

# Symptoms

The damn rain fell like bricks and I cursed the humans for making us stand in the gutter. I stood in line for the hospital, hoping to get chosen for the trial. The sidewalk was wide open except for the sign reading NO ORCS ALLOWED. Some of the kids stood there anyway, acting like this life of cobblestones and brick walls had always been our way. My feet were cold and; theirs feet were dry. I cursed them a bit, too.

I remember wishing I was at my son's place. I hadn't been since I became a prefect; not since Yisha died. If I could get the medicine for Masha, everything would be forgiven. I'd make her a dress, play her some music. Things would be right again.

I squinted ahead - the world wasn't as sharp as it used to be. I saw the long red brick wall and the little white door at the end. It had been a fire exit once; now it opened every day to let orcs into the hospital, ten at a time. A massive yellow sign hung on the wall, towering over all of us. In thick black letters of the human alphabet, it shouted the ridiculous slogan of the truce:

**PEACE FOR THOSE WHO FOLLOW THE LAW. FRIENDSHIP FOR THOSE WHO OBEY.**

A patrol truck crawled down the street, heading to the hospital gates. In the back, humans laughed and chatted about whatever snowflakes chat about. Every orc in the line glared at the truck as it passed us by. I guess all of us were thinking the same. *These pansies shouldn't have had a chance against the horde.*

The truck slowed down. Almost all the younglings jumped back into the gutter. All except one.

That was the first time I ever saw Dahn Bloodstorm. He was young then - couldn't be a day over twenty. But already he stood handsome and proud. He stared at the humans in defiance, his arms crossed, bulging with dark green muscles and fat yellow veins. His tusks, bright white and still sharp, screamed noble descent and a life of comfort.

The truck stopped next to him, not far ahead of me. The driver stuck his bald head out, and yelled for everyone to get off the sidewalk. I recognized him as Sergeant Colina. A letter-of-the-law kind of bigot. Dahn didn't budge. I looked at the little white door in the red brick wall. I really didn't want to be a prefect right then. *Think of Masha. Do your job.*

I walked up and tried to pull him down. "Don't be an idiot," I whispered.

He looked me right in the eye. "Don't be a traitor," he whispered back at me. I froze.

His clothes were classic brown leather, not human jeans like the other kids. I spotted the holes of his tribal piercings - his parents probably still let him wear them at home. And they'd probably

read him the saga of the Lightstones, and the Tree at the Center of the Earth, and all the other patriotic stories. He was nostalgic for a time he'd never even known. Somewhere a proud mother had no idea one of her kids was about to do something really dumb.

I pulled at Dahn again. "Come on, this isn't the place." Others were grumbling too. "Don't ruin it for the rest of us," stuff like that. Dahn stood tall and ignored everyone.

The sergeant's squad put on their helmets, and followed him into the rain. Dahn glared down at the humans, their heads barely reaching his elbows. If he'd wanted to, I was sure he could have squished their little heads like tomatoes. There was still something ridiculous about a man-to-orc confrontation, the raw power of the orc against the bald human in his little uniform, even after the atrocities of the war and the horrors of the truce.

Colina wasn't impressed. "Name?"

I held my breath. *Please just play along.*

"My name is Dahn Bloodstorm," he boasted for all to hear. *Great*, I thought. *A Highborn.*

Colina saw the crowd murmur. He unbuttoned his side arm. "Why were you disturbing the peace?"

"I'm not the one holding a gun."

I sighed. *Come on kid. Just do whatever they want and apologize. You can't win this one.*

Colina pointed to his squad. "Got six men that saw you break the law. No orcs on the sidewalk."

"Go read your own laws," Dahn said. "Not a word about sidewalks."

Colina turned to his patrol. "A toad that reads the law!" The humans giggled like humans do. "Sidewalks are human-size. Orcs blocking 'em are a safety hazard. Get the fuck down."

"So orcs walk in the gutter?"

Colina looked at the rest of the line, sizing up the crowd. There were a lot of us that day. "Orcs can walk wherever they want, as long as it ain't the sidewalk. Safety before comfort."

I stepped forward. "Sergeant, I'm prefect 3141. May I speak?"

Colina didn't even look at me. "I'd rather you don't."

I bent a knee. "Please. He's a youngling, didn't see the war." I tried a smile. "And between you and me, he's not the smartest buck in the horde."

The sergeant was not amused. "I am old and I *did* live through the war. Every truce needs rules. If you orcs don't follow em, we might as well be at war again. Step back in line."

I didn't give up. "You know the stupidity of youth. Let *us* deal with him."

Colina didn't care. "You want your prefect bracelet revoked?"

"I beg you. He is someone's son. Do you have children, sergeant?"

"I had children once," he said. "Now get back in line."

I closed my eyes. *Step back. Think of Masha*, I told myself, *and step back*.

I looked at Dahn standing there, all proud and confident like we used to be. And I thought of Yisha, Pohl, Rink, and all the others. My heart pounded in my throat. I did my best to look determined. And I stepped forward.

"No," I said. "He did nothing wrong."

I heard the other orcs mumbling. The sergeant cocked the safety on his revolver. He spoke slowly now, deliberately. "You two are inciting racial tensions. You are ignoring a direct order from a patrol sergeant. You are jeopardizing the peace. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Dahn kept it short. "Yes."

I did my part. "There's a big crowd, sergeant. Do you really want to kill a Highborn and a widow? We didn't even break any laws."

I smelled him sweat.

"He's a popular guy, too," I lied. "Think of what that'll do to the truce."

Colina stayed still for a few seconds. I could swear he was memorizing our faces. Then he turned around, got his squad back into his truck, and drove. The crowd stomped their feet and danced, the orc way.

I looked at Dahn. He was still standing on the sidewalk, tall, handsome, and smiling.

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Almost an hour later, I shuffled into the hospital waiting room along with nine other orcs. Dahn was one of them. Humans came in to check our bracelets. Everyone got the green light.

The ten of us filled the waiting room. There were no chairs and the ceiling was too low for us to stand without hunching. A window would have been nice, too. Human music played through the speakers. A human clock on the wall ticked human seconds.

In the corner, there was a single tree in a large stone pot. Its leaves were withered yellow, though left and right a few branches seemed to be hanging on.

I looked at myself in the massive wall-to-wall mirror. My tusks, yellowish and gunky and visibly scarred, hadn't been brushed in a week. My arms seemed to have melted from muscles to flabby fat. I was getting old. My fiery red hair had turned ashy gray years ago. Rink used to tell me he liked that look, that it made me look wise and sexy. I hadn't felt sexy or wise in a long time. I missed him.

Dahn was sitting on the floor, leaning against a wall. I worked my way through the room and sat down next to him. I offered my hand, palm up.

"Hi," I said.

He gently put his hand on mine, palm down, but didn't say a word.

"I'm Sandra," I said. "We'll be stuck here for at least an hour. Might as well talk a bit."

"They'll have your bracelet for that, you know," he said.

"Yours too," I said.

"Yeah."

"Things got pretty heated out there, huh?"

Dahn stared dead ahead. "They need to see strength before they'll see us as equals."

"Maybe."

"The Nobles would never have made us stand in the gutter like slaves," he said.

I stayed calm. "Your parents were Nobles?"

He nodded, running his finger over his tribal piercings. "My father died with honor in the war. My mother cozied up to the humans for medicine. She died two years ago, my brother right after. Just before they put the prefects in charge."

"I'm sorry to hear that." I ignored the jab. "Sounds like she was a strong woman."

He furrowed his brow. "A strong woman would have kept her honor."

"There is honor in survival too."

Dahn looked into the hallway. "Life without honor is no life at all."

He reminded me of my sons. I'd had the same conversations with them. I'd lost those, too.

The clock ticked on. When the music changed I was relieved at first, but the next song was equally bad. Squeaky voices, and too many instruments. Like listening to birds all day long. Humans had no sense for rhythm. Their clock sounded better than their radio. I sat down next to Dahn.

"You know... choosing honor over life may sound noble. But things are different when it's the life of everyone else that you're playing with. Sounds like your mother knew that."

He closed his eyes. His smile was long gone. "You know nothing of my mother," he said.

The clock on the wall ticked a few more minutes before I tried again.

"I had twin boys myself. Born a few years before you. Pohl and Bern. They never took the medicine. Didn't trust the humans. Bern had twin girls, Yisha and Masha. No medicine either."

"Sounds like they are orcs of honor. They're right not to trust the humans."

"I buried Pohl two years ago. Yisha's funeral was last month. Planted a white tree and everything. I volunteered as prefect right after. Masha is barely hanging on."

"I'm sorry for your loss. But I can't imagine the shame of having a prefect for a mother."

I swallowed. "Neither could Bern. But the fighting has to stop sometime or we'll all be dead."

"If we stop fighting, they'll kill us all anyway."

"And they might say the same about us. What are you doing here, Dahn?"

He held his head high. "I wanted to see it up close. The experiments."

“They’re trying to cure us.”

He snorted. “You believe that? They keep us on a leash with the medicine. We’re lab rats. They’re the ones who made the plague in the first place.”

“There is no proof of that,” I said.

“I don’t need proof, I know it’s true.”

We remained silent until the doctor walked in.

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The doctor looked young, with his little white coat and curly black hair. Twenty-five? Thirty? I could never tell with humans.

A young orc girl in jeans walked behind him, looking embarrassed at the rest of us. I smiled at her to tell her it was okay. The others didn’t. She followed the doctor to the middle of the room.

He cleared his throat. “Hi. My name is Doctor Vermeer,” he said in the human tongue. “I’m running a stage 2 trial for a modified insulin that slows the spread of the virus through the bloodstream. It’s promising in human diabetic patients. We need to test if the same holds in orc physiology.”

Jeans girl translated. *“Another Doctor. More tests for a cure.”*

We all looked at each other. No one said a thing.

“This trial is considered medium risk. In animal tests, the majority were fine, but side effects occurred in about 30% of the population. They ranged from severe muscle spasms to digestive issues. Fatality rate was 4%.”

Jeans girl summarized it to *“This might sting a little.”*

“Payout is 8,000 dollars, plus an additional 4,000 for each of 5 follow-up visits.”

*“The money is good. Take it.”*

I raised my hand. So did Dahn and 3 others. The remaining 5 orcs walked out, to get back in line for a lower risk trial. The doctor walked up to the 5 of us, eyeing us carefully, and double checking our bracelets. Then he pointed us to the hallway.

“Let’s go.”

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The inside of the hospital was like a maze. I’d never seen a building with so many little hallways and doors going to more doors going to more hallways. We went up & down more times than made sense to me, but in the end we arrived at a larger room, with a bunch of equipment and a large bed, clearly meant for an orc.

The doctor took a pointy weapon and some tubes. “I’ll need to draw some blood,” he said, and looked at jeans girl.

“This part gets a bit weird,” she said, “but he’s going to stick that thing in your arm and let the blood flow into the tube. It’s not much and it doesn’t hurt. They need look at the blood to know if they can do the tests on you. They don’t do anything else with it, they can’t hurt you with it. It’s fine.”

“Still up for this?” I asked Dahn. He nodded.

I was the last orc that he stabbed. My blood flowed into the tube like a little waterfall. It was darker than that of the others – no idea why. He took all the blood and walked out. Said he’d be back in a few minutes.

Dahn was looking around the room, taking it all in.

“This hospital is huge,” I said.

He nodded. “Guess the humans need a lot of healing.”

“They’ve helped plenty of ours too, you know.”

“We shouldn’t have to beg them for their medicine.”

I sighed. “If we were better at this stuff ourselves, we wouldn’t have to.”

“It’s not the orc way,” he said.

“Maybe not. But It could be tomorrow.” I winked.

Keeping an eye on the door, I walked over to the cabinet behind the doctor’s desk. It had all sorts of old-looking books. I took a really thick one and threw it to Dahn. He thumbed through it. It was tiny in his hands, full of little drawings and barely readable letters in the human alphabet. He whisked it away in his jacket.

The doctor came back. He'd chosen me as his test subject. I wasn't sure whether to be happy or scared. I asked jeans girl to make sure that, if something went wrong, Masha would still get the medicine. She reassured me.

I said goodbye to Dahn. Asked him to talk to Bern for me. Tell him I loved him, just in case.

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My memories after that are fragments.

I remember getting strapped to the table. I got two injections – their new drug first, then a shot with the actual virus.

I can still feel the convulsions crawl through my body if I close my eyes. It started in my stomach, then up to my shoulders. My back felt on fire. My muscles were cramping all over my body, tearing me apart – I'd never felt anything like it. A sharp sting burned through my liver. I threw up.

My arms and legs flailed around. The restraints kept me on the bed, but didn't help with the pain. My heart kept pounding faster, and I couldn't get any air into my lungs. I screamed in agony but no sound came out. I'm not sure how long it lasted before a nurse rushed in and plunged a needle into my arm. After that, it's all a blur. I fell in a deep sleep.

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My restraints were gone.

I was in a beautiful field and I smelled flowers and trees and I felt grass on my feet and birds were singing and children playing and I drank water and broth and ate boar with potatoes and lay down on the ground and I was back in the hospital.

"It worked," the doctor smiled and Dahn sat by my side holding my hand and I smiled at him and he smiled at me and I got up and I danced with Dahn and I danced on the street.

The sun shone through the clouds and the only drizzle was far away and I stomped through the puddles on the sidewalk and my legs were strong and I jumped through the air over houses and trees and my eyes were better and my hair was back to fiery red.

And then I was home with Bern and Masha and a beautiful picture of Rink hung on the wall and I wondered where that came from but I didn't care because he looked just like he should and it felt so good to see him again.

And Masha was on her bed in the little green dress i'd made her last summer and I gave her the cure and she got better right away and I sang her some music and then I played and danced with my granddaughter for seven years.

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When I woke up for real, things were different. I was in an orc house, on an actual orc bed. I was confused, couldn't work out what had been a dream and what not. Piece by piece, Dahn and Masha filled me in.

I'd dropped into a coma, but in my blood the humans found antibodies against the plague. For the first few years, they couldn't replicate it, I was their only source. They'd kept it a secret and had only used it to cure their own, but the word had gotten out.

Dahn and Bern had led the rebellion. They'd been smart about it though. Fought with honor, killed only where needed. Spared civilians, even helped their wounded. We have some doctors of our own now, too. Funny what a book can do.

Things still aren't perfect, but we might be getting there this time.

Maybe it's finally stopped raining.