

## Chapter 6

Upon returning to the camp, Jax instructed Leah and Doratin to enter the wagon and remain inside until he returned. Leah boiled water and prepared a cup of tea, busying herself to distract from the night's events. Doratin sat in the corner, his hands grasped tightly to his legs as he struggled to avoid scratching the acidic blood boiling his skin. Jax returned a short while after and went to work.

Doratin bit his lip and held back tears as Jax tended to the wound. He was rubbing a foul-scented cream along the burns while wearing black gloves to avoid contact with the oozing blood. He dressed the wounds on Doratin's back and neck first before tending to his arms.

The wagon was far from silent as Leah hounded Jax with questions.

"Leah, I swear by the gods I will answer your questions," Jax shouted. "But please, shut up until I've helped the kid!"

Leah crossed her arms and paced restlessly about the wagon, her face stuck in a scowl as she kept her mouth shut.

"There, the kid is alright," Jax said, cutting the last of the bandages. He rose and walked outside the wagon, throwing his gloves off into the sand. "When we leave, be sure not to touch

those. As for you, keep those bandages on. If they start coming loose, you come tell me immediately so I can fix them. Until your skin heals, they are going to fester and can cause worse damage. Be patient and let it heal.”

“So Doratin is fine then?” Leah asked.

“Yes.”

“Well then, get to it, Jax! What happened?”

Jax sighed and sat in the corner. He drew out a flask from his coat, taking a deep swig, and dove into the tale.

“After you left, Pysus came limping back into camp. Most of the caravan had turned in for the night, but me and a few others were still hanging around the fire, sharing a drink. I normally wouldn’t be taking part, but I couldn’t sleep. The bottle seemed a decent alternative,” Jax shook his head, pausing as if sharing a thought with himself, then continued. “Anyway, Pysus shows up, being the drunk ass he is, boasting about an orc. This caught my attention. First, Pysus could never fight an orc, not before wetting his pants and running off screaming. Second, if there really was an orc, I wanted to know if it was hostile.

“Pysus dove into his little story, claiming that the orc showed up at your wagon. He said it was a male, big and vicious, and it snuck up behind you two while you were chatting. He drew his weapon, he says, and cut at the monster, sending him running. Problem was, the orc apparently grabbed you and ran off, kidnapping you in the night.”

“You’re joking, right?” Leah scoffed. “Please tell me you didn’t buy it.”

“Leah, I would not have saved you if I thought he was telling the truth. I knew that bugger was spitting a load of lies. Thing is, I’m the idiot who fucked it all up.” Jax took another swig of his flask and sighed. “I looked around at those drinking with us and stared at Pysus. I

said, ‘Pysus, you’re a lying son of a bitch, you know that? The only orc here is just a child. He ain’t hurting anybody.’

“Now at this, the drinking stopped, and the questions went wild. Everyone started shouting and accusing me of allowing the enemy into our little circle, into our ‘family,’ though none of them believe we’re anything like that,” Jax took another drink and looked at Doratin. “I’m sorry kid, but people like you are always going to look like a threat, no matter how young or old you may be. Your secret is out now, and the caravan ain’t exactly thrilled.”

“Finish your story, Jax!” Leah interrupted.

“Leah, that’s the end of it. I left them shouting amongst themselves and went searching for you. I should have left as soon as Pysus said you left, but I didn’t think you were really gone until I found your wagon empty.”

“So, that’s it?” Leah asked.

“For now, I guess so,” Jax shrugged. “Thing is, I don’t know what’s going to go on as this all continues. Word of this won’t just go away overnight. People in the caravan are going to talk. What they decide to do is completely unpredictable.”

“Well, if they try to pull anything, just knock ‘em in line!” Leah shouted.

“Damn it, I’ll try. But you knew this was a risk when you brought the kid along. What anyone decides to do is their own right. I’ll keep them from trying to kill you if that’s what you want to hear, but I won’t do any more than that!”

Jax did not yell when he spoke; he was never much of a yeller. His demeanor was cold, but he was honest. Doratin watched the exchange and felt nerves creeping through his body.

Somber silence took over the wagon. Jax said nothing, nor drank any more. He sat staring at the magical fire in the corner, watching the steam wisp out of the boiling water. Doratin

watched Jax, then looked down at his own hands. Leah watched the young half-orc. She too was silent but saw the misery slowly creeping over the child.

Wordlessly, Leah stepped across the wagon wrapped her arms around the boy and kissed his forehead of dark black hair. Doratin leaned into the hug, though his arms remained limp by his side.

“I’ll keep him safe, Jax,” Leah whispered. “We’ll be alright, no matter what the others decide.”

“I know, Leah,” Jax sighed and rose from the wagon. He left out the back and closed the doors shut, leaving the two silently inside. He stared out into the night, the stars still high overhead in the blackness. He looked back at the wagon one final time, whispering to himself. “But what will the boy do when you’re gone?”

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When Doratin woke the next morning, the wagon was already moving. He was alone in the wagon, sunlight breaking through the makeshift windows Leah left open. A bowl of soup was left out for him to eat, though it had cooled from neglect.

Doratin sat up and winced as some of the scabbing on his back wounds broke open. He ignored it and pushed himself onto his feet, breaking scabs on his arms. The urge to scratch flashed through his muscles, but he fought them back. He hungrily ate away at the soup, then left the wagon.

The young half-orc lept out the back and rushed along in the sand, just outpacing the reymadons pulling the wagon. Running in the desert was difficult. Hot sand snuck into his shoes, burning his little feet. Still, he managed to pull ahead of the wagon and climb up to the front seats beside Leah.

“Well look who finally decided to wake up,” Leah teased, rustling Doratin’s head as she spoke. She was lounging back with red silk draped over her head and shoulders to block out the sun. Her water pouch was beside her, nearly overflowing. The dark bags under her eyes showed her fatigue from the night before. She motioned in front of them as she spoke. “Do you notice anything different today?”

Doratin turned to the front and noted their band of performers had lessened in the night. Where once there were six wagons, including Leah’s, Doratin counted only three.

“Half the wagons are gone.”

“Half the wagons are gone,” Leah repeated.

“This is all my fault, isn’t it?” Doratin asked.

“Well, partially your fault, yes,” Leah said, considering each word carefully. “You ran off in the night and forced Jax and I after you. That left Pysus alone to rouse anger and suspicion in the camp. Those that left all hauled out of here this morning right at the butt-crack of dawn. But here’s the thing: why they left isn’t your fault. Some of these people have horrid backstories: lost loved ones, fought in wars, kind of like you. For them, there is resentment that cannot be mended, and they had little choice but to leave.”

“What about the others?” Doratin asked. “Were they all so...wounded?”

“I’ll be honest, most of them are just hateful,” Leah shrugged. “We’re much better off without that lot anyway, so don’t feel too bad about all that.”

Doratin stared at the rolling wagons. Ahead, he could just make out Jax, his head bowed with a bottle of wine by his side. He maintained his stoic expression. But Doratin could not help but feel guilty; he could not shake the feeling of being a burden to those around him.

Leah noticed the sour mood come over his young face. For a while she let the boy stew, enjoying the sun and the heat after the stressful night. She thought if they were to avoid further disaster, she would have to integrate the young half-orc into the rest of the camp. He needed to learn to be as skilled and charismatic as the rest if he were to survive.

“Tell you what, Doratin,” Leah said. “Tonight, after we have gone about our chores, we’ll join the others around the campfire. I’m sure they’d love to finally meet the newest member of our little troupe.”

She smiled at the boy and placed a comforting arm around his shoulders before returning to directing the reymadons. She could tell which members remained looking over the wagons, and she believed they would welcome the half-orc with open arms.

Doratin did not share Leah’s optimism.