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## *XXXVII - Force 12*

It had been three days since Jean had called Esteban at work to tell him Steve would be moving in with the family. The next day, Steve had been given the offer at school, by Frances who had caught up with the wolf in the hallway, but he had not been certain if he could accept. That same afternoon, he had gone home with the twins after school and he'd had dinner with the family that same evening. Esteban hadn't been there since he would be filming more or less non-stop for ten more days, but Jean had been present. At first, the mood had been a little uncertain; mostly since Steve wasn't sure how to cope with the offer he'd been given. Then Jean had broken the proverbial ice by telling him why she was making him the offer to move in with her family. She had calmly explained her view on the affair to Steve who had listened attentively to it all, before answering.

When he did, his answers had surprised himself. He had been unsure how his mother would react and how he was going to explain it to her, he said...only to stop and look puzzled. Why should he be concerned with that? He had told his mother he wanted to move out and she seemed only too happy to get rid of him after all. She hadn't spoken to him since he'd made it clear to her that he was leaving. She acted as if he didn't even live in the house anymore. It was absolutely unbearable.

Then he'd realized he didn't have to explain anything to her. He just had to pack his stuff and move. That had pretty much settled the issue. He'd accepted the offer. Jean's reasoning against him moving out on his own at the age of sixteen was much too solid for him to argue against it. Furthermore, if he did that he'd need to get a job and he wouldn't be able to finish high school. He didn't want to be a drop-out, so this offer was definitely one he'd take. He'd very gratefully thanked the vixen for the offer and then, after a suitable pause, he had taken the opportunity to properly apologize to her for all the bad things he had said about her in the past. He'd never really had a chance to make that apology before, but he felt better after doing so.

Three days later, Steve found himself putting things in boxes at his room. His clothes had been shoved into big, black bags. His mother had stopped washing his clothes and, much to his own distress, Steve had realized he didn't know how to operate a washing machine. Jean had already picked up some of those bags so that he could get some clean clothes to wear. It wasn't that he had much to pack, really. He just had to do it after doing his homework every day. He'd be moving in with the Lopez-family over the weekend, and he felt great about it.

This really was the fresh start he needed.

This way, he could concentrate solely on doing his homework, making the team and getting on with his life in a good way.

Smiling, he closed the box he was working on. He couldn't wait to tell Coach Larsen about this move. Somehow he was sure that the equine would approve.

###

Gabrielle put down the telephone and added another name to the check-list. She grinned and put down the pen, before picking up the list and heading downstairs into the shop. Yohni was behind the counter. She had hired some help, but she still enjoyed the contact with the customers. She had started talking about expanding the shop area, after all these years. Gabrielle thought it was about high time. The shop was probably the most famous and most visited of its kind in the entire Bay Area by now, and it was still only as big as it had been when it first opened.

"There you go, sir," the mongoose said and put a customer's purchases into a discreet bag. Most preferred those, instead of the black and white striped ones. A few were bold enough to ask for one of those though.

The feline took the bag and sashayed out of the shop. Gabrielle waited patiently for him to leave, before looking at her wife. "Did you remember to have the fire-extinguisher replaced, by the way?" she asked.

"Behave!" Yohni grinned. "He's one of my best customers."

"Are you insinuating anything, Love?"

"Yes!"

"Bugger..."

"GABBY!!"

The equine grinned widely. "Okay, okay, I'll behave...mostly. Anyway, I got another confirmation for the Saturnalia."

"Cool! Who from?" Yohni asked and looked like she didn't believe her wife had the capacity to behave even if she tried. "And how many have confirmed by now?"

"Well, there's Jean and Esteban and the two of us, obviously. And of course...Zig Zag and James were the first to say they'd be here. We have Marvin, Rhonda, Tamara, Michael, Alexi and Wanda coming in too...the whole AVC acting crew will be gathered, more or less. Hell, I even got a hold of the young male who played Judah, and he's coming too..." Gabrielle explained.

"Joey? Yeah, I remembered you said that. It's way cool. I still can't get over how young he looks when I look at that movie and he was really *nineteen*..."

"He was *tiny* for his age, though!" Gabrielle said and continued down the checklist. "Anyway, we have those. We also have Leo and Lizzy, of course, and Fox and Miriam. And we have William and Emma coming all the way across the country for it too. They'll be traveling with Timothy and Malcolm..."

"Yep, still with you..."

"Well, here's the big surprise. I just got a positive confirmation from Ulf and Signe!"

Yohni's eyes went wide. "You're *kidding*! They are coming all the way over from Copenhagen for this?"

Gabrielle's smile went wider still. "Yep, isn't that cool?!"

"It's fantastic! I can't wait to see them again."

"Neither can I. This is going to be the party to end all parties, by the looks of it. I wonder how Jean and Esteban are doing with their part of the planning-process."

Yohni snickered and shook her head. "Knowing Esteban, we'll all need a three-week diet afterwards, and we'll be so stuffed with good food we'll be unable to do much except lounge around and look like blimps all evening."

"Lounge...Good God, I nearly forgot. We need to find out where we can rent enough chaises-lounges for everyone to recline on while eating," Gabrielle said, eyes going wide. "Where on earth are we going to find that??"

"This is San Francisco, baby...if you can't find it here, you can't find it anywhere. Ask Esteban if nothing else. I'm sure he can rent some stuff from one of the movie-studios he's worked for in the past. Imagine what it'd be like to recline on something they used in 'Cleopatra'?"

Gabrielle smiled. "That would be..." she began, but she didn't get any further.

Behind her, Kalen had come into the room. He looked like someone had punched him hard enough to keep him dazed for a week. He was walking unsteadily and he looked like he wanted to cry, but couldn't quite remember how. He was shaking all over. There were no physical marks on him, but Gabrielle's first thought was that someone had attacked her son. But that couldn't be. He had been upstairs all along.

Her next thought was that the gunshot wound had broken up but that made no sense either. There was no blood to be seen and besides, the wound *had* closed fully.

"M...mom...?" the teenager croaked.

Neither Yohni nor Gabrielle actually answered but they were both by Kalen's side in a split second. Both were confused, and both were concerned.

"What happened?" Yohni asked, fearful of the answer. *Her* first thought was that maybe Dina had broken it off with Kalen.

"It's..." Kalen tried, shaking his head slowly like he was trying to fully come to grips with something. "It's...awful..."

Gabrielle put her arms around her son and hugged him gently. "What is, sweetie?" she asked, keeping her voice soothing and gentle.

"It's Coach Larsen..." Kalen managed to stammer. He was still shaking all over. "She's dead..."

###

The scene at the Lopez household was one of barely restrained panic. Steve was there. He'd received the news on his cell-phone on his way to his new home with the first of two car-loads of belongings. They could make do with two trips since he really didn't have all that much stuff to pack down in the first place. Jean had been driving the car, and she had barely dignified Steve's mother with a nod, but had at least made sure the female wolf would not suddenly call the cops and accuse them of abducting her son or something similarly unexpected.

Not that Jean really thought Steve's mother would do that, but by that point she wasn't willing to put it past the other femme to pull some ridiculous stunt like that to bully her own son. At least, Jean thought, she now knew exactly where Steve had learned the less-than-fine art of bullying. The kid had apparently been more or less brought up with it.

On the way home, Steve's cell-phone had buzzed and they had both thought it was Steve's mother. Instead, it was a long text message from Mr. Diazi, summoning Steve to a meeting with the board the next morning to discuss his expulsion. The reasoning had been that since Coach Larsen was now dead, there was nothing that bound the board to keep him enrolled at UHS.

That was the first either of them had heard concerning Coach Larsen's fate, and Steve at first had thought it was a bad attempt at a joke, and that it wasn't actually Mr. Diazi sending the message. When Jean had pulled over the car and called the number back to double-check, it had turned out it was in fact a genuine message and that Steve was up for expulsion from school.

It had very nearly made him break down.

That was almost an hour and a half ago, and Jean had spent the intervening time, since getting back home, making a long series of calls. She wasn't sure how she'd ever forgive herself for having to break the news to Kalen, but someone had to and it was probably better if she did it than if Mr. Diazi did it the following day. After all, as far as Jean was concerned, the lapine had just proven himself to be completely insensitive to the emotions of teenagers, and the vixen mostly wanted to kick the principal's fluffy backside into the Pacific Ocean for it.

She'd also called her husband and told him to get *his* backside back home that evening. She'd need him at the meeting the following day. Esteban had called back ten minutes later and wearily explained that he had been forced to threaten to resign from the movie unless he got one day off to deal with a family-matter. The director of the movie he was

working on was a big name in Hollywood, but also a fur with a severely overblown self-image and an ego disproportionate to even *his* professional accomplishments. Considering that those accomplishments included a Golden Globe and an Academy Award nomination, that was saying something. Esteban had spent a few minutes reflecting on how fame made some furs absolutely impossible to talk sense to.

It was all the more ridiculous for the fact that Esteban normally ran a tight ship as a director of photography, and that he was two days ahead of schedule on all secondary and tertiary units, and that his primary unit had not fallen behind.

Nonetheless, he had managed to get a day off and he'd be present at the meeting. Jean did not plan on letting Steve go through this alone, no matter how many protests Mr. Diaz put up and she was fully prepared to play hardball.

She'd called Leo as well. He had already sent a lengthy Email back, explaining how Steve was responsible for saving his daughter's life, and how he was shocked and appalled to hear that the wolf was being expelled. She didn't know how much it'd help, but it couldn't hurt.

Everything was set in motion. Yohni would be present at the meeting as well. Gabrielle had wanted to, but the vixen had argued that Gabrielle's temper might make things harder on Steve. Reluctantly, Gabrielle had been forced to agree. Jean was better when faced with stupidity. She didn't get angry, demeaning or patronizing. She simply dug in her heels and held firm. It was a trick Gabrielle had never really picked up on, and for once, she admitted that losing her temper would only increase the problem.

Steve was shell shocked, for lack of a better word. Charles was only marginally more coherent. Even though he hadn't actually been trained by Coach Larsen, there was barely a male student at UHS who didn't respect the equine. Most of them looked up to her and quite a few of them were secretly quite scared of her. None of them would ever admit to having a crush on the football coach. It wasn't advisable in any case. And now she was dead. Charles and Steve were both deeply affected, and while Frances was a little more coherent, she did look like someone had smacked her around as well.

In short, Jean had to pretty much deal with all of this on her own. She was willing to do so, but the panic that underlay the tension both Steve and her own children clearly felt, was hard to do anything about. All she could do was to tell them, over and over again, that she would not let Mr. Diaz get away with expelling Steve without a fight.

The way Jean saw this, it was an open-and-close case. Mr. Diaz and the School Board had agreed to allow Steve to stay in school on two conditions. Not on three. The two

conditions were that Steve kept a B-average in all classes, which in itself was pretty harsh, and secondly, that he made the football team. There was no clause anywhere saying that the football team had to be trained by Coach Larsen, and she intended to remind them of this. She had been told that the equine had said she would only train UHS for one more year anyway, and that she stayed exclusively because of the deal with Steve. Since Steve was now a junior, he had two years left of his High School education in any case. Would the board simply have waited a year for Coach Larsen to leave and then expel him? It was a legitimate question and one she intended to put to their faces the following day.

"Steve...Frances, Charles, come over here," she said and sat down by the kitchen table.

She waited for the children to sit down as well. They looked at her, as if hoping she somehow had the magical answer to all that was going on. Jean, sadly, knew she did not. However, she did know she had to be tough the following day, and that toughness may well start right then and there.

"Sure Mom..." Frances said and looked expectantly at the vixen as she sat down as the last one. "Do you know how to fix this then?"

Jean shook her head. "I can't promise you that. But I can promise you I'll go there tomorrow and I'll tear Mr. Diaz a new one...in the most polite, diplomatic and *civilized* way imaginable."

Charles smiled weakly. "Oh no, Mom's getting *civilized*. Run to the hills."

"Thank you, Charles, but I'm quite serious about this. I'm not going to lower myself to the level of a shouting match. I'm not going to resort to name-calling or finger-pointing. It accomplishes nothing and Steve's situation would be equally hard. I do have a question I need you to answer for me, Steve, and I have to ask you to think very carefully about your answer, because a lot might depend on it."

"Sure Mrs. Lopez."

Jean chuckled. "First of all, call me Jean. If you're going to live two years or more in this house while calling me Mrs. Lopez, I'll go nuts. Secondly, I need you to tell me how much support you've got with the rest of the football team. Would any of them, apart from Kale, stand up for you?"

Steve did as he was asked and gave it some serious thought. Finally, he nodded. "Yeah, at least Pablo would. And I think four or five of the others would too."

"Then I need you to tell Charlie who those four or five others are, so he can inform them tomorrow about what's going on. I don't know how much difference they can make, if any, but we could use all the support we can get," Jean went on. Sighing, she put her arms on the table and leaned forward a little, supporting her self on her elbows as she looked at her own children.

They both perked up their ears and looked back at their mother with a worried expression on their face.

"As for you two..." Jean said. "If Mr. Diazi and the board won't change their approach to this, I'll be looking for another school in the area for you to transfer to, right along with Steve. I know it sucks. I know it's grossly unfair and I know I'm mean and evil for taking you away from your classmates and friends...but if that's how they'll treat Steve, I'll not only transfer you to another school, but I'll make sure my superior's at work are told the full and complete story of what has happened over this summer holiday. They might take a dim view of *University* High School's board, once they know what Steve's done to deserve a second chance."

Both Charles and Frances nodded, and both swallowed hard. Transferring schools was a nasty prospect. UHS was the best school in the entire area and no matter what school they ended up at, it'd result in a drop in standards.

"What about Kale?" Charles asked. "He's gotta be told about this."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure he gets told. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd transfer along with you, if it comes to that, but obviously, that's not for me to decide. But this is serious, kids. It's about more than Steve's situation too, if you think about it," the vixen said and looked at the wolf across the table.

Steve frowned and tried to figure out what she meant. "How do you reckon?" he asked.

Jean leaned back in her seat a bit. She'd have to get started on some kind of dinner once she'd explained all this to the children, but she wasn't sure if anyone felt particularly hungry. "If the board gets away with this, they can run out on any deal they make with any student at any time from now on. They will give themselves permission to arbitrarily break any deal with one or two day's notice. Neither you, nor your classmates, nor any other kid at that school now or at any time in the future, can feel they can make an agreement with Mr. Diazi or the board that they can trust," she started. She got up to get started on some kind of food, but she kept explaining, "But conversely, a student making such a deal would have to keep *his* side of it or suffer the consequences. That's not right. I realize that the board and the principal have to hold the last say at school. Of

course they do. But there is something profoundly anti-democratic in the board giving itself permission to run out on any brokered agreement, and the way I see it, education should first and foremost be a means by which to school children and young furs in the way society works. I won't have my children taught that breaking deals is acceptable. And furthermore, while I never knew Coach Larsen, I *did* know her reputation. No parent with children at UHS didn't. And if they do break this deal, they'll be dishonoring her memory."

Steve shuddered at the thought of anyone doing that. "I hope for their sake that Coach Larsen does rest in piece...or she'll be back to haunt them."

"Good God," Charles mumbled. "Can you imagine? Ordinary ghosts rattle chains and go bump in the night. Coach Larsen's ghost hauls a sack of footballs around, using it to hit those who wronged her! Force twelve."

Jean was about to say something, but stopped. The mental image Charles had just conjured up in her head was hilarious, and despite the seriousness of the situation, she couldn't help but laugh softly. She took out some potatoes and started peeling them by the sink, shaking her head.

"Knowing the Coach," Frances said, calmly, "she'd probably be a lot less nice about it. She'd probably end up waking up the board members at night, just by staring at them, arms crossed over her chest. She wouldn't even speak. She'd just be looking at them."

Charles visibly shuddered and his eyes betrayed a moment of terror at the image. "Thanks Sis, now *I* won't sleep properly for a week!" he complained. "That's an absolutely horrifying image. The Ghostly Coach...staring at you disapprovingly?"

"Alright kids, enough with the ghost-stories. Jeez, you'd think you were at a cub-scout jamboree or something, telling stories like that across the campfire to scare the kids half to death before nightfall. Charles, set the table. Frances, get started on the salad please and Steve, I'll entrust you with the chicken in the fridge."

Frances broke out in a big smile. "Well...that means you're officially an accepted part of the family. Mom trusting you with the meat for dinner is a big deal around here," she said and winked at Steve.

The wolf did manage a thin, worried smile as he got up and got the chicken.

###

Kalen was sitting on the football field. He'd spent a lot of time crying, but by now, he just didn't have more tears to shed. He was holding a football in his paws, and he wanted nothing more than to throw it, but he couldn't. Not yet. It was much too soon after the shooting. The bullet had fully entered his body and done some serious muscle-damage, after all. Throwing a ball around this soon would not only be inviting internal bleeding. It'd pretty much guarantee it.

The field was empty, at present. It was early evening, and long shadows had slowly started creeping out from the goal-posts. They looked like giant tuning forks, drawn on the grass with black ink.

Kalen felt like he'd lost a part of himself. However stupid it might sound when he thought about it. The Coach had taught him how to play. She'd been a good friend and a good guide in a lot of life's aspects. And now she was gone.

Someone else would be shouting commands to the players on the field. Knowing the mentality for competitiveness prevailing at UHS, it would certainly be someone highly qualified. Probably even someone who once played at the collegiate level in the Big Ten or something similar. From a pure football perspective, it would probably even be a better coach than Coach Larsen.

But there would never *be* another Coach Larsen...

Kalen hung his head and flipped the ball over between his fingers. He was sitting right in the middle of the field, on the fifty yard line.

Thinking.

"Hey..."

He was snapped out of it by Dina's voice and he looked over his shoulder. There was probably no sight in the world he would have welcomed more at that time, and he scrambled to get up.

The squirrel shook her head and motioned for him to remain seated. Then she sat down next to him, pulling her knees up and looking at him. "Your mothers called me...told me what had happened and where you'd gone. They said you could probably use a little company."

"Yeah..." he said and sighed, looking at the football again, "I just can't grasp that she's dead..."

Dina reached out and put her arms around the equine, and Kalen let himself be embraced without complaint. He needed it.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Yeah. I just don't know how to start..."

Dina nodded. "What happened...?"

"The fur I spoke to on the phone was very polite. I don't think he really wanted to tell me all the details but I kept asking. I really had to know..." Kalen started explaining. Then he stopped and took a deep breath.

"You don't have to say it if it's too hard to do..." Dina reassured him.

Kalen shook his head. "I want to, though. She'd hopped on her motorcycle and gone off for her vacation. I think the fur who called was a friend of hers. He said he'd found the phone-numbers for everyone on the team in her saddlebags along with a list of drills she wanted us to do while she was gone. He'd called me first since I was listed as the starting quarterback. He said...she'd been near his home, and due to arrive any minute...when a group of high school kids had torpedoed her in their car. The cops had said she had tried to avoid getting hit but she never stood a chance. The bike had been *totaled*. They found individual bits of it more than two hundred yards away, Dina..."

The squirrel blinked and swallowed, imagining the cataclysmic force of the collision. It wasn't a pretty mental image and she tried to tear herself away from it. "Oh my God..." she whispered.

"She'd been hurled over the car, through the windscreen of the convertible the kids had been driving, along with the gas tank and part of the front of the bike. Those bits had killed some of the kids in the car. Coach Larsen got hit by the same motorcycle parts when she landed. The fur on the phone wouldn't tell me any more details. He just said she died instantly...she never felt a thing."

"Why didn't the car avoid her? I mean..."

"They were drunk, Dina. There were beer-cans littered all over the floor of the car. The bloodwork on the corpses showed they'd been completely blitzed. The survivors were drunk off their tails too. They barely realized what had happened, in fact. I think they were so gone they didn't realize that it wasn't some stupid computer game or something. I don't know. All I know is that she's dead..."

Dina hugged her boyfriend a little closer. A little tighter. "What was her name, by the way? I mean...everyone just called her 'Coach Larsen'. Didn't she have a first name?"

Kalen leaned into the hug and rested against Dina, finding a good deal of comfort in simply being close to her. "We used to take bets on that. Tried to figure it out. We had furs sneaking peeks at paperwork in the principals office...I know Tyler...one of our safeties...once got himself sent to the office just so he could try to whittle Coach Larsen's first name out of Mr. Diazi. He failed and got two detentions instead."

"Mr. Diazi never told *anyone*?" Dina asked, incredulously.

Kalen shook his head. "Nope. She never introduced herself by any other name either. She'd get grossly offended if parents called her 'miss Larsen' for instance. She said her title was 'Coach' and that she expected even the parents to respect the work she put into the team, by using that."

Smiling a little, Dina shook her head. "She really was an oddball, you know that, don't you? I mean that in the best way but I did get to meet her that night at Zig Zag's and James' house, and now you're telling me this?"

Kalen smiled and nodded. "She was. I told her so frequently. She was just...really unique, I think."

Dina fell silent for a while, letting that statement stand by itself. Finally, she took a deep breath and continued. "The fur you spoke to...was he going to call the rest of the team?" she asked.

"Yeah. He said he was going to call the team before calling the school itself. He said he thought it was best if we got told one by one rather than getting it en masse tomorrow at school. You'd think he knew Mr. Diazi's ways of doing things..."

"How do you mean?"

"They're going to expel Steve anyway. Now that Coach Larsen is gone, they don't feel obligated to honor her agreement with him."

"You're *kidding*..." Dina said before she could stop herself.

Kalen shook his head. "I don't think I'm capable of kidding today..."

Dina felt like biting her tongue, but nodded. "I don't blame you. I'm sorry...I shouldn't have used that expression."

"I wonder what will happen now. With Steve...and the team...and everything else."

"You know, Kale...I think this entire summer is going to stay with you for the rest of your life..."

Kalen chuckled and nodded. "That's for sure. How often does one experience all the things we did, over the space of a few months?"

Dina's smile was slightly crooked as she shrugged and got more comfortable with the equine. It was a nice, warm evening. The football field was in pristine condition and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Somewhere in the background, someone was cutting their grass with an electric lawnmower. A few cars drove by, but mostly, it was a very quiet evening, despite this being San Francisco. If the occasion hadn't been so serious, this would've been a wonderful evening and she'd have loved to spend it with Kalen, sitting here on the football field, just chatting.

She still wanted to spend the evening with him, but for different reasons entirely. He needed someone to talk to. Someone apart from his parents. She could relate, in a way. It was difficult to talk about an adult role-model with one's parents, sometimes.

"Not often," she finally answered. "I'd say once in a lifetime...if you're lucky."

Kalen nodded. He'd thought much the same thing himself. He was about to speak up again when he saw two of his team-mates come walking across the endzone. They looked like they too had received the bad news.

He looked at Dina and smiled a little. She kissed his brow and returned the smile. No doubt the entire team would end up gathering. Somehow, it seemed the only fitting thing...

###

Colton sat down. Julia had just brought out some fresh orange juice and across the table, Yohni and Gabrielle were trying to look like they were relaxing. Neither of them were doing a very good job, but Colton didn't hold it against them. He knew what was upsetting them. It wasn't that they felt ill at ease in his home...in fact they were regular guests...but the situation at school was causing them both some serious concern. He had to say he agreed. He was glad the two femmes wanted his opinion on this, since he knew they could make their decisions without asking him, but that would have been quite unlike them. They normally always involved him in important decisions and he was grateful for it. Julia's advice had even been followed once or twice. But as they sat there,

it was obvious to Colton that at least Gabrielle had decided on a course of action already, and quite likely, Yohni backed her up. He wasn't sure what they had decided on, but he would at least voice his opinion.

"Alright, so what is this thing about Kalen possibly switching schools?" Julia asked, trying to break the ice.

Gabrielle started to explain. Colton nodded and listened. He agreed with Kalen's mothers and he was happy for that. He didn't want to disagree with them on something this important. If the school board insisted on expelling Steve Wulf, Kalen would be switching schools, and now that Steve had moved in with Jean and Esteban Lopez, Gabrielle and Yohni had agreed to let Kalen start at whatever school the Lopez-children and Steve got sent to. Again, Colton had to agree. He didn't know Jean or Esteban very well, though he had met them a number of times, obviously, but Jean was an educated, highly intelligent fur and he was certain that whatever school she chose to send her kids to would be quite adequate in every respect. And furthermore, Kalen wouldn't be alone if he started there at the same time as his best friends.

"What about football, though?" Julia asked. "You know how much that means to Kale..."

Again, Colton nodded. This was true, and Julia's question was legitimate even if the answer was obvious. It was something that needed to be addressed. Colton would be very, very upset if he had no way of playing ball once his wounds were healed. However, having just taken one team to a televised, national championship was probably a pretty good way of making sure he'd get to play wherever he went.

"I can't think of many schools without a football program that I'd send Kalen to anyway," Yohni said and shrugged. "UHS isn't the only good High School in the San Fran area. He'll get to play, no doubt about it. But frankly, his education has to come first and I wouldn't want him to get that education at a school where they teach the students that it's alright to renege on a deal under conditions like these. It's extremely immoral and I won't just sit here and let it happen."

Colton nodded and ran a paw through his hair. "He told me about this coach of his once in a while...sounds like she was something else."

Gabrielle tried to keep a straight face without much success. "That's putting it mildly. The thing is, Kalen doesn't realize this, but I know how much she meant to him. She was the first adult he'd ask if he felt he couldn't ask his family...meaning the four of us

and Jean and Esteban. And some things, we all know, you can't talk to your family about."

Snickering, Colton nodded. "I remember how that was..."

"I think we all do," Julia said and nodded. "It's part of growing up and it was good that he had someone like her. Kale is a prodigy...I know you don't like the word, Gabby, but he is. He needs adults to help him cope with that mind of his. It can't always be easy."

Shaking her head, Gabrielle leaned back in her seat and ran her paws over her face in a weary gesture. "It's not the word 'prodigy' as such, Julia...it's the implications of that word. It's the pressure it puts on him. We all know he's brighter than any of us sitting here. We all know he's a natural leader, an athletic super-talent and a straight A-student who will eventually be drowning in scholarship-offers from all kinds of colleges, including probably one or two Ivy League-places...that's not the point. The point is that the word 'prodigy' places the expectation on his shoulders that he must live up to his absolute maximum potential. And all I want for my son is for him to be happy. If he's happy throwing a football around, I don't care if he could've come up with a Nobel Prize in literature or if he could've ended up being the most highly paid surgeon in the United States...I just want him to be *happy*."

Again, Julia nodded. "I think that's very commendable...honestly, Gabby, but he isn't here, and you know me well enough to know I'd never put any kind of pressure on him to pursue any kind of career except the one he wants to pursue himself. I just can't think of another term that describes him."

Yohni nodded and smiled. "Well, for what it's worth, I think he's a prodigy too. And I know Gabby does the same, but we just never use the word around him. I don't think he thinks about himself in those terms either."

Grinning widely, Colton leaned back. "Of course not, he's inherited my deep, natural humility, after all," he said.

A deep, deafening silence fell across the table.

Finally, Gabrielle reached out across the table and mock-slapped Colton across the muzzle. "Bad stallion! No carrot for you!"

Colton dutifully looked absolutely crestfallen, even shooting out his bottom lip in a huge, trembling pout. Julia groaned and rolled her eyes at the sight, trying not to laugh out loud.

Yohni cleared her throat and managed not to giggle. "At least we're all in agreement?"

"We are," Gabrielle said and sat down. "Once Jean calls tomorrow to let us know how the meeting went, we'll know if it even becomes an issue. But I wouldn't put it past Mr. Diaz to be a right, rank ass about this."

"No fair on donkeys, that one..." Yohni commented, dryly. "But I know what you mean."

"I wasn't referring to donkeys but to the gluteus maximus, Yohni," Gabrielle said and sipped from her glass of cold orange juice, finally remembering it was there.

Colton looked confused. "The whateus huhximus?" he asked.

"Your backside, Love," Julia chuckled. "The muscles on which you sit."

"I sit on a chair!" Colton stated, fervently, nodding and putting his paws behind his neck in a smug look of infinite and complete superiority on his face.

His wife reached out and mock-slapped him across the neck. "There goes your sugar-lump ration too!" she said.

Colton returned to looking crestfallen...