



the Orc's
FATE

Cursed ALPHAS BOOK 2

HAWKE OAKLEY

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Also by Hawke Oakley.

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Prologue

ONE YEAR AGO...

CURT FOOTSTEPS ECHOED in the dark underground dungeon. A man stopped in front of the cell and smiled arrogantly at the creature within. He clenched something in his fingers—a few thick strands of brown hair. He held them up to the dim, dusty light.

“These are for you, orc,” the man announced.

The orc didn’t move.

“What? You don’t like my present?”

The man chuckled and threw the hair into the cell. The orc made no attempt to grab the strands. They scattered to the floor.

“Why are you showing me this?” the orc asked in a low, suspicious tone.

The man’s sharp grin split his mouth like a guillotine. “You almost received a gift. But I’m afraid it was... How should I put it? Lost during delivery. Shame. I paid good money for it, too.”

The orc said nothing. In the few desolate months he’d lived in the cell, he learned quickly that any “gift” from that man was worthless. Just another way of taunting him.

The man shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe another *gift* will appear one day...”

After the man left, the orc wondered about the hair on the floor. He stood grudgingly and picked it up, confused by his

unusual curiosity.

It smelled good. Sweet. Something about it intrigued him, but he couldn't place why.

Suddenly, it struck him.

It smelled like *home*.

But it was human hair. It wasn't possible for it to smell like home. It should've smelled disgusting, unpleasant—it belonged to the people who captured him, treated him like a wild beast.

So why couldn't he shake the feeling that it filled him with hope?

ONE

Pascal

"A... BEAST HANDLER?"

My best friend, Florian, was in the middle of tending his garden when I returned home in a flurry of excitement. I panted hard from running all the way from the square, the thick parchment I'd torn from the job listings board still clutched in my hand.

"Yeah, a beast handler!" I said.

Florian tilted his head. "I'm glad you finally found a job you're interested in, but are you sure it's a good idea?"

"What do you mean? Why would it be a bad idea?" I asked.

Florian moved the mulch around at the base of his flowers. "It sounds a bit vague."

I unrolled the parchment and eagerly scanned it again. "It says beast handler. Sounds more like a hands-on job and less like scooping exotic animal poop behind the scenes."

Florian stood up slowly. "If that's what you want to do, then I'm happy for you."

I knew my friend better than anyone, except maybe his mate, Devereaux. And though Florian was smiling, there was a tinge of sadness in his eyes.

I smiled sympathetically. "You know, you don't have to pretend to be happy that I'm moving."

“I am happy!” Florian insisted. “It’s just...I know you’ve been looking for work and a place of your own for a while, but I’m really going to miss you.”

I pulled him into a hug. For as long as I could remember, Florian had always been by my side. That’s what happened when you grew up in an orphanage together.

Florian sighed, mumbling into my shoulder. “Why’d you have to go and find a job in the next town over? You could’ve taken that bakery position at the shop around the corner and stayed here with us.”

I chuckled. “After years of being forced to bake bread for Headmaster, I never want to touch a lump of dough again.”

That wasn’t the only reason I needed a break. Florian was the kindest soul I’d ever met, and I knew he only meant well, so I didn’t want to admit that living with him and Devereaux wasn’t exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

The orphanage had been my home my entire life, and it wasn’t unpleasant or anything. Being around the kids was fun, and with Headmaster gone, life was a lot easier.

But watching Florian and Devereaux in a constant state of pure happiness awakened a worm of envy in me. It wasn’t that I didn’t want them to be happy—I wanted that for my two friends more than anything.

The issue was that I wanted what *they* had.

I wanted to be that happy, too.

After gruelling away for Headmaster for years, I could finally do whatever I wanted. I was free. So I needed a change of pace. A new job in a different town was perfect.

And hey, the job was titled Beast Handler. How cool was that?

Still hugging Florian, I said, “We will always be best friends, no matter where I am. And it’s not like I’m never gonna see you again. The next town’s barely a one day carriage ride away.”

Florian’s voice softened. “That’s true...”

“And it’s not like you’re alone,” I said, pulling away with a smile.

Even without mentioning his mate’s name, Florian’s eyes lit up the way they always did when he thought about Devereaux. Something ached in my chest. The love they had for each other was almost tangible, like mist in the air.

Would anybody ever love me that way?

“What is going on?” a deep, curious voice asked behind us.

Wherever Florian went, Devereaux wasn’t too far behind. The gargoyle strode towards us gracefully on long, stone legs. Despite my initial shock at seeing a living, moving gargoyle man, Devereaux quickly became one of my good friends. We all felt protected living with him. In fact, he’d helped save my life once. But I knew Devereaux’s focus was on Florian alone.

I didn’t want Devereaux’s attention anyway. I wanted my own mate.

“Pascal finally found a job he likes,” Florian explained.

“Congratulations, my friend,” Devereaux said to me before turning to his mate. “This is a wonderful occasion. So why do you appear upset?”

Florian wiped his eyes with a small laugh. “It’s fine. I’m going to miss him, that’s all.”

“Is he departing somewhere?” Devereaux asked.

“Yeah. The job’s actually in the next town,” I said.

Devereaux nodded solemnly. “Diremeadow?”

Since discovering his origins, Devereaux had done his best to learn all the things he didn’t know about the world. The names of places was one of the gaps in his knowledge. Made sense considering his situation.

“That’s right,” I said.

Florian’s brows knitted in concern. “Not that I’m trying to dissuade you, Pascal, but isn’t that where the kidnappers were taking you earlier this year?”

I tried not to grimace. I hoped they wouldn't bring that up. Now, I felt like a kid trying to convince my parents I knew what was best for me. Not that I knew *exactly* what that felt like, being an orphan with no memory of my folks and all, but I figured it was something like this.

"Yeah, but that was only a couple guys in the whole town," I said, shrugging it off. "I don't want to spoil a great opportunity because of a few bad apples."

Florian and Devereaux exchanged a glance, making me shuffle uncomfortably. I didn't need their blessing to do anything. I was a grown man with no obligations anymore. Sure, I wanted them to wish me well, but I was doing this no matter what. "It's your choice," Florian said, facing me.

"Yup. And I want to do this."

Hearing the determination in my voice, Florian let go of his reservations. "All right. I'll let you go under one condition."

I raised a brow. "Oh? And what's that, exactly?"

Florian smiled. "If you let us help you pack."

I laughed, my heart melting. It struck me now just how badly I was going to miss Florian, too. I pulled him into another hug and buried my face in his shoulder so he wouldn't see the wetness in the corner of my eye.

"DOES it even say what kind of beast you will be handling?"

Florian fussed as we stuffed my clothes into a pack. He had placed the folded shirt inside the pack before realizing it wasn't folded at all. He took it back out and raised a confused brow while Kip giggled behind him.

"Kip, messing up the clothes I folded won't make Pascal stay," Florian said gently.

Grabbing another one of Florian's neatly folded shirts and messing it up, Kip shook his head. "Yes, it will. If he has no

clothes, he can't go," Kip mumbled.

"Hey, he's not wrong," I teased.

Florian shot me a look that said *don't encourage him*. He took the limp shirt from Kip's grasp, folded it again, then placed it in the pack before Kip could snatch it.

I stifled a laugh. I was going to miss the kids' antics.

"Don't worry, buddy, I'm not leaving forever," I told him.

Kip pouted, upset about the whole thing. I patted him on the head.

"What if it's something dangerous, like a lion?" Florian asked.

"That would be *awesome*."

Florian sighed. "Sure, unless you get your hand bitten off."

I grinned and pointed at my face. "Then it would match my missing eye."

Putting the clothes down, Florian looked at me. "I'm serious, Pascal. There's a reason that job listing is still up despite the good wages, plus room and board."

I wrinkled my nose. "That just means it's fate."

"How so?"

"Because I accepted the job before anyone else," I said, gripping the parchment in my hand.

"You didn't accept the job yet. You just took down the listing so nobody else could," Florian said mildly.

"It's gonna be fine. Look, it even says serious offers only. That means I'm the only one who wants this badly."

Pursing his lips, Florian said nothing.

I stayed the night at the orphanage since it would take a whole day to reach Diremeadow by carriage. But I didn't want to stay more than that. For one thing, I didn't want my position to be snatched up by somebody else. And I also couldn't linger in the bittersweet atmosphere any longer. I'd burst out into

tears if Florian and the kids kept looking at me with their heartbroken eyes.

THE NEXT MORNING, my nerves were almost too shot to eat breakfast.

Almost.

After wolfing down some day-old pastries, I gathered my things and headed down to the garden to make my way to the town's carriage port. But of course, I couldn't leave without saying goodbye to Maple. I crossed over to the newly built wooden stall that held our communal horse, an unusually calm stallion with a coat the color of maple syrup.

The kids named him. They were very imaginative.

Maple was a new addition. After our ordeal a few months ago, and Florian's very first impromptu horse riding session on Argon's mare, Midnight, he decided he liked that method of transportation far better than walking. And with our newfound wealth, we had no trouble commissioning a small stable from the local woodworker and handing over the coins for a horse and all his tack.

Maple didn't belong to anyone in particular, since the money belonged to all three of us, and we all took part in caring for him. But I always secretly thought of him as my own. While Florian and Devereaux were off smooching, I'd brush Maple's fur and comb his mane. I liked the way it naturally flopped over one eye. We were practically twins.

"Hey, buddy," I said, reaching up to stroke Maple's nose. He leaned in curiously, sniffing for any sign of treats. I snorted. "You knew I was holding out, didn't you?"

Ployed by his charisma, I pulled out a small piece of stale cinnamon roll and gave it to him. He smacked his velvety lips.

When I heard the tapping of a cane, I knew Florian was approaching. He came up next to me and scratched underneath Maple's chin.

“Pascal, I was thinking... Why don't you take Maple with you?” Florian suggested.

My eyes widened. “What?”

Florian tilted his head. “Well, as much as I love riding him, it's still hard on my joints. I also have Devereaux to fly me around, so I don't need transportation as much as you do. This is a much better way of getting to Diremeadow than sharing a sweaty carriage with a bunch of strangers.” He smiled. “Besides, it'll be nice for you to have a familiar face when you get there.”

Emotion made my throat tighten. “Florian, you better stop talking before I cry again.”

“Cry as much as you want. Get it all out now before you earn a reputation as a crybaby at your new job.”

“Very funny.” I rubbed my knuckles along Maple's warm neck as he leaned into my hand. “Are you sure? About Maple? The kids love him, too. I don't want them to be totally heartbroken by losing both of us.”

“They'll be fine. I was thinking of getting a smaller pet that's easier for them to take care of.”

“Fine. Replace Maple, but don't replace me with another best friend, all right?”

Florian's laugh was bittersweet. “I could never.”

As I tacked up Maple, Devereaux gathered the kids in the garden to say goodbye. It took every ounce of willpower not to cry as they waved frantically and called out in their cute voices. I only managed to keep it down to a couple of tears.

“See you again, my friend,” Devereaux said, his sapphire eyes glistening with emotion.

“See ya, Devereaux.”

Florian dropped his cane and threw his arms around me, knowing I'd catch him.

“C'mon, it's okay. I'm literally one town over,” I said, but the emotions running high choked me up, too.

Devereaux handed Florian his cane as he sniffled.

“If you don’t write, I’m sending Devereaux over. I know where you’re going to live,” Florian mumbled.

I chuckled. “I know. And you better.” Hooking my boot into the stirrup, I hauled myself on Maple’s back and squeezed him with my thighs. “See you soon!”

As I waved back to my old home, Maple broke into a light trot. We were off to a brand new adventure. Who knew what kind of excitement awaited me? A new job, a new home...

And—if I dared to hope—maybe even love.

TWO

Xolkug

DANK LIGHT FILTERED in through the small, grimy window above my head. Though I desperately missed the feeling of the sun on my face and the breeze on my skin, I'd long since given up wasting my energy trying to reach it. Even if I hauled myself up, there was no way I could fit through. Just like everything else in the cell, the window was only a mocking reminder of the outside world.

I closed my eyes and exhaled deeply, clearing the musty air from my lungs. Digging up old memories, I indulged myself in the past. It was the only thing keeping me sane in this day-to-day hell.

I thought of home, my people—which were one in the same. As roamers, we orcs had no physical roots, no ties to the land we lived on except for the friends and family who lived alongside us.

They were long gone now, safely away from this human town. I was glad for them. I didn't want anybody else to suffer this fate. If I could bear the burden alone, that was enough for me.

A wry snort left me. That fantastical story was a good way of convincing myself this wasn't all my fault. If I hadn't been such a fool, I wouldn't be in this mess. But my blood was young and hot, and I overestimated my abilities.

And now I was paying the price.

Hours passed since my last meal—calling the meagre food they offered me a *meal* was a stretch—but I was not hungry. For an adult orc, that was a bad sign. I must've lost muscle.

Wearily opening my eyes, I looked at my hands. The pads of my palms had grown soft. Though the calluses on my fingers remained, I hadn't put them to use for a long time. Too long. They itched to create, to do *something*.

The only craft I had to distract myself from this monotony was a secret stash of woodwork I kept hidden from my human captors. It wasn't often they entered my cell, so it was easy to slide the small wood carvings under my limp pillow. And the knife I used was no knife at all, but the dragon tooth that hung from my leather necklace. It was the one possession the humans couldn't take from me.

The dragon tooth was sharper than it looked. To humans, who believed dragons were mythical creatures—what a ridiculous notion—the tooth hanging from my necklace must've resembled a very large wolf tooth. The outer curve was smooth, glinting a pale cream color, but the underside was sharp as a fresh knife. I couldn't use it to escape, but it was more than enough to fiddle away on my wooden carvings.

Someday, I would break free. When the humans felt the hot fury of my wrath, they'd regret stuffing me in here. I was only waiting for the right moment.

One day.

Hinges squealed as the door opened down the hall. I stiffened. That door only opened when the humans came to feed or mock me. Sometimes both.

I sat back down. At first I met the humans at my full height, towering over them like the miserable waifs they were. But the humans quickly learned it was no threat. Not with the bars in the way. Now I didn't bother unless they really pissed me off.

Bryant appeared on the other side of the cell wearing his usual suit and smug look. Even though I sat while he stood, he

still had to look up slightly to face me because I was so tall. That was a small consolation.

Since there was no food in Bryant's hands, I assumed he was here to antagonize me. I waited for him to speak first. It wasn't out of politeness; I had nothing to say to such a foul person.

Bryant cleared his throat. "Hello, Zewlkoog."

I no longer winced when he butchered my name. I was used to it at this point. Though, I wondered if human lips physically couldn't form the sounds, or if he was mispronouncing it just to annoy me.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"Why, thank you for asking. Yes, you can." He flashed a spiteful smile. "Seems you're in luck."

I withheld a derisive snort. I was anything but lucky.

"A brave soul has volunteered to accept your post," Bryant said.

I didn't know what in the hells he was talking about, so I kept quiet. Since he loved the sound of his own voice so much, perhaps he'd elaborate.

His eye twitched when I didn't reply, but Bryant went on. "Ah, you probably don't know what day it is. Do orcs have circadian rhythms? Oh my. Do you even know what those are?"

Unable to hold my tongue, I said, "Circadian rhythms are no replacement for a *calendar*, but go on."

Bryant always looked irritated whenever I reminded him I wasn't the bumbling oaf he kept thinking I was. He cleared his throat.

"The Grand Show is coming up faster each day. The weather is so *nice*, you see, so it makes the days fly by..."

Rubbing salt in the wound. Classic human behavior.

I kept my expression blank.

When Bryant got no reactions out of me, he finally got to the point. “I expect you to behave at Grand. You may act all docile now, but I know what you are.” The corner of his lip curled. “Then again, I shouldn’t expect anything out of a brute like you. That’s why *he’s* filling the post.”

“He?” I asked.

My renewed interest invigorated him. He smiled, baring his teeth. “Your new tamer.”

The word made my skin crawl, even more so than the mention of the Grand Show. At least I knew what horrors lay at the Show.

But a human tamer? That was an unknown. A threat. How would he be different from the cold human handlers who dealt with me day to day?

A specific job title indicated more power. I had no doubt he’d be worse than anything I’d faced so far.

I was not looking forward to meeting him.

“Try not to kill him, all right?” Bryant said. “We’re paying him a lot of money to get the job done. It would be a shame if your fist slipped and we had to replace him and all that training with another poor soul.”

I ground my teeth. I had never, ever killed any humans. Bryant knew that. Yet he insisted on making outrageous claims about me.

Whoever this man was, I had nothing to gain by killing any human workers. Like Bryant said, they would just replace him anyway. I knew I was worth more than Bryant was willing to admit. Nobody ever came to the Show to see a regular human.

But an orc? An alpha male, no less? That was worth the ticket price.

“An orc’s promise isn’t worth much, but I’d like to hear one regardless,” Bryant goaded, cupping his ear expectantly.

“I promise I won’t kill him,” I said quietly.

“Wonderful. Then I’ll leave you be to your...” He waved dismissively at my cell. “Dawdling.”

Bryant *dawdled* away, the heavy door slamming shut behind him.

I blew out the frustrated breath I’d held. Time was difficult to keep track of in the cell. Was it really almost time for the Grand Show again? The regular monthly Freak Shows were bad enough, but at least those were for a smaller audience. The Grand Show was held once a year, drawing crowds of the sickest people from across the region who all had nothing better to do than laugh at someone else’s misery.

I’d only been in the Grand Show once. It did not go well.

Now it was coming up again, and Bryant and the other humans were making damn well sure I was the proper kind of spectacle this time.

A human tamer...

I scoffed. What a cruel joke. As if the other handlers weren’t bad enough, this man purposely volunteered for this job. He *wanted* to do this. He wanted to subjugate me. There was zero chance of him possessing any decency.

Well, two could play this game.

Just because I wasn’t going to kill him didn’t mean I couldn’t make his life hell.

THREE

Pascal

IT WAS early evening when I arrived at the address in Diremeadow earlier than expected. Maple relished a good run. After strolling down the alley towards the building, I discovered a quiet character leaning on the wall outside. He took a long drag from his cigar as he looked me up and down. I dismounted and shuffled on my feet, hoping I was in the right place.

“Here for work?” the man asked gruffly.

“Yes! I’m here for the beast handler position?”

The man blew out a ring of smoke. “Go on in.”

“Thanks. Is there a place I can board my horse?”

He squinted at me. “You staying?”

“Er, the listing said a room is included, so I hope so,” I said with a weak laugh.

He didn’t return my smile. “Stable out back. Give ‘er here.”

When I handed over the reins, Maple didn’t fuss. If he trusted the guy, then I supposed it was fine. Some people were just curt.

The interview room smelled like smoke and meat jerky. It was empty. I took a seat, waiting patiently. Muffled voices spoke outside before a man wearing a suit entered the room. He beamed and extended a hand towards me. His voice was charismatic and loud, filling the room, making him seem

larger than life. It was like he was too used to projecting his voice for a crowd that he forgot how to stop.

“Hello, there! We don’t get many visitors at this hour. Well, I assume you’re here for work and not leisure. You’re here for the job position, then?”

I smiled, pleased that this man was friendlier than the other guy. “Yeah, that’s right. I’m Pascal.”

Something almost like familiarity flashed across the man’s face. But that was impossible, since we’d never met before.

His gaze slowly raked over my face, pausing on my eye patch before moving on.

“Name’s Bryant Smithson, pleased to meet you. And that’s Pascal...?”

My cheeks flushed when I realized he wanted to know my last name.

“Ah, I don’t have a family name.” I wasn’t sure if I should tell him the whole truth or not, but he seemed trustworthy enough. “I was abandoned at the orphanage when I was young, so...”

Bryant’s eyes lit up. “Really?” he drawled, leaning forward on the table and clicking his tongue sympathetically. “So sorry to hear that. But don’t worry, my friend. Many famous people only go by their first names, you know. Don’t let it get ya down. Anyway, you’re here for a job, not to hear me blather on!” He clasped his fingers together and took on a serious tone. “It’s quite a difficult position. Not many people applied and I don’t blame them! Only the toughest, strongest-willed individuals excel in this line of work.”

My heart beat faster. Was he testing me? I sat up straighter, looking confident.

“Believe me, sir, I’m no stranger to difficult work,” I said, thinking of the thousands of hours I’d spent laboring for Headmaster.

“Yes, a young man like you ought to work hard for a living, that’s what I’ve always said. And you don’t let that eye

patch stop you, eh?”

Most people avoided talking about my covered eye, or even looking at it, but Bryant seemed like a blunt and open person.

“No, sir, I don’t. I’ve had it my whole life so it doesn’t hinder me at all.”

“Excellent, that’s what I like to hear. Now, let’s talk business. You’ll be paid a good wage, plus you get a room to yourself near your charge.”

My charge... It sounded so cool. I wanted to ask what kind of animal it was, but I didn’t want to interrupt Bryant.

“But that’s where the fun and games end. You see, your duties are very important, and they are time sensitive.”

“Time sensitive, sir?”

“Yes, they’ll need to be carried out before the Grand Show in a few months time.”

I had no clue what he was talking about, but I didn’t want to seem uneducated so I nodded along.

Bryant slid the papers and a pen towards me. “Your tasks all involve the beast. From now on, the beast is your life. Caring for it, feeding and cleaning duties, training sessions to achieve full obedience... You two will become *fast friends*, I’m sure.”

I shuffled in my seat. Was the beast not already tame? I remembered what Florian said about it biting my finger off.

My imagination came alive with all sorts of creatures. Lions, bears, wolves, tigers... The beast I was hired to care for could be anything. I was thrilled and excited, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I was also a little scared. Any one of those animals could easily kill me. That explained why no one else had dared accept this job.

I sat up straighter, pushing back my shoulders. This was an important task and a source of pride. I wouldn’t let Bryant down.

“I’m certain we’ll become friends,” I said, echoing his words.

Bryant smirked. “That was a joke, my boy. The beast has no capacity for friendship. It barely has cohesive thoughts running through its head.”

My curiosity swelled. What did Bryant mean by that? Was he one of those people who thought animals didn’t have feelings? Even though I didn’t agree with him at all, I kept my opinion to myself. After all, I considered Maple one of my good friends. Surely whatever animal I was hired to look after would come around with a little time, patience, and treats.

“You can go ahead and sign that,” Bryant remarked at the paper and pen in front of me.

I picked up the pen, still looking at him as I finally gathered the courage to ask, “What kind of beast is it, Mr. Bryant?”

His expression didn’t change. He wore a thin smile, tapping the paper. “Oh, you’ll see soon enough. Believe me, he’s one-of-a-kind. You will *not* regret taking on this rare opportunity.”

He didn’t answer my question, but I was still excited to meet my charge. Whatever it was must’ve been an amazing creature.

I scanned the paper. It was a work contract. Since I’d never had a real job before, I wasn’t sure what to expect. It all looked very fancy and official to me. But once again, there was no mention of the beast’s species in the text. It was going to be a big surprise—and I couldn’t wait.

Bryant seemed to hold his breath until I finally signed the line at the bottom of the contract. He laughed and stood up, holding out his hand. The grip of his large hands and his exuberant handshake shaking my frame made me realize Bryant was probably an alpha. I couldn’t help but grin at his enthusiasm.

“Excellent, my boy, you’ve made a smart choice. Everybody will be jealous when they see how much control

you have over the ferocious beast!”

He said it with such certainty that I was convinced, too. It excited me to think I'd be the sole caretaker of a powerful animal. My heart skipped, eager for our first meeting.

“Could I see it tonight?” I asked.

Bryant barked out a laugh. “Look at you, raring to go! Haven't you had a long journey? Where is it you came from, again?”

“Stonekeep, sir.”

That familiarity flashed across Bryant's eyes again. He whistled as if impressed. He rolled up the contract and pocketed it. “Long trip. Take it easy tonight, my boy, you'll meet the beast soon enough. Come, I'll show you to your quarters.”

I followed Bryant out the back, which led to a dim passageway. Two doors stood at the end of the hall right next to each other. One was standard wood, but the other was thick and heavy with a rusty metallic surface. A padlock secured the handle.

Without pausing to look at the ominous metal door, Bryant opened the standard one to reveal a modest and quaint room. A narrow bed sat against the wall with a little table next to it. Across the room was a dresser and a desk. My room had all the necessities and was clean enough, so I had no complaints.

“It's no fancy accommodation, but it's nice, eh?” Bryant said, tapping his hand on the old nightstand. “Wouldn't mind staying here myself, if I was a young lad like you working this job.”

After spending my whole life sharing a room with my best friend, a solitary room felt like a luxury itself. “No, sir, it's great. I appreciate it.”

Bryant looked pleased. He clearly liked it when I complimented him.

Pausing, Bryant rubbed his square chin. “Now, there *is* a hitch. Not quite a downside unless you're a glass half empty

type of person. But you're not one of those people, Pascal, am I right?"

I shook my head. "No, sir. I try to look on the bright side."

His eyes gleamed when I called him *sir*.

"Good." Bryant pulled a key out of his pocket. It looked heavy, like it matched the metal door. "Your kitchen and washing quarters are downstairs. Surely you saw the other door. That leads to the basement, where the beast resides. Your duties include feeding the beast and making sure it's clean enough, but you're free to use those facilities as well."

So I'd share amenities with the creature? I guess Bryant wasn't kidding about my life revolving around my charge.

Wait... Did animals even *need* amenities like a kitchen and bathroom?

"There's a daily routine on your dresser. Memorize it. Very important to keep on schedule, helps the beast remain calm." Bryant grinned like we were sharing a joke. "He's not as flexible as us humans, you see. Kind of a one track mind with these creatures."

I thought he was selling the creature short, but I nodded and made a note of the paper on the dresser.

Bryant's gaze lingered on me. "Help yourself to any food in the kitchen. I trust you won't overeat, seeing as you're a little thin, eh? But seriously, save some for the beast or he might turn you into a snack!"

Was he serious? I couldn't tell. I chuckled along with him anyway to be safe.

"Good, you have a sense of humor. I like that." He patted my shoulder again, then handed me the key. "Anyway, my boy, get some rest. You're going to need it for your first day on the job tomorrow."

I smiled. "I'm looking forward to it!"

AFTER BRYANT WISHED me good night and left me to my devices, I figured I'd wash up and eat a quick snack before bed. I fumbled the heavy key into the padlock, then the door groaned open.

The stairway was narrow and dark. The wooden steps didn't look sturdy, but they held my weight. It was spooky, yet filled me with a sense of adventure.

At the bottom of the stairs was another gloomy passageway. It was darker and colder than the one upstairs. The flickering lantern in my hand was the only source of light, so I assumed nobody else was down here. I felt a little proud knowing this whole area was my responsibility. I'd do my best to take care of it.

The washing area was rudimentary but it got the job done. After splashing water on my face and gnawing on stale bread from the kitchen, I stopped in the hall. Another heavy metallic door loomed at the end of the hall.

Curiosity flickered in my chest. Did that door lead to the beast?

I tiptoed closer in silence. Unlike the other door, this one had a small peephole.

This wasn't technically disobeying Bryant's orders, right? I wasn't actually going to meet the beast, just look at it.

Unable to resist, I stood on the tips of my toes to glimpse through the peephole. All I saw was darkness. I squinted, but to my disappointment, I couldn't see much. Just the vague bars of the cell. The creature must've been curled up asleep on the floor, swallowed up by the shadows.

I felt bad for it. I assumed it would be outdoors in a nice enclosure, not locked up in the basement. Was it really that dangerous that it had to be put away like this?

I guess I'd learn soon enough.

FOUR

Xolkug

A WATERY RAY of light filtered in through the small, muggy window. But that wasn't what woke me. That honor belonged to the familiar pompous stomping of Bryant's feet as he approached my cell.

I roused with a frown. Waking up imprisoned was never fun, but coming face to face with Bryant first thing in the morning would sour anyone's mood.

There was a different aura about Bryant today. His smug grin was smugger, his sneer more arrogant. An ominous prickle ran across my skin, raising the hair on my arms.

Something was different. An unpleasant feeling stewed in my gut. With Bryant, different was never good.

He approached the cell bars. "Good. You're awake."

I said nothing, waiting for him to get on with it.

"Look alive. Your new tamer is here. Are you ready to meet him?"

A shudder of disgust ripped through me. *Tamer*. As if I was some kind of wild animal.

I scanned the hall. There was nobody next to Bryant. Where was this coward?

When I didn't reply, Bryant kicked the bar, making me jolt.

"Pay attention," he ordered.

I met his eyes, glaring.

He smiled coldly. “I expect you to be on your best behavior for your new tamer. He’ll be in charge of your daily care and training.” Lowering his voice, he added, “And, *orc*... *do* be gentle with him.”

What was that supposed to mean? This new hire was no doubt a cocky, brainless brute with something to prove. I expected a powerful human alpha with a physique strong enough to match my own. I would’ve thought Bryant was joking if it weren’t for the strange hint of sincerity in his voice.

“I’ll do my best,” I said, trying not to sound sarcastic.

Satisfied with my answer, Bryant turned his head and called out, “You can come in, my boy.”

My boy? I withheld a snort. Was he mocking the man? It almost sounded affectionate, and I couldn’t imagine Bryant doting on anyone, much less a gruff bodybuilder.

A quiet set of footsteps echoed as they approached.

Then the air went dead in my lungs.

The human on the other side of the bars was not a towering brute with bulging muscles.

He was only a boy—just like Bryant said.

No, not a boy. He was clearly an adult. But his features were soft, his build was lithe and slight, and there was unparalleled gentleness in his youthful expression. Next to the slimy and rugged Bryant, the young man looked like a porcelain doll.

An instinct flared up inside me.

Omega.

He was an omega.

I stared at him and couldn’t stop. He stared right back at me with his single visible eye. The other was guarded by a leather patch. Unkempt brown hair fell over the side of his face without vision, and his thick eyebrow shot up at the sight of me.

Right. The sight of me. I was an *orc*, after all.

I suspected the poor fool had no clue what he signed up for. Typical Bryant. He wouldn't reveal the truth until he'd ensnared the employee in his trap. He'd hidden the fact that this tiny young man would be in charge of me, his "vicious" orc.

I looked at the omega, who hadn't blinked since seeing me. It was obvious he was scared shitless. No way he'd last a week. Bryant was a fool for thinking this would work. His new employee would flee in terror the second he left this chamber.

For some reason, my gaze kept returning to his fluffy brown hair. It looked strangely familiar. Why?

"Come, my boy, meet your charge," Bryant said, clapping the omega on the back.

He was so small that the force of Bryant's hand rattled his frame. This irritated me. Didn't Bryant notice the difference in their size? Bryant was an alpha. He needed to know his own strength so he didn't impose it upon others.

The young man took a hesitant step closer to the bars, his gaze still wavering as it met mine. Though he was standing and I was sitting, I still towered over him.

The "tamer" Bryant hired to keep me under control was so tiny, I could've circled my hand around his waist. He had no business being here in this dark, musty dungeon. He should've been out in the world, doing whatever human omegas did.

Despite my hatred towards humans, I felt sorry for him.

An electric jolt of recognition suddenly came to me. That brown hair... I *did* recognize it. As the omega approached me, it wafted his scent closer. That warm shade of brown, that sweet scent—it was the same as the hair Bryant showed me months ago. I stared at the small omega with powerful, almost vicious curiosity. How did this happen?

And why did he smell so *good*?

Bryant spoke to the young man as if I wasn't present. "This here is our orc, Zewlkoog. Bit of a mouthful, isn't it? Do you know what an orc is?"

“No, sir.”

The omega’s voice was soft and pure. It sounded like music after hearing Bryant’s grating voice for so long.

“Orcs are terrifying creatures who roam these lands in packs, like wolves. They may look like us, aside from their green skin and tusks and ridiculous size, but don’t be fooled, my boy. There’s no humanity in them. You mustn’t see them as sentient beings like us, but rather... a peculiarly intelligent beast. Like a lion who can stand upright, wield a club, and talk.”

My skin prickled with fury. Bryant’s speech shouldn’t have bothered me. I’d heard all this before. But it was different when he poisoned the mind of someone who had never met an orc.

“Don’t feed him lies,” I snapped.

A mix of annoyance and surprise washed over Bryant’s face. But then his expression turned gleeful, seizing the opportunity to argue with me. “Lies? That is quite an accusation! What exactly did I lie about, orc?”

There was no use arguing with Bryant. I’d tried countless times, but he didn’t care what I said. He was as open-minded as a brick wall. Every conversation with him was just an excuse for him to flaunt his power over me.

But it wasn’t Bryant I wanted to speak to. It was the omega next to him. Though, with Bryant whispering in his ear, would he bother to listen?

There was an insurmountable difference between us. He was a human—one who took this job of his own free will.

My sympathy for the omega dissolved. Humans couldn’t be trusted. I learned that the hard way—and it wasn’t about to change because of a sweet-smelling omega.

I closed my eyes, forcing my surge of rage back down. “Never mind.”

I heard the smirk in Bryant’s voice. “That’s what I thought. See, my boy, his mind just can’t keep up with intelligent

conversation like ours can. That's why you mustn't feel bad for him."

The omega was silent.

"I know this is a lot to take in, but you're not scared, eh?" Bryant asked.

"No, sir."

"Wonderful. Between you and me, it takes a moment to get over his ugliness, but then it's just work. You'll do an excellent job, I know you will."

"Yes, sir."

Anger sizzled inside of me. *Yes, sir. No, sir.* Did this omega know how to say anything else? He obeyed Bryant's commands like a dog. I shouldn't have expected otherwise. No wonder Bryant took such a liking to him. He was young, good-looking, and followed Bryant's every word. Bryant hit the jackpot.

And this tiny omega was meant to be my tamer? What a joke.

"Well, my boy, that's all there is to it. You'll feed the orc daily and be responsible for his care. And of course, training." Bryant wagged a stern finger. "That's the most important task. But you don't slack off, eh? You're a hard worker, I can tell."

"I try my best, sir."

"Of course. You'll need tools, but I'm sure you figured that out already. Can't trust an orc as far as you can throw one! Come, I'll show you where we keep them."

As Bryant tried to lead the omega away, the young man paused. He gazed at me for a long moment. I couldn't read his expression, and I didn't care to try to decipher it. Humans were excellent at masking their emotions. They were a species of liars.

I should've looked away first, to break the connection before he did, to exert some small display of power.

But there was something in his gaze that kept me present. I didn't *want* to break away.

Bryant was the one who ripped the connection apart. "Come on, my boy! We don't have all day!"

"Ah, sorry, sir."

I shook my head, trying to clear that strange feeling. In the background, I heard the vague buzz of Bryant explaining "control tools" to the omega. It was a nicer way of describing the weapons they used to threaten me into obedience. It had been a long time since they actually needed to use them, since I learned early on in my imprisonment that it was easier to play along with their stupid demands than to rebel and get hurt.

But Bryant wasn't the kind of man to ever be satisfied with what he had. His innate power over me wasn't enough. The batons, the whips, the catchpoles, whatever else he had in his treasure trove of evil was the cherry on top of his rule.

And now he was showing the omega his ways, tainting his mind. Doing what humans do—teaching cruelty.

I sighed, leaning back against the cold wall. Maybe if I was lucky, the omega would slip while carrying a weapon and poke his other eye out...

An instant feeling of disgust stirred in my stomach. I didn't like thinking about that.

Bryant's voice got louder as he strolled in front of me again. The omega trailed behind him loosely holding a riding crop. His face was pale.

Bryant clapped his hands together like everything was falling into place perfectly. "Excellent. Now that you're all geared up, would you like to do the honors of unlocking the cell? Then we can head to the training grounds."

The omega didn't move. He stared at the floor.

Sensing the omega's hesitation, Bryant clicked his tongue sympathetically. "You're right, my boy, you're right, it's a lot

to take in on your first day. Here, I'll show you how to do it and then you'll know how. That's right, just this key here..."

The cell unlocked. Bryant swung the door open. The omega looked uncomfortable.

"Stand up," Bryant barked at me.

I slowly stood, rising to my full height of seven feet. The omega craned his neck to look up at me. He must've been a few inches over five feet tall, at most. Without the bars in the way, he looked even smaller. The amount of trust Bryant had in this tiny human omega shocked me. Either that or there were other reasons he offered him the job.

Maybe he knew something I didn't. Was the omega only pretending to be meek? Did he come from a long line of orc slayers? Could he telepathically control my mind with the eye behind the patch?

No. There was nothing special or supernatural about him. He was a regular human. Breakable.

I took a step towards him, expecting him to stumble away or let out a whimper of fear. But he didn't. He just kept staring up at me with that unreadable expression.

"Don't get too close, orc," Bryant warned, as if I was about to lunge at the omega. "I'll be supervising today, so keep in line."

Wasn't the whole point of Bryant hiring a tamer so that he *didn't* have to supervise me? He had other business to attend to, especially with the Grand Show coming up. He must've taken a liking to this boy if he wasted time chaperoning his progress.

I gave a slight nod in response so he knew I understood. Smiling, Bryant turned and put his hand on the omega's back before they sauntered down the hall. Once again, the omega glanced over his shoulder at me.

I wished I knew what he was thinking.

"Come along, orc," Bryant ordered. The coldness in his tone was striking compared to the sweet way he spoke to the

omega. “Go and wait outside, my boy, I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Okay...” He hesitated, dragging his feet before he finally exited to the training area outside.

As the heavy door closed behind him, Bryant eyed me warily. “Tell me, orc. Do I have to cuff you?”

“What?” I asked, taken off guard. I hadn’t worn handcuffs or any other restraints for a long time. It was true that I’d been combative upon first being imprisoned. Who wouldn’t be? But I thought I’d proven by now that I was capable of following orders.

“You *will* behave,” Bryant growled. “I won’t have you injuring that boy.”

I blinked in confusion. Where did this come from? I hadn’t done anything to threaten either of these humans.

“I won’t,” I said.

Bryant scoffed. “Can I trust an orc’s word?”

We’d been through this dance before. He knew I was capable of controlling my strength. That was why I walked freely without a collar, cuffs, or anything else. I had no recent history of lashing out against him or any of his employees.

But the presence of this omega changed things. It was like Bryant felt possessive over him.

I didn’t like that. At all.

“Restrain me if it makes you feel better,” I said calmly. “It makes no difference.”

Instantly, Bryant whipped out his orc-sized pair of handcuffs and roughly clinked my wrists together. I furrowed my brow. They were specially made by an expert blacksmith to withstand my tremendous strength. There was no breaking them. They needed a key.

To toy with me, Bryant jingled the key. The cuffs were a power move. He knew I didn’t need them. He knew I wouldn’t

dare snatch the key from his hands. He did it to mock me, to rub it in my face that he held all the cards.

Inside, I was seething. But I didn't dare let it show in my expression. Keeping it steady, I followed Bryant outside to the training grounds where I braced myself for my day to get exponentially worse.

FIVE

Pascal

AN ORC.

That's what Bryant called the huge, muscular, green-skinned man sitting inside the cell.

The sight of him took my breath away in more ways than one.

The biggest shock was that I expected an animal, something with four legs and fangs and claws.

But the man sitting behind bars wasn't an animal. He was... well, a man.

Bryant's words confused me. I didn't understand why he spoke about the orc man the way he did. Hell, the orc *spoke*. Beasts didn't talk.

I'd heard about orcs once before in passing. When I'd been "sold" by Headmaster earlier this year, the people taking me away mentioned something about orc sympathizers. At the time, I didn't know what that word meant, and I still didn't understand the wording.

A feeling of unease stirred inside me. Was Florian right? Had I made a mistake taking this job? I thought I'd be in charge of taking care of a wild animal, not a man who would pass for a big human if I squinted.

I barely had time to digest anything before Bryant ushered me to the weapons rack. I balked at the sight of the array of violent items. Why did I need a weapon? What the hell was going on?

Before I knew it, Bryant shoved me upstairs from the basement and outside to a dirt pit. Four sturdy walls surrounded it, hiding it from the outside world. Scuffs and marks were etched into the bricks. I paled as I imagined the struggles that created them.

“This is where you’ll work your magic, my boy,” Bryant said under his breath, suddenly appearing behind me. His hand landed on top of mine. It drew my attention to the crop in my hand, the one Bryant ordered me to hold. It felt awkward and unpleasant in my grip.

“Right... Er, what exactly should I be doing, sir?”

Bryant smiled. “Keep the orc in line. Teach him to behave.”

“But he’s not doing anything,” I pointed out.

Bryant’s smile faded. “Oh, you should have seen him at first. Nearly took the heads off some of my men. Don’t be fooled by his quiet demeanor. There’s a monster in there.”

A monster?

I glanced at the orc man, who stood silently on the other end of the pit. His unfocused gaze was on the ground, like he was waiting for this to be over. I swallowed the lump in my throat. I barely knew his name, yet I was supposed to teach him a lesson? This didn’t feel right.

But I wanted to believe Bryant. He sounded genuine.

Yet when I glanced at the orc, he didn’t back up Bryant’s claim. I didn’t know what to think.

“Don’t believe me?” Bryant asked.

“It’s not that, sir,” I said quickly, not wanting him to think I opposed him. “I guess... it’s hard to imagine when I haven’t seen it with my own eyes.”

Bryant chuckled, nodding to my patch. “Don’t you mean *eye*?”

“Ah, yeah.”

With his hand still on top of mine, Bryant lowered his voice so the orc wouldn't hear. "It's better you don't know what he's capable of. Wouldn't want to scare you. But believe me when I say he *needs* to be kept under control. Do you trust me, Pascal?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good lad."

I felt a flash of relief as Bryant finally removed his hand and strode away, standing in the center of the pit between me and the orc man. Neither of us moved. I wondered if the orc was confused, too.

This was a surreal situation, one I never imagined I'd be in. Yesterday I was excited about this new job and the prospect of a new life in a new town—now I faced down a docile orc I was expected to "tame."

Byrant turned to the orc, then to me. There was an expectant look on his face, like he was waiting for something to happen, then was disappointed when neither one of us moved.

"Well?" Bryant prompted me.

I shuffled my feet. "I'm sorry, sir, I'm not sure what you want me to do."

He gestured to the crop held limply in my hand, then jerked his head in the orc's direction. My stomach turned uneasily.

"But he's not doing anything," I argued.

For a second, Bryant's jaw tightened, anger slashing across his face, but then it was gone. He looked cool and collected once more. He let out a laugh as he returned to my side and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

"You've passed the test, my boy!" Bryant said. "You're absolutely correct, no need to harm our precious asset with undue force. This was all to make sure your head's on straight. Can't have our employees abusing their power willy nilly, eh?"

The orc raised a brow behind him.

“Yes, of course not,” I agreed.

Bryant gave me a sympathetic look as he gestured to the crop in my hand. “But do know that you’re free to defend yourself if—or rather, I should say *when*—the orc loses control of his faculties. Remember, they’re not like us.”

I glanced at the orc curiously. He didn’t make a peep or move a muscle. Was Bryant talking about the same man I saw?

When Bryant watched me, waiting for an answer, I nodded weakly.

He squeezed my shoulder before pulling off. “Good lad. You’ll get far with those listening skills. Since you’ve got a gentle hand, how about we keep the cuffs for the time being? I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if we took them off prematurely and I found out later he’d hurt you, my boy.”

It sounded more like an announcement than a question. I didn’t think Bryant actually wanted my input, so I nodded again.

“Hear that, Zewlkoog?” Bryant asked the orc in a sharper tone.

“I heard you.”

The orc’s words were deep and gravelly, sending a shiver down my spine. His voice had an interesting quality, one I’d never heard before.

In a smooth motion, Bryant took the crop from my hand and circled towards the orc. I felt a jolt of unease. The weapon felt safer in my grip because I knew it wouldn’t actually be used for harm. In Bryant’s hand, it was a real threat.

The orc—Zewlkoog, was that his name?—stood still as Bryant walked around him. He almost looked bored, like this wasn’t the first time. As Bryant circled behind him, he smacked the crop into his palm. I winced as the sharp leathery sound echoed in the enclosed space.

What was the point of this? Was Bryant threatening the orc? Whatever he was doing, I didn’t like it.

Discomfort pricked my skin as Bryant thrust out the crop beside the orc's head, right next to his pointed ear. Still the orc didn't move. Bryant locked eyes with me for a second, then moved his arm in a wide arc.

He was going to strike.

"Wait!" I called out, panicked.

Bryant stopped. He smiled and withdrew the crop before striding over to me.

"Another test—and you passed," he said cheerily. "It's good to keep the orc in line, but that doesn't mean we should punish him for no reason. He's exhibiting good behavior right now."

A wave of relief washed over me. It was just another test. Bryant wasn't actually going to hurt the orc.

Bryant handed the crop back to me. I shoved the unwanted thing in my back pocket at the first opportunity. The object felt gross in my hand, radiating violence I wanted no part in.

"Play time's over," Bryant announced. "Get back to your cell, orc."

The orc paused for a single moment to look at me. Then he dutifully strode away, his chains clinking as he went back to his chamber like a scorned dog to its kennel.

Part of me wanted to follow him. There was so much I wanted to say, so much I wanted to ask. But he'd barely left before Bryant's heavy hand landed on my shoulder, holding me to the spot. I couldn't follow the orc with Bryant lurking around.

"There, now," Bryant murmured. "That wasn't too bad, was it, my boy?"

"Um... right."

"You'll get used to it, I promise. Takes a minute to get over his *good looks*, eh?"

Bryant cackled like he'd told an incredible joke, but I didn't know why. The orc *was* good looking. His thick black

hair and curved white tusks, his ruggedly handsome face and green skin... The contrasts between the familiar and unfamiliar parts of his appearance fascinated me. I wanted to get a better look at him. A closer one.

But Bryant clearly thought the orc was ugly, and he expected me to feel the same way. I kept my opinion to myself.

Bryant led me back to my room, insisting I'd had a long day, although it was only the afternoon. My mind still reeled from everything that happened so I let him do it. When I plopped down on the edge of my bed, Bryant lurked in the doorway with a smile.

“Just the right size for you, eh?” he quipped.

“Yeah.”

“Don't forget the schedule. As much as I'd like to let it slide, the brute needs to be cared for. But I don't need to remind you. You'll do great, my boy.”

I gave him a thin smile. “Thanks, sir.”

“And don't be a stranger. If you need anything, or simply want company that's not a green-skinned monster, I live in the unit next door. Can't miss it. You'll know where to find me.”

“Sure. Thanks, sir.”

Bryant lingered, half in and out of the door, then dipped his head and finally left.

A loud sigh escaped me as I flopped down onto the mattress. I'd only woken up a few hours ago, but it felt like ages. My mind swam back to the orc. He wasn't what I expected, but he deeply intrigued me. Bryant promised me a beast... but the orc was a man. Just not a human one.

I sat up and grabbed the schedule. My heart skipped in excitement when I saw that feeding time was coming up. I'd have an opportunity to talk to him alone.

I didn't like the term “feeding time”, though. It was inappropriate, like the orc was some animal who couldn't feed himself if he had access to the kitchen.

I took a pencil from the desk drawer and crossed it out, then wrote “lunch” in its place.

As I headed back downstairs, I felt oddly giddy for my first ever lunch with an orc.

Xolkug

I STARED at the heavy cuffs on my wrists as if I could melt them with my simmering anger alone. Of course, that didn't happen. If it was possible, I would've destroyed the bars of my cell and escaped this place a long time ago.

But why now? As if being locked in a cell wasn't enough, Bryant took it one step further. For what? Just to humiliate me?

No, it was because of that omega. Bryant didn't trust me with him. He was so small and soft—and breakable.

The mere thought sent a ripple of disgust down my spine, making me shiver. I didn't want to hurt him. I had no reason to. Out of all the humans I'd met during my confinement, the omega was the least dangerous.

Or maybe that was just a ploy for me to lower my guard. You could never tell with humans.

I leaned back against the cold wall with a sigh. The omega... What was his name? I hadn't caught it during our brief time together since Bryant was too busy showering him with overly affectionate pet names. That made it seem like they knew each other well, but Bryant introduced the omega as my new tamer. I doubted they shared a history.

Besides, the omega looked completely out of his element. Despite that, he didn't seem *scared*. Uneasy, to be sure. But not frightened. How strange.

I let out a low mirthless chuckle. Who the hell knew what happened in the mind of a human? If I wasn't locked up, I'd have better things to do than waste my time puzzling out their behavior.

Unfortunately, I had nothing to do except sit mired in my thoughts. This cruel confinement was enough to drive anyone mad—human or otherwise.

The door creaked open.

I sat up.

It *creaked* open. It didn't slam.

Had someone other than Bryant come down here?

I held my breath. If the omega was my caretaker, he had access to this chamber, too—and although he was an untrustworthy human, I'd take anybody over the smarmy asshole, Bryant.

A small voice called out, "Hello?"

It was higher in pitch than I was used to, not quite as high as a human woman's but nowhere near the gravelly depths of a typical alpha.

I didn't respond. Bryant taught me not to speak unless spoken to, and I dared not reply in case the wretched man was with the omega.

But I only heard one voice and one pair of footsteps. I paused as a strange anticipation filled me. If the omega came here by himself, this would be our first time alone.

Why did that excite me?

And then, like a shy mouse sneaking around, he appeared on the other side of the bars. His single visible eye blinked, shining with curiosity.

He didn't gasp in horror. He didn't grimace in disgust. He didn't swallow like he was about to be sick.

He just looked at me.

And then he smiled.

“Hi,” he said. “I said hello, but I wasn’t sure if you heard me...”

My mouth suddenly went dry. This wasn’t like Bryant, who spoke *at* me. This omega spoke *to* me, expecting a back-and-forth, but it was like I’d forgotten how to hold a proper conversation.

“I heard you,” I said in a hoarse voice.

The omega’s face lit up. He sidled closer to the bars. He opened his mouth to speak, then paused. I got the feeling a million thoughts raced through his brain and he couldn’t settle on what to say first.

“Names!” he finally said with a jolt. He sounded like he was talking to himself. “I never caught your name. I mean, Bryant said it, but I wasn’t sure, so I figured I’d ask you.”

“My... name?”

The omega nodded. “Yeah. I don’t wanna say it wrong, so I’m sorry if I mess it up a couple times before I get used to it.”

I stared at him like he was an alien. He didn’t want to mess up my name? Why did he care when no other human did? Who *was* he?

“Xolkug,” I said slowly. “That’s my name.”

“Xolkug,” the omega repeated. It was no proper orc pronunciation, but it was sweet that he tried his best instead of purposely butchering it like some other humans I knew. “Am I saying it right?”

“Better than Bryant.”

The omega flashed a grin. “It’s nice to meet you, Xolkug.”

It felt like a snake slithered pleasantly in my chest, its smooth belly scales rolling over my heart. I liked the accented way he said my name. I liked that he bothered to learn my name at all.

And then he offered a hand through the bars.

I blinked at the small pale appendage, not knowing what to do. Did he want something from me?

“I’m afraid I have nothing to give you,” I said.

“Oops.” The omega blushed. “Um, maybe this is just a human thing. But when we meet people for the first time, we shake each other’s hands.”

My brows raised. “This I did not know.”

“Nobody’s shaken your hand since you got here?”

“No.”

“Oh. That’s weird.” He smiled. “Then let me be the first.”

My gaze drifted to his hand. Four fingers and a thumb. Just like me. But instead of the rich color of malachite, his skin was pale as raw bread dough. And just as soft, too. When I touched him, it felt like his hand melted into mine, pliant and supple.

That snake in my chest formed a circle around my rapidly beating heart.

The omega looked up at me and confidently met my gaze. His single visible eye was a rich, warm amber, like a sunset.

I was almost afraid to speak. I didn’t want to shatter this moment. But I couldn’t contain my curiosity any longer.

“I still don’t know your name,” I said.

“They didn’t tell you?” he asked.

“They don’t tell me much.”

He frowned in brief confusion before reverting to his usual lopsided grin. “My name’s Pascal.”

“Pascal,” I murmured, testing out the human name. For some reason, I couldn’t help but grin, too. “If it wasn’t so limp, it could’ve passed for an orc name.”

“Limp?” Pascal sputtered. “Did you just call my name *limp*?”

I balked. I’d gone too far. What was I thinking, insulting my human captor?

“I’m sorry, I—”

Pascal's laugh cut me off. "No, don't be sorry! I think it's funny."

The sweet sound of his laugh echoed in the cell, burrowing into my brain like an arrow. It was genuine. Real. Not like the shallow, mocking laughter I'd heard from Bryant, or the cruel jeers of human crowds.

"Wow," Pascal said, bringing me back to the moment. "You have really big hands."

It was true. They were easily twice the size of Pascal's, and would have swallowed his up.

"I am an alpha orc," I said mildly. "It comes with the territory."

Pascal looked at the cuffs on my wrist. He frowned and withdrew his hand. That shot a pang of disappointment into me. I'd hoped the human handshake lasted longer. I hadn't gotten enough of Pascal's soft, pale skin.

"I'm really sorry about earlier," Pascal said, staring at the floor.

I was stunned into silence. A human? Apologizing to *me*?

Perhaps this was another human social interaction I didn't understand. I needed clarification. Surely it wasn't what it seemed.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"The whole thing with the riding crop..." Pascal shuddered. "I didn't even want to touch that damned thing, but Bryant told me to, and I felt like I couldn't say no." He rubbed his arm. "And then when I wouldn't do it—strike you, I mean—he snatched it from me and..."

"I don't understand," I said. "Bryant always acts like that. Actually, that was laid-back for him."

Pascal's already pale face blanched. "It was?"

"He's done worse. But I'm used to it."

Pascal looked so heartbroken that I almost felt bad telling him the truth. "But... Bryant is so nice to me. And you're not

the way he describes you at all! You weren't doing anything to warrant punishment."

Could Pascal truly be so innocent? Or was it naivete? He looked young. Perhaps he wasn't experienced in the ways of the world.

Like somebody else I know, I thought bitterly.

"My existence is enough to warrant punishment in Bryant's eyes," I said.

Pascal's brows furrowed. "That's not right."

"That's life."

He looked annoyed. "I don't agree with that. We can change our lives. That's what I think."

I let out an amused chuff. It was easy for him to say things like that. He wasn't the one locked up in a cell.

I stood to my full height, utterly towering over him. If he was a mouse, I was a draft horse. Pascal looked all the way up at me, that glimmering hope and defiance burning in his eye.

I didn't want to steal that from him. But he had to know how reality worked.

"Pascal," I said in a gruff voice. "I'm a prisoner. An *asset*. Do you know what else I am?" I leaned closer so he got a good view of my tusks. "I'm an alpha orc. And I'm capable of being just as dangerous as Bryant says."

Was I trying to intimidate him? Maybe. I wanted to test him, gauge his reaction. Could this small human be as kind as he portrayed himself to be? Or was it all a facade to win my trust? It wouldn't be the first time humans played dirty.

Pascal didn't move. He held his ground as I loomed above him. The rusty steel bars were the only barrier separating us. Weaker-willed human alphas in his position would have scattered already.

But not this omega. There wasn't even a hint of fear in his gaze.

My hands brushed against the bars. If my hands weren't cuffed, I could've reached through and grabbed him. Throttled him. Did he know that?

An unpleasant shiver shot down my spine. Disgusted with myself, I turned around to stare at the wall.

I couldn't even entertain the thought of hurting Pascal. It sickened me to my core. I'd spent many hours fantasizing about revenge on my human captors; Bryant in particular.

But Pascal was a hard limit. He was too small, too soft... Too kind. At least on the surface.

"I know that," Pascal said casually behind me. "Well, I actually don't know *that* much about orcs. Maybe you can teach me?"

I paused with my back turned to him. A second ago, I'd intimidated him—or attempted to—but it didn't even phase him. Now he wanted to know more about me and my culture. If he wasn't so sincere, I would've assumed he was mocking me, like Bryant always did.

But this human... There was something different about him.

I faced Pascal again. A kittenish smile danced on his face, curious and sweet.

My brain must've got its wires crossed because I had the urge to hold him against my chest and stroke his hair, as if he *was* a kitten.

I couldn't keep up my fake bravado with him anymore. I let out a sigh of defeat.

"I suppose I can do that, if that's what you want," I murmured.

Pascal grinned. "Cool! Oh, right. One sec."

He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a familiar key. It was a copy of the one Bryant held—the key to my cell. My heart skipped a beat.

The pieces suddenly clicked in my mind. If Pascal was my new tamer, he was responsible for my care. He could let me out of my cage. We could also spend more time together. For some reason, that excited me more than temporary freedom.

Pascal turned the key. The door unlocked, but it was heavier than he expected. It was meant to automatically shut when not held open. Pascal pulled on the bars with all his might, grunting with effort.

“Step out of the way for a second,” I offered.

With a single light push, the door swung wide open. I stepped outside. Pascal’s eye widened in awe as he watched the door slam closed on its own.

“Whoa,” he said. “You’re really strong, Xolkug!”

I could already tell there was a different kind of strength inside this omega.

Pascal was not weak, either.

SEVEN

Pascal

XOLKUG WAS HUGE. I knew that already. But seeing him sit down hunched over behind bars was way different than seeing him stand right in front of me. He was even taller than Devereaux. He was the biggest man I'd ever met, bar none.

But despite his height and big muscles, Xolkug's presence wasn't overwhelming. In fact, it was like he put effort into shrinking himself. Was he trying to avoid scaring me? Or was that something he practiced with every human?

Or worse—was that something Bryant trained him to do?

I ignored the rolling unease that came with that line of thought.

“So,” I announced. “Are you hungry?”

The corner of Xolkug's lip twitched. “Always.”

My gaze was drawn to his mouth. It was so similar to mine except for the great tusks that jutted up from his lower jaw.

“Me, too,” I said. “Let's grab lunch!”

Xolkug looked puzzled. “Grab... lunch?”

“It means to go get food,” I explained, thinking I might've used too much slang.

“I know what it means,” he said wryly. “Is that the reason you released me from my cell?”

“Well, yeah. How else are we going to eat together?”

Xolkug paused, regarding me like I'd said something unusual. Had I? I didn't think so. But Xolkug made no effort to explain, almost like he was nervous. That dampened my spirits. I didn't want him to be anxious around me.

"Hey, it's okay," I said. "If something's bothering you, please tell me."

Some of the tension in Xolkug's shoulders dissolved. He let out a low chuckle. "You are not bothering me. I'm simply confused."

"What's up?"

"You said we're going to eat together," Xolkug said tentatively. "That implies both of us sitting at a table and sharing food."

I scratched my head. "Okay, now *I'm* confused. That's exactly what I meant."

A shadow flitted across Xolkug's face. "The humans here do not share food with me," he said. "They bring it to my cell, where I eat alone."

"What?" I blurted out.

The mental image of Xolkug sitting in his dank chamber eating by himself saddened and infuriated me. Why did they do that to him?

I shook my head vehemently. "No. We're not doing that. No way. Come on, Xolkug."

I stormed off towards the kitchen before I realized he wasn't trailing behind. When I looked over my shoulder, he stood there warily, as if nervous to follow me. Why was he so afraid?

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He took a moment to answer. "I've never been invited to dine with a human."

My heart fell. I was equal parts sad for him and annoyed at every other human he'd ever met. No wonder Xolkug was wary if they'd all treated him like crap.

I walked back to him and put my hand on his arm reassuringly. His green skin was surprisingly warm beneath my palm. He was like a big strong furnace.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said with a smile. “I’m officially your tamer, right? That means nobody can mess with you when you’re with me.”

For a second, Xolkug seemed too distracted to respond. He stared at my hand on his arm before quietly replying, “If you say so.”

“That’s the spirit! Come on, let’s eat. I’m hungry, too.”

A loud grumble came from Xolkug’s stomach. He sighed, finally swayed. “Okay.”

Xolkug ducked his head to fit inside the kitchen. He looked enormous and uncomfortable in the cramped space. I hadn’t realized how small it was until we were both inside.

“Geez, they didn’t make this place very big, did they?” I said.

“To be fair, it’s human sized,” Xolkug mumbled. “I doubt it was meant for an orc.”

I frowned in contempt. That was right—Xolkug said he ate alone in his cell. They didn’t even afford him the decency of sitting down at the kitchen table.

“Well, even a tall human alpha wouldn’t fit in here,” I added, picking up a handful of dried jerky. “I have a friend who’d be just as cramped as you.” I paused. “Well, he’s not a human either, but still.”

Xolkug’s brows shot up. “You have a friend who is not human? What is he?”

“A gargoyle.”

He blinked. “Is he... sentient?”

“Yeah! He’s a walking, talking gargoyle man, with wings and a tail.”

I couldn’t help laughing at the pure shock on Xolkug’s face.

“I know it’s a wild story. My friend—his name is Devereaux—he was *sort of* a human in the past. He turned into one at night. Anyway, he fell in love with my best friend Florian, and there was this whole curse, and a fated kiss, and all that... Here, can you hold this?” I handed Xolkug as much of the jerky as I could carry, which barely filled half of his palm. “Thanks. Anyway, true love broke his curse, and now he’s a gargoyle man full time.”

“That... sounds like a fairy tale,” Xolkug mused.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t blame you if you don’t believe me. If I hadn’t seen it myself, I’d think it was a story, too.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you, Pascal.” Xolkug’s unfocused gaze fell to the floor. “But that’s the cruel magic of fairy tales, isn’t it? They always happen to other people.”

The sadness in his voice filled the room. I wanted to comfort him, but I couldn’t deny what he said. Florian and Devereaux found their special love—meanwhile, I was alone and Xolkug was locked up in a cell. It didn’t seem fair.

Xolkug suddenly cleared his throat. “Didn’t mean to ruin the mood. Could you pass me that carrot?”

I handed him the carrot. It was big and thick, yet it looked like a toothpick in Xolkug’s hand.

“Thank you,” he said. “If you desire nothing else, this should be enough.”

“That’s it?” I asked, looking at the meagre pile of food in Xolkug’s hands. “That’s more than enough for me, but what about you?”

“They don’t feed me much.”

I grunted. “Okay, that’s it. As your tamer, I’m making some changes around here.”

There was a wooden crate full of dried meats on the counter. I put my arms around it, grunting as I tried to lift it but it was heavier than I anticipated.

“Allow me,” Xolkug offered.

He grabbed the edge of the crate and lifted it with ease, like it was made of paper instead of wood.

“Should we be doing this?” Xolkug asked.

“What, *eating*? Bryant won’t be mad about that. Let’s dig in already, I’m starving.”

But then I remembered the cramped room and flimsy furniture. Xolkug definitely would not fit at the dinky kitchen table. I mulled over our options.

“We could eat outside,” I suggested.

“Where?”

“I dunno. Anywhere.”

“Not the training pit,” Xolkug muttered.

“No way! I meant somewhere nice. I don’t know the city well, though. I’ve only been here for a few days.” I smiled. “Maybe we can discover a place together?”

Xolkug made a face and looked away. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

Raising an eyebrow pointedly, Xolkug gestured to himself. I realized what he meant. Xolkug was an orc, a fact I was aware of, but kept forgetting was an issue to other humans.

“Oh,” I said, disappointed.

Frustration welled inside me. None of this was fair. Xolkug deserved to walk among the city streets just like anybody else. Hell, even Devereaux didn’t hide his identity anymore. If anyone had a problem with his appearance, they had to deal with it.

But Xolkug’s situation was different. He was too nervous, like he expected the worst if he tried.

I huffed, tapping my foot. “What if... we went *just* outside the building? We don’t have to go onto the streets. There’s an alley we can hang out in.”

Xolkug pondered my suggestion for a few beats. “If you’re sure it’s all right.”

“I’m sure. And hey, it’s better than eating in a dark basement.”

We shoved everything into a wicker basket. After wriggling out of the cramped kitchen, Xolkug followed me upstairs. We passed my room and headed for the door that lead outside. I noticed Xolkug was hunched over behind me. Even the hallway ceiling was too low for his massive height. But that was okay, because he could stand as tall as he wanted to outside.

When I pushed the final door open and sucked in the fresh air, I sighed contentedly. “That’s better!”

Xolkug hesitated by the threshold, then slowly stepped out. I watched his dark eyelashes flutter shut. His lips parted as he inhaled a deep breath, like it was the first he’d taken in ages. Then he straightened his back and rose up, stretching his arms to their full length, his powerful muscles rippling. Although the alley was shaded, Xolkug’s green skin took on a brighter, healthier quality in natural light. I could only imagine how gorgeous he’d look basking in the sun.

I couldn’t take my eye off him. He *was* gorgeous, wasn’t he? His angular jaw and powerful nose radiated masculine energy. I wondered what it would feel like to run my hands through his dark locks, the scruff of his facial hair, the points of his ears, and the curve of his tusks. He was so humanlike, yet not. That difference pulled at my core. I wanted to know him inside and out.

What the hell?

I shook off the feeling. We were here to eat lunch, not for me to ogle him.

Xolkug groaned in pleasure as he rolled his shoulders post-stretch. “I needed that.”

The sound of his voice was thick and gravelly, sending a shiver through me. I cleared my throat and sat down in the shade, putting the makeshift picnic basket beside me.

“I dunno about you, but I’m eating,” I said. “I haven’t been this hungry since Headmaster punished me for breaking a vase.”

Xolkug sat next to me. I noticed he was careful to leave a bit of space between us so our elbows didn’t touch, though I wouldn’t have minded.

“You’re going to have to explain that one to me,” Xolkug remarked, picking a strip of jerky out of the basket.

“Oh, right. Sorry, sometimes my mouth runs faster than my brain.” I chewed and swallowed. “So once when I was a kid—maybe twelve—I was running around the house, playing tag with the younger kids. I’d slow down to let them think they could catch me before I sprinted off at the last second. Anyway, I did that without looking where I was going, and I slammed right into one of Headmasters’ vases.” I stuffed another piece of jerky in my mouth. “I know it was my fault, but come on. Who leaves an expensive vase sitting on a pedestal in the hallway with a bunch of kids?”

Xolkug regarded me with confused curiosity. “Headmaster... Is that what you humans call your elders?”

“She was my elder, I guess. But that’s just what she wanted us to call her. She wasn’t related to us.”

“I see. But she took care of you and the rest of your... clan?”

I shrugged. “Not really. She mostly did her own thing, while me and Florian took care of the kids, since we were the oldest.”

Surprise flashed across Xolkug’s face. “Headmaster was the elder, yet she didn’t care for you?”

A derisive snort came out of me. “No way. After I broke the vase, Headmaster got pissed. She banned me from eating for three days.”

“What?” Xolkug barked. “You aren’t serious. The elder refused to feed you?”

“Yup. That’s the kind of person she was.”

Xolkug's mouth twisted into a snarl. "She sounds an awful lot like Bryant. Are *all* humans like that?"

"I don't think so. Me and Florian would never do something like that." Frowning, I looked at him. "Wait, did Bryant ever refuse to feed you?"

"Yes. It was the first tactic he tried when I didn't cooperate."

My heart sank. Bryant was so nice to me. I didn't think he was like Headmaster. Why had he been horrible to Xolkug?

I recalled what Bryant whispered in my ear in the training pit, when he wanted me to hit Xolkug with the riding crop. He said I couldn't trust orcs. But I trusted Xolkug. He'd never done anything wrong, not to me. Then again, neither had Bryant.

Xolkug shook his head, his brow furrowed. "Elders are supposed to protect, especially the ones in charge of young ones. What that human did to you was not right."

"I know," I said with a sigh. "Is that what happens in orc... um, clans?"

"Yes, clans. What you described is similar to our culture, except not as twisted. Elder caretakers teach and nurture the clan's young ones."

"Huh. That *is* kind of what me and Florian did. We were the oldest kids, so it was our responsibility." I scratched my head. "But... I think we're unusual when it comes to humans. We grew up in an orphanage."

"What does that word mean?" Xolkug asked.

"It's a place where kids go if they don't have parents."

Xolkug nodded. "I see. And they are taken care of in one communal group."

"You make it sound like it's normal."

"Is it not, for humans?"

I put down my food. "No. It's almost shameful."

“Why? It’s no fault of the child.”

I shrugged. “You’re right, but that doesn’t change the way most people think about us. I’ve been called every name in the book: dirty, poor, bastard... One time this man walked by the orphanage, told me and Florian to get jobs, then threw a pity coin at us.” I grinned at the memory. The stranger had no way of knowing that coin would change Florian’s life forever. “But yeah. I guess the best way to explain it... orphanages are more like places where parentless kids get dumped.”

“That is horrible,” Xolkug said with a mortified expression. “Why did your community not support you, or the other children?”

I realized Xolkug didn’t understand the root of the issue. “Nobody wanted us because we weren’t *their* biological kids. Humans tend to only care for their own flesh and blood.”

He was silent for a moment before he roared, “What? Young ones are blessings! Their parentage doesn’t matter. If they exist, you care for them.”

I chuckled. “Damn, now I kinda wish I grew up in an orc clan instead.”

I was half-joking, but Xolkug’s face was dead serious.

“If you did, you would’ve had the best care we could provide,” he said.

I blinked at him. “Even though I’m human and not an orc?”

“It does not matter,” Xolkug stated. “A young one is a blessing. The species is irrelevant.”

“Really?” I asked, my brows raising in surprise.

“Yes.”

“Huh. That goes against what Bryant said about orcs being terrifying.”

Xolkug ground his teeth. He looked like he wanted to spit. “Bryant holds that opinion, yes,” he muttered.

I noticed the tension in Xolkug's thick arms. My gaze followed the veins along his forearm to the back of his hands.

Before I could stop myself, I reached out and touched it. Xolkug looked up in surprise.

"I don't agree with him. Just so you know," I said.

I felt his pulse beating beneath my palm, warm and fast. Xolkug met my gaze. His eyes were so dark and deep that they seemed endless. He looked at me in a significant way—in a way no other alpha had ever looked at me.

"I appreciate that," Xolkug murmured. "I must admit, I can't say the same about humans. They're quite terrifying."

My spirits fell. Did Xolkug still not trust me? Worse, had I done something to upset him?

Then Xolkug placed his hand on top of mine, sandwiching my hand between his two large, green ones.

"Except you, Pascal," Xolkug said with a hint of a smile.

My sunken heart flew up into my throat, beating as fast as a hummingbird's wings. The warmth of Xolkug's hands surrounding mine seeped up my arm and throughout my body, flooding me with a fuzzy sensation.

For once in my life, my tongue was tied-up. I didn't know what to say. I could barely *think*. All I knew was that I didn't want this moment to end. I felt wholly content with Xolkug's tender hands engulfing mine...

And then Xolkug pulled away. Disappointment filled my veins like ice water, replacing the warm fuzzy feeling.

Xolkug turned his head, cleared his throat, and stood. "I should go back inside," he said quietly. "Could you please lead the way?"

My body felt too listless to move, but I managed to scrounge the energy to get up. I opened the door back to the building and descended the dark, dank stairs to Xolkug's cell. He didn't wait for me—Xolkug opened the cell door on his own and entered, waiting for me to lock it.

It was all so practiced, like he'd done it hundreds of times... It saddened me.

Why had Xolkug's mood changed so abruptly? Had I done or said something wrong? One moment he was holding my hand, and the next he ripped away, more eager to sit in his cell than talk to me.

When I turned despondently to leave, Xolkug said, "Don't forget to lock the door, or else Bryant will be cross."

"Oh... right."

I locked it half-heartedly. A nagging voice in my head asked why I bothered at all. Why should Xolkug sit in this cell while I walked freely? Just because Bryant said so?

"Well... see you later, Xolkug," I mumbled.

Just as I turned to leave, he said softly, "Thank you for lunch, Pascal. It was a pleasure."

My heart fluttered like a petal in the wind.

Then my resolve hardened. That was it. I'd talk to Bryant about Xolkug's situation. I'd change his mind about orcs, no matter what.

EIGHT

Xolkug

ONCE THE DOOR to the cellar shut behind Pascal, I let out a massive breath and gasped for air.

My blood pounded. My chest felt unbearably tight around my racing heart, like a hundred mischievous snakes were slithering between my ribs.

I had to sit down. I shut my eyes and put a hand to my forehead. My skin was hot, almost feverish.

All because of that human omega.

Pascal.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, yet I was still dizzy and breathless. What had he done to me? In less than an hour in his company, his touch on my skin turned me into a disaster.

I was an alpha orc. I was supposed to be strong. So why did this small, fragile human omega have so much power over me?

It didn't stem from his task of "taming" me, or the fact that he held the key to my cell. It was his gaze, the sensation of his hand against mine. It was all the little things he did. Just *him*.

I slumped against the cold wall with a loud exhale. My clan warned me about humans, but I was certain this was *not* what they meant...

Oh, gods. My clan. What would they think about me if they found out I pined for a human?

I clenched my eyes shut and hissed through my teeth.

No, I was not pining for Pascal. I could not allow myself to fall to such embarrassing depths while already at rock bottom. I had to fight this feeling.

I stood and paced the cell. As my eye caught the tiny sliver of light from the window, I stopped.

That was it. It wasn't Pascal that I was infatuated with—it was the fresh air and good food. It was the taste of freedom Pascal allowed me to experience. He represented a slice of my old life, my old freedom. That was why I'd reacted so viscerally to him. Nothing more.

I tried to make myself believe it.

A frustrated grunt escaped me. I had to distract myself.

I laid down on the dingy floor and did a round of sit-ups. That did nothing to help. My mind looped back to Pascal against my will. All I could think about was the curve of his pale cheek, the glimmer of his single amber eye.

What happened to the other one? I was curious, but it was rude to pry. A man's past was his own business. Just like Pascal didn't ask why I was locked up in a cell, I couldn't ask about his eyepatch.

But it wasn't a simple curiosity. It was a gnawing question: was he born that way? Or did someone hurt him? Because if it was the latter, they'd have hell to pay.

Startled, I grunted and leapt to my feet.

Hell to pay? What was I thinking? I wasn't the vengeful type. If I was, Bryant and the rest of his human lackeys would've suffered at my hands, and I'd be long gone.

Why did I feel so strongly about Pascal?

I groaned, slapping my hands over my face. I was losing my mind in this cell. That was it.

Rest. That would fix the shameful misstep in my brain.

I laid down on my bare cot and willed myself to sleep.

“XOLKUG?”

The soft voice enveloped me like a blanket. Pascal’s voice. Wonderful. Now I was dreaming about him, too.

“Hey, um... it’s time for dinner.”

Consciousness slowly came to me. I wasn’t dreaming. I raised my head and blinked the sleep from my eyes. Pascal was there on the other side of the bars, calling out to me.

Despite everything I’d been through—the cold darkness of the cell, the months of misery, the loneliness and boredom and frustration—in this moment, I felt happy. Happy to see Pascal’s sweet, kind face.

I smiled in relief. Seeing that made Pascal smile, too.

“Hey,” he said. “Sorry, were you sleeping?”

I sat up. “Just resting my eyes.”

Pascal unlocked the door. “Wanna go eat?”

I would’ve done anything with him. Not only because it meant leaving the cell, but because I wanted to spend time together.

To my dismay, my desire to stop pining for Pascal wasn’t going anywhere.

“Sure,” I said. “Where to?”

“Being outside was nice before, and I’m sure you appreciate the fresh air. As long as you don’t mind eating in an alley.”

“Anywhere is better than here.”

I noticed the basket in Pascal’s hands. He must’ve prepared the food in advance so I wouldn’t have to duck into the cramped kitchen. It continued to shock me that a human could be so thoughtful. He was so unlike the other ones I’d met.

We headed outside, the same way he did at lunch, but now the sun was gone. The cool evening breeze caressed my skin. I inhaled the air. It was human city air—not as clean and wild as what I was used to back home, but a million times better than the stale basement air.

Pascal didn't sit down. Still holding the tray, he gazed out towards the mouth of the alley, where it met the street.

“Hey, Xolkug,” he said. “Are you sure you don't want to explore? We could find a nicer place to sit than on the ground.”

A familiar worm of unease rippled through me. It felt wrong, but so right. It felt *normal*. Bryant instilled anxiety into me with his cruelty. Earlier I'd refused Pascal's offer because I was afraid of what humans would think if they saw me.

But Pascal wasn't afraid of me. He accepted me. Could other humans do the same?

Then a memory snapped in my mind. The crowd of human faces laughing and jeering at me, callous and uncaring.

The memory plunged me into a pool of anxiety. If it was like that out on the street, then I'd rather stay in the alley with Pascal, sight unseen.

“I don't know,” I mumbled.

Pascal's eye went wide and pleading. “Come on, we'll go together. You won't be alone. If anyone gives you grief, they'll have to deal with me.”

I let out a one note chuckle. The idea of a little human omega standing up for an alpha orc was equal parts amusing and endearing.

Pascal huffed. “What? I'm serious.”

Something about the way he looked at me made my inhibitions melt away. Pascal believed in himself so strongly that I had no choice but to believe in him, too.

“All right,” I said.

His face lit up with joy. “Yay! Let's go!”

As Pascal skittered down the alley, I remembered what he'd said earlier. He only arrived in the city a few days ago before coming straight to work for Bryant. He was almost as much a prisoner to him as I was. I doubted Bryant allowed Pascal much of a leash to wander off or waste time when, in Bryant's mind, he should have spent it taming me.

That worm of unease reared its head again. Exactly how much freedom did Pascal have? Was he even allowed to do this?

But the skip in his step and the grin on his face made me forget about that. Pascal must've known his limits. He wouldn't purposely get himself into trouble.

Pascal waited for me at the end of the alley. Although I was nervously excited, I wasn't quite as eager as him to step out into the street. For one thing, I was a solid two feet taller than him—not to mention my conspicuous green skin. It was clear I wasn't human.

But it was also evening. The darkness made it difficult to discern shape or color. If there was a safe time to be outside, this was it. Having Pascal at my side was reassuring, too.

He looked both ways, and I did the same. I felt a flicker of hope when I saw that the street was empty. All the humans must have gone to their private, solitary dens. It always unnerved me how humans were supposedly a social species, just like orcs, yet spent so much of their lives purposely separated.

Pascal wasn't like that. The orphanage he described sounded similar to our way of life, despite his claim that it was frowned upon. But would he change? Once he found a mate—a human alpha—would they start their own solitary family unit?

My stomach tightened. I despised the idea of Pascal with a human alpha. Maybe because my experience with them had been so dreadful. If Pascal's choice of mate was anything like Bryant, he would have to go through me first.

I paused, shocked by my thoughts. Where was this coming from? It wasn't like me.

Pascal patted my arm, yanking me back to earth. "The coast is clear. Let's go that way!"

The tingling sensation of his hand on my skin lingered even after Pascal took off down the street. I shook my head, then followed closely behind him.

It was quickly apparent that Pascal had no idea where he was going. He scampered down the street like an excited child, eager to explore the city. I couldn't hold back a grin as I watched him. His enthusiasm was contagious. Soon a bubbling energy burst from my chest. I forgot about Bryant, about the cell, about all the misery I'd endured. My whole life was this moment alone with Pascal and his beautiful smile.

Pascal skidded to a halt. "Wait. I hear water!"

"I'm surprised you didn't hear it earlier," I said.

"You did?"

I angled my head, indicating my pointed ears. "I heard it in the distance from the alley."

Pascal gasped. "Whoa! That's so cool! I wish I had ears like that."

I snorted in amusement. That was a first. Bryant and his crew of humans only had negative remarks about my appearance, pointed ears included.

As Pascal gazed at my ears longingly, I had the strange desire for him to run his fingers over them. I shuddered.

Thankfully, Pascal was distracted by the water so he didn't notice my flushed reaction. He ran past the main street and stopped at the edge of the river. It was narrow and unassuming, barely long enough to deserve the foot bridge that spanned over it. I could've cleared in a single leap, though I doubted most humans could do the same.

Pascal discovered a single tree by the edge of the water. Waving me over, he sat by its trunk with a content sigh.

When I joined him, I noticed a loose root broken off from the base of the tree. It would make a good base for a new wood carving. I wondered if Pascal would like that, so I pocketed it before sitting down.

As I sank to the ground next to Pascal, a wave of emotion hit me. How long had it been since I touched the soil? Since I ran my fingers through the grass, since I could gaze up at the night sky?

But as I ran my fingers over the grass, the chains on my cuffs clinked. They were a sombre reminder that not everything was as perfect as it seemed.

Pascal frowned. "I'm really sorry. Bryant gave me all the keys except the ones to your handcuffs."

I shook my head. He wasn't responsible for Bryant's heinous actions. "It's all right. You've done enough for me, Pascal."

He made a face like he wanted to argue, but I didn't want to spoil the moment. I reached for the basket and pulled out a carrot, offering it to him before he could open his mouth to refute me. He paused for a second before chomping on the carrot. I grinned. His easily distracted nature was one of his many endearing qualities.

We sat together beneath the night sky, listening to the murmuring water and distant crickets. It wasn't my old life. But for now, sitting next to Pascal, it was enough.

After we ate, I closed my eyes and wondered what my clan was doing right now. Did they miss me? My heart ached. Of course they did. Orcs weren't like humans. They didn't abandon their loved ones when they became inconvenient. But they didn't know where I was, or if I was even alive. They must've searched all over without a single lead...

I let out a heavy sigh.

"What's on your mind, Xolkug?" Pascal asked.

I opened my eyes, back to reality. Back to Pascal's sweet face blinking innocently up at me. His expression was so earnest and curious. Sometimes I couldn't believe he was

human—the same type of creature who'd locked me up without remorse.

I thought about waving it off and changing the subject to something more palatable. But I was tired of hiding my feelings. When I was with Pascal, I didn't want to smother them.

“I was thinking of my clan,” I admitted.

His amber eye went wide. He opened his mouth to launch into a flurry of questions, then seemed to think better of it.

But I didn't want him to hide himself around me, either. I wanted his true and honest self to shine.

“Don't hold back,” I said with a slight smile. “I can see you want to ask me something. Ask away.”

This delighted him. He sat up straighter, tossing a half-eaten carrot back in the basket.

“Can you tell me about them? Your clan?” he asked.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

A chuckle escaped me. “If I told you everything, we'd be here until dawn.”

Pascal grinned. “Sounds like fun.”

An urge took over. I reached for him and ruffled his hair affectionately. He beamed at the touch, which made me feel good. Unlike other humans, he never shied away from my hands, which were so much larger and stronger than his own. He was like a puppy, soft and trusting.

“I have parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and other relatives you have no words for. We all live together in a communal group, but not like this,” I said, gesturing to the close-yet-distant homes of humans surrounding us.

“What do you mean?”

I looked at the rows of city dens, trying to phrase it in a way that made sense to Pascal.

“I’ve not seen much of humans since being captured,” I said, “but from what I have seen, there’s an aura of hostility among you. Like you don’t actually care for each other. There is only brusque tolerance.”

Pascal tilted his head. “Oh, yeah. I know what you mean. Back where I’m from, people were always kinda rude to me because I was a poor orphan.”

I remembered what he’d told me. Our experiences weren’t so different.

“Poor orphan,” I repeated the phrase, shaking my head. “Those words don’t mean anything to me, or to any orc. Humans judge you for those things. To an orc, you have worth simply by existing.”

Pascal’s watery eye glimmered. He laughed. “Maybe I should’ve been born an orc.”

Something tugged at my heart. That would’ve made these feelings much easier to deal with...

“Maybe,” I said, touching his hair again. “But I like you the way you are.”

Pascal swallowed. His pale cheeks were pink. His eyelashes fluttered shut as he leaned into my palm like a dog wanting more attention—and I would’ve given it to him. For hours. Days. As long as he wanted it, it was his.

But as the moments passed, I felt anxious. Like we were being watched. I reluctantly drew my hand back, feeling ashamed that I’d let the inappropriate act go on for so long.

Was it truly inappropriate, though? What I felt for Pascal wasn’t ugly or bad. In truth, it was the only goodness I’d felt since the humans captured me.

“Xolkug,” Pascal said quietly. “What happened?”

It was like he read my mind. His tone said it all. He wanted to know about my capture.

I sighed. “It was my fault. I was young and ignorant, and I made a reckless decision.”

“What did you do?”

The scenes flashed vividly in my mind. The memories were so clear, it felt like it happened yesterday.

“We orcs never stay in one place for very long. My clan passed this human town from a safe distance as we moved to a new camp. My clan always told us to avoid humans, that there was no reasoning with them. But I was naive, and thought I had something to prove. I’d never seen one up close before. I thought this was my chance. My plan was innocent enough. I’d sneak in, glimpse a few humans, then leave. I figured there was no danger—I knew I was bigger and stronger than any human I’d come across. They couldn’t hurt me.”

Pascal’s face strained. He already knew how this story ended.

“I got inside successfully,” I went on. “I should’ve left. But I didn’t. This strange place compelled me. I wanted to see more of humans and their bizarre culture.”

My brow furrowed for what came next.

“It was when I saw the horse stable that I grew truly curious. Orcs and horses are intertwined. It’s like we share a spiritual connection.”

Pascal smiled. “Really?”

“Yes. But I was a fool,” I muttered. Pascal’s smile fell at my dark tone. “Because as I approached the stable, Bryant moved in to surround me. By then it was already too late.”

Pascal bit his lip anxiously. “Then... he captured you?”

“He and his men did, yes.”

“Did you fight back?”

“Of course I did. When they threw their pitiful nets, I ripped them apart. I was still cocky at that point, thinking I could fight them off and escape easily. But I underestimated their tenacity... and how dirty they were willing to fight.”

The blush on Pascal’s cheeks had long faded. Now he was pale again. He looked sick at my story.

“They used every weapon at their disposal. Anything to subdue me without killing me. Those were Bryant’s words. He wanted me alive, and he was willing to sacrifice his underlings to have me.”

“What?” Pascal looked horrified.

“He didn’t say it. But I saw it in his cold eyes. I was a great prize for him. He sent in man after man, not caring that I threw them away like sacks of grain in my desperation. There were too many of them, and I was growing tired.” I grimaced. “I didn’t want to hurt them, but I’m sure I broke a few bones in the process.”

Pascal frowned. “You were defending yourself.”

“I don’t like resorting to violence,” I mumbled, staring hard at the ground. “I was scared.”

Pascal touched my hand. “You’re kind, Xolkug. You lashed out when backed into a corner. Anyone would’ve done the same.”

I shivered at his touch. Touching him was one thing, but it was an entirely different experience when the roles were reversed. Pascal ignited a flame within me. There was no other human like him. There was no other omega like him.

My gaze drifted to his lips. I wondered if they were as soft as they looked. What I wouldn’t give to reach out and brush my thumb along that sensitive skin...

Pascal didn’t move. His eye was on me, curious, almost anticipatory. Like he was waiting for something.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, but it didn’t go away.

What was Pascal waiting for?

Could we have wanted the same thing?

My arm trembled as I raised it. Pascal’s hand remained on mine, moving with me. The seconds stretched out like an eternity as I slowly reached my thumb towards his mouth. His lashes fluttered shut, waiting for contact. My heart raced. As Pascal’s warm breath skimmed my hand, my chest felt like it was going to explode.

It all felt like a dream. Yet I didn't wake up. This fantasy was real.

The pad of my thumb brushed against Pascal's lower lip. He shuddered, letting out a soft exhale that set my blood on fire. I wanted to hear the voice behind it, to hear every pleased sound that Pascal could make.

My mouth felt dry. I wanted to say something, but I didn't want to break this. It was too perfect.

And of course, perfection couldn't last.

A horrible, cold voice cut through the silence of the night.

"Orc," Bryant called viciously. "Step away from the omega."

My heart dropped like a rock. All the warmth in my body was sapped away, replaced by icy fear. Out of every terrible thing that could've happened, why did it have to be this? Why did Bryant have to ruin this moment?

I knew it was about to get worse. It always did when he was around. I quickly removed my hand from Pascal and stood up, hunching my shoulders submissively so Bryant knew I wasn't a threat.

Pascal wasn't so fast to react. He opened his eye, blinked, then looked around in confusion. He frowned when he saw Bryant. He didn't look as frightened as I felt. That was good. That meant Bryant hadn't hurt him, yet.

And for Bryant's own sake, I hoped he never did.

The man stalked towards us. His scowl told me he was in a foul mood.

I wasn't supposed to be here. Guilt washed over me. I didn't care if Bryant hurt me, but Pascal shouldn't have been punished because of my decision to go along with him. I should have known better—I shouldn't have been tempted by his kind offer.

"It's not Pascal's fault," I stated.

"Huh?" Pascal said.

Bryant ignored us both. He clamped his fingers around Pascal's wrist like a frustrated parent retrieving their disobedient child. Pascal flinched in surprise.

"I'm sorry, my boy," Bryant said with fake sweetness. "Apparently I wasn't clear enough. The orc is *never* to leave the building unless under my strict orders."

Pascal's mouth hung open. I could tell a thousand things ran through his mind, and there was a lot he wanted to say. But Bryant had a quicker tongue, and was better at imposing himself on others.

"We can discuss this at home," Bryant said with a thin smile. He glared at me. "Get back to your cell."

Unease gripped my stomach. I wasn't afraid for myself, but for Pascal. Would Bryant simply scold him? Or would he hurt him?

That fear and anger held me in place for a moment. If Bryant laid a single malicious finger on Pascal, he wouldn't live to regret it.

When I didn't instantly obey his order, Bryant made me pay. In a flick of his wrist, he pulled out the riding crop and struck me viciously across the back of my hands. The same hands that Pascal had touched so tenderly a minute ago. The pain was sharp and hot—not the worst I'd ever felt, but I still winced.

Pascal gasped in horror. Then I remembered he'd never seen Bryant strike me before.

The sympathy in his gaze was too much for my heart to take. I hoped he never saw it again.

NINE

Pascal

I WAS DAZED in terror as Bryant dragged us back—me physically, and Xolkug with the threat of another whipping.

I couldn't believe he'd done that right in front of me. Why? Xolkug hadn't done anything wrong. He stood there silently when Bryant struck him. It happened so fast, I barely knew what was going on until it was over, and then it was too late to stop him.

I was upset for Xolkug. But I was also upset at Bryant. How could he do that? After hearing Xolkug's heartbreaking story, and how he regretted hurting those men in self-defence, watching Bryant ruthlessly hit Xolkug was twice as despicable.

I was sick to my stomach the whole way back. If I'd known Bryant was this type of man before, I wouldn't have taken this job. But if I'd walked out earlier, I never would have met Xolkug. That was an even scarier thought. Now that he was in my life, I wanted him in it forever.

But I had no time to wistfully recall the feeling of his thumb on my lips. As soon as we got back to the building, Bryant yelled at some men to throw Xolkug back downstairs. He clamped his fingers harder on my wrist so I couldn't follow.

Before I could make a fuss, he pulled me into my room and shut the door behind us. Only when the door was closed and we were alone did he finally release me.

I stumbled away from him, confused and upset. I rubbed my wrist.

“What... What did you do that for?” I asked, still dazed by everything.

He hadn't said a word to me since he promised to talk at home. I thought that was an odd thing to say, since this wasn't my home.

Bryant smiled at me, but he didn't seem very happy. That made the sticky anxiety in my chest even worse.

“Pascal,” he said.

There was a strange tone in his voice. He didn't say my name very often, usually referring to me with pet names instead.

“Yes?”

“What happened tonight was inappropriate. You know that.”

I shuffled my feet uncomfortably. “What was inappropriate?”

Bryant looked down at me with pity. “Oh, my boy. What *wasn't* inappropriate? First, you disobeyed a rule. You took the orc out of his cage and into the city. That was a dreadfully silly thing to do. What if somebody saw you?”

I rubbed my arm. “I don't think anyone saw us. The streets were empty.”

Bryant smiled. “Of course they were. Because there's a curfew. But you don't know that, do you?”

“Curfew?”

“Yes. You're new to Diremeadow, so you wouldn't know. But there was an incident about a year ago. Horrible incident.”

My skin prickled with anxiety. “What happened?”

Bryant narrowed his eyes. “There was a violent attack in the street at night. Multiple men were injured, some nearly killed.”

He took a step towards me. I froze. I couldn't move.

"I was unfortunate enough to be there that night to witness it. But I was one of the lucky ones. I wasn't hurt." Bryant adjusted the cuffs of his sleeve. "That would've been tragic, wouldn't it, my boy? If I'd been killed that night by that beast, we wouldn't be standing here having this conversation."

Discomfort crawled along my back. I felt like Bryant wanted me to say something, to be openly relieved that he wasn't hurt, to sympathize with him. But all I could think about was Xolkug's story.

I spoke tentatively. "That beast—"

"It was the orc," Bryant said coldly. "The same one that touched you tonight with its *disgusting* hand."

My stomach churned. They recounted the same event so differently. But that wasn't the worst part. Bryant said it happened a year ago. That meant Xolkug had been trapped in that horrible cell for over a year.

I was overwhelmed. Tears welled in my eye.

Bryant's expression softened. He clicked his tongue and brushed away my tears. I froze, stunned when he touched me without hesitation. Xolkug's touch was always hesitant and gentle, like he was always nervous I'd push him away. Bryant was the opposite. He dove right in with blunt confidence, never once thinking I wouldn't want it. Something about that unnerved me deeply.

"It's all right, my boy," Bryant said, sounding more like his usual self. "Don't cry for me, I'm fine. It's you I'm worried about. The way that beast looks at you... Ugh."

What was he talking about? He got it all wrong. "No, it's not—"

"My boy, please," Bryant said. "I see what's happening here. You've gotten attached to the orc. It's normal for omegas, I know. You have such sensitive souls that it's impossible not to be submissive, even to the wildest beast."

Bryant's voice was gentle and overly sweet, but his statement was a backhand across the face. Had I done something to make him think that way? Or did he assume that about all omegas?

"I don't know if I'm that submissive," I mumbled. I didn't want to sound like I was arguing with him, but how else could I defend myself?

Bryant didn't hear me, or he ignored me. Either way, he didn't acknowledge what I'd said. He put his hand on my shoulder, gripping me a little too hard.

"You have to remember, my boy, he's not a human. He's not even a person. You can't treat him like one. It's like putting a pair of pants on a pig." He barked out a laugh.

But I wasn't laughing. I bristled at his statement. "That's not true. Xolkug is as smart and kind as any human."

Bryant stopped chortling and gave me a sharp look. For a second, I felt a flash of fear, and was reminded of all the times I'd upset Headmaster, and how quick she was to anger when I was defiant.

Bryant's expression didn't quite soften, but it lost its edge. He gazed down at me almost pityingly.

"I know you feel that way. It's just not true." Bryant said it so confidently that there was no room for argument. He might as well have told me the sky was blue.

It bothered me that he wouldn't listen. If Bryant was so adamant that Xolkug was a beast, he'd never willingly let him go. My blood ran cold at the thought.

I swallowed down my pride. Bryant still had the keys to Xolkug's cuffs. I couldn't get on his bad side now, not before my friend was free.

A wistful sensation fluttered in my chest when I thought about him that way. Xolkug was my friend, sure... But he was also something deeper. Something Bryant could never know about.

"Are you listening, my boy?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. That’s all you have to do, listen and nod.”

I forced a smile, hoping it didn’t look too much like a grimace.

However, Bryant was busy moving his hand from my shoulder to my upper back. I tensed under his touch. Where Xolkug’s palm had been so warm and gentle, Bryant’s felt stiff and controlling, as if his fingers would dig into me like claws if I dared to move. I stood still and took shallow breaths.

“Such a shame about your other eye,” Bryant remarked casually. He examined my face without noticing the tension in my muscles. “Every alpha would chase your tail if you had both!”

My fake smile faltered. I didn’t know what to say, so I kept quiet. But when I didn’t respond, Bryant frowned. His other hand—the one not caressing my back—tilted my chin up to look at him. A spike of unease shot through me.

“What did I just say, hmm?” Bryant prompted. “Answer when I speak to you.”

My heart thumped rapidly in my constricted throat.

“Yes, sir.” I didn’t care what I agreed to right now as long as it got him away from me. He was too close, too fast. Nobody had ever been so physically close to me except Florian, Devereaux, and of course, Xolkug. But they were all my friends whose company I cherished.

To my dismay, Bryant didn’t back off. He examined me, running his rough thumb along my jaw.

“You’re quite a pretty omega, don’t get me wrong,” he said. “But missing an eye is a disfigurement. Takes away from your natural beauty.”

I felt like he’d struck me. Not even strangers commented on my missing eye. Most of the time, I forgot about it, since I’d lived without it my whole life. To have it brought up while Bryant touched my back felt insulting and gross and wrong. I shivered in discomfort.

Unfortunately, Bryant took my reaction the wrong way. He chuckled under his breath. “Don’t you worry, Pascal,” he murmured. “I’d never treat you like that. I still think you’re attractive, even like this.”

I could barely breathe. I’d rather be locked up with Xolkug in his dark cell right now than be here. At least with him, I felt safe. Every passing second with Bryant filled me with a deep, chilling anxiety.

Desperate to change the subject, I blurted out, “I’m sorry, sir, about earlier. I didn’t know the orc wasn’t allowed outside, and I didn’t know about the curfew.” I suddenly bowed—both to escape his grip and to make my pleading more believable. Immense relief washed over me when Bryant allowed me the space to bow in front of him. I didn’t care if I was lowering myself if it meant he wasn’t touching me anymore.

“That’s all right,” he said mildly. “Now that you know the rules, I’m sure you won’t break them again.”

“No, sir.”

My head was parallel with the ground so I couldn’t see his face, but I heard the smug smile in his voice. “Good boy, Pascal.”

My stomach churned. I sensed the threat of danger had passed, but unfortunately, I couldn’t escape the conversation yet.

I slowly stood back up. “About Xolkug—the orc—he’s not allowed outside at all? Not even in the alley where nobody can see him, even during the day?”

Bryant clicked his tongue. “Oh dear. Have you taken him outside twice today?”

I regretted bringing it up, but it was too late. I nodded listlessly. When Bryant raised his hand, I was petrified he would slap me for my insolence. Instead, he ruffled my hair. That was far worse. I would’ve preferred he just hit me.

But it was over soon. He drew away, putting his hands behind his back.

“Well, that’s your fault for not understanding the rules correctly,” Bryant chided. “However, since you’ve been good and admitted the truth, I’ll punish the orc in your stead.”

“No!” I nearly shouted. “Please, don’t.”

A hard edge returned to Bryant’s expression. “The orc is *my* asset. You’ll do well to remember that.” He smiled. “Ah, but those omega instincts of yours really are sweet, aren’t they? I’ll think of a way to satisfy that nurturing urge somehow. Get you a pet, perhaps.”

Through the haze of stress, I remembered Maple. My thoughts instantly went to escape. Would both Xolkug and I fit on Maple’s back?

“Just remember, Pascal,” Bryant said as he paused at the door. “Don’t get attached to the orc. If you do... He’ll be the one who gets punished.”

Bryant finally left.

I should’ve been relieved, but I wasn’t. I sank to my knees in despair, crushed under the weight of every horrible thing that happened. I was betrayed and angry and scared... And most of all, I wished I was with Xolkug. But I couldn’t be. Bryant made it crystal-clear that Xolkug would pay the price if we got too familiar with each other.

I bit my lip to stop its quivering. As much as it pained me, I couldn’t be so friendly with him anymore. It was for his own good.

But that didn’t mean it had to be that way forever. I hadn’t abandoned my plan to run away with Xolkug.

I would never, ever leave him.

TEN

Xolkug

I KNEW LONG before Pascal disappeared from my line of sight in the hallway that I'd been a fool. We wouldn't have been in this situation if I kept my head down and stuck to the life I was forced to live. But the tantalizing fresh air, the sky and water, all of it with Pascal next to me... The temptation proved too much.

I didn't regret it, but I would if I found out Pascal had been hurt somehow because of me. That was one thing I couldn't bear.

As Bryant's men threw me back in my cell, I expected a beating. Miraculously, one never came. There were only sour glares as they spat in my direction and left, slamming the basement door. I didn't know if Bryant instructed them to leave me alone, or if they were too afraid of me to follow his orders. Either way, I was grateful.

It was the following afternoon when I realized Bryant *was* punishing me. Pascal didn't come to deliver my food. Two meals were skipped. It wasn't the first time he'd forcefully fasted me. That I could handle. But being deprived of Pascal's presence was a worse punishment.

It was Bryant's doing. I knew it. Pascal would never do such a thing to me, or to anybody else. Something must have obstructed him.

My theory was confirmed when I heard the basement door open, followed by many loud voices talking over each other. I

recognized one as Pascal's—the others belonged to Bryant's men. Both sides sounded charged and upset.

I stood up with a frown and went to the bars, the furthest I could go. I wanted to know that Pascal was safe.

With a huff, Pascal appeared a moment later. His cheeks were red and his brow was furrowed until he saw me.

“Xolkug!” he cried. Then, as if remembering something, his elation faded. “Um... hi. Sorry I didn't come earlier.” A scrap of his fury returned. “Those guys were blocking the door, telling me I couldn't go through, even though it's my *job* to come take care of you...”

The way he said it made me think he'd repeated a similar line to the underlings to no avail.

But the relief on Pascal's face was tempered, like he couldn't fully feel it. I noticed tension in his shoulders and his balled-up fists.

My instincts urged me to reach through the bars and hold him. I wanted to reassure him, to calm him down. But after Bryant's punishment, I lacked the courage to be the same alpha I was last night by the river. The Xolkug who'd stroked Pascal's lips seemed like an entirely different man.

“Did he hurt you?” I asked quietly.

Pascal blinked. “What?”

“Bryant. Did he punish you at all?”

That was all I cared about. My empty stomach meant nothing compared to the possibility that Pascal had suffered, and I couldn't relax until I knew he was safe.

A strange look flitted across Pascal's face. Then he smiled. “No, I'm okay. Were you worried about me?”

My hands clenched around the bars. Suddenly I couldn't stand the barrier between us.

“More than anything,” I growled.

Pascal looked surprised, then emotional, then defeated. He shut his eye for a long moment before opening it again. As he

did so, he ran one hand over his eye patch.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Thanks for asking,” Pascal murmured. “You must be hungry. Let me go get you something to eat.”

I was disappointed as he walked away, tense and clearly uncomfortable. Did I say something wrong?

My gut said no. Something else was bothering him.

When Pascal returned with a basket, he hesitated and stared at the floor. He wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Um... Bryant said we couldn’t eat outside, even in the alley,” he said miserably.

I figured as much. The riverside dinner was way over the line, but our secret lunch in the alley pushed our luck, too.

“That’s all right,” I said, leaving out the other half of the sentence: *as long as I’m with you*.

Pascal’s mouth was a wavy line, as if he’d burst into tears any second. “I thought maybe we could eat in my room, but those guys are still guarding the door.” He swallowed thickly. “And you don’t fit in the kitchen...”

His demeanour pulled at my heart. Why was he acting so distant?

“Pascal,” I said. “What happened?”

He glanced up at me, his amber eye watery, then he shook his head. He wanted me to believe nothing was wrong, but he was on the verge of tears. My instincts flared up. All I wanted to do was protect him. The urge was so desperate, I could’ve pried the bars apart with my bare hands to get to him.

I felt horrible when my question pushed Pascal over the edge. He squeezed his eye shut as tears streamed down his cheek. He huddled closer to the bars, silently asking for comfort. It filled me with massive relief when I could finally put my hands through and hold him. It didn’t matter that the bars were in the way as long as we were in contact.

“Pascal, I’m here,” I told him softly.

His body trembled as he cried. He hiccuped, trying to keep his voice down as he choked back a sob. My heart broke for him.

“I’m sorry,” Pascal mumbled. His face was buried in my chest between the bars. His tears wet my thin shirt.

“What for?” I asked.

“I got you in trouble. It’s all my fault for being so stupid and ignorant and—”

“You are none of those things,” I growled. I wasn’t about to let the kindest human I’d ever met speak of himself in such a way.

Pascal sniffled. “But...”

“But nothing. You did nothing to harm me. Bryant did. He’s responsible for his own actions. *You* didn’t force me to miss meals.”

“I tried to get past those guys earlier, I swear! They wouldn’t listen to me. They said Bryant banned me from going downstairs until after lunch, but he never said that last night when he...”

My blood ran cold when Pascal trailed off and went still.

“Last night when he what?” I asked quietly.

My mind leapt to the worst case scenario, and I imagined crushing Bryant’s skull with my bare hands.

“No, he... He didn’t do anything to me,” Pascal mumbled, although he didn’t sound convinced of his own words. “I promise, Xolkug, he didn’t hurt me. Just made me uncomfortable.”

I ground my teeth, wishing I could gore the man with my tusks. “That’s still unacceptable.”

Pascal was quiet for a few beats. He remained nestled against my chest with his wet face. It was so unexpectedly intimate that I almost forgot about the cage bars separating us.

Slowly, the courage I possessed last night crept back to me. I stroked Pascal’s hair. It was soft and fluffy beneath my

fingers. He relaxed further and sighed.

After a few minutes, he said, “Well, I already failed what Bryant told me to do.”

“And what is that?”

“He told me... not to get attached to you.”

My heart clenched, tripping over itself. Attached how? As a friend?

As something more?

Pascal breathed harder, loud enough for me to hear. It felt like snakes were tangled in my chest, fluttering in and out of my ribs.

It was too late for me. I was as attached to Pascal as a tree's roots were attached to the earth. Being separated from him was increasingly difficult. This past day was agony.

My hand cupped the back of Pascal's head. My fingers threaded through his hair, close to his scalp. He was warm. I felt the racing pulse below his skin.

My throat was tight. I wanted him even closer, without the bars in between.

“Do you think that's weird?” Pascal asked quietly after a moment.

“What is?”

He ducked his head against my chest without looking at me. “That I'm attached to you.”

I drew in a shaky breath. I wanted to sound confident for his sake, but he flustered me. This small physical contact weakened my knees.

“No,” I said. “But humans think differently than I do.”

He made a frustrated sound. “I don't! If that's what they think, then I'm not like them.”

I smiled. “You're... special.”

I couldn't think of a better word in his language, but I was fine with that. I meant it.

“If only more humans were like you, Pascal,” I murmured.

“That’d be nice.” I felt him grin against my shirt. “But then I wouldn’t be special to you.”

“You’re wrong. You *are* special to me, and you always will be.”

He raised his head. His amber eye shone wide and bright. Why did he look so surprised? Hadn’t anyone spoken to him this way before? I couldn’t imagine why. He was desirable in every way. As much as I tried to dampen my urges towards him, I couldn’t. It was impossible.

Pascal suddenly frowned. His brows knitted together as he tucked his forehead into my chest again.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he mumbled. “It’s only going to get you into trouble.”

My stomach twisted—both at the thought of losing *this* with Pascal, and the idea that he’d be punished for no good reason.

“It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been in trouble,” I reminded him.

He shook his head. “I don’t care! It shouldn’t happen at all! Bryant should’ve punished me for breaking the rules, not you.”

Bold with anger, I grasped Pascal’s chin and made him look at me. “Don’t say that again. I will protect you, Pascal. No matter what. Let me handle any punishments in your stead.”

His sweet face contorted in anger. “No, that’s ridiculous! I don’t want to be Bryant’s perfect little omega while you take the blame for everything. It’s not fair.”

That remark about Bryant made my skin crawl, but I pushed the feeling aside.

“Do you think anything about this is fair?” I asked.

That jolted Pascal. He calmed down.

“No, it’s not,” he muttered. “That’s why I’m gonna get you out.”

My heart clenched. As sweet as it was to hear, I wished he wouldn’t make promises he couldn’t keep. I couldn’t get my hopes up in a place like this. It never worked out in the end.

I didn’t have the strength to break that conversation open, so I stroked the back of his head in silence. The sensation of his soft hair beneath my fingers was pleasant enough to make me forget.

The door opened.

We both went still. As footsteps approached, we broke apart like we’d been burned. But the real pain was being separated from Pascal, of being forced to act like strangers—or worse, like a beast and its tamer.

My heart sank when Bryant walked up to the cell and parked himself right next to Pascal with a beaming smile. Pascal’s shoulders tensed as he stood awkwardly next to the man.

“Has the orc been fed yet?” Bryant asked.

“Um, not yet.”

“Not quite on schedule today, eh, my boy?”

Pascal lowered his head. “No, sir, I’m sorry.”

He looked deeply uncomfortable. I wondered if he was afraid I’d be punished for this small transgression, too.

But Bryant patted him on the back. “Oh, chin up. No harm, no foul. Just be careful next time.”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

My stomach coiled in disgust at how long Bryant’s hand lingered on Pascal’s back. I’d gladly starve for a week if it meant he’d stop touching Pascal forever.

Bryant met my eye. As usual, his gaze was cold and callous, as if staring down a vicious animal instead of a person. But there was an extra hint of arrogance glinting in his

eyes. He radiated smugness as his hand curled slowly around Pascal's shoulder.

I was livid. But I couldn't do anything. The stakes were higher now. Talking back didn't just mean punishment for me—Bryant could hurt Pascal, and that was something I'd never risk.

"Good boy," Bryant said, giving Pascal one final clap on the shoulder that made my guts clench in rage. "Now, feed the orc quickly. We've got things to do."

"We do?" Pascal asked.

"Yes, busy day, lots to show you. There's no time to waste, so hurry it up."

Pascal blinked. "All right, sir."

He hesitated, clearly expecting Bryant to leave. But the horrid man stood there as still as stone. He wasn't going anywhere. I had the numb feeling he wanted to berate me in private.

"What are you waiting for?" Bryant asked when Pascal didn't move. "Go on."

Pascal slunk towards the kitchen like a dog with his tail between his legs. As soon as he was out of earshot, Bryant strode towards the bars with an icy glare.

"Whatever you think you're doing, you'll stop if you know what's good for you," he muttered.

Cold fear seized me. How much did Bryant know? Was he guessing? I'd been careful not to be seen being "inappropriate" with Pascal.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean," I said slowly.

"Don't play stupid."

His ferocity startled me. I backed off, putting up my palms to appease him—although in the dark depths of my heart, I'd rather shove my hands through the bars and strangle him where he stood.

Bryant didn't elaborate. I wished he would so I had more information, but he sneered and kept his mouth shut. Was he bluffing?

"Keep your hands off him," Bryant said, enunciating every word. "Otherwise he'll get it."

I stared at him in utter shock.

What did *that* mean?

"Sorry I took so long!" Pascal called. He ran back towards the cell with a full basket.

Bryant flipped a switch. He smiled brightly at Pascal. "Good. Leave the basket with the orc and let's go."

Pascal was terrible at hiding his emotions. As his shoulders slumped, my blood turned to ice. After what Bryant said, I was suddenly afraid for him. I prayed he'd learn to act better.

"It's fine," I said firmly. "I was going to rest after I ate. Leave me."

I ignored Pascal's searching gaze. I couldn't give him any more attention under Bryant's watch.

"Oh. Sure," Pascal said with thinly veiled disappointment.

He unlocked the door, placed the basket inside, then locked it.

Bryant beamed. "Excellent. Now hurry, my boy, we've got places to be!"

He shuffled Pascal away in a rush. I didn't stop to watch them leave. As soon as Pascal placed the basket on the ground, I turned my back to him.

But inside, I seethed. How dare Bryant threaten Pascal like that? Whatever he truly meant, I wouldn't let it happen. I'd protect Pascal from that wretched man.

I'd lost my appetite. Instead, I sat on the edge of my cot, reached under the flimsy pillow, and pulled out the chunk of tree root I'd picked up last night. I rolled it over in my fingers as my imagination ran wild.

I pulled my dragon tooth necklace off, angled it against the wood, and got to work.

ELEVEN

Pascal

I WAS CONFUSED as Bryant abruptly pulled me away from Xolkug. I'd wanted to eat together with him, to talk more. But Bryant sucked all the air out of the room when he arrived, and I'd been forced to go along with him, wherever we were going.

There was something off about Bryant's mood. Usually he was all boisterous charisma and oozing confidence. He seemed distracted. He hadn't spoken since we left Xolkug behind and briskly strode to our mystery destination.

On the main floor, he led me down a passageway I'd never seen, and it reminded me of just how small my world was—and just how naive I was about Diremeadow. I hadn't known about the curfew. I barely knew anything about this town. I'd come straight to work for Bryant and was instantly thrown into this chaotic, unsettling, beautiful experience.

In a way, I was kind of like Xolkug. I wasn't caged, but Bryant expected me to stay in the building at all times. He wanted me close to do my job, and so I wouldn't wander. He'd never mentioned anything about a day off. Why would I get one? Xolkug needed daily attention, which I was happy to give. And the thought of another one of Bryant's callous employees taking "care" of Xolkug made my skin crawl.

But doing non-stop work reminded me uncomfortably of my old life under Headmaster. Bryant wasn't as openly cruel as she was. At least, he was nice to me. Not to Xolkug.

Bryant seemed to really care about me. So why did it feel so wrong?

I glanced up at Bryant as he strode ahead. Though he hadn't said so, I felt like I was in trouble somehow. I wanted to diffuse the situation.

“Um, sir? Where are we going?” I asked.

“Glad you asked,” Bryant replied. He didn't look at me or break his stride. “We're going to the main stage. It's time you saw it.”

“A stage? Like for a play?”

He chuckled. “Good guess. Close. Though I'd be hard pressed to imagine an *orc* memorizing a script!”

I didn't understand what was so funny about that, but I kept quiet. Bryant's mood seemed marginally better than it was in the basement and I wanted to keep it that way.

At the end of the passageway, Bryant opened a door and stepped outside. I blinked as my eye adjusted to the bright sunlight. Why did it feel like I hadn't seen the sun for so long? It was sunny the day I left the orphanage, but that seemed like ages ago now.

I looked around, soaking in the view of Diremeadow in the daylight. People walked along the streets, minding their own business. None of them paid us any mind. I realized with a pang of sadness that if Xolkug was next to me instead of Bryant, we would be the center of attention because of how different we looked.

“This way, my boy,” Bryant called.

“Sorry.”

I ran after him towards an open area. A huge striped tent stood in the middle. It sported a triangular red-and-white flag on top. Similar flags of every color hung along a string surrounding the tent, giving everything a jaunty atmosphere. Along the path, there were empty kiosks that reminded me of food vendors. All of them had colorful awnings.

I stared at everything, frozen in place. I'd never seen anything like this except in books. Was this what they called a fair, or maybe a circus? Headmaster never let us attend such events whenever they rolled into town, calling them a waste of time and money. She always insisted we had more productive things to do at the orphanage.

I heard unfamiliar voices behind me. A couple of women murmured excitedly outside the string of flags. A few other people on the street paused to look. Had they never seen a fair either?

“Good afternoon, fine citizens of Diremeadow!”

I nearly jumped when Bryant appeared behind me, calling out to the small crowd. He waved in a broad, theatrical gesture. Instantly, the people lit up and cheered. Bryant flashed them a dazzling grin.

I didn't know what to do. They clearly shared a rapport, but I felt like an outsider.

“I'd love to stay and chat, but as you can see—” Bryant suddenly put his arm around my shoulders and yanked me close. “I've got a brand new apprentice, and believe me, he's got a *lot* to learn.”

The emphasis he put on that word made them laugh. The crowd stared at me eagerly, like they expected me to do something interesting. But I felt flustered under their gazes. All my life, I'd been ignored as a poor orphan. People pretended I didn't exist. I'd never had so many hopeful eyes on me at once.

“Come along, lad,” Bryant said loudly, hurrying me along.

For once, I was glad for Bryant's briskness. He led me inside the tent and out of the public's watchful gaze.

Once we were alone, Bryant dropped the theatrics. “Those folks are months early, yet still expect a show. Ha! Can you blame them? People want a spectacle above all else. Learn that lesson well.” He leaned in. “Now, look around. This is your stage. Get familiar with it.”

The inside of the tent was massive. It felt bigger than it looked from outside. Rows of benches circled the middle stage. There must have been space for a hundred people, maybe more.

Bryant grinned as he strutted towards the stage and leapt on top of it. “Surprised, Pascal?”

He threw his voice so it filled the whole tent, something he’d clearly practiced.

“Yeah,” I said, aware of how quiet I was. It was odd. I was used to being the loud one at the orphanage, but Bryant’s showy voice made me sound like a mouse in comparison.

“Come, don’t be so shy,” he ordered.

I followed him into the middle of the tent. It was a huge space. I nearly broke into a jog to catch up with Bryant on the stage before he got impatient. On the last step, he grabbed my arm and pulled me up.

He made a sweeping gesture to the rows of seating and spoke wistfully. “Imagine... In a few months time, all those seats will be packed with people. All of them *craving* a show.”

“What kind of show?”

“Anything. *Everything*. It’s entertainment they want, and you’re going to give it to them. That’s the point of your job, my boy.”

I didn’t understand. Why was he showing this to me? My job was to take care of Xolkug, not put on a play for a crowd. I wracked my mind, trying to figure out what Bryant wanted.

“Um, I’m not a very good dancer,” I said. “My singing is worse. Oh, I can bake a good loaf of bread, but that’s probably not entertaining to watch...”

Bryant broke out into raucous laughter. “You poor thing. You’ve never been to a circus, have you?”

I felt embarrassed at my ignorance. “No, I’ve never been allowed.”

He clicked his tongue and gave me a sympathetic look. “Forget about all that. You’ll not only see one in the flesh, you’ll be part of the production!”

“How?”

Bryant paused as if something finally clicked in his mind. “Ah, I see.”

He kneeled on one knee. He wasn’t nearly as tall as Xolkug, but he was still an alpha with plenty of height on me. Despite the fact that we were eye-to-eye, I felt oddly ashamed, like he was purposely drawing attention to my ignorance.

“Your job is to tame the beast, Pascal,” Bryant said. “That’s one of the most important tasks in this whole event! Without you, he’d run wild. He’d *hurt* people. Innocent people, members of the audience who only wanted to be entertained. We can’t allow our precious audience to be hurt, under any circumstances. Do you understand?”

“Xolkug wouldn’t do that,” I said.

Bryant smiled. “He can, and given the opportunity, he will. I know these things. Seen them with my own eyes. Trust me.”

I bit my lip. He wasn’t technically wrong. Xolkug’s version of the story confirmed that he’d hurt someone. But although Xolkug acted in self-defence, Bryant thought it was wilful violence—and I doubted he’d change his mind.

“Do you understand, Pascal?” Bryant repeated.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good boy.” He ruffled my hair and stood up. “Now, memorize every inch of this stage, and the whole arena. Burn it into your mind! You’ll need situational awareness in case something goes wrong.”

“It won’t go wrong,” I insisted. “I told you, Xolkug won’t hurt anyone.”

When Bryant looked at me, there was a sharpness in his expression that wasn’t there a second earlier. But it dissipated when he smiled and said, “Just in case, hm? You can never be too careful when dealing with vicious beasts.”

I nodded tentatively, although I disagreed.

Bryant strode around the stage like an animal marking its territory, then looped back towards me. “Don’t be nervous. You have months to prepare. But now that you’ve settled in, it’s time you learned the routine.”

“Routine?”

“Of course. You don’t expect me to let that brute wander around at showtime, doing whatever he wants!” Bryant laughed. “Ah, you’ve never been to the circus, so you don’t know. Typically a vicious beast—a lion or tiger—is trained to perform tricks.”

I couldn’t imagine any of those wild animals doing tricks. They should’ve been in their homes where they belonged. Just like Xolkug.

“The same goes for the orc,” Bryant went on. “You’ll order a command, and he’ll obey. Simple. For example...”

Bryant reached over the edge of the stage and pulled out a large metal hoop. “You’ll hold this up and demand him to jump through it.”

I tried not to make a sour face at the idea. The whole thing made me deeply uncomfortable. But this was what I’d signed up for—and if I disagreed too much with Bryant, he’d take it out on Xolkug. I didn’t want that to happen.

Without warning, Bryant tossed the hoop at me. He obviously wanted me to catch it, but with my impaired depth perception, it happened too fast to prepare myself. My fingers grazed it and slipped through. The hoop rattled as it landed on the stage.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, picking it up.

Bryant regarded me for a moment. In a serious tone, he said, “Don’t let that missing eye hinder your performance, Pascal. It’d be a shame if you made a mistake in front of the whole crowd on opening night.”

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment. I still wasn’t used to him drawing attention to my eye patch. It had never been a

problem until I met him.

“I won’t, sir.”

“Good. There’s a list of tricks the orc should perform. Teach him well. He was a big draw at the Grand Show last year. The audience loved him. But we can do better. Aim higher. We’ll turn your act into a total crowd pleaser.”

My heart sank. Xolkug had already been forced into this routine once before. I’d be damned if I let it happen to him again. I had to break him out before the next show. But when I mentioned it to Xolkug, he sounded like he’d given up. Maybe he was just scared to try.

He wasn’t alone anymore. I was on his side.

I tried desperately to think of escape options. Could we make a break for it at night when nobody was around? I didn’t think it was possible during the day. There were too many people around who could easily alert Bryant. But disappearing during curfew was an option.

Since our little evening dinner, Bryant kept a close eye on both of us. Even if we escaped, he’d be hot on our tail. He had enough manpower to keep up with us on foot. An orc couldn’t outrun humans forever.

But a horse could.

My heart skipped with excitement. Maple! He was still stabled behind the building. If Xolkug rode a horse, he’d easily outrun any pursuers. He’d finally be free.

Could Maple carry both of us? Did Xolkug even know how to ride? He mentioned that he loved horses, but that didn’t necessarily mean he could ride.

Bryant thrust a paper into my hands. A quick glance told me it was the list of tricks. They included posing on cue, jumping through hoops, speaking when commanded, counting numbers, and something called a “dance” in quotation marks.

My stomach churned in disgust. How was this entertaining to anybody? Did the audience not know that Xolkug was forced to do this for their amusement?

I noticed Bryant watching me expectantly. I smiled and tucked the paper into my pocket.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll study up, sir.”

“Make sure you do.”

Thoughts of escape still buzzed in my head. I needed to get Xolkug and Maple in the same space—and in a manner Bryant would approve of.

I took the paper back out and scanned it. “Sir? I have a suggestion. For the list of tricks, I mean.”

Bryant raised a brow, intrigued. “Oh? Do tell.”

My tongue tied itself into knots, balking at what I was about to say. But if it was for Xolkug’s freedom, I had to play along.

“The audience loves it when beasts do human things, right?” I asked.

Bryant eyed me eagerly. “Yes.”

“So, I was thinking... What if I taught the orc how to ride a horse?”

Bryant clapped his hands. “Now *that’s* an idea. Good on you, my boy! An orc on a horse—no, a flashy pony!”

My excitement faltered for a second. It couldn’t be any horse. It had to be Maple. All three of us were getting out of here together. I refused to leave Maple behind.

“My horse is technically a pony,” I butted in. “He’s not that tall. He was our pet back at the orphanage, so he’s sized for omegas and kids.”

Bryant nodded. His eyes gleamed at the mention of ponies and orphanages. “Yes, yes, I remember now. Someone told me you showed up on a horse. And you can teach the orc, yes?”

“Of course, I taught a lot of the kids to ride.”

He snapped his fingers. “It’s settled. You’ll instruct the brute, and we’ll dress up your pony real nice on opening day.”

Making sure there was no room for error, I asked, “So I’m allowed to take Xolkug outside to the stables?”

He nodded and waved dismissively. “Yes, yes. An orc on a pony... Ha! People will be talking about it for years to come!”

His grandiose laugh tapered into a sigh. He touched my shoulder, gripping it firmly as he gazed down at me.

“You know, Pascal, I *knew* there was something special about you,” he said.

The sudden softness in his voice startled me. “Y-you did?”

“Mhm.” His thumb slowly moved in a circle, caressing the socket between my arm and shoulder. “You’re a clever omega. Not many of them can handle this type of work. They’re either too slow, or too weak. But not you.”

My stomach froze over as Bryant brought his hand to my face. He cupped my cheek.

I couldn’t breathe. What was he doing?

The way Bryant gazed longingly at me sent a cold shiver down my spine. It was a dark, gruesome reflection of Xolkug’s gaze.

Xolkug’s touch made me feel warm and safe. Bryant’s filled my veins with ice—it made me feel like I was on the precipice of a cliff, vulnerable to a fatal fall.

Bryant narrowed his eyes, looking at me closely. He parted his lips to speak.

“Bryant!” A harsh voice called from the tent entrance. “People askin’ if they can buy tickets early!”

Frustration followed by plastered-on glee flickered across Bryant’s face.

“Coming,” he called back.

The spell was broken. As he walked away from me, he grinned and said, “Better get to it, my boy. You’ve got a lot of work to do.”

TWELVE

Xolkug

IT FELT good to work with my hands—or as well as I could with the handcuffs in the way. The hours flowed as I chipped away at the wood. I almost forgot about the cell, and my separation from Pascal.

He never strayed too far from my mind. It wasn't an exaggeration to say he was the only thing I thought about. The sight of his smile was the only thing I had to look forward to in this miserable existence.

I stopped carving and lifted the piece to what little light filtered in through the narrow window. I turned it over in my fingers delicately, examining it. It didn't resemble its final form yet, but it was getting there.

I hoped Pascal would like it.

But I didn't hope for very long. Bryant's dark words echoed in my mind. What he'd said chilled me down to the bone marrow.

Keep your hands off him. Otherwise he'll get it.

I blew out an angry and frustrated breath from my nostrils. What did that mean? Bryant threatened me so I'd keep my distance. He wouldn't actually hurt Pascal... Would he?

He was bluffing. The only time he'd seen us interact was our ill-fated outdoor dinner. But he'd seen my finger against Pascal's lips. It was intimate.

I ground my teeth. I couldn't take the chance that Bryant would harm Pascal. We had to be extra careful not to be seen doing anything "wrong" by anybody.

But how I felt about Pascal wasn't wrong. Nothing that felt *this* good could be wrong.

Beyond that, there was another reason I doubted Bryant's threat. I saw the way he looked at Pascal with barely disguised want. He wouldn't hurt the omega whose attention he craved.

It sickened me. Pascal would never accept a man like him as a partner.

But that didn't mean he'd accept *me*, either.

I was an orc. He was human. No matter how I felt about Pascal, and how kind he was to me, I'd never assume Pascal wanted me back. All I could do was let him know my heart was open.

My heart skipped a beat when the door to the basement creaked open. There was a second of uncertainty before the light, quick footsteps told me it was Pascal. I tucked the half-finished carving beneath my pillow. I only wanted him to see the final product.

"Xolkug!" Pascal cried, out of breath. He must've run here from wherever he'd been.

"Take a moment," I encouraged.

He nodded and caught his breath.

"I've got great news! Well, good and bad... But this part is good. Bryant said I could take you to the stable."

"The stable?" I echoed, standing up. I couldn't believe it. "You mean the horse stable?"

"Yeah! I—" He paused, then lowered his voice. "I convinced him that it would be, erm, entertaining if... you..."

His enthusiasm fizzled out. I could tell he had trouble navigating such an ugly, awkward situation. He didn't even want to say the words.

"You can say it, Pascal," I said. "I don't mind."

Looking uncomfortable, he mumbled, “Well, I told him it’d be entertaining if you rode a horse during the show... And he agreed. Oh, what are we wasting time in here for?”

He grabbed the key and unlocked the cell. It felt good to stand beside Pascal again without the bars in the way. It made a world of difference.

“C’mon, let’s get out of this basement,” Pascal said, skipping down the hall.

I followed until we reached the top of the stairs. I was concerned Bryant’s underlings were still stationed there like vultures, waiting for a mistake they could report to their boss. But when Pascal lifted the wooden beam lock and shoved the door open, the hallway was empty. The relief dissolved my anxiety, and allowed me to feel excited again.

“Where did Bryant take you in such a hurry?” I asked as we walked down the passageway.

Pascal wrinkled his nose. “To this big tent outside. There was a stage, and a ton of seats for a crowd.”

Even descriptions of the place filled me with disdain. “The circus.”

“Is that what it’s called? I’ve never seen one before.”

“In Bryant’s case, it’s less about performers and more of a freak show.”

Pascal shot me a sympathetic glance. “I’m sorry, Xolkug.”

“For what?”

“I had to lie to Bryant. I wanted him to believe me, so I forced myself to sound enthusiastic about the whole thing...” He grimaced like he wanted to say something else. As we reached the end of the passageway, he leaned against the door and checked over his shoulder. “Actually, I’ll tell you later. The important thing is you have to learn how to ride a horse.”

He opened the door to the outside world.

Warm, bright daylight streamed across my face. Fresh air filled my lungs. They were simple pleasures I missed so much.

Pascal watched with a smile, waiting for me to get my fill. He looked happy that I was happy.

I took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. I'd learned to appreciate things like this when I could. I didn't know when Bryant would appear to throw me back in the cell.

"The stable's this way," Pascal said.

My pulse fluttered with excitement. I hadn't seen a horse since I'd been captured.

Actually, that wasn't true. I saw horses at last year's show. They were on display, forced to perform the same way I was—not with positive reinforcement, but punishment for making a mistake. Under Bryant's training regimen, there were no gentle hands.

The smell of hay hit me first. It was that sweet, distinct scent you wouldn't find anywhere else. Instantly, I was filled with fondness and nostalgia.

I wasn't ashamed to say that the sight of the stable choked me up. Horses were deeply ingrained of orc culture, and being able to see them again in the flesh made me emotional.

Pascal noticed I'd paused. "You okay, Xolkug?"

"Yes."

"You're not scared of horses, are you?"

I laughed and walked towards the stable. "You clearly don't know much about orcs."

Pascal blushed. "What d'you mean?"

"*An orc with no horse is a bird with no wings,*" I said, translating an old saying into a language he'd understand. I intertwined my middle and index finger. "We're like this."

His shining amber eye widened. "That's so cool! Wait, does that mean you already know how to ride?"

"Do you already know how to walk?" I asked with a grin.

Pascal bounced on the balls of his feet. "Xolkug, that's amazing! I had no idea. That means—" He stopped abruptly,

looked around with suspicion, then whispered, “That means we can escape even sooner!”

He was still thinking about that? My insides swirled at the fantasy, but it wasn’t realistic, no matter how badly I wanted it.

Just like how I wanted Pascal.

As I thought of a way to change the subject, Pascal gasped. “Maple!”

He dashed down the stable, passing every horse until he skidded to a halt in front of a large chestnut pony. The horse’s ears perked up and his eyes brightened with obvious recognition. Maple snorted with a relieved exhale as he nudged his head against Pascal’s neck. It melted my heart to see them embrace. Never once had I seen Bryant or any of his underlings treat a horse with such care.

“I missed you, Maple,” Pascal said as he stroked the horse’s fur. “I’m sorry I haven’t visited earlier. There was so much going on... Are they treating you all right?”

“You’d make a good orc, Pascal. You even talk to your horse like we do.”

He grinned back. “You think so? Oh, yeah. Maple, this is Xolkug. Be nice, okay?”

I was careful not to stare at Maple. Assuming he’d never seen an orc before, I didn’t want to make him uncomfortable. But he seemed curious instead of anxious, so I eased my hand towards him, palm up. I hoped the rattling of the handcuff chains didn’t spook him. I didn’t touch him, but let him meet me halfway.

Maple stretched his neck and sniffed my palm. I’d missed the feeling of a horse’s velvety soft lips tickling my hand.

“Aw, he likes you,” Pascal said.

I smiled. “I like him, too.”

Hesitantly, he asked, “Did you have a horse back at home?”

“Yes. A big gray mare named Sharamak. It means *raindrop* in our language.” I sighed as Maple let me stroke his chin. “I miss her every day.”

“You’ll see her again,” Pascal promised.

My throat felt thick with emotion. I didn’t say anything.

Pascal grunted as he leaned on the stable fencing. He stood on the tips of his toes, trying to see over the edge. “Xolkug, gimme a hand. I wanna see if it’s clean in there.”

With my height advantage, I saw inside perfectly fine, but I understood his desire to see for himself.

“All right, but it might be hard with my hands tied up,” I said.

A gruff voice interrupted us. “Hell’re you two doin’ here?”

Behind us was a human man of an average build. A beta, I assumed, and a stable hand judging by his muddy overalls. He carried a pitchfork in one hand—I figured that set Pascal on edge. He didn’t like weapons, or things that could be used that way.

Pascal yelped as he stumbled back to his regular footing. Panic flashed across his face. “N-no, it’s okay! We have Bryant’s permission to be here. Xolkug, too,” he added quickly.

“You do, eh?” the man grumbled. “Fine. Don’t care either way. That your horse, lad?”

“Yeah, Maple is mine,” Pascal said.

The stable hand grunted. “I keep it clean ‘round here, but I won’t say no if you’re gonna give it another go.”

He thrust the pitchfork at Pascal, who took it tentatively. Then the man eyed me with contempt before shuffling outside. I was glad he left, both because I didn’t want conflict and because I wanted to be alone with Pascal.

Pascal held the pitchfork awkwardly for a moment before relaxing, as if he remembered that it was a tool for animal care and not meant to be a weapon. “Well, we better get to work.”

He unlatched the gate. The stable for each horse was surprisingly roomy inside, and the floor was clean, just as the stable hand said. The water trough was full and a half-eaten flake of hay remained in the rack. The floor was covered in a thin, comfortable layer of sweet-smelling straw. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that, despite the cold training style, the animal husbandry was decent.

“Huh,” Pascal said, looking around. “This is actually pretty nice.”

“I’ll say,” I murmured. “Maple has a better room than I do.”

Since it wasn’t needed, Pascal put the pitchfork aside. Maple swished his tail and bumped Pascal with his snout. The pony was obviously glad to see him.

“Hey, buddy,” Pascal said, smiling. “I guess you’re doing okay here, huh?” He turned to me. “What do you think, Xolkug? Do you think you could ride him?”

I gave Maple a discerning once-over. He was a large pony, but still a pony. Pascal could ride him without an issue, but he was nearly half my size.

“It’s not the riding I’m concerned about,” I said. “It’s whether or not Maple can safely bear my weight.”

Pascal groaned. “I was worried about that... You can do it, can’t you, buddy?” he asked, holding Maple’s cheeks in his hands. “You’ll get us all out of here.”

“Listen, Pascal,” I said quietly. “I appreciate it, but this plan won’t work.”

He whipped his head towards me. “Why not?”

I grimaced. “Maple can’t hold my weight, let alone both of us.”

“You don’t know that for sure. You haven’t even tried!”

“I’m not risking his safety. Or yours.”

His voice rose in pitch. “What? I don’t care about my safety, Xolkug, I just wanna get you out of here!”

Panicked, I put my finger to his lips to quiet him. He was too loud. If anybody heard this discussion, it was all over.

When I removed it, Pascal was still annoyed. “Sorry. But it’s true. You can’t live like this anymore. I won’t let you.”

I stared at him, shocked by his defiance. His amber eye gleamed with fire.

I hadn’t realized he was serious until now. I thought he was saying things to placate me, to make me feel better about my situation. Did he actually construct an escape plan?

His other comment bothered me, too. He should’ve cared about his own safety above all else. All humans did. It was normal. So why was Pascal throwing it away for my sake? I didn’t understand this strange, absurd, beautiful human.

I turned around with a huff. I couldn’t look at him anymore without being overwhelmed.

“Hey, sorry I got mad,” Pascal mumbled a few moments later. “Let’s just groom Maple and head back. Can you pass me that brush for his mane?”

There was a small ledge with grooming supplies hanging from it. I handed him the brush.

He smiled halfway. “Why don’t you pick his hooves? Um... if you can, I mean.” His smile fell when he looked at the cuffs binding me. “With those on.”

I tested the motions. They flowed back to me like second nature. “I don’t have a huge range of movement, but I can try if Maple’s okay with my presence.”

Pascal looked at his horse seriously. “You be nice to Xolkug, okay? He’s our friend. And when we get out of here, he’s gonna feed you so many treats, you won’t believe it.”

That got a low chuckle out of me. Holding the pick in one hand, I slowly kneeled by Maple’s front leg.

“Easy,” I cooed. “I need your hoof.”

I put my other hand on Maple’s shoulder and gently moved my hand down towards his foot. He didn’t wriggle away or

grunt, so I felt comfortable lifting his hoof.

As I handled Maple's hoof, Pascal stood next to me and brushed the tangles out of his mane.

Pascal let out a small laugh. "Xolkug, look."

I glanced at him. While I bent down, Pascal and I were almost the same height. In fact, he was just slightly taller than me. I saw him from a brand new perspective, gleaming angles of his face I'd never seen before, like the soft layer of pale peach fuzz on his jaw that caught the light.

"Too bad I'm not this tall all the time," Pascal teased.

I smiled. "I like you the way you are."

His eye flickered. Pink blooms appeared on his cheeks.

"I like you the way you are, too," he murmured.

My heartbeat stumbled. I couldn't do this. If he said any more sweet things to me, I'd lose my mind. Did he know he was playing with my heart?

I returned to my task. As I picked loose debris from Maple's hoof, I was glad my face was hidden from Pascal's view. I didn't want him to see how badly he'd flustered me.

A few beats passed in silence. I picked and Pascal brushed. Beneath the smell of hay and horse, I caught Pascal's familiar scent. He was too close not to notice. He smelled sweeter to me every time I was in his presence.

My mind drifted. It went to a fantasy where Pascal was an orc like me. Everything was simpler. I'd ask for his hand. We'd hunt together, ride horses, have riverside picnics, go on dates... We would be lovers without complications.

But life wasn't that easy.

"Hey, Xolkug," Pascal said, deliberate and slow. "Can you look at this for a second?"

I lifted my head. "Sure. What's—"

Pascal's mouth pressed against mine.

I stopped breathing. My heart leapt to my throat. Blood roared in my ears, every rapid pulse thick and loud. Heat flooded my veins. It surged from the tips of my ears to the bottom of my soles and every nerve in between.

Pascal had kissed me.

It was gentle and chaste, just the brush of his soft lips. But it wasn't reluctant. It lingered with hidden desire.

Arousal exploded inside me. I couldn't help it. My body's response was instant and powerful. My yearning for Pascal broke loose and took over. I wanted him, *needed* him.

But I kept still. Aside from my pounding heart, I didn't dare move a muscle. I didn't even take a breath. I let Pascal pull away at his own pace, and was pleasantly surprised when it took him about an eternity.

His cheeks were beet red. "Um," he said hoarsely. "Sorry. Was that okay?"

I finally allowed myself to inhale. "Yes."

He smiled, looking shy. "Oh. Good. Was the kiss okay? The quality of it? I've... never kissed anyone before."

An iron grip clutched my heart and squeezed. Gods, he was sweet. Impossibly sweet.

He'd just given me his first kiss.

Me. An orc.

"Pascal," I murmured. "It was perfect."

His eye widened. "R-really?"

"Yes."

We both breathed quick and hard. Pascal's expression clouded with desire. It wasn't my imagination. His gaze fell to my lower body. No doubt he saw my budding erection—I physically couldn't hold it back any longer, not after that kiss.

"I..." Pascal swallowed visibly. "I want to kiss you again."

A shiver shot down my spine.

Not once, but twice? Did I fall into my fantasy?

But this was reality—the sight of Pascal’s creamy skin next to my deep, malachite green skin proved it. He was still human, and I was still an orc.

A gruff shout outside broke our trance. It was the stable hand’s voice, muttering about forgetting his pitchfork.

I felt a retroactive flash of fear. Had he been right outside the entire time? If we were any louder, he would’ve heard us.

“Not here,” I whispered to Pascal. “Somewhere private.”

He nodded.

We shoved the grooming supplies back into place and said a quick goodbye to Maple. As we ran into the stable hand on the way out, Pascal handed the tool back and thanked him.

If the stable hand glared at us while we left, I didn’t notice. I was high off Pascal’s first kiss, and the only thing I could think about was the next one.

THIRTEEN

Pascal

MY HEART HAD NEVER THUMPED this hard and fast before. Not even when Headmaster smacked me across the face for dropping my dinner as a kid. Not even when I was kidnapped by strangers and scared out of my mind. Not even when Florian tried to rescue me and I was terrified he'd get himself killed.

This experience was something different. This was *good*.

It was late when we sneaked back into the building. We didn't see a soul on the way to my quarters, and I had a handy excuse prepared if we did. Nothing and nobody was going to stop us.

I was so excited and nervous that I couldn't talk. Without a word, I led Xolkug to my room and fumbled with the key. When we were finally inside and I'd shut and locked the door behind us, I felt like I'd gasped for air after drowning.

Xolkug looked big in my room, but not cramped. I was grateful that he didn't seem uncomfortable—both about the kiss, and about his height in this human-sized room.

We stared at each other. Nobody knew what to say.

My mouth was dry. I licked my lips. "Um..." I glanced at my bed. It was the only surface to sit on. "Do you want to..."

"Pascal," Xolkug said. He kept his voice low, almost a whisper. "Are you sure?"

After all he'd been through, I knew it was in Xolkug's nature to be careful. But I didn't want him to think like that about me. I wanted him to trust me.

I approached him. I put my hands on top of his. "Yeah. I'm sure."

Xolkug still hesitated.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked.

He smiled with a twinge of sadness. "Everything."

I knew his concerns were grounded. But this nightmare wouldn't last forever. I'd make sure of it.

"You've been through so much," I murmured, running my hand on top of his. My fingers rolled over the bumps of his masculine veins. His hands were large and strong, yet so gentle. "I want to take your mind off everything."

Xolkug let out a shaky breath. His eyes flashed with emotion, but he still held back.

"I'm an orc, Pascal," he said in a low voice. As if that meant anything to me.

"So?"

I saw his doubts flare up. My heart cinched in sympathy. I cursed the people who made him feel that way. The *humans*. I didn't know how my own kind could act so horribly.

Before Xolkug succumbed to his apprehension, I pulled him towards the bed and sat next to him. He looked bigger in my room than he did in the basement. It thrilled me to be so close to him with nothing in the way.

"Back in the stable. Why did you kiss me?" Xolkug asked quietly.

"I wanted to."

His cuffed hands were in my lap. I kept touching them as we spoke.

"It's not some kind of human custom, is it?"

I laughed. "No! You don't believe me? Here."

Filled with a sudden surge of confidence, I stood up on my knees—I had to, otherwise I couldn't reach him—and pressed another kiss to Xolkug's lips. I felt his warm breath tickle my face as he exhaled. When I pulled away, he looked less nervous.

"That's twice now," Xolkug said, "that the most beautiful omega in the world has kissed me."

"Me?" I squeaked.

Xolkug nodded, looking directly at my face. There was no room for miscommunication. He meant *me*.

But how? I wasn't even the most attractive omega *I* knew. Florian was way cuter than me. And he didn't have an eye patch covering half his face, either. My stomach twisted when I remembered the way Bryant stared at my eye patch, clearly wishing it didn't exist—and that the deformity beneath didn't, either.

"Y-you don't really mean that," I stammered.

Xolkug let out an amused scoff. "What? So you can kiss an orc twice, but I can't call you beautiful?"

My nerves tingled, and my face burned as hot as fire. I couldn't believe what he'd said. I wasn't used to getting complimented.

"I told you, I don't care if you're an orc, so stop bringing it up like it's something bad," I said.

Xolkug looked at me for a long beat, then sighed. "Only if you let me revere you the way I want to."

I shivered. Revere me?

"Okay," I said shakily.

I breathed hard. My feelings for Xolkug overwhelmed me. My skin felt electric to the touch—even when he simply brushed his knuckles across my hand, it shot straight to my core.

We moved slowly at first. Xolkug didn't hesitate, but I could tell he was holding back so he didn't push me past my

limit. I wished he *would*. I had no experience, so I hoped I wasn't too ignorant. I wanted to make him feel good.

I scooted closer on the bed. There was only an inch of space between us. I felt the radiating heat of Xolkug's body and smelled his thick, spicy scent, like cologne and fresh earth. I had the urge to shove my face in his armpit and inhale, but I didn't want to make him uncomfortable.

Instead, I took his bound hands and lifted them to my chest. A clear invitation to touch me.

"Have you, um, ever done this before?" I asked. I didn't know how orc culture worked when it came to intimacy. Xolkug could've had tons of experience—meanwhile I was a fumbling, naive virgin.

"Not seriously." He gently brushed his knuckles down my chest. Even through my shirt, it felt good. "Not with anybody I cared about like this."

My heart fluttered. He cared about me?

"Oh," I said softly.

"Have you?" Xolkug asked in a low tone, his eyes flashing. He sounded possessive for a second.

"No," I replied with a grin. "But if it makes you act like that, I almost wish I had."

He blinked. "Act like what?"

"You got all growly for a second. Like you owned me."

The sharpness in his face vanished. He turned his head. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me... I'd never insinuate that I have a claim on you."

I sighed. He was too damn nice for his own good sometimes. I reached for his face and turned it back so he'd look at me.

"Xolkug," I said, "I *liked* it. A lot."

Confusion flickered across his face. "You liked it?"

“Yeah. So don’t worry, okay?” I smiled, still holding his face in my hands. “Stop holding back. Whatever you wanna do to me, I want the same thing.”

Xolkug swallowed. “Are you sure?” he murmured.

I wondered if there was a way I could prove it to him.

Then I realized there was.

I took his hands and put them between my thighs so he felt my very obvious erection.

Xolkug’s eyes widened. He seemed dazed for a second, unable to think. Then he cleared his throat. “I see.”

“C’mon,” I pleaded. “Be with me in the moment.”

Xolkug shut his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, they flashed with desire. The sharp edge on his face returned.

Without wasting another second, Xolkug kissed me. His lips pushed against mine, dominant, guiding the way. It was the first time he took the lead and I already craved more.

I moaned. My body moved out of instinct to submit to a worthy alpha. As my lips parted for him, Xolkug slipped his tongue inside. It was wide, wet and thick, yet velvety soft. My brain buzzed. I’d never imagined a kiss could feel so incredible.

My reaction spurred Xolkug on. He leaned forward and I fell backwards on the bed. My head hit the pillow as Xolkug kissed me deeper. The hungry motions caused his tusks to press into my mouth, adding an extra level of excitement.

I grunted for him to pause, which he understood immediately. He pulled away to breathe. I brought my hand to his tusks, eager to finally explore them. I ran my index finger up the curved white length and grazed the rounded tip. It enthralled me.

“Sorry,” Xolkug said in a throaty voice. “Are they digging into you?”

“Nope. Just wanted to touch them.”

He made an amused sound. “You know, it’s considered intimate to touch another orc’s tusks.”

I blushed. “O-oh. Should I stop?”

“No.”

Xolkug was firm. I loved that. I wanted more of that side of him. I wanted him to release the true alpha orc he could be.

I was too intrigued by his tusks to stop touching them, but I wanted to keep kissing, too. So I met my urge halfway. Leaning closer, I licked Xolkug’s lower lip, then traveled up his tusk. He hissed softly. I glanced at him for confirmation that he liked it. When he nodded, I kept going.

“They’re so big.” It came out muffled because my tongue was wrapped around his tusk.

A ragged breath escaped Xolkug’s lips. He couldn’t speak without moving his tusks, so he held steady. His half-lidded eyes gleamed with arousal. He liked what I was doing—and I liked doing it.

Pleased at drawing such a cute response from him, I swirled my tongue along the round tip of his tusk. It felt odd but exhilarating. Then I wrapped my lips around it and went lower, enveloping the whole length of his tusk with my mouth.

Xolkug sucked in a sharp breath. His eyes clenched shut and he breathed faster.

I cast a curious gaze down between his legs.

Xolkug was rock hard.

And *big*.

Saliva filled my mouth. Seeing him so turned on made me woozy with arousal. He was hard after I kissed him in the stable, but this was different. His cock looked ready to split his pants.

Smugly satisfied, I pulled off his tusk with a small pop.

“You liked that, huh?” I asked.

Xolkug’s eyes fluttered open. They blazed with desire.

“Want me to do the other?” I offered.

He didn’t say anything, but nodded.

I eagerly complied. I took his other tusk into my mouth and hollowed my cheeks. It was oddly enjoyable to suck on, and it was even better when Xolkug groaned in pleasure. My own arousal pulsed hard between my thighs. My blood raced hot and quick in my veins, making me lightheaded.

When I needed to breathe, I sat back on my knees. Xolkug’s tusks glistened with my spit.

In the next second, Xolkug’s mouth crushed mine. He kissed me, deep and passionate, pushing me into the pillow. I gasped as his tongue claimed my mouth, tasting every inch of it. He was so vigorous that his tusks rubbed against my face, but the hard sensation of them only added to my pleasure.

“Pascal,” he muttered. “No one’s ever driven me wild like this...”

He moved from my mouth to my neck, peppering it with hungry kisses. I shivered. My skin was so sensitive, I could barely handle it.

“Me, neither,” I whimpered.

Xolkug’s lips reached my collarbone. The chains of his cuffs rattled as he fumbled to remove my shirt. I mentally cursed those horrible things.

“Here,” I offered.

My fingers were clammy with sweat as I undid the buttons carelessly. When it was done, Xolkug grunted and shoved the fabric out of the way. I shuddered as the cool air met my hot skin, but Xolkug’s lips warmed me up fast. He kissed down my chest, spreading his affection across every inch of me. I wriggled greedily beneath his touch.

But Xolkug wasn’t satisfied using just his fingers. He bent his head so his cheek brushed my chest. The feeling of his scratchy facial hair made me shudder.

Then his tongue darted out and licked my nipple.

I bit back a yelp of surprise. I'd never been played with there before, but if the tingly way my body reacted was any indication, I liked it.

“Good?” Xolkug murmured.

“Yeah.”

Grinning, Xolkug lapped at the sensitive flesh again. I whimpered in pleasure, trying not to writhe like a fish out of water. It tickled, but also hot jolts of arousal down to my balls. The sensation intensified when Xolkug wrapped his lips around it and sucked.

I couldn't hold back a moan any longer. I tossed my head against the pillow and hissed through my teeth.

When Xolkug stopped, I gasped for air. I felt disappointed that it was over—but then he transferred his attention to my other nipple. I made embarrassing noises as he sucked and licked it. Hazy lust turned me lightheaded. I couldn't think of anything except wanting *more*.

I got the feeling Xolkug could've spent an eternity there, but the pleasure built up too fast. I needed a break, and I wanted to please *him*, too.

After gently pushing him off, my gaze fell to his straining erection. It was bigger now, if that was possible. I reached down with a shaky hand and placed my palm on top of it.

Xolkug sucked in a breath. He went still aside from the rapid, heavy breathing that rocked his frame.

Meanwhile, I felt brainless with excitement and arousal. My hand was on Xolkug's cock. I was touching it.

“It's so... big,” I said.

He huffed. “Yes.”

I swallowed the thickness in my throat. It felt like my heart was stuck there, pounding away. I slowly moved my hand up towards the tip. I didn't even know where to begin. I wanted to touch the whole thing, yet I didn't want to rush. I wanted to make Xolkug feel as good as he'd made me feel.

Even beneath the layer of fabric, I could tell his girth was too big for me. My hand was puny in comparison. But that didn't stop me from running my palm along the whole shaft, up and down, getting a feel for it.

Xolkug shuddered and let out a soft moan. There was a raw quality to his voice that pleased me to hear. Would he finally stop holding back?

His hot, hard flesh twitched. It rose to meet my touch, straining against the fabric. My palm grazed a thick vein, causing Xolkug to moan louder. My heart flipped. His guttural sounds were so primal, so sexy.

What did his cock look like underneath the clothes? Would it look any bigger than it did now?

My blood raced with desire. My skin burned up.

I noticed a small wetness in the fabric at the tip of his cock. My head swam. If he was already leaking pre-cum, did that mean he wanted me?

As I shifted on my knees, I realized Xolkug wasn't alone. I felt a distinct wetness leaking from my entrance. My body craved him.

I must've paused because Xolkug looked at me in concern.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Y-yeah. I'm just... uh... Are orc omegas anything like human omegas?"

He smiled wryly. "I don't know. I've never met any human omegas before you."

I bit my lip. "What I mean is, do they... get wet like we do?"

When Xolkug understood, his brows raised and a burning fire lit up in his eyes. He took in a deep breath, then growled deep in his throat.

"I see," he said, low and rough. "The answer is yes. But an omega's scent has never smelled so delicious."

A tiny squeak escaped me.

Xolkug leaned closer. That primal sound still rumbled in his chest. “Let me smell it.”

I thought I would pass out. Dazed, I laid on my back and opened my legs.

Xolkug buried his face in my ass.

I gasped. He dove right in without hesitation. Careful of his tusks, he rubbed his nose along the seat of my pants. He inhaled deeply and groaned as if it was the sweetest scent he’d ever smelled.

My body trembled with arousal. I couldn’t think straight. I forced myself to remember to breathe. As Xolkug hungrily sucked in the scent of my omega fluid, I lost my mind. My cock ached and my balls felt full to bursting.

“Xolkug,” I mewled. I sounded pathetic, but I didn’t care. This level of pleasure was beyond anything I’d felt in my life, and we were still fully clothed.

The clothes had to go. I craved skin-to-skin contact. I wanted him to fuck me.

“Fuck, you smell amazing,” Xolkug muttered.

The fabric against his mouth muffled the words. He inhaled my wet entrance like a drowning man desperate for air.

“Let’s get naked,” I blurted out.

Xolkug paused. He raised his head. His hair was tousled and he had a wild expression on his face.

“I *want* you, Pascal,” he said, almost like a warning. “Don’t tease me.”

“I’m not.”

We stared at each other, breathless and hot and needy.

My heart fluttered as Xolkug reached for his waistband, the chains of his cuffs rattling—

Loud footsteps echoed outside, then stopped.

Right outside my door.

We stilled. Neither of us dared to breathe.

Panic washed over Xolkug's face. My heart sank. The intimate moment shattered into a million pieces. He wouldn't bounce back from that kind of fear.

It felt like a million years passed before the person outside the door left. But even as the footsteps faded away, it didn't make me feel any better.

"Well, that was terrifying," I mumbled.

Xolkug avoided my gaze. He bit his lip. He looked completely different than the possessive, lust-crazed alpha I knew from a few moments ago.

But I couldn't blame him. While in these confines, he was never free to be his true self.

FOURTEEN

Xolkug

COLD ANXIETY WAS an instant boner killer.

As painful as it was to pull away from Pascal, the alternative was far worse. Bryant or his rats could *not* find out about us, under any circumstances.

Suddenly Bryant's threat about Pascal felt too real. He wasn't the type of man to be satisfied with a simple punishment. If he caught us fooling around, I wouldn't be the only one in trouble. I didn't know how he'd take it out on Pascal, but he would—somehow.

I tried to tamp down my protective urges for Pascal, but it was impossible. We'd come this far. It was too late to go back. My feelings for him were too strong to ignore.

When the coast was clear, I got up and strode to the opposite side of the room. I took a few calming breaths until the lust evaporated from my system.

Pascal didn't move. Even without looking at him, I sensed him frowning sadly on the bed.

"I should go," I said.

He let out a labored sigh. Hearing it broke my heart.

"I know, Pascal. But it's not safe."

"Don't want you to," he mumbled. "It's not fair."

Neither one of us wanted to stop. In a perfect world, we'd have been together all night. Nobody would stand in our way.

We'd be happy together.

But the world wasn't perfect.

"I can't leave on my own. If anyone sees me, they'll be suspicious," I reminded him. "You have to lead me back downstairs."

Pascal grimaced. "Why can't you just stay here tonight? Maybe nobody will notice."

"That won't work, and you know it."

He huffed in frustration. He grit his teeth like he wanted to argue, or think of a better solution, but he eventually sighed.

"I don't want you to get in trouble if you're caught. Let's go," he mumbled.

We took a moment to gather ourselves and let the evidence of our tryst fade away. Then Pascal led me out into the hall. He looked both ways before we stepped outside the safety of his room, then we shuffled quietly to the door that led into the basement.

It was dark. It was already late when we left the stable, so it must've been in the small hours of the night now. I hoped that meant everybody was asleep.

But the footsteps lurking outside Pascal's door proved otherwise. Someone was awake.

That thought haunted me as we tiptoed down into the basement. Pascal's safety hung in the air until he shut the door to my cell. Anxiety made me walk faster. I practically threw myself into the cell and heaved a sigh of relief when the door closed.

Pascal didn't look happy. He stood on the other side of the bars listlessly. Since the footsteps interrupted us, he'd moped like a puppy left out in the rain.

"It's okay," I said.

I wanted to reach out and touch him, to reassure him physically, but I was nervous somebody was watching nearby.

He made a face. "No, it's not."

“I wish I could’ve stayed with you,” I whispered. “You don’t know how badly I want that.”

His eye flashed with sorrow. “You do?”

I gave him a tight smile. “I thought I’d made that crystal clear.”

Pascal staggered forward and leaned his forehead against the bars. “This sucks, Xolkug.”

“I know.”

“I’m gonna do something about it.”

Concern twisted in my stomach. “Pascal—”

“No, I’m serious. I’m getting you out of here. Nothing and nobody’s gonna stop me.”

I said nothing. I didn’t know how to respond to his passionate defiance. I wasn’t used to humans standing up for me.

Pascal’s eye glinted like a shard of amber. He glared at my handcuffs.

“The one key I don’t have,” he mumbled. “The key to your cuffs.”

I assumed that as much as Bryant trusted Pascal with my care, he didn’t trust him *that* much. Pascal had the same idea.

“What if he gave it to me?” he suggested.

“I don’t know if he will.”

“It’s worth a shot.”

The unease from earlier still lingered, making me itchy and paranoid.

“It might make him suspicious,” I warned.

“Not if I’m natural about it.”

I furrowed my brow. I worried Pascal’s charisma would be overshadowed by his honesty. A seasoned liar like Bryant might see right through his scheme.

Pascal curled his fingers around the bars. Not half an hour ago were those same fingers wrapped around my aching cock.

I shoved the memory away. If I thought about that now, I'd get hard again.

"Then what?" I asked. "Even if you get the keys to my handcuffs, nothing will change."

"Yes, it will," Pascal insisted. He gripped the bars tighter. "You'd have both your hands. You'd have a better chance of escaping."

First the horse riding, and now this? Pascal was serious about this escape attempt. It both warmed my heart and frightened me.

"Pascal, I know you mean well," I said slowly. "But I'm begging you. Don't be rash."

"What d'you mean?"

"I was reckless once. It cost me everything."

He glanced at my handcuffs and grimaced. "It wasn't because you were reckless. It was because of bad people."

"That doesn't change what I'm telling you."

Pascal blew out a big frustrated breath. The longer hair on top of his eye patch flew up before it fell down again.

"Are you worried about me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm worried about you, too! I..." He ground his teeth sympathetically. "I love you, Xolkug."

An arrow pierced my heart.

He loved me?

Emotion swamped me. I felt tears pricking the corners of my eyes.

These feelings I'd harbored for Pascal... they could only be love. But saying it felt like a monumental risk. An invitation for heartbreak or ridicule.

And now, he'd said it first. To *me*.

As Pascal gripped the bars, I put my palms on top of his hands.

"I love you, too," I whispered.

Pascal beamed. The joy on his face was worth the risk of my confession.

I knew deep in my bone marrow that I wanted to protect that joy—always.

"I'll talk to him," Pascal murmured. "Win him over. Get the keys. You're not alone, Xolkug. We're in this together."

My heart squeezed. He was so hopeful, it was hard to refute him. And for once, I didn't. I wanted to believe in Pascal and his hope.

So I did.

FIFTEEN

Pascal

AS I STOOD outside of Bryant's office, I steeled my nerves.

This had to go well. There was no other option. Xolkug counted on me to make it work and I wouldn't let him down.

There was a bounce in my step since last night. I was still high from our intimate moment, even though it'd been cut short. But after confessing to Xolkug, I felt light and airy, like a cloud on a summer day. Like I could do anything.

This will work, I told myself. Bryant trusts you.

All I needed was the keys to Xolkug's handcuffs. It wasn't a big deal. After all, I had all the other important keys in my possession. What was one more?

I took a deep breath and reached for the door handle.

"Looking for me, my boy?"

Bryant's voice startled me. I spun around to see him standing behind me with a smile. A mug steamed in his hand.

My mind went blank for a second before I remembered why I'd come. "Oh, um, yes! Good morning, sir."

"Morning to you, too." He reached past me and pushed the door open. "What are we standing in the hallway for? Come in."

I shuffled into his office behind him. Bryant kicked back in his chair and gestured to the seat across from him.

"Go ahead, get comfortable," he ordered.

I nodded and sat down. Bryant took a loud sip of his drink. He glanced at some papers on his desk while I hesitated.

“Still waking up, hm?” he asked.

“Ah, yeah.”

“Couldn’t sleep last night?”

“Actually, I slept okay.”

Bryant glanced at me over the top of the paper. He smiled. “I wonder why that is.”

What did he mean by that? I shuffled in my seat, not knowing how to respond. I assumed he was only making conversation and he’d let it go, but he continued staring at me. I felt pressured to reply.

“Comfortable bed?” I suggested.

“Hmm.”

Bryant put down the paper to give me his full attention. He leaned his elbows on the desk and folded his hands together.

“You’re a smart one, aren’t you?” he said.

“What do you mean, sir?”

Bryant kept smiling. “I told you not to take the orc out of the building except with my explicit permission.”

Did he mean last night at the stable?

“And you’ve obeyed wonderfully...” Bryant paused to take a sip from his mug. “You realized that your *room* is part of the building, after all.”

I froze.

Did Bryant know Xolkug was in my room last night?

My blood ran cold. The footsteps outside. The thought of Bryant standing outside the door, listening in silence chilled me.

My mouth was dry. I didn’t want to reply. I wanted this topic to go away. But Bryant’s enduring gaze made it clear he wasn’t going to drop it.

“I guess so,” I said hoarsely.

“Then you admit it. That the orc was in your room.”

This conversation had flown off the rails. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

There was no point in denying it. Bryant already knew, and I'd only dig myself into a deeper hole if I lied.

“Yes, sir,” I mumbled, staring down at the desk.

Bryant stood up and clicked his tongue sympathetically. “My boy, you mustn't feel bad.”

I blinked and looked up at him. “I shouldn't?”

He strolled around the side of the desk. “Of course not! After all, it wasn't *your* idea. It was the orc's.”

That wasn't true. I led Xolkug to my room. But Bryant didn't let me get a word in edgewise. He strode towards me and put his hands on the back of my chair.

“Don't worry, Pascal, I don't blame you. When a brute threatens you to obey, what choice do you have?”

“Um... He didn't threaten me.”

“Maybe not with *words*,” Bryant said. “But with that big green body and those grotesque tusks towering over you...”

My heart raced uncomfortably. Xolkug didn't do any of that. It was my idea, not his. Besides, Xolkug had never once intimidated me with his body.

I piped up. “He didn't really—”

“And those giant fists!” Bryant exclaimed. “One strike and your tiny body would crumple like a piece of paper.”

I squirmed in my seat. I didn't know what to do. Bryant was ignoring me, and I'd lost control of the conversation.

The keys. I needed to get the keys.

“Right,” I mumbled. “Um, about his hands, sir—”

Bryant spun my chair around. The words died in my throat as he glanced at me with frantic energy.

“Did he touch you with those hands?” Bryant demanded. “Don’t lie for his sake, my boy. I know what can happen behind closed doors. Tell me the truth. If he touched you, I’ll have his hands cut off before sunset.”

A pang of terror struck me.

“No!” I blurted out. “He didn’t do anything like that. You don’t need to do that, I swear.”

Bryant narrowed his eyes like he didn’t believe me. “You’re sure?”

I was breathless. I needed him to believe me.

If he didn’t...

“Positive. Xolkug didn’t touch me, sir.”

Bryant stared at me without blinking. Then he smiled again. “I believe you, my boy. You wouldn’t lie to me.” He paced around the room in a loose circle. “So. What brings you here this morning?”

I shakily blew out a breath of relief. I was glad to be done with that topic.

“It’s about... the orc’s handcuffs, sir.” I hated saying that instead of Xolkug’s name, but I needed Bryant to be on my side. If I didn’t play to his bias, my plan might not work.

Bryant paused mid-stride. “Oh?”

Pushing down all my feelings of disgust, I went on. “As the orc’s tamer, it’s my opinion that he needs the free use of his hands sometimes—”

“Out of the question.”

My mouth gaped open. He’d shot me down too fast. He didn’t even hear me out.

But I wouldn’t go down without a fight. I needed to stand up for myself and for Xolkug—literally. I got up from the chair to show Bryant I was serious.

“Sir, it’s not for the orc’s sake,” I said. “It’s for the *show*.”

Bryant had already opened his mouth to refuse until he heard that last statement. He gave me a sideways look.

“Go on,” he said.

My heart raced. Now I was getting somewhere. As much as I hated doing it, appealing to Bryant’s point of view helped.

“It’s difficult for the orc to ride a horse with his hands bound. Especially since he doesn’t know *how* to ride yet. I want his performance in the show to be excellent. Don’t you think, sir?”

As the lies tumbled from my lips, I saw Bryant’s expression change. He nodded slowly.

“I don’t want a subpar performance, that’s for sure,” he mumbled, stroking his chin. “And you’re saying he *must* have his hands free to do this?”

Bryant watched me closely. I needed to throw in some facts to make my claim believable.

“Yes. Without his hands free, he can’t control the reins properly. He won’t be able to make the horse obey his commands.”

My stomach twisted. I hated talking about Xolkug and Maple this way. But the shifting mood on Bryant’s face told me it was working.

“And even if he *could* ride the horse with his hands chained, he can’t pose or entertain the crowd,” I said.

“Yes, that’s right...”

My nerves felt antsy. Had Bryant changed his mind? I was on the edge of relief, desperate for him to hand over the keys.

“Good, my boy. You’ve really thought it through. Although I’ll admit, I *am* worried for your safety. Without those brutal fists contained, who knows what that beast is capable of,” Bryant muttered.

My stomach flipped. He couldn’t backtrack, not when I was so close.

“He’s docile enough, sir,” I said. “I’m confident in my ability to wrangle him.”

Bryant let out an amused huff. “What a strong, talented omega you are. Many alphas don’t have your kind of bravery, you know.”

The compliments made my skin feel slimy, but I accepted them without flinching. It was all worth it if I could get the keys to Xolkug’s handcuffs.

Bryant sighed and paced in front of me. “Oh, I don’t know... What to do, my boy...”

I ground my teeth. Just a second ago, he’d agreed with me. Why did he slip backwards?

“Why do you hesitate, sir?” I asked.

Bryant paused. He regarded me while stroking his chin in thought. “Isn’t it obvious?”

Crap. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Please enlighten me, sir.”

Bryant chuckled. “Oh, Pascal...”

As he walked up to me, I noticed a familiar glint in his eyes. It was the same possessive flicker I’d seen in Xolkug’s gaze. But on Bryant’s face, it was deeply disturbing.

Suddenly he was too close to me. I backed up, but stumbled on the chair behind me. He caught my wrist so I didn’t fall.

“Careful. Don’t want you getting hurt.” Bryant’s smile turned into a grin. His fingers curled tighter around my wrist. “You think you know what’s best for you. That’s what all omegas say, my boy. But the truth is, you don’t. That’s why you were created this way.” His gaze raked down my body, then back up again. “Small. Delicate. Fragile.”

The floor beneath me felt uneven. I moved my feet, trying to steady myself, but I just backed up against the wood desk, pinning myself between it and Bryant.

My mind clouded with fear. I wanted him to stop touching me, but his grip on my wrist was as solid as the desk behind me. I was like a butterfly on display in a frame, stabbed into place.

“Sir,” I said in a tight voice.

“It’s all right,” Bryant drawled, slow and comforting, but I was anything but reassured. “I’ve got you. No need to worry.”

The words would’ve been nice if they came from Xolkug. But they didn’t.

As anxiety pulsed through my blood, my skin grew clammy under Bryant’s hand. He didn’t let go. He pulled my wrist closer to his chest.

“That’s why alphas like me exist, hm? To take care of you omegas. That’s why I worry about you so much, Pascal. You understand. It’s natural.”

I didn’t understand, and this felt wholly *unnatural*. If I had the strength—and the bravery—I’d rip myself out of his grip.

But I didn’t. Bryant’s gaze paralyzed me.

“Sir,” I repeated hoarsely. “I’ve got a lot of work to do. I just need the keys.”

“In a minute,” Bryant mumbled, like it wasn’t important.

He stared at the other side of my face. When his other hand came up to touch my cheek, I flinched. That made Bryant chuckle.

“Calm down, Pascal. You know I’d never hurt you. I’m no monster like that orc.” He smiled. “It’s laughable. Hilarious, really. The idea of that beast caressing anyone tenderly. Like *this*.” His fingers slid down my face. “He’d sooner break you, hm?”

Defiance flared up within me, twisting around the anxiety. I couldn’t hold my tongue.

“He wouldn’t,” I stated.

“How do you know?”

When I heard the sharp challenge in Bryant's retort, I realized my mistake. One wrong move and I'd plunge Xolkug into deep, deep trouble. I bit down on my tongue.

"I don't, sir," I mumbled. "It's just a hunch."

Bryant's voice lost its edge. He seemed to calm down as he stroked my cheek again. "And your hunch is wrong, my boy. I've told you before, it's because of your hormones. They make you caring and nurturing, even to things that don't deserve it." He tilted his head, regarding me. "It's because you have no alpha mate. Am I right?"

My stomach churned. "What?"

"Well, it stands to reason. If you *did* have an alpha to please, you wouldn't go around playing nice with every alpha you met. You'd be loyal."

A cold wave of discomfort crashed into me. I didn't like his implication. At all.

I had to get out of here.

"Sir, it's getting late and I haven't started any of my chores —"

"Shh." Bryant pressed his thumb to my lips, cutting me off. A chill of disgust ran down my spine. "Don't worry about that. Just let me *look* at you for a moment."

I held my breath as Bryant's thumb moved towards my cheek. It brushed the long tuft of my hair aside, then lingered over the leather of my eye patch.

"Tsk. This ugly thing draws so much attention away from your pretty face," Bryant murmured. "You should stop wearing it."

That was it.

Annoyed, I yanked my hand out of his grip. "No, sir, I won't. Now with all due respect, I—"

I realized a split-second too late that I'd messed up. Rage consumed Bryant's face. He lunged and snatched both my wrists in one hand, like a snake constricting its prey.

“I am not done speaking to you, omega,” Bryant spat. It was the coldest I’d ever heard his voice—even icier than when he spoke to Xolkug. “You’ll listen to my every word until I’m finished. Tell me you understand.”

I stared, panting hard, yet unable to breathe.

“Tell me,” he snarled.

My voice cracked. “I-I understand.”

“You’d better.”

He glared at me for a long, terrifying moment. Then he calmed down. His expression returned to normal. He eased up on my wrists, although he didn’t release them.

“Now,” he said in a pleasant tone, “let’s see what’s *really* under this thing...”

I couldn’t move, or breathe. I stood there frozen in fear as Bryant callously slipped off my eye patch.

As soon as it was gone, Bryant recoiled with a disgusted sound. “Good *god*.” He laughed. “That *is* horrible. No wonder an alpha hasn’t claimed you.”

Bryant peered at my face curiously, like I was an oddity to be observed. I stood there in dazed silence, feeling lower than I ever had. I just wanted this to be over.

“I see why you wear this now.” He dropped the eye patch into my hands. “But don’t worry, my boy. It doesn’t make me think any less of you.”

I felt no relief. It only made me feel worse.

Bryant watched as I listlessly put my eye patch back on, as if making sure I did it right.

The air in the room was still oppressive, but I no longer felt pinned in place. Apparently, seeing my true face killed the mood. It was both a blessing and a curse.

“I’ve got to go,” I mumbled.

Bryant didn’t stop me. As I pushed the door open, he called out, “Yes, you’ve got plenty of work to do!”

SIXTEEN

Xolkug

SOMETHING WAS OFF.

I believed in Pascal, and I believed in his plan. But since I'd woken up that morning, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something wasn't right.

I was restless. I grabbed my unfinished carving and shaved off pieces of wood. Focusing on a task helped fend off of the anxiety that lingered like a storm cloud.

Soon my carving was complete. I blew off the remaining dust and turned the wooden figurine over in my fingers. I was pleased with it, and I hoped Pascal would be, too.

My heart ached when I thought of him. It was torture to be separated from him like this. I hadn't seen him since last night. Longing and concern ate away at me. Where was he? What was he doing?

And most importantly, was he safe?

The basement door groaned open. I stood up and approached the cell bars, frowning. The light footsteps told me it was Pascal, but they seemed slower than usual. Sluggish.

Worry gnawed at me.

"Pascal?" I called.

My stomach flipped when he didn't respond.

Then he came into view. He hung his head. His hair covered his face and he walked like he was bogged down.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He stopped in front of the cell, but didn’t answer. I still couldn’t see his face, almost like he purposely hid it from my view.

“Pascal, answer me, please. You’re scaring me.”

When Pascal tentatively raised his head, I saw the telltale red rims of his eye. He was on the verge of tears.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

He shook his head and didn’t reply, but he opened the cell door and slipped inside, closing it behind him.

Now I was truly concerned. This wasn’t like him. Where was the bubbly, chatty young man I knew?

“Are you hurt?” I asked. “What happened?”

It took him a long time to answer, like it took a monumental effort to speak.

“No, I’m fine,” he mumbled.

That was an obvious lie.

I frowned. What wasn’t he telling me?

“You’re not,” I said. “Tell me the truth. Please.”

Pascal grimaced. He still didn’t meet my gaze. My mind swarmed with all possibilities, then snapped to the worst one.

Bryant’s threat. He’d warned me to keep my hands off Pascal, or he’d “get it.”

“Pascal,” I whispered. “Did Bryant do something to you?”

He finally lifted his head. I saw the surprise and sadness in his wide amber eye. That all but confirmed it.

Emotions raged in my chest. White-hot anger—rage like nothing I’d known in my life. The specifics of what Bryant did hardly mattered. It was enough to know that he’d hurt Pascal. My fists itched. I could’ve turned Bryant inside-out. I felt bloodthirsty, wild with fury.

And then Pascal broke into a sob. He threw himself against my chest.

My rage faded. For now.

Pascal needed reassurance right now, not my anger. I felt the overwhelming urge to protect him, to comfort him until his sorrows had passed.

I guided Pascal to the bed. I wrapped my arms around him, holding him as close as possible. His tears soaked through my shirt. He curled into a ball as he cried, making his tiny body even smaller. I felt every tremble in his frame.

“I’m here,” I murmured. “I’ve got you.”

A couple times Pascal tried to speak, but couldn’t manage words through the tears and shaking. I stroked his shoulders in a soothing rhythm.

Something stirred in the back of my mind.

I closed my eyes. Out of instinct, I rocked gently back and forth. Memories of an old orc lullaby came to me. I remembered every line.

As I held Pascal, I sang the words in a soft voice. If he were any other human, I wouldn’t dare speak my native tongue for fear of ridicule.

But Pascal was the man I loved. He accepted me for who I was. So as he bared his vulnerabilities to me, I bared myself to him in return.

A sense of nostalgia flooded me. As I sang the lullaby with Pascal folded to my chest, the cell disappeared. It felt like we were in another world, just the two of us.

Pascal’s sobs slowed. His tears turned to quiet sniffles. Eventually, his breathing calmed and he went still.

“That’s beautiful,” Pascal murmured into my shirt. “What is it?”

I smiled and petted his hair. “An old orc lullaby. Caretakers sing it to children to help them sleep.”

He sighed. “It’s pretty...”

“I’m glad you think so.”

I still wanted answers, but Pascal was in a fragile state. I didn’t want to upset him again. My burning curiosity had to wait.

“Xolkug?” he mumbled.

“Hm?”

“You’re the best…” He buried his head and nuzzled against me. “I really love you.”

Affection warmed my chest. “I love you, too.”

He drew away and wiped his eye with a snuffle. I was glad he felt better after getting the tears out of his system. I hoped my comfort was helpful to him.

But despite calming down, he still wouldn’t face me. His hanging hair covered his expression.

A horrible mental image came to me. Was he hiding a bruise on his face?

“Pascal,” I said, firm but gentle. “Bryant didn’t hit you, did he?”

“No.”

He sounded honest this time. That relieved me. Slightly.

“If you can, I want you to tell me what happened,” I asked.

Pascal shuffled in my lap. The longer his silence went on, the more concerned I became—and the angrier I got at the horrible human alpha. How dare he upset Pascal this way?

Although he kept quiet, Pascal nestled against me like he was trying to burrow into my skin. I would have let him. If it made him happy and kept him safe, I’d do anything for him.

As I waited, I stroked the back of his head, threading his fluffy hair between my fingers. He sighed contentedly. He seemed to like that.

“Xolkug,” he said softly after a while.

“Yes, Pascal.”

“Do you think I’m disgusting?”

I didn’t think I heard him correctly, because what he said made no sense.

“What was that?”

“I said, do you think I’m disgusting? Tell me the truth.”

“Pascal, I don’t understand. Why would I ever think that way about you?”

The confusion in my voice must’ve stirred something in him, because Pascal finally lifted his head to look at me. His eye was bleary and red, and his cheeks were tear-streaked.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry…”

“Did someone say that to you?”

When he didn’t reply, I knew I was right.

“Who?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” he mumbled. He touched his eye patch. “It’s my fault anyway. All ‘cause of this…”

Gods, I was furious. Whoever filled Pascal’s head with doubts and lies would pay.

“No,” I growled.

The force of the rumble in my chest surprised him. He glanced up. “No…?”

“There is nothing wrong with you—only with people who make you feel there is.”

Pascal blinked slowly. His liquid amber eye wavered with emotion. “But…”

“But what?” I countered. “Tell me what you believe.”

His argument fizzled. He sighed and rested his head against my collarbone. The warmth of his breath against my skin sent tingles over my body. Pascal was a ball of anxiety, wanting to tell me something, but afraid to.

“Bryant said my eye patch was ugly,” he mumbled in a small voice, barely audible. “He said… it distracted him from

my pretty face.”

I took a deep breath to contain my rage. There were so many things wrong with that.

Fresh tears beaded at the corner of Pascal’s eye. I wiped them away.

“He’s wrong,” I growled. “You *are* beautiful. Nothing could possibly detract from it.”

Pascal frowned. My words didn’t reach him. Something else was wrong. I had a dark feeling in my chest, like sensing an oncoming storm.

“Pascal. Look at me. Please.”

He obliged, but hesitated.

I gently took his face in my hands. I ran my thumbs across his small, soft cheeks, still damp with tears. My one thumb grazed skin, and the other grazed leather—the edge of his eye patch.

Pascal flinched.

My heart broke. What happened? He wasn’t like this before. I never, ever wanted Pascal to flinch at my touch.

I kept my hands steady. I pressed my forehead against his. Pascal’s rapid breathing calmed as we shared air. His jumpy nature reminded me of a spooked young horse. He needed reassurance. He needed to know I’d always take care of him, no matter what, so he needn’t worry.

“Hear me, Pascal. I am here. I will *always* be here, for you alone. My heart is intertwined with yours now. Whatever you face, we face together. So open your heart to me. Let me help you.”

He let out a shaky breath. “Xolkug...”

As my words sank in, Pascal nodded. He pulled back with a big calming sigh. He looked stable now, more like his usual self.

“I talked to Bryant about the keys,” he said, glancing down at the chains between my handcuffs.

My jaw tightened. Judging by Pascal's tears, I assumed it didn't go well. I hardly cared about the keys at this point.

"And?"

Pascal shook his head. "I don't know what happened... The conversation was going okay, and at one point I really thought he'd give them to me. But then it got all twisted around, and Bryant got super close to me, and he..."

My organs twisted into an angry, anxious knot. "He what?"

"He started talking about how I'm weak 'cause I'm an omega. How I need an alpha to take care of me." He absentmindedly touched his eye patch. "And then he... wanted to see what my face looked like underneath this."

The dark feeling in my chest thundered.

"And you showed him?" I asked.

"No. He tore it off."

The feeling exploded. Lightning and fire. Pure fury. I could've throttled that disgusting man if he was in front of me.

I sensed it clearly now—the horrible, violated feeling emanating from Pascal. I was a fool for not noticing it sooner.

My mind was split. I wanted to comfort Pascal. I wanted to destroy Bryant.

But my love was in front of me, and he deserved my attention a thousand times over.

"I'm sorry," I murmured. "That never should have happened."

Pascal nodded silently.

I held him close to my chest. It wouldn't protect him from the past, but I'd be damned if I didn't protect him in the future.

Bryant showed Pascal his true colors. But his threat still loomed. He'd never be satisfied with what he had—he'd always be greedy for more.

That wasn't going to happen.

A new flame kindled inside me. Escape was no longer for my own sake. It was for Pascal's. My love was roped into this horrible place.

I'd get him out, and away from Bryant.

"We're escaping," I told Pascal fiercely.

He blinked at me, surprised. Then, for the first time since he arrived in tears, he grinned. "Really? You finally want to?"

"I wanted to before. But I was scared." I caressed his face. "No longer. This place is evil, and I won't let you be hurt any more. We're escaping. I don't care what it takes."

If there was a harsh edge in my voice, then so be it. Our captors would feel my wrath if they crossed me. I abhorred violence, but the humans imprisoning us played dirty. There was no reasoning with true malevolence.

"What are we going to do?" Pascal asked. "I thought we'd escape during the show, but that's months away..."

I remembered all the times Bryant glanced at Pascal with a slimy, hungry gaze. It made my blood boil. Now that he'd already violated Pascal's boundaries once, he wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

"No," I growled. "Sooner. I won't let Bryant lay a finger on you, and if we wait much longer, he'll try."

"Forget me," Pascal shot back with his usual fire. "You're the one who's been trapped here for ages."

"All right. Then we're in agreement."

"Yeah." Pascal frowned. "Ugh, my brain is fried. I can't think of anything right now."

"Don't push yourself. You went through a traumatic experience."

"Yeah, but I wanna help think of a plan."

Privately, I had a few ideas brewing. Most involved brute force—a byproduct of my anger that Bryant hurt Pascal. If Pascal thought of another way, I'd be all ears.

But I felt Pascal's raw exhaustion. He was like an open wound. Now was not the time to brainstorm.

"I've been here for a long time," I reminded him. "One more day won't make a difference."

"But—"

"Rest first. Think with a clear mind."

He sighed in frustration, laying his head on my chest. "Fine."

I knew I'd be all right. But once Pascal left my cell, I had no control over what happened to him. I wouldn't be able to protect him.

My hands curled around his back. I wanted him with me, always.

"Ouch," Pascal mumbled. He drew away from my collarbone with a confused frown. "Something's poking me... and it's not you. What is that?"

"My necklace," I replied absently. Then I gasped. "My necklace!"

I grabbed it off my neck and held it so Pascal could see.

His eye widened. "Whoa, what is that? It's huge!"

"A dragon fang. I've had it since I was a boy. It's the only thing the humans couldn't take from me." I smiled, noticing the curiosity gleaming in his eye. "You, on the other hand, are welcome to see it."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"You're my lover, Pascal. I share everything with you. Here."

He blushed as I handed it to him. The fang was large in my palm. In Pascal's hand, it was massive. It was longer than his entire hand and nearly as thick.

"Wow... It's so cool."

As he fawned over the tooth, I glanced at my pillow. The carving was hidden beneath it, but it didn't feel like the right

time to show Pascal my gift.

“I see how sharp it is,” Pascal mused, “so how do you wear it without hurting yourself?”

I smiled, then translated an old orc saying. “*A dragon never bites lightly.* Dragons are creatures of ancient magic. Their fangs are not like those of other animals. It harms when used with intent. Never by accident.”

Pascal listened in awe. “Whoa.”

I glanced at the fang. The dim light in the room reflected off its curve like a slice of moonlight.

“Pascal,” I said seriously. “Take the fang with you.”

“Huh? But it’s yours.” He shook his head. “I don’t wanna be another human taking stuff from you.”

“This is different,” I insisted. “You need protection when I can’t be with you. Use it.”

It dawned on him what I meant. “Like a weapon?” he asked.

“If it’s necessary. Yes.”

Pascal quietly turned the base of the fang in his fingers, getting acquainted with it.

“I know you don’t like the thought of it. But you need to defend yourself. These men are ruthless, with evil hearts.” I put my hand on Pascal’s and guided the fang over his heart. “Think of it as a piece of me. Carry it everywhere. Let me protect you.”

That struck a chord with him. “Okay. I will.”

Relieved, I smiled. “Thank you. Let me put it on.”

I draped the leather cord around Pascal’s neck. He looked uneasy for a moment as the dragon fang touched his skin, but then relaxed when no pain followed.

“Wow, it doesn’t feel sharp at all,” he said. “Thanks, Xolkug.”

“Anything for you.”

He blushed. “Y’know, I always feel better when I’m with you. I don’t want to leave. Is that weird?”

I took his hand and held it, letting his warmth seep into me. “If it is, I don’t want to be normal. It aches when we’re not together, Pascal.”

“I feel like that, too!” He sighed, half in joy and half in frustration. He flopped against my chest and nestled into me in a way I found so adorable.

I ran my fingers through his fluffy hair. Serene warmth enveloped me. Being draped in each other’s arms like this was serene. Once more I forgot the cold darkness of the cell.

“Xolkug,” Pascal said.

“Hm?”

“Right before I left his office, Byrant got called away to do something in town.”

“And?”

“He’ll be gone for a while.”

“I see.”

“I, um...” He licked his lips, looking shy. “Remember what we were doing before?”

Heat filled my cheeks. “Yes?”

“I want to continue where we left off.”

Oh.

When Pascal saw understanding flash across my face, he grinned. “Have I ever mentioned there’s an extra wooden lock on the basement door that’s impossible to undo from outside?”

“You have not.”

“Well...” Pascal smoothed his hands down my biceps. “Just saying.”

The sultry quality of his voice made my cock twitch. An uninterrupted span of time with Pascal alone was exactly what I wanted.

No—what I *needed*.

SEVENTEEN

Pascal

MY HEART POUNDED as I dropped the wooden beam across the back of the door, securing it in place. I usually left it open, but not today. Locking the basement from the inside felt rebellious. Bryant told me to do it only if necessary.

I'd call private time with Xolkug pretty damn necessary.

I ran back to Xolkug, letting the door close on its own behind me without locking it. There was no need.

“Come here,” Xolkug said in a deep rumble.

I shivered in anticipation, then threw myself at him. Even with the cuffs, he was deft and skilled with his hands. He caught me, pulling me backwards onto the cot. Laying on his big, warm body made me feel safe. Loved.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I kissed him. I didn't care if my lips crashed against his tusks. I was desperate for this.

Xolkug kissed me back with just as much fervor. His tongue was hot velvet. It dominated me. I moaned languidly as he claimed my mouth.

With Xolkug, it didn't take much to turn me on. My cock was hard after one kiss.

There wasn't a need to stay quiet, so I groaned as I grinded against his upper thigh. Xolkug hissed in pleasure. He grabbed my ass, moving his hands along with my motions.

I was frantic with desire. I bucked my hips, over and over. My hard cock rubbed against Xolkug's leg, sending jolts of

electricity up my spine. It felt like our accumulated pleasure from last time flooded back in full force, pushing me right to the brink when we'd barely started.

"Slow down, my love," Xolkug growled in my ear. "Unless you want to spill early."

I whimpered, shaking my head. "Don't care... Need you."

He chuckled. "I need you, too. We have time. Do not rush."

But my brain was hazy with lust. I couldn't think straight. I whined and sped up my bucking movements until Xolkug pressed his hands down firmly on my ass, holding it in place.

"How badly do you want to come right now?" he asked.

The dominant edge in his voice thrilled me. "Real bad..."

"Do you have the stamina to go on after?"

"Yes!" I cried. "I—I don't know what it is, I feel crazy right now."

Xolkug gave me a long look. Then he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. He growled, his fingers squeezing my ass.

"That scent... You smell irresistible." He opened his eyes. They glinted with passion. "Are you in heat?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

He leaned in and spoke in a low, gravelly voice. "Do you feel insatiable? Like you could be stuffed full of my cock and keep on going for hours?"

I shivered. "Yes, *yes*, that's it."

Xolkug yanked down my waistband and underwear in one swift tug. I gasped, excited. His fingers traced the inside of my ass, and I realized how wet my entrance was.

I blushed. How was I soaked already?

"Seems like you are," Xolkug said as he teased my hole.

I whined as the tip of his finger circled it without going in. He smeared my slick around, toying with me. I'd only played

with myself there a few times, but the difference in size between our hands was immense. Xolkug's fingertip pressing against my entrance felt like a human-sized cock.

I shuddered. Would I even be able to take *his* cock?

"I'm going in," Xolkug told me. "If you don't want me to, say so now."

"I want it," I breathed.

He plunged inside.

I gasped. It was the tip of his finger—his huge orc finger—and it stretched the wet ring of muscle so deliciously, I nearly came.

But I didn't. I bit my lip, pulling myself back from the edge. I was hypersensitive. My skin tingled all over.

"Tell me you like it," Xolkug said, more of a disguised question than a demand.

"I love it," I breathed. "I really like it."

"Tell me you want more."

"I want more, *please*."

Xolkug's index finger pushed in deeper. The initial discomfort was buried under shock waves of pleasure that wreaked havoc on my system. I groaned, burying my face in his chest. It felt so good that I mindlessly started humping his thigh again.

"So wet and tight," Xolkug growled.

I nodded numbly.

"You're definitely in heat. Look how desperate you are."

"Uh huh..."

"I've only got half a finger in you, and you're ready to come. Aren't you?"

"Yeah," I whimpered.

"Then do it."

My head spun. He gave me permission. My alpha was letting me finish.

When Xolkug moved his finger in and out, I lost my mind. I moaned loudly, grinding my hips faster against him. He fucked me with his girthy finger, plunging in and out of my tight hole.

I panted breathlessly. I was so close.

“Can I please—”

I barely got my question out. Xolkug leaned into my ear and growled, “Come.”

I cried out. A white-hot wave of pleasure slammed into me. Stars exploded in my vision. It felt so good that I nearly blacked out.

The cum that spurted out of me leaked down Xolkug’s pant leg, soaking into the fabric. I would’ve been embarrassed if I wasn’t still so *fucking* horny.

Pathetic mewling sounds escaped me. My body trembled so hard that I collapsed against Xolkug. I felt limp all the way down to my bones. I was completely at his mercy as his thick fingers continued to stretch my ass.

“Does it hurt?” Xolkug asked.

I could barely breathe, let alone talk. I shook my head.

He stopped fucking me. “Words.”

I could’ve screamed.

“No! It feels good, *please* don’t stop,” I begged.

Xolkug let out an amused huff before he plunged his fingers into my twitching hole. My mouth fell open in a silent cry. I felt the base of his hand against my ass cheeks—his fingers were all the way in.

But Xolkug didn’t stop there. He spread his fingers, exploring my inner depths and getting me used to their size. Every movement sent electric shivers across my senses.

“Fuck,” I mumbled in a daze.

He leaned in to whisper in my ear. “Tell me it feels good.”

“Feels so fuckin’ good,” I whimpered.

He made a sound like a purr. “That’s what I like to hear.”

Xolkug fell into a smooth rhythm, fucking me with his two fingers until I felt like I’d pass out from pleasure.

And yet, despite their size, it *still* wasn’t enough. I craved more.

“You’re burning up,” Xolkug said. “Still in heat?”

I nodded furiously.

Xolkug’s hot breath ghosted across my sensitive ear. “Then you won’t be sated without my cock inside you.”

A jolt of desire shot straight into my balls. I wriggled my ass against Xolkug’s fingers, willing him to go further, willing him to act on his threat to give me a good time.

Xolkug tilted my chin up so our gazes met. “Is that what you want, little human? You want my thick orc cock inside your tight ass?”

The dirty talk melted me. I wanted it so badly I could barely speak, or think, or do anything that wasn’t willingly submit to Xolkug’s will.

“Please,” I whimpered.

He caressed my cheek softly, but his tone was firm. “Say it.”

“I want your alpha orc cock inside me, please, I *need* it—”

Xolkug’s fingers slid out of me. A second later, he suddenly picked me up by the waist. I blinked, jarred by the sudden motion. Then I realized what he was doing.

As he literally held me in the air, Xolkug aligned the tip of his cock with my throbbing wet entrance. He was going to impale me on that massive member. I felt the firm head of his cock prodding teasingly against my hole.

“Oh god,” I moaned.

“Last chance,” Xolkug warned. His eyes burned with lust, but there was affection behind them too. As badly as he wanted to fuck me, he didn’t want our natural size difference to hurt me.

That made everything so much hotter. Xolkug could’ve thrown me on the floor and taken me. Instead, he made me *beg* him to do it.

I nodded weakly. My voice cracked when I opened my mouth. “Please fuck me. Please, Xolkug.”

Stars. White. That’s what filled my vision for a split second.

A moment later, sensation returned.

Xolkug’s thick, pulsing cock was inside me. Filling me. Stretching me to my absolute limit. It stung as it was pried wide open. The nerves in my ring of muscle screamed out, but it was a pleasant agony. The back-and-forth of pain and pleasure was addictive.

I cried out, overwhelmed at the feeling.

“Are you all right?” Xolkug asked softly.

Sweat rolled down my skin. My lungs needed air. I breathed in once or twice as I got my bearings. “Yeah.”

“Pascal.”

“I’m sure,” I promised.

Xolkug exhaled. That firm answer was enough for him.

As my body adjusted to the huge intrusion, I relaxed slowly. The aching pleasure edged out the discomfort. I was impossibly full. I had no clue how my hole managed to accommodate Xolkug’s cock, but I sure as hell was happy it did.

I glanced down to see it for myself. The sight of it turned me on even more. It wasn’t all the way in, not even close. I’d only taken about a third of Xolkug’s massive cock. He gripped me steadily by the waist so I wouldn’t jump ahead and impale myself further.

I blew out a long, calming breath. “Wow.”

Xolkug grunted. Sweat beaded at his brow. “You’re tight.”

“You’re *huge*,” I shot back playfully.

He leaned in to graze his tusks against my mouth. “Your hole is clamping down on my cock,” he murmured.

I shuddered at the pleasant feeling. “Your cock is dominating my hole.”

“You wanted it.”

“I still do.”

Xolkug’s eyes flashed with rampant want. “You don’t understand. I want to fuck you senseless, Pascal.”

I groaned in reply. That went straight to my dick.

“Do it, then,” I said.

“I’ll break you.”

“Then break me. Just put me back together after.”

Xolkug smiled. Adoration radiated from him. I’d never felt so safe, so secure. So deeply and utterly loved.

All the while, I had a massive orc’s cock twitching inside of my ass.

“Should I lay you down?” Xolkug asked.

I thought about it for a moment. “No. I trust you.” I grinned, bumping our sweaty foreheads together. “Use me as you see fit. I’ll tell you if it hurts.”

He pouted slightly, in that grumpy protective alpha way. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.” I wriggled my hips. The raw feeling of my stretched hole made me shiver. “I feel fine now. Keep going.”

Relenting, Xolkug exhaled from his nostrils as he gripped my hips and pushed me ever-so-slowly down. I hissed from the sweet pain. Xolkug paused, watching my face intently, but I didn’t want him to stop. I ground my teeth as my body adjusted to the gigantic intrusion.

“Keep going,” I urged.

Deeper. Wider. My body twitched with every movement. Every bit of Xolkug’s cock entering me felt like I’d ascended to a higher dimension. I was determined to take as much of it as possible. I wanted to please my alpha, regardless of whether our bodies were “meant” to fit together or not. We’d *make* them fit, dammit.

“You’re wet,” Xolkug muttered. His voice was husky with pleasure. “Your slick is pouring down the sides of my cock.”

I glanced down to see it for myself. Light reflected off the wet streams. It made the lower half of Xolkug’s cock look like it was glowing.

Xolkug made another growl-purr sound. Keeping me afloat with one steady hand, his other palm caressed the area below my belly.

“Look at this,” he said. “My cock is so big inside of you that I can feel it from here.”

My eye widened. He was right. My lower belly bulged from his cock. As Xolkug ran his hand over it, I moaned. It felt so naughty.

“I’m gonna swell up like a balloon when you come,” I said hoarsely.

“That would be sexy.”

I whimpered. It *was* sexy. I got harder just thinking about it.

I didn’t know how much more of this I could take. My own erection throbbed, straining uselessly against my cock-swollen belly. I moaned as Xolkug stroked himself through my skin. My brain melted with lust.

“Xolkug, please,” I begged in a broken voice.

“Tell me what you want.”

Fuck. He had no idea how difficult that was when I was so horny I couldn’t *think*.

“Come in me,” I mewled. “Wanna feel it...”

Xolkug shuddered, clearly aroused at the idea. Moving both hands back to my waist, he used me like a toy, bobbing my limp body up and down. My heat flared. Being his living fuck-hole was so hot.

I tried desperately to put my feelings into words. “Tell me... I’m your good little human...”

Xolkug’s eyes flashed. He dug his thick fingers into my hips with a possessive growl.

“You’re my good little human,” Xolkug muttered, stretching my sensitive hole open wider. “You don’t have to think. Just let me fuck your brains out.”

I moaned loudly.

“You like that, don’t you? Being an alpha orc’s hole?”

“Yes, yes...!”

Xolkug grunted as he used me as a toy, slamming me up and down his throbbing length. Pleasure ignited in my veins. I cried out, not caring what I sounded like. At some point I was vaguely aware of wetness on my chest. I must’ve come without realizing it. But it didn’t matter. I was still aggressively, desperately horny. It wouldn’t subside until I’d had my fill of Xolkug’s monster cock.

“Your tight little ass feels amazing, human,” Xolkug growled. “Gonna come so deep in your ass you’ll be able to taste it.”

I shrieked with pleasure. The fantasy, the feeling, it was all too much in the best way. I wanted this moment to last an eternity, but I also *needed* Xolkug to finish. My body and soul craved it with relentless passion. It almost felt like I’d die if Xolkug didn’t come inside me soon.

“I’m halfway in you,” Xolkug told me in between breathless grunts. “Your dripping wet omega hole is stretchier than I thought.”

I bit my lip, nodding fervently. I felt no more pain or discomfort from the massive intrusion, just pure pleasure.

“Fuck... You’re clenching me so hard,” Xolkug mumbled. “It’s like your body *wants* to be drenched in my orc cum.”

“I do, I *do*, please, *fuck*, I need it, Xolkug, I need it so bad —”

The next second broke my brain. Xolkug’s fingers clamped down on my hips. He threw back his head and roared. The primal, throaty sound echoed in the cell. I felt his cock twitch and jerk violently, followed by a torrent of hot cum that coated my insides. Every shock wave of pleasure that ripped through Xolkug mirrored mine. I came for a third time, although my orgasm was pitiful compared to my alpha’s. I felt utterly drowned in his seed, just like he said I’d be.

I couldn’t wait to do it again.

As Xolkug came back to his body, he blinked at me in concern.

“Are you okay?” he asked thickly.

I grinned at him. “Better than ever. Although I *do* feel like a water balloon...”

Xolkug sheepishly lifted me off his softening member and set me down on the bed. My lower half was uncomfortably full. It would’ve been irritating if I wasn’t *literally* swollen with Xolkug’s cum, a concept that threatened to arouse me instantly again.

“Here,” Xolkug said. He gently pressed down on my lower belly, causing his seed to gush out of my loose hole.

I groaned. It shouldn’t have been hot, but it was. Still, it felt good to be rid of the pressure. Meanwhile, Xolkug looked mortified at the evidence pouring out of me.

“I’m so sorry,” he mumbled.

I laughed breathlessly. “Why? I loved it.”

“There is... much more than I expected.”

“That just means you loved it, too.”

A gentle smile replaced Xolkug’s sheepish expression. “I did.” He stroked my hair, damp with sweat. “Your forehead

isn't burning up anymore.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too. I felt like I was on fire, but it went away. So I guess my heat ended?”

Xolkug regarded me closely. “I don't know if it's the same for humans, but an omega orc's heat ends when they're impregnated. But I can't get you pregnant.”

For some reason, a sudden weight bore down on my chest. I didn't know why I was surprised. Xolkug was an orc, and I was a human. Didn't it make sense that we couldn't procreate?

“I guess,” I mumbled. Wanting to forgo the topic, I nuzzled into his chest. “Man, that was awesome, though. I'm gonna be sore tomorrow but it was worth it.”

I relaxed as Xolkug stroked my back in calming motions. “I hope I didn't hurt you.”

I huffed. “No! I told you, I'd tell you to stop if it got too much. But it was just right.” I grinned up at him. “Almost like we were made for each other.”

Xolkug's eyes widened in surprise. A slow, tender smile spread over his face. “Yes. Maybe so.”

He wrapped his arms around me in a sweet embrace. I sighed, fully content. Now that I'd come three times, I was exhausted. I could've fallen asleep like this forever, comfortable and warm against Xolkug's chest...

EIGHTEEN

Xolkug

A HEAVY BANGING sound roused me.

My bleary eyes blinked open. My serenity evaporated at the jarring sound.

Pascal mumbled against my chest. “Five more minutes...”

I instinctively held him close as I sat up and angled my ear towards the hallway. The incessant pounding came from the basement door.

My heart sank. I should’ve known our peaceful moment couldn’t last. However many hours I’d spent with Pascal, it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

The pounding got louder. Whoever was on the other side of the door tried furiously to get in.

Cold reality hit me.

I gently shook Pascal. “Wake up.”

He blinked, still half asleep. “What?”

“Someone’s coming. You have to get up.”

Frustration and sadness dawned on his face. He grudgingly stood up, but he was sore and tired. He wasn’t fast enough.

I quickly gathered his discarded clothes and shoved them at him. “Put these on. Hurry.”

“I’m trying.”

While Pascal shoved his leg into his trousers, I did the same. But there was no hiding some of the leftover evidence. Various stains littered the fabric, obvious even in the darkness. There was nothing I could do except hope whoever came down here wouldn't notice.

The pounding suddenly stopped.

Pascal and I exchanged a glance. He shrugged. "Maybe they left?"

I wasn't so hopeful. Whoever had been that desperate to get in wasn't giving up without a fight.

Pascal was fully clothed now, but his attire had the same issues. I grimaced inwardly. In the throes of our passion, we hadn't been careful at all.

Just as Pascal looked hopeful at the sudden silence, I heard a different sound—rusty creaking.

My stomach lurched. They were removing the door hinges.

I cursed under my breath. "Pascal, go stand over there."

"Why?" He asked.

I wasn't sure if he'd heard the creaking or not. With his human hearing, he probably didn't.

"They're taking the door off," I warned. "We need distance between us. Stand across the cell. Better yet, go stand in the hall."

But Pascal didn't move. He narrowed his eye on me and held steady. "Why?"

Normally I found his defiance adorable, but right now I was terrified for him.

"Pascal, listen to me," I said firmly.

"No. I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying here with you."

"We're going to get in trouble!"

"Of course we are. We're planning our escape."

"Not at this very second," I ground out.

“I’m not moving.”

The rusty creaking hit a breaking point. A second later, I heard the heavy groan of the metal door. It was off.

People ran down the stairs with rapid, aggressive footsteps.

“Pascal,” I hissed. “There’s no time.”

He glared back at me. “I’m staying with you, Xolkug! I don’t care what happens, I’m not leaving, not after what we just did!”

“And what exactly did you just do?”

Bryant stood hunched on the other side of the cell bars. Although his voice was calm, his composure was broken. His face was red with anger and he breathed hard, like a man who’d just been in a fight.

No, no... This wasn’t supposed to happen.

I was frozen. Anxious sweat trickled down my brow.

Pascal didn’t say anything, either. He stared back at Bryant defiantly.

“Answer me!” Bryant roared. It reverberated through the cell, filling the hallway and the whole basement.

Pascal began. “Sir, we were only—”

“If you’re going to lie to me, then shut your mouth, omega,” Bryant snapped.

My anxiety transformed into rage. My alpha instincts rose up, smothering my fear.

“Don’t talk to him like that,” I growled.

Bryant’s head spun towards me. “Or *what*, orc? Are you threatening me?”

“Wait, sir,” Pascal said, putting up his hands. “If you’d listen for one second—”

As the words came out of Pascal’s mouth, I knew it was a lost cause. Bryant was too full of himself, too disgustingly arrogant to listen to a damn thing he said. Pascal saw the good

in people, but if there had ever been good in that man, it died a long time ago.

“I’ve listened to you enough,” Bryant said, scowling. “Your attempt to seduce me was pitiful, by the way. Did you really think that would work? That I’d give you the orc’s keys after you batted your eyes at me?” He let out a bark of laughter. “Make that *eye*.”

When I saw the flash of hurt across Pascal’s face, my instincts screamed at me to intervene.

“That’s enough,” I snapped.

“And that’s enough out of you!” Bryant raised a hand and snapped his fingers. “Guards!”

A cacophony of footsteps rattled down the stairs, followed by the war cries of dozens of men. My head spun.

Without thinking, I reached for Pascal. I needed to protect him from whatever was about to happen next.

But Bryant was closer. He snatched Pascal’s wrist hard and fast, digging into him carelessly as he yanked him out of the cell.

“No!” I yelled.

“Let me go!” Pascal screamed, writhing violently in Bryant’s grip.

The fang, I thought desperately. I wanted Pascal to use the dragon fang to defend himself, but if I shouted it, Bryant would know he was armed.

But it didn’t matter. My hopes were crushed as Bryant pinned Pascal’s arms, rendering them useless. He couldn’t reach the fang.

I was terrified for my mate. In my protective daze, I didn’t notice the swarming guards until it was too late. Countless angry, sweaty human men flooded my cell with chains and weapons, screaming at me to get down and obey.

I paid them no attention. I shoved past, wading through them like I was bogged down in a swamp. Their angry yelling

pitched in my ears—but Pascal’s cries rose above them all. He met my gaze with an expression of sheer terror.

“Stop, don’t hurt Xolkug!” Pascal grunted as he tried to free himself. “Let go of me!”

I reached frantically for Pascal over the heads of the men. Their bodies were a physical wall. No matter how much I pushed through, I couldn’t get past them.

A furious growl built in my throat. I needed to protect my mate.

“It’s getting violent,” Bryant said coldly. “Do whatever you need to subdue it.”

“Stop it!” Pascal cried.

All I could focus on was Bryant squeezing Pascal against his body like a meat shield. He gripped him too hard—he was choking him.

I opened my mouth to scream at Bryant to release him, but my throat was suddenly tight. I reached for my neck. Cold, heavy chains surrounded me.

“Pull!” the men shouted.

They heaved together in one powerful motion. I gasped and fell back, landing with a thud on the floor. They swarmed like insects. I couldn’t see past their legs. I couldn’t see Pascal.

I roared with effort, swinging my limbs to no avail. They pinned me down with their combined weight and their chains.

“Lock him up,” Bryant commanded over the chaos.

I couldn’t move my body. Every limb was tied together. The final nail in the coffin was the chain between my neck and a heavy-duty hook on the wall.

“Quiet,” Bryant ordered.

The men fell silent. They parted for him.

Rage boiled within me when I saw a dirty rag slapped over Pascal’s mouth, muffling his cries. He must’ve been gagged

while I was being chained. To my horror, I saw that Pascal's hands were bound, too.

"You," Bryant said to the closest man. "Take the omega to the pit. Leave him bound."

"Yes, sir."

Bryant thrust Pascal carelessly at the man, who snatched him like he was an object. Then he carted him away. My heart clenched painfully as I heard Pascal's muffled voice until he was out of range.

"No... stop," I croaked.

"Too late," Bryant snapped. "Now, all of you, get out. Get back to work."

The men left.

Bryant stomped towards me. I despised being forced to look up at him, but I glared furiously anyway.

He flashed a cold smile. Then he raised a hand to strike my face.

I flinched.

But Bryant didn't hit me. Instead, he laughed uproariously.

"Oh, that's rich," he said, wiping a tear. "No, orc, don't you worry, I won't hit you. I don't *need* to anymore. Because you're going to obey me of your own free will."

"What?" I asked hoarsely.

His smile fell, and his face grew shadowed. "You see, I'm tired of that omega's antics. His job was to whip you into shape, not to *fuck* you."

Bryant spat the word. A chill ran down my spine.

"He failed. And I don't like failure." Bryant smiled again in a sickly sweet way that churned my stomach. "So, here's my offer. You are going to do everything I say. Obey every command. No fussing, no moping, and no threats against me or any one of my men."

My mouth went dry. I wanted to refuse, but I didn't dare interrupt Bryant. There was a darkness in his voice that frightened me.

"No complaints so far? Good. For your disobedience, you'll spend a week chained to the wall. After that, I'll release you—except for your handcuffs, since the two of you are already so well-acquainted."

I said nothing. A horrible feeling twisted in my chest, like everything was about to get worse.

"Respond if you understand anything I'm saying," he said with a sneer.

My words came out raspy. "I understand."

"Good. You'll atone for your crimes, then give a spectacular performance in my show. I won't accept anything less than perfection."

"What about Pascal?" I asked. My chest hadn't stopped aching since I lost sight of him.

"Oh, he'll get what's coming to him," Bryant muttered.

Protective rage edged into my voice. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ah, ah." Bryant wagged a condescending finger in my face. "I said no fussing and no threats. Are you threatening me, orc?"

I despised this man with every fiber of my being.

"No," I ground out.

"I hope not. In any case, the omega will be punished for his flagrant disobedience." Bryant wrinkled his nose. "The worst offense being the vulgar act he did with *you*."

My spirits crumbled. I'd never felt so hopeless, so awful. It was all my fault. I got Pascal into this mess. I should've resisted temptation...

I hung my head. I'd never debased myself before now, but I no longer had a choice.

For my love, I'd choke on my pride.

"Please," I begged. "*Please* don't hurt Pascal."

Bryant laughed. "Who said I'm going to hurt him? No, we're going to have a lot of fun together."

I seized up with a violent impulse. I felt like a predator poised to spring. Every muscle in my body tensed, ready to throttle the life out of Bryant.

He smiled at me, waiting for me to lose my cool—waiting for me to be the vicious, bloodthirsty beast he wanted me to be.

I was a snap decision away from lunging at him, but I brought myself down from the edge. Just barely.

You fucking bastard, I thought.

Looking slightly disappointed that he couldn't provoke me, Bryant stood up and sighed. "Fine. I'll leave you alone to stew in your thoughts... if you have any."

He turned on his heel. "Oh, and by the way, your little omega cum-dump isn't far. In fact, he's nearby. The training pit will make a good cage until I figure out what to do with him."

My insides felt coated in tar.

I despised Bryant. I hated him. I fucking hated him.

"So, if you ever want to see him again, don't forget to behave," Bryant said. His grin widened. "And I'll make sure that filthy slut does the same."

NINETEEN

Pascal

MY FACE HIT the sand with a thud.

I grunted, writhing against my restraints. Grains of sand clung to my tear-drenched cheeks. No matter how hard I tossed and turned, nothing worked.

But it had to. I *had* to break free and get back to Xolkug.

The man ripped off the gag in my mouth.

I gasped and yelled, “Let me go. Let me go!”

My voice cracked from strain. I’d uselessly shouted the same thing over and over, but the man never listened.

I grunted as I managed to turn halfway onto my back. It was one of Bryant’s men, one I didn’t recognize. How many dozens of underlings were under his control? How could *this* many people be okay with what happened to Xolkug?

“Why are you treating me like a criminal?” I asked. “I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Oh, shut up already.” The man’s voice was casual and irritated, like I was a child throwing a temper tantrum. It was humiliating.

I battled against my restraints. In the heat of the moment, I didn’t realize what they were. I assumed it was the same rope used to tie up Xolkug—but as I felt them rub against my wrists, I realized they were hard steel handcuffs. And not just on my wrists. A pair clinked around my ankles, too.

I was fully chained up. I couldn't move my limbs, use my hands, or walk. All I could do was roll around pathetically in the sand like a slug.

Dread washed over me. I gulped down a breath, trying to calm myself down.

The man who'd dumped me in the pit turned around and walked away.

"Hey, where are you going?" I called.

"Got shit to do." When he squinted over his shoulder, I felt a flutter of hope that maybe he'd changed his mind. Instead he said, "Don't burn in the damn sun. Bryant wants you alive."

He disappeared into the building, slamming the door behind him. A lock clicked.

I blinked. And breathed.

Okay. Don't panic, I told myself. There's gotta be some way out.

I looked around. The pit was familiar in a gut-wrenching way. It was the training arena Bryant took me to when he expected me to use weapons on Xolkug to make him 'obey.' Four sheer brick walls marked up with scratches surrounded me. I couldn't see over them, even back when I'd first seen it, and definitely not from the ground. Scaling the walls wasn't an option.

I gasped. The keys! I *knew* I had the key to the training pit, since Bryant expected me to use it. Even if I couldn't reach it with my hands right now, knowing it was on me was a huge relief.

I wriggled my hips, expecting to hear the jingle of keys in my pocket.

There was no sound.

"What...?"

I wriggled my other hip. Nothing. The keys were gone. Bryant must've snatched them from me during the chaos.

I let out a frustrated groan. How could I have been so careless?

“Shit,” I said under my breath.

My throat was scratchy and raw from screaming. It was also dry. As I slumped on the ground, I realized my back felt hot. I squinted up and saw the sun shining in full force. Its rays beat down on me, heating up the sand. Was that what the man meant about getting burned?

I saw shade on the opposite side of the pit. It was late enough in the day for the far wall to cast a shadow, so I grunted and wriggled over to it. I sweated with effort. By the time I reached the cool shade, I felt dehumanized and awful.

But I still hadn't given up. Xolkug's cries echoed in my mind. He tried to save me. He'd tried to protect me the whole time, except I acted like a complete fool.

I clenched my eye shut as frustrated tears pricked at me. If I had just listened to Xolkug, neither of us would be in this situation.

Anxieties plagued me. Was Xolkug okay? What did they do to him? Did they treat him worse than they treated me?

I grit my teeth. I'd get out of here somehow.

If I couldn't climb the wall, could I dig out? I propped my back against the cool brick wall. Without hands, I had to rely on my feet. I tried using them as a shovel, kicking away small mounds of dirt and sand. But the substrate was relentless. As soon as I shoved it aside, it flowed back into place. For every step forward, I took two steps back.

“Shit!”

No climbing. No digging. No keys.

My hope was stomped out.

My breathing sped up with panic. I'd been in deep trouble before, but this was the worst. When I'd been kidnapped and thrown in the back of a carriage, it wasn't long before Devereaux and Florian saved me.

But Devereaux hadn't been chained. He was free to fly, and with his stony skin, he was impervious to weapons.

Xolkug wasn't. He was flesh and blood, and he was locked up in a basement because of my stupid actions. I'd ruined our escape plan.

I wished I was stronger. I wished I was like Devereaux, or Florian, or Xolkug... I wished I was anything but the weak omega Bryant proved I was.

The door opened.

Bryant stepped into the pit. I froze like a frightened animal.

He strolled towards me. His expression was filled with both amusement and disgust. He stopped an inch away, looming over me. His body blocked the sun.

"Oh, Pascal," he said sweetly. "Do you realize how naughty you've been?"

I stared at him silently. My body trembled against my will. I didn't want to prove his judgments about omegas anymore, but I couldn't stop it.

He tapped his chin. "Let's see. How about... *very*? First, you didn't heed my advice about not getting attached to the beast. Hormones or not, you really should've controlled yourself. I mean, really, spreading your legs for an *orc*?" He sneered distastefully. "There's no words for it. It's foul. Truly abhorrent."

Anger bubbled up in my chest. What I did with Xolkug wasn't wrong, and neither were our feelings for each other. Nothing he did to me would ever change that. Bryant's closed-minded comments lit a fire within me. In an instant, all my fear burned away.

"It's not," I said.

"It is," Bryant snapped. "And since you're too stupid to understand that, maybe this punishment will change your mind."

Is that what this was? Bryant's way of disciplining me? Maybe I was delirious, but for some reason, I couldn't help laughing out loud.

"What exactly is funny?" he demanded.

I met his gaze evenly. "In case you forgot, I'm an orphan who lived under a greedy tyrant. I've been punished before. A lot."

Bryant lunged like a snake. He grabbed my chin, his fingers digging into me. His eyes were wild and red with popped capillaries.

"Don't cross me, omega," he muttered. His hot breath made my eye water. "I'm ten times worse than your Headmaster."

"Clearly you haven't met her."

He struck me across the face. When I didn't react beyond an instinctual grunt of shock and pain, Bryant stood up. He spat on the ground next to me.

"Good," he said curtly. "I'm glad you talked back. You've just earned another two weeks of punishment. You're up to a month now. Maybe more. Depends on my mood."

Four weeks. A whole month.

That was how long he planned to keep me chained up in this pit?

I looked at him but didn't speak. He must've seen the apprehension in my gaze because he grinned, pleased to get a reaction.

"That's what I thought. It's all up to your orc now. If he performs well on show day, I'll release you. If not, well..." He shrugged. "There's always next year."

I blinked. "You... you can't keep me here that long."

"I can, and I will," Bryant said coldly. "So you'd better hope your precious beast behaves."

I was too shocked to speak. Two weeks, a month, a year... Bryant meant to imprison me for as long as he liked.

Seeing my expression, Bryant laughed and clapped theatrically. “Finally, the omega understands the gravity of what he’s done!” A brutal edge slipped into his voice like a knife. “I hope getting your womb stuffed with orc cum was worth it.”

“I... you can’t,” I whispered.

Bryant gave me a look of fake sympathy and patted my head. “There, there. You know, Pascal, there was always one other thing you never understood. You see, the orc is my asset. He belongs to me—and I’m going to make money off him for as long as he lives. But you, my boy?” He ran his thumb over my cheek, touching my eye patch. “You’ve always been replaceable.”

TWENTY

Xolkug

TO MY SURPRISE, Bryant kept his word. A week after the incident, one of his underlings came into my cell under Bryant's supervision and unchained me from the wall. Those seven days passed in a hazy, fatigued blur. My entire body was sore and bruised—but my spirits were even worse off. I'd rather have taken a hundred beatings than be separated from Pascal ever again.

After the underling vanished, Bryant stayed behind. He eyed me coldly from the other side of the bars.

I looked away. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me down on my luck.

Ignoring him, I stood up groggily. The restraints on my hands and ankles were gone, but that didn't stop them from aching. My muscles screamed from disuse. I felt woozy on my legs, like my bones had turned to gelatin in the past week.

I shakily lifted my arms. Clenching my hand into a loose fist made my forearm sore.

Good gods.

It scared me how badly my body deteriorated. I couldn't rescue Pascal if I could barely stand.

But this didn't just happen in the past week. A whole year of imprisonment had taken a toll on me. I cursed myself for only realizing it now. Why hadn't I kept up my physique? Why hadn't I put in any effort at all?

I knew why. Because I had nothing worth fighting for.

But now I did.

“Well?” Bryant prompted.

Oh. Was he still there?

I gazed absentmindedly at him, waiting for him to continue.

“Nothing to say to me, orc?” Bryant asked.

“No.”

He pursed his lips, disappointed. “Don’t you care about your little omega?”

Of course I did. But no good would come from admitting it. I was sick of Bryant’s cruel mind games. I wouldn’t engage in them anymore.

“Answer me, you brute,” Bryant snapped.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I care.”

I didn’t look at him. I stretched my arms and shook off the cinched feeling in my muscles.

A cloud of impatience emanated from Bryant. Did being ignored upset him?

He sniffed. “Since you claim to care, you might as well know he’s chained up in the pit, by the way.”

I saw his smirk from the corner of my eye. When I didn’t react, it turned upside down.

“I suppose you can’t care *that* much, being a small-minded beast and all,” he said.

No response.

A few silent moments later, Bryant huffed. “Don’t think you’ve shirked your training for the show. Someone else will resume it. And believe me, he won’t be nearly as nice as that slutty omega.”

With that, Bryant stormed off. I heard the distant slam of the basement door.

I blew out a long breath.

Pascal was in the pit. Alone. Was he still tied up, too? Was he all right?

Doubts and fears stormed inside me. Yet I couldn't let them bog me down.

Bryant was right. I *did* have training to do—but not the kind he imposed on me.

My old routine felt rusty, but it came to me. I got on the floor, balancing on my palms and the tips of my feet, and began doing push-ups.

One... two... three...

It wasn't long before sweat dripped down my brow and my muscles ached with effort. I pushed through it. I wouldn't make any progress sitting around languishing.

Before being captured, I was in my prime. I could do a hundred push-ups without breaking a sweat. I was powerful and fit.

But I didn't dwell on my past mistakes. I had to move forward.

I'd rescue Pascal, no matter what.

After twenty meagre push-ups, I groaned in fatigue. My muscles were ready to give out. I sat up and caught my breath.

It'd take a lot more than *twenty* to break out.

There was no time to mope. I moved onto the next routine—sit-ups. My core strength had diminished in this cage. My whole body needed to be in shape.

The number twenty lingered over my head, taunting me, so I aimed for thirty sit-ups. Near the end, it felt like my abs were on fire... but I did it.

Drenched in sweat and gasping for air, I collapsed on the floor. I allowed myself five minutes of rest before I moved on.

There was no stopping. Every minute that passed was another minute Pascal was alone, in need of rescue.

My omega wouldn't spend a damn second longer in this hellhole than was necessary.

I hauled my sore body to my feet, then ran in place. Orcs were known for their physical strength, not cardio stamina, but I'd need both to escape.

I only lasted ten minutes before collapsing against my cot. My lungs burned and my skin felt cold from the evaporating sweat.

But above the dizziness and the screaming ache in all my muscles, I felt good. Any progress was an improvement.

After the worst of it passed, I laid my head on my pillow, but it was uncomfortable. Something poked me.

The carving.

I pulled it out, examining it. Longing pulsed like a heartbeat within me. It was meant for Pascal... but Bryant tore him away from me before he could receive it.

My mind kept flashing back to that horrible moment. Pascal could've fought back with the dragon fang, but Bryant pinned his arms so he couldn't. Were his arms free in the pit? Could he protect himself? Or was he chained up just like me?

I cursed my handcuffs. Without them, I'd be in a much better position. Pascal said the basement could be unlocked from the inside. If that was the case, I might be able to break free through brute force...

Which meant the only true barrier to my escape were the handcuffs.

Frustration flowed through me. My hand clenched around the carving.

Then I stopped.

I unfurled my fingers and looked at the wooden horse figurine. *Really* looked at it.

My gaze slid from the carving to the keyhole of my handcuffs.

A ridiculous idea struck me. But maybe a ridiculous idea was exactly what I needed right now.

The figurine was thicker and wider than the keyhole. It was the perfect size to mold into shape through trial-and-error, and with my wood carving skills, I was confident I could make it happen.

Either that, or the workout fried my brain and turned me delirious.

But there was one big problem. Pascal had the dragon fang. Without it, I couldn't carve anything.

...Could I?

A sudden phantom sensation made me shiver. It was the feeling of Pascal caressing my tusks with great interest.

My tusks were no dragon fangs, but could they work in its stead?

I slowly lifted the horse figurine to my lips. My heart pounded with anxious hope. This was an outlandish, impossible idea. There was no way it could possibly work.

Afraid of the answer, I shut my eyes—then rubbed the edge of the carving against one of my tusks.

When I opened my eyes a moment later, I looked down.

There was a thin, paperlike layer of wood in my lap.

My heart skipped a beat. Despite my exhaustion, I launched to my feet. The paper layer fluttered to the floor.

I could do this.

I'd save Pascal with my own strength and ingenuity.

Just wait, my love, I thought, praying to the gods he sensed my feelings. *I'm coming for you.*

TWENTY-ONE

Pascal

SOMETHING CHANGED INSIDE ME.

It wasn't from the maltreatment. Bryant's underlings visited me daily to bring food and water, although it was considerably less than what they offered while I was still an employee. Now I was a prisoner. The joke was on them, though. Years of living under Headmaster prepared me for living with less.

So it wasn't that. It was different, yet I couldn't put my finger on it.

THE DAYS PASSED. I found it difficult to keep track. I'd lost count after the first week or so. Bryant hadn't visited me in the meantime either, so I had no significant events to hold on to. The minutes dragged on into days...

After my morning delivery of food and water, I had nothing to do but follow the shade. As the sun moved overhead in the sky, it turned the floor of the pit hot. I inched like a worm towards the wall with the most shade. At first, I found it humiliating—and it still was—but now, sickeningly, I'd grown used to it.

I had nothing to do but think. Sometimes I thought about Florian and Devereaux. They were probably happy right now, as usual. My heart was happy for them, but it also ached with jealousy. Their love seemed so easy.

Sometimes I thought about Kip and the other children at the orphanage. And I thought about Maple, cooped up in that stable.

But mostly, I thought of Xolkug. I was scared for him. If they were doing *this* to me, what horrible thing were they inflicting on him?

I remembered what Bryant said. That Xolkug was his asset, and I was replaceable. So he wanted Xolkug alive, at least.

Me? I wasn't sure anymore.

I HAD NOTHING TO DO, so most of the time, I slept.

But one day I woke up with horrible stomach cramps. I groaned to myself, tossing and turning in the sand. For once, the sun-baked sand felt comfortable—it was the closest thing I had to Xolkug's warm embrace.

There was no replacing him, though. I suffered alone through the cramps until they passed.

But every time I woke up, they came back. It was awful. It got so bad that I tried not to fall asleep, but staying awake constantly was its own form of torture.

One morning, one of Bryant's men came to deliver my meal while I was in the middle of terrible cramps.

"The hell's wrong with you?" he muttered.

I barely heard him over my grunting and groaning. "Hurts..."

The man stood there awkwardly, holding the tray with stale bread and soup. He put it down and left. I assumed he wouldn't come back until evening, since they never did.

A few agonizing moments later, Bryant appeared. He stalked up to me and curtly asked, "What's wrong?"

I couldn't even turn my head to look up at him. "Stomach hurts..."

"Why?" he snapped.

"Don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? You have all your needs met, you whiny little bitch. Stop complaining."

I groaned through my gritted teeth. I didn't care about his insults. The pain was too much. I almost felt sick with it.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Bryant's face twist into a snarl. His body tensed and he lifted his leg, as if to kick me in the side.

A terrifying, forceful instinct rose up inside me. For a second, it was like someone else took over my body—someone ancient and wise. Someone who knew better about what was happening to me.

"Don't," I snarled.

Bryant looked stunned. Then he spat and stormed off.

I blinked in confusion. What *was* that? That feeling exploded up inside me like a volcano eruption. I'd never yelled at anybody like that before, not even at Headmaster when she deserved it, or at the men who kidnapped me.

Whatever it was, I was grateful. I had the weird feeling that I'd narrowly avoided something terrible.

I STARTED THROWING up in the mornings.

It wasn't pretty. Or fun.

EVENTUALLY, the horrible aches and vomiting passed.

At that point, I didn't know how many days had gone by. Two weeks? Three?

Four?

No, that was just wishful thinking.

Still nobody came to release me, or even to free my limbs. I boomeranged back from acceptance, and now I was pissed off again. I was sick and tired of crawling around like a slug.

"Hey," I called to the man who brought me breakfast. I hadn't spoken to him in a while, not since the time he fetched Bryant for my stomach cramps.

He put down the tray. "What?"

"Come on. It's been ages. When are you going to unlock these chains?"

He grunted. "Not gonna happen."

I wriggled my body in his general direction. "It's sick in the head to treat somebody like this, you know! I know Bryant is messed up, but you and all the other men who work for him are just as bad! No, you're *worse!* You don't even stand up to him!"

All my pent-up anger poured out of me. The man listened with a disgruntled expression but he didn't argue.

Then he narrowed his eyes at me, as if seeing something odd. He took a few cautious steps towards me.

I scoffed. "What, are you scared I'll lunge at you like a rabid dog? Ooh, so scary! A chained-up omega crawling on the ground!"

"Shut up for a second."

I was so not in the mood. "Don't tell me to shut up. Why don't you just leave if you're sick of listening to me?"

The man didn't seem to hear anything I said. He stared at my lower half.

"What the hell?" he muttered. "You crazy? You've been eating fucking sand or something?"

“Huh?”

He grimaced. “Your stomach... it’s bulging.”

He didn’t know what he was talking about. My stomach was—

Then I looked down.

My belly was much, much rounder than it should have been.

“What?” I whispered.

I stared down at the rounded shape, dazed. For a second I felt like a stranger, like I’d left my body and was viewing it from the outside—but at the same time, it was the most connected with my physical form I’d ever felt.

I breathed slow and hard. There was no trick. That *was* my body.

But why did it look like that?

The man peered at me with both curiosity and disgust. He mumbled a curse under his breath, then backed away.

“I’ll get in deep shit if you did something to yourself. Tell me what you did!” he yelled.

I didn’t know what he was talking about. Why did he sound so angry?

“Answer me!”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Still staring at my belly in awe, I sat up as much as I could, trying not to jostle it too much. It felt precious. Delicate. Without thinking, I knew I had to protect it.

“Shit...” He paced aggressively. I got the sense I’d just become a huge problem to him. “I have to report this to Bryant.”

I glanced at him uneasily. The last time Bryant was in the pit, he’d tried to kick me—and I’d stopped him.

Was *this* why?

Had my instincts known something I hadn't yet figured out?

I was too nervous to even *think* about the word. Even if my instincts knew, my brain wasn't completely sure. I didn't know if it was even possible...

My heart pounded as I curled in on myself, trying to hide my belly from view. To protect it.

"He doesn't have to know," I said quietly.

A horrified expression came over the man. "You... there's something wrong with you! You're a freak!"

So *that* was why it was okay to treat me like this.

Stewing with anger, I sharply turned my head away from him. It wasn't the first time in my life I'd been called a freak, but it was different now. I wasn't the only person involved anymore.

I wanted to run my hands over my belly and reassure whatever was growing inside... but my hands were chained. The best I could do was cover my belly with my forearms.

I dully heard the door slam behind me. The man had no doubt gone to fetch Bryant.

Let him come.

In the meantime, I glanced fondly down at my belly. When had it gotten so big? Why hadn't I noticed? How long had I really been here...?

I wished Xolkug was with me. It seemed like everything would've been all right if he wrapped his arms around me and held me close...

When the door opened again, I had a split-second moment of hope, thinking that my wish came true.

Instead, Bryant stepped out into the pit. The man from earlier lingered by the door.

I met Bryant's gaze fiercely. If he'd come to harass me, I wouldn't back down. Not now.

Bryant got straight to the point. “Let me see.”

I didn’t move.

Bryant grinned. By now I realized it wasn’t a real smile. He bared his teeth like a predator.

“Where are my manners? *Please* let me see, my boy.”

That phrase sent a nasty chill down my spine. How did I ever think it was a real term of endearment?

Bryant took a step towards me. I tensed, glaring at him.

“I won’t touch you if you’re a good little omega and open up,” Bryant whispered in a fake-pleasant voice.

The last thing I wanted was for him to touch me. I didn’t have a choice.

Grudgingly, I moved my legs and arms. When Bryant saw my swollen belly, his eyes widened. He was speechless. Various emotions flashed across his eyes.

Was that *greed* I saw on his face?

Bryant grinned maniacally, so wide it nearly reached his ears. Then he laughed. It echoed off the brick walls of the pit.

“Perfect,” Bryant murmured. He sounded genuine. “This is perfect.”

His underling frowned in confusion. “Sir?”

Bryant grabbed the man enthusiastically. “Don’t you see? This is a *perfect* opportunity! The omega isn’t just a one-eyed orphan anymore, oh no... he’s now *pregnant* with a freak of nature! An abomination! Do you realize how many people will pay exorbitant money to see this? We’ll be rich!”

Pregnant.

After I heard that word, I didn’t register the rest of what Bryant said. It didn’t matter.

The only thing that mattered was keeping my baby safe from him.

Xolkug’s baby—and mine.

A well of emotion burst forth within me, feelings I'd never experienced before. They felt ancient and sacred and powerful. I would do anything in my power to protect my child.

"...keep him fed and watered, twice as much as usual," Bryant said.

I zoned back into their conversation. Bryant was ecstatic with this discovery, while the other man remained uneasy. Bryant continued to bark commands at him about my "care" while pregnant.

It should've been a relief that Bryant intended to treat me better now that he knew I was carrying a baby.

Instead it steeled my willpower to get the hell out of this place as soon as possible.

TWENTY-TWO

Xolkug

ONE OF BRYANT'S underlings escorted me to the stable to resume my training. It was obvious Bryant loved the idea of me riding a horse during his show, probably because he thought it was a hilarious mental image. If only he'd known anything about orcs. For once, his ignorance worked to my advantage.

Just like Bryant said, I didn't fuss or complain. If it was for Pascal's sake, I'd bear it. I obliged the man's every command as he postured aggressively and ordered me to the stable.

When we arrived, it was quickly apparent he didn't know the first thing about horses. He was jerky and twitchy around them as we headed down the aisle towards Maple—*not* a good trait around horses.

"Get a move on," the man grumbled. He glanced back and forth at the stalls as if the horses would jump out at him at any second.

I didn't respond. When we arrived at Maple's stall, his rump faced the aisle, like he was sulking.

"Hello, Maple," I said.

Maple's ears perked up. He turned around, his eyes bright with recognition. I lifted my chained hands slowly to stroke his velvety nose.

"Enough wasting time," the man behind me ordered. "Take it out to the arena. Do whatever it is you do."

It suddenly occurred to me that if the man was ignorant about horses, he also knew nothing about riding. He'd expected me to retain whatever training Pascal had taught me. Maybe Maple and I could use his ignorance to our advantage, too.

The wary man hung back as I took Maple's bridle from the tack area, then put it on him.

The man grunted. "Good. At least you know how to do *something*."

He said it like he was surprised, as if he could do better. I nearly snorted. He clearly couldn't tell a saddle pad from his own ass.

I led Maple out into the horse arena. It was a simple dirt circle behind the stable.

But I noticed one very important detail. There was no fence. Whoever used this arena clearly kept the horses on a tight lead at all times.

If one was to, say, get loose...

A wild plan formed in my mind. I didn't know if it would work, but I had to try.

"Let's go, Maple," I said, taking the loose reins and leading him into the arena.

The man leaned against the stable wall, crossing his arms and frowning. "Well? Ride the damn thing so we can get this over with."

I ran my hand along Maple's back. I purposely hadn't put a saddle on him, not that the man noticed or cared. For my plan to work, Maple had to be as light and unburdened as possible.

I could not ride him. That was obvious to anyone with eyes. I was far too tall and heavy for a large pony, even a stallion, to carry comfortably.

I needed a large orc breed. I needed my own horse, Sharamak.

"Hello?" the man snapped. "Get on with it already!"

“Okay,” I called back just to shut him up.

I took Maple’s head in my hands and stroked his cheeks. Everything rode on him—literally.

“Maple, listen to me,” I whispered. “You are smarter than humans give you credit for. I know this.”

He snorted lightly.

“Pascal is in danger. Go home. Find Florian and Devereaux.”

Maple’s ears twitched. He recognized the names.

“When I release you, run as fast as you can. Trust no humans except the ones you know.”

“Hey! Orc! Stop mumbling to the damn horse and get on it already!” the man yelled.

There was no more time. I hoped Maple understood.

“All right,” I said loud enough for the man to hear. I took Maple’s reins loosely and stood at his side, acting like I was about to hike myself over his back. Hidden from view, I dropped the reins. “Let’s go, Maple.”

As I pretended to slip in the dirt, I slapped Maple’s rump. It wasn’t hard enough to be painful, but I knew it would surprise him.

Maple reared. He let out a loud whinny, then took off. With no fence in the way, he was already halfway gone.

“What? Oh, fuck! No!” the man moaned. “Get that damn animal back!”

I brought my fingers to my lips, falling back into a familiar gesture. Then I whistled, loud and sharp. It was a sound that started high and pitched down low before evening out.

Maple didn’t come back, and I didn’t want him to. It was an orc whistle, one he’d probably never heard before. The sound meant nothing to him.

But it did to Sharamak... if she could even hear it.

“You stupid orc!” the man bellowed, storming up to me. “You let it escape!”

I turned around slowly to face him. Since I’d started my workout routine, I felt myself standing taller. It was like Pascal moved a boulder blocking the stream of my confidence, letting it all flow back to me.

The man noticed, too. He suddenly balked and kept his distance. I noticed his eyes raking my broad shoulders and bulging biceps.

“Y-you shouldn’t have let it go,” the man mumbled. His arrogant barking became a pathetic mewl.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have much experience with horses,” I lied.

He sighed. “Whatever. Fuck this, I’m taking you back to your cell.”

I quietly kept in line as the man ushered me away from the stable. But the whole time, my gaze was on the horizon. I put all my hope in Maple and Sharamak.

Unlike humans, horses had never disappointed me.

I CARVED another line into the concrete wall.

Thirty days.

That was how much time passed since Pascal was wrenched away from me.

It was also how long I’d spent working out for hours each day, reclaiming my original physique. Maybe even surpassing it.

I felt stronger—not just physically, but mentally, too. It was time to break free of this horrible prison.

My body and mind weren’t the only things that had transformed. The wooden horse figurine—once meant as a

romantic gift for Pascal—had changed shape. It was now a perfect key to my handcuffs.

Or so I hoped. I'd only been working on perfecting it for 720 hours, minus sleep.

The wooden key was snugly hidden in my pocket. I kept it on me at all times, waiting for the right moment.

A feeling of urgency simmered inside me. Today it rose to a boil.

Something had changed.

I didn't know what, but it did. It felt like storm clouds choked the sky, about to break open and let their torrent loose. I stood and paced the cell restlessly.

Thirty days since I'd seen Pascal. This prickling, uncomfortable feeling screamed at me to *go to him*.

I stopped pacing. If I waited around for the perfect moment, it would never come.

I couldn't wait any longer.

My hand trembled as I picked up the key I'd carved. Handling it was awkward, but I'd grown so used to wearing the handcuffs that I knew exactly how to move—that alone should've been a sign it was time to break free.

I held my breath as I slid the head of the key into the slot.

No tension.

I pushed it deeper.

No clicking mechanism or wall of steel stopped me. The key slipped in, smooth and silent.

My heart pounded like a thousand thundering hoofbeats. I forgot to breathe.

The key went in. Now all I had to do was turn it...

SLAM!

The basement door opened. Somebody was coming to my cell.

The footsteps were unhurried but heavy. Not Pascal, and not Bryant. One of the man's army of underlings. Was he taking me back to the stable for training?

Lightning crackled in my chest. No. Not today.

No matter what happened today, I was *going* to see Pascal. No mortal force could stop me from seeing my mate any longer. The gods themselves would have to strike me down.

Heart wrenching with anticipation, I turned the key.

It clicked softly.

The mechanism came undone. The cuffs loosened.

I caught them before they fell and clattered loudly. I wanted to stuff them beneath my pillow, but there was no time. The man was seconds away from my cell. I gripped them in my hands like they were the corpse of some prey I'd finally killed.

A man appeared in front of me. I recognized him—he'd gagged Pascal and dragged him away that horrible day. He must've been in charge of Pascal's care while in the pit.

My heart thudded. Would he notice my missing handcuffs? Or would he see them near my hands and assume I was wearing them?

But the man barely looked at me. He had a distant, distracted look in his eyes, like he'd seen something terrible and couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Bryant wants to see you, orc," he mumbled. "I'm taking you to him."

He didn't look at me directly. His gaze was unfocused, staring at the far wall.

I nodded. He unlocked the door. It swung open with a rusty groan.

This was my chance.

My hands were free. I could do *anything*. I could crush this man's head like a walnut if I so desired. But he led me quietly upstairs without stoking my bloodlust. Never once did he

notice my hands weren't cuffed. I got the sense he wanted to get this over with. He didn't want to spend a second longer near me than his job forced him to.

And he led me straight to Bryant.

Nobody else was in the hall. I was grateful—the other men might not be as absentminded as this one.

With a sudden flutter in my chest, I recognized the route we took. We arrived at the door leading to the pit.

The place where Bryant first ordered Pascal to strike me—and my mate had refused.

Now it was finally my turn to strike back.

When the door to the pit opened, sunlight blasted my eyes. I squinted past the sudden brightness of the rays.

There were two figures in the pit. One stood confidently in the center. Bryant.

Behind him, laying on the ground with his back facing me, was my mate.

He looked frail. His skin was covered in sand and dirt. All his limbs were curled and tied together. It was shocking that the humans had chained Pascal up tighter than they did to me.

Pascal looked thinner. Sadder. But when he looked at me over his shoulder, I saw in his glowing amber eye a burning ferocity that took my breath away.

From a single glance, I knew he'd been through too much.

No more.

Pascal gasped when he saw me. "Xolkug!" he cried.

Bryant stepped in front of him like he hadn't spoken. "Good. You're here."

I didn't know if he was referring to me or the man. It didn't matter. This ended now.

"Have you made good progress in your training?" Bryant asked, speaking to me now. He wore a smarmy smile that made me want to punch him in the teeth.

“Yes,” I said.

I expected Bryant to notice my lack of restraints any moment. But he didn't. He, too, barely looked at me, as if a pressing issue sucked up all of his attention.

I didn't understand. Wasn't a loose orc the most worrisome thing that could possibly happen?

I glanced at Pascal, wondering if he knew something about it. But when our gazes met, I froze. There was fierce desperation and fury glinting in his amber eye. Something he *needed* to tell me, but couldn't. What could it be?

I remembered that simmering anxiety from earlier, like a storm about to break. Here in the pit, the sky was blue and the sun bright... yet the dark clouds gathered. The air was charged.

Bryant stalked up to me with a grin. He was in a better mood than usual. Did it have anything to do with my mate tied-up and exhausted on the ground?

Fire burned in my guts. If he'd touched Pascal inappropriately, I'd have his head.

“Excellent,” Bryant said. “I don't need to hear my mens' reports to know you're doing your best. You'll put on a spectacular performance.”

He spoke with smug knowledge. He referenced our conversation from the night he split us up, when he blackmailed me into performing well to save Pascal.

My fingers tightened around the loose handcuffs. Dangling in my hands, they were no longer a restraint tool, but a weapon. It would only take a second to smash the steel into Bryant's skull.

But Bryant didn't notice. He jauntily circled around Pascal, not knowing he'd been moments away from death at my whim.

The only reason I hesitated was because of the look in Pascal's eye. What couldn't he tell me? I wondered if he bit back a warning. Maybe there was an ambush waiting for us in

the hallway, or Bryant had a secret weapon hidden beneath his clothes. I wished Pascal could speak directly into my mind.

“You didn’t answer me, orc,” Bryant said cheerfully. “You *will* perform well on show day, won’t you?”

I ground my teeth. He was hiding something. I just didn’t know what.

“Yes,” I muttered.

“Can’t hear you.”

“Yes, I will perform well,” I snapped.

Bryant stopped. He raised a brow and looked at me directly. “I’d watch that attitude if I were you.”

I was about to snarl back at him that I was done with his bullshit—until Bryant put his hand on Pascal’s thin shoulder.

Rage exploded inside me. I wanted to rip his head off. I wanted to smear his blood across the walls of this pit, staining them forever.

How *dare* he touch my mate?

Bryant knew exactly what he was doing. As he snaked his dirty fingers across Pascal’s shoulder, he met my gaze, grinning wildly. He was visibly excited, bursting with his desire to share a secret.

I didn’t care what the fuck it was. I’d trained long and hard for this. I’d used every skill in my arsenal to set us up for escape. I was saving Pascal.

I took a step towards them, the chains rattling with the motion.

And then Bryant turned Pascal around.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

Pascal was thin—yet his belly was swollen. Round.

Pregnant.

TWENTY-THREE

Pascal

MY HEART SWELLED as Xolkug appeared in the pit—my mate, my alpha, my knight in shining armor.

His muscles were bigger now. He looked far stronger and more confident since the last time I'd seen him. His whole aura evolved into something bright and powerful, like the sun. Gone was the Xolkug who'd submitted to his fate of being locked up in a cell. I was so, so happy to see it.

If we were alone, it would've been perfect. We could've reunited the way we wanted to. But Bryant and his underling were here, poisoning the atmosphere, trying to ruin our love with their hatred. I was sick of it.

As Bryant squeezed my shoulder, I saw Xolkug tense.

Then I noticed something was different. In my excitement to see him, I hadn't seen it right away.

His handcuffs were gone.

At first, I thought my eye tricked me. Certainly the humans wouldn't lead Xolkug right to me without restraints...

But if I hadn't noticed at first, maybe they hadn't either. Xolkug clutched the loose cuffs. From the corner of one's eye, it still looked like he was wearing them. Besides, the humans were distracted. Bryant was crazed with greed since he realized I was pregnant. The other man, his underling, had been horrified.

I met Xolkug's gaze deliberately. If his hands were free, we had a fighting chance.

But Bryant wouldn't let us go that easily. And now he had the biggest piece of blackmail of all—our baby.

I didn't want Xolkug to find out like this. Sharing the news of my pregnancy should've been a tender, wonderful moment. Instead, Bryant was going to weaponize it against my mate.

When Bryant spun me around to reveal my belly to Xolkug, he froze. I watched a thousand emotions flicker across my mate's face.

“Well?” Bryant said smugly, after it sank in. “You understand the stakes now, don't you, orc?”

Xolkug stared at Bryant, expressionless.

“Funny how this even happened,” Bryant went on, gesturing with his free hand while the other stroked my shoulder. It sent chills through me. “Who knew humans and orcs could even breed?”

The human man behind Xolkug looked deeply uncomfortable. It angered me.

“You're a real pioneer, Pascal!” Bryant declared with a laugh. “Without you, the world would be clueless! But you went ahead and spread your legs for that beast.”

Bryant was so caught up in his sick elation that he didn't notice Xolkug take a step closer.

Chuckling, Bryant looked down at me. There was no fake fondness in his eyes anymore—only greed that he'd found a new asset. He'd stopped caring about me, if he ever did at all.

No, Bryant never cared. I knew that clearly now. The only person who'd ever shown me true compassion in this place was Xolkug.

“Yes, you really took one for the team,” Bryant said, grinning. “And good timing, too. Only been a month since you got knocked up, and look how big that belly is already. No human child would make you swell up that big in only a

month. It's because there's a *monster* of a baby inside of you—imagine how big you'll get by show time!”

Bryant laughed, overcome with joy at the thought of his spectacle. Meanwhile, I stewed with rage. It sickened me to hear him talk about my unborn child like that.

“My baby isn't a monster,” I muttered.

Bryant flashed a condescending smile at me. “What was that, omega?”

“My baby isn't a monster. *You* are,” I snapped.

Bryant's brows raised in shock. Before he could say anything, my white-hot anger poured out of me.

“You're keeping a pregnant omega locked up, exposed to the elements, barely feeding or clothing me! All for what? So you can put me on display for your sick freak show? You're a disgusting man! You're inhuman!”

Bryant chuckled and stroked my hair, sending a grotesque chill down my spine. “Oh, no. Your hormones got you all confused. Poor thing. You see, the inhuman one is that orc. The one who *fucked* you. The one *you* spread your slutty legs —”

Powerful malachite-colored fingers grabbed Bryant by the throat. His eyes bulged and he gasped uselessly for air as Xolkug lifted him off the ground.

“That's enough,” Xolkug warned in a low, dangerous voice.

Bryant clawed at Xolkug's hand, kicking his legs uselessly. “How... did you...?” he choked out.

The man standing by the door started, backing away. “Shit!”

Xolkug brought Bryant's face close to his. “This is what you wanted, wasn't it?” he growled. “You wanted Pascal to be a victim. And you wanted me to be a monster.” He squeezed Bryant's throat. “Here you go. I'm playing the perfect role for your show. I'm the big, bad orc you desperately want me to be.”

Bryant grimaced angrily, spitting half-curses. He flailed in Xolkug's grip. The difference in their size and strength was overwhelming. It occurred to me that if Xolkug wanted to break Bryant's neck right now, he could do it easily. Bryant didn't stand a chance.

And maybe he didn't deserve one. I didn't know if Bryant was right about my overly-caring hormones or not, but still, I couldn't bring myself to watch this any longer.

"Stop, Xolkug," I said quietly.

Fire burned in my mate's eyes. He slowly unclenched his fingers from Bryant's neck so the man could breathe, but didn't let him go.

Bryant gasped, pointing a frantic finger at his underling. "Guards! Get them!"

The man by the door hesitated, frozen in fear.

"Go, now!" Bryant snarled.

Xolkug sighed. "This is why I didn't want him to speak."

"You'll never get away with this!" Bryant spat. "I'll have your head, orc, mark my words!"

"Shut up already," I interjected.

Bryant was too enraged to notice anything I or anybody else said. "How did you get free? Who betrayed me by releasing you?" he ranted at Xolkug.

"Nobody," Xolkug said mildly. He examined the handcuffs. They were orc-sized, too big for Bryant's wrists. "I released myself."

"How?" Bryant demanded. His furious confusion distracted him from the fact that Xolkug brought the handcuffs closer.

"I carved a key and escaped," Xolkug explained. He snapped one cuff around Bryant's neck and the other to his upper arm. It wouldn't hold forever, but it incapacitated him long enough to release me.

As Xolkug dropped him on the ground, Bryant flailed and roared, “What have you done to me? What are you doing?”

Xolkug ignored him. He picked me up, cradling me in his strong arms. “Are you all right?” he asked softly.

I smiled. “I’m fine. Let’s talk later.”

“I agree. Brace yourself.”

I held still as Xolkug snapped the restraints on my wrists and ankles like they were made of paper. As I stretched my limbs for the first time in a month, I groaned in relief. I was sore all over and exhausted, but Xolkug’s presence gave me all the strength I needed.

In a quick motion, Xolkug tied the chains of the cuffs together in a rough knot. He took his makeshift restraint over to Bryant, who hissed and kicked in the dirt.

“Get away from me! Disgusting beast!”

Xolkug said nothing as he pinned Bryant’s flailing legs and tied them together with the chains. It wasn’t a perfect restraint, but there was no time to waste. It would keep Bryant from following us for a while.

“Let’s go,” I said breathlessly.

I was ready to walk on my own, but Xolkug scooped me up and ran. I yelped in surprise.

“When did you get so fast?” I asked.

“I’ve always been fast,” he said evenly. “The humans just never let me run.”

Xolkug bolted for the door. Just before we reached it, he put his fingers to his lips and whistled loud and hard. Then he threw the door open and ran down the hallway towards the exit. We heard Bryant screaming curses behind us.

My heart pounded with a mix of anxiety and hope. That horrible man wouldn’t let us go that easily. But I had faith in Xolkug. He felt different, like a new side of him had been unlocked. As he held me close to his chest, I felt his powerful

rippling muscles and steady breathing. Had he been working out in our time apart?

It wasn't just his physicality. He seemed emotionally stronger, too. Seeing me pregnant must've awakened his alpha instincts. Even though this was the most dangerous situation I'd ever been in, I felt safe in Xolkug's arms.

We neared the end of the hall. So far, nobody blocked our path. For a moment, I wondered if everything would go according to plan, and we could escape without a hitch.

Xolkug kicked open the door to the outside world.

A swarm of Bryant's men waited for us. I recognized the one from earlier. He must've gathered them on Bryant's command.

Steel glinted in the sunlight as the men readied their weapons. Knives, pitchforks, shovels... anything they could carry.

I sucked in a breath and shrank against Xolkug's chest. I didn't want him to fight the angry mob. There were too many of them, and they were armed to the teeth.

"Get out of my way," Xolkug boomed in a resolute voice.

His chest rumbled deeply, like a tremor in the earth. I'd never heard him talk that way. He was so soft-spoken and gentle with me, and during the interactions I'd watched between him and Bryant, he purposely lowered his voice. It was refreshing to see he wasn't holding back anymore.

The mob didn't move. They exchanged hesitant glances at each other. Had they noticed the change in Xolkug, too? Some of the men stared at my belly. They all knew I was an omega. Did they know the baby was Xolkug's? Or did they think it was Bryant's? That thought was nauseating. Either way, my pregnant belly gave them pause.

Xolkug took a step forward.

"I'll say it again. Get out of the way," Xolkug ordered. "*Now.*"

They balked. Xolkug tensed with impatience. He took another step, and the mob retreated a step in turn.

One of the bolder men raised his shovel. “L-leave the omega and get back in your cell!”

“No, it’s the orc he wants,” another man hissed.

The ringleader man from the pit muttered, “We want both. We can’t let them leave. Not the orc, and not that pregnant abomination...”

Xolkug snarled. “Don’t you *ever* refer to my mate again that way unless you want to end up like Bryant.”

The man paled. “What did you do to Bryant?”

Xolkug said nothing, letting his threat hang in the air. Bryant was only restrained, but they didn’t know that. For all their ignorance and fear of orcs, they probably assumed Xolkug had smeared Bryant across the walls.

Xolkug’s glare finally broke the man. He and half the mob threw their weapons on the ground and ran back inside to save Bryant from his fate.

As the mob thinned out, they lost steam. They pointed their shaky weapons at Xolkug.

“Well? Want to end up like Bryant?” Xolkug growled. He approached the trembling mob. “Trust me. It won’t be pleasant if you force me to put my mate down.”

My heart hammered. I knew how much Xolkug despised violence. He wanted to avoid it at all costs, but I also felt his burning desire to protect me—and our baby.

“Please,” I said to the men. “You don’t have to do this. Just let us go.”

They looked at me, as if remembering I was a person and not just a sack of potatoes in Xolkug’s arms.

“That baby,” a man with a pitchfork mumbled. “Is it Bryant’s?”

That annoyed me.

“What if it is?” I replied irritably. “Would that make you more or less inclined to capture me?”

“A-answer the question, omega!”

Growling, Xolkug snatched the pitchfork out of the man’s hand and tossed it thirty feet away. The mob yelped in shock and scattered backwards. There was enough space to run past them now.

“Enough,” Xolkug said quietly to me. “Let’s go.”

I nodded, and he took off into a mad dash. I couldn’t believe how fast he was.

“Do you know how to get out of here?” I asked.

“Yes. I’d never forget.”

He didn’t need to elaborate. I knew that horrible night he’d been captured was etched into his memory, along with the route to freedom.

Panicked voices called out behind us. “S-stop that orc!”

The mob chased Xolkug, but could never catch up. He was too fast and too determined. Without horses, they’d never match his speed. Pride welled up within me. My alpha was amazing in every way.

When Xolkug ran past the stable, I gasped. “Maple! We can ride him out!”

“Maple is gone,” Xolkug said. “I sent him to get help. Speaking of which...”

Xolkug raised his fingers to his lips and whistled again. It was that same unusual sound he’d used before.

“Who are you calling?” I asked. “Sharamak? Your horse?”

Xolkug smiled. “I’m surprised you remembered her name.”

“Of course I did! Who d’you think I am?”

We left the stable behind. It was for the best—Xolkug wouldn’t fit on any of those horses anyway. But what did he

mean by sending Maple for help? He was a nice horse, but I doubted he'd understand specific instructions like that.

Xolkug sounded serious, though. Xolkug clearly believed in Maple, and I believed in Xolkug. Whatever his plan was, I hoped it worked.

My stomach flipped as Xolkug bolted past that horrible tent. The sooner we left it behind, the better.

"Xolkug, put me down. I can run, too," I said.

"No," he growled. "You are my pregnant mate, and you've been tortured for the past month. You're not running. Let me handle this."

As stubborn as I was, I couldn't argue with that. My body felt weak and frail. I wouldn't have been able to do anything without Xolkug's help.

Finally we reached the street. It was mid-day and full of people, who stared and screamed and dispersed upon seeing Xolkug. It was chaos, but we didn't have time to stand around and think about it. Xolkug bolted straight for the stone arches that marked Diremeadow's exit.

Behind us, hoofbeats suddenly pounded, getting closer every second.

"Shit," Xolkug muttered.

I craned my neck past Xolkug's arm. My heart dropped. Bryant was on a horse, leading the re-established mob, all of them armed and on horseback.

"Stop them!" Bryant shouted.

Xolkug was fast, but not faster than a four-legged mount. They'd catch up soon—and we were so close to escaping.

"They're gaining on us," I cried.

"I know," Xolkug muttered.

"You think you can escape that easily?" Bryant screamed. He sounded hysterical. "*Nobody* gets away from me!"

Terror seized my body. There was something deeply wrong about that man. The last thing I wanted was for our family to be back in his clutches.

I cursed my frailness. If Xolkug could put me down safely, he could've turned around and fought Bryant. The mob was nothing without him. If he fell, I was sure the rest would follow. But I was too weak to be left alone—and it was Bryant's fault.

My terror twisted into anger.

“Get away from us!” I snapped at him. “Just leave us alone!”

Spittle flew from Bryant's mouth like a rabid animal. “You're *mine*! Both of you! I'll have you, no matter what, even if it means I have to cut off all your limbs!”

His crazed words finally hit his underlings. They paused, their horses slowing. Horror spread across their faces.

It wasn't just his employees. Pedestrian onlookers in the street stopped and gaped at what Bryant just said—Bryant, the previously well-respected businessman, threatening to dismember a pregnant omega.

The mob fell away from Bryant. Now he was the only one chasing us.

“Xolkug,” I said. “It's just him now.”

Xolkug didn't stop to look. He kept staring ahead determinedly. “Good.”

At first I couldn't hear it over the sound of blood roaring in my ears. Then it exploded like thunder. Heavy, loud hooves that shook the ground.

Xolkug grinned.

I turned around to see what he was looking at. Then I saw her—a giant, beautiful gray horse.

Sharamak.

Behind us, Bryant's horse whinnied and balked in fear at the sight of such a massive horse.

“What the hell is that thing?” Bryant muttered.

Xolkug didn't stop. He ran with increased vigor, eager to be reunited with her. They nearly collided in their enthusiasm, but Xolkug kept me safely out of the way so I wasn't crushed by the colossal horse.

“You came,” Xolkug murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

Sharamak huffed softly as she nuzzled his face. It warmed my heart to see them clearly so fond of each other.

“Hold on tight,” Xolkug said to me. He put one hand on Sharamak's powerful back, then launched himself up and swung us on top of her. She was so tall that I felt dizzy from the height.

Now *we* looked down at Bryant, whose horse spooked. It wrenched its head back and forth, wanting to get out of Bryant's control. I didn't blame it.

Finally, Bryant grew frustrated and stumbled off the horse.

“Fine! I don't need you!” Bryant shouted as it ran off. His head whipped around to glare at us. He was practically foaming at the mouth. “You think your monster horse will save you, huh? Too bad! You're never escaping Diremeadow, mark my words, you abominations!”

“It's over, Bryant,” Xolkug stated. “Your men have abandoned you, and your true nature has been exposed.”

Bryant gawked up at him. He slowly looked around and saw the horrified gazes of everyone watching this unfold.

“My true nature?” Bryant spat, laughing. “What about *yours*? You're a violent orc!”

“I haven't laid a finger on you,” Xolkug said.

Bryant had no physical injuries. He looked fine. That was obvious to everyone watching.

Bryant whipped wildly towards me instead. “And what about you, omega? Sleeping around with that *beast*? Getting

knocked up by it? Who knows what kind of disgusting thing you're gestating?"

Behind me, I heard Xolkug inhale a deep, calming breath. I ground my teeth. We both knew there was nothing we could say to change Bryant's mind. He was too narrow minded, too convinced of his own opinion.

"You can think whatever you want," I said. "Just leave us alone. Don't hurt me, or my alpha, or my baby. Let's go, Xolkug."

As Xolkug opened the reins, Bryant bolted to the exit. It was useless. On horseback, we could simply run past him.

"You're never getting out of here!" Bryant snapped. He tried to rope in the onlookers. "All of you, get over here. Don't you want to help? My assets are trying to escape!"

My heart quivered as the people glanced uneasily at us. Would they join Bryant?

But they didn't move towards him. They hung back uneasily, watching the scene unfold. That was good enough for me.

Xolkug made a clicking sound to move Sharamak forward. The great horse walked straight ahead. She paid Bryant no mind, even when he lost all composure, yelling and cursing.

"What about the show?" Bryant demanded, yelling at people. "The performers can't quit, they have work to do! Don't you care if the show falls apart?"

Bryant's frantic demands made everyone uncomfortable. They moved away, trying to get out of his range as he tried and failed to recruit them. If he wasn't such a despicable man, I might've felt sorry for him.

"Where do you think you're going?" Bryant snapped as Sharamak broke into a trot. "You'll never get away from me, ever!"

"I think it's over," I mumbled to Xolkug. "Let's get out of this horrible place."

Xolkug's powerful chest rumbled behind me as he spoke.
"Well said, my love."

TWENTY-FOUR

Xolkug

I WAS beyond relieved to see Sharamak. If she hadn't found me, I was worried I'd be forced to fight Bryant—and no doubt win. He didn't stand a chance against me at my full strength, especially not when he threatened my mate and child.

But I didn't want to fight him and humiliate him in front of all those people. He'd done a pretty good job of that himself already.

As Sharamak stepped out beneath the stone arches of Diremeadow, I felt like I could breathe for the first time. I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with clean air.

But I couldn't breathe without smelling Pascal's wonderful scent, too. Had he always smelled so good, or had our forced separation intensified his scent? Or was it the fact that he was pregnant? Either way, I couldn't get enough of it.

Once we'd left Diremeadow and it felt safe to just *be*, I buried my face in his hair.

Pascal chuckled. "What are you doing?"

"Smelling you."

He sighed contentedly and leaned back, putting his whole weight against me. Even though he was pregnant, he was lighter than before.

"I'm going to feed you. A lot," I grumbled. "We have a month of lost time to make up for."

Pascal's amber eye glistened with affection. "I'd like that."

I slowed Sharamak from a trot to a walk. With her large size, her gait was longer than a human breed of horse. There was no way Bryant or anyone else would catch up to us on foot.

But I kept looking over my shoulder. I didn't want Pascal to worry, but Bryant's threat infuriated me. That disgraceful human was in for a shock if he ever threatened to hurt my mate again.

Pascal suddenly bolted upright. "No way."

I turned around.

Still blurry on the horizon, a strange combination of figures came towards us. One seemed to be a human-sized horse with a rider, and the other was a rather large bird. Except, despite the fact that it was flying, it clearly wasn't a bird.

"What...?" I murmured.

Pascal gasped sharply. "Maple. It's Maple! And he brought Florian and Devereaux!" His voice was choked with emotion. It pitched higher with relief and joy.

As the figures approached, I suddenly recalled what Pascal told me. He'd told me about a living, sentient gargoyle. Was *that* the creature flying towards us?

I found out soon enough. As Maple caught up with Sharamak, Pascal wriggled like a hooked fish. I leapt down and helped him to the ground so he wouldn't fall.

Opposite us, the gargoyle-man landed beside Maple. I'd never seen anything like him before. He looked like a moving, talking statue. He was tall, though not quite my height, and his skin was completely made of stone. A large pair of gray wings erupted from his back, along with a long tail. But despite all that, his eyes were the oddest trait about him—they were a pair of glimmering blue sapphires.

"Are you all right?" the gargoyle asked as he helped the rider to the ground.

The soft-spoken omega smiled. "Fine, Devereaux, thanks."

The omega was around Pascal's age, with flaxen hair and warm brown eyes. Once he was on the ground, he took a cane from Maple's saddle.

"Florian!" Pascal cried.

"Oh, Pascal..."

The two omegas collided in a hug. A novel warmth filled me. This was the first time I'd ever seen a pair of humans being kind to each other. It was nice.

"What happened?" Florian asked.

Pascal let out a breathy laugh. "A lot. I'll tell you later. First, I have to introduce somebody." He pulled out of the embrace and smiled at me. "Guys, this is Xolkug. My mate."

Florian gasped—not in shock at my appearance, but in joy for his friend. "Pascal, that's wonderful!"

I found myself strangely shy. It wasn't often a human was genuinely excited to meet me. I offered my hand. "Hello. It's good to meet you in person. I've only heard stories from Pascal."

Florian smiled as he put his small, dainty hand in mine and shook it. "It's good to meet you... Xolkug, is it? Am I saying it correctly?"

I smiled back. "Yes."

"I should introduce you to my mate, too." Florian took the gargoyle's hand. "Go on, Devereaux."

Devereaux bowed to me. "Pleasure to meet your acquaintance. I must admit, I have never met an orc before."

I took his cool, stony hand and shook it. "And I've never met a gargoyle."

A soft gasp from the omegas drew my attention.

"Pascal," Florian murmured, staring at his friend. "Are you... pregnant?"

Pascal flashed a shy grin. "Geez, is it that obvious?"

“I’m so happy for you and Xolkug!” Florian cried as he hugged his friend again, more carefully this time.

It felt so good for Pascal’s friends to accept me and our child without a second thought. It was refreshing after all we’d suffered under Bryant.

“Man, when Xolkug said he sent Maple to get you, I wasn’t sure how that’d turn out,” Pascal said. “I know he’s a clever horse, but I didn’t think he was *that* smart.”

I chuckled as I ran my hand over Sharamak’s neck. “Horses are smarter than most humans believe.”

“How’d he find you?” Pascal asked.

Florian and Devereaux exchanged a glance.

“Well, we were watching the kids, as usual,” Florian began. “All of a sudden, Maple came barrelling down the street. He knew exactly where the orphanage was. Which I suppose shouldn’t surprise me, since he used to live there. But he was frantic and without a rider. That gave me a bad feeling.”

Devereaux dipped his head. “We had not heard from you since you left, and with Maple’s urgent behavior, we knew something was wrong.”

“You guys...” Pascal’s eye watered. “I’m really happy you came.”

“I am, too,” Florian said.

From behind us, the sound of thundering hoofbeats made me frown. I turned around and froze.

Bryant rode towards us on a fresh horse. His eyes were wide and crazed, and he gripped a polearm furiously in his fist.

“Who is that?” Florian asked hesitantly. “Someone you know?”

Devereaux had a sixth sense for danger. Without hearing the answer, he stepped in front of his mate and flared his wings. I was right next to him. We kept the omegas behind us as we formed a formidable wall of muscle and stone.

“Yes, unfortunately,” I growled.

“I take it he is no friend of yours,” Devereaux muttered, more of a comment than a question.

I glared at Bryant. “No. An enemy. He locked up Pascal and threatened to dismember him.”

Devereaux’s mild-mannered nature disappeared. His wings flared and he flexed the stone claws at the end of his hands. He was an alpha, just like me, and I knew he’d stop at nothing to protect a pregnant omega. Even though we’d just met, he was a fellow nonhuman alpha. I trusted him on a deep level.

I’d lost my patience with Bryant. Now there was nobody to watch. If he picked this fight, the fault was solely on his shoulders.

“Don’t take another step closer,” I called out. “I’m warning you, human.”

Bryant didn’t slow his horse. He leaned forward, yanking its mane with his free hand enough to make it whinny in discomfort. He didn’t care who he hurt—animal, orc, or even human.

For once, I didn’t feel pinned against a wall. I had backup this time.

“Devereaux,” I said, “can you release the horse before we end this? I don’t want it caught in the middle.”

The gargoyle nodded and leapt into the air. His stony wings snapped with the sound of a cracking boulder as he flew over Bryant. If the horse was afraid of me, it was terrified of a large flying beast. It reared in a panic and dumped Bryant to the ground.

I was relieved when the horse ran off. Now it was just Bryant versus us, the so-called abominations he despised.

Bryant crawled to his feet and snatched the polearm. He breathed hard. He was a mess. He’d lost all the composure that made him well-respected to humans and threatening to us.

“Told you,” Bryant sputtered. “You won’t get away from me...”

“Give it up,” I snapped. “You’ve lost. I took my freedom back, and so has Pascal.”

“No... you belong to *me*.”

Bryant shakily raised the polearm. He was so out of breath, I doubted he could even use it.

“Go home, Bryant,” I ordered. “Don’t pick a fight with us. I won’t hold back against you anymore. This is your last warning.”

He lunged. His movements were sluggish and predictable. I snatched his polearm and snapped it in half, tossing the broken pieces aside. Bryant gawked before scrambling for the sharp end.

“I’ll have you both,” he muttered. “The pregnant omega, the orc...” He looked greedily at Devereaux, who stared back at him. “And you, whatever *you* are.”

“I doubt that,” Devereaux said disdainfully.

Clutching the broken polearm, Bryant attacked. But this time, it wasn’t directed at me.

He aimed for Pascal.

And that’s when I lost it.

Snarling, I whirled on Bryant. I was stronger and faster, and most importantly, fuelled by the instinctive desire to protect my pregnant mate. Bryant wouldn’t lay a fucking finger on him as long as I lived.

My hand clamped on top of the sharp end, crushing it in my fist. I didn’t care if I bled. I wrenched it out of Bryant’s measly grip and handed the bloody metal to Devereaux.

“Keep this out of his hands,” I said.

Bryant screamed in frustration. “You fucking bastard creature! You should’ve been locked up for the rest of your wretched life! You have no right walking around like—”

A dragon fang came within an inch of Bryant’s face. Pascal’s eye burned furiously, like a living flame. He held the fang to Bryant’s eyelid, unflinching, daring him to move.

“Shut the hell up already,” Pascal muttered. “Xolkug has given you every chance to turn around and stop being an asshole. But you refuse to take it. So now, *I’m* telling you. Get the fuck out of my family’s face before I wreck *your* face.”

Bryant huffed out a contemptuous laugh. “You think your threat means anything to me, *orc-fucker?*” He took a step closer to Pascal, clearly thinking he would back off. “As if I’d be intimidated by a slutty omega like—”

Bryant’s foot snagged on a rock. He tripped. The dragon’s fang sank deep into his eye.

Pascal gasped, yanking it back instinctively. Blood gushed from Bryant’s eye in a red torrent. As the pain hit him, he clawed at his face.

“You!” he shrieked at Pascal.

I thrust myself between them. Bryant’s fist landed on my chest, but my muscles had grown strong and firm. It barely felt like anything.

I glanced at Devereaux, who shared my thoughts. It was time to get out of here. We needn’t waste any more of our lives on that pathetic man.

Devereaux grabbed Florian and leapt into the air, holding the omega close to his chest so he didn’t fall. Meanwhile, I snagged Pascal and we quickly mounted Sharamak.

“*Go!*” I called in orcish, giving her the command to run as fast as possible.

She bolted ahead. Maple joined, following closely behind. Devereaux followed my lead, flying above us with Florian.

I took one final look behind us. Bryant had collapsed, moaning and wailing and cursing. He’d live, but he wouldn’t be the same. Now he’d be forced to experience a different point of view because now he had one eye—just like Pascal.

WE RODE FOR AN HOUR, getting as far away from Diremeadow as possible. Soon all traces of human society were gone. Out here, it was peaceful. The long grasses swayed in the breeze and the afternoon sun shone turned the fields golden.

“How do you feel?” I asked Pascal.

He hadn't spoken much since the incident with Bryant. The blood-stained dragon fang laid against his chest.

He smiled up at me. “I'm okay. Just exhausted.”

“I know. We'll rest soon.” I kissed his forehead.

“Where are we going?”

I hesitated. I was leading him home, but it was to *my* home. My orc clan. What if Pascal wanted to go back to his human town with Florian and Devereaux?

“Xolkug?” Pascal asked, frowning. “What's wrong?”

I met his gaze. “You've been through too much. I understand if you want to go back to a familiar place and rest. Do you want to go home with me... or with your friends?”

Pascal glared at me.

“W-what?” I asked.

Florian chuckled. “Xolkug, he clearly wants to be with you. I don't think it matters *where* you go as long as you're together.”

My cheeks flushed. “Is that true, Pascal?”

“Pretty much.” He flopped against my chest. “Can't believe you thought I wouldn't wanna go with you...”

My heart fluttered. “All right. I'll take you home. What about you two?”

After exchanging a curious glance with Devereaux, Florian said, “I'd like to visit, if that's all right. But I understand if they wouldn't want a random human around.”

“Or a gargoyle,” Devereaux added.

I grunted firmly. “Nonsense. They'll welcome both of you.”

Florian brightened.

Now, only one problem remained—what if my clan had moved on? I'd been in Bryant's clutches for over a year. There was a grim possibility that my family had already left and moved onto the next camp. If so, it might take ages to find them...

"It should be up ahead somewhere," I mused out loud.

There were worn footpaths in the grass, far too wide to belong to a deer or fox. It could only be an orc-sized horse. That gave me hope my clan hadn't left yet.

Sharamak sped up on her own, breaking into a trot on the hill's incline. Her hooves fell naturally into the worn paths. My pulse picked up. Would my clan be there just over the ridge?

As Sharamak broke the crest of the hill, my heart skipped a beat.

The familiar deerskin huts remained exactly where I'd left them. Large horses grazed at the corners of the camp. Tears filled my eyes when I saw my friends and family milling around. It was like I'd been thrust into a memory, except this was real.

I was back home.

No, *we were home.*

TWENTY-FIVE

Pascal

THE FIRST THING I felt when I saw Xolkug's clan was peace. It was like falling into a downy bed after a long, hard day.

It was my first time seeing orcs besides Xolkug. As soon as they noticed our presence, they dropped whatever they were doing and rushed over. They spoke in a language I didn't understand, but recognized from the phrases I'd heard from my mate. Still, I didn't need to understand their tongue to know relief and joy when I saw it.

As Xolkug helped me down from Sharamak's back, everybody swarmed us with what was clearly love. Two middle-aged orcs were the closest. Their resemblance to Xolkug made it obvious they were his parents.

After saying a few things in orcish, Xolkug held up his hands. "Everybody, there's a lot to tell. But first, my mate needs to rest."

"Mate?" the taller orc repeated in our shared tongue.

He looked down at me—way down. He was even taller and broader than Xolkug. I figured he was Xolkug's alpha father, and that the lithe man beside him was Xolkug's omega father. They both glanced at me with tenderness in their eyes.

"I see," Xolkug's omega father said, smiling.

His alpha father put a huge, friendly hand on my shoulder. "Welcome, welcome."

I suddenly felt overwhelmed with feelings. I'd never known my own biological parents, and likely never would. So for two strangers of a different background to instantly accept me into their family felt deeply gratifying.

Xolkug said something to the curious orcs observing Florian and Devereaux. They nodded.

"I told them they're our good friends," Xolkug explained. "They're welcome to stay in camp as long as they wish."

Xolkug took off Sharamak's bridle and let her wander off, then led me to a roomy hut. It was orc-sized, so there was plenty of space for all of us. There was a simmering stone pot in the middle of the floor, along with a hole in the ceiling for the smoke to escape.

I sat on one of the squishy pillows on the floor. Xolkug put his arm around me, so I leaned against him with a content sigh. It was the most comfortable I'd felt for a long time.

Xolkug's parents looked eagerly at us. They were calm, patient people. If I were in their shoes, I'd already be bombarding the newcomers with questions.

"I know you must have a lot of questions," Xolkug said. "But first, I'd like to introduce everybody. Pascal, these are my parents, Chakub and Yakha." He gestured to his alpha and omega father respectively.

I smiled. "It's nice to meet you."

Xolkug held me close. "And this is my mate, Pascal. I know he's probably not what you expected, but he is mine."

The affectionate ferocity in his voice sent a pleasant shiver down my spine.

Despite Xolkug's words, I saw no judgment in his parents' eyes. They were happy to see him alive and well, and to meet me.

Xolkug went on. "And these are Pascal's—and my—good friends. Florian is human, too. Devereaux is a gargoyle. They helped save my mate from a vicious enemy."

Chakub frowned. "An enemy? Who is he?"

Xolkug's gaze darkened. "He was the man who kidnapped me and kept me like an animal."

Fury ripped across Chakub's face, while Yakha looked horrified and sad. I couldn't imagine how they felt thinking about what their son went through.

"We can discuss it later," Xolkug said mildly. "What matters right now is tending to Pascal. He's pregnant."

Their mood changed instantly.

"He is? But he's so small," Yakha said, blinking in surprise.

"Pregnant? I thought he was handsomely plump," Chakub admitted sheepishly.

I laughed. "Nah, I don't usually look like this. It's because I'm carrying our baby. Right, Xolkug?"

He beamed down at me. "Yes, my love."

"Then he needs to eat more!" Yakha exclaimed. "Chakub, get bowls for our guests. Devereaux, do you eat? Never mind, Pascal can have your share if you don't. Go, Chakub!"

Chakub was already out the door. Florian and I exchanged an amused glance at the orcs' enthusiasm.

A minute later Chakub returned with beautiful stoneware bowls. Yakha ladled out a heaping portion of hot stew for each of us. My stomach growled. The scent alone was amazing. I couldn't wait to taste it. The portions were, of course, orc sized. I could've swam in the bowl. But I was so hungry and grateful for a hot meal that I didn't even care.

"I told you I'd feed you a lot," Xolkug teased.

"Mmm, don't mind if you do..."

Xolkug offered me the first spoonful. I took a bite. My taste buds exploded as the thick, savory stew hit my tongue. The meat and vegetables were divine. I closed my eyes and moaned, then realized what an embarrassing sound I'd made.

"Oops," I squeaked.

The orcs laughed.

“That’s good,” Chakub said. “Means you like it.”

Florian sighed contentedly. “This is wonderful. What is it?”

“Boar stew,” Yakha said. “We hunted it fresh this morning. The potatoes and vegetables were gathered outside our camp.”

“Man, I can bake bread, but I could never cook anything *this* good,” I said, stuffing another spoonful into my mouth.

Yakha’s eyes glittered. “I will teach you.” He paused. The gentle look on his face reminded me of Xolkug. “That is... you’re staying here, yes?”

“Of course!” I exclaimed. “I’ll stay as long as I’m welcome.”

Xolkug huffed like I’d said something silly. “You are part of our family, Pascal.”

My throat went tight with emotion. I swallowed my stew and sniffled. “Cut it out, you’re gonna make me cry.”

Devereaux leaned over, offering me his bowl. “Please take mine. You and the baby need it more than I do.”

I accepted it gratefully. “Thanks, Devereaux. This is so good I could eat ten bowls.”

Yakha beamed, clearly happy that I enjoyed his cooking.

After we’d eaten, Xolkug’s parents wanted to know more about me. I told them all about my past. I didn’t think it was very interesting, but they hung on to my every word. Just like Xolkug, they were shocked to hear about the human orphanage and the horrible Headmaster. It made me happy to know our baby would grow up in a loving environment, and that they would be cared for by everybody, not just their immediate family.

By evening, I was exhausted. I’d eaten my fill and talked more than I had in a month. I was half-asleep when I heard Chakub and Yakha offering Florian and Devereaux their own guest hut for the night.

At one point, Xolkug picked me up in his arms and led me to a smaller, private hut. It was dark inside except for a single beeswax candle. I was vaguely aware of Yakha and Chakub bringing us furs, blankets and pillows to make us comfortable. They wished us goodnight and slipped out.

I yawned against Xolkug's chest. "Time's it...?"

"Late." He smiled. "Time for you to sleep."

"But I wanna cuddle..."

"We can cuddle while you rest."

I nuzzled my face into his bare biceps. It occurred to me that he wasn't wearing a shirt. Or pants.

"You're nakie," I mumbled.

He sounded amused. "I prefer to sleep naked, but I didn't want to expose myself to the humans when I was locked in the cell."

I nodded sleepily. "Because you have a huge dick. They'd get sooo jealous."

He chuckled.

Despite my fatigue, laying against my mate's naked body ignited a fire in me. I didn't want to sleep right away. We were in a private place, and I wanted alone time with him.

My hand snaked down Xolkug's naked chest. He let out a slow, soft huff. I could tell he wanted me to rest, but wasn't about to turn down foreplay. I didn't want him to. After everything he'd done for me, I wanted to make him feel good.

My fingers found a familiar trail of thick hair. It was novel to touch Xolkug without any clothes in the way. It was freeing and adventurous. I went past the patch of hair and wrapped my fingers around the base of his cock—or tried to. It was so girthy my fingers didn't fit, but I tried my best.

Xolkug moaned quietly. "You're going to get me all riled up."

"Heh. That's what I want."

Xolkug made a pleased rumbling sound as I moved my hand languidly up and down the length of his cock. I felt it swell against my palm, rising fast. I licked my lips as excitement coursed through me. The lust in my blood overpowered my fatigue.

“So big,” I murmured as I gave it a slight squeeze.

Xolkug grunted. He leaned his head back against the pillow. “Just the right size for you.”

I grinned. Who knew that a human omega could take an alpha orc’s dick after all?

As I toyed with Xolkug, he became fully erect. I saw a bead of pre-cum glistening in the candlelight at the tip of his cock. I smeared it off with my thumb, making Xolkug groan.

The air was hot and humid inside the hut. Our breath, sweat and scents mingled into an intoxicating perfume. Xolkug’s alpha musk drove me wild, and I was sure the smell of my slick did the same for him.

I put both my palms against Xolkug’s shaft and rubbed him in a slow rhythm. His sensitive flesh was hot and thick, pulsing with need.

“I still can’t believe this fit inside of me,” I murmured.

“Me neither.”

“That proves we were made for each other, huh?”

He grunted in affirmation. He was too aroused to speak. I loved having that kind of power over him. *Real* power. Not taken by force, but given through trust.

I worked my mate’s huge cock with my full attention, like it was the only thing in the world. My mouth watered at its sheer size, the throbbing veins, the deep malachite sheen of his skin... It was like a work of art, a living jade carving.

Or maybe I was just obsessed with Xolkug’s orc dick.

Not wanting his balls to be left out, I lowered one hand to cup them. Xolkug groaned, shifting his weight so my hand disappeared under his sac. They were big and heavy. I

massaged them gently until Xolkug's breath was choppy and ragged. My other hand travelled up from the base of his shaft to the sensitive tip.

Xolkug hissed. "Come here," he ordered suddenly.

"Huh?" I wondered if I'd done something he didn't like.

But then Xolkug grabbed me like a doll and lifted me up towards his face. It thrilled me. He was so strong. I wished he'd handle me like that more often.

Xolkug was horizontal against the bed. With his head on the pillow, he placed me on top of his face so that my cock met his lips.

"I'm going to suck you dry," Xolkug growled.

Heat seared my cheeks. "B-but I wasn't done—"

In one gulp, Xolkug's mouth swallowed up my entire cock.

I gasped. Stars exploded in my vision. The wet heat of his mouth made me dizzy with pleasure. His huge, velvety tongue caressed my cock in a way that was both lewd and loving.

"Xolkug..." I mumbled.

I swayed on top of him, but his hands shot up to steady me. His hands were gentle and firm as they grasped my hips, holding me in place as he sucked me off. I was on top of him, but Xolkug was in clear control. It felt amazing.

I glanced over my shoulder. Xolkug's cock was harder than ever. It twitched and jerked on its own. Giving me a blowjob turned Xolkug on, too.

I groaned, unable to think. "Your mouth's so good..."

Xolkug made a thick, demanding noise as he parted his lips, forcing me to look down. The sight made me fiercely hard. My cock laid on his wide, wet tongue, drenched in his saliva.

"Fuck," I whimpered.

His eyes gleamed mischievously. He'd literally brought me down to my knees on the bed. I believed him when he

promised he'd suck me dry.

“Grab my tusks,” Xolkug ordered.

I nodded, feeling delirious with pleasure. My hands trembled as I grasped his tusks. They were spaced evenly on either side of my cock, the perfect handlebars.

Xolkug tongue wrapped around my throbbing cock in a swirling motion that made me cry out. I bit my cheek to keep quiet. I didn't want Xolkug's whole clan to know.

“No,” Xolkug said sharply. “Don't silence yourself. Let me hear everything.”

My mind swam. “But—”

“Orcs aren't shy about sex. Let it all out, Pascal.”

It wasn't a suggestion. It was a command, one I was happy to oblige.

I was shy at first, only releasing soft whimpers and grunts. But as Xolkug masterfully sucked and licked my aching cock, I couldn't hold myself back any longer. Moans spilled out of me. I made every wanton sound in the book. Soon I stopped caring about what I sounded like and just let the pleasure consume me.

“Xolkug,” I whimpered, bucking my hips. I couldn't control my sounds, and I couldn't control my body, either. My muscles moved on their own, seeking more and more pleasure.

One of Xolkug's hands moved from my hips to my ass. He pushed me closer so that I nearly fell on top of his face. I grabbed his tusks tighter for support. My trembling body needed it.

“Fuck,” I mumbled. I was too wild with arousal to say anything else. “Fuck...!”

A loud wet smack filled the room as Xolkug sucked my cock hard, then popped off of it. I gasped, wracked by a full-body shudder.

“Fuck, that feels good,” I moaned.

Xolkug said nothing. He dove back into it, engulfing my throbbing member. He sucked me harder than I thought was possible. Pleasure exploded in my veins. I thrust into his mouth faster. At the same time, Xolkug's hand pushed against my ass, making me fuck his mouth as deep as I could go.

“Yes, yes, yes!” I cried.

Xolkug suddenly tensed. Then his frame shook violently beneath me. I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see the huge load erupt from the tip of Xolkug's massive cock. I gasped as it painted my back. It rolled down my shoulders in a sticky pool. A human never could've produced so much cum.

He never stopped sucking me off, even while he came. The sensation of my alpha's thick, hot cum on my back sent me over the edge. Grabbing his tusks, I screamed as I shot my own load down Xolkug's throat. He gulped it down without removing his lips from my sensitive flesh. That intensified the aftershocks. I whimpered, my voice breaking from pleasure.

After we both finally came down from the high, I went limp all over. The fatigue slammed back into me in full force.

Xolkug picked me up and placed me on the bed. My eye was half-closed as he rummaged around to find a clean cloth. He cleaned me up, which I sorely needed since I was half-coated in orc cum.

“Thanks,” I mumbled with a smile.

He looked satisfied. “It was my fault anyway.”

“I was the one who roped you into sex...”

He kissed my damp forehead. “You're welcome to rope me into sex anytime, my love. Now let me put down a clean blanket so you can sleep.”

“Mmm...”

I shut my eyes as Xolkug moved things around, then eased me into bed. He climbed in beside me. His radiating warmth and scent were deeply comforting. It wasn't long before I drifted off. For the first time since I'd met Xolkug, I fell into a truly peaceful slumber with my mate's arms around me.

TWENTY-SIX

Xolkug

FLORIAN AND DEVEREAUX left the next morning, since they had to tend to the children at the orphanage. They thanked my people for their hospitality, and took off into the sky. Pascal hugged his friends as he saw them off. He was emotional, but he knew it wasn't goodbye forever. Our camp wasn't too far from Stonekeep, and we had easy modes of transportation to visit one another, wherever my clan might go.

But to our surprise, Maple chose to stay. He'd taken quite a liking to the bigger horses, especially Sharamak. He always chose to graze close to her and we often saw them dozing off together.

"I guess he's just like me," Pascal teased. "He prefers orcs to his own kind."

As time passed, Pascal's belly grew fast. He was a bit bigger every morning.

I was both excited and a little concerned. Pascal was human. Could he safely carry a half-orc baby?

But it eased my nerves to see that Pascal wasn't worried at all. As he got bigger, he fawned over himself. He'd talk to his belly like the baby was already out in the world. It only deepened my love for him.

To my pleasant surprise, Pascal fit seamlessly into our clan. Everybody was curious about him, of course. Most orcs had never met a human who hadn't tried to hurt or kill us. But Pascal brimmed with curiosity and interest in our culture. He'd

even tried to pick up orcish words and phrases. It reminded me of when we had our first riverside dinner, when he'd told me he wished he was an orc, too.

Today, Yakha taught Pascal how to make boar stew. Chakub and I helped by chopping vegetables and peeling potatoes, while the omegas seared the meat on an open fire.

"You hold it over the flame like this. Don't get it too close to the flames, unless you want it to char. But it's bad for you and the baby," Yakha explained to an enraptured Pascal.

Pascal nodded. "Can I try?"

Yakha handed him the boar strips on the skewer, watching closely to help. "Good. Just like that. You're a natural orc cook!"

Pascal grinned at the compliment.

"I'm glad you two made it out in one piece," Chakub murmured to me as we chopped vegetables. "I'm sorry you went through that."

I'd told my parents and the rest of my clan about what I'd gone through. They'd all been desperately worried about me, but didn't know where I was. Even if they had, they never would've stormed a human town to save me. A whole clan of orcs storming a human town would've only ended in disaster. Despite our strength, we only resorted to violence when we needed to—unlike humans, who were quick to draw their weapons.

In the past, I would've blamed myself for getting captured. But now I knew it wasn't my fault. I was not a perpetrator, but a victim. Bryant was the one who hurt us.

"I am, too," I replied. "But I'd go through it a thousand times more if it meant meeting Pascal."

Chakub patted my shoulder. "I'm glad you two can be together now in peace."

I smiled, looking at my mate. "I am, too."

“WHAT’S IT LIKE BEING PREGNANT?” a young orc asked.

Pascal and I offered to watch the orc children today so the elder caretakers could rotate and take a break. They thanked us for the help, happy to have another set of hands on board.

Pascal had taught me an ironic human saying: “it takes a village to raise a child.” If that was the case, I didn’t understand why they didn’t actually practice it. Perhaps their culture had shifted over time.

“What’s it like, huh?” Pascal mused. A swarm of orc youth surrounded him. Many of them were almost as tall as Pascal, despite being less than half his age. “Well, most of the time, it feels like carrying a big rock inside of you.”

The kids giggled. “Ew!”

“Not ew! It’s not like I literally swallowed a rock or anything. It feels nice.”

“Does it feel like you ate a lotta food?” one asked.

“Hmm... Not really. But my back hurts. And my feet. And I get really hungry. So it’s more like the opposite?”

“That’s weird,” one child commented. “I hope I never get pregnant.”

Pascal laughed. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Why did *you* get pregnant?”

I exchanged a glance with Pascal. He’d learned much about orc culture already, but it took him a while to understand we didn’t have shame about bodily functions like humans did. Orc children understood that babies were created out of love and a mating ritual, without the in-depth specifics.

“Well...” Pascal glanced at me with a smile. “I got pregnant because I loved Xolkug more than I can ever express.”

My heart fluttered.

“Aww!” the kids gushed.

“I’m gonna love somebody that much someday,” the closest child promised.

“I’m sure you will,” Pascal said. “Loving someone doesn’t mean you *have* to have a baby with them, though. Remember my friends, Florian and Devereaux?”

The kids nodded. They definitely remembered the unusual pair from their visit.

“They’re in love, too, but they don’t have a baby. The two of them are their own little family.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Every family is different. The only thing that matters is that it’s made up of people who love each other. That’s all.”

The young orcs nodded, taking in this wisdom.

“Now,” Pascal said, standing up with a hand on his lower back. “Who wants to help Uncle Pascal cook dinner for the clan tonight?”

The kids all shouted at once. “ME!”

THE DAYS WENT BY BLISSFULLY. I couldn’t recall a time in my life when I’d been happier. Having Pascal by my side was a dream come true—a dream I didn’t even know I had until he’d slipped into my life. Now it was impossible to imagine a future without him. But like my father Chakub said, I didn’t have to. We were together in peace.

We laid on the grassy bank together, soaking up the warm sunshine and feeling the caress of the breeze on our skin. After what we’d been through, we’d never take a simple pleasure like this for granted.

“This is nice,” Pascal murmured, nuzzling my chest.

I stroked Pascal’s back. I was careful to make space for his huge belly while we hugged. He looked ready to pop. Pregnant

orcs were big, but Pascal was massive.

“Are you comfortable?” I asked.

He grinned. “As comfortable as somebody can be when they’re *this* pregnant.”

I huffed, not totally satisfied with that answer.

“Don’t worry so much, Xolkug,” he said, resting his cheek on my bicep. “You’ve literally done everything in your power to make me comfortable. The only other thing you could do at this point is magically push the baby out of me.”

“I wish I could,” I mumbled. “Unfortunately, orcs aren’t the best at magic.”

Pascal glanced at me curiously. “Huh. I don’t think humans are, either. Who is, then?”

I shrugged. “Elves. Dragons.”

Pascal was quiet for a moment. “I think Florian and Devereaux know a dragon.”

My brows shot up. To know a dragon was incredibly rare. “They do?”

His lips pouted in confusion. “Hm, I don’t know for sure. He’s not *big* like a dragon. He’s shaped like a human, but he has purple scales and claws. That’s what Florian told me.”

I didn’t know what to think. The description didn’t sound like a true dragon, but it certainly wasn’t representative of any humanoid I knew. Besides, Florian wasn’t the type of person to lie or exaggerate. Maybe I had to accept there was more in this world that I didn’t yet understand.

Pascal shrugged and snuggled into me. “Well, anyway. You don’t need magic to make me feel good, even though I feel like I ate a watermelon.”

I smiled, then paused. “You know, Pascal... there’s an old orc wisdom about inducing labor.”

Pascal popped up like a dandelion in spring. “Really? What is it? I’m getting kinda desperate at this point,” he said, making a face at his ridiculously round belly.

I gave him a sly look before leaning in to whisper in his ear. “It involves lovemaking.”

He blushed, then returned my mischievous glance. “I’m not opposed to that...”

I scooped him up and ran to our hut in a hurry. The second Pascal was in bed, I climbed on top of him, already burning up with lust. He’d been hormonal too, lately. Within a minute both of us were hard, and Pascal’s entrance leaked.

“I’m going to miss seeing you like this,” I said breathlessly as I pressed a finger to his wet hole.

Pascal bit his lip, then sighed loudly as my finger eased into him. “Heh. Really?”

“Yes. You’re so fucking sexy.” I ran my other hand gently over his belly. “Irresistible.”

My mate shivered. The deeper he got into his pregnancy, the harder it was for him to move, so I’d ordered him to lay back and accept the pleasure I gave him.

I curled my finger inside of Pascal, making him moan.

“Mmph... Xolkug...”

I kept stroking him from the inside. The tight heat of his body made me shudder.

Pascal laid relaxed in bed, his eye closed and his lips parted to make sweet sounds. But the next noise that came out of him wasn’t sweet at all—it was a sharp, pained intake of breath.

I stopped immediately. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” he mumbled, frowning.

“What is it?”

Pascal grimaced. “Ow. Oh...” He gazed at me. “I think... I’m going into labor.”

All the lust fled my body. I was now fully in protective alpha mode, ready to support my omega mate.

“Should I get Yakha?” I asked.

When Pascal bit his lip and nodded, I called outside the hut for my father. He appeared a second later with Chakub behind him.

“I’m here,” Yakha said, kneeling by the bed. “We will get you through this, Pascal.”

My mate nodded slowly. I could tell he was nervous. I held his hand, engulfing it with mine.

“Ow,” Pascal groaned, clenching his eye shut tightly. “Man, giving birth is gonna hurt like a bitch, isn’t it?”

“It will pass,” Yakha promised. “And when your baby is here, they are all you’ll remember from this experience.”

Pascal let out a shaky breath. “Okay.”

I wasn’t an omega, and I’d never given birth, so I was glad my father was here to support Pascal with his perspective.

“Chakub, bring us water and cloths,” Yakha ordered. “Xolkug, kiss your mate.”

“Kiss him?” I echoed.

“When he’s not pushing, it will distract him from the pain.”

Pascal glanced hopefully at me. He seemed curious about trying Yakha’s suggestion.

“All right,” I said.

I leaned over Pascal. His brows creased with pain, and a sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead. I brushed his hair aside and pressed a kiss to his temple. His amber eye fluttered shut.

“I’m here, Pascal,” I murmured. “I’ll always be here.”

He let out a small squeak and wrapped his arms around my neck, wordlessly locking me in place. He didn’t want me to leave, and I never would.

I was deeply grateful for Yakha dealing with the labor end of things while I comforted Pascal. Once the water and cloth

arrived, he got to work. Pascal's underclothes were removed and the bed was made clean, ready for the baby's arrival.

Yakha handed me a cool, damp cloth. "Put this on Pascal's forehead."

Pascal sighed contentedly when I placed it on him. "Feels nice."

"Good," I said.

I kissed him again, on the cheek now. As I moved towards his lips, Pascal turned his head to meet me halfway. He whimpered as our mouths gently collided. He made a sound that sounded like my name, but didn't stop kissing me. He pushed his lips against mine, chasing a deeper kiss until I slipped my tongue inside. Pascal moaned.

"Good. He's dilating," Yakha commented. "Keep going."

I didn't need to be told twice. Kissing my mate was a gift in and of itself.

I angled our mouths to get a deeper kiss. Pascal gasped and moaned louder, writhing against the bed. I couldn't tell if it was from pain or pleasure, but he had me in a needy headlock, so I didn't stop.

Pascal tensed. A shiver of agony ran through him as he let out a pained moan into my mouth. I swallowed the sound, wishing I could've swallowed his pain with it. But this was something my mate had to bear by himself, but not alone.

"I've got you," I promised softly. "Take my hand. Crush it as hard as you need to."

I slipped my hand into Pascal's. His pale fingers wrapped around it and squeezed. He yelled with the effort, doing it as hard as his muscles allowed, but it didn't hurt me.

"Good, Pascal!" Yakha called excitedly. "You're doing well. The baby's crowning."

"Oh, god," Pascal groaned. Sweat drenched his face now. I cleaned it with a damp cloth. "Fuck... it hurts."

Pain struck my heart. "I know. I'm sorry."

“Keep pushing!” Yakha ordered. “It’s coming!”

As much as I wanted to see the baby, I stayed with Pascal. He needed me.

He screamed now, his whole body shaking as he strained. He poured all his strength into it. To my surprise, he was even starting to hurt my hand with how intensely he gripped it. I couldn’t imagine the agony he was going through.

“Halfway there,” Yakha said hopefully.

My father’s calm tone soothed me. I’d been worried something would go wrong during labor, but so far, all was well. Yakha had delivered many babies in our clan and this was no different.

“Xolkug...” Pascal whimpered.

I brushed his sweaty hair aside and peppered kisses along his forehead. “I know, my love. You’re almost there.”

He tossed his head back and screamed again.

“It’s big,” Yakha said in explanation. I sensed he didn’t want to say more and alarm Pascal. For an orc, it would’ve been an easy birth—but for a human, even an omega with wide hips, it was challenging. But Yakha didn’t seem concerned, only sympathetic to Pascal’s pain.

A shrill wail split the air. My heart skipped a beat.

Our baby was crying. That was an excellent sign.

“Good lungs,” Yakha said excitedly. “One more push, Pascal.”

My mate bellowed in agony and determination. He sounded angry at the fact that his labor wasn’t over yet. I didn’t blame him.

But when I peered over to his lower half, I gasped.

There was our baby, alive and healthy—and testing out a *very* strong set of lungs.

Pascal let out one last exhausted cry before it was over. Yakha caught the baby and wasted no time cleaning and

bundling it. I desperately wanted to meet our child, but first I had to ensure my mate was okay.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Did I do it?” Pascal slurred.

I grinned. “Yes. The baby’s here.”

He looked alert instantly, sitting upright despite how tired he was. His parental instincts were stronger than his fatigue. “Let me see.”

Yakha’s face glowed with joy as he handed his grandchild to my mate. Pascal’s expression melted into serene happiness. I was sure it mirrored my own. It felt like a door had been opened inside of me, revealing a brand new path in life—one of parenthood.

Pascal pressed our baby to his chest. The little boy was bundled up securely in soft cloth, courtesy of Yakha. He’d stopped crying now that he rested against his birth father’s chest.

I wiped the tears from Pascal’s eye.

“Thanks,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “Oh, Xolkug... look at him.”

“I am,” I whispered.

Our baby resembled an infant orc, but the longer I regarded him, the more human qualities I saw. His ears were rounder, like Pascal’s, and he already had a patch of dark hair on his head. His skin was a shade of light green, like jade.

Pascal nestled his chin against our baby’s head and inhaled. He smelled sweet, like all infants.

“He’s perfect,” he murmured.

“He is,” I agreed.

Yakha beckoned Chakub back inside the hut. My fathers both gushed over their grandchild. I half-expected Pascal to be overwhelmed from the attention, but he took it in stride.

“Thank you so much for your help, Yakha,” Pascal said, sniffing. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Yakha smiled. “No need to thank me. You are family, Pascal. I would help you give birth a thousand times.”

Pascal laughed tiredly at the idea.

“Exactly. You’re one of us,” Chakub said.

Pascal glanced down with a bittersweet expression before looking up again. “I never knew my parents, or any other family. So to be part of yours... it means a lot to me.”

As we hugged Pascal and our baby close, my heart swelled. Three generations of family were in the hut. My mate would never feel unloved or alone, ever again.

After the group hug, Chakub asked, “So? Have the gods blessed you with a name?”

Yakha chuckled, playfully nudging my alpha father. “Chakub and I argued for days over Xolkug’s name.”

Pascal gave me a grin. “Nah, we didn’t argue. We picked a name pretty soon after we got to the clan.”

“Oh?” Yakha asked.

Pascal glanced down at our beautiful boy and smiled. “I wanted a traditional orc name, so Xolkug helped me choose.”

“But I also wanted it to sound pleasant to human ears, and be easy for humans to pronounce,” I added. “Why don’t you tell them, my love?”

Pascal nodded. “So... this is Lun.”

“Lun...” Yakha echoed. “Simple, yet sweet.”

“It’s a beautiful name for our beautiful grandchild,” Chakub said.

I looked at Lun. My heart and chest were full of love for him. He tilted his round, fluffy head back to stare at Pascal, who smiled down at him. Lun blinked, then rested his head on Pascal’s chest, seeking his unconditional love and warmth.

EPILOGUE: Chapter 27: Pascal

"PLEASE TELL me he's gonna stay cute and small like this forever," I begged.

Xolkug chuckled as I helped Lun "walk" on his stubby, clumsy legs across the grass. Lun wasn't actually walking—I carried him in an adorable imitation of it. It was a cute bonding activity for both of us, and fun for Xolkug to watch.

"You already know the answer to that one," Xolkug said wryly. Lun's half-orc background made him grow like a weed. Since he was born three months ago, he'd doubled in size with no signs of slowing down.

"But he's so *cute* like this," I argued, pouting as if that would change anything.

Xolkug grinned. "He'll be cute when he's older, too."

"I know... He's our baby, so he'll always be adorable. Right, Luny?" I tickled Lun, making him break out into hysterics.

He was literally the cutest thing I'd ever seen. Hearing him laugh and seeing his smile filled me with so much joy it felt like I could explode.

After our laughing fit, I scooped him up in my arms, which had grown stronger since coming to live among the orcs. I'd always been used to manual labour, but much of my strength was sapped away when Bryant held me hostage. After settling into the clan, it not only came back, but surpassed my previous abilities. I was now officially the only human in the clan who could lift in a small log over my head.

Which wasn't saying much, since I was the *only* human in the clan.

But those days of despair and hopelessness were behind us now. Xolkug and I had each other, we had Chakub and Yakha, and everybody else in the clan, living as one big extended family. And of course, we had Lun, the light of our lives.

I squished my son's cheeks as he patted his pale green hands against the grass.

"What if we have another one, when Lun gets bigger?" I asked.

Xolkug looked amused. "I think you're underestimating how much work an orc toddler is. How about we raise this one until he's old enough to walk and talk first? Then we can revisit this conversation."

"You're on."

As we played on the hillside, the horses grazed around us. That was another culture shock to me. Here among the orcs, the horses were free to roam wherever they wished instead of being stabled. They had their own shelter area, but weren't forced to stay there. The horses never went far, though. They liked being close enough to keep an eye on the two-legged ones.

Xolkug nodded at a pair of horses nearby. "Looks like were not the only ones raising kids."

I followed his gaze and saw Sharamak and Maple leaning on each other. It was a familiar sight by now, but I hadn't noticed Sharamak looking slightly rounder than usual until my mate pointed out.

I gasped. "Maple! You're gonna be a dad, too? Wait, how did he even *reach* up there?"

Xolkug grinned, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Love always finds a way." He lowered his voice and whispered in my ear, "I seem to recall that we did the same."

I blushed. "Yeah, and I'll do it again."

He laughed airily. Then he paused, gazing intently at something in the field. When I looked, I saw a hooded figure on the large black horse.

I squinted. "Wait a second... I've seen that horse before."

That relaxed Xolkug, but only a little. He put Lun in my arms and stepped forward to address the stranger, who stopped a respectful distance away.

“Greetings,” Xolkug called. “Who goes there?”

“My name is Argon.”

I perked up instantly. “I know that name. He helped Florian and Devereaux save me once before,” I told my mate.

Xolkug nodded. “Can you please remove your hood? I’d like to see who I am speaking to.”

Argon hesitated, then sighed and slowly reached for his hood. He wore a pair of black gloves to hide his hands, but it didn’t matter once he’d slipped the hood off to reveal his appearance underneath. Instead of a human face, Argon had a dragon’s head. He had deep purple scales instead of skin and a pair of horns coming out the back of his skull. His gleaming yellow eyes pleaded with us not to be afraid.

Xolkug took in a deep, startled breath, but otherwise didn’t react. “Thank you.”

Argon dipped his head respectfully. “I’m sorry to intrude. I only came because I heard what happened from Devereaux.” His smile was deliberately soft, but it still reveal the rows of sharp dragon teeth. “When he told me and orc in a human were in love, I had to see it for myself.”

My mate relaxed completely, sensing no danger from Argon. He put his hand on my waist and pulled me close. “That’s right.”

“And we have the baby to prove it,” I added with a grin.

Argon regarded our son fondly. There was a tired, gentle look on his face. “Beautiful. Both your love and your baby.” He was quiet for a moment. “That’s truly all I wanted to see. I’ll be on my way now.”

As Argon opened the reins to turn his horse, Xolkug called, “Wait. That horse... It’s an orc breed.”

Argon looked intrigued. “Is she? I suspected as much. Midnight towers over most other horses.” He patted the horse’s neck affectionately. “Do you know her?”

Xolkug shook his head. “It’s rare, but once in a while, an orc horse wanders off, never to be seen again. Midnight

sounds like one such mare.” He smiled. “Then I’m glad she found a good home with you.”

Argon seemed pleased at his praise, and Midnight huffed as if agreeing.

“Let me ask you one more thing,” Xolkug said. “Why did you come all this way just to see us in love?”

Wind blew over the field, rustling the grass and making Argon’s hood flutter.

“It’s the second time this has happened,” Argon murmured, just loud enough to hear. “And yet, it still surprises me.”

The first time must have been Florian and Devereaux, I realized.

“Do you mean a human falling in love with a nonhuman?” I asked.

“Yes,” Argon said.

I felt a wave of sympathy for him. I knew what it was like to feel fundamentally unlovable. Nobody should have to feel that way.

“You’ll find someone,” I promised, nodding firmly. “I just know it.”

Argon let out a small laugh. “Thank you. Both of you. I really must be going now. I’ve got something important to accomplish.”

That clicked in my mind.

“Hang on,” I called quickly.

Argon stopped.

I took a deep breath and tried to steady the emotion in my voice. “Florian told me you were looking for Noel. Is that true?”

The determination flashing in Argon’s yellow eyes would’ve been enough of an answer, but the dragon-man said, “Yes. And I won’t stop until I find him.”

He nodded his head farewell, then took off, disappearing past the horizon.

AFTER HEADING BACK to our hut to cuddle in bed, Xolkug asked me, “Who’s Noel?”

I gave him a bittersweet smile. “An old friend of me and Florian’s. Headmaster sent him away—sold him—a long time ago. We both assumed he was dead, but in the back of our minds, we never gave up hope.”

Xolkug smiled and caressed my face. “If anybody can find him, it’s a dragon.”

My heart fluttered when he called Argon a dragon. Not a dragon-creature, or dragon-man, but a real dragon. Did that even matter? Regardless, he said it with such conviction that I seriously believed him. I put my faith in Xolkug’s trust, too. Argon *would* find Noel.

“It would be nice if the three of us could be reunited,” I commented. I glanced down at our son, soundly asleep between us. “I want him to meet you and Lun.”

There was such a warm look on Xolkug’s face that it almost moved me to tears. He cared about me and my happiness so deeply. I threw my arms around him, hugging him tightly and breathing in his amazing scent.

“I love you so much,” I murmured. “You know that, right?”

He exhaled gently as he ran his hands down my back. “Not as much as I love you.”

“Impossible,” I grumbled.

“Let’s agree to disagree on this one,” he teased.

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THE END

TWENTY-SEVEN

Epilogue: Pascal

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THE END

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