

# The Long Chase

Marquis Orias

M&F -> Anthro Foxes, Rabbits, and Dogs

10k Word Sports Comedy

“Jack, I just don’t understand the game. Seems a bit trite, especially with some of the rules–”

I’ve had these conversations before, always with outsiders. Vanessa, God bless her soul, didn’t get the meaning of *The Chase*. She didn’t look past the bizarre rules toward the heart of the game... man-turned-beast competing on a field that required human wits and animal stamina.

Turning my head to make sure nobody at the party lingered too close to be interrupted if I got *excited* in my delivery, I prepared my little spiel for Vanessa. An elevator pitch for my sport, so to speak.

“Well you see, it’s ultimately a game of speed and field control.”

“Right, but why are people trying to add a dragon–?”

“Wyvern, and that’s because of rule creep. Some people are innovators in the worst way.”

Ah. The Long Chase. The pride of my life. The sport I’d sunken years into, shifted hundreds of times over, all because I couldn’t stop playing the fox. I enjoy the hunt, the seizing of flags, so much that even during off hours I dream about being in the headspace of a true dogfox, in his prime and ready to pounce upon the rabbits.

Tonight’s social event, on the eve of the Semi-Regionals, isn’t an official media outing, but I do it *for the ‘gram* so to speak. My team... and my opposition... mill about between roughly thirty or so interested fans and a very uninterested barkeep.

Noble, in full rabbit regalia, clutches her phone between dulled claws in the far corner. The past few parties she’s done this, insisting that reading up on different workout regimens and nootropics is more in her best interest than consulting with our fanclub. Naturally I disagree, but Noble does as she pleases. Judging from the twitching of her sable-colored ears, she’s reading an article about how a specific vitamin she takes doesn’t *actually* work. Pity. At least Contessa mingles with the attendees, posing for photos.

Contessa, though, also came to this party as a proper sighthound. Silken fur, long legs, her black hair tied into braids that dangle past her shoulders. She went for a borzoi mix when choosing her species, though that came with certain impulsive tendencies. She bolted fast, *so fast*, at the slightest provocation.

Almost more than the rabbits...

Vanessa taps my arm. “Jack, you’re zoning out again.”

“It’s a very important game tomorrow.” Another sip of sparkling water across my tongue, resting atop my palate and burning. “We’re seeded for finals, if we can keep ourselves at least four flags ahead of the opposition.”

A tall order, but not impossible, especially if... a certain vixen... didn’t bring her A game. Lady luck could very well be on my side.

“Is that hard–” Concern flashes across Vanessa’s eyes.

Hard? Eh. Dependent on many factors outside of my control.

“It’s not easy, I’m counting on interceptions.”

Flagging down Rico for a return, however, was always tedious. Unlike Noble, Rico didn’t keep his cool on the field. A blessing and a curse. Easy to psyche out, tricky to actually catch. Always jittering, twitching, and I swear that rabbit biology wasn’t equipped to handle the sheer quantity of off-brand energy drinks he downs when nobody’s looking.

“Aren’t you worried about the other... hound, I guess?”

“BullyMan? Uh, hold on a second.” I turn around to look for the bulky anthro pitbull. Usually, he stands near the door, his arms crossed and–

Vanessa lowers her voice. “Is BullyMan his actual name?”

“It’s a nickname that stuck. Forever. Hmm. You know, I don’t see him. I guess he...” I pause for a moment on a stranger cupping a drink with both hands, his body semi-obscured by a potted plant that maybe looked stylish in 1993.

The stranger isn’t a dog but–

Ah! I’m not the only person in human form tonight. And here I thought I’d be the odd one out, but BullyMan’s anxiety got the best of him.

“I should probably give him a talking to. No sense leaving him as a wallflower.”

“And leave me all alone?” Vanessa cocks her head to the side, a smile across her lips.

“I’m sure my ex will drop by to bother you. She likes to do that at these sorts of parties.”

I mean, it's true, Kelly does.

"Excuse me, your *ex*?" Vanessa raises an eyebrow in concern.

"Kelly's the only vixen here. She prefers to stay constantly foxy. Helps with her blog brand. I'm sure she'll talk to you about it... and then tell you how awful and self-absorbed I am."

"Oh... ha... ha...?" The awkwardness sets in early tonight.

Good. Means I have an excuse to step aside.

-----

I make my way through the crowd to BullyMan, who now is hiding completely *behind* the potted plant, its fronds obscuring his face and the ginger ale he's nursing.

"Nerves getting to you?" My approach is direct, but trust me, that's what works on this guy.

"Oh. Hello, Jack. Yes. Nerves." BullyMan has a broad face as a human, matching his pitbull looks whenever he takes his nanopill.

"Those people out there like you. They follow all your plays--"

"It's not them, it's the game tomorrow. It's kind of a big deal. For all of us."

"Kelly getting you stressed? I know she's got that competitive edge."

Competitive edge is an understatement. Already, I know that she's huddled over my date, letting loose all sorts of bubbling drama. We have a love-hate relationship, like that. Not enough to actually get back together, but enough to clash on the arena turf.

"Kelly's just focused on her blog... it's actually, uh..." BullyMan's grip on his glass of ginger ale tightened. "So you know Noble."

“Of course I know Noble. We all know Noble. You see her twice a week during scrimmages.”

“I like her, Jack. I really do.”

“You *like* her? She’s cold, BullyMan. Really cold. Like Kelly and I bicker and all, but a relationship gone south with Noble could turn rotten real quick. She’s got that plotter vindictiveness.”

“That’s why I’m afraid to ask her out, okay? I almost did three weeks back at the Folk Night Parade, out on Hastings Boulevard... the beer garden we were at after.”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember.”

In truth, I didn’t completely remember. During that public parade, I was focused purely on landing a sponsorship deal from a local shoe manufacturer. The joke being that as anthros, well, we didn’t wear shoes, but I countered with an offer of wearing branded shoes whenever I didn’t wear the fur. Granted, that was before I realized that *these* shoes, if you could even call them that, didn’t have a good fit and lent themselves well to blisters, plantar fasciitis, and actually falling apart during walks. Mistakes learned, but hey, that’s the sports marketing game.

These local businessmen can be ultra cutthroat and–

Ah, yes, BullyMan is talking to me.

“So, like, after I told her about my inherited condo, she asked if I did deep sea fishing, and like, while I’m *interested* in deep sea fishing, I’ve never actually done it before... but like an idiot, I didn’t hold my tongue... too busy slobbering as a dogman... and I... just... lied, Jack. I lied to her. I told her I actually deep sea fished all the time, and you know Noble, she’s going to check me on that. She’s going to ask about marlins and–”

“Marlins and all sailfish are more surface-level catches, you might be better talking about Humboldt squid.”

I've got my own fishing knowledge, see?

BullyMan's eyes glaze over and his voice deepens. "Humboldt squid. The red devils. Vicious creatures. Make for good calamari though, or so I've been told."

"Who told you that?"

Really. Who told him that?

"Uh, chefs. People behind the meat counter at the grocery store." BullyMan seems defeated, a glum look plastered across his boxy muzzle.

"Oh."

Fair enough.

I regain my composure. "Back to Noble. You just have to be confident. Tell her that you're an idiot who doesn't actually deep sea fish, but that you're trying to impress her. Be vulnerable. She'll respect that."

"Vulnerable... because she turns herself into a rabbit, and they're a prey species?"

"No. you're reading too deep into this, BullyMan. Too deep. Well, you lied about the deep sea fishing, so not deep at all, in your case."

If I were *crueler* then I'd likely psyche him out a bit, play mind games. But I'm a kind soul, you see. Competition or not, Bullyman and the rest of *Team B*, as I mentally refer to them as, well, they're my friends. I enjoy their company, even if Kelly brings out the worst in my personality and we *bicker* and screech like... well... two foxes fighting over territory.

Hmm. Perhaps that's fitting for us.

-----

Naturally, Kelly, in all her foxy glory, speaks with Vanessa. I knew she would, I guess I'm a real grade A clairvoyant, but it's enough to still make me roll my eyes. She's rocking the anthro look tonight instead of her human skin.

"Ah! Jack! I was just talking to... Vicky..."

"Vanessa."

To be honest, I've slipped up, once or twice.

"Vanessa! Yes, she's lovely. I showed her my Etsy shop with all the charms and sigils. You know, the sigils with the bronze and the silver--"

"No, I don't know. You never showed me. Not even once."

Nobody at this party knows this, but I actually did wander into Kelly's Etsy shop one bored evening. Browsing... sometimes you need a break from doomscrolling about all the madness in the world. Now Kelly, she's got a talent for graphic design... but not for physical design. Point is, I've seen better sigils concocted by people claiming to channel Aleister Crowley himself than what comes out of Kelly's mind. I think she wants to be provocative, but also doesn't understand how to make appealing jewelry that someone would *actually* want to wear.

But perhaps I could be a good friend... or ex-boyfriend... and wear one of her pieces as a lucky charm. Hmm. Should I? She'd probably read into that as more than just a friendly gesture... and I'd probably end up loving the bling.

Bah.

Kelly, slitted golden eyes alert and watching, stands defiant. "I *totally* showed you my Etsy page! Back when I was working on the invocation series. The kind with the Elder Archons--"

Darling Kelly, my ex-squeeze. We met during a regionals... f-four years back. Oh God, was it five? How the time flies, especially when bonds age and turn brittle.

Two foxes locked in competition, teeth bared and gnashing as they sought the other's rabbit. Not even repeated kicks to the face from Noble could fluster Kelly, though I haven't the faintest idea how she didn't lose an earring or septum piercing in the process.

Maybe her magic works? Her hair certainly casts its spell, put up into an unkempt bun between two attentive, swiveling ears.

Vanessa takes her chance to speak up, confusion flush across her face. "What's an elder archon...? Is that a Chase rule for how the foxes fight the hounds or—"

"Wait, wait... Jack, you're dating someone who *doesn't* know the game? Does she even know that you turn yourself into... well... this...?" Kelly gestures toward her exposed fluff, bristled fur, and fluffy brush.

"I..."

Oh my God. *Does* she know that I have to turn into a fox for the games? I mean, she simply must know that I shed this human veneer, this facade, to get in touch with my animal side.

"Wait... Jack... you turn into a... a fox...? I thought you were one of the bunnies. And you turn into a girl fox..."

"I turn into a fox, Vanessa. Not a vixen. Not a bunny. Not a hound. I become a male fox for the games."

"Oh! So you get all fluffy?"

Vanessa cracks a smile with that remark, which catches me off guard. Kelly flashes a toothy grin, too. Ah, well, at least they're becoming fast friends.

*Wonderful.*



“So when I shift, I choose a summer coat variant. The bulkiness of a winter coat leaves me looking too much like a sentient loaf of fur. Plus, it gets hot when running under those arena lights.”

Kelly holds up her black-furred arms, her permanent obsidian gloves. “Maybe if the Committee ever allows for outdoor winter play…”

Something along those lines.

“You’re inside on a… football field? But like with rocks and trees–”

“It’s about the same size as one.”

Actually, it’s about twice the size as a regulation football field, but that’s only when taking into consideration the square footage of any raised platforms as well as the burrow tunnels, the labyrinthine warrens, that penetrate another two stories beneath the sod. I read once that the Roman Colosseum had a similar arrangement of rooms and passageways beneath that playing field, a maze created when the Emperors no longer wanted an urban lake.

I wonder if Noble ever feels like a gladiator when she’s thumping around down there.

“Nah, there are tunnels.” Kelly’s whiskers twitched as she spoke the words.

She betrays her feelings, but I share the sentiment. The tunnels, fit for a slender rabbit hybrid, don’t quite accommodate a slender foxperson. Crawling through those depths is a tight squeeze, where any speed advantage is lost, and ambushes in the dark become the course of action.

Rico always runs, so I have it easy. But Noble, ah, Noble can bite, kick, and throw sand with remarkable accuracy. Kelly suffers for it.

The stadium monitors have their night vision cameras and infrared views illuminating our underground cat-and-mouse game... fox-and-rabbit game... as well as which exits the hounds stand near during this game phase.

Now if the powers that be ever decide to change some rules... I personally, and this is my opinion, think that they can make the holes a 'little' bigger, just enough to run through... none of this crawling around like an animal—

Ah, darn. I think I figured out the point.

Vanessa perks up, though. She loves the concept. “Ooooooooooh. Tunnels. I like tunnels. Sometimes, like, when I’m driving on the turnpike, and, uh, I go through a tunnel... I hold my breath until I reach the other side. I’ve only blacked out twice!”

Kelly and I can only stare.

“She’s a keeper, Jack.” Kelly taps me on the shoulder. “A real keeper.”

I keep my voice low. “Hey now, this is our first date. We’re still trying to figure out if we’re compatible.”

It’s true, compatibility is critical. She still hasn’t witnessed my metamorphosis, and I didn’t bother to send her any photos of myself fully *foxed*. That’s more of a second date conversation, anyway.

But hey, at least she’s *interested*. I can build on that with more rule explanations. “Vanessa, there’s an arboreal component to the course, as well. More than just the tunnels.”

Vanessa seems dumbfounded. “Foxes can climb trees?”

Kelly takes her chance to tease me further. “I can, but Jack here struggles a bit.”

“Gray foxes tend to spend a lot of time up there. Red foxes can, too, if they have a reason.”

Kelly once again interjects herself between us. “Vanessa, there are ropes and ladders affixed to certain trees. They encourage us to get creative.”

Creative is one way of putting it. The Commission overseeing our athletic pursuits wants to keep the crowds enthralled. Not everyone wants to watch video feeds of scuffles down in the winding tunnels; sometimes, they want to see dangerous leaps branch to branch.

I don’t understand why they don’t just add squirrels to the game. No, instead they’ve got... other plans... other plans that, if I dwell upon them too much, will surely cause me to lose my composure.

Kelly nudges Vanessa’s shoulder. “He’s shown you what he turns into, right?”

“A fox like you, right?” Vanessa scrunches up her mouth as she ponders all the possibilities of foxy Jack.

Kelly taps her whiskered snout. “Vulpine visages. He doesn’t like to have his senses always overwhelmed, though.”

I can only roll my eyes and groan. “Thanks for telling my life story for me.”

I come across as sarcastic, but I’m actually kinda thankful. This sort of small talk bores me, it’s the irritating details of shedding one’s human flesh for copious amounts of fluff and fuzz. Overheating, itching, constant sensory overload in our fair city.

“It’s a fun life story, Jack! How you rose to the occasion during the *Great Molasses Flood of ‘19*. Fanciful stuff.”

Utterly lost, Vanessa can only question her reality. “M-molasses can flood?”

Vanessa sure is a keeper... I... oh boy...

I should really have just sent her a picture. A candid foxy selfie. Would have made this so much *easier*.

You know what... I'll show her. A single, proud photo of me holding up a trophy after I defeated the *Upstate Rangers* two years back. My whiskers might be drooping, and my fur caked with mud, but I've got that winning spirit in my slitted eyes. Referees actually have to prop me up in that image, I'm too tired after an endurance gauntlet—triple overtime, I'll have you know—to actually stand upright and stable.

It's a good picture; it reminds me of why I play this game.

I pull up said picture, apply the appropriate filters with one, two, three swipes, and then hand Vanessa my phone. "Here. I've got one for you. This is after six hours of tunnel standoffs."

Clutching my phone between her hands like she's cupping a drink, Vanessa's brows rise in utter surprise.

"Oh my gosh! You're so cute! I just want to put a little collar on you and walk you around my subdivision! Maybe take you into the office! My office lets us bring in pets on Friday, provided they aren't too exotic. That you could open doors would be, like, exotic, but you wouldn't attack anybody like Alan's tiger did—"

"Heh. Maybe." My gaze drifts over to Kelly, the vixen barely holding herself together. A few laughing whines slip past her lips.

Exes can be so mockingly cruel.

-----

On my way to the stadium next morning, Venessa texts me a "let's just be friends" message. Which is fine, I don't mind friends. The game I live for can be hard to understand from an outsider's perspective, and I'm not always feeling the role of the teacher. At least now I won't have to be paraded around an office, much to Kelly's disappointment.

Taking the long route up winding concrete stairs, I meet with Tony, our general manager, in the corporate box seats. He'll be down on the sidelines soon enough, but right now he's buttering up to a possible corporate sponsorship from a niche flip-phone

revival outfit. As far as the details go, I'm not sure if this corporation manufactures the smartphones or is an intermediary that runs wholesale. The phones are shiny, though, polished chrome.

Our team logo would look good as a custom engraving, I can't deny. Abstract shapes etched against chrome pop in all the right ways. Maybe I can finesse my way into testing out a promotional product... but the minimalist flip-phone definitely would be a concession. Could I abandon my social media feeds so readily? I'd only be able to curate my image at my desktop... looking at a blank screen with either baggy human eyes or slitted fox pupils.

Not exactly how I want to spend my evenings... I already have to mope around Kelly's Etsy shop to know what she's talking about during practice sparring. That's dedication, and I don't have nearly the same commitment to my desktop. I need my smartphone with all the bells and whistles to keep me properly distracted and sane.

Tony's got this deal nearly ironed out, especially since he's rocking his fancy *deal closing tie* complete with little stacks of \$100 bills flying around with proportionally-sized angel wings. Such clothing matches the venue, that's for sure. We might not perform in a lavish stadium, but nobody told the architects during the box seat construction. Multiple monitors line the wall, each offering a different 4K view of the arena. Endless platters of food are shuffled in by neatly dressed attendees. There's beer, but apparently it's from the bad kind of craft microbrewery. The leather couches they've chosen are, at least, comfortable enough. And... oh my God, they did get a massage chair. I thought Tony was just joking about that...

With a hand placed upon my shoulder, Tony makes a formal introduction on my behalf to Tallyrand, the flip-phone CEO... or COO... I'm not entirely sure which *C-tier* he is, but he does come across as well-dressed and exceptionally polite. Outsiders showing interest in my niche sport is the fastest way to my scheming heart.

"Jack, a pleasure. I've seen your replays on the local network." Tallyrand has a firm handshake, one that digs into my bare palm.

I respect that, though I wonder if he's searching for vulpine pads.

“Hopefully only the good ones.”

“You’re very talented, sir. *The Chase* is the future of entertainment. All this biotech hybridization. People turning themselves into bipedal beasts. It’s incredible what science can do.”

He’s touting the science, but he’s selling minimalist flip-phones. Tallyrand considers himself a moderator of innovation, a man who walks the path of maintaining the past while looking optimistically upon the future. Retain what works. Alter what doesn’t.

“We aim to entertain and show off what humanity can do when provided with the right tools.”

“That pouncing of yours... acrobatic, Jack. You’re always doing tricks! Incredible tricks! And I’m not easy to impress, Jack. You should know that.”

Apparently I’m enough of a niche sports celebrity to justify a sponsorship deal that actually nets *returns*. Maybe he thinks that I’ll make flip-phones cool again.

Maybe Kelly can sell a few on her Etsy shop, put together her own custom engravings.

*But Tallyrand didn’t mention her, did he?*

“If you win today, I want your trio to front our fall lineup. What do you think? I’m imagining a limited run. Rosegold veneers. Logos are flexible, and we may go with a design that spans front and back. Perhaps a picture that changes not only appearance but its very meaning based upon whether the phone is opened or closed. There’s a lot you can do with a clamshell.”

Tallyrand’s got a clear, welcomed vision. I’m glad that Tony brought in someone better than last season’s cayenne doughnut salesman.

Plus, I've got my fair share of concept art for a distinct logo, one that feeds my ego and keeps my teammates satisfied, too. Well... that'll satisfy Contessa. Noble, Noble always has her critiques, especially if the piece lacks *symmetry*.

The hound lunging upon the fox pouncing upon a sprinting rabbit. A mammalian ouroboros, albeit with a few more parts. That's what I want to see, the trademark of my elite sport, creme de la creme, mixed with my own little foxy sigil. If Tallyrand wants a business card, then I've come prepared...

Tallyrand continues his pitch. "If you win today, I'll double my initial batch and put out a series of advertisements for you. Streaming, everyone loves streaming, I'll make sure to get you a banner across the hottest local channels."

Have to think small before you can think big. That's the separation between a dreamer and a realist. The realist can dream up colossal plans, of byzantine complexity, and yet they can parse down each little step they need to take in order to achieve that dream. And if any little gear in the grand clockwork jams, well, they find an alternative.

I'm too lazy to find an alternative, especially when Tallyrand is dangling such an enticing deal before my eyes. Fresh chicken to the starving fox? The allegory fits me too well.

Still, I assure him that he's made the correct choice.

"We're going to win today. Maybe 20,000 people watch us between the stadium and the local access channels. Not a lot, but this sport is growing. Everyone wants to be more than themselves, and what better way to do that than by sporting hair and sprinting around as a canine, vulpine, or lapine of your choosing?"

Tallyrand cracks a wide grin. "We're early, Jack. So very early. You're a trailblazer. Heck, you all are trailblazers. Be proud of that."

Coach Tony nods in agreement. "He's mighty proud, our Shenanigan Jack. You'll see him doing tricks from the start, keeping the rabbit on his toes."

"I've got a few tricks. But I'm just consistent. Speed and offense. That's all."

I do like my tricks though.

“What’s your favorite trick? I mean, if you had to pick one.”

Tallyrand is a fake fan, yes, but he’s also got money and a sponsorship dangling like grapes over my muzzle. He also asks a very tough question, one that’s quite situational.

“Snares keep the rabbits on their toes. Sometimes the hounds stumble into them, too.”

“Snares. You guys get rope?”

“We can fasten our own from cordwood. Different reeds and vines. There’s flexibility in the rules.”

“And nobody gets hurt?”

“Well... we can’t make *deadly* traps.”

Naturally, a few sprains occur time and again. Our altered forms, however, carry more resilience than comparatively fragile human bone, sinew, and muscle. We’re built for sport, built to run, built to let the wind coarse through our ruffled pelts as we pursue flags and glory. I can’t remember the last time I actually got a proper injury, except one to my pride.

Tallyrand gestures out toward the field being tended by landscapers. “This game you play, it’s fascinating. That you’d change yourself into a... a beast... to push the limits of human strength and endurance. Science never ceases to amaze me.”

“If you pressed me on the technical questions, I’m afraid I’ll have to defer to my teammate, Noble.”

“Noble?”



Tony shakes his head. “Tallyrand hasn’t met the rest of your team yet, Jack. You’ve got the honors of being the first.”

“Has he met Kelly?” I ask Tony.

“Nope, but, uh, she’s dropping by later.”

Makes sense. Tallyrand would want to meet both team captains. He’s hedging his bets.

I turn my attention back to Tallyrand’s original question. “Yes, Nobel. She’s our team runner. Rabbit... hare. Quick on her feet, very knowledgeable about the nano-metamorphosis and how to optimize our builds.”

Knowledgeable is an understatement. I see the white papers she reads on the latest molecular engineering theories and my head spins. She has to have a master’s degree, but none of us can ever get a straight answer out of her. One of these days, we’ll find out the truth.

“Ah, in any case, it’s been a pleasure meeting you, Jack. Truly a pleasure. I look forward to the game itself, and I wish you the best of luck.”

“Thank you, thank you.”

I beat a hasty retreat from the corporate box seat down the concrete corridors toward my locker room. Not a moment to spare. I’ve got a human form to shed.

-----

I don’t always watch my changes, but today my nerves are on edge, and I need to focus. Witnessing one’s face disappear under curling fur, an alien pelt, only to burst forward, sweet emergence, into a vulpine snout helps me get over any fear welling in my heart.

The thought of losing can’t pass my mind when Shenanigan Jack comes out of the gate swinging, his numerous tricks primed and on display.

Through the grace of genetics, I was blessed with being of entirely average looks. Plain. Simple. As myself, my *human* self, I disappear into a crowd.

But as a fox, I'm different. A hybrid, even in a world increasingly full of hybrids, still draws stares of curiosity and admiration. People see me, and they want to understand how the world looks through my eyes. And then usually I have to correct them that no, I'm not colorblind as a foxman. Keeping optimized human traits is simply best practice. If people ask me about how I process the world as a vulpine humanoid, I tell them that it's not about the sights. It's about the sounds and the smells. Every whisper becomes conversation. Nearby heartbeats become steady, if often uptempo, drumbeats.

Typical uniform dress for *The Chase* is a sleeveless top coupled with basketball shorts. Simple. Loose. Doesn't interfere with the fur growth. Sometimes the pants or shirt can snag on a stray branch or root, but more often than not, that's an acceptable compromise versus the unpleasantness of tight clothing. Give the sport a few more years, and a reputable fashion house might step in to make a uniform that can properly breathe without being loose and baggy, but I'll take the sagging cloth for now. Just how it goes. The pants do, however, come with a neat, concealable slit to let my tail snake through. No threads fraying and bursting, ruining my shorts. Every fox or hound in the game has made that mistake at least once or twice, I guarantee it.

White and orange hairs inch across my face, five-o'clock shadow at first that thickens into a curly beard. If it weren't for my darkening nose and lips, each acquiring a sleek, obsidian shine, I might be able to pass off the beard as normal. Opening my mouth shows my enamel in the process of curling downward, sharp.

"Tiny knives. That's the comparison. Everybody loves to call the fangs 'tiny knives' when they can..." I spread my grin wider, watching as my elongating canines thicken, sleek enamel glistening along their sharp edges.

Fierce fangs, ripe for hunting chickens. Or rabbits.

“Rico, you’re going to have to run fast today.” I say to myself right as my ears stretch upward and outward, cartilage flexing and running, bent by an unseen sculptor keen on creating perfect pyramids.

A fox’s brush erupts from my lower back, its stretching length already coated in sharp, crimson fur. Even before it’s complete, I already have total control through nerve endings firing to life with fresh little sparks. There’s never pain, only dulling tingling, but I suppose any outside watching would hold their mouth in horror, eyes wide in fear.

Maybe I’d feign agony for them, and act like I’m turning into some B-movie werewolf. Audiences get a kick out of such theatrics. Everyone wants to think that shifting shapes has to be painful. Hardly. The nanotech numbs the nerve endings, so even stretching skin, tensing muscles, and elongating bones are hardly an inconvenience.

Audible cracks announce the stretching of my ankles, my gait pushed onto the balls of my feet. Balancing upright on digitigrade legs is tedious, but the nanotechs, in all their brilliance, enhanced the bone and muscle strength of anthro legs. That extra strength carries me faster without risk of any fracture, even when leaping from trees, but I will admit that actually watching my feet stretch and distort is always a strange sight.

As I mentioned before, this metamorphosis is never painful, but it really ought to be, especially when my big toes reduce and disappear. No dewclaws on fox hindlegs, and the nanoserum creators are big on accuracy. Which, to me, is funny, because they’re sitting around in a lab talking back and forth about how to distort the human form into some hybridized Frankenstein... but they’ve gotta be *accurate*, too. Love ‘em to death; I should really meet one of the brains who lets such a transformation even take place.

My feet finish changing into dainty, nimble paws with a final *snap* that always lets me know I’m complete. I always take a few moments to collect my balance, which is similar to remembering how to ride a bike with a little nerve damage... or a lot of nerve damage... man, that numbness lingers even after a few steps. But the sensation always comes back, and then I’m processing the floor beneath me through hardened pads. Animals with paw pads have a distinct advantage there... any human calluses can’t compete.

More of my pelt coats my shoulders, fur rustling as it fully grows in. This part I always can feel, especially toward the end. Like getting wrapped in a permanent, breathable blanket, one that holds a subtle heat, but never overwhelming. Granted, I never flex a vulpine winter coat. If I looked like one of those fox loafs, I'd probably faint from heatstroke.

"You know, I'd look good in shades." I always make sure to talk to myself before stepping outside... just in case my mouth decides to fail on me. Growling and yowling gibberish is never pleasant, especially to the local sports reporters eager to get a pre-game statement.

Speaking of which...

It's showtime.

-----

"I think we can try the reversal strategy." Noble barking out tactics suggestions is her method of saying *hello*.

"Hi, Noble. Yes. Reversal. Very good strategy."

"Noble already briefed me. I'm ready." Contessa holds up her phone to snap a doggy selfie for her Insta feed. She's put her hair up behind her floppy, borzoi ears. A nice look, all things considered.

There's nothing left to be said. Reversal strategy. The aggression of Noble chasing down the opposing team's rabbit to assist me places incredible pressure on Rico, Kelly, and BullyMan. The latter, I believe, is the weak link. Strength undermined by nerves, BullyMan's situation is one of rooted and inflexible action. A roaring crowd can get him to snap, break down and lose himself in the moment, but as long as I account for him bearing down on me, he can be confused and outmaneuvered.

Contessa snaps another photo. "Stadium's starting to fill in. Early as we are."

The bleachers are starting to fill in, but they'll never be *full* at a regional. Maybe several hundred onlookers, clustered into the lower rung. Nobody will be up in the annexes, and I can see lights and monitors flashing in only four of the corporate boxes.

What I *can't* see is Kelly meeting with her team across the arena. The trees they've planted are fuller than usual, hefty conifers with drooping branches. Regulation doesn't dictate *how* the topology has to be outside of the elevated areas, flat ground, and tunnels. Each stadium has a unique layout, a unique footprint, even if they all use the same building blocks.

"She must be behind the central hill."

"Hmm?" Contessa has transitioned to taking a panoramic shot of the stadium.

Noble answers before I can, a clear case of a rabbit being swifter than a fox. "He's obsessing about Kelly again. He can't let her go. She can't let him go. They'll meet and clash out on the field of battle. It's poetic, really."

"That's not necessarily true. We have a healthy sense of competition."

"She got you to casually browse her Esty shop."

*I might still actually buy something, all right? Maybe some jewelry will give me an extra vulpine flair, accentuate my foxy looks. A piercing or two. Ear... in a place that can actually shift alongside me.*

Noble places a hand on my shoulder, her ears furrowed back.

"Jack. Focus on the game. Not the glitz or the glam. Not the crowds. Not the deals. Not Kelly."

"I have to focus on Kelly, she's the opposition. Plus with our reversal strategy."

Noble's grip on my shoulder tightens. "Pin Rico. That's it. Let me think about Kelly. We're going to win handily today. I can sense it in the air. This is our moment."

A rare showing of emotion from Noble. The way her ears flop and perk, and the way her large feet twitch and thump, reveals an excitement to match the rest of us. She, too, feels the allure of the chase. Sure, it's from the perspective of a prey animal, but she's got a dominant attitude. Her mind, constantly weaving through corridors and finding new answers to elusive mysteries, is uniquely suited to traversing the dark caverns lying beneath our paws. I don't envy her, but I admire her dedication.

"I like the way you think."

It's true, I do like the way Noble thinks. I like the way Contessa thinks, too, because she's very blunt, very surface level, and it's a nice balance. As a team, we've got that unstoppable edge, the kind that Kelly wishes she could possess with her own neurotic hound and hare.

Contessa interrupts Noble's peptalk. "Is it just me, or are there more hills on the course than usual?"

Noble doesn't take her eyes off me as she answers.

"Trick of the eyes, they raised the central mound several feet higher. Steeper gradient."

"Ah." Contessa turns around and snaps another picture. "Oh, also, Kelly's coming over."

"Don't look at her." Noble threatens me, a crazed look in her eye. "Don't think about the jewelry, the magic rituals. All that's nonsense."

"What's your astrology sign?"

Noble maintains her stare. "Virgo. But that's not important. This game is important."

"Oh, I know it's important. Did you know that Tony arranged for a possible sponsorship for custom flip-phones?"

“That seems in-character for Tony. Did he also contact the vacuum tube factory?”

“No, but I saw him eyeing up nixie tubes.”

“Gimmicks and relics.”

“There’s still money in it. Hobbyists.”

Noble shakes her head. “But we’re not appealing to hobbyists, are we? We’re for the masses. Our sport will be the next big thing.”

A voice of reason above the discourse. Noble stays cynical, but she absolutely understands the stakes. Dreaming big, but thinking appropriately small. Steady steps.

As much as I dwell on Kelly, where would I be without steadfast Noble?

“Ready to clash?” Kelly approaches with her bushy tail swishing back and forth, betraying her eagerness.

Yeah. I’m ready to clash. I’ve been ready to clash since Tony and Tallyrand showed me my likeness etched upon a flip-phone case. And I’m not even one for flashy tech, I just understand the appeal and value of one’s likeness being commoditized.

Contessa poses for an action photo with Kelly, two clawed thumbs up. Borzoi and vixen alike are caught in the moment with half-lidded eyes and blurred movement. Great for the Insta feed, it’ll get a share of emojis.

“Those trees are dense, eh?” I ask Kelly.

“Dense and unusually sappy. I have a few needles caught in my fur.” She gestures toward her fluffy brush. “Pine just isn’t my preferred scent.”

Noble’s voice drops to a frustrated growl. “I wonder if the organizers are trying to send us a sign? You know, that’d be like them... to prep us for the inclusion of a 4th.”

The dreaded 4th player. The enlargement of the teams necessitating not only more complex field dynamics, but also greasing rusty social skills. Recruiting? Who had time for that? Making more friends? I couldn't even get my dating life together, let alone set out on the arduous task of finding a new species to fulfill the role of... oh no, the dense trees mean they're going to want flight.

"I think the wyvern joke is anything but." A somber tone doesn't feel right from me, and yet... "The powers that be will demand that we add a dragon to the roster."

"Technically a wyvern isn't a dragon but... uh..." Contessa's voice wavers as she reads the disappointment on our faces.

"Do you think we're being paranoid? I mean, change is good right? We all change. Shedding our human skins for this." Kelly reaches down, grasps her tail, and gives it a firm shake. Only a few pine needles flutter down toward the ground.

Noble, however, stays realistic. "Wyverns aren't real. Heraldry or not, I don't think the organizers will bring a dragon into the fold. A bird, however—"

Birds. Wyverns. Does it matter? It's the 4th...

Contessa raises an eyebrow. "What bird preys on dogs?"

"You're thinking linearly, that the 4th player will naturally be above the hound. The bird could target the rabbit, too, exclusively on the open plains." Noble points around to the gaps between the tree thickets.

Oh lovely, complicating things even more. Still... perhaps not my concern.

Kelly shrugs her orange shoulders. "Could be a large eagle. Those can prey on wolves. And if they can prey on wolves, then they can prey on hounds, and foxes, and rabbits—"

"That's not always how the food chain works, you know. Sometimes animals are too small to be worth the trouble." Nobel stands defiant of the fact that we'd all be on a 1000' by 300' rectangle and not in the wider ecosystem at large.



I don't understand why The Commission wants to dabble in changing the rules as far as team composition is concerned. Alter the landscapes. Add more trees. Add *different* trees with more exotic leaves and tropical stylings... No, no. On second thought, don't do that, the humidity would be dreadful for my fur, would be like hanging around in a greenhouse. I'm fine with my image being *sleek* or *fluffy*, but being drenched from humidity and artificial rain showers simply wouldn't do.

Casey, thankfully, changes the subject. "I came over here to also relay the message that the start has been delayed by about fifteen to twenty minutes. One of the referees has food poisoning, so they need to find a replacement."

Knowing The Commission, they'll likely deputize a random stranger off the street. They'll give him the little rulebook and a proper reflective vest, but then they'll shove him to the sidelines, and he'll wander onto the playing field like a complete imbecile, staring up at the trees until a desperate fox, eager to return his flag, careens into the wayward referee and—

Why, yes. I'm still bitter.

I take a single step onto the actual field, letting grass tickle my temporary black socks. "Any last-minute rule changes? How's Rico holding up? Is he ready to get pounced on?"

Kelly wrinkles her nose. "He's never ready, Jack. But you'll have to catch him first."

There's a *Watership Down* joke in there, but I don't bother to call it out.

I often do, in fact, catch him. I run him down, my fangs bared and my paws digging into soil, darting left and right as Rico bucks and scurries, closing the distance until I can snatch away his flag.

A distant call from the referees kicks off both a siren and the rumble of the stadium's loudspeakers roaring to life. Not much longer, now.

Let the games begin.

-----

With sand in my pocket and a healthy amount of branches and cordwood to bend, prep, and fashion into little snares, I have another chance to live up to my nickname. Shenanigan Jack. Master of Tricks. Dirty fighter. Cocky schemer.

During the opening phases of The Chase, the foxes and hounds get a ten-minute head start for any preparations. Both the foxes and hounds pick ambush points, though the hounds can't intercept the foxes until the rabbits enter the playing field.

BullyMan lingers nearby, I can pick up on his heavy breathing. He's psyching himself up as a blitzzer, aiming to not only intercept me once Noble and Rico sprint for the flags, but to also note where I've set my traps. Because of this, I've not actually *set* any yet. I'll wait until he's preoccupied with someone else. Best to set the snares inside the warrens, though.

Despite his skittish attitude, BullyMan can sprint faster than me. It's true, much as I'd like to deny it. He's built like a tank as well, sheer mass bearing down upon my comparatively diminutive form should I hold my ground and fight.

Good thing he's a terrible fighter. I'm surprised Kelly hasn't kicked him off the team yet. At least a demotion to the practice squad is in BullyMan's future. He lacks that killing instinct, that animal urge.

He just doesn't have that dog in him.

Yes, I can outfight BullyMan. Some martial arts tricks that I've picked up over the years from bored evenings watching UFC. Some animal posturing. My coat fluffs out when I'm agitated, and BullyMan telegraphs his holding bites... panting and getting all whale-eyed. If he didn't do that, I'd have a harder time. I don't want to help him learn to fight me... I kinda enjoy having my showmanship 'pro-wrestling' moments with him. The crowd eats those theatrics up.

Today, however, BullyMan doesn't appear to be watching me assemble my snares. Maybe he's learned? Maybe he's waiting to ambush me near the central warren passageway, the simplest, largest tunnel, once I set out to lay my traps.

"Always the obvious places." Kelly, perched up in a tree she's somehow scaled, glares down at me. "Rico's learned where not to run."

I don't let her know that she succeeded in sneaking up on me. My hands work overtime, claws dancing around different strands of assembled rope.

"Rico panics and forgets everything. He'll take any detour away from my offered chase."

"You offered chase. You make it sound so professional."

"My snares are professional."

Kelly flashes a toothy grin. "So are mine. You're stepping in one."

I hate that she's right, my left paw sitting directly in the middle of a loop connected to a branch bent under pressure. Upon the slightest trigger, I'd be heaved straight into the air.

Oh, the crowds would get a real kick out of *that*, and I'd be dunked on for sure across social media. Those memes would be harsh. Harsh, but fair. I'd dunk on myself, too.

"You're lucky, Jack."

"I know."

"Noble might not be so lucky, though. She's always watching for snares on the warrens, but how often do you scan the trees?"

"I'll just have to warn her and—"

The blaring siren announces the release of the rabbits, but also heralds BullyMan crashing through the foliage to my right. He telegraphs... wrong... he's off by *feet* and—

BullyMan triggers the snare and I'm hoisted into the air, my own worst fears coming true as I'm lifted five, ten, fifteen feet above the forest floor.

“Neutralized the fox. Good job, BullyMan.” Kelly congratulates her teammate. Shimmying down the tree, she even gives him a hug. “We are going to *win* today.”

I see all this transpire while inverted. It's like the climax of a sports comedy-drama, except I'm the bad guy who just got bamboozled while the audience cheers.

From my current position, the tree blocks the overhead view of the crowd. I'm sure a hidden camera or two has a great view of my precarious situation.

Bah.

All right. I need to get down. Warn Noble of other traps. Intercept Rico. Set my own traps. A laundry list of important tasks, and yet all predicated on me being able to chew through this snare. Yes, chew, I have no other means of freeing myself. A little nibble here, a little rip and tear there. The long drop onto the faux forest floor will hurt, fifteen feet of *fun*.

Snarling, I tear into the cordvine fibers. They're fraying, but far too slowly. My ears pick up on distant commotion, as well as the announcers making note of my plight.

*“Looks like Shenanigan Jack is making like a tree and leaving the arena field—”*

I hate that announcer. I don't know his name, even though he introduces himself every game. None of his jokes land, ever. He certainly tries, but his quips just make my blood boil.

The fur along my hackles rises as I chew deeper into the snare. My sharp fangs

can't fail me now, not with this much on the line. Already I'm burning time; my team's synergy is jeopardized.

While I'm gnawing away, the sound of a score buzzer interrupts me.

Oh, no. Could it be—

“Jack!” Contessa's voice precedes her emergence through a thicket. “Noble just scored. What have you... oh...”

“I'm a bit preoccupied.”

“That's one way of putting it.” Contessa paces below me, her hands on her hips. “I suppose I could help...”

“Just grab a stick or something.”

The branch thwaps me across the back of my head, a sudden snap of pain that forces a yelp from my snout.

“Ah. Missed.” Contessa raises the stick again.

The switch is three times her size, how can she whip with such ferocity—

“Yeah! You missed!” I arch my neck backward to push away the pain. If I wanted a deep tissue massage with a beating, I'd make Coach pay for it.

“Just hold still!”

Another whack. Another involuntary yelp from my lips.

“Just release the snare! Untie it!”

“You're moving! I can't!” The borzoi hound pulls back the branch and strikes me again.

Wonderful. Just. Peachy. All of this is being recorded too, caught on video for the masses to see during the reply. It's not even an interesting battle; instead I'm the world's saddest foxy pinata.

"Jack! What are you doing!?" Noble, no flag in sight, bounds into view through an adjacent thicket.

"Just hanging around."

Noble grabs her ears and gives them a firm tug. "Jack, that's stupid. Get that snare undone."

Does she not realize that I've been trying to do just that?

"I got this, Noble, trust me." Contessa swings the branch at me again, though thankfully she misses.

"You're really going to make me scale that tree to free you, aren't you, Jack?"

"I don't see any better options?"

Kelly and her own bag of tricks have left me utterly bewildered and hung out to dry. Normally her snares aren't this elaborate... I... is she selling knotcraft on Etsy? Did I fail to properly pay attention? I definitely saw some crochet, but—

Noble releases the snare at my ankle, and I tumble back down to earth, landing with an audible thud and another involuntary yelp of pain. Contessa, despite her immense strength and endurance, does not even attempt to catch me.

"How many flags are we down?" I ask Noble, not yet having a chance to see the obscured scoreboard.

"One... Rico's sharp today. They brought their A game. Disappointing—"

"Disappointing? Don't we like a challenge?" I steadily rise to my feed, my paws digging deep into the forest floor's abundant leaf litter.

“I like a challenge. I don’t like being down. And we’re burning time–” Noble disappears back into the brush with a single bound.

Rabbits, man.

“I’m going to have to contend with Rico. Make sure that Kelly doesn’t set any more snares.” I instruct Contessa, but she gives me a curt nod and an even more curt bark.

“You got it, I’ll hit any snares with my stick.”

“Right...” I sprint off through the nearest thicket, keeping my head down and scanning for more traps.

Already off to such a wonderful start...

-----

While hunting for Rico, I stumble across BullyMan arguing with himself. I don’t think he has emotional issues, per say, but he does lack confidence. These psych-up exercises reflect that.

I can’t be too hard on him, a distant buzzer indicates that Rico is having a good game. 2-0. Bah. Terrible.

“Everything all right?” I speak up when I really should pass by him. After all, in theory, he can subdue me at a whim. Well... he can subdue me after winning a fight, but this fox *wins*.

“Oh, hi, Jack.”

“Ah, Bullyman. No. No. There’s no plane nearby.”

That’s the stupidest thing I’ve said in a while, referencing a deleted scene out of *Airplane* of all things. But hey, I’ve got my schtick.

BullyMan's voice drops to a growl. "Ha. Funny. Jack, listen. I'm supposed to stop you, Kelly wants me to stop you, but I'm terrible at it."

"Yeah, you are. You know that dogs are supposed to chase foxes?"

"Chase my own tail, maybe." Bullyman looks over his shoulder at his wagging tail, his whip-like appendage thrashing to and fro. "I don't know about foxes."

Some people can't be helped. Not every dog has his day.

"I'll be on my way, then. I need to apprehend Rico and relieve him of his flag."

A distant buzzer, with the correct tone, indicated that Noble succeeded in her latest venture.

2-1. Nice. Very Nice. We're not out of this, yet.

Well, at least I'll be unimpeded.

-----

Rico, however, keeps his distance. I guess Kelly's been training him, pushing him to his limit, helping with his endurance sprints. His pace, solid and consistent, makes me work for each potential trap, each potential ambush.

I almost corner him near one of the warrens, but he dips and dives into an adjoining passageway. One of the tight squeezes, too tight, where he can crawl through on his belly, but I'm hopelessly at a loss.

So, I have to wait for him to surface once more.

At least the distant echo of our team scoring keeps me motivated. Noble has secured another flag, avoiding Kelly's taut snares. Now, if only I can catch our own rabbit.



My attuned senses pick up his faint cologne through the underbrush, and I can hear his frantic breathing, nearly gasping for air with each footfall. Ah, yes. My quarry.

And he does have a flag.

Jittery Rico sprints in abject terror, which is especially funny because there's no way he sensed my presence before emerging from the tunnel.

I close the distance on a sprinting Rico, but he's already deposited a fresh flag. Bad. Very bad. The timer is running out, I can hear the final few clicks and—

“That's 3... Oh, jeez... we w-win.”

Two buzzers ring, one for each team. The final billboard reads 3-3. Ah. Noble. Saving us from ignominy.

But I still choked at the last minute, and a tie might as well be a loss.

I'm still standing by our goal post, dumbfounded with ears and tail drooping, when Noble, Kelly, and BullyMan stumble out onto the main path.

Noble doesn't seem too upset, but I'm sure she'll properly curse me out.

First, however, I have to deal with Kelly.

“Well, would you look at that? A tie.” Kelly puts a hand on my shoulder. “That's good! Maybe we'll both get a merchandise deal now.”

“A tie.” After all that effort to claw our way back out of the pits, we can only manage to break even.

“You seem shocked. Don't worry, you'll get your custom engraving. Tony told me. Coaches never lie.”

“He's... he's not your coach!”

“Oh, right. Well, he said we’d get our engravings. Maybe he’s playing for all teams.”

Playing for all teams, negotiating deals for himself and others. That’s very Tony. Incredible Tony. Maybe Kelly’s own coach is just a puppet, piloted remotely by tiny drones holding the strings. Drones controlled by Tony. Now there’s a thought. Not a particularly smart thought, but a thought.

“What’s on your mind, Shenanigan Jack? You seem down.”

Do I reveal my true thoughts with cameras lurking nearby? Do I dare?

Yes. Yes, I do.

Panting out of sheer exhaustion, I bemoan the fact that we never secured a Gatorade sponsorship. Even an Orange Julius merchandising deal would suffice. I can rep Orange Julius, most of my coat is orange! Just give me a chance! I can make it work! It’s simpler and has broader reach than flip-phone etchings. I’m not opposed to niche, but I want a taste of real *popularity*, ‘ya know?

“Oh.” Kelly nods in agreement. “I getcha. Kinda. Sorta.”

Does she though?

-----

The team huddle is bittersweet.

“Well executed.” Noble keeps her post-game notes brief. “Next time, we’ll do better.”

At least she thinks there will be a next time. I don’t know what I’d do if my team disintegrated... if they gave up. I’d be heartbroken if they gave up on their dreams. We can all have a little snark, sure, but we keep pushing ahead.

BullyMan awkwardly shuffles into our little team gathering. “Hey... uh... Noble.”

“Yes?”

His tail betrays his nervousness, appendage firmly tucked between his legs.  
“Wanna, uh, go out sometime?”

Noble gives him a series of nods. “Yeah, sure.”

Nobody ever gives up playing The Long Chase.

-----

Kelly ambushes me outside the locker room, playfully boxing my shoulder. “Ties aren’t so bad, eh?”

“They’re certainly rare.”

No. Steaks can be rare. A tie in *The Chase* is practically unheard of given the sudden death rules. Such a turn of events shouldn’t have been possible, victory snatched away from me at the final moment. Flags tossed by screaming referees, and yet... and yet...

I have half the mind to pull away, walk out of the stadium with an ounce of my pride intact. Maybe I’d hop in my car and drive throughout the night, traveling to nowhere in particular. My gaze meets Kelly’s own. “You really are magic, aren’t you?”

“No.” She snorts and shakes her head in response. “I’m not magic. No spells. No mystical chanting. That out there was simply dumb luck.”

“I don’t know if I can believe that—”

“If I cast a spell, do you really think it would be to *draw*? Hell no, I play to win. We both do.”

So it's a sign from the universe, then. Reality cracking just a little to let me know that there's a broader game afoot. Kelly's not in on the joke, but she's a part of it. I wonder if the universe will mind if I laugh along? Join the chorus? The crowd sure did gasp—

“I guess this means we'll have to play a rematch. Tony's probably scrambling to hold together our merchandise deals—”

“He plays both sides magnificently.”

Kelly follows me out to the car, I guess she's parked in the same lot. On the way, she pokes and prods with her little quips and offhanded references to Merlin, Gandalf, Crowley, and others so obscure that I have to wonder if she merely pulled their multi-syllable names out of thin air. Kelly's talented like that. Crafty, foxy wit.

“Hey, don't let it get to you. I don't want you moping around leading up to our rematch. You need to play your best.”

“Kelly, I usually do—”

“No, no. You get all lost in your head. That's not... good, Jack. You should be playing tricks on others, not yourself.”

“Wha- what trick am I playing on myself?” I find myself taking a step closer toward her, my furry shoulder brushing against hers.

“I think you know.”

Then she plants a kiss on my cheek. Whisker against whisker. It's fleeting, but her presence is *there* and my heart flutters.

Oh, the games we play.

