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V – Grey Clouds

Guy opened the file cover in front of him, reaching out for his coffee-mug. A single lamp was lit, next to the table, and he was in desperate need of sleep. It was four thirty in the morning, and he hadn't been to bed yet.

There was a connection somewhere, he knew it ... he just had to find it.

He pulled a pad of paper towards himself and jotted down the name "Jason F. Hartwood" and circled it. Then he tapped the pencil against the paper several times, sighing as he tried to think what to make of it all. Finally, he tore the page off and started over, this time writing the words "Compromising information" and circling that. Then he wrote the name once more, but this time off to the side, circling that as well. The two were connected, but it was unlikely that Mr. Hartwood had the information directly from the source.

In fact, since Gabrielle's father had died many years before, that was completely impossible as far as the jaguar was concerned. He picked up a print-out of the notes Gabrielle had sent him, detailing all that she knew about her father's financial records. It wasn't much, but it was good information. The IRS was extremely unlikely to have leaked the documents Jason Hartwood had used, and that left only one fur.

The accountant.

Guy wrote that down on the notepad and circled it as well. So now he had three circles. The information, the accountant and Jason Hartwood. How the three were connected, however, he just couldn't see.

Had the feline actually gone looking for the information? That would normally be the logical conclusion, but there was something about that which just didn't ring true.

First of all, Jason Hartwood had an absolutely rock solid reputation as a fur who played fair and by the book. But more importantly than that, Gabrielle had been absolutely open about her family's history in crime. She had taken a huge risk on that when she ran for office, but her honesty had paid off. Furs liked to think there was still such a thing as an honest politician, and Gabrielle was as close to that ideal as anyone Guy had ever met or worked for. Ever politician had to compromise from time to time ... it was a part of the game ... but she at least played with her cards laid down on the table, and no one had ever found anything to fault her for in relation to her father's criminal activities.

Until now, that was.

But because of that honesty, and because both former federal agents had vouched for her innocence as part of her last campaign, Guy just didn't see the notoriously decent and upstanding Mr. Hartwood deliberately digging for dirt in Gabrielle's past.

Which meant someone probably gave him the information ... but who could have done so? The accountant was serving a veeery long sentence at Colorado State Penitentiary and nothing indicated that Jason Hartwood had gone to visit him.

And since the accountant obviously didn't have the complete criminal records of the Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg criminal syndicate with him in his jail-cell, that excluded the possibility that he had mailed the document to Mr. Hartwood on his own initiative.

Guy groaned and put the pencil down before putting his head in his paws. The file in front of him gave him almost nothing to go on. Since High School, Jason Hartwood had been politically active, and he had *never* before been known to strike a low blow.

It was infuriating ... but the jaguar knew he just had to keep looking.

Getting up, he shook his head and shuffled towards the couch. He'd get a few hours of sleep before trying again, though. He needed it ... and if he didn't sleep, he might miss an important detail. And that would be inexcusable.

###

Gabrielle adjusted her jacket and opened the door to the meeting room. She hadn't slept much and she had needed to literally force her way through a crowd of journalists waiting outside, simply to get in. Her mood reflected this, and she was gritting her back teeth in irritation. She had no choice but to attend this council meeting, but she wasn't going to take any kind of grievance from anyone.

So she nodded to her peers and found her seat, sitting down.

Across from her, an elderly canid glared at her at length. He represented South Beach and Gabrielle knew him to have a sense of humor to rival that of Attila the Hun.

On a good day.

If the sun was shining.

And if someone had just bombed the Castro.

Maybe.

She still smiled politely to the old-timer and apologized to everyone for her tardiness.

"Well, I suppose one can't expect you to turn up on time or even properly dressed for a council meeting, Mrs. Ryder," the canid said. He had a voice like someone chewing sand.

"Excuse me?" Gabrielle said, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

"Not only are you in trouble with the law ... and if it was up to me, you'd be suspended until that had been properly investigated ... but wearing a *T-shirt* to a council meeting? And what does that *mean* anyway?"

Gabrielle looked down herself. Her jacket was left open and frankly she thought she was dressed reasonably well. It wasn't exactly the great unveiling of next year's budget.

Shrugging, she looked at the canid, flicking her hair back and adding her most distinct English accent to her voice as she spoke. "Dear me, old chap, I didn't know there was a *dress code*, for something this informal. But for your information, it says "A pair of big, blue tits". I would've worn another, but my "Swallow"-top is dirty. But one bird is as good as the next one, eh?"

The canid looked like someone had just spoken to him in a foreign language. He did seem to realize he'd been made fun of, and scoffed dejectedly at the equine. The rest of the furs around the table snickered more or less openly.

"Oh and for the record, I'm not in trouble with the law. I've been accused of something I haven't done, but the police are not involved," Gabrielle said. "There are no grounds for a suspension, but if there was, I'd take myself off the council until my name was cleared," Gabrielle said, the accent leaving her voice only to be replaced by a hard, determined edge. "In fact, I would like to know if there are others here who have a problem with my presence!"

Two other furs tentatively raised their paws and Gabrielle nodded.

Then, she did absolutely nothing.

She simply ignored them.

And the meeting got underway.

###

Vishalya wanted to talk to Kalen and tell him the horrible news of her brother's plans for her, but he wasn't answering his phone. She wasn't worried as such, since he would often leave it off, especially while at practice ... which, after all, was twice a day ... and he also tended to have it turned off while he slept. He didn't feel like having fans or reporters calling him at three thirty in the morning, going "Oh, I'm so glad I caught you at home!", and frankly, she understood him. Especially since his recent success on the playing field. He had already told her all about that, and she secretly kept up to speed with his exploits on the Internet anyway. Secretly, because her brother disapproved so absolutely about her contact with her American friend.

Now that disapproval would get even worse.

Sighing, she adjusted her sari over her shoulder and went out the back door, sneaking around the back of the house. She just needed to get out for a little while. Look around in one of the market-places or something. Anything. Being at home was stifling and she could almost smell her brother, everywhere she went. It was becoming unbearable, and she wanted to escape for just a short while, at least. She wanted to get out of the house for just a couple of hours.

That wasn't entirely true, and she knew it. She wanted to get out of the house, but not just for a few hours. Not with what had just happened.

"Vishalya?"

Her mother's voice stopped her dead in her tracks. Feeling her shoulders slump, she slowly turned around and put her palms together, bowing lightly to her mother.

"Where are you going?" the older equine asked. She was seated on a bench in the garden. One rarely used and out of the way, between three fruit-trees. Nearby flowerbeds made that place fragrant in summertime. It was one of Vishalya's favorite spots in the entire garden, but no one else seemed to use it much for some reason. But her mother was undeniable there now.

"Just out shopping," Vishalya answered, truthfully. It wasn't like she was running away that very instant.

Her mother nodded. "Come ... sit with me a little while," she said.

Vishalya could hear a certain weariness in her mother's voice. One she hadn't heard before. She loved her mother ... and her father ... very dearly, and she didn't like them to be upset in any way. But at the same time, they hadn't stood up for her against Yashvir and his plans to marry her off and that had hurt her deeply. Still, she couldn't help but feel sorry for her mother and she walked towards her and took a seat on the bench.

"Yes Mother," she said, quietly.

"I know what you're feeling right now," her mother said, quietly. She wasn't looking at her daughter, but rather staring into the distance in a dreamy kind of way.

Vishalya sighed. That was such a cliché and she was surprised to hear her mother use it. "Do you really?" she asked, rather more bitterly than intended.

"I do actually. I didn't choose to marry your father either," was the unexpected answer.

"But I thought ... " Vishalya began, looking rather taken aback.

Her mother smiled a crooked little smile. "We love each other, but it wasn't a marriage we chose. It was chosen for us. Love came later. It took work. But it's been a wonderful life with him ... you should know that. The Gods have blessed our house with many riches ... none greater than our children. But I remember the day my father called me in and said to me: "Talikka, I have picked your husband for you". I thought my world would end right there. I really thought ... I'd never be happy."

She was still staring into the distance, and Vishalya realized her mother was remembering that day while she spoke. She also knew her mother was trying to comfort her and reassure her, but it wasn't working as intended.

"Mother ... may I be blunt for a moment?" she asked.

Talikha seemed to come back from her trip down Memory Lane and nodded to her daughter. "Of course. I'd prefer it if you were, actually."

"You and father were married over thirty years ago. India was much different then than today ... in fact the whole world was a vastly different place. What Yashvir is doing is not just wrong, mother, and you know that. It's downright illegal. Forced marriages are a thing of the past in India. It's on par with customs like Sati. It's cruel, antiquated and vile in every way. That you and father's marriage worked out so well doesn't disprove that. It's simply a stroke of good fortune and a true blessing from Parvati. One I am happy for, but it doesn't mean that the practice is right or justified. I want to pick my own husband. Out of love, Mother. I won't be used as a tool by Yashvir to further his own agenda! I have to live out my entire life with the consequences. He doesn't have to deal with it. All he needs to do is reap the benefits!"

The look on Talikha's face at the mention of the ancient, long-outlawed practice of Sati was one of absolute horror. "*Vishalya!*" she burst out, "Sati is an entirely different matter! Self-immolation ... how can you even *think* to compare that to what Yashvir is suggesting?"

"Because it stems from the same rotten kind of thinking, Mother!" Vishalya answered, irritably. "Because both forced marriage and widow-burning is based on the concept that females have no rights except those granted to them by their husbands, and we have come too far to allow that to take hold again. We are an enlightened family. We should be on the forefront of the fight against that kind of barbarity!"

For a moment, it looked like Talikha would argue further. But then ... slowly ... she simply nodded. A tiny smile could be seen at the corner of her mouth and she reached up and gently stroked her daughter's mane. "You've always been spirited. And intelligent. I am sorry about all this. But I can't change it ... I don't have that kind of influence over Yashvir. He won't accept my advice anymore."

"I could leave," Vishalya said, quietly. "You know ... pack my things and simply leave the household."

"That would break your father's heart, but I can't say I don't understand your reasoning," her mother answered, dropping her paw again. "But what you heard about our situation is also true. We're on the verge of bankruptcy. Your marriage might very well be what saves the family from ruin. I'm not saying that should be what decides whether you stay or not, but at least you should know that it is true ..."

Vishalya fell quiet for a while. Her mother wasn't trying to force her or cajole her, but her not-so-subtle reminder was unwelcome nonetheless. She didn't want to say anything she'd regret, so instead, she got up and ran a paw through her mane, looking skywards. Birds sang above her in the trees, but grey clouds were rolling in on the horizon. It would most likely rain within a couple of hours.

"I didn't doubt it the first time I heard it, Mother," she said and sighed again. "But I find it difficult to cope with. The trip to the United States was a great success, and Father is a great businessfur. He'd get the family back on its hooves in due time. Even if that meant we'd have to cut back a little here and there and yes, possibly sell some assets to cover some of our losses."

"Vishalya ... if we don't find a way to cover up some major gaps in the family finances within six months, we're finished. We won't be able to fulfill the American contracts."

"And because of that, I must throw away my right to choose?" Vishalya asked, angrily.

Her mother hung her head. "I'm on your side ... but I can't sit by and simply ignore the facts either," she said, quietly. "If I asked you ... nicely ... would you at least meet this fur Yashvir has in mind and ... "

"And *what*?"

"And just see if you get along? Who knows ... he might be a fantastic prospect?"

Vishalya narrowed her eyes. "I'll meet him. I can't, in good faith, deny you that. But I already know a fantastic prospect, Mother. Whether you like it or not!"

She didn't leave Talikha a chance to answer as she adjusted her sari over her shoulder again and strode away. If she hurried, she might still have time to do a little window-shopping and think of something else.

###

Getting out of the shower, Kalen was vigorously trying to dry his mane with a big, fluffy towel. The last practice of the day was well over with, and he was in a good mood. He wanted to go home and call Vishalya and simply spend an hour chatting with her.

It had been too long since he had time to do that, and he didn't want to give Vishalya the impression that he couldn't find time to talk to her.

Joe nodded to him and smiled as he left, and Kalen found himself as one of the last players to get out of the shower and getting ready to leave. It was always like that. He liked standing under the hot water, letting it relax sore muscles and make him slightly sleepy, and he always took more time than most furs to get himself soaped up. Equine fur didn't lend itself terribly well to fur conditioner ... at least his didn't, and he would probably look rather silly and fluffy if he overdid it. So he used plenty of soap instead.

He got dressed and left, heading to the parking lot to get into his car. He was almost there when a fur with a microphone came running towards him. It took him slightly aback. Usually, reporters wouldn't bother the team after a simple training session, unless some major news had just broken about the team. As far as Kalen knew, nothing of the sort had happened and he turned towards the approaching fur and nodded, politely.

"Slow down, Sir, or you might have a heartattack," he grinned.

The reporter was a rather heavy-set feline and he heaved for breath as he slowed down. "Thank ... you ... Mr. Twain ... Ryder ..." he huffed and put his paws on his knees for a moment.

"You know, you could've just called out to me. I'd have waited," Kalen offered. "Are you alright?"

The feline nodded and managed to get himself upright. "I'm ... I'm okay. Thank you for waiting, Mr. Twain-Ryder."

The equine grinned again. "No problem. Dude, you look like you could use a sit-down," he said and reached out, steadying the reporter. He had never seen the feline before. "Who are you, if I may ask?"

"Tom Birman," the feline answered. "NBC ... here ... my press card."

Kalen took the offered card and looked at it and nodded. "Fair enough. So, what can I do for you? It's just an ordinary practice session today."

"I know, but I'm not here because of you, Mr. Twain-Ryder. I'm here because of your mother and the situation surrounding her. And please, before you get angry, run off or tell me you have no comments, please let me explain why I'm here in the first place?"

Kalen had already taken half a step backwards and had made to turn around and leave, but he nodded, slowly. "Alright. I can do that, I suppose. Why are you here then?"

"Because Fox News is going to run it on all their California stations, and they are going to try to turn this into a real scandal. They want to see your mother buried so deep she'll never come back up again, Sir ... and I'm interested in the other side of the story."

"So you're doing this out of the goodness of your heart, to help my mother escape the evil clutches of Fox News, is that it?" Kalen asked, incredulously.

Tom Birman shook his head with a crooked smile. "Mr. Twain-Ryder, you have a reputation for being a highly intelligent fur, so I'm not going to insult you by saying something like that. I do this because it's a good story. But my interest is genuine enough, and I do want to tell the story as it's seen from your family's perspective. Your mother doesn't return calls. All I get is a standard phrase that she'll release a press statement soon. But there really isn't much time to wait."

"Why is that?"

"Since when has Fox News waited until they had all the facts before running a story, Mr. Twain-Ryder?"

"Point. Alright then ... I'll answer your questions, but please remember I don't know much about it, and that I'm naturally going to be heavily biased here."

"That's fine with me. Okay ... if you could come this way, I've got a van and a camera crew waiting around the corner."

Kalen nodded and followed. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time, and this was not related to the team, and consequently, he was well within his rights to speak to the press about it. Even if someone on the top floor complained, he would maintain he was within his rights to defend his family at any time, regardless of what the team had to say about it.

Around the corner, an NBC-van was waiting, just as Tom Birman had said it would. The feline nodded to two furs, one with a camera and one inside the van, operating the sound equipment, and then turned to face Kalen.

"I'll try to be brief, but I should warn you that I've got to ask some pretty uncomfortable questions," he said.

"And I should warn you that I retain the right to break off the interview if I think it's going too far," Kalen answered.

Tom Birman nodded and cleared his throat. "Alright ... then we take in three ... two ... one ..."

The camera-fur nodded to let his boss know he was recording.

"This is Tom Birman from Jacksonville, Florida. I am standing here with Kalen Twain-Ryder, one of this year's great surprises in the NFL. However, I am not here to talk football today. Kalen Twain-Ryder is the son of Los Angeles councilmember Gabrielle Ryder, who recently has come under public scrutiny for allegedly accepting money from the mob. Mr. Twain-Ryder, thank you for consenting to talk to us about this. Can you please give us your immediate impression of the situation?"

Kalen cleared his throat and ran a paw through his mane. He had been on television before but this was different in so many ways and he found himself slightly more nervous than he'd normally be in front of a camera.

"I'll try at least. It's not a secret that most of the expressions best suited for describing my grandfather are unsuitable for television, but I'll settle for saying he was a genuine, A-grade dirtbag. He ran the Denver mob, before I was born. It's never been something my family has kept from the public. It would be fairly stupid to try, anyway. The point is ... my mother was instrumental in bringing about the fall of my grandfather's criminal empire. Police and Federal records show this clearly, and she's never even been *suspected* of having done anything criminal herself. But she did grow up in the home of someone who made his money on crime. That is undeniable."

Tom Birman nodded. "Alright. So what you're saying is that as a child, she had no influence on what her father did, and as an adult she actively worked to stop him."

"That is correct. I don't know the exact details, but I do know my grandfather even tried to have my mother abducted at one point, to stop her. And that he threatened to have her killed if she wouldn't comply with his wishes," Kalen said. That much he did know at least. He wasn't clear on many of the details though, and neither of his mothers wanted to talk about it much. They both seemed content to leave it in the past, and Kalen's grandmother had never wanted to talk about it either. She got very sad whenever the

subject was brought up, and as he had loved his grandmother very dearly, Kalen had never pushed her for answers.

"So your grandfather tried to have his own daughter kidnapped. Yet recently, allegations have been made that your mother accepted nearly eight million dollars from your grandfather?" Tom Birman asked.

Kalen chuckled. "Let's be realistic here, shall we? I'm sure most of your viewers have families of their own, Mr. Birman. Children are not expense-free. They require clothes, furniture, food, entertainment, education, allowance, space ... having children is expensive. It's a blessing, no question about that, but it's not free of charge. I'm sure my mother's clothes, furniture, food, entertainment, education and her allowance as a child was paid for with money my grandfather made through illegal means, but is that her fault? If your own child, Mr. Birman, came up to you tomorrow and said "Dad, I don't like that you're a reporter. Can't you get a job closer to home?" would you *really* give it all up? Or would you try to explain to your son or daughter why you had to keep working with what you did? Now imagine how that works in a family run by a fur so twisted he already knowingly makes his money on the suffering of others. Can you really, in your wildest dreams, imagine he would stop because his child told him to?"

"Not really, no. I see your point."

"She probably cost him a good deal more than eight million, Mr. Birman. But only the truly wicked would blame a child for the crimes of their parents."

Tom Birman nodded again. "That's almost biblical, Mr. Twain-Ryder."

"I do have a degree in religious science, but it was unintended," Kalen chuckled. "Look, my point is simple. I don't know the details of all this. But I would prefer if my Grandfather's criminal activities were not projected on to his descendants. I'm a law-abiding fur. I've never even stolen a piece of chewing gum, and my mother actually helped bring his crime-spree to a halt. Yet she is being labeled a benefactor of his crimes and that is being used against her politically. It's wrong, Mr. Birman. It's just plain wrong."

"One last question, Mr. Twain-Ryder?"

"Sure."

"I think we can all agree that there's no point in blaming your mother for what took place when she was underage, but the case specifically concerns an amount of money paid

to your mother *after* she became an adult and moved out. The allegation goes that she was a benefactor of your grandfather's ill-gotten gains, because he knew his empire was coming apart and he wanted to preserve some of that wealth within the family?"

Kalen nearly burst out laughing. "Is that what they are saying??" he asked, incredulously. "You're joking, right?"

"I'm quite serious, I'm afraid," the feline answered.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Kalen couldn't keep a grin off his face. "That's just ridiculous. I'm sorry, but that's got to be the joke of the year. First he tries to abduct her ... then he threatens to kill her ... and when she helps bring down his whole disgusting house of cards, he decides he'd better give her some money so the family doesn't lose everything? Come on, that's just absurd."

"I suppose that does sound a bit far-fetched," Tom Birman chuckled.

Kalen nodded once again and ran his paw back through his mane. "If my mother actually received money from my grandfather at that time ... as I am led to believe the evidence shows that she did ... I can tell you she did not benefit from it herself. It was given away ... to charity or to friends in need, take your pick. And if anything, she would have taken the money to further hurt my grandfather. How exactly, I can't tell, since I don't know. But I can assure you, I didn't grow up in a house full of luxury and opulence, paid for by my grandfather's criminal activities. The FBI would definitely have taken an interest in that, when they brought the Denver mob crashing down, I can tell you that much."

"That seems logical, yes," Tom Birman said and smiled. "Then I thank you for your time, Mr. Twain-Ryder, and good luck with the rest of your season."

"Thank you," Kalen answered and nodded as the camera-fur signaled he'd stopped recording. Then he shook paws with the feline and smiled.

"I hope that wasn't so bad?" Tom Birman asked.

"Not at all. Look, do you have a card I can keep? I'd like to tell my mother that you might be worth talking to if she needs to get her side of the story told."

"I'd appreciate that," the feline said and took out a business card. "She can reach me on that number, day and night."

Kalen nodded again and excused himself, heading back towards his car.

###

Zig Zag closed her computer and sat up straight, then leaned back in her chair and stretched. A job well done was a job worth savoring. Particularly when it came to helping out an old friend. Charles and Frances had called her a few days before, explaining how they needed help. Esteban was a real mess, and he needed something to help distract him.

So she had set out to do just that.

"So what's up, Mom? You look particularly pleased with yourself tonight?" Douglas, her youngest son, asked. He had walked up behind her without her noticing. He was a teenager nowadays, with all the issues that came with it, but Zig Zag had tried it twice before, so she knew how to cope.

"How do you think a place like "Gun Lake, Michigan" sounds?" Zig Zag asked.

"Like you need a permit and full body armor to go there. Why?" Douglas asked and bit down on an apple. He had grown into a good-looking young fur, Zig Zag had to admit. When he was younger, he'd been a bookworm and to a certain extent, he still was ... but he'd taken to track-and-field sports and he was lean and athletic. He had the build and colors of a coyote, like his father, the stripes of a tiger and the tail of a skunk.

All three of Zig Zag's and James' children had turned out that way, but their eldest, Alexandra, was black-and-white, whereas the two boys, Gabriel and Douglas both had their father's colors.

"Silly!" she chided and mock-batted her son across the back of his head. "It's a fishing lake."

"ARGH ... MOM! Not my hair, PLEASE!" he whimpered and immediately tried to undo the damage done. "A fishing lake?"

Zig Zag couldn't contain a snicker. "I'm sure you'll live. Last I checked, hair wasn't a vital organ. Anyway, yes. A fishing lake. We're all heading there. It'll be good for us all, and anyway, we're not going alone. We'll be bringing Esteban. He needs some cheering up!"

Douglas' face had started to fall the moment he realized he'd be spending several days holding a fishing rod, but when Esteban's name came up, he immediately cheered up. "Esteban's coming? *Great!*"

"Plus you get to see your mother make a complete fool of herself, trying to figure out the intricacies of fly-fishing," Zig Zag chuckled. "I have noooo idea."

"Might want to settle for something less complicated than flyfishing then, Mom," Douglas said with a smirk. "Maybe a stick from the woods with a piece of string and a bent nail will do?"

"Good God, who put new batteries in you today. When *I* was your age ..." Zig Zag chided.

She knew exactly what effect that would have on her son and completely predictably, he immediately rolled his eyes and groaned like the world was coming to an end. "Oh please no, spare me, spare me ... not a lecture about how well behaved and polite furs my age were when you were young," he whimpered.

"Are you saying I'm old?" Zig Zag asked, finding the urge to bait her son irresistible.

"Mom, I'm a teenager. You're ancient by definition!" Gabriel retorted.

"I oughta ground you for that one," Zig Zag said and tossed her hair theatrically, sitting up straight again and pushing up her bosom slightly. "I'll have you know, most of your team-mates still ogle me when I pick you up from practice!"

"ARRRRGH ... MOM! GAAAH, I didn't *need* that!!" Gabriel groaned and covered his face. "Oh God, if I grow up to have psychological issues, I'm SO blaming you!"

Zig Zag snickered and got up, ruffling her son's hair to completely undo his careful styling. "Yeah? Really? Not your siblings or your father or all the hundreds of other times you've said that very thing?"

Douglas knew he was trapped in a corner ... and he did what all teenagers throughout the ages have done in that situation.

He ran out of the room, covering his hair with his paws, whining up a storm.

Zig Zag, grinning widely, headed to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee.