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XII – Across the globe

Kalen opened the door to his mothers' house and entered. He was glad to be home. Somehow, this place would always be home, no matter where he had his official residence, but in truth, he suspected, many children felt like that. Adults of fifty would still say they were "going home" to visit their parents. That probably didn't end until those parents ended up in nursing homes. Probably because nursing homes weren't really homes. They were simply places to pass time, waiting for Death to come.

That was probably too grim, he knew, but the fact remained that this was his home and always would be.

It was getting obvious that Jacksonville would miss the playoffs. They were six and six and still had a shot at a trip to the post-season, but that would require them winning their last four games, and considering that three out of those four were against postseason teams from a year ago, none of whom seemed to have lost their edge, there was little chance it would work out.

He would have liked to take the team to the postseason. If for no other reason than to truly stick it to the ownership for firing him, but at least he knew he was not to blame for his team's troubles. He, at least, had done his share, and then some.

Twenty five touchdown passes. Another four rushing touchdowns ... and he would almost certainly break the magical barrier of four thousand passing yards. He needed less

than two hundred passing yards on average for the last four games. It was definitely doable. He'd made the best possible sales pitch for himself this season and he wasn't quite as worried as he once had been about his future career. Those were numbers someone would pick up on and he would have a job next year for sure. If he was lucky ... he might even get a starting job in a different ballclub.

He slipped his feet into a pair of hoof-covers and hung up his jacket in the hall. It was funny, really. There was still a pair of hoof-covers in his size on the shoe-rack. So to his mothers, this was clearly his home as well.

It was home because they were here. His childhood had been spent upstairs at the store, back when it was a one-story place. When his mothers had moved here, this place had become "home". It was not a matter of location, but of content.

Stopping by a mirror to make sure he didn't look too disheveled when going upstairs, he took a moment to take in the scent of the place. Neither of his mothers were particularly fastidious about dusting off, so there was a slight scent of dust in the air. And cinnamon. The house always smelled of cinnamon. Anyway, the place wasn't dirty, but it was lived in and it felt like the kind of place where he could kick up his hooves and not get told off for it. House & Garden would no doubt hate the place. The only room that followed any kind of decorating rule-set was the drawing room. Everything else was a hodge-podge of styles.

"MOM?" he called out. "EITHER OF YOU!?"

Yohni answered. They were aware he was coming, of course, and he could smell tea and freshly baked bread.

Bounding up the stairs, he made it to the first floor and took a look around. Yep ... everything looked just as it always had.

"Gabrielle will be back as soon as she can disentangle herself from the press," Yohni said from the kitchen. "She's been busy all day. I swear, even I had to go home early. Can you imagine that? Respectable California newspapers coming to my shop to get a comment? Just because she managed one of the biggest upsets in modern Californian voting history?"

Kalen grinned widely. "It's difficult, I'll grant you. But then again, it's a brave, new world. Could you imagine any of this happening twenty years ago?"

Smiling, Yohni shook her head. "Wouldn't have been possible then. Thank God it's changed. Anyway, how are you doing, my dear? You look like someone in dire need of a cup of tea and some of your mother's home baked corn bread!"

"Oh, I'm famished! They don't feed me, y'know, Mom. I haven't eaten in days and I'm suffering ... *suffering*, I tell you!" Kalen exclaimed, purposefully overacting horribly.

Yohni just looked at him for a loooong moment. Then dryly replied with an "Aha! I see."

"See what?" the equine asked, innocently.

Taking a mug from the cupboard and putting it on the table, Yohni shrugged. "You inherited your father's sense of high drama and none of your mother's acting talent! Now sit down and behave!"

"Yes Mom," Kalen said, snapping his fingers as if to show regret at his lack of acting ability.

Yohni ruffled his hair and poured him a cup of tea. "That's alright. You're still the best looking player in the league."

"On a team that won't make the playoffs and who won't renew his contract," Kalen added.

Yohni shrugged, matter-of-factly. "If you ask me, that's a blessing. Your teammates are nice, your coach is a good fur, but you've been treated like dirt by the owners and I think you'd have been much better off being drafted by another team."

"Like who?"

"The Raiders or the 49ers would've been good if you ask me!" Yohni said with a wide smile. "You'd have stayed in California instead of going to that awful, Godforsaken place!"

"You mean Florida?" Kalen asked, incredulously, seeing where this was going.

"Horrible place. Too many crocodiles and hurricanes. Terrible in every way ... can't imagine why any fur would voluntarily live there?" Yohni said and rolled her eyes theatrically. She even put a slightly haughty edge to her voice just for effect.

Kalen grinned and sipped his tea. "Damned Mom ... you didn't lose *your* acting skills at least!" he mumbled. "Christ, I needed this ..."

"What? A cup of tea? I thought we taught you how to cook before you moved away from home, dear?"

"It's never the same as yours, though. It doesn't have that flavor of "Mom" to it."

Yohni smirked. "You know, that's entirely the wrong thing to say to someone with my past ..."

Kalen went crosseyed and nearly choked on his tea. "MOOOM!!!"

Grinning, Yohni went to get some corn bread from the oven. Kalen could still sound exactly like an offended teenager when he wanted to.

Somehow, that felt very reassuring.

###

Vishalya craned her neck and set her lips and eyes in a hard expression. If she was to be a bargaining chip, she would at least make her revulsion and her protestations clear to anyone. Her mother adjusted the red and gold sari that Vishalya had chosen to wear, and stepped back, nodding.

"You've never looked better," she said, wearily. "And I feel dreadful about all this."

Vishalya nodded. Her mother was coming around to her side, but there was nothing Talikha could do. This was entirely in Yashvir's paws by now, and even though her father had returned, Vishalya knew he wouldn't stop his son.

"When we were in the United States," she said, looking into the mirror but addressing her mother, "Father said that he had brought me there, because Yashvir didn't have what it takes. What changed?"

Talikha shrugged and sat down on the edge of her daughter's bed. "The embezzlement."

"That's his answer to everything, isn't it?" Vishalya asked. "That it's all because of something as flippant as money?"

"A lot of money, Vishalya."

"All the money in the world can't buy happiness, mother, only the illusion of it. Doesn't the travails of the Pandavas and the wisdom of Yudishtira in particular teach us that after losing everything, a fur may find his path to true happiness, wisdom and redemption?"

Doesn't his final test show us, specifically, that worldly trappings are an illusion and that true happiness comes from family and love?"

Smiling just a little, Talikha nodded. "You are correct, of course. But money is also a powerful intoxicant, and while no one would dare to question your piety, my dear, the lessons of the Vedas are not the foremost thing in your father's mind. Or in your brother's."

Vishalya snorted indignantly. "And yet Yashvir claims to be a Hindu nationalist. Nationalist, sure. Hindu, I'm not so sure of! He reads the Vedas like a bedtime story, never fully conscious of what they say and what they teach us."

"He's still your brother."

"Only because I can't deny genetics, mother. I would take a great deal of pleasure in publicly renouncing him."

Talikha nodded again. "He scares me by now. Your father thinks the only way out of this miserable position we're in will be through your brother's political connections. I disagree, but he doesn't really listen to me anymore."

Vishalya softened a little and turned to face her mother. "At least I know you've come to see things from my side, and that is a comfort. And who knows ... the Gods may send a miracle yet."

"I will pray for that," Talikha said, quietly, getting up.

###

Nadia coming home was easier than Steve had feared. The doctors simply felt that now that she was out of immediate danger, she would recover faster in her own home than she would in a hospital bed. A nurse would visit three times daily for a few weeks, then gradually, the amount of visits would lessen until finally, they'd stop completely.

After that, however, she would need to start coming in for rehab at the hospital, learning how to walk on her prosthetic limbs.

But no one had been happier to be out of the hospital bed and back home than Nadia. Leo and Lizzy had practically begged her to come home to Seattle to stay with them while learning how to walk again and healing up completely, but Nadia wouldn't hear of it. She had a home with Steve, she insisted, and that was where she'd go.

Steve, for his part, was enormously grateful for that. He still had to go to and from the hospital every day though, but now it was to check up on his father who was still in a terrible state and barely communicative after that morning breakdown.

Furs who knew Esteban were deeply concerned. He had never seemed like the type who could possibly crumble so completely to most of them, but his children ... all three of them ... knew how deeply the death of their mother had struck their father. None of them knew what to do, though, except trust in medical science to help their father recover and be there for him as much as possible.

Nadia sat upright in a wheelchair and looked over the mess in the living room, groaning. "This looks like a regular bachelor-pad," she mumbled. "We're going to have to clean up somewhat around the house, and since none of us can stand up to use a vacuum-cleaner, we'll have to hire some professional help until your leg is healed, Steve. I'm not living in this kind of mess, y'hear?"

Steve happily nodded. It was good to hear that Nadia was as strong as he had expected she would be. That she wasn't moping in a corner or spending her time wondering why she hadn't simply died, but then again, she hadn't shown that kind of mentality in the hospital either. The doctors had warned him it might come later, but then he would be ready to deal with it.

"I'm fine with that. In fact, if I'm being a real swine about this, I'm calling the Greys to tell them I need help with the cleaning until I'm able to stand on my own two feet. They'd pay for it!"

Grinning, Nadia shook her head in disbelief. "You wouldn't!" she asked, looking at her boyfriend.

"Oh Hell yes, I would! It's not as if it'd make the bottom drop out of their budget!"

"But Steve ... they know you live with me. And they know who my Father is ..."

The wolf shrugged. "So? Officially, this is my flat. Officially, you live at campus!"

Rolling her eyes, Nadia tried hard to look reproachful and disapproving, but even without a mirror, she knew she wasn't succeeding. "What's for dinner, anyway?"

"Well, that's going to have to be a cooperative effort for the time being? I hope you don't mind?" Steve asked.

"Oh woe is me," Nadia mock-complained. "I have a boyfriend who actually volunteers to do half of the work in the kitchen, whatever shall I do with myself? Life as I know it is surely at an end. The gross unfairness of the world will never cease!"

Shaking his head in disbelief, Steve . "And you managed to do it in iambic pentameter on top of things ..." he mumbled. "Shakespeare would cringe in his grave, I'm sure."

Nadia fell silent for a moment. She looked at her legs and sighed, rubbing her face. "Things will have to change around the house in general, you know that, don't you?" she said, suddenly all serious.

Steve nodded, all the mirth instantly vanishing upon realizing what Nadia was getting at. "I know. And I'm going to help with anything I can. But first of all, you're going to walk again. You're not bound to that wheelchair for life. And secondly, I'm not going to be the kind of asshole who won't let you do what you're capable of doing."

"I know, and you have no idea how important that is right now," the young hybrid said, quietly. "I need to know I can still do things. Maybe not as fast as I used to ... at least not for a good while ... but I need to not feel like a useless cripple."

Steve smiled. "Not a problem. You get to chop the onions!"

"Oh, just you wait until I get my prosthetics ... I'll be chasing you around the place with half a freshly sliced onion, then!" Nadia chuckled. "But truly. It means a lot to know you'll help but that you're aware that I need to do things myself, too."

Nodding slowly, Steve sat down on the couch and rested his crutches next to him. "Alright, how would you prefer I go about it? Should I wait until you ask for help or should I jump in when it becomes obvious there's something you need help with?"

"I'm not above asking for help. You know I've never had a problem with that," Nadia answered, thoughtfully. "I'm not one of those furs who thinks it's a gross humiliation to ask someone for help. I can't do everything. I couldn't do everything before the accident ... then why should I be able to when I've only got half the amount of leg I did before?" she asked, slightly bitterly.

Steve leaned forward and pulled her wheelchair close, looking straight into her face. "I want you to listen to me for a moment, Nadia. I'm here because I love you, and this doesn't change that fact in any way whatsoever. You've got no idea how much you impress me already. Furs have cracked totally when they've suffered less than you have,

and you're able to crack jokes about it! Do you have any idea how awesome that makes you?"

"Oh yeah, that's me. The half-legged wonder," Nadia chuckled. Steve did have a point, and she knew it. "Thanks Love. I needed you to say that."

The wolf leaned forward and kissed his girlfriend gently. "Then I'll remember to say it every damned day! You're the best part of my life. Everything else is secondary."

"Even football?" Nadia asked, teasingly.

"If you asked me to, I'd send in my retirement papers first thing in the morning," Steve answered, truthfully.

Nadia smiled and ran her fingers through Steve's hair. "You're a big lug, sometimes, you know that?"

Steve grinned and shrugged. "I think that's part of why you keep me hanging around."

###

Gabrielle had said goodbye to the last of the reporters. Or more precisely, she'd told them all to bugger off and come back the next day if they had more questions. As far as she was concerned, it wasn't arrogance, when they had started asking circular questions. After answering the same question, asked in slightly different ways by the same furs four times, it became dull. Besides, she wanted to go home to her wife.

And her son, for that matter. She knew Kalen was visiting.

She needed a bit of normal family life for a day or two, actually. The election had taken a lot out of her ... more than she wanted to admit, too.

She pulled up the car and got out. She knew the Castro like her back pocket and she had easily lost the two or three cars that had suspiciously followed her from City Hall. Some reporters just didn't know how to take "no more questions, come back tomorrow" for an answer.

Making it home from the parking space wasn't even a problem. She didn't spot the first photographer or journalist until she was a hundred yards from the door, and she simply smiled politely and kept repeating "come back tomorrow" as she made it inside and locked the door after her.

"I'm HOOOME!" she called out.

"Hail the conquering heroine," Kalen called out from upstairs. "Congratulations, Mom!"

Grinning, Gabrielle hung up her coat, slipping on a pair of hoof-covers, "What are you talking about? I've fought for years to get heroin off the streets of the Castro."

The groan she got for an answer could be heard downstairs ... in stereo. The noise a mongoose and an equine could make when they decided to groan in tandem was amazing, Gabrielle noted to herself. Then she headed upstairs.

"Jest aside, I swear you'd think two thirds of the reporters out there had been predicting my victory all along, and not the other way around. I'm getting as much attention as the mayor! That can't be right," she said as she opened the kitchen door. Heading over to her son and kissing his cheek, she smiled widely. "I'm so glad you're here!"

"Sounds like you need some heavy lifting done, Mom," Kalen chuckled. "It's good to be home. Frankly, though, I need some advice."

Gabrielle had already continued towards her wife, kissing Yohni gently and pinching the mongoose's backside playfully. "Advice? From an old crone like me?"

"Very funny, coming from the femme who got voted "hottest politician in California" last year."

"By Pethouse Magazine," Gabrielle groaned and rolled her eyes. "Harry Rex still has a soft spot for me it seems. And you shouldn't be reading that kind of filth, Kalen, it's awful and pornographic and very immoral!"

Kalen opened his mouth to answer ... then groaned again, once more in tandem with Yohni ... before shaking his head. "Coming from you, that's utterly unconvincing, you know that don't you Mom?"

Gabrielle grinned and nodded. "Yep. Truth be told, it's a mother prerogative, though. You're never going to be allowed to grow old enough to realize that girls don't have cooties, and you're certainly not supposed to understand what sex is ..."

"Fool me once," Yohni muttered and chuckled. "Sit down. Tea! Advice! No more horsing around."

"Ooomph!"

"Ow ..."

"She got us, Mom ... I'm wounded, I'm wounded ..."

Kalen flopped backwards, rolling his eyes and lolling his tongue out the side of his mouth while gurgling and pretending to be seriously wounded and Gabrielle did her best fake swoon in her chair. Yohni took one look at the two of them and put the teapot on the table with another headshake.

"Equines!" she grumbled. "You're born drama-queens aren't you?"

Kalen sat back up straight and nodded with a wide, smug grin. "Yup. Anyway, listen ... if it's okay with you two, I need to ask you what to do about something."

"I already told you, dear. You need to get signed by a California-based team," Yohni said and poured a cup for her wife. "Everything will solve itself then."

Shaking his head, Kalen scratched his forehead and put his elbows on the table. "I'm not so sure it will. At least not with Vishalya."

"Ah, it's about girl-trouble then," Gabrielle said. "I suppose I can see why you'd ask us, then. But what's the problem?"

Kalen took a long moment to think about it. He already knew what he wanted to do. So why did he need to ask his mothers? He would have to talk to his father too, about this ... and that made no sense either. He was an adult and capable of making his own decisions. Yet he really felt he needed to talk this over with his parents.

"I want to marry her," he finally said. "There. I said it. And I know it's silly ... I know I only met her a few times and that she's half a world away in more ways than one. I know all this. And yet if I think about it, this is just the way it is."

Gabrielle looked at Yohni. The mongoose looked back and shrugged.

"Why's that silly," Yohni asked. "I knew I wanted to marry your Mom the moment I laid eyes on her."

"It's not that complicated, really. You know where you are, which is point A. You know where you want to end up ... which is point B. Now all you have to do is connect the two," Gabrielle said. "I mean, if she's as fantastic as you describe her, then I'm going to have to resign my post as most awesome equine in the northern hemisphere!"

"No chance," Yohni chuckled. "What exactly is it you're in doubt about, though?"

Kalen shrugged. What *was* he in doubt about? There was no easy answer to that and he leaned back in his chair again, covering his face with his paws and sighing deeply.

"I'm not in doubt about her or how I feel. But India is far away and, let's face it, very different from the United States. I'd have to go and get her, too. Her brother is trying to marry her off to some dipshit she's never met, to save the family fortune."

Gabrielle's face grew hard and dark instantly. "He's what?" she asked, calmly.

"Oh dear ..." Yohni mumbled and shook her head. "This is going to get ugly."

"It already is," Kalen said and sat upright, looking at both his mothers. "Vishalya's family is in the steel industry. Her father owns several steel mills ... that was why he was in the United States in the first place, to make business contacts. But apparently, someone skimmed off the top of their funds for a long time, without anyone noticing. It was an accountant, apparently, and they didn't realize what had happened until suddenly, notices began coming in saying that Vishalya's father hadn't paid various subcontractors and the workers at one mill hadn't been paid for two months. Then it began to roll. It looks like they've lost well over half of their fortune on this and they've still got unpaid bills aplenty. So to avoid bankruptcy ..."

"... Vishalya's getting hitched with someone with lots of cash to save the family fortune, regardless of what she thinks about it!" Gabrielle growled, between her teeth. "So, when are you leaving?"

Kalen felt a sense of relief. This was the kind of thing he'd needed to hear. "As soon as the season is over."

"Not before?"

"No. For two reasons. First of all, I need to be a success to stand any chance of swaying her parents. Preferably a success with a great big contract looming overhead. Secondly, I need Steve to come along for this."

"Steve?" Yohni asked. "But with Nadia's injury ...?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Not to mention his own," she added.

"His leg will heal in time. That's one of the two reasons I'm waiting until after the season ends, after all."

"His leg will be healed, but Nadia will need him, Kalen. You can't selfishly drag Steve across the globe with Nadia staying back here," Gabrielle pointed out. "But even if you

don't bring him, I see your point about going before then. You're under contract. You can't leave until the season is over."

"We're not making the playoffs, so the season will be over before too long. And thanks to modern medicine, Steve's leg won't take four months to heal, either. But I see your point ... about Nadia."

Kalen fell quiet for a while. "I'm going, though. I'm going, and I'm bringing her home with me. No one should be forced to go through with a marriage they don't want to go through with!"

"You're preaching to the choir," Gabrielle said, matter-of-factly. "Remember what your grandfather Theodore tried to do to me."

"May his arse itch and his arms be too short, wherever he is now," Yohni muttered. "For what it's worth, you've got our support for this, Kale. She sounds like she's worth it."

Kalen nodded. Vishalya was definitely worth it.

Gabrielle leaned forward over the table and looked at her son. "I want a promise out of you though," she said. "I want you to swear to me you won't take any stupid risks."

"I promise. I won't do anything dumb, Mom. I'm not twelve years old, trying to impress someone with how brave I am. I'm doing this because she's the one," Kalen said, meeting his mother's gaze.

"Good. Then go get her!" Gabrielle said with a smile.

###

It was late evening. Vishalya couldn't get a hold of Kalen. Arjun Sharma ... her husband to be ... had been one of the least interesting furs she could remember meeting. It wasn't that he was a bad fur. In fact, she didn't think he had the brains to be, but he was unbearably dull and to say he was simple-minded was an understatement.

He wasn't even attractive. He was slightly on the heavy side, which his insistence on wearing traditional, white clothing had done nothing to hide, and he had watery eyes. But that didn't matter. What mattered was that he was dumb as a brick and even more importantly, that Vishalya didn't know him and had no choice in whether to marry him in the first place.

So by now, she really wanted to call Kalen and talk to him. She knew he was visiting his family in California, but he had brought his cell-phone and had told her to call collect. But for some reason, she couldn't get a connection.

In fact, she hadn't been able to for some time now, and she had come to realize that her brother had something to do with it. Which meant she had to get a message to Kalen in a way her brother wouldn't be able to stop. Sending an old-fashioned letter seemed like the easiest thing to do, but that could be a long time underway, with postal services being what they were these days. It would simply take too long. Finding a neutral place to send an Email was another option, or getting a hold of a cell-phone that her brother hadn't blocked.

A cell-phone he hadn't blocked ...

Smiling crookedly, she suddenly knew exactly what to do. The fact that it would piss off her brother was just an added bonus.

It was beautiful in the garden this time of the evening. The stars were so clear above her that she felt almost overwhelmed when looking up at them. It was getting chilly, but she could bear it if it meant some peace and quiet.

There was a light on in the living room. Her father and mother were arguing. Yashvir had been there but like her, he had simply walked out when the argument started. She'd left because she hated it when her parents fought. He had left because he couldn't be bothered by it.

At least she knew how to get a message to Kalen now. She had to prepare, though. It was probably going to be the last chance she got to before the wedding. After that, Yashvir would clamp down on security like ...

She sighed and shook her head. He treated her like she was a gold bar ...

A valuable commodity, full of symbolic as well as real value, soft and malleable, but cold and incapable of feeling.

"So this is where I can find you, sister," Yashvir said from behind her. "Couldn't stand the argument either, I take it?"

Closing her eye, Vishalya did her best not to fly off in a rage simply from hearing her brother's voice. "I take it you don't approve of me sitting out here on my own?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't suppose any harm can come from it," Yashvir said and brushed his paws off against one another, before sitting down next to her, uninvited. "Now that you've met your future husband ..."

"What about him?"

"I'm sure you can see I haven't saddled you with some kind of monstrosity. He's from a good, respectable family. You'll have practically anything you want."

"All I saw was a buffoon who, at the age of 25, still needs help tying his shoelaces," Vishalya said, venomously. "Save your sales-pitch, brother. I am not one of those half-witted geese you had to boast at your conquests."

Shrugging, Yashvir smiled and seemed indifferent to the scorn. "You don't seem to understand your luck, Vishalya. You really don't. For all your claims of intelligence, you don't seem to be very perceptive."

"Then by all means, elucidate me! Tell me how why I am so lucky to be forced to marry someone she doesn't know and doesn't love."

"You're lucky because for one thing, you're doing something for your family. Something important. Not many furs get a chance to save their family in such a literal sense as you. But as I know family means nothing to you, I'll settle for saying you're lucky because you're getting a husband you're clearly smarter than. Which means someone as clever as you should be able to manipulate him into practically anything."

"A quick divorce then."

"I said *practically* anything, Vishalya," Yashvir said, evenly. "Don't test my patience further. You wouldn't like me when I get angry."

"Yashvir, I'd loathe, detest and despise you even if you were bouncing off the garden walls with joy," Vishalya said and folded her arms over her chest, looking straight ahead so as not to have to look at her brother.

He raised an eyebrow. "So much hatred, and for what? All I'm doing is offering you a fortune on a silver platter ... a life as the wife of a future leader of ..."

"Of what? He's so dense he couldn't lead a starving fur to food!" Vishalya bit back. "Trust me ... if I am indeed forced to go through with this charade, I will turn into your worst nightmare. If he is that easy to manipulate, then I guarantee you I'll use his influence to harm you!"

"But the problem, my dear sister, is that his influence comes through his father, who is the fur agreeing to this marriage on his son's behalf. You can't hurt me. You never could. You'd really do yourself a favor just giving up on these ridiculous notions of yours and enjoy your wedding. I promise you, you'll have the grandest, most amazing wedding since Draupadi!" Yashvir said, in his most sincere voice.

Vishalya nearly retched. Draupadi was one of her greatest role-models ... a figure out of the Mahabharata, beautiful beyond words, but wise and strong as well. The most powerful female figure in the old Vedas, in many ways. Someone who could sway the men in her life with a few, simple words, who was wise, generous to her friends, brave, strong and utterly ruthless when she needed to be. For Yashvir to invoke her in a situation like this was nothing short of revolting.

Instead of dignifying her brother with an answer, she simply got up, straightened her sari and walked back to the house.

She'd rather listen to her parents arguing than to her brother's oily attempts at being nice and generous.