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Black Hope

Kalen closed the door to his car. He was still driving his old Trans Am, lovingly cared for and maintained ever since he originally got it on his sixteenth birthday. He could afford a bigger car nowadays. He could afford it ... but he didn't want it. He loved his car. It meant something to him. It had brought him closer to his best friends. Closer to himself too, for that matter. And it still looked good. Not to mention it was still running on a hydrogen engine although he had needed to get it replaced two years earlier. That was alright ... it had cost him a pretty penny but by now, he could go two hundred miles on a hydrogen cell the size of a pack of cigarettes. It paid itself back pretty quickly, when one thought about it that way.

Plus hydrogen cells cost a fraction of gasoline these days anyway.

He adjusted his suit and tie and, for the twentieth time since getting into the car, he thought about how much he hated wearing that kind of getup. He felt out of place in a suit. It made him look all ... official. He preferred jeans and a hoodie, or at least something similarly relaxed if he could choose for himself but Coach Jones threw a fit if any of his players turned up at Team Headquarters wearing anything but a suit.

Kalen had always been a Team-First-Kinda-Guy so he hadn't made a fuss about it, but he knew everyone around him was aware of how uncomfortable he was in that kind of

getup. Still, Coach Jones had instructed him to come to a meeting and as he approached the huge building in front of him, Kalen couldn't help but wonder what it was about.

He'd only just been promoted to the primary backup-role two weeks prior, and he knew the owner of the team wasn't too keen on it. He also knew why.

It was still a matter of that old gunshot-wound. Even after three years of practicing at an NFL level, there were doubts that he could perform on the field without it becoming a problem. He had a stronger arm than the first string quarterback, and his accuracy was almost as good, but the owner of the team had serious doubts about him and he knew that once his contract ran out after this season, he might not get an extension.

Without any playing time, he'd be lucky to get another contract offer from another team. He might be able to get a contract in the Canadian league or maybe down in Mexico, but the NFL would almost certainly be a thing of the past for him.

It made his heart ache to think of it. He knew he could play. He knew he had what it took, and that he'd be a great quarterback if only someone would let him prove it. But how many furs didn't walk around the United States with similar thoughts? At least he'd come this close. Closer than most.

He'd been allowed to sniff the flowers but not to bring them home, so to say.

Frankly, it only made the situation all the more frustrating. But now that he was the second string quarterback there was a real chance he might get some playing time through the season. He had to grab the chance with both paws if he got it, and then go in there and play so well that someone would want to pick him up after the season was over.

In the meantime, all he could do was watch game-tape, study his playbook, get as many reps with the first string offense as he could convince the coach to let him have ... which would undoubtedly not be many ... and just pump iron as much as possible to stay fit.

It wasn't like he had anything else to do anyway. He didn't have many friends on the team. Some of the guys were nice enough but most of them were still in the wild untamed height of their youths and they were primarily out to have a good time. Fast cars, hot femmes, lots of bling ...

Kalen didn't like partying like that. He remembered his rookie symposium and how the commissioner had told everyone to be very, very careful about what kind of furs one chose to hang out with. Some of his teammates seemingly hadn't listened to that and

hung out with some of the shadiest characters Kalen could remember ever seeing anywhere. Most of his teammates made a lot more money than he did too ... having bigger contracts than a lowly third-string QB, only recently promoted without a renegotiated contract.

As far as he knew, he had been promoted because Coach Jones had gone to bat for him, and somehow, Kalen figured that was what this meeting would be all about. About his future with the team ... or lack thereof, if the owner wasn't going to relent.

He opened the door and headed inside. Adjusting his tie again he nodded to the furs at the reception and got onto a glass-lift, taking him up eight stories to where Coach Jones' everyday office was. Once he got out into the hallway, he came face to face with the first string QB ... an almost impossibly reedy looking canine in his late thirties. He had been great in his youth. Now his career was on the downturn ... and everyone knew it, apart from himself.

Nonetheless, Kalen nodded politely to him and got nothing but a curt sneer in return. They had never had a good relationship, and Kalen knew exactly why. The canine thought every quarterback on the roster was a competitor out to get him. Still, Kalen felt confident he had learned something from being on the same team as a star in the autumn years of his career. Coach Jones had made sure of that, and Kalen was grateful for it.

For one thing, he was a far more patient player now than he had been in High School. Coach Larsen would probably have approved.

Sighing slightly as the elevator took the canine downstairs, Kalen shook his head and headed towards Coach Jones' office. He knocked on the door and waited for an answer before opening and stepping inside. Closing the door behind him, he adjusted his tie yet again, feeling almost like it was strangling him.

Coach Jones, a squat, powerfully built wolverine and a former NFL-star in his own right, was standing by the computerized wall-screen, setting up a play against the first pre-season opponent the team would play.

"Tell me, Kale ... how do you look in a tuxedo?" he asked, without turning around.

Kalen blinked. That was hardly the opening to the conversation he had expected.

"Erh ... " he began.

"That's not much of an answer!"

"Sorry coach. I just didn't expect that question. I look about as uncomfortable in a tux as I do in a suit, I'm afraid."

Coach Jones chuckled. "Tough luck for you. Roland refuses to go to a party tomorrow and you know that what Roland refuses to do ..."

"Roland doesn't have to do. Yes, I know," Kalen said. Roland was the first string quarterback. "What party, if I may ask? And I assume that since you called me here that means I am to go instead?"

"It's not something I like, but what the ownership dictates, I have to comply with and Roland gets out of a lot of off-the-field activities because he'd rather be home, nursing his ego," the wolverine said, finally turning around.

Kalen was surprised. He'd never heard his coach speak out so frankly and so openly against a team-mate before, let alone the starting quarterback. But then again, the wolverine had a well deserved reputation for being a no-nonsense type.

Not unlike Coach Larsen, really.

It stung in the equine's chest to think of the blonde femme. It always did. The world wasn't always a fair place and his childhood idol's death had left a wound in him that, as opposed to the one inflicted by Benjamin Aureus' gunshot, had never really healed.

"Roland is a good quarterback, Coach," Kalen said, trying to be as diplomatic as he could about it.

The wolverine nodded approvingly, and Kalen felt like he'd just passed some kind of test. "He is. Not as good as he was five years ago though, and I will be blunt with you. I think you are the future of this franchise, but unfortunately, my beliefs don't extend to the top of the hierarchy in this ballclub. You have an awesome amount of talent, you're quiet and unassuming, you've never caused a scandal and you're unfailingly polite. Most of all, you're a fucking great leader, and no, you can't quote me on that because the boss would have my hide for it."

"He really doesn't like me, does he?" Kalen chuckled.

"I don't think he cares, to be more precise. I think he's convinced himself that the second you don a uniform and step onto a football field for real, your old wound will burst open and you'll bleed to death right there on his nice green turf in front of eighty thousand spectators and nothing anyone says to the contrary will convince him otherwise. I think we both know what that means as well," the wolverine said, sadly.

Kalen nodded and sighed deeply. So this was it. At least Coach Jones was being honest and forthright and he appreciated it greatly.

"Yeah, it means this is my last season with the Jaguars," he said and shrugged. "I won't be getting a contract extension."

"Unless the moon suddenly turns into cheese and falls into my lap ... no. I wish it could be different, Kalen. You have no idea. I think we're sending away bonafide star quality by letting you go," the wolverine said and picked up a piece of paper from the desk. "However, I'm going to do what I can to let you at least network some to make some connections. And besides, I don't care what the boss says ... I'll make sure you get some reps with the first string offense now and again and I'll make sure you get a quarter or two worth of game-time as well. It's the most I can do though."

"I know Coach. It's really appreciated, too," Kalen said and shrugged.

The coach held out the paper for Kalen to take and the equine did so.

"That's the invitation for the party tomorrow evening. For God's sake, be on your best behavior. The Dolphins and Buccaneers are sending representatives from their teams too. Hang on to the paper, since you'll need it to get in along with your team credentials. I'd hate to let you go to either the pirates or the fish, Kale ... but I'd hate even more for your career to end before it really got going. Make some friends. The Dolphins will probably need a quarterback next season at least."

Kalen nodded and looked at the paper. It was a gold rimmed invitation for a ball at the Governor's mansion. Strict dress-code and all.

"Governor Williamson really likes football, doesn't she?" he asked and grinned. "All three Florida teams invited to send representatives for a party with foreign dignitaries? I mean come on ... "

The wolverine smirked. "I think she sleeps under a Buccaneers' blanket with a Dolphins' pillow under her head and Jaguars' sheets covering the mattress."

Kalen tried to imagine how that would look and just shook his head. "From a team point of view ... that's just wrong on so many levels, Coach."

"Yeah, our bed sheets look like shit. Now git! You have a party to attend and a long drive ahead of you. If you want, we can arrange ..." Coach Jones began but stopped once Kalen shook his head and made a dismissive gesture.

"I like my car, Coach, and if I drive, it'll give me a legitimate excuse to stick to fruit-juice all night."

"You don't drink much do you?"

"I never saw the point in willfully making myself sick the next day, is all."

"Smartass. Get going already."

Kalen smiled and left the office. Once outside, though, his shoulders slumped. No contract extension. He would, at best, be considered a career backup, but far more likely, he wouldn't get another shot at things. And now this party. It sounded like boredom and dreariness gift wrapped to make it look more appetizing, but he'd do it because Coach Jones asked him and because, even though it was a tremendous Hail Mary ... it might help him in terms of networking.

After the party ... he'd have to get a hold of his parents and his aunt and uncle and talk this over with them. He'd need their advice.

He still felt horrible when he parked his car at home and got out.

He did own a tuxedo, but he'd need to find it and get it packed.

###

The drive had been long and utterly uneventful. Driving across the great state of Florida, from Jacksonville to Tallahassee was not Kalen's idea of a 'good time' but he had at least left in very good time, and he had found himself a decent hotel. The team covered the expenses for that, and he could have lived somewhere far more fancy if he wanted and no one would have lifted an eyebrow, but he wasn't the type to do that. He didn't like spending the team's money on his own gratification and he knew it was one of those things that some of his team-mates thought was strange ... or even a provocation. But Kalen just didn't like spending other furs' money on himself if he didn't have to. He hadn't been raised that way.

So he had found a hotel he could afford and checked in. Being a third-string-quarterback-made-second-string-only-recently he wasn't exactly a household name, and he hadn't been recognized. Not even when he signed the guest book. It didn't bother him. He wasn't playing football for the fame. He played because he loved the sport.

As he pulled up his car near the governor's mansion he got out and locked the door. He'd walk the rest of the way, rather than let some valet park his car somewhere where he couldn't immediately find it. In any case, he was in good time and didn't have to hurry.

Adjusting his tuxedo a bit, he checked his watch just to make sure he really was in good time, but as he expected, he was. He had almost twenty minutes until he was supposed to be at the party, and a five minute walk to get there.

He didn't want to embarrass the hostess by arriving too early while things were still being readied, and he had more or less decided to go for a stroll in the opposite direction for a few minutes before a thought struck him.

This was an official party.

With foreign dignitaries.

At a United States Governor's home.

Security would no doubt be thick, and he was supposed to be there in just under twenty minutes. Slapping his forehead, he set off towards the mansion at a brisk walking pace, after checking and double checking that he had both his official team-card in his pocket, as well as the invitation. Both were where they were supposed to be, and he didn't waste any more time getting to the party.

He was parked on Martin Luther King Boulevard and had to turn right on Brevard, before coming up on the mansion on his left, down Adams Street. He didn't want to break into a run and arrive looking all disheveled, but he still had a deep urge to kick himself for forgetting about security. This wasn't some weekend blowout with some friends. Shaking his head, he could see he'd have to wait in line for a while to get his invitation and credentials checked ... there were others waiting before him at least. He recognized a few faces from the news as well. He even saw a few reporters. None of them were particularly familiar to him, but the microphones and camera-crews were telling give-aways.

He got in line and waited his turn, smiling politely to a few furs when they noticed him. Most of them didn't really seem to know who he was and Kalen wasn't too surprised by that.

When he had been a teenager, he had been able to identify every player on the rosters of his favorite teams if he saw them, but as an adult and an NFL backup, he had realized that apart from teenage boys, most furs only knew the faces of franchise players. The star

quarterbacks ... but not their backups. The high flying wide receivers ... but not the centers. The running backs ... but not the long snappers.

He ran a paw through his mane and ruffled it up a bit. He had combed it, and brushed it down and tried to make it behave but it was utterly hopeless. His mane had a mind of its own.

Finally he reached the front of the line and showed his invitation to security. They looked him up and down and for a moment, he could see the disappointment on the face of one particular fur. Clearly, he had hoped to get to meet a player from the starting lineup.

It was somewhat insulting, but Kalen was too used to it to say anything as he showed his team credentials to confirm he was a Jacksonville Jaguars player. Then he entered the mansion.

He pondered whether to go introduce himself to the hostess, but he decided against it when he saw her already busily chatting with some of the other guests. No doubt she'd mingle and frankly, he wasn't really important enough to take up the governor's time. Instead, he tried to orient himself in the room but it wasn't easy as it was already filling up quite rapidly. He recognized only a few faces, mostly belonging to Florida celebrities. The foreigners were all unknown to him, although some of them, dressed in traditional styles for their home countries, stood out. No doubt he'd have to explain the game of Football half a dozen times throughout the evening, but he didn't mind that.

Sticking one paw in his pocket, he headed towards a large table set up with refreshments and picked up a glass of fruit-juice. It was freshly pressed and quite tasty, if a bit on the sweet side ... he'd probably pick another type next time.

Just as he was about to mingle, he stopped. Approaching him was a mountain of a wolf and Kalen, who was both taller and more strongly built than almost any of the guests, for once found himself dwarfed.

"Ullo ... " the gigantic fur rumbled and picked up a glass of cold water which nearly vanished in his massive paw.

Kalen nodded and smiled. "Mr. Jackson, a pleasure to meet you."

The wolf chuckled. "You only say that because you never played against me."

Grinning, Kalen shrugged and sipped his juice. "Well, I'm sure I would've found the meeting less pleasant if you had crashed into me and sacked me, if that's what you mean."

"Exactly right. Anyway, we drew lots. I lost. That's why I'm here."

"Very pirate-like of you, I guess. Fitting for the Buccaneers."

The wolf eyeballed Kalen good-naturedly and picked up a pawful of peanuts from the snack-table, popping some of them into his mouth and chewing them. "Smartass."

"So they say," Kalen responded, smoothly. "Seriously though, I was told to go."

"I take it your prissy first stringer wasn't interested."

"Something along those lines, although naturally, I wouldn't call him prissy."

The wolf chuckled again and ate a few more peanuts. "He whines every time he gets sacked, did you know?"

"Your point being?" Kalen asked, starting to feel a little annoyed at his conversation partner's attitude.

Finishing the peanuts, the wolf looked at Kalen with a shrug. "My point being that he's over the top and everyone thinks it's fucking stupid that you haven't been given the chance yet. We hear the rumors too, you know. About how the Jacksonville ownership thinks you're going to collapse in a cascade of blood the second you throw a pass."

Sighing, Kalen shrugged. There was no point in denying the facts after all, but if a Tampa Bay player knew that much, then most of the NFL probably knew. A public secret. It just made things all the more frustrating.

"Yeah well, I'll be looking for a new ball-club after this season. I just got told today."

"That's harsh."

Shrugging, Kalen nodded. "Maybe so. Anyway, who did the Dolphins send?"

"Haven't seen any of the fish yet, but they're bound to have sent *someone*."

"Your team did. Mine did. They probably will as well."

The wolf nodded and picked up some more peanuts before turning to head off into the crowd. "Keep your chin up. Someone will give you a chance to play."

Kalen just nodded. The room was almost packed full and he was starting to wonder how many more furs they were going to cram in there when a large door was opened to an adjacent room. It helped a lot and he allowed himself to be swept along into the next room. He might as well start to mingle a little ...

###

Nearly three and a half hours had passed. It was dark outside and several of the guests had become pleasantly inebriated. Some had passed through pleasant inebriation and entered the realm of the roaringly drunk, and Kalen was bored to tears. He'd made polite conversation with several furs ... even with the Governor who at least had the decency to not look too disappointed that Jacksonville had sent a backup. Just as he expected, he had needed to explain the basics of the game of Football to several foreign big business guests, including a Norwegian couple, a South African CEO and the Thai ambassador and his wife, who just happened to be in Florida and had received belated invitations.

One thing he still hadn't quite figured out was the purpose of the party, but at least he understood his reason for being there now. He ... as well as the other team representatives ... were there for their entertainment factor and the fact that they were representatives of "American culture".

The equine couldn't help it, but he found that rather amusing. When he thought of culture, he thought of art and music ... museums and theatres. But strictly speaking, sports qualified as culture as well.

He was getting thirsty again. He'd gone through five glasses of fruit juice already, but the heat was unbearable. Lots of furs in a relatively confined area tended to do that.

He looked at the glass in his paw and sighed. It was a paw-engraved crystal glass, probably worth a small fortune, and it really was a small work of art ... but it was empty. There was nothing for it. He had to go get a refill. By now, few furs seemed interested in him and he had pretty much picked up that at this stage of the party, the big business-types were all networking with one another, and the Governor was busily making her rounds to all of them.

Looking into the glass again, he decided to go get himself that refill. It was either that or stand around getting more and more thirsty and that just didn't seem particularly appealing. He politely apologized to a couple of furs he had to squeeze around to get to the drinks table, and straightened up. If things didn't get any more interesting soon, he would probably discreetly leave the party early. After all, he could always say he had to be back on the practice field tomorrow. It wouldn't even be a lie.

Then he stopped.

His train of thought stopped as well.

His jaw went slack ...

He had gone looking for some fruit juice ... and had found a vision.

By the drinks table ... right by the punch bowl in fact ... stood an equine. She wasn't looking in his direction, but Kalen found it impossible to tear his eyes away from her. He had always thought Dina was the most beautiful creature in the world, even now that they were no longer a couple, but at that moment, he realized he'd been wrong. The femme in front of him was darker even than he was himself. His own fur was black but ... hers was literally like a piece of midnight, cut out of the fabric of a winter night. Her mane was charcoal ...

No.

Not that.

Even darker than that.

It was like ...

He shook his head, reminding himself not to get started on the whole poetry-thing again. Somehow, he always did that when he saw someone beautiful and it was so cheesy it made his toes curl.

Or rather, they would have if he had *had* toes to curl.

But this creature in front of him was ... beyond lovely.

Her pose was one of elegant, bored resignation. She flicked her mane a little and sipped from her glass, and Kalen found himself mesmerized by that simple motion. Her manner of dress told him a lot about her. She wore a very dark red and warm yellow sari, and between her eyes, a small red dot was visible.

India ...

Kalen had a degree in religious science. He knew more about Hinduism than any non-Hindu he'd ever met, and the femme in front of him made him think of legendary names, taught to him in classes several years ago.

Amba ... who remained young and beautiful for an eternity, until she killed herself to gain revenge on the male who had made her an outcast and then spurned her.

Draupadi ... so beautiful that she had five husbands, five brothers who all loved her without jealousy.

A sound of something shattering broke him out of his dazed state of mind and he realized the glass he had been holding until a few seconds earlier had fallen from his fingers. It had broken into hundreds of little pieces on the floor and Kalen felt panic rise in him at the realization. It wasn't made better by the fact that everyone in the immediate attention seemed to turn their undivided attention to him.

He knelt and started picking up the broken pieces. Sighing, he felt stupid. Here he was, at a Governor's ball and he repaid the invitation by breaking an expensive glass.

A black paw reached down and helped him and Kalen felt his heart catch in his throat.

There she was.

"Did it slip?" she asked, politely.

"I ... " Kalen started, but his vocal cords went on strike, formed an orderly picket line and refused to cooperate with the legal authority of his brain.

She smiled at him. "It's alright," she said. Her voice carried enough of an accent to be alluring and exotic, without being a caricature. Like everything else about her, it was *perfect*. "I'm so bored I nearly fell asleep too."

"Buh..." Kalen tried, mentally threatening his picketing vocal cords with the cerebral equivalent of a water-canon. They responded by defiantly going on sit-down strike.

"You're very articulate, aren't you?" the femme asked, looking like she had to suppress a giggle.

Sending in the adrenalin SWAT-team, Kalen finally managed to clear his throat and blink. "Oh ... but ... I'm not sleepy, actually. I'm so sorry, I just found myself staring. It was quite rude."

She didn't seem to catch on at first and she looked genuinely confused as she looked around at the assembled crowd. "Staring at what? I mean, it's a very nice house but ... is it all that different from other high class parties?"

"I don't rightly know. I don't get to go to many, to be honest. But if I'm to venture a guess, this one has something truly extraordinary."

"Then please ... point it out to me? I'd love to see something extraordinary."

Kalen had hot-and-cold flashes and he had no idea where he got the courage from, but he swallowed hard. "I was actually referring to you, Miss," he said and fully expected to get slapped across the face.

Instead, she simply looked surprised and slightly flattered. "Really? Me? But why?"

"Because ... I took one look at you and I thought of the most spectacular ... beautiful ladies from the old legends," Kalen answered. He was already in to his neck ... he might as well drown himself good and proper.

She smiled softly. "Oh please, don't tell me. King Arthur's queen and knights of the round table and that kind of thing?" she chuckled and looked like she was already mentally moving away from the conversation.

Kalen didn't want her to move away, and with his heart hammering against his Adam's apple, he shook his head hurriedly. "Actually, more like Draupadi."

That actually got a raised eyebrow. Clearly, she hadn't expected him to know that story and she got back up, holding the broken shards of the glass in her paws. "How come you know that name?" she asked. "I haven't met any westerners who knew the tale of the Pandavas yet."

Kalen got up as well. "I have a degree in religious science, Miss. It's ... nothing particularly special."

"If you had made that comparison in India, I would have agreed," she said, putting the shards down on a tray that a valet brought for the same purpose. "But this is Florida. I definitely didn't expect it here. That makes it ... and therefore you ... special. Anyway, my name is Vishalya. My father is Rajivh Singh, and he's the reason I'm here. He got the invitation ... and decided I might be a strategic asset in his networking-plans for the evening, but I've spent most of my time sitting on a couch or sipping punch."

"Rajivh Singh ... I'm sorry ... the name doesn't ring much of a bell but then again, I'm just a football player," Kalen answered, truthfully.

Vishalya shrugged. "He's a manufacturer. He owns several steel-yards and factories north of New Delhi. In India, he's a bigshot. Here, he's unknown and it irks him. So he

wants to make business contacts. Anyway, you're a football player? I take it you mean the peculiar American variety of the game where you throw the ball but still call it "foot"-ball?"

Smiling, Kalen nodded. "Yeah well, the most scoring member of a team is always the kicker anyway, but I know ... it's still a weird name for it."

Vishalya smiled ruefully. "Is there a reason why you're not telling me your name?"

Kalen felt like bonking his head into the wall repeatedly, and his eartips felt like they were on fire. "Oh ... damned ... I'm sorry. My name is Kalen. I play quarterback for the Jacksonville Jaguars. Or more precisely, I am the backup quarterback."

"Ahh, so like me, you get to spend most of your time sitting on couches, sipping punch."

"Well, Gatorade more like it, but yes, in principle."

Vishalya grabbed a couple of glasses of champagne from a tray passing by within reach and held one out to Kalen. "Here's to us couch-potatoes then," she said and smiled the most radiantly white smile Kalen could ever remember seeing.

He took the glass, looking at it. "I erhm ... I'm driving. And I have to be back at practice tomorrow ..."

"... and you need to live a little as well. You know what I see when I look at you?" Vishalya asked.

"Please, do tell me."

"I see someone very handsome, who seems very uncertain of himself. And that is a shame. You should recognize your chance when it appears in front of you and then grab it with both paws and not let go."

Kalen smiled crookedly and looked into the glass again. "I only just met you, you know. If I reached out to grab hold of you, I'm sure your father would take umbrage."

"So you *do* have courage. Very good," Vishalya said with a warm smile. "You're right of course, but I appreciate your honesty."

"How long are you in the United States for?" Kalen asked, deciding one glass of champagne wouldn't hurt. He'd catch a cab to his hotel and get the car tomorrow before

going back. He'd simply have to call Coach Jones and let him know things had dragged out and that he couldn't make it back for practice.

No doubt he'd get a fine for it ... it was standard team policy to fine players who were absent from training without being sick ... but he'd just have to pay it.

"Another month. We've been here two months already."

"Has your father had any luck making contacts then?"

"Plenty. But not enough for his liking. However, I don't think he will ever be satisfied. It's part of how he is."

"Well, I suppose that's how big business works."

Vishalya nodded with a crooked smile, sipping her champagne. "It probably is. I wouldn't really know to be honest. I'm not actually included in business decisions. My father and my brothers take care of those."

Kalen found the smile infectious and he returned it. "What would *you* like though?" he asked, putting one paw back in his pocket and relaxing a little now that small-talk seemed to go so well.

"I don't know, really ... " Vishalya answered. She looked slightly surprised, not so much at the question as the earnest way in which Kalen had asked it. "You're different. You actually sound as if you *care* about what I'd like to do."

Sipping his champagne again, Kalen shrugged. "Of course I care. Why wouldn't I?"

Vishalya actually laughed out softly, gesturing towards the doors to the garden. "Let's go get some fresh air while we talk. It's cramped in here."

Kalen nodded and quite happily obliged. Getting some fresh air was one of the best suggestions he'd heard since arriving at the party, and he put his glass away before following Vishalya outside.

The garden was very nice. It was lit by burning torches, adding a nice bit of atmosphere and there was a nice scent in the air from the many flower-beds. There weren't many other furs out here, and as soon as he and Vishalya left the porch, they were entirely alone in the garden. He walked slowly, simply enjoying the femme's company, while trying not to stare at her every two seconds.

"Where I'm from ... and I don't just mean India ... femmes don't have much say in business. It seems to be the same all over the world. Males run businesses and corporations and whenever an occasional femme joins the mix, she's seen as an aberration and slightly comical," Vishalya said after a while. She sounded annoyed by that fact. "I'm used to being asked what I want to do, but I'm also used to the question being asked either purely as polite banter where the fur asking is already mentally on to the next three questions while I answer, or because they expect me to say I want to get married and raise a family while supporting my successful husband."

"My mother came from such a family," Kalen said and shuddered. "My grandmother was supposed to support my grandfather unquestioningly. They tried to forcibly marry off my mom to someone she'd barely even met, so she rebelled."

"What did your grandfather do?" Vishalya asked, looking at Kalen with a smile.

Shrugging, Kalen pondered how to best answer that. The easy thing was to say he wasn't quite sure. The honest road was to tell her the truth. He preferred the second option.

"He was a crime-boss from Denver. My mother and my uncle both fled from it."

"You *are* different."

Kalen smiled slightly. "How do you mean?" he asked and looked sidelong at the femme walking next to him, only to yet again feel taken aback by how lovely she was.

Vishalya shook her head and made a paw-gesture in front of her while still walking along, as if to say she was searching for a specific turn of phrase. "You are so ... honest about it. You could have told me anything and I might never have been wiser, and yet you tell me your grandfather was a criminal. That is very rare."

"What, criminal grandfathers or honesty?" Kalen asked in jest. "No, don't answer that. I was just kidding. I don't know if honesty is rare. I know it's the only option for me. I was raised by two mothers and a father who all believed in integrity and being a good fur. Plus an aunt who had to go through all kinds of Hell because she was honest, and she still ended up probably the best fur I've ever known."

"Two mothers and a ... ohh ... your parents divorced and your father remarried?"

"Not quite so simple. A mother plus a mother, and a father who lived with his first wife."

Again, Vishalya did a double-take. She stopped walking and looked directly at Kalen who stopped as well and looked at her, hoping he hadn't offended her.

"Dare I ask what caused your aunt's problems?" she asked, tentatively.

"She's transsexual. And she's not related to my family by blood. But she's my aunt none the less," Kalen answered. His aunt Jean didn't keep her condition a secret anyway.

"Next you'll tell me the uncle you mentioned in passing is gay ..."

"Actually ... "

"You've got to be kidding ..."

"Not at all."

Vishalya actually laughed. "Okay, you must have the strangest family I've probably ever heard of, and you're still being completely honest and open about it. Do you have any idea how spectacular that is? Truly? I mean, in comparison my life is absolute boredom!"

Smiling again, Kalen shrugged and ran a paw through his mane. "I'm sure you've got plenty of amazing stories to tell. To me, my family is just that. My family."

"I think I can actually understand that. And I know I can respect it."

"As my aunt would say, she never asks anyone to understand, but she does demand that those she deal with respect her."

Vishalya nodded, still smiling. "She sounds wise."

"You should meet her one day."

"Maybe I should."

Kalen nearly bit his tongue off realizing what he'd said, before Vishalya's reaction sank in with him. He nodded, slowly, coughing out an apology. Vishalya looked ready to speak up again when a voice to their right rang out in a language Kalen didn't understand.

Vishalya clearly did, however, and she looked instantly tired as she responded.

A heavy set equine with a pot belly and all the airs of someone believing himself to be King of the Universe came towards them in long strides. He looked very offended and stopped right in front of Kalen, raising a finger at the young male in an accusing gesture.

"You do not talk to my daughter alone!" he barked in a voice twice as heavily accented as Vishalya's. He would have been a caricature if he hadn't been right there in the flesh.

Kalen was about to start apologizing, when he remembered his lessons. He put his palms together, gently and lowered his eyes before bowing respectfully. "I do apologize, Mr. Singh, for the offense. Your daughter came to my aid when I broke one of our hostess' glasses, and we started talking. I suggested we go outside since the air was getting heavy inside, and therefore the fault is entirely mine. I am most sincerely sorry if I have caused you distress or if I have somehow dishonoured your family."

Behind her father, Vishalya looked like she was ready to burst at the seams with laughing, but she managed to keep herself completely quiet, while Rajivh Singh looked like someone had knocked him around with a clue-by-four.

"A most respectful and proper apology," he said, sounding utterly surprised. "You are not Hindu are you?"

"He is not, Father," Vishalya said. "But he has studied our beliefs. He surprised me by mentioning the Mahabharatha."

Mr. Singh looked increasingly confused. But his ire had also clearly drained out of him. "How absolutely unusual!" he said and sized Kalen up. "You have not touched her?"

"I would not dare, Mr. Singh. We merely talked. Your daughter has been very kind to keep me company so I wouldn't grow too bored."

"Bored? At this excellent and entertaining soiree? But I have met so many furs who will benefit my own business. Certainly a young, strong male like yourself ..." Mr. Singh began, before Vishalya broke him off.

"He is a sports-star, Father. He plays American Football in Jacksonville," she said.

Kalen nodded. "There are no business contacts for me to make here, to be honest. I am merely here to add local color to the festivities, I think. The Governor is a big fan of football."

Mr. Singh looked incredulous for a moment, then nodded. "I see. Well, I can see how this party might not be terribly interesting to you then. You play for Jacksonville, was it?"

"Indeed. At least for the rest of this season. Then I'll be looking for a new employer," Kalen explained. There was no reason to go into deeper details than that.

Mr. Singh pondered that a moment. "Well, I am actually due at a meeting in Jacksonville in two days. Could you recommend a good restaurant?" he asked.

Kalen thought about that for a long time. "That depends on what kind of food. I've had good experiences at the Rajputani myself."

"Define 'good experiences'," Mr. Singh said, not sounding completely convinced.

"They have the decency to ask the customers if they want their food "hot" as defined in the west or as defined in India. I admittedly didn't have the courage to try the real deal yet. Coach Jones would kill me if I went down with heartburn for three days," Kalen said, smiling politely.

Behind her father, Vishalya covered her muzzle to stanch a giggle. Kalen tried to make it seem as if he wasn't looking directly at her, but he still picked everything up, and apparently, he was doing and saying the right things.

Mr. Singh nodded at least. "I shall have to try that place then. However, as I have no idea where it is, I'd be grateful if you would accompany my daughter and me for the meeting. I'm sure you can keep each other from getting too bored, and it will help impress a local business-fur if I have one of the local sports-stars present."

Kalen couldn't help smiling. "I'd be delighted. Not that I'm that big a star. I'm the second string quarterback ..."

"Second string?"

"It means I'm the first reserve. Number two in line."

"That's big enough a star for my liking. You won't take the attention away from the deal I'm trying to make," Mr. Singh said with a crooked grin. "Anyway, we'll be staying at this hotel."

He reached into his pocket and took out a piece of paper and a pencil-stump, writing down a few words. Then he gave the paper to Kalen and smiled politely. The younger equine took it and looked at it, before nodding and putting it in his pocket.

"I'll be there. In two days and at what time?" he said,

"Let's say half past six. And yes, the day after tomorrow," Mr. Singh replied.

Kalen nodded and once again put his palms together and bowed respectfully as Mr. Singh led his daughter back towards the party.

It took a while before he walked back to the rest of the party. He was smiling. Not so much at the dinner invitation, but because he'd meet Vishalya again.

Even if it was only for one more night, he wanted to meet her again. Spend a whole evening in her company. He wanted to know more about her. As much as he could in fact.

He wanted to reach out and grab hold of the chance that presented itself ... with both paws.

Even if Mr. Singh would have take umbrage.

Even then.

Was she this chance? He didn't know for sure. He knew his stomach still felt bubbly and it wasn't because of that one glass of champagne he had earlier. It was because of her. Because of her voice, her eyes ... because of the way she had helped him when he made a fool of himself.

He wanted to know her. Not just *get* to know her, but truly know her.

He picked the piece of paper out of his pocket and looked at it again. It was a good hotel.

Then he pocketed the paper once more and smiled as he headed back inside. Suddenly, the party wasn't quite as dull anymore.