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XI – Crunch time

"Well, it's hurt your numbers," Guy said and put the newspaper down. "You're still in the lead, but it's not by much. And he's gaining daily.

"The press statement did slow the decline down, though," Christopher added. "But Guy's right. If this continues, you'll lose. We have to find a way of reversing this."

Gabrielle leaned back in her chair. For a brief moment, she contemplated what it would mean if she lost her seat on the city council. She would have to go back to doing something else, obviously ... probably designing again. But it was doubtful if she'd have much of a chance if the reason she lost her seat was because of a scandal involving the mob.

Besides, she wasn't a quitter. Jason Hartwood had thrown down the gauntlet and she would gladly pick it up and proceed to pummel him into submission with it!

Sitting on her paws was getting annoying though, but fortunately, she had an ace up her sleeve this time. "I know. But my son called me yesterday evening with some good news."

She flicked the TV on across the room. Guy and Christopher both looked a little confused.

"I don't think right now is the best time for ..." Guy began but Gabrielle cut him off with a gentle paw-gesture, indicating something was about to happen on the screen.

Tom Birman's face appeared and the brief interview he'd done with Kalen ran across the screen. Gabrielle was smiling but neither of her advisors seemed to share her good mood.

"He shouldn't have done that," Christopher groaned and put his head in his paws. "He hadn't been briefed on what to say."

"Frankly, I think he did really well," Gabrielle said, slightly irritably. "Everything he said is true. And he comes across as believable."

Guy rubbed the bridge of his nose and nodded. "Oh yes, he's believable. He's a sports-hero. He's also your son, Gabby ... so you're not really in a position to determine if he's believable or not. You're biased, sorry to be so blunt. Chris is right. He shouldn't have said anything."

Gabrielle shook her head slowly. "Okay. Enough of this. You two are going to listen to me now, and I want you to pay good, close attention to every word I'm saying, alright?"

Her voice was tightly controlled and both the jaguar and the lapine nodded and listened.

"I'm sick of this pussyfooting around-stuff. It's not who I am. I am not going to stick my head in a bush like some damned ostrich because of a jackass like Jason Hartwood, d'you hear me? I want to fight him. If that means I lose, then at least I go down fighting. Instead of this attempt to apparently kill the rumors with silence. Let me tell you something about how the real world works! If I don't say anything, it won't kill the rumors. They'll just circulate and grow and expand amongst co-workers, friends, family ... and on election day, they'll all stand there in the voting booth, and they'll want to vote for the SAFE option, and suddenly that won't be me anymore. So enough of this. Start taking the fight to him ... right now. Clear?"

"Crystal ... but how are we to take the fight to him when there's nothing to pin on him?" Guy asked.

"I don't want to fight him with his own dirty methods. I want to fight for my reputation. Not destroy his. Kalen told me this Tom Birman-fur wanted to do an interview with me. Set it up. And I don't want to hear any kind of protests about it!"

Christopher nodded. "As you wish. We'll get right on it."

Gabrielle nodded and got up. "That's more like it. Fox is running a story on this today. You both know that. Do you really think that'll be objective and fair? I'm an outspoken, openly homosexual, extremely liberal politician from the Castro for God's sake. I couldn't be a bigger target for them if I had Harvey Milk written across my forehead!"

Then she walked out.

"You gotta admire her guts," Guy mumbled and scratched his cheek.

Christopher nodded and shrugged slightly. "I'm not denying her guts. I'm wondering how to avoid this becoming a full blown disaster. I'll get a hold of Tom Birman and NBC. And YOU had better start prepping for the town hall meeting tomorrow evening because as far as I can see, that's going to be a bloodbath."

The lapine turned and started typing an email. Guy got himself a cup of coffee before heading out of the office to get a hold of a few campaign volunteers to help him.

###

Esteban plodded to the front door to open it. He wasn't living in a daze anymore. That had passed. But he had no energy and no real will or drive to do anything. He hadn't trimmed his cheek-fur since the funeral, and he often forgot the simplest things. Like doing the laundry, leaving him plodding around the house either in yesterday's dirty clothes while the machine finally tried to catch up, or wearing his a T-shirt and boxers while sitting under a blanket in front of the television.

Sometimes he forgot to cook. He'd realize only later when his stomach protested, at which time he'd grab a sandwich.

Every time he forgot something, it brought tears to his eyes ... simply because he knew why it happened. Because he still somehow expected that Jean would chide him for it and remind him, and then he'd get it done. It was how it had always worked in their relationship, and it was how his subconscious still worked.

But of course ... Jean didn't remind him to put the dishes in the dishwasher anymore. Or anything else.

At least he had clean clothes today. His stomach had recently reminded him to eat, and he had picked up some cold waffles from last night, munching half-heartedly on them as he flicked through the various news-stations.

That was when he had heard the doorbell.

As he opened the door, he found himself face to face with the most unlikely image in the world.

Zig Zag, wearing a sun-hat with fishing-flies inserted into it, holding a long fishing-pole in one paw and a bag in the other. She was wearing a pair of Wellingtons and quite sensible clothing for someone who, for all intents and purposes, looked like she was going fishing.

Gone was the executive powerhouse that she had transformed herself into since her acting days had ended.

Of course, the gigantic grin on her face wasn't helping the image get any more realistic.

"Erhh ... " he managed, instantly realizing how dumb he sounded.

"Hey Esteban. Go put on something more sensible than that! You're coming with me!"

"Uhhh ... buhh ... I wha ... ?" the maned wolf managed, blinking a few times in confusion.

Zig Zag rolled her eyes theatrically and groaned. "Are you always this articulate when you see a femme in rubber boots?" she teased.

The slight innuendo slammed into Esteban like an eighteen-wheeler and he blinked away the confusion. "No ... no, not usually," he managed to answer. "I just never expected to see you here in THAT kind of getup? What gives?" he asked, trying to smile.

"We're going fishing. And yes, I said *we*. I haven't got the first clue as to how one goes fly-fishing, but I found this beautiful spot. The family is in the car, the tents are packed and James can't teach me how to fish, so I really do need you to come along and help me!" Zig Zag said, beaming widely again.

"I don't really think ... " Esteban began, but stopped when he was presented with the biggest, wettest, puppy-eyes he could remember ever seeing on his former boss's face.

"Pleeeeeease?"

"Gahh, that's so not fair!" he grumbled good-naturedly and shook his head a little. "Alright. Get everyone out of the car and into the kitchen while I pack my gear. It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes."

Zig Zag smiled yet again and shook her head. "I'll tell James to take the kids somewhere to get them something to eat. That'll take forty five minutes or so. Take your time, I'll just come in myselfish! And you can't stop me, lobo. Muahahah!"

Esteban facepalmed and shuffled inside, mumbling something about giving the lobo a break, while Zig Zag headed back out to the car to deliver her message.

###

"There you are! I've missed you."

Kalen smiled widely as Vishalya's face appeared on his telephone-screen.

"I missed you too. Especially these last few days," Vishalya answered. She both looked and sounded worn, and Kalen was immediately worried.

"What's happened? You sound like something's wrong? Is everything okay with your family?" he asked.

Vishalya shrugged and looked over her shoulder, as if to make sure the door was closed and no one was listening in on her conversation. "Define "okay", Kalen. None of them are sick if that's what you mean."

Kalen nodded, relieved. "Alright. So far so good then. What is it, though? You really sound like something's gone south in your life."

"Gone south?"

"Sorry. It means that something has gone wrong."

Vishalya nodded and rubbed her face, wearily. "Well, I can't lie to you. It just wouldn't be right. My brother ... "

"Yashvir, yes? You didn't tell me much about him," Kalen asked, just to make sure he was thinking about the right fur.

"That's him, yes. And I haven't told you much about him because ... well ... because I don't like him. There. I said it. I don't like what he stands for, or his opinions. I don't like anything about him, actually. But he's my father's heir, and my father is giving him more and more say in the everyday running of the family."

Kalen could sense something more behind the worry than what Vishalya was saying, but he didn't know how to tell her that. "Why's that? Your father seemed healthy enough

when I met him. He'll last another thirty years or more, I'm sure!" he said and scratched his cheek.

"Probably. But the family fortunes won't. We're going bankrupt, Kale ... my parents told me a few days ago that someone's embezzled a huge amount of money from us. If something drastic isn't done ... and swiftly ... we won't be able to fulfill those contracts my father signed in the United States. And then we'll be destitute."

Kalen felt like someone had just doused him in ice-water. "Is there anything I can do to help? Anything at all? I've got some contacts and ... " he began.

Vishalya smiled and actually touched the screen on her end. "You're very sweet when you worry like that, Kale. But there's nothing you can do. Yashvir's already arranged for someone to bail out the family."

"Then ... why so worried?" Kalen asked. Right now, he wished he had a second line open to Leo Leon. He'd know the where-tos and what-nots of something like this immediately.

"Because the fur who agreed to help out my family, also agreed to help Yashvir's political career get started ... and his only price was that his son would marry *me*."

Kalen blinked in surprise. "Erh ... run that by me again?" he asked. He wasn't going to say the obvious thing. His degree in religious science gave him more knowledge of Hindu culture than bar far the majority of Americans and simply saying "say no then?" wasn't necessarily an option. He knew that, but he wasn't going to accept this quietly.

Vishalya shrugged again and rubbed her face once more. "You heard me. In about half a year's time, I'll be married off to someone I haven't even *met*. Someone I don't *want*. And I have no say in the matter. If I say no, my family is bankrupt."

Kalen wanted to scream out in protest. But what could he do? It was an impossible, wholly unfair position to place anyone in. But he wasn't simply going to accept that this was how things were! He was half Ryder, half Twain and neither side of the family ever gave up that easily!

"Vishalya, look me in the face and tell me right now that there is no other way? I mean, I know where you live. If I have to pull an Errol Flynn here, swinging in on the chandelier to save you then dammit, I will!"

At least that got a smile on Vishalya's face, but she did look at Kalen. "There are alternatives. If my father sold off something like sixty percent of the family assets and downsized everything, he could pull through and rebuild."

"But of course, that's not being considered. He'd rather sell his daughter like ... like ... gahh, this sounds like something out of a seventeenth century description of the most backwater areas of India, if you'll pardon me for saying so!" Kalen growled.

"Nothing to pardon. I said much the same thing. That we're an enlightened family. That this is the same kind of thinking that widow-burning springs from ..."

"Sati."

"You know ... you'll never cease to amaze me, Kale. I wouldn't expect an American to even know that term," Vishalya said. Her voice was very soft and tender and Kalen felt like someone was stabbing him in the chest.

"I'm going to get you out of this, Vishalya. How long do you have?"

"Six months they said."

"Alright. Then ... once the season is over, I'm coming over there, and ... and I'm not going to let this happen to you!" Kalen burst out. He felt so feeble in doing so, but what else could he say?

Vishalya looked like she was about to answer. Then she hurriedly looked over her shoulder and back to the screen, wide-eyed. "I've got to go. Someone's at the door!"

She hung up.

Kalen sat there, staring at the now black screen. Then he pounded his fists into the table and roared in frustration, before picking up an apple from a bowl next to him and launching it across the room.

It went through the open door to the kitchen and through the window.

Slamming his forehead into the table where his fists had hit moments before, Kalen knew he had to get a hold of a glazier ... but first ... before that ... he had to call someone else.

He dialed the number and waited for the connection to come on.

"Oh ... hey Kalen. Jeez, you look like someone's just force-fed cod-liver oil down your throat. What's up?"

"Hello Nadia. Is Steve in? I *have* to talk to him."

The hybrid smiled uncertainly, but nodded. "Yeah sure. Let me go get him for you."

Kalen nodded and waited. He'd need Steve's help ... but he was not going to let this come to pass. Not ever.

###

Steve hung up after almost twenty minutes. He felt nauseous, and like he wanted to punch something. In fact, his knuckles were itching. He didn't know Vishalya, since he hadn't met her yet, but he knew what she meant to his best friend, and even if she had been a complete stranger, the concept of forcing someone to marry against their will was enough to make him angry on her behalf.

So naturally, he'd agreed to help Kalen. There was no question, in fact, that he'd help. He'd have helped even if he *had* met Vishalya and didn't like her.

For Kalen, he'd walk across hot coals or worse.

Nadia came into the living room. She looked worried.

"I didn't hear what that was all about but judging from Kale's tone of voice and your facial expression, something pretty dire is going on," she said.

Steve just nodded, tapping the tip of his lower jaw, frowning deeply in thought. He didn't speak, although he heard what Nadia said.

The hybrid nodded, slowly. "And I shouldn't ask ... I can tell," she said and made to go back into the kitchen.

"It's not that," Steve interjected. "I'm just not sure how to phrase this in a way that won't give your eardrums third degree burns."

"Did something bad happen to Kale?"

"Not yet. But unless I help *him* find a way to help someone *else*, then something bad will happen to him."

Nadia blinked. "Okay, that was convoluted. What's going on?"

Steve beckoned for her to come over. She did and he pulled her down onto his lap. "Did I tell you today that I love you?" he asked.

Nadia giggled and corrected her glasses. "Not yet, no. I *was* starting to wonder."

"Don't ever doubt it," Steve said, quite deadly serious. "You remember how much Kale used to fawn over Dina, way back when they'd just started dating?"

"Oh God, do I ever? I think I wrote some of his bad poetry down somewhere. I figured I could always blackmail him with it later," Nadia said and smirked good-naturedly.

Steve nodded and couldn't help a twinge at the corner of his mouth. Kalen's predilection for sprouting sappy, romantic poetry over girls was practically legendary amongst the stallion's friends. And while he thought the world of Kalen ... Steve, with his degree in English Literature, knew that his friend would never make it as a poet.

"Good grief, I had no idea you could be that cruel," he mumbled. "I still want to marry you though."

"But now it's out of fear of what'll happen if you don't, admit it!" Nadia teased and ruffled Steve's hair.

The wolf grinned and shook his head. "I'd still want to even if you hadn't told me that. More every day, in fact. But Kalen hasn't actually had a real girlfriend since he and Dina broke up."

"No? What about that girl from College?"

"You mean that Cheerleader? I think the only one who really thought they were a couple was *her*. She was nice enough but Kalen was just trying to be polite about saying no, and he really, really sucked at that back then. There were a few girls he tried dating a few times, but it's never gotten off base one. Anyway, stop derailing my train of thought here!"

He tickled Nadia a bit and she squirmed, giggling up a storm. "Okay, okay, what's going on with Kale then?"

"Well, he's met this girl now ... you know about that of course."

"Yes. She's from India ... but I didn't think he was all that serious about her, really? He hasn't started on the poetry yet."

Steve nodded. That was a sensible enough comment, if one knew Kalen Twain-Ryder

...

"He's serious. He's more serious than I've ever seen him before," he said.

Nadia blinked. "More serious than with Dina? I thought they'd end up getting married!"

"We all thought that," Steve said and shrugged. He leaned back and ran his paws down his face, groaning slightly. "But it wasn't to be. Thing is, I really think he's found the girl of his dreams this time. And it's precisely because he isn't writing bad poetry. This isn't some childish fancy, Nadia. He's serious this time. It's for real."

Nadia nodded again and half-turned on her boyfriend's lap to run her fingers through his hair. "Alright, so we've established he's in love. That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"It is. But he just told me that her family is trying to force her to marry someone against her will."

"*What?*"

"That was pretty much my reply, too."

"But this is the twenty first century, for crying out loud?"

Nadia looked like she simply couldn't bend her head around the fact that anyone would do such a thing.

"It happens in many parts of the world, and we both know that deep down. We just prefer not to think about it because it isn't a problem around here. Thing is, Kale wants to save her," Steve said, wearily.

"Why do I smell an adventure in this?"

"Because he wants me to come along and help him?"

Nadia nodded. The good-natured, slightly frivolous, jesting façade that she had put up had evaporated. Steve couldn't help but think it was scary how much Nadia took after both her parents when she got into a mood like that. She'd show that same stone-cold, utterly expressionless face that her father had perfected over many years in big business, and the same, almost painfully intense look in her eyes as her mother.

"You make sure you let me know if there's anything you need help with. And that goes for both of you. You tell him that, Steve ... from me," she said.

Steve nodded. "I will. He's my best friend, Nadia ... and all I want is for him to have something like we do ... you and me. But right now, I'm just a bit at a loss."

"Of course you are. You just got the news. It needs time to sink in. So why don't we go out for dinner, and we talk this over some more, and then we'll see what needs to be done?"

"Did I tell you today that I love you?"

"Five minutes ago. Keep sayin' it, though. It doesn't grow old."

###

Jessica Greystone put down the letter and hung her head. She knew her editor and there was no point in calling him, trying to make him change his mind. The message had been delivered and now she had to decide how to react to it.

She really didn't want to lose her job, but Steve Wulf clearly wasn't going to give her the time of day.

She had to make him listen, though. She really had to make him understand how important it was that she got that interview for Sports of Today.

There was only one thing to do ...

She had to try again. And be more insistent this time.

Picking up her car keys, she headed downstairs. There she grabbed her bag and her recording equipment before nodding to herself.

Yes. More insistent. That was definitely the way to go.

###

Bingo was most definitely the dogs name, Old MacDonald's farm and all its livestock had been thoroughly examined and everyone in the car had come around the mountain at least a dozen times.

And Esteban had to admit, he was feeling less awful than he had since Jean died. It was very hard not to cheer up in the company of Zig Zag and James and their kids. He'd even managed to join in with the singing, and Alexandra had asked him if he didn't know a few driving-songs in Spanish that he could share with them.

He'd tried his best, but he couldn't really remember the lyrics. He hadn't heard them since he was a child, and his father had never approved of singing in the car like that anyway.

"So, we're headeeng to Gun Lake? Anee reason for that place een parteecular?" he asked at last. He was sitting in the front seat with James. Zig Zag and the kids were spread out across the two rows of back seats.

"Yep!" Zig Zag declared. "It had the coolest name of the lakes I looked at. That's my *entire* reasoning, right there for you!"

"Help me," James mock-whimpered and looked sidelong at the maned wolf. "I've married a gun-nut!"

Esteban tried very hard to keep a straight face. He managed for all of three seconds before he sputtered and snickered uncontrollably.

"Gracias ... I needed that," he said, quietly, after regaining his composure.

"You should also feel privileged, you know," Alexandra said and smiled. "I can't stand fish, but I'm still coming along for your sake!"

Esteban nodded. "I'm glad you all did this for me."

James smiled crookedly. "Oh, think nothing of it. You've been a friend of the family for how many years now?"

"Since before there *was* a family, Dad," Gabriel said from behind his father, in that tone of voice used by children to explain really obvious things to their oh-so-foolish parents.

Esteban recognized that tone of voice from when Charles and Frances grew up. They were both experts at it.

"Alright. No more Bingo ... no more Scottish farmers ... how about a game of Eye Spy?" Zig Zag asked, and before waiting for an answer, continued: "I spy with my little eye ... something beginning with H!"

"HONDA!" Douglas burst out and pointed to a car coming in the opposite direction.

Esteban smiled a little again. Perhaps this fishing trip would help him get through the grief a little faster.

Just maybe.

###

Steve blinked. He wasn't quite sure what had just happened ... but he was pretty sure it wasn't good.

His head was hurting, and the noise had left him almost deaf.

He tried to speak, but his chest was aching.

Nadia ...

Nadia??

He tried to reach out, but his arm was stuck.

"Jesus CHRIST! Someone get over here! They're still alive!" he heard a voice shouting.

"I'm ... I'm alive," he groaned. "Whu ... what?"

He tried to remember what had happened. They had left the apartment and gotten into his car to go out to dinner. He'd ordered a table and everything had been fine. So he had started driving ... nothing unusual there, and he had come to an intersection where he needed to turn. He'd taken a right turn to get to the restaurant. Then ... then he wasn't quite sure what had happened.

A lot of noise.

Was Nadia okay?

He had to know.

"I ... I think it's Steve Wulf. Good God, IS THAT AMBULANCE ON THE WAY ALREADY??" the voice nearby shouted.

Steve wanted to ask what had happened.

But he couldn't focus. The world swam in front of his eyes.

Then everything went black.