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XIV – Nap

The rising sun offered very little warmth that morning. There was a thick mist, and the smell hanging on the air was one of cold, boiled cabbage. It was the kind of day where most furs would stay in doors rather than venturing out into the world. The mist clung to fur, and so would the stench. It would take several baths to get rid of something like that, in fact.

The locals called it "Delhi Mist", but it existed in many major cities in the world. Beijing allegedly had it worse than anyone else.

Vishalya looked out her window. She hadn't gone down to have breakfast with her family this morning. She'd rather spend all day in the thickest of the mist than have to endure her brother for ten minutes. Or her father, as it was. She had always loved him, always respected him and thought highly of him, but by now, he seemed so enthralled with Yashvir's plans to save the family fortune that she didn't seem to really matter anymore, as far as he was concerned.

There was a knock on the door, and while Vishalya was in a good mood not to answer, she knew that wouldn't make the fur outside go away. So she got up and opened the door.

She had expected it to be Yashvir, but to her relief, it was her mother.

"I just came up to tell you, your father is taking Yashvir on a tour of the plants today. And I'm going to the temple. So you ... you have the day to yourself," she said with a smile, before lowering her voice to continue, "In case there's someone you want to call."

Vishalya nodded and hugged her mother, thanking her. She would certainly try, but she didn't think it would work. Yashvir had no doubt already taken care of that.

"Then I'll see you tonight," Vishalya said. If Yashvir and her father were touring the plants, they wouldn't be home until the following evening at the earliest. Maybe not until the day after that, which suited her incredibly well.

Talikha kissed her daughter's cheek and left. Vishalya went back into her room. She would go downstairs later, when her father and brother had left.

###

"Why didn't you simply sue them into oblivion?" Steve asked. He was curious, rather than upset.

Leo, sitting opposite the wolf, shrugged. "I planned to, but when I realized I could obtain the majority and change the magazine, I guess Nadia's words got through to me."

"What did she tell you?" Steve asked, pouring a cup of coffee for his erstwhile father-in-law.

Taking the coffee, Leo looked nothing like the obscenely rich fur he really was. He wore a pair of well worn jeans, some sneakers that had definitely seen better days, and a University of Oregon football-jersey. He looked like any other fur, relaxing, and Steve admired that trait in the lion. He could really put the CEO aside when he was not at work.

"She told me not to get so caught up in the idea of vengeance that I lost myself," the lion said and sipped the black liquid. "I'd ask Nadia to marry you if you had no other qualities than your coffee, Steve ... damned this is good."

Grinning, the wolf nodded in gratitude at the compliment. "I hope I have other things to offer though," he said. "I can see Nadia telling you something like that. It's very like her."

Nodding, Leo took another sip of the coffee and leaned back. "Besides, she's right. If I bought the magazine, I can actually change it. If I bankrupted them through lawsuits, all they learn is that they did something wrong. Not how to do things right."

"How very wise."

"What about you, though, Steve? What are you planning on doing now?"

The wolf took a moment to think his answer through before delivering it. Finally, he put his coffee down and looked at Leo, across the table. He was trying to gauge whether the lion meant more than the obvious by his question. Was this a nagging doubt that he would stand by Nadia? That he'd up and leave?

No.

Leo would have asked him outright if he thought that was the case.

There was nothing to that question except genuine interest and concern.

"I've started rehabbing. The physios say I'll be able to complete short runs within a month, if I don't push it."

"Just in time for the post-season, eh?"

"I'm not playing any more football this season. Fargo is going to make the playoffs, but I won't be there with them."

Leo nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that. I can't even begin to imagine how it must feel."

"Right now, I'm focused on helping Nadia," Steve simply said and got up. He still used a cane to support himself, but that was only for a few more days.

Leo watched as the wolf headed into the kitchen. Then he took a moment to look around the living room. It was a warm, lived-in place. No white walls and chrome furniture here. Steve had definitely inherited his mother's sense of aesthetics. Jean had always preferred warm colors. The living room was painted in a great, marbled mustard yellow hue, with thick carpets on the floor and loads of artwork on the walls. That, at least, was Steve's own taste kicking in. It was the kind of living room that made Leo feel like kicking up his feet, popping open a bottle of beer and getting enormously comfortable the moment he stepped in.

It was a *welcoming* room.

Steve came in, carrying a tray of muffins. "Sorry, I forgot these. Nadia baked them yesterday. We tried one each already. They hit the bottom of your stomach like two hundred pounds of bricks, but they taste fantastic!"

Leo reached up and grabbed one as Steve passed the tray on the way to putting it on the table.

"Oh goody! Walnut muffins! Can't wait to try these," he said and bit into it.

Steve watched with interest as Leo ate the muffin, before taking one himself. "It's going to be a long haul, but I'm going to be here for Nadia every step of the way. Kalen wanted me to go with him to India when the season was over but I'm staying here. He understands why."

"India? Why India of all places? I mean, don't get me wrong, it's definitely worth a visit but what prompted that particular choice?" Leo asked, raising an eyebrow, before taking another highly pleased bite of his muffin.

"He's met a girl ... from New Delhi. And to be honest with you, I think she's "the one". But there are problems. Her brother is forcing her to marry someone against her will. She wants Kalen, just as much as he wants her," Steve explained, taking a bite out of his muffin. To say it was heavy was a severe understatement, but it was an absolute walnut explosion on his tastebuds. Nadia had tried numerous times to make her muffins fluffier, but it always happened at the cost of a drop-off in taste.

In the end, she had settled for heavy-but-tasty over fluffy-but-bland.

It wasn't until he had chewed and swallowed his bite of muffin that Steve realized Leo had stopped eating or talking, and that the lion was looking like someone had just punched him.

"I guess history really does have a habit of repeating itself," Leo said after another awkward moment of silence. "What is it with Gabrielle Ryder's family and forced marriages? Is there a particular equine *tradition* for that kind of nonsense that I don't know about?"

Steve shook his head. "I don't think there is. I think it's ... well ..." he scratched the base of an ear and thought it over for a moment before going on. "A lot of equines are extremely conservative types. And they don't interbreed well with other furs. There are so few of them, that most of them are extremely conscious of the fact that they've been in danger of vanishing completely if they don't all beget lots of children. Gabrielle, for her part, has made it her great mission in life to fly in the face of tradition, and even she became a mother. I think the Black Death is imprinted so deeply in their consciousness that having children becomes an almost overriding drive in them," he said. "Which makes it all the weirder that apparently, the brother in this case ... doesn't want his sister to

marry another equine. Apparently, from what Kalen had told me ... the groom-to-be is feline."

Leo nodded, slowly and with great seriousness as Steve spoke. He agreed ... in fact, Steve simply reiterated what most social studies said about equines. But that didn't make forced marriages any less obnoxious to him.

"What's Kalen's plan then? He rarely does anything without a plan, after all," he finally asked.

Steve finished his muffin, brushing his paws off against one another. "He's going to New Delhi to bring her here. As soon as the season is over. I ... wish I could help him. If I didn't need to stay here and help Nadia, I would, too."

"I don't envy you your position, but I do admire your dedication to my daughter," Leo said and smiled. "I hope everything works out for Kalen with this."

Steve nodded, sipping his coffee. "So do I ..." he mumbled.

###

"Is this going to work?" one canid asked.

"Of course it will. We've gone over this so many times I'd be able to explain the plan to you in detail if you woke me up at three in the morning," the other one answered.

The first canid nodded and checked his pockets. He had what he needed. Indicating to his friend that he was ready, he watched the second canid walk up to the gate and enter the code. Then, they hurried inside.

"Up the stairs, down the second hallway on the left, end of the hallway," the first canid reminded himself.

The second one nodded and pulled a keycard out of his pocket, opening the front door. Then they both stepped inside, as quietly as possible, and hurried upstairs. The whole house was very quiet, but exquisitely decorated. Statues and paintings on the wall showed the ancestors of those living in the house. And various deities of particular importance to the family.

"Remember, no harming her," the second canid whispered.

The first canid smiled widely and pulled a piece of cloth and a glass bottle from his pocket. "I know," he answered.

The second canid listened closely. There were no sounds to be heard. Nodding to his comrade, they both moved forward swiftly. To the second hallway on the left, then down that way. They could hear music from behind the right door.

Nodding to one another, they burst into the room. Only to find it empty.

"Damned!" the first canid growled. "She must've seen us coming through the gate!"

"THERE!" the second one called out and began bolting down the hallway. "STOP!"

Vishalya, however, was not in any mood to obey as she sprinted for the stairs.

###

"Hey Dad!"

Nadia waved at her father. She was in a wheelchair, but she looked like she was in good spirits. She was propelling the wheelchair herself, too, rather than letting her mother do so.

Lizzy brought up the rear, closing the door to the living room behind her with a big smile. "I smell coffee and muffins," she pointed out. "Thank goodness we have such considerate males in our family!"

The implied inclusion did not pass unnoticed by Steve, but the opportunity to quip was too good to pass up. "Oh yeah? We weren't even thinking of you two. We're being entirely selfish and self-indulgent over here!"

"Typical male behavior," Lizzy answered, never losing a beat or even stopping in her stride. "I swear, your gender invented the ideal of the petty bourgeoisie."

Nadia groaned loudly and shook her head, rolling her wheelchair in between her boyfriend and her mother. "Enough out of you two already," she grinned. "Steve, thanks for having the coffee ready!"

"You're welcome," the wolf said and smiled widely. "So, good shopping trip?"

"Oh yes! Nothing better than some serious power-shopping to lift one's spirits," the hybrid said and waved a shopping bag around triumphantly. "So what have you two been up to?"

Leo scratched his neck. "Trying to figure out the mass-to-size-to-taste ratio of your walnut muffins, my dear. Through extensive taste-testing. And talking about Kalen's woes, to be honest."

"Woes?" Lizzy asked. "I thought the boy was head over hoof in love. Did that not work out anyway?"

Steve scooted sideways to make room on the couch. Nadia rolled her wheelchair up next to him and deftly moved herself into the couch, not without a certain look of triumph on her face. Moving around wasn't as hard as she had feared it would be, although obviously she wouldn't be running a marathon anytime soon.

The thought stuck with her.

Why not actually? Why couldn't she? Or at least half a marathon. Other furs with disabilities had done something like that. If she remembered correctly, some fur with one leg had climbed Mount Everest decades ago. If he could do something that difficult, then surely she could run on a reasonably flat surface for a few hours! Although she'd need to learn how to walk on her prosthetic legs first, of course, and she would need to exercise a lot to get into good enough shape for something like that.

Allowing the thought to remain with her made her smile as she leaned against her boyfriend. It was definitely not a bad goal to set herself. For now, she would happily settle for Steve's arm around her, though. It always felt safe and comfy when he did that.

Steve, who had no idea what was going through Nadia's mind but who was more than happy to supply her with an arm, looked at Lizzy and shook his head. "It's not that they've broken up or anything. It's a lot more complicated than that. It involves a brother with a Napoleon-complex and potential forced marriage," he explained.

Lizzy's eyes went dark and angry. "I see," she simply said and sat down next to her husband. "And what does Kalen intend to do about this?"

"He intends to go over there to bring her back to the United States."

"When exactly is he leaving?"

"Right on the other side of New Year. As soon as his team's season is officially over, he's without a contract and he can leave."

Lizzy nodded. "I would've been disappointed in him if he didn't do something, at least. He's a resourceful young male. He'll succeed, I'm sure."

"He wanted me to go with him," Steve said, matter-of-factly. "It's only a couple of weeks away, but I'm off this walking stick in a week, and I could have gone with him, but I've told him I'm staying here to help Nadia with her recovery."

Leo nodded, but Lizzy seemed to be thinking about something. No one said anything for a while, although the supply of coffee and walnut muffins decreased steadily. Finally, Lizzy looked like she'd made some kind of decision.

"Well," she said, "We're celebrating Christmas together as usual, I expect?" she said.

"Naturally!" Nadia said. "Although Steve will need to spend a day or two with his family too over the holidays."

"My dad moved in with my sister temporarily, while he recovers from his nervous breakdown," Steve explained. "It was just all too much too swiftly for him. I was planning on celebrating Christmas with you and Nadia, and then going to visit my family the day after Christmas, and stay there two or three days."

Leo nodded and finished his coffee. "I think that sounds like a very good plan, actually. That way, Nadia isn't home alone since she'll be at our pla ..."

"Dad!" Nadia broke in. "I realize you're trying to be helpful but being a cripple doesn't make me helpless. It makes things more difficult but look ... I've still got two arms and a good head on my shoulders!"

She waved her arms over her head to make her point and Leo blushed, shamefacedly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that, obviously."

"I know. I just need to show you all that while I do need help for a while and while there are things I can't do anymore that I could before, I don't intend to let this be the end of my life. I'm going back to school, I'm getting my damned degree, and I'm going to *walk* up to the dean to receive my diploma on graduation day!!"

Lizzy grinned and leaned back in her seat, crossing her legs. "That's my girl!" she said, proudly.

"Oh yeah? Mine too!" Leo objected.

"You can have her when she makes trouble. THEN she's your daughter!" Lizzy mock-chided.

Leo looked glum and moped excessively. "See what I've got to put up with? She's like this every day, all the time," he said and looked at Steve, angling for some sympathy from his fellow male. "That's what marriage is like, for you!"

"I can't wait, then," Steve said with a smirk. "Hey, Nadia ... once you're done walking up to the dean for your diploma, what do you say to walking up the aisle the following Sunday?"

Nadia's jaw dropped. They had joked around about marriage before, and sure, they had talked about getting that done when she was out of university, but this was a real, concrete proposal. This was the first time anything this concrete had been said.

"I ... I'd like that," she said, clearing her throat once the shock had settled. Lizzy and Leo both looked equally blind-sided. "Wow ... we'd better start planning then."

"Leo ... I hope you didn't spend your entire fortune on buying those companies," Lizzy said, out the corner of her mouth.

Leo just smiled and poured himself a fresh cup of coffee.

###

Vishalya woke up with the most unbelievable headache. She was laying on a bed in a darkened room, and her head literally felt like it was going to explode. She reached up and put a paw in front of her face, groaning low in her throat and taking a deep breath.

She couldn't remember what had happened and she had no idea where she was. All she knew was that she had a foul taste in her mouth and the most obscene headache.

"You're awake at last," a voice said from the darkness of the room. "Good. There's a glass of clean water on the table next to you, as well as two aspirins. I am sorry we had to sedate you, but otherwise you would have struggled."

"Wha ...?" Vishalya tried. The voice spoke English with an American accent. "Who ... are you? Why ...?"

"For obvious reasons, I can't give you my real name, but in the interest of communication, you can call me Harry. I do not mean to harm you in any way. I am not holding you for ransom ... simply for safekeeping. You will be fed, you'll have access to decent accommodations, like a bathroom and shower, clean clothes, books, even radio and television."

Vishalya tried to open her eyes, but it hurt in ways she couldn't even describe to even try, so she remained on the bed for now. "Harry" was speaking in a comforting tone of voice, but the message was clear enough nonetheless. She had been kidnapped. And there was only one fur who could be behind it.

"Tell ... my brother to go fuck himself on a ten foot long, three foot wide, splintering, rotating rock-drill," she wheezed, still keeping her eyes shut. "And tell him ... I'll kill him for this. Not ... metaphorically."

Harry waited until he was sure she didn't speak. "Clearly, I can't tell you who my employer is," he said. "Look, I'll leave you alone. If there's anything in particular you need once you get your bearings, knock on the door and whoever is on guard will try to help you. Honestly, I am not a monster, and I will try to make this as ... as comfortable, I suppose is the only way to put it, as I can. There's no way out of here, and even if you should escape, you wouldn't get very far. Just take my word for it."

The door opened and a bit of light entered. Vishalya forced her eyes open but everything was blurry and swimming in front of her eyes. She saw a shape leave the room and she quickly closed her eyes again, to avoid throwing up from nausea.

Yashvir ...

There could be no one behind this but her brother.

Who had clearly lost his mind.

###

Yashvir answered the telephone and listened to a voice on the other end. Then he smiled and nodded. "Of course. Excellently done, Mr. Smith. I appreciate your work-ethic. Yes, naturally I will transfer the full payment to you immediately," he said and hung up.

"What was that, Son?" his father asked, raising an eyebrow.

Yashvir smiled. It was time for a coup-de-grace. He could feel that tingling sensation in his entire body that came with knowing he was about to win ... and win big. He wanted to savor the feeling for a few more precious moments, and he typed in a quick message on his telephone, waiting for confirmation, before he looked to his father.

"That, Father, was the future calling," he said.

Rajivh Singh was not a stupid fur, and he knew instantly from the look on his son's face that something was terribly, terribly amiss. "What have you done?" he demanded.

"Oh, I have simply taken the necessary steps to make sure that my plans proceed unchallenged, Father. Vishalya is in a safe location now. Where that filthy American won't be able to find her, or even get in touch with her, or vice versa. Naturally, I could not expect her to come along peacefully, so I arranged for ... Mr. Smith ... to procure her and bring her to a safe location known only to him and to myself," Yashvir said, looking every bit the victorious conqueror. His father would disapprove, but he had that all taken care of.

Rajivh's eyes went wide. "Yashvir ... are you standing there, telling me to my face that you had your sister *kidnapped*?" he protested.

"Naturally I am. Now, Father, don't be sentimental or naïve, please. First of all, her objections to the marriage were so strong that I have to make sure she won't sabotage it by refusing to marry, when the time comes. Secondly, I could not risk her simply running away. She's a silly creature, after all. She might get hurt if she tried something like that. Someone might ... take advantage of her. Imagine the shame that would bring on the family?" Yashvir said and stopped the car, opening the door to get out. He looked down on the steel plant below, putting his paws in his pockets.

His father, enraged and shaking all over, tore open the door on his side of the car and followed his son out, storming around the car. "This is going TOO FAR!" he roared. "I support the marriage, but she must be convinced in a decent way! She must be made to see she'll save the family. Not this. I will not have you forcing her into this! She was right, this is paishacha vivah. This is *forced marriage*, Yashvir. Illegal *and* immoral!"

"Father, Father, Father," Yashvir said, laughing overbearingly, "Do you take me for an absolute fool? Don't you think I have anticipated this reaction from you, or at the very least from Mother?"

Rajivh stopped. He did not like the look on his son's face one bit. Not *one bit*. "What have you *done*?" he demanded.

Yashvir took out his telephone and held it up so his father could watch the display. "Take a good look. I'm sure you will recognize that bank-account. It is your private account, after all. When you gave me influence and power over the family business, you really should have been more careful with which bank accounts I got information about. It was the simplest thing in the world to find the password to your account. You are not exactly a fur of great imagination. If you were, you would have chosen something apart

from the name of your favorite child, and her birth date as the password. It took me ... oh ... all of thirty seconds to figure it out? As you can see, I have just made a transfer of twenty five million rupees to an account in the Cayfur Islands. It's a trifle, really. Twenty five million for a job like this? They might as well do it for free. With her luxury-habits, they won't have much left for themselves afterwards, by all accounts."

He put the telephone away. His father looked like someone had rammed a hot blade into his chest. "Why ...?" he whispered.

"I should think it was obvious, Father. I have now thoroughly implicated you. After all, this money came from your *private* account. If I go down because of this, you'll go down twice as hard. Nominally, you still run the family business, and clearly ... you bankrolled this whole endeavor."

"But ... but the police will know the transfer was made from your cellphone!" Rajivh protested, grasping at straws.

Yashvir smiled evilly. "What a nice smelting facility we have here. I must say, I find I rather like the steel business. I'm sure my brand new and entirely *untraceable* cell-phone won't survive the meeting with the hot metal of course. I really wouldn't make a scene of it if I were you, though. For Vishalya's sake. Instead, I suggest you simply play along, for the good of the family, and you'll see, I'll return us to both wealth and glory again, when on your daughter's wedding day, you officially retire, leaving the company fully and *completely* under my control. Never you worry, though. I have no intention of leaving you or Mother destitute on the streets of New Delhi. You'll continue to live with a suitable stipend. A good, worthy retirement, I should think, and you'll have the joy of your grandchildren to keep you happy. I'm sure Vishalya will prove as fertile as most equine femmes, so while it's difficult to interbreed, I have no doubt she'll produce two or three heirs in due course."

Rajivh took a step backwards and shook his head slowly. "Gods protect us ..." he whispered. "There is no way I could have sired someone as vile as you!"

"Are you saying Mother has been unfaithful, Father? I'm sure she would just love to hear that!" Yashvir chuckled. "Trust me, I'm *your* son. But you failed to comprehend Dharma, Father. And while Dharma protects when protected ... it destroys when destroyed!"

His voice had fallen to barely a growl as Yashvir looked over his shoulder at his father.

Rajivh had tears in his eyes.

Dharma ... duty ...

How had he failed to live up to his duty?

"You are not my son ..." he whispered. "But for your sister's sake ... and your mother's sake ... I have no choice but to do as you say!"

Yashvir nodded. "How very wise," he said at last. "You have no idea how much trouble I have had to go through, and you clearly have no idea how deeply you disappointed me by favoring my sister over me! Oh, she's talented, I'll grant you. But I am your *son*!"

Rajiv shook his head.

But there was nothing he could say or do.

Yashvir had trapped him. So easily.

And now it was too late to change anything.