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VII – We've got to stop meeting like this

Steve opened his eyes and immediately regretted it. So he closed them again and groaned. The light was downright painful and he felt like someone had asked him to block an eighteen-wheeler.

Something told him that wasn't too far from the truth, either. He vaguely remembered a car ... hitting his ...

He opened his eyes wide again!

"Nadia?" he wheezed. He couldn't see anything except the light. It stung his eyeballs and he blinked rapidly.

Kalen's voice met him. It sounded like the equine was very badly choked up. "She's alive," he said and cleared his throat. "Not in this room though."

"Where ...?" Steve tried, but his voice wouldn't cooperate. He was in a tremendous amount of pain. "And you ... here ... how?"

"If you need painkillers, the nurse can come in and give you some," Kalen said, quietly. "Nadia's in surgery. You're out of the woods, but she's been very badly injured. I got a call about this almost immediately. I was in my car ... I just turned around and went to the

airport and got on the first plane to Chicago, and from there I got on another flight to Fargo. I got here fifteen minutes ago."

Steve, who wasn't quite with it yet, immediately tried to sit up. He regretted it the same instant, and whimpered in pain. "Wh ... what ...?"

"You've got a broken leg. And a severe concussion. And your ribcage's taken some punishment. You're black and blue, but you didn't take the worst of it. The car hit the other side of your vehicle," Kalen explained. It was clearly causing him a lot of distress to do so.

Nodding very slightly, Steve swallowed. He remembered now. He'd been taking Nadia out for dinner. They had been driving ... and they'd been about to turn at an intersection. Then everything got blurry.

"Nadia?" he tried again.

"I don't know the details yet, Steve. I honestly don't know if I'm even allowed to tell you anything ..."

"You're my ... best friend, Kale. If ... I have to hear ... bad news ..."

His head was hurting from talking and he groaned, clenching his eyes shut.

Kalen sighed. "We've got to stop meeting like this, y'know," he chuckled, bitterly. "With one of us in the hospital."

"Funny ..." Steve wheezed and coughed.

"Nadia's very badly hurt. They say she'll live ... she's got a concussion too but that's the only injury to her head. Shit, Steve ... I don't know how to tell you this ..."

Steve just nodded. He could hear how much this was affecting his friend. Kalen was Nadia's friend too and the equine had always been emotional when it came to friends and family.

"The other ... driver ...?" he asked. He realized he had to stop talking. His head was hurting and he was getting dizzy.

Very dizzy.

Kalen was fortunately there with a metal tray when Steve turned over in bed and emptied his stomach. It wasn't exactly the most enjoyable position to put his best friend in, but at that moment, Steve was just grateful.

"Easy, Big Guy ... easy," Kalen said, gently. "I'll empty this. The other driver didn't make it. Seems she was some reporter for Sports of Today."

Steve's stomach turned again. He'd sue the pants off that rag for what had happened to Nadia ... He'd ... he'd ...

Kalen went back to his friend's bed after emptying the tray. Steve was out cold again and he sighed as he headed to the door to get a nurse to come check up on him.

Then he'd go and find out if there were any new developments with Nadia.

###

After the news of Steve's accident, Gabrielle was in absolutely no mood to get involved in any kind of political argument, but she had little choice in the matter. The debate had been set up months in advance, and everything was planned and prepared. There was nothing she could do, but she hated it. Her son's best friend ... and a young male she herself had come to care a great deal for over the years ... was in the hospital. Leo Leon's daughter as well.

She had kept in touch with the Leon family for many years. Lizzy Leon, a doe with serious left-wing sympathies, had been one of Jean's friends at university, and Leo Leon, a lion of indisputable integrity and courage, had helped save Gabrielle from a forced marriage many years before, before he even met Lizzy.

Sometimes, when she was in one of her stranger moods, Gabrielle would sit down with a glass of something mildly alcoholic and reflect on how strange the world had worked out for her and those around her. How so many furs somehow seemed connected to one another. It could be quite thought-provoking.

Sighing, she closed her eyes and tried to focus. She felt like she was being thrown to the mob, more or less. The atmosphere was not exactly friendly out there.

"Are you okay, Mrs. Ryder," one of the volunteers present asked her.

Gabrielle nodded and tried to smile. She wasn't going to pour her worries onto a complete stranger.

"I'm okay," she said and opened the door, walking through it.

The audience went very quiet and Gabrielle immediately knew how much of a storm she was in for.

###

Kalen closed the door behind him and turned to face Lizzy. Leo wasn't there. Or rather, he was at the hospital, but not in the room. He was talking to a couple of doctors.

Lizzy had been crying. In fact, she still was, and Kalen felt awful for her. He couldn't even begin to imagine how a mother must feel in a situation like this, and he felt moved to put his arms around the doe to give her a gentle, supporting hug.

And it still felt insufficient.

Nonetheless, Lizzy seemed grateful for the gesture and hid her face against Kalen's chest for a moment, shaking uncontrollably.

"She's going to make it," the equine whispered. "That much is certain. And apart from a concussion, she didn't have any head-injuries. She'll make it ... we've got to keep telling ourselves that."

Lizzy tried to nod. "It's ... it's good of you to come here so fast, Kale," she whispered. "It means a lot to Leo and me that you're there for both of them."

"They're my friends, Mrs. Leon ... I couldn't do any less."

"Kale ... you've known me for how many years now? Lizzy ... *please*."

"As you say, Mrs. Leon," Kalen said with a crooked smile. He went through this with Nadia's parents every time he met them.

"You'll never learn," Lizzy grumbled, wiping her eyes and managing a tiny chuckle. "Has anyone told Charles and Frances?"

"I called them as soon as I got here and had anything to tell them. They'll both arrive tomorrow morning."

"Thank you."

Kalen let Lizzy out of the hug and nodded. "Don't mention it. I'm just glad to help."

"You're a good friend, Kalen. Everyone should know someone like you," Lizzy said and wiped her eyes again. "There's Leo. We'd better ask what news he's got."

Kalen nodded and turned to face the lion. Leo looked extremely serious, not to mention more than a little shaken. He had his jacket over his elbow and the top two buttons of his shirt were undone. He had been crying ... Kalen could tell even at this distance. But Leo was an emotional fur ... Kalen had to believe it wasn't because of bad news about Nadia. He had to remain optimistic.

He gave Lizzy time to talk to her husband first. It seemed the most respectful thing to do, so he simply waited while Lizzy approached the lion. Turning his back for the moment, he looked out a window at the parking lot outside.

Hospitals were such strange places. He felt ambivalent towards them, and he always had. On one paw, he knew furs went there to get cured of disease ... to have surgery, to have broken limbs reset ... but at the same time, the fact that hospitals were necessary simply proved that furs suffered.

Of course furs suffered. It was inconceivable that the world wouldn't involve pain, injury and death. But it would still be better if it wasn't the case.

Kalen knew he'd have made a really terrible doctor. He thought about these things too much.

Part of his education had taught him how the various faiths of the world explained such things as suffering and pain.

"God's will".

"Fate".

"Judgment".

"A test of faith".

"Righteous punishment".

They seemed to be terms which, in one form or another, applied everywhere.

Kalen didn't hold to any of it. Pain and suffering, as far as he was concerned, were problems faced by furs, created by furs and overcome by furs. It was the way the world had always worked. But it didn't make it any less tragic or any more fair, and when it

affected those close to him, it was easy for him to understand why, throughout the ages, furs had felt a need to somehow explain their tragedy away by divine influence.

Lizzy started sobbing. Loudly. In fact, she sounded like she would fall to pieces and Kalen immediately turned around to see what was going on.

Leo was holding his wife who, as Kalen expected, looked like she was close to fainting.

"Hello Mr. Leon," the equine said, realizing he sounded exhausted. "As I just told your erstwhile son-in-law ... we really have to stop meeting like this."

Leo nodded, quietly, stroking his wife's back. He didn't answer for a while, and Kalen didn't pressure him for information. In fact, the equine felt bad for his quip. It hadn't been the right time to say something like that, but if he didn't try to lighten the mood a little, he knew he'd end up a sobbing wreck.

"Hello Kale," Leo answered and sighed. "I guess you're right."

"You probably don't want me asking this right now, but I'm going to anyway. What did the doctors say about Nadia?" Kalen asked, dreading the answer, considering Lizzy's near-breakdown.

"She's going back into surgery. She'll live but ..." Leo began, then stopped and shook his head, once more trying to comfort his wife who by now was crying openly.

Kalen nodded understandingly, and tried to show Leo he didn't need to be told right now.

He would find a doctor instead.

###

"Why should I risk voting for someone who'd take mob money?" a femme in the audience asked.

Gabrielle tried to stay calm. The implied accusation of corruption was almost too much to bear. The debate itself had gone pretty well. She and Jason Hartwood had talked about their ideas for the Castro and to say they were radically different was an epic understatement. Gabrielle wanted to preserve the Castro's "distinct flavor", as she had put it. She was proud of the Castro's history as the largest LGBT community in the United States, and as one of the most diverse and open-minded inner-city areas in the United States. This, she had argued, was worth preserving and she would defend that distinctness

at City Hall. This had met with general approval from the audience, and she had felt she had done well for that reason.

Jason Hartwood, on the other paw, had openly stated that he wanted to "normalize" the Castro. That he saw the real estate value, considerable though it may be, as suffering significantly. What he had referred to as "ordinary families" didn't want to move to the area, and that kept real estate prices on an unnaturally low level. He also stated that he was deeply concerned about the crime-rate ... to which Gabrielle had dryly remarked that the main problem in the Castro remained Hate Crimes committed by furs coming in from the outside, not petty larceny and burglaries committed by residents in the area itself. It had gotten a good snicker from several furs in the audience.

All in all, Gabrielle felt she'd come out on top after the debate. And then, as the audience was allowed to ask questions, the first one addressed to her was *that*.

"I needed food and clothes like every other child. Should I have gone naked and unfed as a child?" she asked.

"I don't think that's what the lady was referring to," Jason Hartwood interjected. "I believe the question concerned the possibility of a payoff from your father, shortly before the federal investigation against him began in earnest."

Gabrielle felt like reaching out and slapping the male. "I know. But my answer is relevant, regardless. I am not to blame for my father's crimes, and I refuse to take responsibility for what *he* did. I also fail to see why I should even apologize for his actions. I did not encourage him ... in fact, quite the opposite. What he did was on his head. Not mine. Unless we are speaking in biblical terms here, there is no way I can be responsible for the actions of one of my parents."

"That may well be, but ... " the feline started, but Gabrielle interrupted him.

"There are no buts in this, Mr. Hartwood. My father's crime was his wrongdoing. Not mine. Next question please."

What really annoyed Gabrielle was the slightly smug look of victory that spread across Jason Hartwood's face at her answer.

###

Charles knocked on his sister's door. It took a few moments before she opened. She looked so haggard that Charles found himself wondering if it was a good idea for her to come at all. Her apartment wasn't large, but it was usually spotlessly clean, yet over his

sister's shoulder, he could see the living room and it looked like someone had set off a medium sized nuclear warhead in there.

"I've ... got the plane-tickets here. Are you sure you want to come?" he asked and looked back to Frances.

She nodded. "I am. But I need a break from bad news soon, Charlie. I can't get a hold of Dad either. I tried calling him, but he didn't answer his phone. For God's sake ... first mom, now Steve and Nadia?"

Charles instinctively reached out and put his arms around his sister. "They're alive, and from what Kalen said on the phone, they're going to stay that way. And as for dad ... we'll try again before we go to the airport. We can call Mrs. Mendez and ask her to go check up on him."

"The neighbor? Good idea," Frances said, quietly, before untangling herself from her brother's arms and stepping aside to let him in. "I'm sorry about the mess, but I haven't had time to clean in a while."

So there it was. Charles nodded and patted Frances' shoulder gently. "Don't worry about it," he said, "you've seen my place often enough to know that I don't mind the mess."

"I guess not. I'm almost done anyway. I just need to pack a few more things. Can you try calling Mrs. Mendez in the meantime?"

"Sure ... go ahead and finish packing while I do that."

"Be right with you then."

Frances headed back to her bedroom and looked at the open luggage with a feeling of weariness spreading in her entire body. Even her bedroom was a mess. She had been lucky to find this place ... and it was normally so easy to keep tidy. She didn't have that much stuff in the first place, mostly because she didn't like her home to be crammed full of junk ... but somehow, everything was messy right now, anyway.

Her bed hadn't been made. There was laundry on the floor.

Worst of all, the cigarette butts in the ashtray on the table told their own story. She'd started smoking when she was in college. Nerves about exams and the likes had gotten her started, and she had known it was a bad idea from the onset. But it had helped calm her down ...

She'd promised herself, on graduation day, that she would stop, and she had.

And then her mother had died.

And out came the Lucky Strikes.

She needed to get a grip of herself and stop again. She'd done it once ... clearly she was capable of breaking the habit, and she would just have to do so again.

Reaching out to the pack, she pondered crumbling it up and throwing it away.

At least she was just smoking ... not drinking.

She lit one up and closed her eyes as the smoke filled her lungs. She crossed her arms across her chest and stood there, looking out at the night sky, enjoying her cigarette and feeling both rotten and guilty at the same time.

"I thought you'd kicked the habit," Charles said from the door behind her. She hadn't even heard him come in. She'd gone through most of her cigarette without noticing that time went by.

"I did. I'm back on them," she said, almost daring him to chastise her for it.

He didn't. Instead, he sat down on the one chair in the room and looked out the window with her. "What're you looking for?" he asked.

"Some kind of light at the end of some kind of tunnel, I guess," Frances said, sighing. "And not finding it at the moment."

"I know the feeling. Anyway, I got a hold of Mrs. Mendez. Dad's not home. She said she saw him get picked up by a striped lady. They drove off in a car full of children, apparently. She said Dad had brought his fishing rod," Charles explained.

Frances nodded. "Good. Then Zig Zag's on the case. But he shouldn't have left his phone at home."

"You know, in some ways ... I think it may be the best thing he could've done."

"Yeah ... maybe you're right ..."

"Come on," Charles said with a slight smile. "Let's get your stuff packed. We've got to get to the airport."

Crushing the remains of her cigarette in the ashtray, Frances nodded without a word. She'd get off the cigarettes again ... when this thing with Steve and Nadia had been taken care of.

###

Kalen had located a doctor at last. Or rather ... locating a doctor was easy in a hospital. What he had located was a doctor who knew what was going on with his friend. He wondered if all surgeons looked as exhausted as the canid he was looking at. Somehow, they seemed to. Every surgeon he had ever met looked like he or she needed five days of non-stop sleep. It probably had to do with literally holding the life of other furs in their paws every day. The pressure would have to be absolutely indescribable.

Another reason why he was sure he would've made a very bad doctor.

The pressure of tens of thousands of furs, roaring his name from the seats ... that was nothing.

That was just entertainment.

This was life or death ... and who cheered for *these* furs at the end of the day?

The surgeon finished sipping from a cup of tea and Kalen didn't pressure her, even though he was extremely anxious for news.

"How is she?" he finally asked, when he sensed that the canid was in a state of mind to answer him.

"She'll live," the surgeon said. "But that's only because we live in this advanced day and age. She's lost one leg four inches below the hip. And the other at the knee. Even with the best prosthetics out there, she'll never walk without canes again. And she is very, very lucky, Mr. ... "

"Twain-Ryder. I'm her friend. From way back."

"Heh ... I know that name. My son won't stop going on about you," the surgeon mumbled. "She's going to need friends. And support. And a lot of time."

"She'll get all the support she needs. You have my word on it," Kalen said, solemnly. "I'm ... I've ... seen a lot of hospitals lately."

His voice cracked, but he forced his tears back and he cleared his throat repeatedly to try to get himself back under control.

The surgeon nodded and reached out and gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder. "You okay?" she asked. "I could have someone come and talk to you if you need it."

Kalen shook his head. "No thank you, Ma'am. I'm just ... I'm just ..." he tried and again he had to stop and take a deep breath.

"It's okay. I understand ..." the canid said, sympathetically. She might look tired but Kalen realized she was in no way indifferent.

It only made it all the more important that he pulled himself back together and he closed his eyes for a couple of deep breaths. Then he nodded and looked back at her. "You know ... your son ..." he said and tried to smile.

"He'll never let me hear the last of it when he hears I met you. I'm not much of a football fan myself, though."

"He should pick his heroes better. And you can tell him that from me," Kalen said, quietly. "You're the real hero here. Not me. And I want to thank you for saving my friend's life."

"I'm just doing my job, Mr. Twain-Ryder," the canid said and smiled crookedly. "But if I can get that in writing from you, I'll probably use it to make him clean his room a bit more often."

Kalen managed a chuckle, between snuffles and clenched teeth. "Just a moment," he said and took out a pen. He cast about for a piece of paper and found some laying on a nearby table. It was some kind of information-sheet about public health care and what rights patients had. He turned it over ... and as expected it was blank on the flip-side.

Putting it on the wall, he started writing a few lines and finished it with his autograph. Then he gave it to the surgeon. "Here. Frame it. Put it on his wall if you think it'll help," he said and smiled.

The canid chuckled and took it. As Kalen left the room, she looked at it.

"Your mother is the real hero. Not me. Now clean your room, kid."

And then Kalen's signature.

###

Gabrielle closed the door behind her and leaned her head against the wall. She could not remember being this exhausted before. It wasn't physical ... this was emotional

exhaustion. She felt utterly, absolutely drained and all she wanted was a large helping of Yohni, preferably with a side order of Yohni with extra Yohni.

"Don't tell me," she said. The other door in the room had opened and she expected Guy or Christopher to lay into her. "I just wrecked my own chances."

"I wouldn't say that," Yohni answered. "I was in the audience. I heard some of the audience mumbling that enough was enough when the third mob-question was asked. And at the femme next to me, who clearly didn't know I'm your wife, leaned over and said she thought that with so many questions of that kind, your opponent had to be behind it."

"He's not," Gabrielle said. "I don't know how I know it ... I just know it. He's not. But thanks for trying to cheer me up."

Yohni walked up to her wife and slipped her arms around Gabrielle's waist from behind, leaning her head against the equine's back. "You smell nice."

Gabrielle couldn't help a chuckle. "And you're not giving up, are you?"

"On you? Nevah! Can't make me, so there ... neener! And you still smell nice."

"What do you say we go out for a drink?"

"It's past eleven o'clock, hon ... we're not exactly twenty anymore," Yohni said and smiled crookedly. "Are you sure you can take it?"

"I'm going to get a drink. And then I'm going to get another. And then I'm going to go home and forget those idiotic questions!" Gabrielle said and sighed, pushing herself off the wall.

Yohni turned her around and looked up at the equine, still smiling that crooked smile. "I think I know how to make you forget," she said and wagged her eyebrows.

Gabrielle smiled. Then she leaned down and kissed her wife.

Tomorrow, Guy and Christopher would tell her she'd more or less lost the election. But she'd worry about it later.

Later.

###

When Kalen woke up, the first thing he did was call the club office to tell them he would be in for afternoon practice, but that he couldn't make the morning session, and why. With a game the following day, he knew he'd be in a lot of trouble but Nadia and Steve were more important.

He had slept on a rather uncomfortable couch in the hospital waiting room, and one of the nurses had been kind enough to cover him with a blanket. He was still sore though. Practice that afternoon would be sheer Hell.

When he got up, he realized there were reporters outside, and he had not been in the mood to talk to any of them. He had pulled the hood on his hoodie up, and hurried out while no one noticed. Then he'd gone to find Mr. and Mrs. Leon. As it turned out, neither of them felt like talking to the press either.

Mrs. Leon had gone to talk to the doctors. Mr. Leon hadn't eaten anything since arriving at the hospital and his wife had given Kalen the strictest instructions to make sure her husband got some breakfast.

Kalen knew better than to argue with the tone of voice the doe had employed, and for a moment, he felt like saluting.

Instead, he had taken Mr. Leon to a nearby diner and bought them both breakfast.

They were now sitting opposite one another, stabbing their food without much appetite, and trying to get some kind of conversation going. It was next to impossible, but Kalen was determined to succeed.

"Your wife's going to cuff me about the ears if you don't eat anything, Mr. Leon," he tried at last. "Come on ... your daughter doesn't need you keeling over from low blood-sugar."

The lion actually winced, but he did eat a little, and Kalen nodded before taking a bite of his toast. The dietician working for the team would no doubt die of a heart-attack if he even knew what was on the plate in front of Kalen right now, but the equine didn't intend to eat most of it anyway. Just the things he felt he could get away with ...

Such as the toast.

"Both her legs ..." Leo finally said and put his fork down before covering his face with his paws. "Why ...? Why did this happen?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that, Mr. Leon," Kalen said, quietly. "All I know is that when the editor at Sports of Today decides he wants an interview with an athlete, he won't stop until he gets it. For any reason whatsoever. That throng of journalists at the hospital? I'll bet you any amount of money that there's at least one SoT-reporter in that crowd. Trying to get to Steve."

"I'm going to close them down," Leo said, darkly. He looked over the rim of his coffee-mug in a way that made Kalen gulp in dread. There were times when the lion could look extremely scary and now was one of them.

"How?" Kalen wondered aloud, despite himself.

Leo finished his coffee and cracked his knuckles. "I'm going to get a legal team together. The best furs out there ... and then I'm going to sue them. I'm going to bleed them dry. Penny by penny. I'll sue them once ... then again ... and then again ... for something new, related to this, every single time. I'll even sue them on behalf of the family of the reporter who got killed if I have to. I'm going to make them spend their lives in court, until the negative publicity kills them and they have to start laying off furs. And then ... I'm going to buy the remains ... and close it down."

Kalen nodded.

He liked that idea.

He finished his coffee and looked across the table again for a moment. Then he sighed. He didn't want to go back to Jacksonville this soon, but he had no choice.

What he really wanted was for life to start taking a turn for the better soon.

Really soon.