

## Chapter 5

The journey from Thalandor to neighboring settlements was long. The endless dunes, gusts of sands, and scorching heat offered no reprieve to the travelers below. Those who attempted to travel at night dared worse fates. While rare, the longer one spent in the desert at night, the more creatures may find them easy prey.

Doratin stayed inside the wagon during the day. Leah tasked him to lock up the food, clothes, tools, and supplies before he proceeded to make the beds. Reymadons did not need much water, so their travel was usually uninterrupted. He did little with his time inside, his brain numb and thoughtless as he stared blankly at the four walls surrounding him.

At night, Doratin gave the reymadons water and food. Sometimes, Leah wished to sleep under the stars, so Doratin would aid in setting up the tents and bringing the blankets from the wagon to lay about for beds. He helped build fires. He helped secure the wheels of the wagon. He helped prepare meals. Leah kept Doratin busy, hoping he would work past the trauma he experienced. Yet come the end of the chores, he went to sleep in the corner of the wagon with barely a word uttered during his waking hours.

During their first week, Leah practiced her performance after Doratin went to sleep. She was one of the troupe's highlight performers: a fire walker, as she liked to call herself. She mixed chemicals and powders to set off explosions of fire, all while dancing and flipping throughout. While she required daily practice to maintain her edge, she could not risk Doratin wandering into other campsites.

Many of the other performers shared Jax's opinion. An orc of any kind, regardless of the amount of blood in their veins, would be unsettling. Some performers lost families to orc raids; others were ex-soldiers who spent their youth fighting orcs. Others were from small villages where stories of orcish brutality were sung to children around campfires and before bed.

Leah worried for the child and wished to shelter him from such prejudice. But, like all things on the road, nothing stays secret for long. Eventually, the camp would learn the truth of their new guest.

When they did, loyalties would be tested.

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The second week after his arrival, Doratin was revealed to the camp.

The reveal was accidental. Jax had expressed a need for caution, and Leah took the advice seriously. She kept apart from much of the troupe, her wagon always at the rear of their parade. Leah always remained alone and spoke little with the other performers to begin with; her continued isolation was far from an oddity.

However, one member of the crew began to take notice. Pysus was an ex-mariner from the Floating City, exiled for crimes he committed as a child, or so he said. During his time as an outcast, a younger Jax came across the man and brought him into the troupe. Pysus played the fiddle and was a welcome musical contributor to their troupe.

There were people among the traveling show from all races and walks of life in the Free Cities. Often, these people formed bonds with each other, creating lasting friendships and the occasional romance. Pysus had his eyes set on Leah from the day they added her to the show. Her pale skin and slender figure sent him drooling, a physical attraction he could hardly contain. He would often flirt and face rejection from the woman, yet he maintained his insipid persistence.

During the day, Pysus remained in his wagon, thinking of Leah and her pale skin turned pink after being bathed in the sunlight. It had been a while since he last laid eyes on her, not since Thalador had they spoken.

As usual, Leah sent Doratin about his nightly work. He filled the buckets for the reymadons, then returned inside to fetch their food.

While Doratin was inside, Pysus arrived at the camp. He spotted Leah immediately; her sleek form looked tantalizing as it bustled about the camp. She wore no headwear, her long hair falling in waves of auburn behind her. Pysus paused and whistled, causing Leah to spin about in sudden alarm.

“Oh ho, calm now darlin’,” Pysus laughed. “You seem a little tense right now. Probably from all that time you spend by yourself, huh? How about a little company for tonight, what do you say?”

“Pysus, I assure you, if I wanted company, you’re the last person I’d turn to,” she retorted. Leah found the man’s unshaven beard and ponytail hideous. His beer gut repulsed her. Worst of all, he refused to accept ‘no’ as an answer.

“A little harsh, don’t you think?” Pysus frowned. “Come now, I’m a good friend at this point. Known you for practically your whole life now.”

“A fact I wish I could relinquish,” Leah spat as she turned back to her work. “Now get lost.”

She bent over and set about checking the wheels. Pysus ignored the woman and moved closer, a wicked grin crossing his lips. He stepped behind her and placed a hand on her rear, squeezing and smiling as he bent down to whisper in her ear. “Come on now, we’re so far from everyone else--”

Leah grabbed his wrist and twisted. In the same motion, she moved to a standing position and forced Pysus onto his knees, squawking in pain. “You ever lay a hand on me again, I’ll make sure you don’t have any hands.”

“Oh, come on, it was just in good--” Leah squeezed harder, bending his arm and wrist further away from his body, causing some of his bones to crack. “Ow, ow, ow, ok! I won’t do it again, I swear!”

Leah released the man and pushed him over. He grabbed at his wrist and rubbed the bones, red imprints from Leah’s fingers burned into his skin. “Holy hell woman, you really know how to screw a guy over.”

“You really don’t know when to quit.” Leah turned from the man, returning once again to her task.

Suddenly, Pysus cursed and leaped to his feet. He pushed Leah down and stood over her, drawing a knife he previously hid. Leah was prepared to kill the man. Only, she was puzzled to see he was not facing her. As she turned, she realized Pysus was facing the wagon.

He was staring at Doratin.

“Who the hell are you?” Pysus growled.

Doratin dropped the food he carried. His eyes grew wide as he stared at the knife. Jax was the only one who ever came to the wagon at night. Despite his intimidating figure, he was kind enough to Doratin. This man was different. He stood threateningly over the child, his expression one of pure rage.

“Come on now you damned orc, speak!” Pysus yelled again. “What, you got nothing to say?”

Leah got to her feet and grabbed at Pysus’s arm holding the blade. “Pysus, hold on, he’s not the enemy. He’s just a kid!”

“He’s an orc, woman! He’s an orc!” Pysus threw Leah back and stared at Doratin, knife ready to strike. “Last chance, kid. Who the hells are you?”

“Pysus, calm down!” Leah pleaded, lunging again for the weapon.

During their scuffle, they took their eyes off Doratin. He recognized the stranger’s eyes. Men like him were everywhere in Thalador. They hid behind fallen debris, covered themselves in disguises, slinked about in alleyways, always looking for new victims. Men like this were dangerous, and every child in the city knew if you ever encountered one, you ran.

Not for the first time, Doratin ran out into the open desert sands. He turned his back on the camp and sprinted, tiny legs and little feet moving with tremendous speed as he scurried over the dunes away from the threat behind him.

“No, no, no!” Leah shot away from Pysus when she noticed Doratin running. “Doratin! Doratin, get back here! Doratin!”

“Let the runt go, darlin’. He’s no good anyway, not his kind,” Pysus said. “Besides, now that he’s gone, we can get back to our little conversation, hm?”

Leah's response was a swift kick to the groin that sent Pysus flopping to the ground in excruciating pain. She spat in the sand near his head, then raced out into the desert in pursuit of the half-orc.

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The desert sky was cloudless. Both moons were out in full, basking the ground below in a soft glow of purple. The stars were visible in the sky, though Doratin failed to notice the plethora of lights above. His eyes were locked forward as he ran.

Leah was nice, but she was not his mother. Nothing could replace that. He believed he would never have a home again either. He was tired, and all he wanted was to be back in Thalador. He wanted the hut over his head, the fire burning bright, and his father's journal close to his chest to read...

Doratin stopped abruptly. He parted Thalador with that journal, but he failed to find it the next morning. He did not remember letting go of it, likely losing it in his sleep. That journal was likely lost forever, buried under sands in the middle of nowhere.

His legs gave out and he fell. An aching pain crippled his stomach as he realized he may never see that journal again. Worse still, he realized how helplessly lost he had become. The sands were all the same. Any random path over the dunes could lead him back to the camp or stumbling into something far worse.

A loud shriek overhead, an ungodly shriek of pain and death, shocked Doratin out of his self-pitying. He looked up to behold a massive black mass. Its wings spread wide like a bat against the red light of the moon, though its head and body resembled that of a massive insect, including a colossal stinger at the end of its backside.

Doratin had never seen such a creature before, but the shriek it emitted nearly caused him to freeze. He watched, horrified, as the figure dropped, the shadow growing larger as it came hurtling towards the ground.

His fear subsided for a moment when the creature veered to the right. Its wings beat once, heading down into a small valley beyond Doratin's vision. The creature rose again, straight toward the moon, before diving down a second time.

Doratin stayed low and crawled his way to the edge of the dune to peer into the valley that lay beyond. All instincts inside his brain begged him to run, yet his gut told him to investigate. Mounting the dune's apex, guilt flooded over the child.

Leah went searching for the half-orc, hoping to convince him to return to the camp. She followed the boy's tracks in the sand, hoping to find the child before tragedy struck. Unfortunately, fate had other plans.

The giant velspawn came down in an instant, stinger outstretched to paralyze its victim. However, Leah was no easy prey, managing to dive away from the first, second, and even the third attempts at her life.

Doratin witnessed this from afar and noted fatigue beginning to overtake Leah. Watching her struggle reminded him of a day not long ago. He watched as sword after sword attacked his mother, while he stood idle and useless. He wished he could have returned and helped her, even if only to be with his mother as she passed through the Golden Passage.

With tears filling his eyes, Doratin stood tall and ran to Leah. Fear, rage, and courage blended as he cried out. He focused on Leah and watched as the creature dove a fourth time. Once again, the creature missed, leaving a massive gash through the sand in its wake.

Doratin ran right towards Leah and pulled her aside. He tried to stand in the path of the velspawn, creating a barrier between the predator and its prey.

The velspawn paused in the air and hovered, staring at the newcomer. The velspawn saw the grey skin, a color associated with death. However, its hesitation was brief, as this little newcomer boasted no shining metals or vicious fangs that could possibly harm the predator.

“Doratin, thank gods you’re alright,” Leah reached a hand down and pet his hair. “Too bad I wasn’t able to find you in time to avoid such a mess.”

“I’m sorry,” Doratin croaked.

“You should run, child, while I keep the velspawn occupied,” Leah whispered. “Go back to the camp and find Jax. He may not agree with me, but he will keep you safe for as long as he can. This much I can promise you.”

Doratin shook his head and refused to move, continuing to stare down the velspawn ascending further into the night sky.

“Listen, Doratin, now is not the time to be stubborn,” Leah grabbed the child and pulled him back, stepping in front of him. “Get out of here!”

“NO!” Doratin shouted, resuming his protective position ahead of Leah.

Leah smiled despite the dire circumstances. He spoke more now than she managed to pry from him in the entirety of their previous time together. It was sad to see the boy begin to bloom, only to fall at the hands of a velspawn.

Leah bent down and brought Doratin in for a hug. “Well, then I guess we face it together.”

The velspawn watched the embrace and saw an opening. It dove, then pulled its stinger forward at the last instant, aiming to maim the larger of the two. However, Leah pushed Doratin

aside and rolled backward. The stinger missed them both, creating a deep gash in the sand instead. The velspawn responded with a shriek of dismay, rising and turning again to strike. It sped downwards, rapidly descending on the easier target, the little grey one alone in the sand.

The stinger never struck home, as a massive shape lept from the ravine above. It hurled a spike through the air at the velspawn, forcing it to veer off course and turn to face the unwanted newcomer.

“Thank god,” Leah gasped.

Jax stood tall in leather armor, including pieces of plate buckled over his shoulder and wrists. He carried four javelins on his back. In his hand, he drew forth a two-handed long sword of glittering steel. He rushed forward to stand over Leah, urging Doratin to move.

“Hurry!” Jax yelled to the boy. “Get your ass up and move!”

Doratin obeyed and turned to run for Jax. Above, the velspawn dove, aiming to cut off the little grey one.

“Doratin, get down!” Jax released a javelin, arcing towards Doratin’s face.

Doratin flopped down and covered his head, the buzz of wings growing to an uproar behind him. The javelin whistled by, just inches from his head. It hit its mark, releasing a spattering of yellow liquid that stung Doratin’s skin as it sprayed over his body.

The velspawn released a visceral screech that sent their ears ringing. Frustrated and wounded, the creature turned to find easier prey. It flew away, turning to the horizon, the javelin still impaled in its flesh.

Back in the little valley, Doratin’s skin was writhing. He desperately removed his shirt, throwing it down where the acid continued to eat away at the cloth. The worst of it had been removed with the shirt, but acid burns still festered on his back, neck, and arms. The pain was

excruciating and itched something fierce. Doratin went to scratch at his wounds, but his hands were pulled away.

“Whatever you do, don’t scratch it,” Jax commanded. He removed a bandana from his belt and used them to tie Doratin’s hands together. “Get up and move. That thing may come back, and I’d rather not be here if it does.”

“Leah...” Doratin asked, trying to look past him.

“I’m fine, Doratin, I’m right here,” she smiled, bending down beside the child. “You’re safe now.”

“No, we’re not.” Jax rose, scanning the sky as he began to walk. He found the brightest star overhead, using it as his guide. He turned and began the trek back to camp. “This way, quickly. Leah, grab the kid and keep his hands tied.”

Doratin began to walk but immediately buckled over with a scream as the pain flared around his skin.

“Suck it up, kid,” Jax commanded, continuing to push onwards. “Velspawn have acidic blood, but that pain is much better than being eaten alive. You’re going to have to push through it. Leah, keep him moving, and let’s go. Now.”

“Come on, Doratin,” Leah encouraged the boy, getting him to hobble along. “Jax, thank you for coming out and helping me. How did you know we were in trouble?”

“That is a long story,” Jax sighed without turning. “It’s better I tell you when we are back at the camp. Things are going to be quite different from now on. And I don’t think it’ll be for the better.”