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XIII – Calling out

The room was well furnished and in many ways quite pleasant, but the overriding feeling for Vishalya was one of disgust. It was her brother's office, and she could smell him, even as she entered. Fortunately, he wasn't at home. She'd waited for the chance for more than a week since that uncomfortable talk in the garden, and finally, Yashvir was gone.

She knew he was arrogant and she knew he felt he had beaten her. He was wrong, of course, but she knew she couldn't change his mind or the way he perceived things. All she could do was hope and pray. And call Kalen.

She knew she couldn't use Yashvir's telephone. He had it coded. She couldn't simply turn on his computer and use that either. But she had borrowed her mother's laptop, which *wasn't* coded, and she quickly connected it to Yashvir's network. Then, she closed the door and locked it. Right now, she really didn't need someone walking in on her accidentally.

Making the call, she put her palms together and prayed that this would work. If it failed, she was out of ideas. It took a few seconds to connect to the foreign network, and then call the right Florida number, but those few seconds felt like weeks.

When she heard the hold-tone, she dared to breathe again. She knew Kalen was always at home at this time of day. Or almost always. It was her best chance and if he wasn't

there, she could at least leave a message for him. She waited ... impatiently ... while the phone rang on the other end. Once ... twice ... several times. She started worrying.

Maybe he wasn't home after all.

"Kalen Ryder speaking," a voice suddenly said on the other end of the line.

A moment later, he came up on the computer-screen and Vishalya's heart skipped a beat. "Kalen! It's me. I don't have much time. My brother had my phone-lines blocked. I can't call you. I'm using my mother's computer and Yashvir's network in his office. He's out of the house but not for long!"

Kalen's eyes went wide. "Vishalya?? I've tried calling you for weeks! I figured your brother was behind it. It's so good to see you!"

"Listen ... I met the male my brother wants me to marry a little over a week ago. He's just about the dumbest fur in India. I need help getting out of here!"

"I'd tell you to get on a plane immediately, if I thought it'd work," Kalen said and sighed. "But somehow, I doubt you'd even get to the airport before you'd be caught and brought back."

Vishalya nodded. "He doesn't even let me go to the temple without one of his goons coming along anymore," she said, reproachfully. "What am I going to do?"

Kalen thought for a moment, before answering. "Would he suspect something was wrong if you suddenly started acting all amenable to his demands?"

"He'd probably lock me in my room to make sure I didn't run off!"

"Hm. Then that won't work. Okay, you need to continue with business as usual. I've bought the tickets. My team won't qualify for the playoffs and ... frankly, I'm starting to appreciate that. I'll be out of a contract as soon as this season is over, and for the Jaguars, that means as soon as the regular season is over. I'm on the plane that same evening."

"Thank you," Vishalya said and closed her eyes, putting her palms together in front of her face again in a gesture of gratitude and prayer. "Thank you so much."

Kalen waited until she opened her eyes before answering. He was smiling and he tried to look certain of himself, but his chest felt like it might burst from the force his heart hammered with. "Don't mention it," he said. "I love you ... and I need you to know that," he said, surprising himself with how steady he managed to keep his voice.

Vishalya blinked. She opened her mouth to answer, just as she heard the door open in the hallway outside. "Yashvir's back already," she said, hoarsely. "I love you too, Kale ... please ... get me out of here!"

She kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the screen, then terminated the connection just as her brother unlocked the door and opened it.

"Vishalya?" he said, surprised to see her in his chair. "What are you doing here of all places?"

Closing the lid on her mother's computer, Vishalya stood upright. "I was making a phonecall," she said, not without a certain amount of spite. She might as well tell him. He'd know as soon as he used his network to make a call, anyway. The "numbers recently called"-list would show a telephone number in the United States.

Yashvir's face darkened and he stepped into the room. "You continue to defy me?"

Vishalya smiled her sweetest, most ingratiating smile. "Yashvir ... I'll defy you from the other side of the grave if I have to," she said and strode out, past him.

She knew she'd never get another call off to Kalen from this house, but right then and there, she reveled in her small victory anyway.

###

Normally, he was just about the friendliest fur in big business. He had over twenty years of experience at making business deals that were fair for as many furs as possible. Contrary to what many furs believed, it was good business being honest and forthright. He might have made a fortune once in a while, by being less scrupulous, but in the long run, that would just have come back to haunt him. It would've cost him dearly on the image-front, and Leo couldn't afford that.

In a way, he made his money by spending money. There were many furs out there who appreciated that even big business could be done with a clean conscience.

But for the first time ever, Leo didn't want to be clean or fair. He wanted Sports of Today to stand as a warning to rags out there, using paparazzi-photographers and sensationalist journalism, regardless of the cost.

Nadia had tried to talk to him about it, and she had been quite clear on a few things. If he went as far as he had originally planned, she would hold it against him. She wanted Sports of Today to pay, too. But she didn't want innocent furs to suffer because of it.

He had tried to explain to her that there were no innocent furs working for Sports of Today, or any magazine or newspaper of that ilk, but she had been adamant. And while he was less than pleased to admit it, she was probably right. But the editorial staff ... the furs who made the decisions ... would be held accountable. As would the worst of those journalists using unsavory methods.

The desk he sat behind was massive. Over him loomed a gigantic painting of his late father. The furniture was made from oak ... a deliberate choice, as oak was not endangered, and the carpets were thick and comfortable. The screens for teleconferences, built into the wall opposite from him were very large and of the best possible quality. It was an office designed to make a visitor understand that the fur in the big chair was conscious of his image.

The door opened, and one of Leo's secretaries peeked in. Being in charge of a company like Leon Inc. meant Leo needed several. The young, male feline looking in was one of the most recently hired. He had been an intern but had impressed everyone enough to get a steady job once he was done with his college education.

"Mr. Leon," the feline said. "The representatives for Sports of Today are outside. As requested, I've kept them waiting for half an hour. They're close to boiling point by now. Should I send them in?"

Leo smiled slightly. "Yes, why not?" he said, rolling up his shirt sleeves. He had always detested ties as the most useless, pointless item of clothing in the history of male attire, and he never wore one unless he absolutely had to. And one of the major perks of being the CEO of a major, international cooperation was precisely that he didn't *have* to do that very often.

He only ever wore a tie once. Every time he'd worn one, he'd make sure it was burnt. It was almost a religious ritual, and while he allowed his employees to wear ties if they wanted to, there was no demand that they do. A suit could look good without a tie too.

A moment later, the door opened, and two furs entered. The one on the left, a short hamster in bad need of a suit two sizes bigger than what he wore, practically had "lawyer" written across his forehead. The other one, a tall, gaunt greyhound, was the majority stock-holder of Sports of Today.

Leo had never met him before, but he knew enough about the fur to loathe him already. His name was Wolfgang Frederick Burke, and he was, as Leo understood it, the fur responsible for the "journalistic" ethos of Sports of Today. Or lack thereof, as the case was. He had inherited both stocks and methods from his father, and as far as Leo

was concerned, the world would have been a better place by a small but measurable fraction, if Mr. Burke had done the world the favor of choking to death on his first high-school lunch.

"Mr. Leon," the lawyer said and approached the table, extending a paw. "It is an honor to meet you."

Leo raised an eyebrow, quickly letting his eyes glide over the papers on the table in front of him to recall the hamster's name. Mr. Burke looked like he was about to blow up from indignation at being kept waiting for half an hour.

He didn't take the offered paw. "Is it, Mr. Redding?" he asked. "Is it really?"

The hamster quickly realized he wasn't on friendly grounds and withdrew his paw, already looking a bit shaken. Leo knew enough to know he'd already won the first, small victory of this meeting.

"Thirty minutes, Mr. Leon?" Mr. Burke finally said, practically between his teeth. "I'm a busy fur. I don't have ti ..."

"Then you'll *make* time," Leo said, matter-of-factly. "You see, I'm about to make you an offer, and I suggest you listen closely."

Mr. Burke's eyes narrowed noticeably. "Or what? I know what you're trying to do! But Sports of Today is not for sale! Not at any price, and especially not to you!"

"No? Well, pardon me for saying so, Mr. Burke, but absolutes in my line of work are the purview of halfwits and incompetents," Leo countered, easily. "You, like most other furs with a bank account the size of yours, have spread your wealth out over more than one company. However, as I understand it, you only own the stock majority in two of those. You are represented on the board of six other companies of various sizes, however. Should I tell you who owns the stock majority in those six companies as of two o'clock yesterday afternoon or can you guess for yourself?" he asked, crossing his legs and folding his paws over his midsection, leaning back in his high-backed chair.

"And so what if you do?" Mr. Burke asked, but Leo could tell that the news had shaken the greyhound pretty badly.

It had cost Leo well over two billion dollars to get those stock majorities, but he was absolutely sanguine about it. The money was well spent regardless of Mr. Burke's involvement. All six companies were solvent, even if their business methods needed an overhaul.

"That means, Mr. Burke, that this morning, the board of SurPlex met and voted you out. And the board of MediFram Inc. met an hour later ... same result. When we're done here, I've got a teleconference with the board of RanchCorp. Guess what the only point on the agenda is?"

Mr. Burke swallowed and adjusted his tie which, to Leo's unmitigated pleasure suddenly seemed to strangle the greyhound. "You can't do that! If the board meets, you'd have to summon me too!" he growled.

"You fail to understand my commitment to this, Mr. Burke. You see, the same thing goes for all six companies. The board consists of you and me at present. I fully intend to hire a new managing director and a new board in all of them, of course, but at present, I am the only stockholder with enough stocks to be eligible for a seat on those six boards, except for you. So if you insist on a summons, I hereby summon you. Ah, you're already here. Good. As majority shareholder of SurPlex, I hereby move to remove Mr. Burke from the board on grounds of unsavory business-practices. My sixty percent of the shares say you go. What do your forty percent say? Ah, never mind. You're out. Shall we move on to MediFram Inc. or do you get the picture already?" Leo asked in his most friendly tone of voice, smiling widely ... showing entirely too many sharp teeth for someone sounding so likeable.

Mr. Burke swallowed hard. "You wouldn't! This'll bankrupt me!" he complained.

Leo nodded and put his face in deeply sympathetic folds. His tone of voice changed to one of deep regret and sympathy and he nodded sagely, as he tapped his fingertips together. "Indeed it will, Mr. Burke. But I am offering you a way out. I'll buy your entire stock of Sports of Today save one share at seventy five percent of their current value. I'll leave you one share so you can attend stockholders' meetings in the future and see how I intend to change your life's work into something laudable. I urge you to take my offer. It will only be made this once and it will keep you well in the black. If you're careful about your investments in the future, you might even be able to live out your life in luxury without ever needing to work again. May I suggest investing in Leon Inc.? We're rather good value, I'm told, and I foresee a rise in stock value in the near future due to our expansion into sports journalism, farming utensils and machinery, drill-bits and hospital supplies, amongst other things," Leo said, keeping a perfectly straight and neutral face.

The lawyer, Mr. Redding, tried to regain a measure of control over the situation and he leaned over to whisper to Mr. Burke. The Greyhound looked like he had been forced to swallow a peeled lemon sideways, but nodded.

"Eighty five percent of the value, and you've got a deal, Mr. Leon," the hamster said. "But I should probably point out that Mr. Burke has many years of experience with sports journalism, and he would undoubtedly be of great use to you in the future should you wish him to."

"I'm not made of money, whatever you might think. It is not good business-practice to throw good money at garbage," Leo said, flatly, completely ignoring the second, implied offer.

Mr. Burke's fists clenched and his knuckles went white through his fur. "Garbage? Sports of Today is ..."

"Garbage," Leo reiterated. "I wouldn't insult my backside by using your pages as toilet-paper, Mr. Burke. Seventy seven percent. And that's my last offer. If you don't take it, you'll find yourself bankrupt in a week."

Finally ... the greyhound's shoulders sank and he looked down. "What is it you have against me, Mr. Leon? All I've done ..."

"... is run a *so-called* sports magazine with such deliberate and purposeful low morals that you have cost my daughter a leg and a half. And you very nearly cost my future son-in-law his professional career, Mr. Burke, and don't you dare have the gall to stand there and deny responsibility, and don't you *dare* try to convince me that you wouldn't have used Steve Wulf's retirement to sell even more copies of that God-awful *rag* you publish," Leo said, his eyes narrowing and his lips curling back to reveal his incisors ... long, and sharp as they were. He got up, out of his chair at last and walked around the table, looking Mr. Burke straight in the face as he continued in a tightly clipped and controlled tone of voice. "You're a disgrace to journalism, Mr. Burke. A creature as vile as you should count his blessings that I don't simply put all my means and all my considerable effort into crushing you until you'd have to beg for spare change for a cup of coffee on street corners! In fact, I **STRONGLY** suggest you send my daughter a very large, very expensive bunch of flowers to thank her for that, because I'm telling you right now that if it wasn't for her moderating influence, I wouldn't be done with you until your unborn grandchildren regretted you ever being born!"

Mr. Burke felt his legs quiver underneath him. He'd never had to look someone like this in the face before. He was used to being the fur in control. The one who could make or break an athlete's reputation. But right then and there, he knew he could do nothing to get back at the lion facing him down, and he knew he was completely outclassed.

He also knew exactly how dangerous Leo Leon was. Not physically ... he couldn't hope that the lion was dumb enough to actually physically assault him ... but to his future.

"Seventy seven percent will be just fine," he wheezed, remembering how to blink again. "I'll let Mr. Redding take care of the exact details. No need for me to keep that last share, even."

Leo nodded slowly. "No, there's a need. In fact, I insist you turn up for future shareholders' meetings. I shall make sure transportation is available for you every time, so you won't have to pay out of your own pocket, Mr. Burke. I want you to know what I am doing to turn Sports of Today into a credible, proper magazine. And if that fails and I have to close it down ...? I guarantee you, I'll do so knowing I've never spent my money better! Good day, Mr. Burke!"

The greyhound practically fled for his life, while the hamster stood there, open-mouthed, looking after his fleeing employer until the door closed behind him. Finally, he turned back to Leo and gulped. "I must admit, Mr. Leon ... now I really *am* honored to meet you!"

Leo chuckled. "Thank you, Mr. Redding. Now, shall we get down to business?"

He went back to sit down behind his desk, once more leaning back in his chair and smiling that warm, friendly smile of his. Mr. Redding was not his enemy, after all. But he knew he had made one in Mr. Burke ... and he was certain the greyhound would be back in some way later.

It didn't worry him.

###

Frances opened the door. She was at home and she had just arranged her guest room to have a semi-permanent resident. The car had just pulled up to the curb, and she'd seen her brother get out. This was it, then. Reversal of situations. Instead of her moving away from home ... which she had years ago ... her father was now moving in with her. She had more room than Charles, so she had offered to take their dad in for as long as needs be; even though Charles had insisted he could have done so as well. She knew he could, but her place was simply bigger.

She knew what this meant. It meant spending a lot of time trying to keep her father afloat. It meant less of a social life, and it meant no boyfriends for a while. And all of

that was totally inconsequential compared to the fact that her father had crumbled so completely.

Charles didn't live that far away and he would probably spend most of his time off work at her place for a long time too, trying to help out.

After opening the door, she hurried to the kitchen to check on the food. She knew hospital food was absolutely dreadful regardless of where in the world one had to endure it, and she had decided to cook a decent meal for all of them. That, of course, meant not letting the rice burn in the pot.

It took longer before she heard Charles by the door than she had expected, and she was nearly on her way to check if it wasn't him anyway, but finally, she heard him.

"That, sis, smells absolutely fantastic! What is it?" he called out.

"Beer basted, oven fried chicken with five cloves of garlic and whiskey-smoked salt!" she answered. "Oh, and basmati rice and sauce béarnaise."

Charles appeared in the kitchen door, eyes wide, "Whoa ... *real* sauce béarnaise?" he asked. "Home made?"

"From the bottom up. Takes ages but it's so much better than the ready-made stuff," she said and smiled. "Did you get dad?"

Charles nodded and hurried to close the door behind him. "I did. Frankie, promise me you won't look shocked when you see him. *Promise* me. He's still very fragile."

Frances looked deeply worried. "Shocked? Charlie, this is dad we're talking about."

"I know. I still want you to promise me you won't. Go to the toilet ... suddenly remember you've got to water the potted plants in the living room, I don't care. Just don't be in the room when you begin to shake. He's ... changed."

"Now you're scaring me! But I promise."

Charles sighed. "I know. I don't mean to. Just ... remember he's still fragile," he said.

Frances nodded. Closing her eyes and taking a couple of deep breaths, she forced herself to show a façade of carefree happiness.

The door opened again.

"Hey, no fair closeeng the door on an old lobo!" Esteban complained. "Especeallee when eet means blockeeng off the scent of good food!"

Only Frances' eyes betrayed her shock at seeing her father, and fortunately, he was looking at Charles as he entered. He was stooped. Markedly so, walking hunched over. His eyes were lackluster and dull and his fur was going white in places. His mane was steel grey.

He looked like a fur of seventy or more ...

His voice was strong, but Frances could barely recognize the fur in front of her. How could her dad have aged so drastically ... and so swiftly?

"Well, if the door isn't closed, Dad, the steam from the rice and the oven would stain my windows in the living room!" Frances said and smiled. "Come on, have a seat, both of you. I've got a good bottle of wine on the wine rack. I'll just go get it."

It was the world's weakest reason. Drinking wine to a beer basted chicken was almost criminal, and she knew it, but she had to get out of the kitchen for a few seconds. She could always claim to "remember" afterwards.

Esteban smiled and nodded, taking a seat and rubbing his paws together. "Eet's veree nice of you to let your old dad move een like thees," he said and got comfortable.

Frances just smiled and leaned down and kissed his cheek. "Any time, Dad. Any time!" she said and hurried out of the room.

He'd even started smelling like an old fur ...

She hurried into the living room, before biting her knuckles to avoid shrieking.

###

The physiotherapists had just left, and Nadia was on her back on the couch, panting for breath. Who would have thought training would be so damned hard without legs? She was absolutely exhausted. Steve was in the kitchen. He could almost support himself on his broken leg now. It was still set in a stiff, metal and carbon-fiber frame, but it enabled him to move around more freely. He hobbled and he still had to use a stick to support himself on, but it wouldn't be for long. Then he'd be able to start training his leg again.

Nadia felt a pang of envy at that and quickly chastised herself for it. It was not right to envy him. In fact, she knew that it was probably fortuitous that she was the one who had

been injured the most. She would still be able to do her job with artificial legs, after all. If Steve had lost his legs, it would've been the end of his career right then and there, for obvious reasons.

But it still hurt. And she was still angry.

Not at Steve, though. He was such a fantastic support these days. And he did things right most of the time, too. Only a couple of times had she needed to clear her throat to remind him she hadn't lost either her arms or her wits, and both times he'd simply backed off and apologized, and let her do the chore in question.

Right now, however, she was absolutely content to lay back and let herself be pampered.

"Here you go," Steve said as he entered the living room, hobbling along while holding a tall glass in his free paw.

"Excellent! Apple juice and Sprite and lots of ice cubes. Best thing there is when you're thirsty," Nadia huffed and pulled herself up to a sitting position on the couch.

Grinning, Steve gave her the glass. "I'm fine with Gatorade, myself."

Groaning and rolling her eyes, she made a mock-swipe at her boyfriend. "You're under contract with them. You've got to say that," she pointed out after a long, badly needed swig of the cool drink.

"It tastes like someone boiled their jockstrap and squeezed it into a glass, but I've got to admit it gives you an energy boost," the wolf chuckled and sat down next to his girlfriend.

Nadia scrunched up her face at the mental image. "Oh thanks ... now I'll never drink Gatorade again," she mumbled.

"You didn't to begin with."

"So?"

Steve grinned, grabbed the remote control and turned on the television.

###

Kalen stood in the airport, looking up at the signs above the various small offices where various airlines had their offices. Finally, he spotted what he was looking for and he walked down the line to the relevant office and through the door.

"Welcome to Air India, sir, how may I help you?" a male fox said in thickly accented English. He was smiling widely and looked like the very essence of friendly helpfulness.

Kalen was taken slightly aback. The fur in front of him was probably the leanest fox he had ever seen, and he had seen some pretty spectacular examples over the years.

"Erh ... well ... I need to go to India in early January," Kalen said, trying not to stare. The fox really looked emaciated rather than lean once one got a second look at him.

The fox didn't seem to notice, or if he did, he didn't show it. "Yes Mr. Ryder, absolutely. We have daily flights leaving here, from Jacksonville, to New Delhi. If you wish to travel to another part of India, there are more flights from Miami."

Kalen smiled crookedly. "New Delhi is actually the closest major city to where I need to go. Excellent! I had better buy two tickets, just in case. I only expect to need one, however. I will also need an extra ticket back from India, to the United States. And how did you know who I am?"

"I watch football too, Mr. Ryder. When in America, do as the Americans, I say! In any case, two tickets to New Delhi from Jacksonville in early January. And three tickets back. That is not a problem. Do you have an exact date you wish to leave on?" the fox said and perked up his ears, happy that Kalen wasn't telling him off for recognizing him.

Taking a scrap of paper out of his pocket, Kalen nodded. "Yeah, let me see. We play our last game in Pittsburgh on the second of January. That's an evening game, so I won't be home until the third. When in the day does the plane leave?"

"Early morning, Sir. At ten past seven."

"Blast it. I won't be able to make that then. Okay, the fourth in that case. I leave on the fourth of January."

The fox typed the information into his computer and nodded. "Absolutely Mr. Ryder. When will you be returning?"

"I have no idea," Kalen said, truthfully. "It could be months if I'm unlucky."

The fox looked a bit confused. "Unlucky? India is a splendid country, Mr. Ryder. Spending a few months of the off-season there isn't unlucky at all."

"Oh, it's a bit complicated," Kalen explained, not wanting to go into detail about the reason for his trip to a complete stranger, however helpful. "I'm actually certain I will enjoy India a lot. I already like the food, I wrote several papers on Hinduism in college,

and if everyone is as friendly as you, I'm sure I'll get along with them famously. But you see ... I have no team next year and I can't stay away for too long, since my agent will be trying to get me set up with a new club to play for."

"Ahhh ... in that case, Mr. Ryder," the fox said, tapping the side of his nose, "I can reassure you that with the upsurge in the Indian economy over the last twenty years, practically every corner of the country has teleconference capabilities by now. You won't find a place outside the slums in New Delhi where you can't set up an uplink."

"That is good to know, but many teams will want to run me through a few drills before signing me. Anyway, that's for me to worry about when the time comes. The question is whether it's better to buy the return tickets when the time comes."

"Well, I doubt you will spend more than six months in India, Mr. Ryder?"

"I won't be able to stay even that long."

The fox nodded. "In that case, I can make the return tickets open-ended. I can even make that one-way ticket so that it is attached to the other two. That means it just has to be used within a six month period of you using the tickets to New Delhi. It'll cost a little bit extra but ..."

"That's cool, I'll take it that way then."

"Very well, Mr. Ryder. That will be eleven thousand and fifty two dollars, tax included. If you wish to purchase cancellation insurance, it is another hundred dollars per ticket. Oh, and remember you need a valid visa, too."

Kalen felt a sensation of cold running down his back. "Visa? Damned I'd forgotten all about that!"

"Oh dear," the fox said and scratched his cheek. "Let me check with the Indian embassy."

Kalen waited on pins and needles while the fox navigated around the internet. Finally, he nodded. "It's alright, Mr. Ryder. Since I honestly don't think you have a criminal record, a visa only takes ten days to obtain now, and you can apply for it over the Internet."

"*Thank* you," Kalen muttered, breathily. "I'd best get to it then. And yes, I'll need cancellation insurance, just in case."

He took out his credit card and paid. He knew he was going, but if any opportunity presented itself to leave before the fourth of January, he would take it. For the moment, he had to get home so he could apply for a visa. And he had to get a hold of Steve, just in case.