

Quarterly Growth

By: IndigoRho

The atmosphere in the conference room was tense. Most business meetings at Evergreen Tech were casual affairs, excuses to chat and eat good food at the company's expense. On that day, though, the various department heads had been gathered together to report on how they'd handled the second quarter. None had necessarily fared poorly, but the Vice President of their branch—Leon Gaines—was notorious for holding others to high standards.

Leon was naturally imposing, a rotund spotted hyena who always wore a perfectly-fitted suit and a deceptive smile. His frosted-tip mane was immaculate, his voice calm and friendly. Regardless, everyone in the room knew what the Vice President was capable of when...disappointed.

"Thank you for that presentation," Leon said as a nervous fox returned to his seat. "Now I'd like to hear from Mr. Jacobs."

Jacobs—an already flustered cardinal—seemed momentarily confused before shuffling his notes and clearing his throat.

"W-well, as you know second quarter is traditionally our slowest, and growth has been rather limited this year so..."

The eyes of everyone else were on Leon, the other department heads trying to gauge how their superior reacted to the obvious bad news approaching. His staple smile had yet to fade.

"...um, we managed a net positive when compared to last year," Jacobs finished, daring a glance at Leon.

"Excellent news Jacobs," Leon said. "Though what was the *exact* growth percentage?"

There was silence, and Jacobs appeared even more nervous than before.

"If you remember, our first quarter growth was record-breaking, so it's only natural a slow-down would occur after..."

"Exact growth percentage...please."

"H-half a percent."

Leon gave the smallest frown, then stood up. "That is...rather disappointing to hear Jacobs."

The hyena slowly stalked his way around the table, department heads along his path cowering in his wake. Jacobs was practically shaking, shuffling through his notes and reports in a desperate attempt to find something to improve the boss' mood.

"But we managed to expand into four new markets that are guaranteed to boost future sales, and earnings were some of the best in our department's history when adjusted for inflation, and employee retention numbers were way up, a-a-and..."

The cardinal was silenced by Leon's paws firmly resting atop his shoulders. "*Growth* is what we here at Evergreen Tech value above all else, Mr. Jacobs. And unfortunately your department only seems to have achieved a margin of error."

Jacobs was at a complete loss for words, coming up with and discarding a dozen different excuses in seconds.

"Don't worry though, Jacobs. I believe you're perfectly capable of changing," Leon grinned, the tracest hints of wickedness showing through. "We just need to make sure you have a new understanding of what 'growth' truly is. In my opinion personal experience helps."

One of Leon's paws stealthily went under the table, before swiftly retrieving a hidden hose. Without warning he shoved the end of the hose right into Jacobs' beak, forcing the terrified cardinal to swallow a large length of it down. All the while Leon kept him from getting up. A light whirring noise started, and Jacob's eyes widened as his cheeks puffed up—he was being filled with air.

"Personal growth is *very* important Mr. Jacobs," Leon chuckled. "Without it you can't possibly hope to handle the *pressure* of a corporate work environment."

The buttons of Jacob's shirt strained and burst in quick succession as his red-feathered middle

ballooned outwards with surprising speed. Naturally thin, the cardinal now sported a solid beach ball belly, and its expansion showed no signs of slowing.

The other department heads watched in silence, all afraid to even look away from the punishment being doled out. Jacobs' gaze darted between them in desperation. None attempted to intervene, and most were simply glad they weren't the one blimping up.

Jacobs' bloated sides soon pressed against the arms of his chair, securing him in place and denying him any hope of being able to wiggle free. He doubted he would've gotten far regardless. The cardinal was too afraid to put up much resistance, not even bothering to try and remove the hose that was steadily inflating him. All he could do was hope the Vice President only intended to embarrass him in front of the others, and not something worse.

"See, *this* is the rate of growth I expect from our departments each quarter." Leon gave Jacobs' growing middle a slap. "Evergreen Tech is always expanding, always growing—and a failure to ensure that will mean you department heads will *personally* take up the slack."

Jacobs was well on his way to becoming a bright red ball. He could hear his hide starting to creak as he grew bigger and bigger, his internal pressure on the rise. The chair beneath him was groaning from the strain as well, digging into his sides. His wings and legs were puffing up.

Amidst the pressure and swelling there was another strange sensation, as if something was trying to lift Jacobs upward. When he whined his voice was unexpectedly higher pitched, and with horror Jacobs realized it wasn't air he was inflating with—it was helium.

The cardinal squirmed a bit more boldly as his chair lifted barely an inch off the ground. Inevitably the chair couldn't handle its larger occupant anymore, and launched backwards as Jacobs was forcibly dislodged. He wiggled and whimpered as he rose higher, no longer dealing with the additional weight. The remainder of his shirt and pants tore away as his expanding body began to envelop his limbs. Jacobs' drifted until his rear bumped the ceiling, head angled down thanks to the hose still trailing from his beak to the table.

"Jacobs here is showing wonderful growth potential, hopefully you're all looking up to him," Leon said with a smile, almost daring the room to laugh. He pressed a paw up against the taut, rounded side of the cardinal, which prompted a concerned whine. "Hope you're not running out of room in there Jacobs, because as my visual you'll need to be much, *much* bigger."

Jacobs fell into a full blown panic. He was almost completely spherical, his head and the tips of his wings barely jutting out. His cheeks had become orbs pressed against his beak, making even whimpers a difficult task. The pressure was impossible to ignore, as were the worsening, ominous creaks of his hide being stretched to its limits. Leon should've stopped inflating him by now, turning him into a bird balloon should've been more than enough humiliation to both punish him and serve as a warning to the others. If the flow of helium didn't end soon Jacobs was going to burst.

Leon, meanwhile, seemed rather satisfied with how things were proceeding. "Looks like Jacobs here is experiencing a few growing pains. Nothing a dedicated department head can't handle though!" Another poke tested the cardinal balloon's hide, which had almost no give. "See, he's starting to relax and go with the flow. I bet he's *bursting* with potential."

The intense pressure had driven Jacobs into a daze, the cardinal struggling to think straight. He knew he was dangerously close to the breaking point, but what little of him was left coherent clung to the dwindling hope he'd stop inflating soon. Maybe if he held on for just a few seconds more, surely Leon would spare him.

The first leak was miniscule, a hiss and a spurt of air that merely tussled a couple feathers. In a flash it grew, though, spreading out in all directions across the entirety of Jacobs' sprawling surface. One second the cardinal was floating above everyone—a massive creaking orb—and the next he was a boom and a gust of helium. Red feathers were hurled across the room, raining down upon the various department heads as they cringed from the explosion. The hose fell to the floor, still spewing helium. Jacobs' beak was impeded in the table itself, pinning down the remains of his report.

Leon turned off the hidden helium tank and reeled in the hose, taking a moment to brush off a couple feathers that'd landed on his suit. He calmly returned to his chair with a smile on his face, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened

“Seeing as Jacobs has opted to expand his horizons elsewhere we'll just have to skip the rest of his department's presentation.” Leon scanned the room, meeting the gaze of every department head still intact, until he stopped on a badger. “Walters, time for your report. Hopefully Jacobs isn't *too* hard to follow...”