had been incredibly proud of the stance Leo had described himself as taking.

Could she see herself as the wife of an army officer? A career soldier?

If anyone had asked her two or three years ago, she'd have punched them for their insolence. If anyone had asked her a little over a year ago, before Nine-Eleven she'd have told them Leo wouldn't do such a thing. But Nine-Eleven changed everything. It changed the world...and the furs in it. Ideals she had held as absolutes had turned out to be debatable. Beliefs she had thought to be unshakable had come crashing down like the Twin Towers themselves.

It had forced her to face her own shortcomings and her own idealistic arrogance.

That had been difficult, and it had been a struggle she needed to deal with on her own. In that respect, not having Leo around turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Had he been there, it would've been harder for her to come to terms with her own change of mentality. His letters from Afghanistan, and his phone calls whenever he got the chance, had shown her that he was changing too, and that had made it easier for her to deal with her own beliefs being altered.

She had thought herself a Marxist. She'd been proud of being an Anti-Imperialist and an Anti-Militarist. She had been proud of her social conscience and how she placed the needs of the weak over the comfort of the wealthy. The many before the few. She had always thought that the American Dream was a load of crock, and that it was a way of telling poor furs to bite it back and endure for the remote, million-to-one chance that they could claw their way out of destitution.

But what about the millions who didn't manage to do so? That's where the American Dream failed. That's where conscience and dignity and most of all society had to step in and solve the situation.

It had been such a wonderfully simple way of looking at the world. Idealistic and blind.

Some things were worth fighting for. Some things *had* to be fought for. And the American Dream was only bad if it was taken at face value. Why should one fur who managed to make a good life for him- or herself not be allowed to do so? The question was not holding back those who did well for themselves. The question was to help those who didn't to live good, fulfilling lives *too*. One didn't cancel out the other. It wasn't bad to be successful. In fact, if no one was successful, then everyone would be mediocre and mediocrity never really helped anyone. It was important to let the success that some furs would enjoy be used to help those who didn't have the chance to excel.

She was no longer a Marxist. She'd come to realize that, at least. She'd truly realized that after Consul Katze had explained why she had been singled out by C-Kitty. Not a Marxist...but certainly more red than most democrats. She always would be, and that was fine. Youthful idealism had been burnt away by the fires in New York and Pennsylvania, and in its stead, galvanized and shining, had stood a firm understanding of herself and of right and wrong.

Leo had fought, by his own words...not for what the United States of America was. But for what it could become. For what it had the potential to be. And that was worth fighting for.

So...the answer was most definitely and certainly a yes.

She could see herself as the wife of a career officer. She would be proud to be, because she knew that this particular career officer had values she could support. As long as he retained his integrity, she would be right beside him. Not behind him. Leo didn't need a cheerleading squad or a backing group. He needed an equal. Someone to stand beside him in life.

Someone where he wouldn't have to turn his neck so far around it'd snap to see her. Just look to the left, and there she'd be.

She smiled.

"Lizzy?"

She turned around towards the voice. She had no idea how long she'd been standing in her own thoughts. A long time, obviously. The plane had landed outside. She could see it out the windows. She hadn't even noticed that it had taxied up to the gate and that it had emptied.

There he was. Big, strong, handsome...

All hers.

She knew what love was. The way her heart skipped a beat or two. The way he smiled at her and the way that made her blush.

"I don't have the legs for this," she said and shrugged and brushed down her skirt. It was a simple, black thing which went with the T-shirt she was wearing. Nothing fancy at all, really.

"I think you do," Leo answered and stepped up to her, brushing the back of his paw over her cheek. "I like the red rose motif..."

Lizzy smiled a little. "Well...I figured the hammer and sickle symbolism needed a change. Social Democrats use red roses..."

Leo smiled back at her. Then he wrapped his arms around her.

"Elizabeth Doe..." he said, softly. "Will you marry me?"

Then he kissed her.

She'd say yes when it was done. But Lizzy was in no particular hurry...

###

When Professor Nicholson opened the door to the lecture-hall and called her in, Jean wasn't worried anymore. She was serious, determined and calm. But not worried. She picked up her notes again and nodded to her mentor.

"I'm ready," she said.

Professor Nicholson chuckled and adjusted his glasses. "You sound like you're going to your execution, Jean."

"Oh, nothing of the sort. This is a lot more serious," the vixen said, straightening her back. The vaguest hint of a smile played about her lips.

Professor Nicholson nodded in approval. "You always did have a good sense of priorities, Jean LeBrun...or should I say Mrs. Lopez?" he mumbled, gruffly, while trying to contain a smile of his own. "Come on in then."

Jean nodded and followed him into the lecture hall. It wasn't exactly packed. Ten or fifteen students were present. She knew most of them and the rest were probably there because the topic of her PhD was of some interest to them in general. William White, Hantaywee Twofeathers and Richard Terry were there, smiling widely at her.

She owed those three. Bigtime and she knew it.

They had been right behind her, backing her up and making sure she felt welcomed and needed by the student community when things had grown ugly. They had proved to her that while she'd face jerks and bigots for the rest of her life, she could rely on those who truly mattered to stand by her.

Hantaywee had just finished her paper, Jean knew. She would have time to grade it before her time at the History Department was up. If only just. The puma would, Jean realized, probably grow to be an excellent historian in her own right. Probably specializing in the history of Native Americans in relation to the Europeans. And not necessarily all the bad stories either. Hantaywee had, amongst other things, shown a great interest in the colonial era and how the British had interacted with various native tribes. A little told part of Native American history. But as she had pointed out, being Sioux didn't mean she had to concentrate on the tribes of the Great Plains.

Richard had grown into a confident student. He passed his various tests either on the first or second attempt now, and while he and Hantaywee had recently broken up, they remained great friends. Jean knew the terrier would probably never be making headlines with his research, but he would probably be a very qualified high school teacher some day...and as far as she knew that was exactly what he wanted to do with himself anyway.

William would, if Jean was any judge of character, be writing his own PhD at some point down the road. Maybe not right after completing

his studies. Maybe a few years down the line after he'd had time to get some experience under his belt. But he *thought* history. He knew what the essential things were. And, as he had proved to her earlier that day, he knew what made it a valuable course to others. How to make it interesting.

History couldn't bring about the cure for cancer or explain one of the great unsolved riddles of mathematics. But it helped educate furs. It helped each fur who knew about it to gain a greater understanding of the world, and of themselves in the world. And based on this understanding, they could strive to better the world. That, at least, was what she could hope for. William understood this. And he understood that to achieve this...history first and foremost had to be fun...and it had to be as accurate as research and sources would allow it to be.

No Hollywood history for him.

Jean smiled a little. Esteban might very well end up filming that kind of movie. That'd be an interesting conundrum. Something to talk about over the dinner-table for sure.

"Mrs. Lopez," Professor Nicholson said, clearing his throat. "I need to ask you before we begin if you are familiar with the procedure for this defense?"

"I am," Jean answered and smiled at last, putting her notes and PhD down on the desk in front of her. "And unless anyone has any questions to ask me before we begin, I believe we should get started. If someone at the back would do me a favor and switch off the lights, I will get the presentation started..."

Professor Nicholson looked around. None of the others on the review board had anything to ask, it seemed. He nodded to Jean to let her know she could start.

Hantaywee got out of her seat and switched off the lights a moment after Jean had turned on the overhead projector.

The vixen cleared her throat and placed the first of her prepared transparencies on the overhead. "Then I'd like to thank you all for coming and welcome you to this presentation. I am sure that you have all had plenty of time to familiarize yourself with the material as I have written it, so I won't waste your time on going through things you have already read. Instead, I will present background information, dealing

with the political situation in Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century from a religious point of view. If you look at this map, ladies and gentlemen, you will see that the picture was extremely muddled. Prior to the Peace of Westphalia, there was no international agreement to follow the Treaty of Augsburg of 1555. '*Cuius Regio, eius religio*' was only a pretty Latin phrase until this time. The idea that the religion of the ruler of any given district or principality would be the religion of his subjects as well existed...and was summarily ignored. There were only three choices mentioned in the Peace of Westphalia, however: Catholicism, Calvinism and Lutheranism. Tough luck for you if you were an Anabaptist without the means to buy passage to the New World..."

Jean smiled as she heard a couple of the students giggle.

At least she was off to a good start.

###

It was nearly nine in the evening, and Esteban was pacing. He'd wear a hole in the carpet soon, as Fox had commented, if he didn't sit down soon. Esteban wanted to sit down. He wanted to relax. He wanted to talk to Leo...more than he already had. He wouldn't mind having a beer or two either. But he was too nervous to do so. He could barely see straight.

"Relax lobo...pacing won't make the time go faster," Miriam said and held out a beer for him to take.

He took it gratefully and downed a third of it. "Gracias, Meereeam," he said, realizing his voice sounded hoarse. "I'm sorree...I'll try..."

"Everyone here thinks the world of her, but do you see any of us going out of our minds from nerves?" Emma asked and smiled, crossing her legs. She felt really good. Leo had more or less showered her in compliments since he came through the door.

The lion was currently stirring the punch bowl. Lizzy had barely let go of him since they came back. Of course they had heard about the proposal and everyone had cheered long and loud.

Leo would be the last one to leave the ranks of the bachelors, as Fox had pointed out. Leo had retorted that he had other ranks to show nowadays...and then he had tapped his rank insignia.

That was two seconds before he'd vanished into the bedroom to change into something civilian for the evening. As he did so, he realized it was the first time in a year he was out of uniform. Not even when he'd been home on leave for the weddings had he changed out of it. It felt amazing to fold up the officer and place him neatly on the dressing table, and just be Leo Leon for a while.

Everyone wanted to know how everything had gone while he was there. Apart from Lizzy, he hadn't really told anyone much when he was home the last time. There hadn't been time to do so. Nor had it been the right occasion.

But he could tell them all now. He was allowed to, as well, with General Aureus and his son both behind bars. But he had still prevaricated. He didn't want to ruin a wonderful evening with stories of mayhem and horror and bloodshed. But the others had all said they wanted him to talk about it and if anything...Fox was there. Leo had started saying no again, and then realized that it would be wrong of him to do so. He looked at the faces of all his friends and understood why they asked him.

They wanted to help him share the burden.

They could never understand. They hadn't been there, but what struck Leo was that this was alright. They didn't have to be. He closed his eyes a moment and recalled a letter he had almost forgotten along the way. The letter he had written before going off to war, saying he didn't want to become an emotional cripple when he came home. He really didn't. He had received so much help along the way. So much help and support from those around him. But he also knew that despite all this help, many other furs would have crumbled and retreated into their own little world of bitterness and anger. He avoided it because he had been strong enough...and determined enough...to avoid it.

And here were his friends. Looking at him. Hoping he'd share. Hoping he would let them carry just a tiny fraction of the burden he had come to carry, and it made his eyes glisten with tears. These were all bright and intelligent furs and they all knew they could never carry it for him. All they could do...was help *him* do so. And they were willing to.

Such were the natures of the furs he called friends, and he knew he was blessed.

"Okay," he said at last. "But not all of it tonight. Not all at once, okay? I suggest we meet up a few times over the next two weeks, before I go back on duty, and I'll tell you what you want to know. And I'll start tonight but not all of it at once."

"That's fair," Emma said and smiled. "That's perfectly reasonable. Would it be okay for me to bring William along? You'd like him, Leo...I promise."

"If he's managed to capture the heart of Emma Gray, the sweetest mink in Ohio, then I'm pretty certain I'll think he's a great guy," Leo said with a wink. "Just warn him what it's all about, okay?"

Emma blushed furiously and nodded. "I'll do that."

Leo nodded. "Good. But anyway, I won't start telling anyone anything until Jean is here too. She shouldn't be left out."

"Agreed," Fox said and nodded. "She'd be upset if she didn't get to share in this."

Esteban was about to say something when the door opened. He looked over and smiled. "And there she ees at last!!" he exclaimed. "You promeessed you'd call, Chica!"

"Shame on you, Jean. Poor Esteban's been beside himself all evening," Leo said and headed over, hugging the vixen tightly.

She returned it and sighed deeply in relief. "It's so good to have you back home in one piece, Leo. We've all missed you terribly."

The lion smiled and let go of her. Esteban came over too, taking her paws.

"So..." he said and swallowed, eyes wide. "How deed eet go?"

Jean just looked at him...

...and smiled.

The end

(See you in Transitions III)