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X – Two weeks on...

It had been two weeks since Nadia woke up in the hospital. Two weeks since she first learned that she had lost a leg and a half ... and consequently, it had had enough time to sink in. Many tears had been spilt, though mostly when she was alone or with Steve. For a while, she didn't understand how her life could go on, with her being crippled like that. Nor did she understand why Steve would want to stay with her. He could have any femme out there ... and when she had even mentioned it to him, he'd been angry. Or insulted, more like it.

He'd told her firmly and in a tone of voice that told her he really didn't want to go further into that particular debate, that he was not leaving. Not now, not ever.

She didn't understand why, but she was grateful for it. Especially now that so long had passed. Days of aches, nights of itching and hours upon hours of boredom interspersed by visiting hours. Her parents had come by every day. Steve spent every second he could with her. Charles and Frances had been there, but Frances had to leave after a couple of days, going back to work. Charles had lost his job. He had left only the day before, a new job waiting for him back home in California.

Steve's dad was still there. But he was barely recognizable. He lived at a hotel near the hospital, and he came to visit every day ...

His hair was grey. He stooped slightly and his paws shook so badly he had trouble holding onto a cup of coffee at times. His face was haggard and his eyes dull and lackluster. It was terrible to behold ... that a fur as lively and happy as Esteban Lopez could collapse so completely and so swiftly was almost unfathomable.

Several of her classmates had come by. She appreciated it, but she knew she'd lose contact with most of them. Her parents had arranged everything with her university, once the doctors had been able to say with any measure of certainty how long it would take for her to recover and learn how to walk with her prosthetics. Or at least shuffle along, supporting herself on canes ... if it would even be possible at all.

So she would go back to school next year.

Kalen had visited twice more. He was in Fargo now ... his team was playing Steve's next. They had looked forward to that, but obviously, now they wouldn't actually play one another. Kalen, however, had incurred the displeasure of the League by stating he would be wearing something to honour his injured friend.

The league rules concerning uniforms did not allow for individual statements like that, but Kalen had made it clear he would break the rules if needs be, and pay the fine without complaint.

Steve had been touched by the gesture.

A doctor was examining her wounds while these thoughts ran through Nadia's head. She had her bandages checked twice daily and they were replaced every morning. The swelling had gone down a lot, but the aches hadn't diminished. On the contrary in fact.

Sighing, she closed her eyes and hoped the doctor would be done soon so she could have some visitors. The television was about as interesting as the food they served at the hospital. At least her concussion was gone and she could read again. So her parents had brought all her books from school and whatever reading material she wanted otherwise.

She looked sidelong to her bedstand and smiled crookedly. She was old-fashioned in some ways. For one thing, she preferred books where she actually had to flip pages, rather than reading pads. Most of her friends at university didn't understand that. The reading pad was much easier to use, with search-systems and access to the Net, where relevant commentaries and reviews could be found in the blink of an eye.

But Nadia preferred real paper books. It was far easier for her to take in knowledge that way, for some reason. But there, on the bedstand, was a reading pad, nonetheless. It was

simply easier when confined to a hospital bed day in and day out. And the damned thing was slowly growing on her, too.

She still preferred visitors though. Finally, the doctor seemed to finish and he left the room after a few polite nothings. And only moments later, the door opened again and Lizzy entered. Propping up her bed with a smile spreading on her face, Nadia greeted her mother happily. Finally, someone to talk to!

Lizzy put down her purse and took off her jacket, before sitting down next to her daughter's bed, crossing her legs. "Good morning, sweetie. Slept well?"

"Better than last night, at least," Nadia admitted. "Where's dad?"

"He flew back home yesterday. He has to be in court today and tomorrow. Then he'll come back," Lizzy answered, smiling. "Don't worry. We'll get them for what they did."

Nadia felt a strange sensation of uncertainty. She was angry that she had lost her legs. Furious in fact. She wanted someone to pay, but it seemed to her like her parents had launched a crusade against a lot of furs, most of whom had nothing to do with what had happened. She didn't really know how to explain that to her mother, however. But while she wanted those responsible for the accident to be held accountable, how did it make everything right to get a lot of innocent furs fired?

"Okay," she said, her uncertainty obvious to anyone who heard her. "I just ... I mean, you really want to close down that newspaper ... ?"

Lizzy looked slightly surprised. "Of course we do. It's because of their dreadful business practices that this happened. Because they won't take no for an answer, by orders of their executives," she said. "You don't have to worry, though. Your Dad is damned good at this kind of thing."

Nadia nodded slowly. Clearly her mother didn't understand her dilemma. She'd have to explain it later, though ... when she had figured out how to get her point across.

"Did you hear about Kalen?" she asked, smiling widely.

Lizzy nodded and matched her daughter's smile. "I did. He is a very good friend, Nadia. You and Steve are very lucky to have someone like him in your lives. I don't normally watch sports but I think I'm going to have to watch this particular game."

"Just to see what he comes up with, eh? Anyway, Mom ... I've got something I want to ask you."

"Go ahead?"

Nadia adjusted the bed slightly and looked at her mother. "This is going to sound weird. But what would you say if I asked if I could help you out? With the agency I mean? It'd be something to do with my time while I'm here."

Lizzy looked surprised. She ran something called the "Last Chance Agency", helping young criminal offenders get their lives back on track, while they were still in jail. Her success-rate was well above average, but despite numerous requests from higher authorities to expand her program, she had refused to do so. Part of why she was so successful, she argued, was precisely because she took an interest in each and every one of her wards, as opposed to simply running them through a system, en masse. Most of the furs she helped had multiple experiences of being let down by furs they trusted. It was critical in each and every case, that this did not happen again. The only way she could guarantee that was to run a small agency with a limited number of employees where she could stay abreast of every case.

"Well ... what did you have in mind?" she asked. "I mean, you can't go visit these furs in jail, obviously. And even if you could, it takes a lot of training to know how to get through to them."

Shrugging, Nadia smiled. "I know. I was thinking about paperwork and suchlike. Anything. I would just like to do something useful while I'm laid out here anyway."

Nodding slowly, Lizzy thought about it long and hard. It wasn't as simple a request as it seemed. She couldn't simply give Nadia a bunch of case files and tell her to read through them. All cases involved sensitive information which she couldn't give to anyone else. Not even her own family. If it ever came to the knowledge of even a single one of her wards that she had let her daughter read through the cases, she might as well close down the Agency right away. She'd never be able to recreate the necessary trust in her impartiality and professionalism again, but at the same time, she really wanted to help Nadia.

"I'll see what I can do," she said. "No promises. Perhaps Martin can use some help."

Martin Hunter had been one of her most spectacular successes. A former habitual, juvenile delinquent and ganger who had turned his life around in the most unbelievable way, by helping bring the insane, mass-murdering jackal Benjamin Aureus to justice, at great risk to his own life and health. While still in jail, even.

When he got out of the slammer, he had gone to work at a garage, where Lizzy had arranged for an apprenticeship for him, but much as he had oil in his blood, and much as he seemed to be one of nature's born mechanics, he had eventually drifted back to the Last Chance Agency. Lizzy was extremely happy to have him working for her. He spoke the language of young criminals better than she ever could, and he was walking proof that her program worked. He was a certified mechanic, he had a family and two small children of his own, and there was no chance whatsoever he would ever get in trouble with the law for anything more serious than a parking ticket again.

He might just be able to use some help. Nadia studied communications, after all. They just might be a good match, professionally speaking.

Nadia smiled. "That'd be great. If you could ask him, that'd be really nice," she said and adjusted her bed upwards a little to avoid slipping. "Hey, I might even get extra credit for it when going back to school."

She added the last part as a jest. It wasn't important to her if she did or not. She was one of the best in her class anyway. Not *the* best, but certainly in the top five.

And it would give her something to do with her time, while waiting for her wounds to heal.

###

Gabrielle was not pleased. Jason Hartwood's campaign was a well oiled machine, and every day new opinion polls showed the damage done to her credibility. By now, she was trailing badly, and the last debate was only days away. If she didn't somehow, pull a winning trick out of her sleeve, she'd lose the election. Not even the television-interview had turned the tide, although it had stopped her decline from getting out of control. Still, she was behind by as much as six points. A massive difference, almost impossible to make up. In truth, her only chance was to discredit Jason Hartwood, but there was no news about his wife, and without that, there was no way of figuring out how she had the information about the eight million dollar-check.

She had one card left up her sleeve, but it had to be played extremely carefully. She had been in contact with the FBI, and they had confirmed that they hadn't come looking for the money she had received from her father, because the paper trail had shown it was clean. She had gotten money that had been earned through one of Theodore Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the third's legitimate fronts. This might have been a winning argument, and she had been ready to use it immediately, but Christopher had urged her to wait until the last debate. She had asked him why, and he had explained

that while the money she had received had been legitimately earned, the money used to set up the business front almost certainly hadn't been, making the money suspect and dirty regardless. And that meant Jason Hartwood's campaign staff would use that argument if they were given time to do so.

Gabrielle did not like playing the game that way, but she was starting to really appreciate how dirty politics could be, and if this was her trump card, she'd have to play it last of all.

Sighing, she looked at the computer-screen in front of her. She would be asked to give a short speech at the final town hall debate, but no ideas presented themselves. Making a speech along the lines of "he's mean and he's lying and he shouldn't do that sort of thing" was, obviously, not a choice. So she kept struggling, trying to come up with another idea. It wasn't happening yet, though.

Yohni came in, closing the door behind her, holding two steaming mugs in her paws. Gabrielle smiled and leaned back. A mug of something hot might just be what she needed anyway.

"I figured you could use some hot soup. And something to distract you for a few minutes, before that furrow on your brow becomes permanent," she said and held the mug out for Gabrielle to take.

The equine did so and inhaled the scent of Yohni's vegetable soup with a contented sigh. "And to think you used to hate cooking," she said, sipping it. "You could serve this stuff for the president of the United States."

Yohni chuckled. "You think I'd waste good food on that asshole?" she asked with a smirk, "Not going to happen."

Gabrielle nearly exhaled the soup through her nostrils but she managed to choke back the laugh. "I love you for many, many reasons but I admit your directness is one of the more important ones!" she grinned and put down the mug for a moment.

"Look who I live with? If I wasn't forthright and direct, I'd go nuts around here. When Kalen still lived at home, I think my directness was the only thing keeping me from going utterly mad! Jeez, being the sole mongoose in a household of equines ... I'm sure there's a book in that somewhere."

"You should write it then," Gabrielle said and turned off the computer. "This isn't getting anywhere. I'm going to have to wing it."

"Good. You're better when you do," Yohni pointed out and sipped her soup. "So ... what will we do after the election?"

Gabrielle smiled and nodded to herself. Yohni knew as well as her that the election was almost certainly lost. Barring a miracle, she couldn't catch up to Jason Hartwood by now, and the incessant statements of optimism around her campaign office was driving her up the wall. Of course the furs working for her had to continue to believe in victory and believe there was a chance to turn things around, but a sprinkling of realism wouldn't hurt them either.

She sipped her soup again and wondered quietly what she *would* do after the election. Probably go back to designing.

"I'm not sure," she said and shrugged. "I think I'll take some time off first. Then probably start working on a new collection or something along those lines?"

"Sounds like a good idea," Yohni said and nodded. She looked like she was going to say something more, but she was interrupted by the phone ringing.

For a moment, Gabrielle looked tired and Yohni wondered if the equine was simply going to let it ring. But instead, she put the mug down and answered the phone ... without enabling the camera.

"Gabrielle Ryder speaking," she said and listened to the fur on the other end.

Yohni didn't understand what the subsequent conversation was about. In fact, it didn't sound much like a conversation at all. More like the fur on the other end did all the talking, and Gabrielle answered with "yes" and "aha" or "I see".

It took a while, too.

Then finally, Gabrielle nodded to herself. "Please, send me that right away. Yes, Email is fine."

Then she hung up and smiled crookedly before sitting down and turning the computer back on. Yohni still had no idea what had just happened.

"So ...?" she finally asked.

"Hmm?" Gabrielle mumbled and looked up from the screen. "Oh ... oh sorry Love. That was someone from the office. Seems they found out how Mrs. Hartwood got her information at last."

Yohni raised an eyebrow. "So ... what is it?" she asked and walked around the table to read what was on the screen.

She took a few moments to skim through it. Then finally she looked at Gabrielle again, incredulously. "How could it take them this long to figure something like that out?"

"He said she'd covered her tracks very, very well. Like she had deliberately gone to a lot of trouble to make sure the paper trail didn't lead back to her."

"Gabby ... if that's true, then she's probably the most cold and calculating bitch out there, no offense to any female canids of course. The only reason she could have for doing that so meticulously was if she had spent *years* planning how to get back at you!"

"Look at this ..." Gabrielle simply said and opened another file.

Yohni did so, once again reading through the file in front of her. "It looks like a census-page ... why do you ... oh ... oh I see. What a godawful little creep!" she said and narrowed her eyes.

"The question is whether this is enough. Besides, Yohni, while she's turning out to be a disgusting little git, her husband has been nothing but upstanding and forthright so far."

"Gabby, he attacked your damned integrity!"

"He has every right to. He got the information ... if he didn't use it, he has no place in politics. Besides, he doesn't know me, and he didn't know the story behind it. To outsiders, those eight million *must* look really suspicious."

Yohni frowned. "I don't have to like him anyway," she mumbled. "Do you think this is enough?"

"To swing six points? I doubt it. But it'll make my loss a lot smaller at least," Gabrielle said with a shrug.

Yohni put down her mug and sat down on Gabrielle's lap. "You know ... if they take the Castro out of the Castro ... I want to move."

"Where to?" Gabrielle asked, slipping an arm around her wife to make sure she didn't slip off her lap.

"Not sure. Leave the country, maybe?"

"Might not be a bad idea. We'll take a look at it when it's all done and dealt with."

###

Kalen opened the small but heavy package in front of him. It had been redirected to the hotel where he lived while in Fargo for the game, rather than going to his home. That sort of thing happened automatically now, but when he was a child, it would've been inconceivable. That package would've been waiting for him when he got home or, if he had been gone too long, it would have been returned to sender.

But now, mail followed furs when they traveled, providing they had an official travel itinerary, and the entire team naturally did. It held a small, bronze statue and a letter. An actual, paw-written letter. Those were rare nowadays. Everyone sent mail electronically, and school-children only wrote things by paw in the first grade. And not even in all classes. Many furs could barely hold a pen the right way anymore ... something Kalen thought was a sign of spiritual impoverization. The ability to read *and* write was important and simply constructing words seemed ... bland to him. He thought more about what he wrote, when he wrote something by paw.

He sat down and read the letter. It was from Vishalya and it made him smile to simply hold it in his paw while reading it. She was apologizing for not sending the statue sooner ... something which he found rather amusing since he hadn't even known she had bought it in the first place. She could've sent it six months after buying it, and he wouldn't have known to expect it.

Still, he was happy that she was thinking of him. And the statue was a very nice piece, too. He knew what Ganesha symbolized, and he was touched by Vishalya's kindness in sending it to him. It meant she cared enough to want to make sure the gods were protecting him, and that was a really heartwarming feeling.

He put the statue down on the table in front of him and read on. It was a long letter. In some places, it was rather sad, too. Vishalya wrote about how she had to keep the letter a secret from her brother, because he didn't approve of the contact she had with Kalen. She wrote about how much she resented the marriage she was being forced into.

Kalen wanted to write her back ... tell her to forget that marriage and come to America again. But ... that would look strange. It would be much too forward of him and worse, if her brother did intercept the letter, she would be in all kinds of trouble.

That was really the main problem. Kalen knew he had found the girl of his dreams. The One! The future mother of his children! All the old clichés. But she was from a different culture than him, and she had a family with different values. He knew more about Hinduism than most Americans would ever know about their *own* faith, but that didn't

make things any easier, really. Not as long as Vishalya's xenophobic, misogynistic brother had any say in things and from what she was writing, his influence was increasing almost on a daily basis.

Kalen remembered when he had first met Vishalya's father. Mr. Singh had seemed like a good businessfur, but Kalen was starting to realize that the Indian equine lacked something. He trusted his son too much, and that was damaging him right now.

At least judging from what Vishalya was writing.

Sighing, Kalen leaned his head back after finishing the letter. It seemed like the only thing that mattered to Vishalya's brother was *money*.

When the season was over, Kalen would go to India and bring Vishalya home with him, if it was the last thing he did! He'd have enough money to come across as someone important and not simply someone who could be dismissed, then.

Particularly if he could go with a Super Bowl ring on his finger. He knew Football wasn't a popular sport in India, but he'd still have a world championship to his name that way ... and a lot of money.

It made his stomach turn to even think along those lines, but if he had to contend with Vishalya's brother, he knew he'd need some kind of leverage.

He looked at the bronze statue of Ganesha and smiled. "Hey you ... help me out. I'm a non-Hindu and I need help!" he chuckled. Probably the most irreverant prayer he could come up with, really. Referring to a major deity as "hey you" wasn't exactly what he had learned at University, but somehow, Kalen felt Ganesha would understand, if he was listening.

He got up, out of his chair and placed the statue on his luggage. He did not want to risk forgetting it when he left. Then he fell backwards onto his bed and sighed, deeply. He needed some sleep. And a good idea or two.

One thing at a time, he thought ... and drifted off.

###

Yashvir put down the receiver, terminating the phonecall. Then he leaned back and tapped his fingertips against one another, smiling grimly. "Excellent," he muttered to himself. He'd had just about enough of his sister's nonsense, and he had made an important decision.

Without involving his parents. There was no need for either of them to know. He was pretty much in charge of the family by now anyway, and it would only be a matter of time before that was made official. Then he would control the family and its fortunes ... such as they were ... and he would be on his way to parliament. Well on his way, even.

That his sister wouldn't voluntarily help him achieve this goal was simply unacceptable.

The door opened and two tall, muscular male canids stepped in.

"Gentlefurs," Yashvir said and got up. "So glad you could make it on such short notice."

The canid on the left smiled and bowed slightly. "We are pleased to do business with you, Mr. Singh. So ... who is this fur giving you trouble?"

"An American, but I don't want you to go after him. He is too high profile for something that simple. Instead, I want you to remove that which causes him to annoy me," Yashvir explained, adjusting his jacket slightly and walking around the table to look at the two furs in question.

"Another American?" the canid on the right said. His accent was noticeable ... he too was clearly from the States. "And a high profile one? A politician?"

Yashvir shook his head. "No, but that needn't concern you. What I want you to do is remove my sister."

The two canids looked confused.

"You want us to ...?"

"You mean ...?"

"Of course not. I want you to abduct her. I want you to take her from here, to a location specified by myself, and keep her there, without contact to the outside world, and I want you to do this eight weeks from now. Is that sufficient time to prepare?"

The two canids nodded. "No problem," the one on the right said. "It'll cost you, though."

"I expected that. We shall settle the pecuniary details later, once I have heard your finalized plans," Yashvir said, matter-of-factly. "I want no harm to come to her ... whatsoever. If she is as much as bruised, then I can assure you, I've got enough money to send someone after the two of you without restraints. Do we have an accord?"

The canid on the right nodded. "We do, Sir. No harm will come to her. She'll be treated like a princess. In fact, we may be able to get her to come along voluntarily."

"Now that ... I would like to see," Yashvir chuckled. "Well then, surprise me. I expect you back here three weeks from today with some finalized plans."

The two canids nodded and turned, leaving the office and Yashvir smiled, adjusting his jacket again. Then he left his office to find something to eat.

###

Steve sat bolt upright in bed, covered in sweat. Coming home from the hospital was nice on paper, but it was terrible to turn over at night and realize Nadia wasn't there next to him.

And that made no sense. She lived on campus, most of the time. She spent almost every weekend at home with him, and vacation-time was always set aside for the two of them but he was used to sleeping without her being there. But now that his girlfriend was hospitalized, it felt like she was never coming back. But she *was*. It was silly of him to even think that. She was well out of the woods and in fact, she'd be home one of the next few days.

He fell backwards on his pillow again. It was dark in the room and he was still in that strange place halfway between being asleep and being awake. For a moment, he contemplated getting up, but it was pitch black outside, so it was still in the middle of the night. He could turn and look at the alarm-clock, but frankly, he didn't care what time it was. It was "too early", and he was going back to sleep.

Once his heart-rate slowed to a reasonable level, at least.

Swallowing hard, he finally caught his breath and he blinked a few times against the darkness.

Something was wrong.

Or perhaps not wrong. Something was out of the ordinary, at least.

For a moment, he tried to figure out what it might be, until he realized what it was his sixth sense was trying to tell him.

He wasn't alone in the room.

Blinking again, he fought back the urge to immediately leap out of bed, but ... if this was an armed burglar, he could be shot or stabbed before he even knew what hit him.

But surely, a burglar would have noticed him sitting upright like that?

Slowly, his curiosity got the better of him and he sat up again in bed. His eyes were getting used to the darkness at last.

No, he'd been wrong. He *was* alone in the room. There was no one else there.

Nodding slowly, he lay back down on his back. It was the same kind of feeling that he had experienced that night not long ago in the hospital. Where he had been sure his old football coach had been sitting across the room when he woke up one night.

What he wouldn't give for some good advice from that particular fur these days.

He had to be sure.

However idiotic or silly it might be, he just *had* to.

Coach Larsen had been dead for years, but ... there were still those out there who believed Elvis would come back, too, after all. Slowly, he reached out to the side and turned on the lamp on the bed-stand.

As expected, the room was empty. He was alone indeed.

Sighing, Steve nodded to himself. Then he turned off the light before rolling over on his side and going back to sleep. It was easy to drift off again, tired as he was. The temperature in the room was just right and his pillow practically reached up around his head and pulled him into a soft, insistent caress.

Smiling contentedly, Steve made a grunting sound as pleasant dreams drifted up from his subconscious.

The barest hint of wind made the curtains flutter.

It was a nice, quiet night outside.