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II - "Or maybe it does ..."

The apartment looked exactly like when Steve left it. Since he lived alone most of the time, only interspersed during school holidays when Nadia would be there or when they'd go to visit family together, he had long since come to the conclusion that a genuine pile of mess was conducive to his thought process.

So his apartment looked like most apartments of single males under the age of 30.

When Nadia was due to arrive, he'd be a frenzied ball of energy, storming around cleaning everything, and despite that, Nadia would still groan when she saw the place. It was almost a ritual by now and he was pretty sure she did it mostly to tease him.

He'd be playing again the coming weekend, and it would probably do him a lot of good. It would give him a way of releasing some of his frustration if nothing else. He looked at the helmet on the table and rubbed his face. It wasn't his game helmet or even the one he used during practice. All his gear was in the care of the equipment's manager at the team facilities. This one was the helmet he'd worn last year. He'd kept it as a memento.

Nadia had joked that it would make a good alternative Jack'o Lantern for Halloween.

Steve had dutifully played along and whimpered as he cradled his helmet.

"There there ... she didn't mean it," he'd said and patted it gently.

Then he had chased after a giggling Nadia, all through the apartment, holding his helmet out in front of himself, pretending it was barking angrily at her.

The phone rang and he picked it up. It was his head coach, wanting to know if he'd made it back alright and if he was fit to practice the next day.

It was a nice gesture but there was really no choice whether he was ready or not. As it was ... he felt about as ready as he'd ever get. So he answered and hung up.

Something to eat would be good but his fridge was empty. He could ... and should ... fill it up, he knew, but he really couldn't be bothered with it at that moment. Instead, he settled for a glass of cold water from the faucet.

He looked at the glass for a moment after refilling it. The clear liquid inside sloshed around some.

Water was so different depending on where one lived. The water coming out of his own faucet was just right. It tasted nice without leaving the tongue wondering where the calcium was. The water at his pare ...

He sighed.

The water at his *father's* house basically tasted of bug-all whatsoever and one might as well stick one's tongue out the window.

The phone rang again.

At first he thought it was the coach again. But picking it up, he realized it wasn't.

"Hi Kale. How are you doing?" he asked after listening to the introduction from the other end of the line.

He listened and nodded. And his mind started churning.

###

Vishalya bowed before the statue of Ganesha and said her prayers quietly. Then she placed a small offering of saffron and rice on one of the tables arranged for it, before heading outside. It didn't take long, but she felt better for it nonetheless. The trip to the United States had been quite an experience but it was still a bit confusing when she looked back at it.

Of course, coming back home wasn't exactly a dance on rose petals either.

She nodded to her brother to let him know she was ready to leave. Yashvir adjusted his tie and nodded back to her. They were barely on talking terms as it was. They hadn't been for years and while Vishalya showed her brother the respect and deference that he was due as the heir in the family, the fact that their father had chosen her to accompany him to the United States had only soured things further.

So no words were exchanged as they headed to the car.

Frankly, these moments in the temple were some of the most peaceful that Vishalya knew of and she enjoyed them as such. She didn't agree with her brother on a lot of issues these days and it was difficult enough to maintain civility around the dinner table when those issues came up. As such, she found silence the wiser and more prudent course of action.

They got into the car and drove off. Vishalya looked out the window and tried to think of something else than her rotten relationship to her brother.

For some reason, her thoughts kept revolving to the Governor's mansion in Florida and Kalen's facial expression when she helped him pick up the remains of his shattered glass.

It was a pleasant memory ... and it made her smile.

###

Kalen opened the door to the restaurant and entered. Almost instantly, he had three waiters bowing and scraping while showing him to a table and he was in a good mood to turn around and run out, arms flailing in panic.

Becoming the hero of Jacksonville was all well and good but this was ridiculous!

His stomach told him that running out, arms flailing in panic was an unacceptable proposition, however. It was empty and demanded food.

Now!

Kalen grumbled something about his stomach and who was really in charge, but it made no difference. A loud growl from his midsection informed him that further resistance was futile.

So he obeyed and sat down, picking up the menu.

It wasn't hard to choose. The strangest thing was that he'd come to this restaurant regularly since moving to Jacksonville. It was, in fact, one of his favorite places. A small

place with good food and nice waiters. Now they treated him like royalty and all he really wanted was for them to stop doing so and go back to how things had been a few weeks ago.

"Give me the usual," he said to the waitress waiting by his table. He tried to smile as he gave her the menu, too. "And I mean that in every way, by the way. For goodness sake, I toss a football around. I didn't create lasting peace on Earth."

The waitress blushed a little. "Yes Mr. Twain-Ryder. Sorry ... it's just ..."

"I know. I'm not angry or anything. It just feels weird when even the staff at my favorite restaurant starts treating me like I'm the eighth wonder of the world."

"I guess I can see what you mean, sir. I'll tell the others."

Kalen smiled and leaned back in his seat. A few moments later, the waitress came back with a glass of ice-water. Kalen rarely drank anything else. He did drink alcohol but only rarely since it really wasn't good for him. Besides, because he drank so rarely, he easily got drunk despite being a physically impressive specimen ... and being drunk meant making idiotic mistakes and saying stupid things.

His father had once told him that no matter how much one wanted to, one could never un-say something once it had been said. So Kalen had decided against drinking. Even if he had liked drinking ... which he really didn't ... he absolutely hated hangovers, and that, in his opinion, was the only reason he'd ever need not to get drunk. A glass of wine or champagne when it was called for was fine. A 500 horsepower power-binge, complete with compromising photos in the morning papers the following day wasn't.

His phone rang and he sighed as he picked it up. It was the regular call to attend church on Sunday that the club sent out to all its players every week. Kalen never did, and he deleted the message and shrugged. It was one of those few areas where he didn't comply with the wishes of the club. Naturally, going to church was not mandatory ... but it was considered good form to do so, and it was seen as an important community aspect of player activities. Kalen thought he could "be there" for the community in hundreds of other ways than by displaying his poor singing-voice every Sunday. Besides, he wasn't sure how he felt about the whole faith-thing anyway.

The waitress came back with a fresh salad and Kalen happily dug in.

It had been a while since he had been here, but they made some of the best salads in all of Jacksonville and Kalen was, as most equines, not much of a carnivore.

He only knew of one who had deviated from that in fact, and she had been dead for ... too many years.

Sighing at the thought, Kalen looked at his salad and prodded a slice of tomato.

It squelched reproachfully ...

He quickly tried to put his train of thought onto a different set of tracks. The last time he'd visited a restaurant had been when he'd taken Mr. Singh and his daughter out to dinner. Or rather ... Mr. Singh had been the one inviting, but Kalen had been the one recommending the restaurant.

It had been a fantastic evening. Even if he had needed to order his food a little less hot than how Mr. Singh and Vishalya had preferred it, it had been a great experience. Not only had the food been very nice, but the company had been outstanding.

Mr. Singh was both intelligent and polite, and to Kalen's surprise, he had been quite interested in hearing about Kalen's choice of education. It had quickly dawned on him that since Mr. Singh was Hindu, he really hadn't expected to find Americans who knew anything about his religion, and when Kalen had mentioned Draupadi ... indisputably the most beautiful, intelligent and strong female figure in the Hindu holy text called the Mahabharata ... the first time they even met, he had been taken totally aback.

Kalen had only been pleased to explain ... but he had to admit to himself, the real reason why he enjoyed the evening so much had been Vishalya.

He realized he had stopped his fork halfway to his mouth at the memory and, blushing slightly, he resumed eating. But he couldn't quite shake that memory.

The thing was ... he wanted to see her again.

He'd tried to push it from his thoughts. After all, she was now back in India, and he was in Florida and there was little or no chance they'd ever meet again, but he wasn't content to simply let that be the end of it.

He quite simply wanted to see her again.

In fact, he wanted to see her again many times. Not just once or twice.

He grinned crookedly and looked at his salad, now half-eaten. His mind wasn't sprouting bad poetry. That meant this was ... different. He wasn't sure *how* it was different but it *was*.

Fortunately, he knew just who to talk to about it.

###

Gabrielle kicked up her hooves and picked up her mug. The Castro was beautiful this time of year. It was late summer with fall slowly approaching, and the weather was almost perfect. Not so hot one couldn't bear staying outside and not so dry one couldn't breathe.

She looked at the ice-tea in her mug and grinned. Yohni would have her hide if she knew. The mongoose would insist that ice tea belonged in tall glasses, preferably combined with lots of ice cubes, but Gabrielle wasn't bothered. It tasted the same either way and Yohni wasn't home anyway.

They still lived in the Castro ... although they had moved since first arriving in the area. Originally, they had set up shop in a two-story building with Yohni's store on the ground floor and private residence upstairs but as the shop became a huge hit, they had realized they needed more space. When Kalen moved away from home, they had hired a bunch of furs to knock down walls and fix the staircase, and they had expanded the store upstairs while finding a nice condo for the two of them further down the road.

Gabrielle was now sitting outside, looking down onto the street, watching furs running around like maniacs, trying to put up decorations for the Pride Parade.

Those weren't the same as when she was young, and she was thankful for it. Back then, they had been protests as much as celebrations of life and an excuse to have fun. Protests against bigotry and protests to call for civil rights ... *equal* rights ... for the GLBT-community. Now those rights had been secured, and contrary to the beliefs of opponents back then, society had in fact not collapsed. And straight furs still got married and still had children the old-fashioned way. Now everyone simply enjoyed the same civil rights.

The parades were no longer needed as platforms for protests, but no one saw the need to get rid of a good excuse for an epic party.

So now the parades were simply celebrations of life and happiness.

Gabrielle liked to watch them, but she hadn't taken part in them for many years. She had designed a few costumes that some of the participants had used in the past though. These days, she didn't design as much as she used to. It wasn't that she didn't want to, but there was no time with her new job. She still came up with a new design now and again and Ryder Attitude Wear still existed, but mostly, she sold reprints of older designs. Some of them were as popular now as when they had been created.

Regardless of that, her work now was more important. Much as she liked coming up with in-your-face statements for tops and new design ideas for skirts and pants, she might as well use those in-your-face statements in politics.

More than one of her opponents had felt the sting of her wit over the years.

Her mother had been proud of her when she entered politics, and Gabrielle couldn't help feeling slightly vindicated. If a former porn-star could make it to the San Francisco City Council for the Castro district, then the last of her father's bias and bigotry had been irrevocably crushed beneath her success.

It had been a good feeling. She was facing reelection and the polls were overwhelmingly in her favor, but she would have to go on the campaign trail soon. At least the campaign trail didn't span the entire state ... just the Castro and a number of debates in other parts of the city.

Jean had been happy when she got elected. In private, she'd pulled Gabrielle aside, taken her paws and gently brushed aside the fur at her wrists.

"I had to save you that night. I knew you'd end up doing something significant," she had said, looking at the old, almost faded scars beneath Gabrielle's fur.

At the time, it had floored her. Jean had a way of doing that to those she met.

She sipped her ice tea and leaned back. She could call the party office tomorrow. Today, she didn't want to do anything more complicated than resting her hooves and drinking ice tea.

###

"Zig Zag speaking."

The tiger-striped, black and white skunk signed a piece of paper and put down her pen, as she listened to the introduction on the other end of the line.

Then she smiled widely.

"Kalen! It's great to hear from you. Fantastic game you had this Sunday. Whaddya mean if I watched it?? You're family, kiddo. Of course I watched it. James was bouncing in his seat through the entire game, too!"

She smiled and nodded to herself as Kalen said something. "Oh, I think our television screen can take a popcorn-bombardment. That's about the extent of the damage done. Anyway, how are you doing? It's good to hear from you again."

Again Kalen said something and Zig Zag's face went serious. She got out of her chair and headed to the window, looking out. She wasn't as young as she had once been but business was booming for her. Her production company was a big player these days. Even though there were still a few mutterings about ZZ Studios continuing to produce triple X-rated movies. That would never cease, though. The mutterings *or* ZZ Studios.

It was where it had all started and it was the last thing she'd close down if all else went belly-up for her.

"I still can't get to grips with it either. It's surreal ... I always expected her to outlive the lot of us, even though she told me her medicine would pretty much guarantee that didn't happen," she said and sighed. "I know Steve's team gave him some time off to spend with the family at least, but Esteban is a bloody mess. I spoke to him yesterday. He's monosyllabic and his mind goes wandering halfway through words."

Again Kalen spoke. This time for some time and Zig Zag nodded seriously. Down below, someone had just arrived. Someone in a fancy sports-car. Zig Zag narrowed her eyes and looked closer. It wasn't someone she couldn't keep waiting for a while. Right now, she felt like talking to Kalen and movie-stars and -starlet's just had to learn that the world didn't always revolve around them anyway.

She smiled. Then she nodded. Putting one paw to her hip and craning her head a little, even though Kalen couldn't see it, she practically purred into the telephone as she answered the equine.

"I see. And I assume we're talking about this young female that your mother told me about then? From India? She said you had shown her a picture and basically gushed over her for two hours straight. She also said you hadn't started getting all poetic on her which, she said, pretty much stunned her."

Kalen mumbled something rather incoherent on the other end of the line and Zig Zag grinned widely.

"It's simple, Kale. It always is when it comes to love, even though you males like to complicate things needlessly. You like her. A lot. In fact, I'm prepared to guess you're probably head over hooves in love with her. Now you have to tell her that. Otherwise, nothing more will ever come of this and you'll end up sitting there, ten years down the

line wondering why you never got anywhere with her. And don't start the "but what if she doesn't like *me*?"-routine. If she doesn't, then it won't kill you. And at least you'll have certainty. You can just politely excuse yourself and leave. The fact of the matter remains that you need to tell her," she explained, tongue in cheek, knowing full well how Kalen would react.

Something was said on the other end and Zig Zag facepawed. "You're not your uncle ... and he practically patented the "pitiful whine". You might as well give up. You know I'm right," she said and smirked. "Now go tell her or I'll call your mom and ask *her* to do it for you!"

The next whine was loud enough that Zig Zag had to remove the phone from her ear but she still grinned. Kalen knew she was right ... and she knew that he knew. Besides, he wouldn't have called her if he hadn't wanted to be told the truth. And as expected, a few mopes and groans later, he conceded the point.

"Good. So far so good. The next thing to consider is that you're having a breakout season and she's in India. You can't go flying off to find her until the season is over. You're contractually obligated. No ... stop complaining and listen to me. To me, it sounds like you've been hit very, very badly and that's a good thing. But you've got a contract to think of. Not the one you've got now, but next year. A career, Kalen! And I'd be quite disappointed in you if you didn't do your damndest to land yourself in a sweet spot with a huge contract. So ... you play the season to its conclusion. And if by season's end, you still want to go find her and if you still feel the same way, then you know it's for real. But until then, you play your heart out because all things considered, I'm sure you'd rather go find her riding on a wave of success than the opposite," Zig Zag said and waited while Kalen digested that.

Then she nodded and smiled.

"That's the spirit," she said. "Okay, I've got someone waiting outside for a meeting, but do keep me posted okay? Good grief, you'd think I was running a dating agency ..."

She hung up and looked at the phone for a while, trying to wipe the grin off her face. She already knew that Kalen would be heading to India at the end of the season. In fact, she was willing to put good money on it.

Then she turned around and headed to the door and opened it. Outside, one of Hollywood's up-and-coming stars was waiting, fuming with the indignity of being kept on hold like that. Zig Zag simply put on her most business-like smile and stood aside to let the fur into the office.

"I do apologize, but I had an urgent call of great importance. I'm sure you understand," she said ... and snickered slightly behind her guest's back.

###

Kalen hung up and sat down. He was sitting by one of the artificial ponds in one of Jacksonville's parks. A few ducks were waddling around nearby, occasionally breaking into a rather sad sprint to be the first to reach some breadcrumbs dropped by one or more of the kids nearby.

He saw a few Jacksonville jerseys on nearby kids or parents. Most of them, unsurprisingly, carried the name of Drexler on the back. Roland had been a star for years. A star with an ego too big even for his talent, and it hadn't diminished even though the talent had.

So far, no one seemed to pay him much heed. He was grateful for that ... very much so in fact. What he needed was peace and quiet, and he needed fresh air. At the same time. Going for a walk in the park had seemed like the answer. He was wearing a pair of jeans and a sleeveless muscle-shirt and apart from the fact he was six feet four inches tall and trained nearly to the peak of physical perfection, he could have been any other black-furred equine out there. Not that there were that many equines to begin with but ... still.

He hoped it was anonymity at least, although he knew it was probably a forlorn hope by now. His face had been all over the news since that big win. Some of the photos had been pretty good, too. Some of them had been regular hero-shots in fact.

He preferred those to the mug-shots that the newspapers usually used, anyway. He knew it was just his imagination, but he was sure he squinted in the official team-photo.

The ducks ran past him, quacking loudly as they chased down another bready morsel and he grinned. There was something inherently humorous about the way they moved. A moment later they had vanished from his field of vision and he looked back out over the water. The pond was calm and a few kids had put boats out, steering them around with their remote controls.

He picked up a pebble and turned it over in his paw, before throwing it into the shallow end of the pool near his hooves.

The conversation with Zig Zag had helped clear his mind. The skunk was right ... he needed to act on his feelings or it would just gnaw away at him for ages. But she was also right in saying he couldn't suddenly take off for India in the middle of the season.

He'd have to wait until the season was over. But even then, India was very far away and so utterly different from the United States.

If nothing else, it would be an adventure. And since he wouldn't be bound by a contract to a ballclub at the time, he could go and find Vishalya, while his agent looked for an interested organization, wanting to hire him.

It all depended on how well he did this season, though. The trouble was, though, that the team he played for wasn't all that good. Roland Drexler's lack of precision was hardly the only problem Jacksonville faced on the pitch. Defensively, they were in the bottom of the pile both against the run and the pass. The shutout against the defending Super Bowl Champions had been all the more surprising for that.

Teams that scored lots and lots of points only won if they kept the opponent from scoring even more, and Jacksonville's opponents usually put up big numbers.

Kalen picked up another pebble and looked at it. All he could do was his best. He could try to be a leader and live up to what Coach Larsen had told him years ago.

That he was a leader both off the field and on it.

"Excuse me ... sir?" a voice said next to him and he looked up. Two young canids were looking at him, wide-eyed and slightly awe-struck. They looked like brother and sister.

"Sure, what can I do for you?" he answered and smiled.

"Wow! It really *is* him!" the female said and nearly hid behind her brother, giggling. "Oh my God, I'm so telling the others at school tomorrow!"

Kalen chuckled and dropped the pebble, brushing his paws off against one another and getting up. The siblings couldn't be more than eleven years old. They both wore rucksacks and Kalen figured they were probably on their way to school. In the background, he could see someone who was probably their parents, looking a little hesitant ... yet hopeful. He nodded politely towards the adults and crouched in front of the kids.

"Tell them what? That you met a football-player? Can't be that big a deal, can it?" he asked.

The young male nodded eagerly. "Oh it is, Mr. Twain-Ryder! Our dad's been sayin' you should be the starter ever since the team drafted you. He said you were awesome in

college and now you're awesome in the NFL! Please sir, pleeeeeease can we have your autograph?"

"Of course. Do you have a pen or and something to write on?"

"Yessir! Right here sir!"

Kalen took the felt marker he was presented with and the rucksack and wrote his name and a small greeting on it. Then he did the same for the young girl when she held out her bag for him too. Then he ruffled the kids' hair and walked towards the parents, extending a paw to the father.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, sir. I appreciate it," he said. "Nice kids you have."

The father of the children opened and closed his mouth a few times, then hurriedly thanked Kalen and shook his paw. The equine grinned slightly and looked at the kids with a wink.

"Stay in school you two, y'hear?" he said and waved as he headed off, sticking his paws in his pocket.

It was going to be a good day.

###

It was blistering hot and Vishalya was in no mood to be outside. The fact that Yashvir was hosting an afternoon party for his friends only added to that. She did not agree with her brother's views, nor did her mother, but her father was indifferent about it, and Yashvir took full advantage of it.

He was active in the BJP ... a party with a long history of borderline religious extremism. Sometimes it even crossed that border. The BJP wanted India turned into a Hindu nation and woe betide anyone who disagreed. The problem, as Vishalya saw it, was that while the vast majority of the Indians were Hindu, there were almost a hundred and sixty million Muslims in the country as well, not to mention a fifty five million Christians, thirty four million Sikhs and twelve million Buddhists. On top of that came various Jainists, Vedics, Zoroastrians and a wide variety of other faiths each with several hundred thousand or a few million adherents. The more radical BJP members ranted about throwing out everyone who wasn't Hindu. The less extreme members ... to which Yashvir belonged ... simply spoke of taking away certain civil rights, such as the right to vote, for any non-Hindu.

He also favored a two- or three-tiered citizenship, where only Hindus could have full citizenship, which, apart from giving them exclusive rights to vote, meant their testimony in court would hold far more weight than testimonies given by non-Hindus. There would be other differences too. For instance, in Yashvir's perfect world, only Hindus could ever hold any level of public office in India. From Supreme Court Judges all the way down to the lowliest clerk in some Gods-forsaken postal-office in Jaipoor, only Hindus would be able to hold any kind of position of authority. All policefurs would be Hindu ... the officers of the army would be exclusively Hindu and preferably, if Yashvir had it his way, non-Hindus wouldn't even be eligible for non-commissioned officer ranks ...

Vishalya dreaded what that particular limitation would make the Sikhs say. They had literally centuries of traditions of making up the backbone of some of the most elite formations in the Indian army after all.

Sighing, Vishalya tried to think of something else. She was true to her beliefs and she visited the temples every week, particularly the nearby temples to Ganesha and Krishna, but she failed to see the logic in alienating huge portions of the population because they chose to believe in something else than the majority. Even if it had made sense religiously ... which it didn't ... she knew it would wreck the economy of India possibly for good to segregate the country.

On a more basic level, it was simply wrong.

But you couldn't tell Yashvir that. He wouldn't listen to rational arguments.

Frankly, Vishalya found herself disgusted with her brother more often than not. She had told him so to his face on two occasions. Both times they were alone. She knew better than to dishonor him in front of someone else, but that didn't mean she couldn't tell him what an idiot she thought he was when they were alone.

Consequently, they were not on talking terms.

Fortunately, the house was large enough that they could avoid one another most of the times. Except at meal-times, and even then, Yashvir was often out of the house.

She left the room and headed down the hallway towards the staircase. If she was lucky, she might sneak something to eat out of the kitchen without Yashvir or anyone from his party noticing.

It just annoyed her having to move around like a thief in the night, in her own home.