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XXIV – Paichacha Vivah...

"I guess this is it, then?" Steve said. Before him loomed the walls of the Singh family mansion. He remembered when he and Kalen had come here the first time, bribing themselves past the guards. This time, it hadn't been quite that easy.

But regardless of that, they were here now. Looking at the back wall. From within, the sounds of many voices carried towards him. Most sounded like they were having a great time. Clearly, a celebration was going on. It turned Steve's stomach to think this was a wedding where only one of the two furs getting hitched was willing. To him, freedom was incredibly important. He had learned that as a teenager, when he had finally come to realize what his biological mother had been doing to him. How her passive-aggressive behaviour had been a tool to control him.

But that paled in comparison to this. He had been able to break free, although with a lot of help ... but this was a wedding. If they didn't get Vishalya out of there, she'd be forced to live out the rest of her life with a fur she despised. She would have to sleep with him and even bear his children.

Feeling thoroughly nauseated at the very idea, Steve looked at Kalen, hoping for some kind of response, but the equine looked unbelievably tense. His lips were practically colourless, they were drawn so tight across his face. His eyes were burning with intensity.

"Kale?" Steve tried, hoping to snap his friend back to reality for a few moments.

"Yes. This is it," Kalen finally said. "Look, Steve ... it won't be a case of me going in there and saying "I object" and then the whole thing is called off. It's almost certainly going to get ugly. There will be goons in there, ready to stop any kind of trouble. You don't have to ..."

"Yes I do," Steve interjected, in a voice that said he wasn't going to argue the point. "Now, let's get over this wall."

"There are furs on the other side," Kalen said. "And even if there wasn't, there will be motion sensors on the wall itself. And cameras. It's going to be a hot reception."

Steve nodded. "Probably," he agreed. "Anyone with guns, you think?"

Kalen shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. To be honest with you, I think there will be. They've got armed guards at the gate, and armed guards at the checkpoint to the area. Why not in there?"

"Jeez, what a wedding," Steve mumbled in a sarcastic tone of voice, golf-clapping. "Here comes the bride, prodded down the aisle by semi-automatic weapons."

"I've got to get her out of there, Steve. I've *got* to!"

"I know. But I've got to ask you one question before we go in there."

Kalen looked at his friend. "If you're going to ask me if she's worth it ..." he began, testily.

Steve shook his head with a big, wolfish grin on his face. "Nahh, I know she is. Otherwise you wouldn't be here in the first place, and your taste in femmes is almost as good as mine," he teased. "What I've got to ask you is ... aren't you happy you went to that party at the governor's place? Even though the team forced you to do so?"

Kalen's irate facial expression softened and he nodded, grinning along with his friend. "Yeah. I am. I guess there's a silver lining to every cloud, eh?"

"I thought Vishalya had black fur, not grey," Steve said with a smirk, only to have Kalen whack him over the back of his head. "Eeey, no messeeng up the lobo's mane!" he whined.

Kalen groaned. "So, Esteban Junior, are we going to do this?"

"If you've got the grappling hook, then yes," the wolf answered. "Who goes over the wall first? You or me?"

"I'll go first," Kalen said. "At least some furs in there know me. If they spot me, we might have a better chance."

Steve nodded and rolled his head on his shoulders. They'd have to get over that wall really fast. The motion sensors and cameras would pick up on the grappling hook immediately. He was considerably taller and far heavier than Kalen, but he was able to climb ropes better than most furs despite that. He was, after all, a highly trained, professional athlete. Still, Kalen would get in faster, there was no question of that.

"Here we go then. We go on three," Kalen mumbled. "And pray our get-away-car is ready for us."

Grinning again, Steve couldn't suppress a short, snorting laugh. "You make it sound like we're breaking into a bank."

"One ... two ... THREE!"

Kalen bolted up and around the car, towards the wall. He had a firm grip on the rope in his right paw and the grappling hook in his left. It only took seven seconds to run to the wall, but it felt like an eternity. No one stopped them, though. No one shouted for them to halt. Pausing for only two seconds to catch his breath, he took one step back from the wall and threw the grappling hook up to the top.

There was no alarm, but Kalen hadn't expected one. If there was an alarm system, which he suspected there was, it would almost certainly be silent.

Still, he grasped the rope and Steve stood ready to help push his friend up to the top. It only took a few seconds for Kalen to get to the top, where he groaned.

"Caltrops," he growled. "Ow ow ow ow ow!"

Steve nodded and immediately pulled off his shirt, tearing it up and wrapping his paws in the cloth. He could still grip the rope easily enough but at least he wouldn't hurt himself at the top.

"Careful with your paws friend," he said, "They're an important part of your livelihood."

Kalen had already jumped down on the other side of the wall and he didn't answer. He probably didn't hear what Steve said anyway. The sounds of lots of frightened furs running hither and thither on the inside were coming over the wall towards Steve even as he climbed up to the top.

Wincing at the sight of blood on several of the caltrops, his attention was quickly diverted to the scene down on the other side of the wall. Kalen was standing on a stone table, his stance showing that he was ready to bolt out of there as soon as he knew where to go. He had jumped a few feet to the right to hit the table, but Steve knew he could make that jump easily, and followed his friend.

"Okay, where is she?" he asked.

Kalen shook his head to show he wasn't sure. "Probably inside the house."

"Then that's where we are going," Steve mumbled, before raising his voice. "HEY. EVERYONE CALM DOWN. THIS IS A RESCUE, NOT AN ATTACK!"

"Very subtle," Kalen chuckled and hopped off the table, running towards the patio and the large doors that were already being closed.

It was rather foolish. They were glass doors after all. Getting in would be very easy indeed.

###

"This all looks great," Christian said, leaning back with a satisfied look on his face. "I think you've comprehensively proven, that all my worries about you were wrong. Good job."

Hillary Reyes stopped looking worried and broke out into a big, relieved smile. "Thank you, Mr. Pardinus. You think Ms. Leon will approve as well?"

"I'm sure she will. I also have to applaud you on your sense of good business practice. You are correct that we can't inundate the market with our new strategy in two weeks. It simply isn't possible. However much Leo Leon wants us to go to a web-based format only, we can't get news through to our potential readers in just two weeks that this is what we're doing. And more importantly, we need to re-school a good number of furs to do this."

"I've taken the liberty of looking up some courses in web-design, and there are a lot of good ones out there," Hillary said, "But even so, we're going to need to hire several trained web-designers to maintain the new format and the forums."

Christian nodded and put his paws behind his head, clicking his tongue a couple of times as he thought things over. "Again, you're right. How long do you expect it will take?"

"If we start the process today ... three months would be the bare minimum."

"Then we start today. I appreciate the input. When you leave, could you tell Ms. O'Hara to come in here in ten minutes?"

Hillary nodded and picked up her papers. "Of course. I'll make sure to have the first four of these ads ready before I go home today. I'll have my furs working overtime if needs be," she said and smiled as she left the office.

Christian grinned. Making the change in two weeks had been hopelessly optimistic, and Hillary was right to point it out. The point was, that she had done so in an educated manner. She hadn't simply thrown up her paws and said "that's impossible". Instead, she had come to him with a list of concrete reasons why the change from paper format to the Internet had to be postponed. Not cancelled, just delayed while the necessary changes took place.

That in itself spoke of a change in attitude. Hillary was thinking in terms of practical solutions and possibilities, rather than what couldn't be done, and if she did that ... others did too.

Leaning forward again, he opened his computer and typed in a quick mail to Nadia, attaching all the material Hillary had just shown him, along with his own views and recommendations. He didn't doubt that Nadia would listen. Instead of going to a completely new format in two weeks, they'd wait two months, then make the transition from paper to the Internet over the next four weeks. Idealism was all well and good, but even the best of intentions had to take actual possibilities into account.

Dotting down a few notes to himself, Christian tried to think of the best way of presenting this to Mr. Leon. Occasionally, a subordinate had to be the bearer of unwanted news, and the lynx knew well enough, that it was all a matter of how it was presented.

###

The wedding party had descended into pure chaos the second Kalen and Steve made their entry. Two guards had come around the corner of the building, sporting automatic weapons and a clear intent to use them, but Steve had tackled one to the ground and knocked him out, and Kalen, who was further away, had picked up a rock from the ground and sent the other fur to never-never-land with a well-placed throw.

Steve had taken their weapons and thrown them over the wall, which had caused even more confusion amongst the guests, running hither and thither.

It wasn't until then that Kalen figured out why everyone was so afraid.

There had been numerous terrorist attacks in India throughout the years, and the guests clearly feared they were in mortal danger. However much he and Steve tried to shout that they were not attacking anyone, no one seemed to listen.

"We're in deep trouble, Kale," Steve shouted, trying to keep his voice above the din. "When the cops arrive, they'll shoot first and ask questions later!"

Kalen nodded. "That's why we need to get to Vishalya right now!" he answered, pointing towards the doors. "Her brother went inside. I'm sure we'll find her in there too!"

One of the guests came at Steve, swinging a bottle of something over his head like a club. He had a wild look in his eyes, and clearly tried to play the hero of the hour. The wolf groaned slightly and unceremoniously knocked the fur out, and catching the bottle before it hit the ground. "Think you can get us inside with this?" he asked and gave it to Kalen.

The equine took it and flicked it over a few times in his paw. Then he nodded. "Yep. Let's go," he mumbled and launched it at the glass doors.

They shattered in a most satisfying way as the bottle passed through the glass panes, cracking on the floor. Furs were now practically stampeding to get out of the garden, but the only way to do so was to follow the path around the house. The armed guards from the front gates were trying to come around the same way, and the resulting traffic jam gave the two Americans a few precious moments.

Moments they were not going to waste. Steve nodded to his friend and lowered his shoulders.

"Remember Canton," he mumbled, "and follow me."

Kalen smiled and followed right behind his massive friend as he blocked his way through a couple of servants, ending up in the living room of the house.

"VISHALYA!?" he shouted, desperate for an answer. "VISHALYA, WHERE ARE YOU?"

The answer he got was not what he wanted to hear. At the top of the staircase leading upstairs, Yashvir came into view. Kalen had never seen Vishalya's brother before, but he knew instantly who he was facing.

"When the police get here, you two will wish you'd never been born," he growled. "There are members of parliament amongst the guests. You'll be under arrest for terrorism. You'll cause an international scandal and a serious diplomatic crisis!"

Steve bared his fangs and curled back his lips. "I'm going to be reeeeeally nice to him, Kale. I promise. I won't break him nearly as much as I want to, just let me at him!"

Kalen shook his head. "There are going to be guards coming in here any second. You need to knock out the first few ones to discourage the rest!" he said.

Steve snarled ferally at the equine at the top of the staircase, but nodded and bounded for the front door. Kalen turned his eyes back to Yashvir. "I'm not sure the police will see it that way," he said, matter-of-factly. "After all, both Steve and I are unarmed, and your sister ..."

"My sister will say *exactly* what I tell her to say!"

"Or what? She's got her own opinions if you hadn't noticed."

Yashvir's smile was so vile Kalen actually felt a shiver run down his spine. "You think so? There are ways of breaking obstinate females. And her husband-to-be, I'm told, was *extremely* thorough with her."

For a moment, it felt like someone ripped the carpet away under Kalen's hooves. His head spun. There was no need for Yashvir to go into more detail about what he meant ... Kalen could see it, right there on his face.

"You ... rotten ... swine," the American wheezed, tears burning in his eyes. From the front of the room house, he could hear a lot of commotion going on. Clearly, Steve had engaged the guards ... and from the sound of it, he was winning, paws-down.

While the guards were armed, they didn't seem too keen on firing their guns. Like Kalen had expected, they were too worried they'd accidentally hit the wrong fur, and modern automatic weapons could shoot clean through walls or ceilings and wound furs in other rooms or even on another floor if unlucky.

It gave Steve a fighting chance ... and he was angry on top of things.

"I don't need to listen to your insults, *American*," Yashvir said, dismissively, turning around. "I've done absolutely nothing wrong. I am the head of the family, and I've simply exercised my rights. I'm going to be gracious, since it's my sister's wedding day, and let you run. If you're fast, and if you know a good hiding place or two, you might still escape the police. If you stay, I guarantee you, you'll end up wishing you were dead."

Kalen narrowed his eyes and started up the stairs. "I'm not going anywhere," he spat.

Yashvir sighed. His shoulders slumped and he turned back around, pulling a punch-dagger from within his tunic. "You don't think you're going to get away with this, do you?" he asked. "This is not a Bollywood movie. The hero doesn't swing in on a chandelier, rescuing the heroine in the nick of time. You Americans ... you're all the same."

Kalen didn't answer. He just ducked left as Yashvir swung the punch-dagger at his face. Then he hopped a couple of steps back down the stairs to avoid a punch towards his midsection.

Yashvir had the high ground, and he clearly knew how to use his weapon. But Kalen was too angry to be afraid or worried. He kept ducking and weaving, until finally, he was back down in the living room, facing his enemy on even ground. Punches came fast and hard and once or twice, Yashvir managed to nick Kalen's clothes or even his skin, drawing trickles of blood.

And slowly, he was forcing Kalen backwards.

"KALE! WE'RE GOING TO HAVE COMPANY IN A FEW MOMENTS!" Steve shouted from the front of the house.

Kalen didn't answer. He had to stay focused on Yashvir and the wicked looking blade in his paw.

Once again, Yashvir punched towards Kalen's face, then his midriff, and Kalen had to jump backwards.

His right hoof landed in the slippery mess left by the burst bottle he had used to smash the doors with.

For a brief moment, he looked like he might avoid stumbling ... but then, like a falling tree, he went backwards, over a recliner and through a table. And Yashvir was on him like a hawk on wounded prey. Within the blink of an eye, he was sitting astride Kalen's chest, his punch-dagger raised.

"I ought to thank you," he said, hatefully. "If I didn't hate you so much. You have practically ensured my election. I'll be a hero ... killing a dangerous terrorist, attacking members of parliament at a peaceful wedding. I'll probably be up for a civic medal for this. But that's going to be nothing, compared to how much I'm going to *enjoy* this."

Kalen watched the blade descend. It all happened in slow motion.

Something hit Yashvir.

Something Steve-shaped.

The dagger went flying, and Steve and Yashvir tumbled across the floor, a tangled mess of fur, fangs and fists. Kalen managed to get upright just in time to see Yashvir somehow get up on top of Steve, and grabbing the broken bottle-neck from the floor.

"Oh no you fucking don't," Kalen growled as he grabbed Yashvir's raised arm around the wrist, with his right paw. Then, using every ounce of strength in his body, he punched at the Indian equine's elbow ... from the back.

There was an unpleasant crunching sound, and then a moment of silence, before Yashvir tumbled off Steve with an agonized scream, clutching his shattered right elbow in his left paw.

Kalen didn't even stop to think as he bounded up the stairs to the first floor.

"VISHALYA? VISHALYA ARE YOU UP HERE?" he shouted. He didn't even pause to ask Steve about the "company" the wolf had mentioned.

But he could hear a lot of commotion downstairs again.

Tearing open doors, he felt tears press their way to the fore again. It wasn't until he got to the end of the hallway and looked out at the scene in the garden that he realized what was going on. The police had arrived. In force, it seemed. There were dozens of police-furs in the front yard, and most of the armed wedding-guards were ...

... paw-cuffed?

Kalen looked utterly confused at what was going on for a moment, until he realized that Vishalya was out there, flanked by two police-furs.

He shuddered from head to foot and bolted back downstairs, practically into the arms of a very large tiger, wearing a uniform.

"I've got to get out there. I've got to get to her!" he burst out, but the tiger kept him from going anywhere.

"Easy, easy ..." he said, in good English. "I need to ask you a few questions. You are Mr. Kalen Twain-Ryder, I assume?"

Kalen nodded frantically, still trying to get past the tiger. He had to get outside to make sure Vishalya was alright. "I am. Please, let me go. I've got to see if she's ... if she's ..."

"I assume you're talking about Miss Singh," the tiger said. "She's being taken care of as we speak. You are a lucky fur, Mr. Twain-Ryder. A very lucky fur indeed."

Steve, who was sitting upright against a bookcase, trying to catch his breath, looked up. "Why is he so lucky? He's been cut, he's been stabbed at ... "

The tiger chuckled. "He is lucky, because he has good friends. We have been investigating Yashvir Singh for months. Ever since someone at his father's company tipped us off that he was up to some kind of criminal activity, involving the family assets. We had no concrete evidence, but when we received a call from his father yesterday, things began to make sense. Apparently, Yashvir Singh thought he had cowed his parents so thoroughly they wouldn't dare try to stop him. And when we then received a second telephone call, from a cab-driver, who said he was helping two half crazy Americans prevent a case of Paishacha Vivah ... we figured we could arrest him on those charges first, and get him to talk about his other criminal activities when we interrogated him anyway."

Kalen listened to the police-officer. Then he swallowed, hard ... and then tears began to flow. He looked down and away, and shivered from head to hoof. "Please ... let me go out and see her?" he whispered.

Finally, the officer let Kalen go. The equine wiped his eyes and headed outside, and Steve got up to his feet.

"Officer, I'm just an American in a foreign land, and I don't know much about your customs, but ..." he began, then sighed.

"Yes?" the tiger asked.

Steve looked after his friend. The door behind Kalen was closing, and he turned his gaze back to the tiger. "I'm fairly bright, you know. And I know Kalen better than anyone. When you said ... that thing. That Paiplabahabawhatasomething-or-other ...?"

"Paisacha Vivah?" the officer asked, seriously.

Steve nodded. "Yes. That. What does it mean?"

"It's an illegal practice, Sir," the tiger said, his voice quite solemn. "It's a remnant of a past where the caste system was still in place."

"I see," Steve said and nodded. "Forced marriage, then."

"Not exactly," the tiger answered, sadly. "Marriage by rape."

###

Kalen closed the door behind him. The front garden was a mess. It would take a battalion of gardeners six months to get it to look like a garden again, in fact. Furs were being questioned by police-furs. The armed guards had been disarmed, put in pawcuffs and they were now being loaded into police-cars. Kalen had no doubt they'd be let go soon enough. They had just been hired to guard a wedding party and had, strictly speaking, done nothing they hadn't been paid to do.

Vishalya hadn't seen him yet, it seemed. Two police-furs were standing by her, but she seemed almost dazed by everything that was going on around her.

He didn't understand what was being said by anyone, but a rather stocky male canid in his late fifties approached him cautiously, and Kalen stopped, momentarily, looking at the fur.

"I understand you are American?" the fur said. His Indian accent was extremely heavy.

"I am. If you'll excuse me ..." Kalen answered, "I've got to see Vishalya Singh."

The male nodded. "Before you do, I've got to ask you, is it true that this was a forced marriage? I had no idea, you see."

Kalen looked at the fur with an empty expression on his face. He wasn't going to be used as a convenient alibi or excuse by any of the guests attending the wedding, and he felt sick to his stomach that this fur was trying something like that on him. "You can talk to the police about that," he finally said. "I've got more important things to do."

"More important ... but ... but I am ..." the male began, clearly surprised and flustered at Kalen's dismissal of him.

"Completely irrelevant compared to Vishalya's wellbeing," Kalen completed the sentence, and walked on.

Vishalya half turned just in time to see him before he reached her. Her eyes instantly grew to the size of saucers, and without a word, she turned around and bolted towards the gate.

Kalen was taken completely aback, as were the two police-furs who had been standing with Vishalya. They looked at Kalen in confusion, then after Vishalya, then seemed to figure something out between them and one of them tried to stop the American, while the other ran after the fleeing bride.

It took a moment before Kalen figured out how to react. Then he looked at the police-fur and shook his head. "Please, don't stop me. I've come all the way from America to ask her to marry me," he said, evenly. "And I've had a really, *really* bad day so far!"

To his credit, the police-fur immediately got the message and stood aside with a nod, and Kalen sprinted after Vishalya.

He caught up to the other police-fur first, and quickly managed to convince him to stop pursuing Vishalya. Then he turned back around to see where she had gone.

She was nowhere to be seen, but there was only one place she could have hidden, except amongst the police-cars, and somehow, Kalen didn't think she'd gone there. So he ran around the corner, and up ahead, he saw Vishalya, still running.

Sighing, he ducked his head and ran as fast as he could. Even in her dress, she was a fast runner, he noted. At least it wasn't a western-style wedding dress, he thought, or this would have been a scene taken out of any number of cheap romantic comedies. This, however, was a lot more serious, and as he caught up to her and overtook her, he turned around and put up his paws.

"Please ... stop," he wheezed, half out of breath. "Please?"

Vishalya looked at him with a terrified expression, but she did stop running. "Why are you here?" she asked.

There was pain and fear in her voice, and it nearly broke Kalen's heart to hear it. But he managed to smile, regardless. "I'm here ... because you asked me to save you."

Vishalya shook her head furiously. "No. No, go back to America, Kalen," she said, her voice breaking. "You don't want me anymore."

"I think I should be the judge of that," Kalen said and took a half-step towards Vishalya, still holding his paws up.

Vishalya started to turn away. "You don't want someone like me. I'm unclean. I'm spoiled. I'm ..." she whispered, her voice breaking and she began to cry.

Kalen wasn't going to let her run away again. He took another half-step towards her and gently put his arms around her, pulling her in close. "You're perfect," he whispered, burrying his muzzle in her mane. "You're beautiful. You're intelligent. You're wonderful ... and I came halfway across the world for you. I fought your brother for you. I nearly got shot by the guards for you. So whatever you say ... don't ever tell me you're not worth it. Because you are. And I love you."

Vishalya broke down completely, sobbing against Kalen's chest, her paws clenching his shirt tightly as she tried to hide from the whole world. All the while he held her and stroked her back, whispering over and over that he loved her.

"I don't even have a family anymore," she finally wheezed, between sobs. "They wouldn't want someone like me back."

"They're not good enough for you anyway," Kalen answered, softly. "But would you like a new family?"

Vishalya didn't answer. And Kalen didn't pressure her about it.