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## *I - "It just doesn't get any worse than this ... "*

Two damned days.

That was all that had passed since that awful ordeal up in Ohio.

Kalen wished he'd never again have to go through something that horrible, but despite any such wishes, he knew he would have to sooner or later. Furs died. It was part of life in fact. Wisecracks would say death was the only certainty in life, except taxation, and they were right too. But attending his aunt's funeral had been the single most painful event he could remember ever going to. In fact, it had been so terrible that he couldn't think of a single thing to compare it with.

He'd stood there and watched his uncle Esteban fall apart. He'd watched Steve crying openly. Charlie and Frankie, petrified with grief.

Hundreds of attendants ...

All because of his aunt.

To show her the last respect.

But the most horrible part of it was, that standing there ... he had realized that even surrounded as he was, on all sides, by other grieving furs ... he was completely alone.

No doubt, everyone there felt much the same. That each for present was alone with his or her grief, and that there was no way of sharing it. Because Aunt Jean had meant something different to each of them.

That was two days ago.

Two measly days!

In no way enough time to come to terms with what had happened.

Kalen looked at his helmet and hung his head. His teammates were leaving the locker room. Outside, Jacksonville Municipal Stadium was packed. It had been two years since the team had a sold out game, but it had been even longer since the team had a winning season and the fans had not been pleased.

But tonight was different. The defending Super Bowl Champions were in town, and Kalen knew he should look forward to the game ... but he couldn't.

He couldn't shake what had happened two days ago. And besides, he wouldn't be playing. He was still only the second string quarterback, and while he might get a couple of snaps throughout the game, the amount of playing time he'd see would be minimal at best. Plus he'd only get onto the field when the game was either won or lost.

Roland Drexler, the team's quarterback, still had the absolute and unquestionable support of the club owner, and there was no way Kalen would be able to change that.

And the equine knew it.

All because of Benjamin Aureus. Sometimes, Kalen wondered if the jackal hadn't managed to score a small victory anyway by circumspect means. The wound he had inflicted on Kalen, years ago, was keeping the equine on the sidelines. Not because it was a problem but because the club owner *believed* it was a problem. Regardless of evidence to the contrary.

"Hey ... Kale, c'mon dude. We've got to get out there!" a voice said and Kalen raised his head.

He didn't really have many close friends on the team. In fact, one of the major problems in Jacksonville's locker room was precisely that there was little team cohesion. But he did have a few buddies there, and the tall, broad-shouldered lion talking to him from the door was one of them.

He nodded and got up. "Sorry Joe ... I was far away in my own thoughts," he said and approached his teammate.

"Yeah, in Ohio, and don't try to deny it!" the lion said with a concerned look on his face. "You've been beside yourself since you got the news. I never got to express my sympathies but ... consider it done okay? I'm really sorry for your loss."

"Thanks Joe, you're the first fur in the organization to mention it apart from Coach Jones," Kalen said and ran a paw through his mane. "Anyway, come on. We've got a full stadium out there. See if you can't catch a few tonight, okay?"

Joe chuckled and looked over his shoulder and down the hallway to make sure no one was listening. "It's not a matter of whether I can catch them, my friend. It's a matter of the idiot we've got under center throwing balls away left and right."

Kalen couldn't help a crooked smile. When the team's tight end spoke like that, it was usually a good sign that the quarterback was in trouble but not in Jacksonville. Not Roland Drexler ...

And it didn't do him any good lamenting it. Besides, Kalen knew he'd probably be useless if he did get the chance to play. With the funeral on his mind and all ...

He put on his helmet and patted his team-mate's shoulder, before running down the tunnel towards the exit.

In the distance, he could hear the stadium loudspeakers. The visiting Texans were getting introduced already.

###

Steve rummaged through his bag, seemingly without much interest in what he was doing. He tossed most of the contents into his dirty laundry hamper, before letting himself fall over on the bed, almost on top of the now nearly empty bag. Then he covered his face with his paws and sighed.

His team, the Fargo Greys, had given him tonight's game off. He'd packed everything and he was ready to get on a plane back to Fargo if they changed their minds, but fortunately, the coach had been very fair about it ... as had everyone else on the team for that matter. Including the leadership. Naturally, he didn't have to play when his adoptive mother had just been laid to rest. Next week was bye week anyway, where his team wouldn't play at all, so he had been instructed to stay fit, but that otherwise, he had some time before he needed to be back with the squad.

Time he planned to spend in Ohio with his family. His dad and his siblings ...

They had been his family since they adopted him that summer when he had gone to Ohio with Kalen and with Charlie and Frankie and all the others.

With Nadia.

She had gone back to Cornell after the funeral, although she had offered to stay too. Steve had told her not to, and luckily, she had understood why.

This was something he needed to deal with himself. Along with the rest of the family.

He looked at his finger and the engagement ring he wore and he knew just how damned lucky he was to have met someone like Nadia, and he counted himself lucky for it. She was still in college, but they did get to see each other frequently, and they were planning on getting married once she had her degree.

Sometimes, life threw some serious curveballs.

He, who had spent most of his childhood growing up in a one-parent home with an emotionally abusive mother, had ended up getting adopted by the most open-minded family he'd ever met. He'd earned a football scholarship to USC, and he had been able to make the team AND get drafted into the NFL as an offensive tackle. And he'd gotten engaged to this amazing girl whom he had met that same summer ... a girl who now studied at an Ivy League university and whose father was one of the richest furs in the American North West.

Life really was weird sometimes.

Weird but great.

Although ... right now, life wasn't all that amazing. Right now, it involved a lot of pain and trying to come to terms with the loss of someone he had quickly come to call "mom", as opposed to the female who gave birth to him ... whom he had made a serious effort to simply forget existed.

How was he going to help his father deal with the loss when he barely knew how to himself? Or his sister? Or his brother?

There was a knock on the door, as if in response to his thoughts. He didn't answer, but then again, he knew he didn't really have to. It opened and Frances entered. She still looked shell-shocked and Steve sat upright on the bed, patting it to tell Frances to take a seat.

"Dad's trying to cook us something to eat," she said and sat down. "I'm not really hungry, though."

"None of us are," Steve said, honestly. "But we still need to eat."

Frances nodded and stayed quiet for a moment. "I guess so. I guess your team didn't want you back already?" she said and prodded the bag next to her on the bed.

Steve shook his head. "They told me I didn't need to be back until next Tuesday, but that I need to keep training while here. I'll do some running and go use the facilities at the school if they'll let me."

Frances managed a tiny smile. "If you'll sign a few dozen T-shirts for their team, I'm sure they won't mind too much," she said and rubbed her face. "We'd better go down and help dad out though. In his current state of mind he could burn ice-cream."

Steve nodded and swung his legs off the bed and got up. "Good point. Come on. Let's go down there," he said and put an arm around his sister's shoulder as she got up, giving her a squeeze. "Mom wouldn't want us to come apart. Think about it. Right now ... she'd be crossing her arms and tapping her foot and telling us to get over ourselves."

He tried to sound light-hearted and he even managed to perk up his ears.

He still knew it would've been more convincing if his voice hadn't broken.

###

Kalen stood on the sidelines between his team-mates when it happened.

At first, he wasn't quite sure what was going on out there on the field. Jacksonville had the ball. The play had been a perfectly simple one, too, but something had gone disastrously wrong and the Texans' star linebacker ... a huge fur who had set a league record in quarterback sacks last season ... had come crashing straight through the line like a speeding freight train through a papier-mâché wall.

Then he had collided full force with the apparently completely unprepared form of Roland Drexler, and everything had come to a complete halt on the field.

Then Coach Jones had torn his headset off and had sprinted onto the field.

Only moments before the Red Cross furs had done the same, carrying a stretcher.

By now, it was absolute pandemonium in the stands and while Coach Jones had come back from the field, Kalen was still not sure what had happened. Neither were his teammates.

They were less than three minutes into the game, and Coach Jones was on the phone with the club owner, and from the sound of it they were not in agreement.

Kalen had heard his name spoken by the coach ... several times. But it was difficult to hear anything clearly.

Then the stretcher had been carried past them and his stomach had done a quick imitation of a high speed elevator.

Going up ... going down ... going up again.

He'd forced himself not to get sick but Roland's left leg had been an absolute mess. And there was a lot of blood to be seen as well. The canid was unconscious and frankly, Kalen was grateful on his team-mate's behalf, even though he didn't get along with Roland very well. It looked well beyond painful.

"DAMMIT Sir, I'm putting my foot down on this! I have authority on the field and we did not promote Kalen just to play the third stringer over him anyway! I'm putting him on the field. If you want to make a fuss over it we can deal with it AFTER the game!"

Coach Jones put down the phone and turned around. "Kalen, get your helmet on already! What the Hell are you waiting for?" he growled. "Get in there. This is your team tonight."

Someone might as well have thrown a bucket of ice-water in Kalen's face.

" ... This is your team tonight ... "

He nodded, slowly, before putting his helmet on. "Yes Coach," he croaked. "What's the play?"

"Give it to Russo and tell him to take it straight up the middle. I'll get you a new play after that. Hurry or we'll get a penalty!" the badger snapped and Kalen simply nodded as he ran onto the field.

On the scoreboard it said second and seventeen ... with the score being tied at nothing.

###

Vishalya Singh yawned heartily and put her paw under her chin, doing her damndest not to fall over sideways from boredom. If it wasn't for the fact that she had met Kalen, this whole trip to the United States had been just about the worst waste of time she had ever experienced. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd ended up sitting by herself somewhere, while her father conducted business with someone, and while she was happy for him that he made so many new contacts, she failed to see why he wanted her to come along. Her brother would inherit the family company anyway ...

Tonight, she'd much rather spend her time either by a television set or at the stadium in Jacksonville. Kalen's team played tonight, after all. She didn't understand the rules, but a few days after they had initially met at the governor's ball, Kalen had met her and her father for dinner in Jacksonville. It had been a wonderful evening ... easily the best she had experienced in the United States yet, and her father had asked Kalen to please explain the rules of American Football to him.

Vishalya knew her father had just asked to be polite, but Kalen had managed to boil the rules down to something brief and relatively easy to understand. Vishalya at least knew how points were scored now, and that the point was to move the ball ten yards in four attempts. The rest was still a little unclear but that was okay.

What surprised her more than anything was that she had been genuinely interested. Normally, sports were not her thing. She liked cricket, but that was pretty much it. But despite that, she really wanted to see Kalen play ... and win.

Her father laughed out heartily behind her. She was standing on the balcony outside the hotel suite, watching the Florida night sky and wishing herself away. Then she heard the door opening and closing and a moment later, her father stood next to her.

"That went well," he said and smiled. "We'll be returning to India in a couple of days. That was the last meeting I had to take care of."

"Yes Father," Vishalya answered, trying very hard to conceal her boredom.

"I hope you have enjoyed the United States?"

"I have, but ... may I ask something without you getting upset?"

Her father looked a little surprised but nodded. "Certainly. I should hope you would always be forthright with me."

"I try, but I don't want to disappoint you, Father. But I don't understand why you didn't bring Yashvir instead of me. He's the one who will inherit the family business after

all, so I figured he'd benefit more from all this than I do?" Vishalya said and shrugged. "Don't get me wrong. I like the United States. It's so different ... but why me?"

Rajivh smiled crookedly. "Maybe because you are more entitled to the family name than Yashvir? Maybe because someone had to stay and run the business at home? Or maybe I just felt like showing my daughter a different part of the world?"

Vishalya chuckled. "More entitled to the family name? Yashvir is easily as fierce as I am. More so, in many ways."

"Perhaps, but he is not as clever, Vishalya. A true lion sneaks up on his or her prey and pounces only when the kill is certain. Your brother is more like a wild cheetah. He'll run himself into the ground in pursuit of what he wants, but if he doesn't catch his prey quickly, he'll just give up and go pant for breath for half an hour," Rajivh said and shrugged. His voice was quite serious. "He is not a bad businessfur. He just doesn't understand the value of guile and subtlety."

Vishalya didn't push the issue further. The name Singh meant lion ... and had been with the family for well over a hundred years, since one of her ancestors had performed a great feat of bravery in the British army. The name Singh had been with the family ever since. Vishalya knew there was more to the story and she wanted to learn all of it some day, but it would have to wait a bit. Now was not the time to ask her father. Still, she could see what he meant. It didn't change anything though ... her older brother, Yashvir, would inherit all her father's businesses, and frankly ... she didn't really envy him.

"I have enjoyed the United States," she finally said and looked back out over the city from the balcony. "I'd like to say goodbye though ... "

"Ahh yes. To the young Mr. Twain-Ryder," her father interrupted. He nodded and stuck his paws in his pocket. "Well, no harm in that. He was most pleasant company, and the restaurant he suggested was quite good."

He headed back inside. Vishalya stayed on the balcony, quietly letting her thoughts wander.

###

Kalen sidestepped. It wasn't even something he thought about. He just did it. A Texan flew past and probably into low orbit, but Kalen didn't even look his way. Instead he pulled his arm back and let the ball fly.

The stands erupted.

Ducking and juking left, Kalen could see Joe stretch out to his full length, catching the ball safely. He didn't get any more yards but that was alright. It was a new first down.

Keep the chains moving ...

Keep ... the damned chains ... *moving* ...

The Texan who had flown past him came trudging back towards his own line. He had a bewildered look on his face, like he couldn't figure out how in the name of God he had *missed*. Kalen didn't even bother to look at him twice. Everything was utterly surreal. This was his team tonight. Tonight of all nights.

Aunt Jean ... only two days in her grave.

Vishalya going back to India.

His future with the team non-existent regardless of how well he played tonight.

And then Roland Drexler's right femur had burst in two places. It hadn't just snapped or fractured. According to the news from the sideline, this was it. Roland Drexler's career was officially over. He'd never play again. If he managed to walk without a severe limp it'd be an act of divine intervention.

So tonight this was Kalen's team.

What about next week, though?

He listened to the play Coach Jones called over the radio in his helmet and nodded before getting into the huddle.

Calling the play happened almost on autopilot. He stood up, clapped his paws and his team dispersed into their normal lineup. The Texans lined up to blitz him and he had to call a line from scrimmage. Coach Jones didn't like it when a Quarterback did that but what did he have to lose? Next year, he'd be playing somewhere else entirely ... if he'd be playing at all.

He might as well enjoy himself a little. This might be his only genuine NFL appearance after all. Next week the ownership might have decided to bench him and make the third stringer the starter over him anyway.

"SIXTEEN ... SIXTEEN ... SINK TWICE, FLIPPED!" he roared.

The crowd was eerily quiet as he stomped the ground once and felt the football between his fingers. He dropped back ... three steps, faked a paw-off to the running back and rolled left. The running back was plowing up the center of the Texan's line with a gusto and the confusion was almost complete.

Almost.

A linebacker had seen the trick for what it was and was coming down on Kalen like something out of a nightmare. The equine knew that in less than two seconds, he'd be flat on his back and in considerable amounts of pain. But his receiver wasn't open yet.

If he threw it now, he'd throw an interception and that would *really* seal his fate for the rest of the season.

So he juke to the left ... further to the left. The linebacker tried to adjust his course ... his arms flailing to catch the elusive quarterback in front of him. He was growling audibly and Kalen was sure he could see murder in the fur's eyes.

He extended his right paw ... and stiff-armed the defender.

The crowd went absolutely *wild* on the ledgers.

He looked out the corner of his eyes for a split second and gritted his teeth. "*My* ball!" he sneered ... then slipped away from the defender. He only had half a fraction of a split second to act and he knew it ... so he pulled back his arm and sent the ball flying.

It was a perfect spiral. Absolutely, utterly perfect.

The receiver barely had to work for it. All he had to do was open his paws and the ball fell into them. He didn't even break stride. The rest of it, Kalen didn't get to see. He was flat on his face on the turf with a pile of extremely angry linebacker on top of him!

Even from beneath the mountain of angry fur, Kalen could hear the referee's whistle. He didn't have to guess how many yellow flags were already on the field ... and then the crowd exploded in jubilation.

He snickered. "I win ... you lose!" he grinned and hauled himself to his hoofs.

The linebacker looked like he was ready to eat his facemask with rage but Kalen just extended his arms into the air and let himself get buried under a new pile ... this time made up entirely of happy teammates.

###

Steve hung up the phone. He'd just called to congratulate Kalen, and he had to admit, it was the first time he'd honestly felt like smiling since the funeral. Forty eight to nothing ... against the defending Super Bowl Champions. And Jacksonville had been thirty five point underdogs going into the game. The networks were talking about it as if it was the biggest upset in thirty years and it probably was. And it wasn't even a title game.

Kalen had been very quiet on the phone, though. He had said again and again that he didn't really know how he'd done it. He'd done it for Aunt Jean, he'd said. Several times.

Steve had told him how much that meant to him to hear and he'd promised to tell the rest of the family.

Then he had to let his friend off the hook. There were more interviews to do. More furs to talk to. And a coach to placate, apparently. Steve had to ask what that was all about some other time.

"He said he won it for Mom," he said and turned around, looking at the rest of the furs at the table. They had just learned that Kalen had actually played. None of them had watched the game. Everyone just thought he'd sit on the sidelines, but now they really wanted to watch it.

No doubt they'd get their chance. The NFL network was bound to replay the entire game if nothing else.

Esteban actually smiled, even if his eyes were sunken and his face was drawn. Steve felt a huge boulder fall from his heart at the sight. His adoptive father had looked ... worse than words could really describe, ever since ...

He was just happy to see Esteban smile again.

"He was very quiet about it. But I think he'll make a point of saying this in the interviews too."

Frances nodded. "That's Kalen for you. Remember that time on the high school radio? After the Canton-game?"

Charles' mouth quirked at the corners. "Yeah, he nearly walked out of the booth when the hero-worship started. He always hated that, didn't he?"

"Oh yeah. Like after the Rose Bowl? Everyone wanted to pat his shoulder and he kept pushing them towards you Steve," Frances added.

Steve blushed. "He really did win that game for us, though. That one he *should* have taken credit for."

Esteban got up and started collecting the plates. "He never liked taking credeet for aneetheeng though," he said and shrugged. "That's the way he ees. I don't theenk eet's Gabrielle's or Yohnee's doeeng either."

The three younger furs looked at each other and groaned.

"Aunt Gabby? Being self-deprecating and modest?" Charles asked. "Hello, my name is Charles Lopez, I live on Planet Earth. Where are *you* from? Oh, and before I forget ... *take me to your leader!*"

It actually got a snort of laughter from Esteban. "I theenk some ice cream would be good, no?" he asked.

Steve nodded. "Sure, let me get some bowls for it. I'll do an extra few miles worth of running after dinner."

He got the bowls and out of the corner of his eye, he could see Frances getting some spoons.

As he turned around, though, he saw Esteban by the freezer, holding the box of home-made ice-cream in his paws. His eyes were welling up again.

"Thees ... was her favoreete kind, you know ..." he said, quietly.

Both Steve and the twins put down what they were holding and walked up to their dad to hold him ... before he came apart in front of them.

###

Kalen closed the door to his apartment at long last.

Forty eight to nothing.

Two points away from what, many years ago, had been called a "fifty-burger". It was the biggest humiliation of a Super Bowl winner for as long as he could remember. He wanted to feel excited and in a weird way, he was. It was all just filtered through his aunt's death. Years from now, he knew he'd look back on this game as one of his greatest, and he'd be happy and he'd smile but right now it all just felt weird.

What he really wanted was to get out of his suit and into something relaxed and then fall down onto his couch and watch the updates from the other games from around the league.

Then he'd crawl into bed and sleep like the ...

No, he wasn't going to think that.

He'd crawl into bed and get some very well earned rest. That's what he'd do.

The phone rang and he sighed. If it was one more journalist, wanting to ask him the same five questions, he'd tell them to call back tomorrow and then unplug the phone. But he still picked it up and answered it.

Then his eyes went wide. "Miss Singh? I mean ... yes, I know, I'm sorry, your father isn't here. Vishalya. I know, I know ... anyway, what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

He could guess. He knew she had to go home one of the next couple of days. But right now, he'd really rather just forget that and just listen to her voice for a little while.

So he did.

And for twenty minutes, it felt like the world was a genuinely nice place to be again.