

"Alright, team! Everybody up!"

Lucas Harrier grumbled and rolled onto his back, feeling the weight of his belly shift against uncomfortably against his lungs. He'd already been in and out of sleep for that past few hours, but if Coach Pendergrass was telling him it was time to get up, it was time to get up. He kicked his way out from under the slightly-starchy hotel bedsheets and sat on his knees. His old jersey had ridden up over her belly in the night, but it wasn't going to be covering much of it anyway. Lucas sat back on his paws, threw his arms over his head, and yawned, flashing his canine teeth and letting his tongue flop out.

"Coach you don't..." Lucas paused to yawn again and smacked his lips together. "What d'ya mean 'team?' I'm the only one here."

"I'm not just talking to you, kid," said the coach from the bathroom. The hiss of the running sink made him raise his voice to the same tone Lucas had grown so familiar with during practice. "You're carrying them, so that means you *are* the team!"

Lucas licked his lips and glanced down at his belly, rounding out just a little farther than his knees. Coach had a point, though he didn't think yelling was going to wake up his litter as much as breakfast would. Lucas felt a slight poke on his right side, so soft it felt more like an itch, and touched his thumb to it while smirking. At least one of them was awake. Maybe they would grow up to be a running back like their dad with all that extra energy.

"C'mon, kid, get a spring in your step," said Steve Pendergrass as he strode out of the bathroom. The old badger was already dressed, but his fur was still wet from the shower he'd taken while Lucas was still asleep. At least he gave his pregnant player a little extra shut-eye. "We don't got all morning."

"Sorry, coach. It's a little harder than it..." Lucas was interrupted by a yawn again. "Used to be."

"Well, we gotta be outta here by seven if you want time for breakfast."

Lucas perked up at the mention of food. He was already a big eater back when he played, but the litter of six growing in his belly had tripled his appetite. With the image of a hotel continental breakfast buffet drifting through his head, Lucas hefted his heavy body to the edge of the bed and hauled himself up with a hand from Steve.

"How you feelin'? Sleep okay? Any pain?" He patted Lucas's belly protectively. "Need me to set any of 'em straight in there?"

"No coach, I'm okay," Lucas chuckled as he rested a hand on his stomach. "They're all doing good."

"I knew you'd be a natural," Steve smirked before walking back into the bathroom. Lucas beamed with pride and wrapped his arms around his belly while wagging his tail. Praise from Coach Pendergrass was hard to come by, especially on the field. A lot of Lucas's teammates took it too hard, called him a tyrant, but it just meant that when he gave it, he really meant it.

"What'd you bring to wear, Lucas?" Steve poked his head around the corner to ask.

"Well uh..." Lucas swallowed and glanced toward his suitcase on a nearby chair. "...Whatever still fits me, I guess."

"I was afraid of that," the badger said, frowning. "I brought a couple Raptors t-shirts just in case. Try 'em on and see how they feel while I brush my teeth."

"Got it, coach."

When Steve ducked back into the bathroom, Lucas waddled across the room with a hand on his back. He was still fit from his days as a football star, and while his physique had helped immeasurably with the pregnancy, there were some things he wouldn't be able to avoid. Lucas flipped open Steve's suitcase and found a stack of plastic-wrapped t-shirts in a familiar blue-green color. The first one he opened was a medium.

"*Snrk*," he snorted before tossing it aside. "Nnnnope."

He tried on a large, next, but could hardly get it past his ribs before he gave up on it. The XL wasn't much better. He could get it past his ribs and a little of the ways down his sides, but it couldn't stretch far enough to get past the most prominent swell of his bump. By the time Steve had finished in the bathroom, Lucas had managed to squeeze himself into a XXL, but not comfortably.

"That'll work," the coach said.

"Are you sure?" Lucas tried to tug the shirt farther down and glanced in the mirror to find the Carolina Raptors logo stretched by his belly into an unrecognizable blob. "I look huge."

"May not be a bad thing," Steve nodded. "Drafters want to know the prospects are coming along big and strong. This might give 'em a better look at you."

"I guess that makes sense," Lucas said. He reached under the shirt to smooth down his fur, then rested both hands on his belly and sighed. "I wish Travis had been able to come."

"Would'a been nice," Steven nodded. "But it's the mother's stats that are more important for right now."

Lucas turned and frowned at his coach.

"Primary father, I mean," Steve winced. Clearing his throat, he pulled at his collar and added, "Sorry, old habits."

"What makes my stats more important?" Lucas asked, deciding to let the matter slide.

"The genes for the secondary come into play once they're older," Steve explained as he put a hand on Lucas's belly. "But for now, your genes, diet, and exercise are the most direct way to predict what kind of players they'll be."

"So *my* stats are the ones to look at before they're born," Lucas said while nodding to himself. "And Travis's will be more important once they're old enough to actually play?"

"Just some of the stuff teams consider," Steve said. He patted Lucas on the back before nudging him back across the room. "Now finish gettin' dressed! You want breakfast or not?"

Lucas put on his belly-band before squeezing into a brand-new pair of jeans made to look pre-distressed with white scuffs on the knees. The t-shirt, while tight around his middle, was long enough to cover the hair-tie he was using to hold the jeans together. He'd long given up on being able to button his pants.

"You ready?" Steve had been dressed for a while, but he wasn't complete without his trademark aviator sunglasses tucked into the collar of his polo and the worn, red visor on his head. It was what everyone knew him for, his players especially. To Lucas, he looked practically naked without them.

"Ready, coach," Lucas said with a pat to his pregnant belly. "The whole team."

Out in the hall, he had trouble keeping up with his coach's long stride, though they were nearly the same height. Steve stopped every few feet to wait for him. The pregnant running back didn't stop until they reached the elevator, his first opportunity to catch his breath.

"Don't wear yourself out, kid, you ain't runnin' laps," Steve chuckled.

They stepped out into the marble lobby together. As his coach went to the front desk to ask about something, Lucas idly stroked his belly and people-watched. A skinny deer woman and her two kids clopped through the lobby in bathing suits, reminding him of his determination to get in the pool at least once before going home. Lucas hadn't been much for the water, but once his belly had started putting on more weight, he could hardly get through the day without a swim, to the point that Coach Pendergrass had worked frequent trips to the pool into his Paternity exercise.

Lucas froze, his ears twitching, as a very familiar scent touched his nose. The sweet, savory, buttery smell of breakfast food wafted around the corner. Someone in his belly began squirming, as if they could smell it too, and the depths of Lucas's bottomless hunger fell just a little lower. He bit his tongue and tried not to drool all over his new shirt.

"Alright, got a cab coming to pick us up at eight," Steve said as he walked over.

"A taxi?" Lucas cocked his head to the side. "Why not just get an Uber?"

"I don't trust all that," Steve frowned. "Just gettin' into some stranger's car like that. At least a

cab driver's got a boss I can..." He trailed away once he saw the strained look on the pregnant canine's face and heard a thin, desperate whine in his throat. Laughing, he jabbed his thumb around the corner. "Food's that way. We got an hour."

For once, the badger was the one lagging behind as Lucas ran with a burst of speed down the hallway. It wasn't anything to put in the books, but would've been a top-ten in the hundred yard pregnancy-dash. Steve arrived to find Lucas filling a plate with pancakes, bacon, mini-muffins, and every other delicacy the hotel bar provided. Steve got himself a cup of coffee in the meantime and carried it back to the table Lucas had collapsed onto with his overflowing plate of food.

"Count out the calories," Steve said as he sat. "Don't overdo it."

"I'm not, I'm not," Lucas huffed as he inhaled the first pancake. A litter of six took a lot of energy, but the canine was a black hole when it came to food and could very easily stuff himself full to bursting. Steve needed him alert and awake during the draft pitch, not half-asleep in a food coma.

Lucas stuffed his face with enough breakfast food that Steve was getting full just from watching. As the foot started hitting his stomach, the litter began waking up, jostling one another in a crowded shoving match for room. Most of Lucas's breakfast would be going straight to them, so he ate enough to make sure none of them went hungry. He was forced to sit with his side to the table, his belly filling his lap, and he wiped maple syrup off his hand to try and pacify the active babies.

He finished his first plate in record time. Before getting up for a second course, Lucas glanced up over Steve's shoulder. His coach followed his vision and turned to see a chubby, middle-aged hound in a striped polo standing over them.

"H-Hey! G'morning!" he said in a soft accent. "Now, I don't usually do this but...are you Steve Pendergrass? The Raptors' coach?"

"I was until 2012," Steve said with a nod before holding out his hand. Lucas had taken the moment to get up and shuffle back to the buffet. "What's your name?"

"L-Lewis, sir!" the hound said, his voice rising and his tail batting the chair behind him. "I... *Wow!* Never thought I'd see you out here, Mr. Pendergrass! I've been a Raptors fan my whole life. My wife even went to LSU while you was still coaching out there!"

"Glad to hear it. Hope I left those teams better than when I found 'em," Steve said. "The Raptors were a good team even before me, though. I'm managing a few of my boys these days. Maybe even some future Raptors, if we get lucky."

"Is that what you're doing in Dallas?" Lewis asked. "Prenatal draft?"

"Yep. Got a meetin' this afternoon with a couple teams, seein' if they can recognize talent in the womb." Steven chuckled and sipped his coffee, intending to finish it before it got cold. As if on cue, Lucas returned to the table with another plate of food and met eyes with Lewis.

"Are you-" Lewis's eyes went wide. "Oh my God, you're Lucas Harrier!"

"Yes, sir, that's me. Last I checked, anyway." He set his food down and waddled around the table to shake the fan's hand. While he was distracted, Steve plucked a few unnecessary strips of bacon and mini-muffins from Lucas's plate.

"I was at that Kentucky game a few years ago," Lewis said. "With that touchdown? I was...Oh man." He chuckled and shook his head. "I was screamin' so hard I couldn't talk for a week after that."

"Yeah, I got real lucky with that one," Lucas said, smiling bashfully. He stroked the side of his belly, which he tended to do when he was getting anxious. Even after so many years of praise for that play, too much of it tended to make him uncomfortable.

"That was some damn good football." Lewis caught the movement of Lucas's hand and moved his attention to his belly. "And this! I always figured your kids would be good prospects if you ever had any. Who's the secondary father?"

"We keep that one to ourselves for right now," Steve interrupted once he saw Lucas about to answer. It wasn't a secret that Lucas was pregnant, but they had to keep Travis's involvement under wraps until the litter had a team.

“O-Oh, sure, sure, sure. I get it,” Lewis said, nodding a little too fast. He turned to Lucas and added, “I never really thought you’d be the primary father, though. Always pictured you’d be somebody’s secondary.”

“Well, y’know,” Lucas shrugged as he stroked his belly. “You can’t predict everything.”

Lewis paused before his enthusiasm ramped up again.

“Well! Now I hope I’m around long enough to see these kids play! Wherever they end up.”

“We got some time,” Steve nodded before glancing at Lucas. “But any kids of Lucas’s will be players to watch, that’s for damn sure.”

“I hope it goes well!” Lewis said as he took out his cell phone. Steve knew all too well what was coming next. “Would you guys mind if I got a picture?”

“A quick one,” Steve said, motioning the hound over. He put on his sunglasses and posed for a selfie. Lewis then moved to Lucas, who was showing remarkable patience for a hungry, pregnant ex-football player.

“In twenty years, I bet I’ll have a photo with a future Heisman winner before they were even born,” Lewis said.

“*Six* of ‘em,” Lucas said, patting his belly. Steve smirked. He didn’t like that Lucas had just told on the size of his litter, but he was always quick to boast for his unborn pups.

“*Six!*” Lewis glanced down at the canine’s round middle, then nodded. “Yep, that looks like six to me.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Steve said while making a show of checking his watch. “But we gotta get on the road, soon.”

“Oh! Right, right! Sorry, didn’t mean to hold you guys up.” Lewis backed away and waved before turning and practically skipping down the hall.

Lucas sighed and eased himself into the chair. He glanced down at his plate, then snapped his head toward Steve, who was chewing on one of his bacon strips.

“Go get more fruit,” he told Lucas.

It took the pregnant football star less than ten minutes to scarf down his second plate, which a glacially slow pace for Lucas. After putting away enough food to empty half the buffet, he was still hungry enough to grab an apple and two bananas as the taxi pulled up. Coach Pendergrass took the passenger seat while Lucas was content to sprawl out in the back. The food had riled up his litter and he needed the extra room to try and calm them down.

While Lucas wasn’t a stranger to big cities, especially the once his football career had taken him to, Dallas was the one that *felt* the biggest. While New York and Chicago were densely packed in a small area, Dallas just went on and on and on. He hoped there would be time after the draft to see some of it. Lucas looked away from the window and back down to his belly. He had only been gone a few days, but already missed Travis. Pregnancy was making him clingy. A hard *thump* from one of the pups jabbed Lucas in the ribs, who was always surprised at how hard such a tiny paw could hit.

“You’ll definitely be our kicker,” he whispered while poking the at the tiny lump rising out from his belly.

The taxi took them out of downtown Dallas and farther into the industrial area, where the buildings weren’t as tall but twice as wide. They were impressive, but not as much fun to look at, so Lucas spent most of the drive alternating his attention between his cell phone and his litter. Steve had his laptop in his lap and was putting the finishing touches on his presentation. He had something of an idea of which teams would make an appearance, but he wouldn’t know for sure until they got there. Since the Prenatal Draft was such a long-term investment, the only teams that went were ones that either had money to burn or enormous faith in their coaches’ judgment. If they were lucky, the winning team would have both.

Lucas was so lost in thought he didn’t notice the cab had stopped until Steve was tapping on his window. He hauled him back on his paws in the parking lot of an enormous office building, its glass

catching the sunlight and casting a glare Lucas had to shield his eyes from. It was one of those featureless buildings he saw all along interstates and city-centers, but had no idea what was actually inside them.

“You alright, kid?” Steve said, leaning over to catch Lucas’s eye. “Feelin’ frosty?”

“I’m okay, coach,” Lucas said with a terse nod. He was more nervous than he expected, but he believed in Coach Pendergrass. Compared to the Super Bowl, this was nothing.

“How about the team?”

“Feels fine, I guess,” Lucas said, pressing his hands to his belly. “Real active, though.”

“That’s a good thing. Let’s ‘em know the kids got spunk,” Steve said, patting Lucas on the shoulder. “Alright, let’s knock ‘em dead in there.”

“Right,” Lucas nodded with a determined scowl on his face. It’d been four years and seven months since he’d last stepped on the field, but he could still feel that fire in his chest that Coach was a master at bringing out of him.

The pair of them entered a lobby with a high ceiling and polished tile on every surface. Team banners from all around the country hung from the ceiling. Lucas was quick to spot the flag for the Carolina Raptors between the Missouri Gladiators and the Alabama Raiders. Most of the teams named after animals had to change after enough people complained they enforced stereotypes, but the Raptors had gotten around it since they were named after a species that was already extinct.

The lobby was busier than Lucas expected it to be. Men and women of all species milled around the lower offices. Many of them gave Lucas lingering looks as they passed, but whether they recognized him from his football career or his belly simply drew their attention, he couldn’t be sure. Steve returned shortly and clipped a pin to Lucas’s shirt reading ‘Visitor’ before putting another on himself. He followed the badger to the elevators, his pregnant waddling doing little to calm the litter that was still hopped up from the big breakfast.

They got off on the 16th floor, an open area that looked wider than it seemed due to the glass walls that partitioned off the empty conference rooms. Steve led the way with his laptop bag slung over his shoulder and was checking for their assigned room from the list on his phone.

“Hey coach,” Lucas said. He was panting at the effort of trying to match the badger’s stride, but he didn’t want to be the one to slow them down. “Do they have a break room around here? With a snack machine?”

“You still hungry?” Steve said without turning around. “I watched you put away enough for three linebackers.”

“I’m not hungry now,” Lucas said, “but I will be in a little bit and probably won’t be able to leave the meeting to get anything.”

“Y’know what? That’s smart.” Steve stopped and pointed in the opposite direction. “Should be back near the bathrooms. Don’t get no junk food or nothing like that. Get a granola bar or fruit if they have it.”

“Sure thing, coach.” The two parted ways, with Steve still in search of the conference room and Lucas in search of snack to pacify his overactive pups.

The break room was a small kitchen with a tile floor. Instead of a machine, the entire back wall was dedicated to metal shelves of snack food. To the right of it was a small computer kiosk with a bar code scanner. Lucas was so transfixed by the new, expensive technology that he didn’t notice the other man in the room. A tall, bulky zebra stood next to the coffee maker with his back to Lucas, doctoring up a Styrofoam cup of it with creamer. His shoulders were nearly as wide as Lucas was tall, giving away that he must be a player, rather than a coach or a manager.

Lucas turned to the snacks and rubbed small circles across his belly while his mouth watered. Every neon-colored bag of chips or crackers caught his eye, many of them uncommon brands he’d usually only saw in the grocery store. It took enormous effort to tear his eyes away from the unhealthy snacks at eye-level and to look to the granola bars on the bottom shelf. A box of Cliff bars caught his

eye. Lucas took a few deep breaths and gritted his teeth before squatting. He carefully sank down to his haunches, the extra weight of his middle straining on his lower back and the litter kicking impatiently at being squished. He grunted, despite himself, and managed to snatch one of the bars before falling over. Lucas took a deep breath and tried to stand up, but lost his balance on the slick floor and fell to his knees with a hard *whump*.

“Ow,” Lucas grumbled as he rubbed his back.

“You good?” said a deep, resonant voice somewhere above him.

“I’m good,” Lucas grumbled. He put the Cliff bar in his mouth and tried to push himself upright. A broad hand patted him on the shoulder before offering itself palm-up. Lucas took the help and grunted as the zebra pulled him to his paws with considerable effort. On the way up, he came face-to-belly with the man’s stomach, a broad dome of coarse, striped hair barely beneath by a purple t-shirt the covered only slightly below his navel.

“Don’t do that without nobody around,” the zebra laughed. He wasn’t loud, but his deep voice carried far in the tile room.

“I usually don’t.” Lucas set the granola bar on a nearby table and patted his belly. “I think you’re speakin’ from experience.”

“Shit, I gotta be good with my hands. I drop something, it’s gone for good.” The zebra touched his own belly in sympathy before cocking his head at Lucas. “I think I’ve seen you before. You with the Raptors?”

“I was, few years ago.” Lucas pointed to the wild Harlequin mascot for the Louisiana Jesters on the zebra’s shirt. “I know we played you guys all the time, though. I’m Lucas.”

“Lucas Harrier!” The zebra grinned as he shook the canine’s hand. “I knew I recognized you. You were the running back, I remember now. Speedy little motherfucker.”

“Well, not anymore,” Lucas chuckled as he stroked his middle. “I’m guessing you were on the line, right?”

“Tight end. And don’t you make no jokes about that,” the zebra said with a good-natured smirk as he gestured to his own pregnant stomach.

“Hey, I ain’t got room to talk,” Lucas said. “Sorry if I don’t recognize ya, but if I was doin’ my job right, I never had to run into you.”

“DeMarcus. Wilson.” He held out his hand and Lucas’s was dwarfed by it as they shook. “You here for a draft?”

“Yep, me and Coach Pendergrass. He’s my manager now.” Lucas paused and glanced at his stomach. “Well, *our* manager.”

“Steve Pendergrass?” DeMarcus whistled. “I remember him. He’s a mean motherfucker.”

“Only to the other team,” Lucas smiled. “You here for a draft, too?”

“Yeah, we’re givin’ it a shot,” DeMarcus shrugged. “We went back and forth about it before figuring it was worth tryin’ before I’m due. Figured they were gonna end up playin’ football, anyway.”

“How many you got?”

“Twins. Due next month,” DeMarcus said, beaming with pride.

“All that’s just twins?” Lucas said, gesturing to DeMarcus’s stomach. “I’m impressed. Who’s the other dad?”

“I ain’t really supposed to say,” the zebra said with a cheeky smirk that showed it clearly wasn’t going to stop him, “but...Kendrick Hardy.”

“Kendrick Hardy! The bull guy? The center?” Lucas whistled. “Yeah, those are his alright. Born linebackers, that’s for sure.”

“That’s our pitch. How about you?”

“Litter of six,” Lucas said with a proud grin and a wagging tail.

“God *damn*, that’s half a starting lineup. Who put ‘em in there?”

“Our QB, Travis McKnight,” Lucas answered. Even if it was a secret, he was too excited to hide

it anymore.

“Well shit, those are gonna be some fast-ass toddlers. I ain’t jealous.” DeMarcus reached down at gave Lucas’s belly a friendly pat. “Good luck out there, man. Maybe our kids’ll be on the same team.”

“Hope so. Glad to meet ya. Good luck with yours, too.” Lucas caught sight of a moving spot on DeMarcus’s belly and put his hand on it, hoping the zebra wouldn’t mind.

“Little higher,” he said, coaxing Lucas’s hand a few inches up. A moment later, a small hoof thumped the center of his palm with a surprising amount of force.

“*Damn!* That was *strong!*”

“Try feelin’ that from the inside,” DeMarcus laughed. He picked up his coffee from where he left it and waddled out the door. “See ya ‘round, man.”

“You too,” Lucas said, and he hoped he would.

Even though he’d bought it to save for later, Lucas ended up eating half the Cliff bar on the way to the conference room. He folded the wrapper around the rest of it and tucked it in his pocket before shuffling toward the room Steve was in. His laptop was on the table and connected to the overhead projector by cables running through the floor. The first slide of the presentation was the teal Carolina Raptors logo. Steve was setting out a stack of glossy folders at each seat around the table.

“You get lost?” he asked when Lucas waddled inside.

“Sorta. Nobody here yet?”

“*We* needed to get here by ten, but *they* aren’t coming ‘til ten-thirty.”

Lucas nodded and settled himself in the chair near the front of the room he assumed was for him. He shifted under the weight of his pregnancy until he was comfortable, then wheeled to the table and began clicking through the presentation.

“Don’t mess with that,” Steve said.

“I’m just looking,” Lucas said. He was getting nervous again. All the stats and numbers and play highlights reminded him of his own draft into professional football, but this was different. It wasn’t himself that was being judged, but his *children*. He already felt protective of them, even before they were born, and worried about the group of strangers that would be deciding their future before they had a say in it. Lucas tried to remind himself what Steve had told him, that the coaches were simply looking for potential, that this was essentially a very early scouting session. Sighing, he again wished Travis was there.

A group of loud voices echoed from somewhere outside the room, growing louder by the moment. Six men in business suits and baseball caps rounded the corner, all of them with the same booming voices and stocky builds as Coach Pendergrass, came into the conference room together, each of them taking a seat around the table. One of them, a bear with a lime green Alabama Raiders cap on, crossed the room and shook Steve’s hand.

“How the hell you doin’, Steve? Been too goddamned long,” he said, gripping the badger’s hand a little too hard.

“Doing good, Larry. Doing good. Been keeping your boys in good shape out there, aren’t ya?”

“Yeah, well, getting them into shape ain’t hard, it’s keeping them there that’s the trouble.” Larry glanced over Steve’s shoulder and spotted Lucas in his chair. “Lucas Harrier! I remember you pretty damn well, too. You were little hellion out there, weren’t ya?”

“I tried, sir,” Lucas said. He moved to stand, but was waved down by the Raiders coach.

“Don’t bother getting up, son, you look pretty settled in there,” he chuckled. “Just keep on bakin’ those buns in your oven, alright?”

“Yes, sir.” As Larry took his seat, Lucas frowned at the back of his head. He was a loud man, which wasn’t uncommon among coaches, but Larry tended to let his mouth speak more than his actions. Casting his eyes across the room, Lucas found he didn’t recognize the other men, but knew who they were based on the hats they wore. They were the coaches for the Alabama Raiders, the

Kentucky Bandits, the Louisiana Jesters, the Mississippi Vikings, the Florida Pirates, and the Tennessee Knights. All of them were good teams, but Lucas couldn't help but be disappointed the Raptors hadn't sent a representative.

"Alright, everybody settled in? Close that door for me, would ya Harvey?" Steve stood at the end of the table and planted both his hands on it in an obvious power move. With his visor and sunglasses, he looked like the picture-perfect image of a legendary football coach. "First, I wanna thank all y'all for comin' out and givin' us a chance. I think y'all made the right decision and one of you is gonna be getting some damn fine football players out of it. I know that for a fact."

Steve stepped away from the table and gestured to Lucas, who took that as his cue to struggle to his paws. He rocked in place slightly, his belly swelling out from his body far enough to catch the light from the projector. He tucked his hands underneath his middle and nodded to the coaches.

"And if you don't remember me, than I know most of your teams remember Lucas Harrier, here. You may not have seen him since he spent most of those games in your end zone."

"H-Hey, y'all," Lucas said with a wave. He rocked on his paws slightly. "My name's Lucas. I'm from Greenville, South Carolina. I was the starting running back for the Carolina Raptors between 2009 and 2015. Before that I was a free saftey for the University of South Carolina. And...well..." Lucas swallowed past a knot in his throat and gestured down to his round, gravid middle. "These... these are my kids. And I hope they'll be great football players someday. Thank you."

The coaches gave Lucas a polite round of applause as he settled back into his seat. Steve smiled. No coach ever expected players to be eloquent, but they could always be counted on to be sincere.

"Now, Lucas ain't never been one to brag, so I'll go ahead and do that for him," Steve said. He picked up the remote connected to his laptop and advanced to the next slide, a graph showing Lucas's stats from his time with the Raptors. "Lucas wasn't just a good running back, he was *the best* running back in Raptors history since the 1950s."

The pregnant canine shifted in his chair and glanced away while Coach Pendergrass read off his statistics with building enthusiasm. He watched the other coaches as they nodded and listened intently to Steve's pitch. Lucas was good and he took pride in what he'd done for the team, but he never knew how to respond to excessive praise. A wiggling feeling from one of his pups turning over distracted him and he smiled to himself. He knew, at least, he'd have no such hangups about bragging for *them*.

"I think the numbers speak for themselves, but in case you aren't convinced," Steve said, "I wanna show you a clip. A play I *know* your boys are never gonna forget." He pointed at the boar wearing the Kentucky Bandits hat at the end of the table as the rest of the coaches chuckled.

Lucas turned in his chair to watch the video on the projector. It was a moment he remembered well, but it was always interesting to see it from a different perspective.

It was late into the fourth quarter of a 2010 playoff game between the Raptors and Bandits. The Bandits were ahead by a field goal and the line of scrimmage was near the Raptors' thirty yard line. Steve had started the video a few minutes before the play, during the Raptors' last time-out of the game. Underneath the commentary by the sportscasters, the camera lingered on a much younger and much skinnier Lucas on the sidelines, drinking water through his helmet. The present-day Lucas stroked his belly again, hardly believing that the trim player from the past was himself.

The camera cut to Coach Pendergrass, hiding his mouth behind a clipboard as he talked to tall hyena, Travis. The play was the quarterback's idea and hinged entirely on Lucas, but they didn't tell him that until it was already over. The room watched as the Lucas from nine years ago spoke to Travis for only a few seconds, then nod before taking his position. None of them knew the simplicity of Travis's instructions. In that brief moment, he'd told Lucas, "Run. Do no stop." To the running back, that was all he needed.

It was a miracle the Raptors had the ball in the first place. They took their positions, each knowing this was their last chance to pull out ahead. Their center hiked the ball to Travis, who backed up and made a feint like he was going to pass it to their wide receiver. At the last minute, Lucas darted

by him so fast he was already past the forty before the other team realized he had the ball.

Lucas ran. He did not stop. At the time, he'd been so focused on that one command that he didn't notice until watching the footage how close he'd come to getting tackled. He passed the forty, then the fifty, then into Bandits territory. He was practically skipping from one yard line to the next, blasting past Kentucky's defense that he only remembered as orange blurs of color. Lucas sprinted in a straight line, not even bothering to dodge up or down as anyone who could stop him was so far behind they'd need wheels to catch him.

At the time, Lucas had been confused when he'd run out of field, finding the way forward blocked by a padded wall. His brain caught up with him a moment later and turned to find the Bandit's end zone fifteen feet behind him. He barely had time to drop the ball before a wave of shouting bodies nearly knocked him off his paws, but it wasn't the Bandits. Lucas's team lifted him in the air, jostling him like a car crash, and with a chorus of throaty cheers that drowned out the rest of the stadium that did the same.

"Damn," said Larry in the back of the room.

"Damn right," Steve responded, letting the video play a little longer behind him. "Put a straight line ahead of Lucas and nobody, damn near *nobody*, could catch him."

Lucas watched the screen and noticed the moment Travis had pulled him into a tight hug, lifting him off his feet. Everyone in the room had seen the play, but only Lucas knew what happened after it. He smiled to himself and stroked his middle, remembering that as the first night he and Travis had slept together. The first time he'd told Travis he loved him.

"But y'all know all that," Steve continued as he stopped the video. "I know a few of y'all were there, too. Lucas's talent can speak for itself, but those pups didn't get in there by themselves, did they?"

Steve pressed the button and moved to the next slide, eliciting a few gasps from the watching coaches. On it was a candid photo of Travis, still in his pads but carrying his helmet by the faceplate. Lucas swiveled in his chair and smiled up at the dark-furred hyena. If he couldn't have the real thing there, he could at least enjoy a photo.

"The pups' secondary father is Travis McKnight, Carolina Raptors starting quarterback from 2005 to 2015, and handsome young man." Steve flashed a quick wink to Lucas, who immediately blushed and looked away.

"Quarterback *and* running back?" said the Pirates coach. "That's some pedigree, Steve. You weren't out there playin' matchmaker, were ya?"

"Nope, these two found each other on their own," Coach Pendergrass said, shaking his head. "Can't say I didn't notice, though."

Steve clicked past Travis's photo and to another slide showing a graph of stats similar to Lucas's.

"Now, the Raptors have been blessed with some talented QBs in the past, which means Mr. McKnight isn't *the* number one, but he's damn sure in the top five. He took us through to four Super Bowls and won us two of 'em. He's been shortlisted for the Heisman several times and I consider it an *insult* he's never won it. The kid's a prodigy. I wouldn't be surprised if he ended up coach one of these days."

Steve walked through a list of highlight videos of Travis's best plays. Lucas watched the screen with the rest of them, but was barely paying attention to anything but the sight of the hyena whenever he came onscreen. A few of the pups began tussling somewhere low in his belly, but Lucas simply rubbed the spot and let them fight it out while watching the old clips of their father. If he was confident in his pups' potential, it was because of *Travis's* genes more than his. Lucas could run and he could jump and he could dodge, but he did so under the direction of others. He liked being told what to do and liked when it was kept simple. Between the two of them, Travis was the real star.

"Now, I could spend all day talkin' up my boys," Steve said with an exaggerated shrug. "But the

fact of the matter is that Travis McKnight and Lucas Harrier have retired from the game of football.” He paused for effect, letting the moment of silence sink in. “Fortunately, they’ve been so kind as to show us what the *next* generation of players will look like.”

Steve advanced to the next slide, a monochrome image of an ultrasound projected high above the room. Red lines pointed to each little gray lump that represented one of the pups. Lucas sat up straight, his attention returning now that they were discussing his children.

“Lucas is currently six and a half months pregnant with a litter of six,” Steve said, pointing to each potato-shaped lump on the screen. “One-two-three-four-five-six. From the talent of their fathers, I can tell you, sure as fact, that these six will be bona-fide superstars the minute they’re old enough to put cleats on the field.”

“*Six* of ‘em,” said the Knights coach with a whistle.

“Lucas and Travis’s family both have a history of litters. You’re lookin’ at half your starting lineup right here,” Steve said, gesturing to Lucas. Lucas sat up straight, resting his hands on his belly while trying to look presentable.

“Not necessarily,” Larry said. “What about the genders?”

Steve had told Lucas earlier in his pregnancy that the demand for female players was growing now that the women football leagues had been gaining steam, but there was still less demand for them than male prospects. Steve was convinced the winds were changing, that a few years down the line would see the women’s league at the same level as the men’s. However, the coach smirked at expectant father as he turned to the room and revealed their biggest secret.

“All male.”

“You’re shittin’ me,” Larry said, his eyebrows raised. “All six of ‘em? All boys?”

“A litter of six bouncing baby boys,” Steve said, folding his arms. “Which means six future players all for one team.”

“Hell, that’s a whole six-man team on their own,” the Vikings’ coach said.

“Between the two of ‘em, those kids are gonna be some good runners,” Larry said as he sat back in his chair and stroked his chin. “Strong legs.”

“I think Lucas can attest to that,” Steve said, eliciting a chuckle from the room.

“How about it, son?” Larry asked Lucas. “They got a lotta energy?”

“W-well, they move around a whole lot,” Lucas said, clearing his throat. At that moment, one of the pups was jabbing a foot near his ribs while another was trying to turn over in a space that wasn’t going to fit him. “And they’re gettin’ stronger every week so... Yeah, they’ll probably be pretty fast when they grow up.”

“Good. You’re the real expert, here,” Larry said.

Lucas smiled and nodded, but detected condescension in the coach’s words. Thankfully, even if Alabama picked them up, Larry would probably be long-retired by the time the litter was old enough to play.

“We got some projections here,” Steve said before moving to another slide showing a graph comparing Lucas and Travis’s stats together. “We can pretty much guarantee the pups will be strong runners, making them ideal wide-receivers if they can inherit Travis’s reflexes. Predicting a good QB is damn near impossible, but I’d be surprised if, out of all six, one of ‘em doesn’t end up perfect for the job.”

“Not real good for the line, though,” said the Vikings coach.

“No, that’s our only weak point. The dads are both smaller fellas, so you’re looking at purely offensive players. Not sayin’ it *can’t* happen, but Lucas probably won’t be giving birth to no linebackers.”

Thank God, Lucas thought with a relieved sigh. He’d shifted to the side in his chair, with one leg tucked underneath, and an arm cradling his middle. He and Travis liked to imagine the kind of positions the pups would end up in, most of their predictions coming when they were most active. If

they had strong legs, they might be kickers or runners. If they wiggled or moved a lot around their brothers, they might be good at dodging. If they hiccuped, it might mean they would have strong lungs and great endurance. It was amusing to see this game of theirs play out in real life between some of the most influential coaches in the country.

“The numbers are good,” said the deep voice of the Jesters’ coach. He was a dark, stocky horse who had barely spoken since entering the room. “But there’s more to it than that. What kind of shape are the pups in? Right now?”

“No birth defects, no abnormalities, no nothin’,” Steve nodded. “Every one of ‘em is healthy as can be.”

“So what about the mother? What kinda shape-” Larry winced and shook his head before looking at Lucas. “Primary father, I mean. Sorry, Lucas. What kinda shape are you keepin’ in?”

Lucas took a deep breath and groaned as he stood from the chair. Steve was quickly at his side and helped the pregnant young man steady himself.

“Well, Coach Pendergrass has me on a pretty good diet and I spend a lotta time exercising during the week. I’m up to about 220 right now, but he says that’s okay.”

“He’s been doing great,” Steve said. He wrapped an arm around Lucas’s shoulder and patted his belly with the other hand. “He ain’t put on a pound he ain’t supposed to, especially since so much of is goin’ to the litter.”

Steve stepped away as Lucas turned and stood in profile to the room, pulling his already-tight shirt even tighter to better display the size of his middle. He couldn’t wait until the meeting was over and he could put on something that didn’t make him feel shrink-wrapped.

“They ain’t little,” said the Knights’ coach with an impressed whistle.

“They’re all just shy of three pounds right now,” Steve said, “but s’long as Lucas keeps up his calorie intake, the doctors think they’ll be between six and seven. I know that don’t sound like much, but that’s pretty damn big for a litter of six.”

“That’s good for *twins*,” nodded the Knights’ coach. “It’s about the size my kids were. They sure *felt* bigger, though.” Lucas blinked in surprise as the coach gave him a sympathetic smile.

“What’s the likelihood Lucas will make it all the way to term?” the Jesters’ coach asked.

“We did some digging on that one,” Steve said. He stepped closer to Lucas and idly laid a hand on his belly. “Lucas and his three siblings were a little premature, only by a few weeks. But his triplet cousins, carried by his uncle, made it all the way to term. Based on genetics, we got about a 60-40 chance Lucas makes it to his due date. ‘Course, neither of ‘em were pro athletes.” Steve patted Lucas’s belly before gripping his shoulder. “You keep bakin’ those buns as long as you can, kid.”

“I’ll try, coach,” Lucas said. “But uhh...it’s kinda up to *them*.”

The coaches laughed. Lucas joined them, but noticed the Jesters’s coach was the only silent one in the room. He had his hand over his mouth and his brow was furrowed with an intent look at Lucas’s belly. The canine swallowed, feeling oddly exposed. He didn’t expect to please everyone, but the intense scrutiny the coach was giving his unborn pups was making the fur on the back of his neck stand up.

“I think that just about does it,” Steve said. He gestured to Lucas’s swollen middle and said, “How about we leave y’all to decide among yourselves which one of you wants to win a Heisman or six?”

Steve led Lucas out the door, leaving the coaches to talk to one another. Once they were in the hall, the coach sighed and took off his sunglasses. Lucas took the wrapped granola bar from his pocket and ate it while rubbing his stomach.

“I think that went well,” Steve said. “I know all those guys, so at least we weren’t pitching to strangers.”

“Who’s the Louisiana coach?” Lucas asked through his food. “The horse guy?”

“Vince Kingston. He was their assistant coach back when you were playin’,” Steve said. “He’s

quiet, but real smart.”

“I don’t think he likes ‘em,” Lucas said with a dejected sigh as he watched a paw push out from his belly.

“Don’t be so sure. He’s a hard fella to read.”

“What happens next?” Lucas asked.

“Well, first we let ‘em stew for a bit,” Steve said between sips from his water bottle. “After that, they’ll start the bidding. That’s the fun part.”

Lucas’s eyes widened and he wrapped his arms around his belly, protectively.

“No, it’s not...It ain’t like that. They don’t wanna take your kids, Lucas,” Steve quickly explained. “They aren’t *buying* them, it’s an investment. They’re bidding for the contract for your kids to play for ‘em once they get old enough. And that money’s for *you*, kid. You and Travis. It’s money to raise ‘em into the kind of players they think they’re gonna be.”

“O-Okay...Okay.” Lucas nodded. “But...Coach, what if this is the wrong thing to do? What if they don’t wanna play football?”

“Then buy ‘em out,” Steve shrugged. “I know it seems all official, but none of those kids are gonna be locked into anything. These teams got money they can afford to lose. We’ll work that into the contract, I promise.”

Steve checked his watch and put his sunglasses back on.

“I think that’s enough time for them to fight it out,” he said before patting Lucas on the shoulder. “Like I said, this’ll be the fun part.”

Lucas waddled into the room ahead of Steve, who pulled the door shut behind them. The coaches had all been talking amongst themselves, but stopped once they entered the room.

“Alright boys, I see you ain’t torn each other’s throats out, yet,” Steve said with the bombastic voice he’d put on earlier and clapped his hands together. “How’s about we get this show on the road already? Who’s got the first offer?”

Lucas shuffled back to his chair and carefully sank into it. He stroked the underside of his belly, aware that it was now the center point of the entire room’s attention. He was happy his litter didn’t know what was happening because he was nervous enough for all six of them.

“Five hundred thousand,” said the Vikings coach. Steve dropped his arms to his sides and stared at him.

“Five hundred...Chip, you can’t be serious. For *six* players?”

“I’m just gettin’ things started!” Chip said, throwing his hands up. “Wanted to see where the bottom was.”

“Alright, then how ‘bout this?” Larry leaned over the table and tapped it with a finger. “Two million.”

Lucas’s eyes bugged out of his head. Steve, however, maintained a cool presence behind his sunglasses.

“Two point five,” said the Pirates’ coach.

“Three,” countered Larry with a smug grin on his face.

“God damn, Larry,” said Chip with a chuckle.

“I like what I saw,” the bear said with a shrug as he leaned back in his chair. “I think those boys are gonna be hell on the-”

“Twelve million.”

Everyone in the room fell dead silent. Even Steve couldn’t hide his shock behind his aviators. Lucas’s jaw fell open. The pups inside him continued to kick and squirm comfortably, blissfully unaware of how much they were suddenly worth.

“Twelve million dollars,” said Larry. “Vince, have you lost your mind?”

“I think I should be asking you the same,” said Jesters’ coach, the man who’s disapproval Lucas was most the convinced of. “Six players for one team, all of that caliber? Two million each to raise a

football player to the professional level isn't much to ask for."

"Would y'all consider trading them pups individually?" Larry asked.

"No." Lucas answered immediately.

"No can do. The litter's a package deal." Steve said. He seemed confident in the answer, but he and Lucas had argued about it for weeks. Lucas didn't want his sons bringing their team rivalries home with them.

"Damn," Larry huffed as he slumped back in his chair and folded his arms. "Louisiana management's gonna have you shot for spending all that damn money, Vince."

"No they won't," the horse said. "They trust my judgment." Confident no one would outbid him, Vince stood and walked across the room. He was a few inches taller than DeMarcus, though more slender. He towered over Lucas before offering his hand to help him stand.

"What do you say?" Vince asked. Up close, Lucas was surprised to find him much younger than he expected.

"I think you got yourself a-" Steve began to say before Vince held up an enormous hand to stop him.

"I'd like to ask the father, first." Turning back to Lucas, he said, "I think your kids have some real potential, Mr. Harrier. They're practically pedigree. If my team's Super Bowl performance is any indication, I have an eye for talent. But more than anything, I'm curious. I'd like to see the kind of men they'll become, not just as football players. If I can help them become better at both, then that's worth any cost."

Lucas looked up at the coach before glancing around the room. Even Steve was quiet. This really was his decision and his alone. Travis hadn't been able to come, but told Lucas to do whatever he thought was right for their children. As much as he wanted someone to tell him what the right choice was, that wasn't going to happen.

Until he realized that he didn't *need* to believe in himself. He needed to believe in his *pups*, in the litter still nestled inside him. And that was the easy part.

"Sir," he said to the intimidating man towering above him, "they'll be the best damn players to set foot in the state of Louisiana."

Vince smiled for the first time all morning and took Lucas's hand in a powerful handshake. Lucas grinned as the rest of the coaches gave them a polite applause, none more enthusiastic than Steve's.

"*Oh, damn,*" Lucas winced as one pup started a chain reaction of kicks inside him, then laughed. "I think they like you, Mr. Vince."

"Let's hope they still like me when they get on the field," Vince chuckled. He patted Lucas on the shoulder and walked him to the door. "Welcome to the team. This will be the easiest contract I've ever signed."

Lucas smiled on the way out the door, his hands cradling a belly full of future Louisiana Jesters.