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XV – After New Year

Christmas had come and gone. It had been one of the strangest Christmases in Steve's life, and he had some *really* strange ones to compare with from before he was adopted. His dysfunctional, biological mother had not exactly been the most pleasant company for Christmas, more often than not.

He remembered how he had felt that first Christmas after being adopted. How he had wept ... right there at the dinner table. He had broken down and cried like a baby, right in front of his new family, and they had all dropped their cutlery and rushed to hug him. All at the same time. It was one of the best and warmest memories he had, and he cherished it.

He hadn't wept because he was upset. But because he still, at that time, didn't understand how he could be so lucky. And because he really understood how blessed he had been. He had spent practically all his pocket-money for two whole months on Christmas presents for his new mom and dad and for the twins ... and for Kalen. And while he had loved every present he got, he had been a little surprised to find that he actually enjoyed their reactions even more when they unwrapped something *he* had bought *them*.

Those were memories he treasured. So having spent part of Christmas with his father, his brother and his sister this year had been utterly bizarre. While everyone had tried their best to be in good cheer, it was clear that the fact Jean hadn't been there had been

... too strange for everyone. No one knew exactly what to do in certain situations and Frances had been so scared of looking like she was trying to take her mother's place that at one point, Steve had found her crying by herself in the kitchen.

But they had done the best they could. All of them. He was still shocked at how badly affected his father was by it all. He'd grown so old in such a short time.

Sighing at the thought, Steve put his mug in the sink and looked for the soap. He might as well clean it right away.

He'd spent Christmas Eve with Nadia and her parents. It was the only Christmas he could ever remember attending which had practically vanished in wedding-talk. But at least he had only himself to blame for that.

It was early morning, January 1st now, and Christmas was already a memory. As was New Year's Eve. It had been a relatively quiet thing this year. The team had held a huge bash, but he had excused himself from it after only an hour. Then he'd gone home to spend the evening with Nadia. He couldn't stay away from an official team party like that, but truth be told, most of his team-mates had a different concept of partying than he did, involving obscene amounts of alcohol and scantily clad femmes. Steve didn't like getting drunk. He'd tried it a few times but he was one of those furs who always paid the most dreadful price the following days when Mr. Hangover came a-knockin'. Besides, he didn't like the loss of self control that alcohol brought on.

For all he knew, that made him "boring" in the eyes of some of his team-mates, but that was not his concern. He had a couple of glasses of champagne with his girlfriend, and they had quite happily howled along to Old Lang Syne come midnight, and that was about it.

Now it was the first of January, and Steve was walking on his own two feet at last. No cane. He wasn't exactly sprinting, but he was walking at least.

It wasn't the first time he was grateful for modern medicine.

Nadia was still asleep. Smiling crookedly, Steve got an idea.

Breakfast in bed ... just the way to surprise her on the first morning of the year.

###

Kalen closed his bag and nodded to himself. He was just about packed and ready for leaving the next day. His visa had come through between Christmas and New Year's Eve,

and he made sure he had the passport ready, placing it on top of his bag, so he wouldn't be halfway to the airport before remembering it.

It had been weeks since he had heard from Vishalya, and he was worried about her. Admittedly, she had said she wouldn't be able to call, but he had hoped she might sneak a letter into the mail or something instead. But there had been no word, and he was deeply concerned.

But tomorrow, he would leave for India, and he was determined he wouldn't come home without the girl of his dreams. This time ... it was for real. This time it wasn't a fad or someone he just liked the look of.

And as long as she wanted him too, he wasn't going to let anyone get in his way.

Picking up his wallet, he checked that he had the rupees in ready cash he had exchanged a few days before. Then, slowly he began to relax.

Everything was ready. Everything except one thing. He was still under contract. But that would run out at midnight when the postseason officially started. It was just a matter of time now.

He wished he didn't have to go on his own, but he did understand why Steve couldn't come. He had no doubt that if the big fur felt ... in any way whatsoever ... that he could have come along, he would have. But while Nadia was healing very well indeed, she had still lost a leg and a half, and Steve felt a clear obligation to help her. Something Kalen understood fully.

His cell-phone rang. He had left it on the living room table, and Kalen turned around and looked at his apartment. When he came home ... whenever that was ... he would have to start packing *everything* up in boxes. Depending on where his next team was based, he needed to move there. He knew there were players who basically flew across several states every day to get to practice and home, but frankly, it felt ridiculously complicated and besides, Kalen felt that if he played for a team, he had to live in the city he represented. It was a matter of sending the right kind of signal to the fans.

A big part of him hoped Fargo would pick him up, and he had no doubt Steve would put in more than a good word for him. It could be fun playing with his old friend again.

Crossing the living room, he picked up the receiver.

"It's himself speaking, the King of Cool, the Master of Mojitos and the Guru of Good looks! Happy New Year!" he said, smiling widely.

Then the smile faded and he slapped a paw to his forehead. On the other end of the line was the Jacksonville Jaguars CEO.

"Yes Sir ... hello Sir," he continued. "Yes, I'm listening."

And he did. Halfway through the monologue, he felt like simply hanging up in disgust. But he was not stupid. Doing that would accomplish nothing.

Finally, the fur on the other end of the line stopped rambling. "Sir, I should probably remind you that all contract negotiations has to go through my agent. I can't agree to your offer without bringing him into this. Yes, yes I promise I'll give it some consideration. Could I ask you to forward it to him in print, though, so he can look it over? Yes, thank you. Yes, I'll get back to you."

He hung up and instantly stuck two fingers into his mouth as he glared at the phone, as if trying to make himself throw up. He had been treated like dirt by the ownership and now, after hanging him out to dry time and time again, they were offering him a new contract less than 24 hours before his old contract expired? He didn't care if they offered him the moon!

Quickly pressing one of the speed-dial numbers he had pre-programmed, Kalen grumbled something to himself about rotten business ethics, wondering, and not for the first time, what the Hell had happened to the Jacksonville Jaguars of his childhood, when they had been famous for fair play on and off the field.

"Hello Jamie ..." he said at last. "It's Kalen Twain-Ryder ... yeah, Happy New Year to you too. Listen, you're probably going to hear from the management of Jacksonville veery soon. Yes, today. Yeah, they're offering me a new contract, would you believe it?"

Listening to a string of obscenities from the other end of the receiver, Kalen actually held it out and away from his ear, blinking in surprise, before making sure it was his turn to speak again.

"Good God, I had no idea you knew language like that," he chuckled. "But we agree completely. I'm completely and utterly fed up with their bullshit. You know what this means, don't you? That either they're offering a decent contract to make me a backup behind their first round draft pick, or they are offering to keep me on as their starter but at reduced wages. But frankly, I don't care if they gave me the best contract in the history of the NFL, guaranteeing I'd be the starter for the next five years whether I had a passer-rating of 55 or not. I'm not playing one more down for those creeps! No, exactly ... *precisely.*"

He listened as his agent ranted on some more, nodding all along, before finally speaking up again.

"I'm good enough to be the starter in any ball-club out there and we both know it, Jamie. You get me a new contract once free agency opens ... preferably with an organization with some playoff potential, and make sure I'll be the starter, and I'll play my backside out of my uniform for them, whoever they are. But until then, stall Jacksonville and keep them thinking I'm interested for as long as you think it's funny. Just don't sign anything with them. I'm off to India tomorrow. I don't know exactly when I'll be back but I'll check my E-mail so you can always get in touch with me there, and I'll bring my phone so if I'm in an area with good reception you can call me. It'll just be bloody expensive."

Again he nodded and grinned widely. "Sounds good to me. Again, Happy New Year. I'll see you when I get home, Jamie. Give your wife and your kids my best."

Shaking his head, Kalen put the phone aside. He had more important things to think about than some last-second idiotic attempt from the Jaguars at preventing him from going to a competitor.

"Now ... where did I put that street-map of New Delhi?" he mumbled and started looking.

###

Vishalya had been a prisoner for a while. Without access to windows, she had started losing track of time, and she no longer really had any idea for how long she had been there. The room was not uncomfortable, and while she deeply resented "Harry" for keeping her a captive, she had to admit he had at least been true to his word about making it as comfortable as possible. She had access to a television and a DVD-player, with movies. But not to actual television. It was apparently deemed unwise to let her keep abreast of the world outside the confines of the compound where she was kept. She had been allowed out a few times, to stretch her legs and to get a little bit of fresh air, but it wasn't often. Vishalya had a clear feeling that her captor was unhappy about that. It seemed he wanted to let her out once a day, but someone had told him not to.

It didn't take much imagination to figure out that Harry got his orders from Yashvir, anyway.

At least she had ample reading materials. Harry had even made sure she got a couple of small statues of her most important deities so she could set up a small shrine in the room

for when she wanted to pray. She didn't feel quite so alone because of that. Having Lakshmi, Ganesha and Vishnu looking on from their table by the wall made her feel a little better. But only a little. Deep down, she was seething, and when she got out of this mess, her brother would be made to pay a steep price for this, she had promised herself that so many times it had become redundant already. Frankly, she really needed Ganesha to take action on her behalf. He was, after all, the Remover of Obstacles ... amongst many other things.

But the Gods did not come to the aid of furs anymore in such direct ways. Still, she was sure she'd get out somehow.

###

It was mid-afternoon by the time Nadia hadn't felt like being cooped up at home any longer. So Steve had called a cab, and they had gone out. By now, it was almost dinner-time and they were sitting at a coffee-shop, trying to decide whether to go somewhere for something to eat, or if they should simply go home. Steve had signed half a dozen autographs for furs who had recognized him, but mostly, it was a quiet afternoon. Most furs were still recovering from the celebrations the night before.

"Hey, I said I'm fine with going home if you'd rather do that. Come on, Steve ... you look like you're a million miles away," Nadia said and reached over, waving a paw in front of her boyfriend's face.

Steve blinked and snapped out of it. "Jeez ... I guess I was. I'm sorry, dear. I was just thinking of Kalen. He's leaving tomorrow, after all."

"I'm a bit worried about him, to be honest with you," Nadia said, biting her bottom lip. "India is far away and it's so different from the United States."

"Kalen probably knows more about India than most furs, though. At least their culture," Steve pointed out.

Shaking her head, Nadia sighed. "Only part of it. He knows a lot about their beliefs, but India is more than religion. Any country in the world is more than religion, in fact. There's history and secular tradition, politics and everyday life," she said.

Steve nodded and looked at the table for a moment. "I know," he finally mumbled. "I've been trying not to think too much about all that. And it's not exactly a vacation at the beach he's going for, either."

Nadia shook her head again. "No it isn't."

"And he's going on his own."

"He doesn't have to."

Steve raised his eyebrows and looked at his girlfriend. "I can't go with him! You still need me around the house," he said ... but somehow he knew that argument was flawed.

Pushing aside the cup in front of her, Nadia leaned over the table and looked directly at her boyfriend. For a long moment, she didn't say anything. She just looked at the wolf across the table and Steve was starting to feel slightly uneasy about it when she finally spoke up again.

"Do I?" she simply asked. "I've got family who can help take care of me, and as I told my dad, I'm crippled ... not helpless. There will be times in the future when you won't be at home for days on end, due to games being played all over the country or even in Europe. I'd have to be able to take care of myself for those periods, wouldn't I?"

"Of course! I'm not suggesting otherwise. It's just that it's still so recent," Steve protested.

Nadia shook her head yet again, her eyes never leaving Steve's. "Your best friend needs you, Steve. Are you going to leave him to face this challenge alone?"

A little smile spread on the wolf's face. "Thank you," he said and reached over, taking Nadia's paw, giving it a little squeeze.

"You're such a lug sometimes," Nadia said, smiling warmly. "But I love you anyway."

"I love you too. And I guess we'd better get that cab home then, so I can pack some things in a hurry."

"And I'll get on the phone with the Indian Embassy. If we're lucky, it may be they can fix the paperwork overnight. You're a sports star, after all. It tends to help."

Steve nodded. Suddenly, they had to move very fast indeed.

###

Zig Zag got off the telephone. Her stomach was hurting after talking to Esteban, but at least he was coherent. That was an improvement at least. She'd settle for small blessings for the moment if she had to.

She didn't even have time to lean back in her seat before her secretary buzzed her, and she pressed the right button on her telephone to hear what he had to say.

"Excuse me boss, but I've got someone on the line for you," the voice of her secretary said.

"Can it wait? I'm not really in the mood to talk business right now," the skunk said and rubbed her face.

"Then this might be what you need. It's a private call ... the young Mr. Twain-Ryder, Boss."

"Kale? I've always got time for him. Put him through."

A moment later, Kalen's face came into focus on her screen and Zig Zag smiled happily as she adjusted the receiver slightly.

"Hey Zig Zag. I thought I should just call and let you know I'm leaving for India tomorrow. After all, you did tell me to act on this," Kalen said. Behind him, Zig Zag could make out a packed bag and some paperwork on the table.

"I did too!" she said, trying to keep any worry and weariness out of her voice. "But tomorrow? You should've told me. I'd have talked to Alex! He could've arranged for your flight over there."

"To be perfectly honest with you, I didn't think about that," Kalen admitted. "I've had so much on my mind. I haven't been able to reach Vishalya for weeks. I think her brother is to blame ... she said he would cut off the connection to the United States from their home, and he's probably forbidden her to go out so she can't send a letter the old-fashioned way."

Zig Zag scowled. "He sounds like a rank piece of shit to me," she mumbled. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"I will be. All my parents have already sat me down to give me a long lecture on how to be, in fact. Each of them. Individually. And my mothers gave an encore ... together!"

"And let me guess, they all said the same thing?"

"Exactly."

Zig Zag chuckled and got up, out of her seat. "I won't repeat it all then."

"Speaking of your cousin, though ... if this does get messy and I have to get out in a hurry, it might be a good idea to keep him in mind," Kalen said, thoughtfully. "If he's willing to help out, of course."

"He will be," Zig Zag said, emphatically. "I know my cousin. Once he hears about this, he'll probably volunteer to come out and get you himself if you need it."

Kalen smiled. "I like your cousin, Zig Zag. I've liked him since I met him back in Ohio for the first time. He's a good guy."

"He is that. Tell you what, I'll get a hold of him and explain the situation to him. Then I'll let you know."

"Probably best if you send me an Email or a text-message on the phone. I'll be hitting the pillows as soon as we hang up. After all, come midnight, I'm a free fur without a contract, so I am leaving on the first flight out tomorrow."

"When is that exactly?" Zig Zag asked.

Kalen adjusted his screen a little. "Twenty to eleven. Well, there is a flight before that, but that leaves at half past five in the morning and I really don't want to risk getting on the wrong plane out of sheer grogginess."

Zig Zag laughed. "I can just see it. Kalen lands in Sweden and gets met by blonde bombshells presenting him with meatballs and cleavages suitable for mountaineering, and all he can think of is getting back on the plane to go find the girl of his dreams in India," she teased.

Kalen played along and instantly put on his best "dumb-breast-addled-male"-face, pretending to drool slightly. "Cleeeeeavaaaaaage," he droned.

Snickering, Zig Zag shook her head. "Be careful though, alright?"

"I will be. Thanks for your advice in this," Kalen said. "I'd better go sleep though. Take care of yourself. I'll send a postcard once I'm there."

"You sleep tight then," Zig Zag said and fingerwaved as the screen went blank.

She went to get a few papers in her filing cabinet, looking for something, before dialing a number on her telephone again.

It took a moment for the connection to be made. Finally, the face of a lioness came up on the screen.

"Corrie! Hey there," Zig Zag said. "You wouldn't happen to have Alex around, would you?"

"He's in the back yahd. Shall I get him for ya?" Corrie asked.

Zig Zag nodded. "Please, if you could. I may need his help with something."

"Just a moment then."

Leaning back, Zig Zag waited. A smile spread on her face. Something told her that Kalen was in for a new grand adventure. At least this time, she hoped, it would result in him getting the girl of his dreams instead of shot.

###

Yashvir was in a splendid mood. The wedding preparations were all coming along, and he was starting to attend his first meetings with furs of real importance as a result of his new connections. Of course, he could still be cut out of the loop on a moment's notice, but that would only happen if the marriage didn't take place.

He was going to make sure it would, and he already had a plan for how to get rid of the last objections to his scheme.

His parents didn't talk to him anymore, and he was in no hurry to change that. After his conversation with his father at the smelting plant, he knew fully well that both his parents were against his plans, and he also knew they couldn't do a thing to stop him, unless they wanted Rajivh to spend most, if not all, of the rest of his life in prison. So he had sequestered himself in one half of the house, leaving the rest to his parents. If he didn't see them again until the servants informed him of their deaths, he would be quite satisfied, although in truth he knew that wouldn't be the case. He did, after all, have to invite them to the wedding. And no doubt they would occasionally bump into him.

He'd simply have to take over whatever parts of the house he needed for his own purposes as he went along. They had no choice but to agree to whatever demands he made, after all. Though in truth, he planned on keeping his promise to his father and make sure they had a suitable stipend for their old age. The reason was simple:

He was a better fur than they.

His own father had ignored him and preferred his sister over him. And his mother had done nothing to change that. But he would not be so mean. After all, they were his parents.

The two Americans he had hired had turned out to be a good investment so far. The money he had spent was a trifle compared to what he would make through his new contacts. And of course, he had his sights set on the future as a whole. Not only the steel business, but parliament. Once there, who knew what it could lead to?

India was a steamrolling economic powerhouse of the 21st century, having gone from a third rate economy to a world leader in a matter of thirty years, but it was still not quite on par with the absolute elite. It was generally considered only a matter of time, however, before it reached that level or even eclipsed it. Yashvir had timed his ascent to power well, and he knew it. He could be part of the last steps up the ladder to world prominence. If what that took was the alienation of a sister he didn't like and parents who had lost sight of the real goals in life, then so be it.

It was a very small price to pay.

###

It was ten in the morning on the second of January when Kalen finally got through check-in. All he carried was a piece of carry-on in the shape of a shoulder-bag with a padlock on it. Something that wouldn't be easy for pickpockets to get into. It held a couple of books and a small, paw-held computer on which he could study plays from last year's games.

And a football. It was simply something he liked to hold on to, and besides, he expected to throw it around a bit in India. Not that he expected to find many fans of the sport there, but he'd just have to throw it, then run after it himself. Double the exercise, that way.

Standing in the airport terminal, he felt a deep sense of relief. He was finally on his way. And more importantly, he was a free fur. He wasn't worried anymore, either. There would be a job for him next season in the league, he was so certain of that, that he had slept more soundly the night before his contract ran out, than he had for over a month prior to it. No doubt because he was finally able to relax without worrying about his job-situation. Now at least he knew exactly where he stood.

He crossed the terminal to a bookstore. He had already brought reading material but looking never hurt anyone, and he might find something interesting. Maybe something about India would be a good choice.

It was a fairly large store, but as expected, the "airport novel"-section took up a considerable amount of space. It didn't offend him, but he wasn't interested in that kind

of thing, himself. His teammates had occasionally teased him, because of him reading books on religious theory on the flights to and from games. No doubt he came across as slightly boring to some of them, but that was only for as long as he had been a backup. After he took over as the starter, the teasing had stopped almost instantly.

The section on other countries was pretty good, much as Kalen expected from a bookstore at an airport. He could find extensive reading material about Thailand, China, Japan, South Africa, Brazil and dozens of other countries. Including, fortunately, India.

Picking up a couple of books, he leafed through them quickly to determine if they were worth spending his money on. They both seemed fairly good.

"Ahem!" a loud, deep voice said behind him. "Don't you know you have to pay before you read them?"

It was a deep, slightly gravelly male voice, and Kalen nearly jumped through the roof from surprise. Starting to protest, saying he simply wanted to make sure what he spent his money on before spending it, he turned around.

Steve grinned widely, clearing his throat. "Hello Mr. Twain-Ryder. I hear your doctor has ordered an overseas vacation," the wolf said and smiled widely.

Kalen's mouth opened and closed a few times. He blinked ...

"Steve??" he finally managed to say. "What ... what are *you* doing here?"

Steve took out his passport and checked it. Frowning somewhat, he pushed out his bottom lip and scratched the back of his head. "Well, I was kinda planning on a trip to Egypt, you know ... see the pyramids and so on, but for some reason, someone screwed up and my passport got stamped for a trip to India. So I guess that's where I'm going."

Kalen grinned crookedly. "Well, I'm sure you could get into Egypt anyway, if you tried hard enough. You sure you want to go to India?"

Steve shrugged, playing along. "I suppose one warm place is as good as the next? It's bloody cold in Fargo this time of year, if you hadn't noticed! We've got three feet of snow and that's considered a mild snowfall. I need sunny beaches! My doctor said so too!"

Laughing, Kalen threw his arms around his friend and gave him a solid squeeze. "Damned, am I glad to see you!"

"I don't know. Are you?" Steve grinned, hugging the equine right back.

"Oh Hell yeah. Now ... are you ready for an adventure?"

"As ready as I'll ever be!"

Kalen let go and nodded. "Well, let's try to find the right exit then."

Steve looked at his ticket and nodded. "It says right here. Terminal C, exit 37. This is Terminal A, though. We'd better get moving."

Nodding, patting his friend's shoulder again as if to make sure he was really there, Kalen nodded and headed off.