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XXX - "The game of his life"

"Hey, move over already, or I'll wag my tail in your face!"

Jean forcibly nudged Gabrielle out of the way and sat down on the couch. The vixen was carrying a gigantic bowl of popcorn, which she placed in her lap once she had found her seat.

"Bossy, aren't we?" Gabrielle teased but crossed her legs and flicked on the television. Yohni was still in the kitchen. She'd be bringing some more snacks and refreshments, and Esteban was supposed to arrive any moment with Fox and the beer.

No football game was complete without beer.

Jean felt pretty good about tonight's game. Miriam was still in the hospital, but she wasn't really interested in sports. Fox, however, could use a fun evening to take his mind off his worries about his wife. He was scheduled to go home the next day. He needed to get a hold of his lawyer first thing Monday morning, and before he could do that, he'd need to find all sorts of paperwork from way back when.

It was good to know Fox would have a good, relaxed evening with some close friends before the fecal matter hit the oxygen rotation system back home in Los Angeles.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Gabby..." the vixen said, popping a few popcorns into her mouth.

The equine nodded at her. "What?"

"Why aren't you and Yohni in Ohio to watch this game live? I'll bet you any amount of money most of the other players' parents are there."

Gabrielle grinned. She had been expecting that question to come from *someone* for days, and it hadn't yet.

"Simple," she answered. "This is Kalen's road trip. I won't say this is his 'coming-of-age-rite', because when he gets back home, he's still sixteen years old, and no one is an adult at that age...but it's an important thing for him to do this. I would've loved to watch this game live. And I have had to listen to Yohni moping about not watching it live for *days...*"

"I heard that!" came the mongoose's voice from the kitchen.

"GOOD!" Gabrielle answered with an impossibly wide grin. "Anyway...Jean, the point I'm trying to make is...I trust my son, and I am not going to hawk over his shoulder for any reason during this trip. He deserves this much trust. He's earned it. How would you have felt if Francois and Marie had come home in the middle of the first party where they trusted you with the house? No matter how good their excuse, how would you have felt?"

"Good point," Jean answered, nodding. "Well, we'll just have to enjoy his triumph from here."

Gabrielle didn't get to answer before Fox came through the door carrying two six-packs of beer and wearing a huge smile. "The game hasn't started yet, has it?"

"Not for another twenty minutes, Fox. Come on, sit down and unwind," Gabrielle answered and pointed to the most comfy chair in the room.

Fox obligingly sat down and took a deep breath.

Esteban came in a moment later and took a seat as well, looking like he could barely wait for the kickoff. "Eemageene that they are showeeng the whole game? Eesn't eet just fantastico?" he said, almost bouncing in his seat.

"One would think it was your son playing in that game," Fox chuckled.

"As good as!" the maned wolf retorted. "Charles and Frances are my cheeldren, but Kalen ees *familia*!"

Gabrielle leaned over and kissed Esteban's cheek. "You're kinda cute when you get all Mexican like that," she teased.

"OY! Paws off my husband, you flirtatious filly, you!" Jean burst out and tossed a pawful of popcorn at the back of Gabrielle's neck.

Esteban looked at Gabrielle in a suitably crestfallen manner. "She's armed, amiga. Popcorn. You reallee don't want to test her weelleengness to use them."

"Damned straight! I'm a vixen on the edge!" Jean grumbled, good-naturedly.

Gabrielle slowly turned her head and looked at her lifelong friend. "My dear," she said, a smile slowly spreading on her face. "Using the word 'straight' to describe any aspect of your existence is an oxymoron, and you know it."

Jean put a paw to her chest and made a gargling sound, lolling her tongue out the corner of her mouth and turning the white out on her eyes. "Oh...oh no, she got me. Mercy, mercy...I'm mortally wounded..." she moaned.

Esteban mumbled something in Spanish and shook his head, trying not to laugh out loud as he turned the sound on the television up a few notches.

###

The mood in the dressing room was mixed. Some of the players were awestruck by the fact that they were in the same dressing room as many of their idols had used. A few were scared half to death of appearing in front of a national audience. Most were just coping as best they could. Just a couple were so excited that Kalen worried they might pass out.

He, himself, was seated with a football between his paws, knees spread and eyes on the floor. He was concentrating. Trying to focus on the game ahead. Never mind the audience. This was just another game, he kept telling himself...to no avail.

This was much, much bigger than anything he'd ever taken part in before.

Steve sat next to him, wearing his game uniform for the first time. The wolf, already a huge fur by any standards, looked positively gargantuan in padding. Kale was glad Steve was on his team, rather than the opposing one. Someone that big would be physically intimidating to *anyone*.

The door opened and Coach Larsen came in. She was wearing her usual type of clothing. A sleeveless white T-shirt, combat fatigues and a wide, hard leather belt. Nationally televised game or not, nothing was going to make *her* dress up all fancy-like. Kalen smiled at the thought. It was strangely comforting, however weird that was. The only thing he noticed that looked different about the equine was the pendant around her neck which she usually kept hidden away was more prominently displayed than usual, hanging outside her top.

She looked at the entire squad and every teenager fell completely silent. Kalen thought he saw something akin to sadness flicker across Coach Larsen's face, but that had to be his imagination. Surely, this was her greatest achievement? A female coach taking her team to the national scene? She could probably go on to the college ranks for all he knew. And who knew where that might lead in time? How could she be sad?

No, it had to be his imagination.

"Well boys..." she said after a long moment. Her voice sounded a little more hoarse than normal as well, Kalen noted.

They all listened. They all had their attention focused on her.

Coach Larsen ran a paw over her mane, grabbing a hold of her thick braid. She sighed before continuing. When she looked up, the sadness had left her face. There was nothing but steely determination there.

"You're finally here," she said. "This is what you've all been playing for, even before you knew this game was a possibility. For many of you, this will be the biggest game ever. Your own, private Super Bowl."

Some general nodding and smiling took place amongst the players. It was a good analogy. One they could relate to.

"You are the best damned team I've ever coached," the female went on. "You're here because you're a team. Because you *play* like a team and because you *think* like a team. This is a team sport. You can't win by playing Lone Ranger out there on the football field. It just makes you look like an idiot, and each one of you here understands that. I've taught you pretty much all I can...and tonight, we'll see if that's enough. I can tell you that the other team plays just as well...or they wouldn't be here. They have a coach who's just as good as I have been at teaching the rules and the systems of football. If you're going to win tonight...you won't win because of me or what I've taught you. You'll win because of two things...and only two things..."

There was a brief, but loud storm of protest. None of the players felt that their coach should discount herself like that, but she quickly silenced them with a brief paw-gesture.

"Shut up, and listen to what I have to say instead of trying to give me a victory before it's been won!" she snapped. It worked. The young males in padding and armor all fell silent. Coach Larsen nodded, briefly. "The first thing you'll win on is your own guts and your own strength. I'm not going to talk about 'heart'. It sounds cheesy. But you'll win if you have the strength to claim this victory, because of your attitude. Do you play for your own glory? I don't think so. None of you in this room play for yourselves. You play for the furs next to you on the line of scrimmage. For the fur holding the football at any given time. You play for the love of the game. I think...I've managed to teach you that much."

Kalen nodded. "You have, Coach."

Everyone else nodded in agreement. Even Steve, who had only just joined the team. Coach Larsen smiled crookedly and nodded. She slowly walked along the benches, either patting each player on the shoulder or ruffling their hair.

"The other reason," she continued, "is a little more complicated. You're an army. You all know this comparison. A football team is a tribal army, fighting against another tribal army. And you have reached this place because you've fought honorably every step of the way. I've never seen you deliberately play dirty out there..."

"...you'd have killed us if we did, Coach," someone said further down the bench from where Kalen was sitting. The equine couldn't help grinning, as did most of the team.

Coach Larsen nodded. "Probably. Or I'd have done something worse than killing you. I'd have thrown you off the team and then I'd have told your parents why."

A collective wince ran down the entire line of players.

"Ouch..." Steve muttered. "She plays hardball..."

"Always," Coach Larsen answered, without missing a beat. "But my point is...you'd a damned fine army. You've got a bloody good chieftain leading you into battle, and you're all outstanding warriors. You have reason to be proud of yourselves. You play hard...but you play fair. And believe it or not...it's possible to win that way. Give yourself one more victory, boys. You deserve it. More than any team I've ever trained, you deserve it."

With that, she picked up the bag of footballs and left the dressing room. No one said anything for a while. In fact, no one said anything until Steve suddenly remembered to breathe again, nearly coughing his lungs out in the process.

"I feel all warm inside," he mumbled.

Kalen nodded. "I think we all do. Okay...everyone huddle up around me."

Every player in the room did, and Kalen crouched in the center of the huddle. "We don't run in there one at a time. We're not NFL superstars, and we shouldn't try to be. We don't run in there at all. I want everyone here to *walk* onto the field. Calmly...and with *dignity*! Hold your heads high, and then let's win this one for Coach Larsen as well as for ourselves. We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her."

Not one voice protested. Kalen slowly stood up and straightened his back. He looked up at the clock on the wall. Outside, he could hear the speaker on the stadium. It wasn't anywhere near full out there, but none of the players in the room had ever played for as many furs as there would be on the ledgers anyway. And besides, this game was televised.

"Team...on three..." he said, breathily. "One...two...three..."

"TEAM!"

Everyone had joined in.

###

Zig Zag made sure her children were all comfortable in their seats, and that they had their soft drinks, before she sat down herself. Alex was seated on her right, the children on her left and on the opposite end of the kids, James had planted himself. That way they had their children boxed in to better keep an eye on them. Alex had come along quite happily. He wasn't planning on continuing on until the next morning. Watching the game with his cousin seemed like the best possible way of spending the evening.

The ledgers were hardly full. The Hall of Fame football field was big enough to house thousands of spectators, and while Hatton clearly had nearly emptied the town, and while there were a lot of UHS parents and friends along as well, the stadium was no more than half full at best. What made this night's game spectacular were the camera-crews. The stadium speaker had already presented the game as 'the game of future talent'.

This was going to be a well played game. Probably the two best high-school teams in America were about to go head-to-head.

"There...are we all set?" Zig Zag asked.

The kids all nodded. James brandished a homemade UHS-banner and Alex leaned back, putting his paws behind his neck with a smug grin on his face, clearly getting very comfortable.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," the skunk said and smiled, turning her attention to the field.

The first team was running onto the field, but it didn't look like Kalen's team. They wore dark blue jerseys, dark blue helmets and white pants. UHS played in red and white, so this had to be the opposition. The speaker introduced them as the Hatton Flyers.

It was only another minute before UHS entered the field. They were walking. Slowly, and as a group. As they reached the center of the field, they took the time to turn and bow to the spectators. Only then did they walk to their sideline.

According to the clock, the game would start in less than ten minutes.

###

"You should watch this!"

Benjamin sighed. His assistant had been nagging him for the last ten minutes. He'd never liked football, but his assistant did, and the game was apparently quite good. Frankly, Benjamin wanted to get back on the road. He wanted to move on to the next kill, but they weren't leaving until tomorrow.

"Seriously, Mr. Aureus...no joke. This is great stuff. Those UHS-kids are somethin' else. Doesn't look like they have any half-breeds in the ranks either! They're up by sixteen and they've only played one quarter! Two touchdowns, two extra points *and* they managed to sack the other quarterback in the endzone for a safety."

Putting his head in his paws, Benjamin groaned loudly. "I don't care!" he growled. "I have more important things to think about than some stupid football game!"

"Well...even so...you should relax some before tomorrow. You're all wound up like a spring. No reason for it, neither, Mr. Aureus. They haven't caught you yet, and they won't catch you in the future either. You're too damned good."

Benjamin really, really desperately wanted to punch the canid in the next room. But he needed his get-away driver intact, so he pushed that thought away and picked up a clip, starting to fill it with bullets.

###

Towards the end of the second quarter, the tables had turned dramatically, and Hatton had managed to not only equalize but to bring themselves in the lead. The main reason for that was a string of penalties. Hatton had apparently found out that the way to win was to make sure Kalen didn't get to throw the ball. They were bull-rushing him constantly, more often than not using excessive force or hitting him after he got rid of the football.

"They're hurting him on *purpose!*" Steve whimpered, shaking his head. He wanted to shout out to his friend. To stop getting back up. To lay down and let himself be carried off. "Coach...Coach for God's sake, you *have* to stop him..."

Coach Larsen simply folded her arms across her chest, setting her jaw and looking at the playing field with hard, uncompromising eyes. Out there, Kalen got back on his hooves, obviously dazed after the latest hit. Once again the referees called a penalty. Roughing the passer...yet again.

"He's right Coach. They're doing this on purpose. They're trying to take Kale out of the game. Please, can't you pull him out?" the team place kicker, a short, wiry feline called Pablo asked.

Narrowing her eyes, Coach Larsen simply showed a bit of teeth as she nodded for the play to resume. Kalen got under center. Shaking his head again, he called out the snap-count. He was *clearly* shook up. The snap was taken. Kalen took a five step drop. Perfectly executed. Then his linefurs fell back, forming a protective pocket around him. Also perfectly executed. Steve felt a moment of relief. Perhaps Kalen would manage to deliver this pass and...perhaps...

The left cornerback let his assignment run free. If only Kalen could see it...if only...

Steve's eyes went wide. The cornerback lowered his head and juked left around the offensive tackle, desperately trying to cover two furs at once. The receiver was perfectly open...thirty yards down field. Kalen had seen him. He pulled his arm back...and brought it forward.

The hit was astonishing. It was timed flawlessly. The football flew askew, jumbling across the sideline. No one paid any attention to it. The crunch of fur hitting fur was all anyone cared about. Kale's hooves were lifted off the ground and his face visibly contorted in a grimace of pain as he was slammed into the ground, the cornerback on top of him.

There was a deafening silence on the sidelines. The crowds had shut up too. Even the fans who had cheered for the Flyers had gone silent as they realized what was going on, on the field.

The cornerback got up, striking a menacing pose over Kalen who was still on his back.

On the sideline, the physicians were getting the stretcher ready, but Coach Larsen held out a paw sharply to stop them.

"What're you doing??" Steve gasped. "Coach for God's sake..."

"Stop invoking your God or I'll *make* you shut up. This is football, not a religious ceremony," the equine growled, without even looking at the horrified wolf.

Pablo shook his head and looked up at her too. "Coach...please listen to him. Let Kalen come out here and take a breather if nothing else."

"This is his moment. I will not take it from him unless he signals that he wants to leave the field!" Coach Larsen said and nodded towards Kalen who was struggling back on his hooves yet again.

"We can't win like this. Not if he gets pummeled like that. He needs to recover, Coach," one of the defensive players said behind the equine.

Her shoulders simply tensed up as she stood, legs slightly apart, not taking her eyes off the field. "There are more important things than winning."

The team was stunned into silence. In all the time they had known their coach, they'd always known her to be the type who would tell them never to give up hope of a victory. To always fight to the last second, even if they were hopelessly behind.

"Th...there is?" Pablo asked, sounding more surprised than he knew he should have.

Coach Larsen nodded, slowly. Just once. She didn't speak as the snap count went up again.

Steve looked back to the playing field in horror.

###

Gabrielle's face was a mask of rage.

"If I ever get my paws on Hatton's coach, he's going to need to find a nice girl's name for himself!" she hissed.

Jean winced. "Speaking from experience...ouch..." she muttered.

"Sorry, but those bastards are actually trying to *hurt* my son," the equine said, narrowing her eyes to slits. She sank deeper into the seat, folding her arms across her chest.

Fox nodded. "They are, too. It appears they want to win at any cost, even if it means playing dirty on purpose. If their coach is to blame...and I am sure he is...then I could make a *nice* living from being his therapist. Come on, this is a High School game. There's no need to go to these extremes. I'd like to say though, I think it speaks highly of your son's team that they aren't resorting to the same low methods in return."

Gabrielle shrugged. "Have you ever met their coach?" she asked, without sitting up straight again.

"Can't say I have," Fox answered, shaking his head.

"From what Gabbee told me about her, I theenk the players know eet'd be reallee stupeed to play dirtee," Esteban chuckled. "Come on...the game eesn't over. I have faith een Kale's abeeleetees."

Gabrielle nodded again, looking quietly and sullenly at the television screen.

###

Three minutes into the third quarter, Kalen finally raised his paw. The score was UHS 19, Hatton 24 and he was so thoroughly banged up that he couldn't see straight anymore. He didn't want to leave the game but to stay on the field was completely out of the question. He looked to the sideline and signaled that he wanted a break, before stumbling to the bench.

Coach Larsen crouched in front of him and held out a bottle of water for him to take. She didn't speak. She simply looked at him.

"I'm sorry coach...I just need a few minutes to catch my breath," the equine wheezed. He looked like he'd been through a meat grinder. He was bruised, even on his face, from having been knocked over so many times. He had a cut along his lower jaw on the left side, where he'd scraped himself raw after a particularly vicious tackle. His walk had been limping. All in all, he looked awful.

"Why did you stay on the field?" Coach Larsen asked, quietly. She was still crouching, looking up at her protégé. "You could've asked for a break long ago."

Kalen smiled grimly. "Why didn't you pull me out?"

"Because I trust you, and because it is your decision to make. Of all the players on this team...and there are many talented ones...*you* are the one who could go all the way. You know that. Your teammates know that. I am not going to pull you from the field if you don't want to leave it. Not on a day like today."

"I didn't want to leave, Coach. This may just be football, but there's such a thing as showing those *bastards* that I'm not a quitter. That cornerback of theirs...he whispered to me that his school had waited fifty years for this, and that they'd hurt me if that was what it took to win. He told me to back off and sit the rest of the match out..." Kalen said. His voice was angry. His eyes narrowed.

Coach Larsen nodded. "And you wanted to prove to them that you could take whatever they dished out."

"Yeah..." Kalen said.

Out on the field, the game resumed. The UHS backup quarterback was taking a snap. Sadly, that backup quarterback was Pablo...the kicker. He was fairly good and could probably have made the position on pretty much any High School team, but this wasn't any ordinary game.

"Then I want you to listen to me, Kalen...because what I have to tell you now may very well be the last thing I can ever teach you as a football-player. Your team depends on you. You showed real grit out there...by staying and fighting against someone who would do you harm. I'm *proud* of you...I'm proud of your courage. You're the best player I think I've ever had the privilege of coaching...but you have to understand that you are not just one guy out of eleven. You're the *leader*. On the football field, and off it. Others look to you for leadership and strength, and if you fall, the *team* falls. And even leaders need breaks now and then. Alright?"

Kalen felt sucker-punched. He'd never heard Coach Larsen speak like this before. He was blushing at the praise, while realizing that he was being corrected by the one fur outside his family he had the greatest respect for in this world. He knew he'd never forget this particular lesson.

"Yes Coach," he said, meekly. "I won't forget...I promise."

"Good," the blonde femme said and stood up. She rolled her head on her shoulders and flexed the musculature on her left arm a little, as if loosening it up. Kalen sat there in awe. His father was one of the strongest furs Kalen knew, but there was no question that if he ever arm-wrestled Coach Larsen, he'd be wearing his arm in a sling for a month.

Shaking his head, he put his face in the palms of his paws and leaned forward, exhausted.

###

Gabrielle had stopped looking like she was about to murder someone. Instead, she'd picked up a pad of paper, and started drafting a letter. When asked what it was, she'd calmly explained that she was writing the school board of the High School in Hatton, asking for an explanation for the team's methods.

Yohni knew that the letter was unlikely to ever get sent, but it helped calm the filly down and that was all that anyone could ask for at that moment. She herself was worried sick, but at least Kalen had left the field. Never mind whether UHS won the game...she just wanted her son back in one piece, and she knew Gabrielle felt exactly the same way.

She leaned over and kissed her wife's cheek, before opening a beer and holding it out for Gabrielle to take.

"Here. Have a brew and try to relax. He's safe on the sidelines now," she said.

Gabrielle took it and put the paper aside with a sigh. "Maybe so, but that doesn't make what they've done to him so far acceptable."

"No one is saying that. Even the commentators are saying this is outrageous, and they are supposed to be impartial," the mongoose said.

Esteban clinked his beer against Gabrielle's. "He's goeeng to be fine, amiga. He's tough."

"I know, but I hate seeing him getting hit like that," Gabrielle mumbled.

Fox smiled. "If you didn't, I'd have worried about your maternal instincts," he said and winked.

Jean chuckled and shook her head. "Ever the professional, Fox..."

The male smiled and opened a beer for himself. "Yep. And besides, Esteban is right. The game isn't over yet. Wait and see...Kalen will surprise us all, still."

Gabrielle nodded and slipped an arm around her wife, trying to relax. It wasn't easy, but at least Kalen wasn't in harms way for the moment.

###

Coach Larsen looked up at the clock. She narrowed her eyes. The game had tensed up. The score was Hatton 24, UHS 22, and it looked like nothing could break the deadlock. After the first drive with Pablo at QB, which had resulted in a field goal, the Hatton defense had caught on to him and there was nothing he could do to get back into scoring range now. The players on both sides were dirty and worn. It was a battlefield out there, with warriors glaring hatefully at each other across the trenches.

Three point stances...faces less than two feet from one another...she could only imagine what little jibes and what gross insults were hissed back and forth out there. But it was no good. The UHS offense, for all its attempts, and all its hard work, could not break down the Hatton defense. She sent the punting team in, yet again and watched the ball soar high and long, down to the Hatton return-fur, who ran it back only four yards before getting buried underneath piles and layers of UHS-players. She did not like what she saw when the ball was dug out.

One of her players limped towards the sideline, clearly injured.

"Troy, get over there and let the physicians take a look at that..." she called out, pointing the player towards the furs with the stretcher.

Troy shook his head and indicated that he was done for. "Sorry Coach...this is bad," he whimpered. He was a big fur, playing offensive tackle but the sound of his voice instantly told the equine that this was not a minor injury.

She nodded and took a deep breath.

"Steve..." she said, flatly, "get your ass over here..."

Steve blinked and almost leapt to his feet. "Yes Coach!" he said, nearly standing to attention.

"Troy's down...and he won't be playing again today from the looks of it. You'll take his place."

"I...but..." Steve began, his eyes going wide. "Coach, I don't want to let the team down and I haven't had any practice at his position."

"You won't let anyone down. And we haven't got anyone else we can put in there who's half as big and strong as you. But I'm looking for more than size and strength from you...come here," Coach Larsen said and pulled Steve's head closer, leaning in to whisper in his ear.

His eyes going even wider, Steve just nodded slowly. "Alright...I get it..." he said, swallowing.

"Kale, get back on your hooves. You're going back in, Pablo's not getting anywhere and you've been bouncing in your seat for the last several minutes," Coach Larsen said and smiled grimly. She wasn't looking at the younger equine. Only at the playing field.

The defense was making life miserable for Hatton again. They played as well as they had in the first quarter. Clearly, the second quarter was an aberration, caused by the shock of seeing how Hatton demolished their quarterback.

"THAT'S RIGHT. THAT'S HOW TO DO IT, HAROLD!" she called out, clapping as one of the cornerbacks got up, having flattened Hatton's quarterback six yards behind the line of scrimmage.

The Flyers would have no other choice but to punt the ball again.

They did, as expected.

UHS received the ball on their own twenty yard line and their return-fur ran it up to the twenty eight yard line, before being shoved out of bounds.

Kalen buckled his helmet-straps and looked at Steve with a nod. "Let's go play some ball," he said and smiled.

Steve put his helmet on and narrowed his eyes. "Trust me, Kale...I'll play more than ball..." he growled and ran onto the field.

###

Kalen shook his head and got under center. He put his paws down to receive the snap, looking left and right at his team-mates. They were all ready. Ready for his call. Ready for him to step up and do what he was supposed to do.

Ready for him to *lead*.

He'd never felt this nervous before in his life. Except...maybe once. When he told Dina how he felt. Yes, that was worse, and he had managed. He could manage this too. He

took the snap fast and faked the ball left, before giving it to the running back who was coming up on the right.

Four yards. Four to go. Third and four and this drive *had* to lead to a score, or else it was all over. And there was very little time left.

He got under center yet again and called the snap, then took a five step drop and dumping the ball off in a short pass to his right Wide Receiver. Five yards...

First down.

He took a deep breath and checked the clock on the stadium. Forty eight seconds remained. He took one look at the opponents and caught the eye of the cornerback who had been so successful in blitzing him. The other fur smiled grimly back at him, making a slight paw motion across his throat, as if to signify he was going to cut Kalen's.

The equine nodded. He saw the play called from the sideline and nodded. Then he ducked into the huddle.

"Listen all...before I call this play, I need you to answer one thing for me."

The whole huddle nodded, every single player looking confused. But Kalen didn't mind their confusion. He needed an answer. A clear, unanimous answer. Taking a deep breath, he looked around at every single fur.

"Do you *trust* me?"

Every player in the huddle nodded again. It was just one nod, from all of them, as if on cue. It almost looked rehearsed. Kalen smiled and nodded again.

"Then we run a forty eight reverse, post-post power..." he said. Then he got up, clapping his paws once and running to his position. He got ready and took the snap, quickly holding it out for the running back to grab. It was not what Hatton had expected. A running play with less than a minute to go was normally considered a waste of a down, and a waste of a time-out. They had lined up for a passing-play and Kalen grinned in the face of the blitzing Hatton cornerback as he held up his paws.

"You can't touch me," he chuckled.

"You're *dead!*" was the response. "I'll mount your skull over my bed as a trophy when I get home!"

Kalen rolled his eyes. The referee blew his whistle and the crowd on the stands went wild. UHS had just picked up 19 yards on that rush. The equine immediately held up his paws and placed the fingertips of his right paw against the palm of his left. The whistle was blown again for a timeout.

Then he looked at the sideline to see what the coach wanted him to do. He smiled. She had called exactly the play he had expected, but he didn't agree with her. There was only one way left to win this game, and that was to surprise Hatton's players one more time.

"Listen to me..." he said as he got back into the huddle. "You all saw Coach Larsen's call. Forget it. I will call the play from the line of scrimmage. We're going to run a switchblade on two..."

"You what...? From the fifty yard line??"

"*Trust* me!"

The linefur nodded again. "I trust you. We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you, Kale..."

"Bullshit," Kalen said and shook his head fervently. "I'm one player. Just one damned player. This is a *team*, guys. This is *our* team. You hear me? I'm not the star here. You're not the stars. The *team* got this far. Not you, not me, not any one of us. We got here *together*. Now let's *win* this together!! Are you with me?"

The looks on the faces of his team-mates told Kalen all he needed to know. They were all with him. They'd play their backsides out of their pants to win. Not for him, not for themselves, not even for Coach Larsen although most of them probably wanted to give her this victory. They would play for the *team*.

"Steve...I need you to listen because we only have time to go over this one single time," he continued.

Steve crouched and looked straight at him, nodding to show he was paying absolute attention.

"When I call this play, you won't know the signals...you haven't practiced them with us. So here's what I want you to do. Drop your assignment. Just forget your assignment completely. Let him run past you if he tries. I need you to stop the *opposite* cornerback. You fall back, and block him for me. In fact, I need you to destroy him. I need you to put him so far under Canton soil that he'll be shitting turf for the rest of his life. Alright?"

Steve just nodded and stood up. Everyone else did the same as Kalen clapped his paws. He looked at the clock.

Thirty five seconds left of the game, with a first and ten exactly on the fifty yard line. He smiled. In eleven seconds the play had to be underway.

"FOUR...TWENTY TWO...FOUR...TWENTY TWO..." he roared. The whole line tensed up as he took three steps back to shotgun position. He was going to make Hatton believe they'd throw it. No one would call a shotgun formation play from the line of scrimmage with thirty five seconds left and then run it.

He smiled and nodded to himself. Five seconds left. "FIFTY...HUT...HUT..." he stomped his right hoof into the ground once and the ball came at him.

He caught it...effortlessly. Time slowed to a crawl. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve drop back two steps and turn on his heels. His direct opponent got so surprised to find himself without anyone to block that he fell flat on his face. Steve didn't stop to wonder. Instead he ran behind Kalen as instructed and the equine instantly fell into line behind his large friend.

Three...four...five long strides later, Steve let loose a primal roar that made Kalen smile as he tucked the football in securely.

Coming towards them was that cornerback, just as Kalen had expected. He was going for another sack. But this time, he wouldn't have open roads to his target. Lowering his right shoulder, Steve never took his eyes off the oncoming Hatton Flyer. He just sped up at the last second, to surprise the cornerback, and to prevent him from suddenly changing directions.

The sound as the wolf barreled into his opponent was one of the most gratifying noises Kalen could remember ever having heard. Time was still running slowly as he rolled to the right, past Steve and the Hatton player. Kalen only had the briefest moment to see the results of the hit, but they were nothing short of spectacular. The Hatton player had been in full forward motion when Steve's tackle had impacted. The cornerback's legs had not caught up to the fact that his torso had stopped moving forward.

His helmet was coming off, the chinstrap apparently broken. The Hatton player himself was placed almost horizontally in the air, and both Steve's forearms were still solidly planted on his chest. The wolf's snarling, enraged features was the last thing Kalen noticed before time seemed to catch up to what was happening.

He was wide open. Tucking the ball in tighter, he broke into a flat sprint for the endzone.

Forty yards...

There was no one within reach. The Hatton players were completely shocked that anyone would run a trick play in a situation like that.

Thirty yards...

Kalen couldn't see Coach Larsen's face. But he knew what the femme would say if this didn't work out. He'd never hear the last of it. His battered body was aching, but his smile was impossibly wide.

Twenty yards...

He ran so fast he felt he was flying. He could barely feel the impact of his hooves on the grass. He could hear the roar of the crowd and he loved it. Loved it without shame or regret. There was a fraction of the furs on the stands that he could expect if he got to play for USC, but the noise they made...oh the sweet, wonderful noise...

Ten yards...

He couldn't hear anything except the beating of his own heart.

Five yards...

He felt the impact in his back sharply. It knocked the ball loose and for a moment, it felt like his blood turned to ice in his veins. No...no he couldn't fumble now. He couldn't fall...but his legs had left the ground. There was a Hatton player attached to his midsection, growling at him.

He couldn't lose this ball.

Reaching out, and stretching his arms as far as he could, he felt the leather between his fingertips again and he let instinct guide him as he pulled it back towards himself. As he hit the ground, everything went black for a moment. The air had been knocked clean out of his lungs and he wasn't sure where he was on the field. He heard the whistle and reached his paws up to signal a timeout. The last one UHS had to spend...

"Son, you don't have to call a timeout after a touchdown," a slightly amused voice said above him.

Kalen opened his eyes and looked at the referee. Then he turned his head, slowly...very slowly...to look at the playing field. His shoulders...his head...his outstretched arms...

The football...

All across the goal-line.

The Hatton player finally let go of him, but he was too tired to stand up. Not so much from the physical beating, so much as from the realization that it worked.

The Hatton player reached down and offered him a paw up. "I think you just earned yourself one hell of a scholarship," he said, sounding understandably disappointed.

Kalen took the offered paw and let himself get helped back on his hooves. "Thank you...a lot of your guys did too," he said, trying to catch his breath. "It's not over yet. You've got what...twenty seconds to score?"

His opponent smiled and shrugged. "I think we both know you just won this," he said and ran to his own sideline...moments before Kalen got buried in jubilant teammates.

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"Mr. Aureus...you really should watch this..."

The voice of his assistant had changed pitch. From excited to surprised, but it didn't matter to Benjamin. He had finally had enough.

Growling, he turned in his seat and narrowed his eyes. "I couldn't care less about some idiotic football game! Stop *bothering* me about it!" he snarled.

The canid in the next room shook his head. "No, Sir...that's not what I'm talkin' about. The game's all over. But I've just realized somethin'..."

"Oh please...*do* enlighten me as to your great insight," Benjamin growled. He was well beyond angry by now and his assistant was begging for a slapping.

The canid pointed to the television screen. "Well...the California team just won an' they're interviewin' their Quarterback. An' he's got some friends there with 'im..."

"Is there a POINT to this?"

"Well, Sir...how many doe-lion hybrids do you know of, Mr. Aureus? An' the Quarterback's name is Twain-Ryder. Isn't one of those soldiers you're lookin' for an equine named Twain?"

Benjamin was out of his seat so fast the chair toppled behind him. He ran into the next room and stared at the television screen. He didn't even listen to what was being said. He didn't have to. All he noticed were faces...and the name of the young player being interviewed.

But most importantly...he noticed the hybrid right behind him. A large wolf almost obscured her, having an arm around her shoulder, but there was no doubt at all.

With a smile slowly spreading on his face, Benjamin immediately knew what he had to do.

"We're going to Ohio..." he said, hoarsely.

His assistant blinked. "Mr. Aureus...the brotherhood expects you to..."

"Fuck that. I'll get around to it eventually."

"But..."

He was in no mood to argue. Nor was he going to deal with having an assistant who wouldn't follow orders.

As he stood upright, the popping sound of a single, silenced shot was the only response he made.

"I've been wanting to do that for days," he hissed.

He had to pack his gear. He had to leave...and he had to leave fast. He'd bring the corpse of his ex-assistant along and dump it somewhere inconspicuous.

What mattered was getting to Ohio.

Fast.