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word count:

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THE LEGEND OF DORATIN

By

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Prologue

440 of the Fourth Age

Night fell and brought a still coolness over the unwavering heat of the desert sands. The city of Thalador slept; the shops and merchants, the constant foot traffic, all retired for the night. Only a few guards prowled the streets. The city's center, the palace of the Seven-Sons, cast shadows over those sleeping below while its golden walls crafted with enchanted metals glittered under the moonlight.

A lone figure wove its way along the inner wall, staying close to the shadows as a patrol passed. They were rare in this part of the city where wealth and peace were abundant. Guards walked about in groups of two here, often with little trouble.

The figure crouched low. Her robes were pulled tight over her body, and a silk scarf wrapped tightly about her head, hiding her face and hair. She waited for the guards to pass out of sight before vaulting the wall into the outer city.

While the inner city boasted high walls and grand estates, the outer city was made of modest homes. Clay structures stood at single levels, though there were the rare two-story homes littered about. They had carved windows and entryways in their sides blocked by wooden shutters or doors. Just beyond the wall, many of the homes were occupied by Thalador's

soldiers or travelling merchants. There were few that had little private gardens, or a reserved spot along the road to arrange a cart or other services for sale. The guards still patrolled in groups of two, though they moved with greater frequency.

Buildings came closer together as one went further away from the city's center. Land was considered a privilege: only money bought more land. The poor lived in smaller huts on top of one another, the only space between them the roads that wove in and out of the neighborhoods and the small alleys filled with excrements. The walkways and roadways that were once cobbled stones shifted to sand, the same sand that stretched for hundreds of miles outside the city: the endless sands of the Kaldiron Desert.

At the very outskirts of the city lay the Hovels. These were one room homes just large enough to fit in a bed, a cooking fire, and maybe a table and chairs for a lucky few. The guards ran about in groups of four, weapons always ready for trouble. The streets were always empty, even in the daytime, as no one dared be caught outside lest they were heading to work or returning from it. Here, curfews were enforced with prejudice, a likely death sentence should one be caught outside too late.

The woman was smart however, knowing well how the guards operated. She watched them train, watched their routes, watched everything about them. Avoiding them, even in the smallest of places, even with the countless patrols wondering the streets, was an easy feat.

The woman crept along the streets and arrived at her destination. The home was on the edge of the Hovel; the street lay at its front, nothing but endless desert behind. It was worn down, the sides eroded and damaged from the wind, sand, and sun. A single window lay on its right, a door on its left. Feint firelight was just visible through the cracks around the door and shades.

The woman knocked on the door three times in rapid succession, then three times in a much slower pattern. A brief scrummage was heard inside, before three rapid knocks sounded from the inside to meet hers.

Relief filled the woman as the door opened revealing a tall half-orc. His skin was black, body covered in thick hair. His head resembled that of a human, only with tusks instead of teeth, and pointed ears. He stood looming over the woman, strong in his youth, barely past twenty-five. His eyes shown deep yellow and looked down at her with admiration as he ushered her inside.

“Were you followed?” His voice was deep and warm, a soothing sound to the woman’s ears.

“Not tonight, not last week, and never in the future,” the woman chuckled as the man closed the door. “Now how about a proper greeting?”

The half-orc smiled and wrapped his arms about the woman. His arms were nearly as big as her, as he stood like a mountain over her slender figure. Delicately, he pulled aside the wraps to reveal the woman’s face. Her skin was dark like chocolate, her hair black as midnight still tucked into the rest of her clothes. Warm eyes of brown looked up at her love as he pulled her close for a warm kiss.

“Melonia I-” His words were cutoff as Melonia pressed her lips back against his. He gripped her tighter, lifting her from the ground and holding her close to his chest. They could feel the pounding of each other’s hearts racing under the dance of the fire’s glow.

“Not now Tardin,” Melonia spoke with soft words as her hands felt his face. “Speak little of worry now. Let the world not matter outside this little hovel tonight. Let it be just you and me until the sun bids us part.”

Mesmerized, Tardin held Melonia and obeyed, letting love wash over him as the world outside faded away.

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Those nights continued for weeks, into months, into nearly a year. Every week, on the fifth night, Melonia would make her way through the city, covered head to toe in cloth, until she reached the Hovels. Each night she knocked on those doors, and each night Tardin opened them to greet her.

It was summer, the hottest time of the year when even the nights gave little reprieve from the heat. Melonia made her way through the city, sweating profusely under her clothes. Sand was sticking against the bottom of the cloth, but she barely noticed. Her heart was a flutter, her mind occupied on other things. She moved along as if in a daze, like a cloud overhead drifting by in open skies.

As usual, she came to Tardin's home. Today, she had made extra care to brush her hair, even donning make-up that she prayed had not run in her sweat. Brushing off any top layers of dirt, she stood tall before raising her hand to knock on the door. She stood waiting, ready to embrace Tardin and share her excitement with him.

No knock came.

Melonia knocked again, wondering if he had fallen asleep or felt ill. That would explain why he had taken so long to move. It was only on the fourth knock that desperation began to fill her bones. She knocked over and over now, no longer regarding their shared code.

It was well near an hour when she left the Hovels in search of her love. Unfortunately, she knew where he would be.

She sprinted through the streets now, no longer concerned over hiding. A few guards called out for her as she ran, but they were too surprised to see a woman running around to grab

at her. She sprinted from house to house, following the edge of the city, until she came all the way to the Eastern Passage.

The Eastern Passage was a heavily guarded main road with two barracks for soldiers on either side. These barracks had matching stone turrets that rose to the highest points outside the inner city, connected by a single bridge between them. From this passage, heading east, one came to the Desolate Lands. The land was a warzone, owned and controlled by the Resolute. Orcs and Revenant patrolled the border and constantly raided the desert and Free Cities' outposts.

The Eastern Passage was infamous for sending out half-orcs and orc refugees to fight and die along that border for the Free Cities. Every year, they came about and gathered new men, or half-men as they were called, to fight. It was a lottery: random drafting every time. But they always came at night, without warning.

Tonight, was one of those nights.

Just below the barracks, nearly two hundred orcs and half-orcs- men, women, and children alike- were gathered about in clumps. Chains were being strapped along their ankles, tying them close together so none could run away. All around, soldiers walked with weapons drawn, ready to beat down any who dared to resist.

Scanning the crowd, Melonia was met with a sight of horror and sadness. Tardin was there on the edge of the pack being escorted along by two Thalandor soldiers. He had not yet been chained with the rest of the group. However, he showed little sign of resistance, his head down in despair as they marched him along.

“Tardin! Tardin!” Melonia left where she was and ran for him. Tardin heard her voice and turned to see her, his eyes filled with more despair than before. Tears ran down his face as he shook his head, turning from her as he walked.

“Tardin! No, you can’t!” Melonia ran with new vigor, pushing through the ring of guards to get to her love. But she was stopped too soon, guards surrounding her from all sides, weapons drawn. One human reached out a hand and grasped her arm, holding her steady.

“Stand back woman,” he barked.

“Let me go!” Melonia screamed and balled her fist, releasing a vicious punch that caught the guard on the jaw under a small gap in his helm. His head shot back, and he released the woman. But she did not get far when a second guard rushed forward with a spear drawn and stabbed her through the leg, immobilizing her.

At this, Tardin grew enraged and used his great orcish strength. He pushed aside the guards escorting him in a frenzy and ran to Melonia. Two more guards stepped forward, attempting to bar his passage, but he turned them aside with ease. He came crashing down on Melonia’s assailant, placing a strong blow on the man’s head that sent him toppling over. He took the spear out of Melonia’s ankle and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in close.

“You should not have come here,” he was sobbing now, holding her tight. “You should not have come.”

“I can help you, Tardin,” she cried into his arms. “You know I can. They won’t take you away from me, not today. Not ever.”

“They’re not the kindhearted people you think they are, love,” he kissed her forehead, still holding her close. “You should have stayed hidden, gone back home. This will do you no good.”

“They won’t take you.”

As Melonia spoke, rough hands pulled her back from Tardin. She screamed out as the guard pulled her back, casting her down into the dirt. Two more guards came in close behind with clubs drawn and began beating at Tardin. He roared in agony, but he did not retaliate. He let the blows fall, praying that in beating him, they let Melonia go free.

“Enough!” Melonia screamed. She stomped down with her still good leg, then ripped the cloth from her head. “By the Seven-Sons, I order you to stop!”

“Fuck off,” one of the guards spat as he laid another blow on Tardin. Tardin took the blow and looked up at Melonia with tear filled eyes, begging her to stop.

“I said enough, on order of Melonia Sunwave!” she shouted again, removing a small medallion from her cloaks. Seeing this, the guards all froze, astonished, and confused.

The medallion was a golden signet with a single circle in its center and eight curved blades springing off it. Between each blade was a silver diamond. Together, it resembled the desert rose, the sigil for one of the members of the Seven-Sons families.

“This mark is mine, marking me as one of the Sunwave,” Melonia spoke with confidence now, commanding her subjects. “I order you to release the half-orc and continue with your business without it.”

“My dear, that is simply not how this works,” a voice hissed from behind her. “We have carried out your father’s orders to the letter. That is all we are doing my dear, just following orders.”

The newcomer was a half-elf, with slicked back brown hair over pale elvish skin. His eyes were green and looked out with disgust at the world around him over a crooked pointed

nose. He wore the typical mail tunic of the guards, with an additional cloth tied from his right shoulder over his chest. This marked ranks among the city guard; his cloth marked a captain.

“In this you have done well Lyndor,” Melonia spoke without turning towards him, keeping her voice from quivering. “But orders can change, as they are now. I expect to be obeyed.”

“Of course, m’lady, I understand completely,” Lyndor smiled, placing two hands on either of Melonia’s shoulders. “But you see, your orders directly disobey your father’s. I cannot obey such a command.”

He grinned wickedly, then nodded to the two guards. They returned the gesture and resumed their beating, mercilessly bearing down on Tardin.

“Stop!” Melonia cried again, desperation returning to her voice. “Please, let me at least see my father about this, please! Give him a chance!”

“Hold now,” Lyndor took one hand from Melonia’s shoulder and held it palm out to his guards. “This is an interesting proposition I see here. I agree m’lady. I will escort you back to the palace and have my men hold in their operation until we return with your father’s blessing. I believe that is fair compromise indeed.”

“Thank you,” Melonia spoke with unease in her voice. “Let us go then.”

“Of course, my dear, of course,” Lyndor smiled and whistled to two other guards who had been spectating from the barracks. “Please, bring our lady here to the chariot yes?”

Melonia took one last look at Tardin and gave a weak smile. Bloodied and woozy, Tardin managed to focus on Melonia’s face, seeing her perfect eyes and flowing hair one last time. He smiled a big tusk filled smile. The two felt hope for a moment as Melonia went to the palace to fix all the wrongs of the night.

When Melonia was out of earshot, Lyndor walked over to Tardin and leaned forward, placing one hand on the half-orc's shoulder. He smiled then leaned in close.

“I want you to know, you have just killed her,” Lyndor whispered. He nodded to his guards to continue as planned. Without further words, he turned and accompanied Melonia to the chariot parting for the Palace of Seven-Sons.

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The chariot carrying Melonia and Lyndor moved through the streets, out of the dirt roads and onto paved ones. It passed under the inner wall, the only wall in the entire city. Beyond lay the seat of power in Thalador: The Palace of Seven-Sons.

The Palace of Seven-Sons was among oldest buildings in the Free Cities. Its main feature was a massive dome that lay at its heart. Adorned with grand white pillars on all sides, the interior was open wide, filled with gardens and pavilions of various uses. Its dome roof was made of solid gold rising some hundred feet above the pillars themselves. When the sun cast its light on top, the dome was visible for miles across the desert.

On the outskirts of this grand dome rose seven spires: one for each of the seven original families that created Thalador. Their walls were made of brown stone molded together into unflawed surfaces. Atop each spire were golden minarets, rising into solid gold domes. These seven structures were enchanted to light up when the sun fell, creating the illusion of sunlight glistening on the grand dome itself.

The chariot stopped at the base of the first tower. The courtyard was decorated in wild green ferns and flowers native to the desert: expensive to maintain and even more expensive to find. An assembly was awaiting them when they arrived, a group of five men. Four of them were

armed with black leather and golden plate from head to toe, equipped with six-foot spears and bronze bucklers.

Their charge was the fifth man and Melonia's father, Yellan Sunwave. Sunwave was the head of all seven families in the city, inheriting the title of High Lord passed down for centuries. Yellan was growing older, yet still stood tall, back straight, hair impeccably groomed. He wore a trimmed beard cut close to the jaw line. His stare was ice, apathetic brown eyes laced with irritation regarding his daughter. Today, he wore little more than a silken robe, as he was just raised from sleep.

"What is the meaning of this?" he growled to Lyndor, ignoring his daughter.

"My high-lord, sir," Lyndor bowed lowed, his right arm in a fist across his heart. "Your daughter has come with a plea to have your orders revoked."

"My word is law. Melonia knows this."

"Perhaps you wish to hear her words nonetheless, high lord," Lyndor stood straight now, moving aside to present Melonia. "I'm sure you'd find it...interesting, to say the least."

"Speak quickly girl."

"Father, I have not come to have your orders repealed or changed, I swear it. I know the law of the city," Melonia stood straight, holding firm despite the trembling of her hands behind her back. "I have come to ask a simple favor: an act of mercy."

"Mercy? Is this a joke?" Yellan's stare intensified, struggling to maintain his composure.

"Mercy for a young man, name Tardin," Melonia said. "He is being wrongfully taken from the city, and I wish him to be spared."

"Not possible," Yellan looked towards Lyndor. "As I said, we were to remove only those of orcish blood."

“We have followed that order perfectly,” Lyndor smiled and bowed slightly again. “Only those with treacherous blood are being removed from the city.”

“Then there is no issue, regardless of what you may say about this Tardin thing,” Yellan turned back to his daughter. “Now I suggest you remove yourself from that filth you’re wearing and get back inside. Expect swift discipline this night.”

“No, please father!” Melonia spoke quickly, the words beginning to rush out. “Tardin may be a half-orc, but there is no treachery in his heart! He is a good man, a kind man. He loves the city, and he loves me, and he would never turn on us! He is a man like you or-”

“He is nothing like me!” Yellan roared, turning in rage on his daughter. He swung with his right arm, the back of his hand striking her. “Those filth are nothing like us! Orcs are the enemy. They always have and always will be! No, he is no man! He is half-orc, half wild beast! Now speak no more of this and return to the palace before I do something you will regret.”

“I love him. Please.” Melonia spoke softly now, holding back tears as her face stung where she was struck.

“Take her, Lyndor.” Her father said turning and walking with his guards.

Lyndor was all too happy to oblige. He and the chariot driver picked Melonia up by the arms and began to drag her away.

“Where would you like her to be placed high lord?” Lyndor called after Yellan.

“The Hovels. She is a sympathizer with beasts and can thus lay with them.”

“Father please!” Melonia cried out as Lyndor began to drag her away. “Please father you don’t understand!”

Yellan paused for a moment, then turned to look over his daughter. A single tear was falling from his eyes, though no emotion made its way into his final words. He took one last look at Melonia, then turned his back on her forever.

“I have no daughter.” Those were the last words Melonia heard before the chariot doors closed, and she was taken away from the palace for the last time.

Part I

Beginning in 451 of the Fourth Age

Chapter 1

The market square was alive with color. People from all around the Free Cities gathered every fortnight to trade their goods. Rows upon rows of carts lined the streets, filled with luxurious silks, fine jewelry, pristine silverware, decorative weapons, and fresh food of all varieties: meats, fruits, vegetables, baked goods, and more. People pushed against one another, packed shoulder to shoulder in the sweltering heat of the sun in hopes of earning the best deal of the day. Voices hollered out prices and insults as elbows and money were exchanged freely. All the while, the city guard watched with general boredom.

While the adults all struggled and haggled, children dashed in and out of the crowds with ease. Many such children made a week's earnings in a single day out here, snatching goods and money before anyone noticed. They could skip about the colored robes and under legs of much larger adults unnoticed and unencumbered.

One child did not partake in such activity, however. He was a half-orc of little consequence. He looked like a human child, with brown eyes and black scraggly hair, but his tusks, pointed ears, and grey skin were unmistakable orc qualities. Naturally, he lived in the hovels with a single mother, desperately poor and constantly beaten down. Yet, he had been

taught from a young age one does not steal. He had made it to the age of ten, never stealing once despite all the temptation surrounding him.

Today that little child, Doratin, was going to break that streak. He was hungry, as was the case with most little orc children living in Thalador, but he could manage his hunger. It was not his hunger, but the day itself that had brought him out to the markets. It was his mother's birthday. She never made a large fuss about it and they never had visitors or guests like other families did. Still, every year she prepared a little extra dinner and treated Doratin to a lovely meal. On his birthday, she would do the same, but get him a little gift as well.

This year, Doratin decided he wanted to give his mother a gift. He worked in a stable on the edge of the city, cleaning up hay and horse poop, all for a few small copper. This copper was always returned to his mother to help pay for the meal and rent. But this week, a man had come in drunk and given Doratin a generous tip: twenty whole copper! It was more than he normally earned in his labors. He decided not to give it to his mom but save it for today instead. After all, the coppers were a gift, a gift he could turn into something nicer.

He was walking along the east corner of the market, right on the edge of the inner wall. A few guards were standing nearby, including a half-elf decorated with the blue cloth of a captain. They were scanning the crowd and, like most other adults, never glanced down at young Doratin. He paid them equally little notice and continued his walk, passing alongside various carts.

He was searching for a cake. His mother loved this western cheesecake made with carrots and cream crafted in Eastwood. Doratin had spent enough time in the markets to know there was a cart that sold such a dessert. He passed by several with their own scent of freshly baked goods, when he finally found the one he wanted.

The cart was no simple thing. Rather, it was an entire trailer pulled along by four rheimadons: four legged lizards the size of horses, with large, spiked spines and a smooth sandstone colored skin. The trailer itself had one of its four walls folded down, revealing a small staircase that led up to the interior. A fresh oven was in one corner, while a glass case filled with fresh cookies, pies, and cakes, lined the walls. A little gnome the size of Doratin with scraggly little hairs atop his head, a pointed nose, and giant round ears, walked about in a too-large robe calling for wanted customers.

“Come on up and enjoy the Free Cities finest goodies!” the gnomes voice was squeaky and did not carry extremely far over the roar of the square. “Come try some alabaster cakes! White-moose milk cookies! Whispian brownies: they’re vegetarian!”

His pitch went on and on as he listed his goods. A few customers eventually came over and purchased a few items and left, at which point the gnome resumed his endless ranting.

Doratin walked up to the cart timidly, then stepped up the stairs to look over the desserts. He had seen this gnome’s cart on previous trips and knew the cake would be there, but he felt timid and uncertain on what to expect from any exchange that was to follow.

“Well, hello their young man,” the gnome waddled over and placed a callused hand around Doratin’s shoulder. “A little orc in you eh? Just means you need some extra sugar and goodies to satisfy that beastly hunger huh? Let me tell you, I have just the thing!”

The gnome darted away, then returned with a large cake, decorated with rattlesnakes and fangs.

“Ta-da! The hungry boy special!” the gnome laughed as he took a wiff. “Yessir this is the one for a kid like you! It has got some of that sweet vanilla-cinnamon base that locals of

Eastwood adore, garnished with the salty crunch of rattlesnake and cacti-scorpio skin! As good as it smells, and better when you hear the price! Only twenty gold pieces!”

“I’m sorry, I really don’t want that,” Doratin spoke loudly, though his eyes never met the gaze of the frantic little gnome. “I think I know what I do want though.”

“A kid who knows what he wants eh? Alright kid, I respect that. I like it!” the gnome set the cake aside then came to stand beside Doratin “I’m guessing you’re looking for one of the cinnabon cakes then? Or perhaps a tideberry turnover? Or maybe something exotic, like the frozen wallabeast cookie? I know you orc folk like a little beast in your snacks!”

“Actually sir, I want one of those.” Doratin pointed to a small cake, barely larger than his fist. It was a simple orange colored cake with a purple icing glazed over its top.

“Eastwood cheesecake? Really?” the gnome was surprised and slightly annoyed. “Of all my goods, you want the fricken cheesecake?”

“Yes sir, it’s a gift for someone.”

“A gift?” the gnome looked at Doratin with newfound interest. “A lady friend no doubt! Well sir, kids like you need a little help and this is the thing for you! Hell, if it’s a gift you should have said so in the first place! I can do these up real special you see, make them all nice and pretty to give to that special lady friend of yours!”

The gnome grabbed one of the cakes and walked over to his little table at the end of the cart. He rummaged around a barrel Doratin had not noticed originally and picked out a pink box. This was followed by a purple ribbon the gnome expertly cut with his fingers, magic of some kind, and wove about the box. In just a few seconds, the little cake was away, safeguarded in beautiful packaging perfect for any gift.

“What do you think of that handy work kid?” the gnome placed the box down then continued without answer. “I’ll tell you that’s some of the finest gifting you’re going to see this side of the Baldrak Mountains. You ain’t ever going to see better, not in your entire life boy! Now, what will you say, you ready to buy?”

“Yessir, I’m ready,” Doratin reached into his pockets with the twenty copper, excitement building as he imagined his mother’s eyes when she beheld her present. Pride filled his little chest as he looked over the box.

“Great, great!” the gnome smiled and clapped. “That’ll be three silver pieces!”

Doratin’s heart dropped. His hand, clutched tightly around the copper in his pocket, felt numb as he stared in astonishment at the meticulously wrapped box. How could one little item be so expensive?

“Oh, I think I know that look,” the gnome sighed. “Your heart just sank because you can’t pay that much. Well kid, I understand. Desert is no place to make a living. Tell you what, I’ll give you a discount. Only two silver!”

“I can’t do that...”

“Well alright, how about one silver and twenty-five copper eh?” The gnome pushed. “You have to at least have come with some silver, right?”

“I’m sorry sir, I had no idea...” Doratin rummaged in his pocket, suddenly embarrassed by his lack of funds. “I only have this...”

The gnome looked at Doratin’s hand, counting out the copper pieces. He looked up, then counted again. “You really only have this much kid?”

“It’s all I have sir.”

“HA!” the gnome pushed Doratin’s hand away and burst out laughing. “What did you think you’d accomplish kid? Twenty copper in the grand markets of Thalandor? That’s rich; what a joke. Honestly, you best be walking around with at least some silver if you plan on purchasing a single damned thing out here. Why, you just wasted my time so badly, it hurts! I could have been out there, selling away, or buying my own goods. But no, instead I’m in here, with a little orcish freak who doesn’t understand simple math!”

The gnome continued his tirade, placing the box down on the counter and gesturing about wildly, laughing all the while. His voice grew louder and began to draw attention from some passersby. Doratin felt his heart drop and the cheeks on his face burn red hot in embarrassment. It was only a little piece of cake. How in the world was he to know such things would be so expensive? He was five copper short of a silver, but he had not expected that to be so little in the markets.

“Alright kid sit and sulk as much as you need,” the gnome snapped at Doratin. “But when the human half of your brain realizes how dumb you look, get the hell out of here. I’m very busy.”

The gnome turned from Doratin and went back outside. He began to call for customers and was met by an elf and human dressed in lavishly decorated orange robes and silver jewelry. They wandered towards the opposite end of the little cart, looking over some of the larger cakes and pies the gnome had to offer.

Doratin was alone next to the counter, the box of pink and purple wrapped nicely in front of him. Three silver for a box and a little tart. It was almost laughable. Three silver could get his family through a full six weeks of rent, and even leave things left over for food. Yet here, it didn’t even get him a little pastry.

His mother had always told him to be weary around the market. She said they would scam him if he ever got close; they would laugh at him and call him names. The gnome had not called him names, but he had insulted him in every possible way. That gnome lived on the road, selling goods and scamming people for unbelievable wealth, Doratin thought to himself. What difference would a single cake make?

Doratin glanced behind him where the gnome was deep in conversation with his newest customers. With his eyes on the three, Doratin stepped slowly towards the counter. He knew that guards would try to catch him, and they would beat him if they did, but he knew he was quick. He could likely sneak unnoticed through the crowd and escape the market if he tried hard enough.

He took a deep breath, then snatched the box.

He heard the shouts from behind, the gnome breaking away from his two customers. He felt the eyes following him as he ran into the crowd, diving into the throng of colored silk before disappearing.

Doratin managed to navigate the crowd with ease. Most people paid little mind to him as he ran, though a few hands did clutch their purses a little tighter. He returned the favor and ignored them. He held the prize close to his chest, the scent and warmth sneaking out of the box.

The gnome had navigated the crowd parallel to Doratin, watching the child rush through the legs from afar. He was going for the edge of the crowd, in search of the guards to send after the half-orc thief. Even if the cake was a mere two silver, the gnome refused to lose any profits.

Doratin heard the shouting and peered through the crowd to see the familiar shine of soldier's gear moving towards him. There were three of them, armed in the typical gold of the

Thalandor guard. One of them was the same half-elf dressed in the captain's garb. Getting caught by such a man would mean trouble.

The soldiers began pushing aside the crowd, using their shields to move anyone in their way. Doratin quickened his pace, veering sharply to the side towards the opposite edge of the square. It would make his trip home longer, but there were more buildings and alleys. He could lose himself somewhere in the maze before making it back home to his mother. He had time.

Yelling grew closer as the crowd began to take notice to the spectacle. A few people began glancing at Doratin as he ran, though no one cared to make a move. A couple moved aside then blocked the way again behind him, seeing no harm in the little boy's actions. Doratin was grateful and used that time to sidestep again, just in front of the first row of carts.

The carts ran along for twenty feet before a small break. This little break led into a thin alley, barely wide enough for a full-grown man to stand in straight. Any guards who cared to follow him would have to attempt shimmying against the wall: no easy feat when completed armored.

At the end of this long alley was a single-story tavern. There was a bar and food inside, with the back of the kitchen facing the alley. There was a small cutout in the wall that allowed the heat from the ovens to vent into the open air.

Doratin used this ledge as leverage to hoist himself up and onto the roof of the small tavern. The heat venting out, plus the scorching of the desert outside, made the ledge incredibly hot. Doratin burned his hand and feet as he used it to climb his way up onto the little roof. The roof was no better, having warmed with the rising sun overhead. Doratin's feet would burn the longer he stayed. Still, he took a moment to glance behind and was pleased with what he saw.

Two guards attempted to follow him, the third likely too smart to try squeezing in such a space. The two that had been following were now trapped, their spears tangled in their legs, shields pressed between their chests and the wall. Doratin chuckled at the sight and gave them a little wave before turning back and leaping off the edge of the building.

This part of the city was strictly residential, the streets almost deserted as everyone flocked about in the market square. Doratin turned about each way and saw no one. No guards. No sounds. Nothing.

With a smile, Doratin hummed a little tune to himself as he began to walk along the street. He parted the lid of the box just enough to peek inside. The cake was still intact, the icing miraculously holding its shape. His mother would be surprised and pleased.

He turned down the street and began his walk back to the hovels. The sun was beginning its decent and the air was losing the edge it carried. The nights were still warm in the city, but it was a comfortable warmth, not the oppressive heat of the day. Doratin felt the little cobblestone street under his feet and winced as he walked, the burns beginning to blister over. Still, he felt pride and satisfaction with his surprisingly successful trip to the market.

“Hold,” a voice shouted from behind. “I suggest you drop the box and move along with your day orc.”

Doratin turned to see the third guard standing just a few strides behind. He must have gone through the crowd and around the buildings, with incredible speed to, in his pursuit of Doratin. The guard was a half-elf with a pointed goatee and pointed ears sticking out of the helm covering his face. He wore the regular golden armor of the guard, though he carried no spear, instead preferring only the short sword on his waist. A blue cloak was draped over the armor, falling diagonally from shoulder to his left hip. On his right shoulder, a silver medallion

decorated with the Thalador Sun shone brightly, acknowledging the soldier's rank and prestige in the city.

Doratin turned and resumed his run. He knew captains did not let little thieves go, especially not orc thieves. He heard the clinking movement of armored feet pursuing him, gaining ground the longer he ran.

Doratin could not outrun the man. He needed a new plan, a way out. Then he saw it.

He noticed a structure of wooden scaffolding against the side of a three-story sandstone building. It looked flimsy, unmaintained, and deserted like the structure it stood against. However, it looked just sturdy enough to hold the weight of a little half-orc and his package.

He rushed to the side and grabbed a hold of the first ledge, using one arm to hoist himself over the top. He felt the entire thing shake, the joints creaking as the board bent under his weight. Ignoring the groans of the wood bending against his movements, Doratin climbed higher, making his way to the second level, then prepared to leap the final distance to the roof.

A hand shot out and grabbed his ankle, holding it tightly. The entire structure was shaking now as the half-elf had jumped onto the edge of the scaffolding. Dust and sand fell about, covering the two as the half-elf struggled to pull Doratin down.

“Kid, you're making a huge mistake,” the half-elf growled. “Let go you little piece of-”

The captain was cut-off as the board he stood about shattered. He fell through, back down into a heap upon the sandy cobblestone street. Doratin leaped at the same moment, just barely grabbing a hold of the roof. As he did, the pressure from his jump sent the rest of the scaffolding toppling over, broken boards and shattered supports crashing down in a pile of dust upon the captain.

Doratin tossed the box over the ledge and pulled himself up. He turned when he was safely above, looking down on his fallen pursuer. The guard lay unconscious but breathing. The dust cleared and settled around him, blocking the shine from his once-golden armor. His helm had been knocked away in the fall, now buried beneath the rubble. The medallion was no longer against the half-elf's chest, lost somewhere in the pile.

Doratin paused for a moment and regained his breath. His heart raced, air coming in gasps. His clothes were now stuck to his body, covered in layers of sweat and dirt. When he peaked at the cake, it still held its form, the dirt unable to breach the perfectly wrapped gift.

Doratin had caused a lot of trouble, and for that he was sorry. But stealing the good, smelling it now so fresh and sweet, seemed well worth it. Smiling, he resumed his journey home, eager to see the smile that would be waiting to greet him.

Chapter 2

The sun had begun its decent overhead when Doratin arrived home. Home was small, even by standards of the hovels. It was jammed between two larger hovels that formed an alleyway leading to the entrance. A single door led into a small one room living space in which a fire pit was dug into the center of the clay floor. The four walls were solid stone; the only source of natural light was a hole in the center of the roof which allowed the smoke to disperse into the night air. A table and two chairs leaned against wall, two beds along the back. A few piles of clothes and meager possessions littered the ground.

His mother was already at work roasting a rare chicken over the fire when he arrived. The chicken was small, but there was still enough meet for the two to make several meals. On the table lay a small tray of rice and corn with two empty plates on either side. A bucket of water had already been gathered and distributed between two cups.

“My you are late,” his mother spoke as the door opened behind her. She was a beautiful woman, though the years had not been kind to her. Her hair, once black as midnight, now boasted streaks of silver and grey. Her skin was dark, though wrinkles had come to line her

cheeks. However, her eyes never lost their luster; they still shown with vibrance and love every time they looked at Doratin. “I see you’re not empty handed today?”

“Sorry mom,” Doratin said between a cheery grin. “I wanted to surprise you! I’ve been saving up my coin for today, and I got you something nice!”

Doratin placed the package on the table, though he did not open it. He promptly took his seat and began kicking his legs underneath the chair in giddy excitement.

“How on earth did you manage to get something from the market?” his mother asked. “I doubt any amount of saving would have bought anything from the place. Not to mention the pretty little ribbons there.”

His mother removed the chicken from the spit and placed it down on the table next to Doratin’s package, then took her seat opposite him.

“Did you steal it, Doratin?” She asked.

“Sort of...” Doratin looked down, his grin replaced with red-faced embarrassment. “I’m sorry mom, but I really wanted to get you something. The gnome wasn’t very nice, and I figured he wouldn’t mind being upset if one thing went missing. And it was your birthday, so I thought it was fine. It was just the one time, and I did try paying him, I swear!”

“Oh, Doratin,” his mother wore a soft smile. She looked at her baby and shook her head gently. “Doratin, I’ve taught you better than this. I appreciate your little gesture of kindness, and I know you meant well in your heart. But we don’t steal from people. No matter what they’ve done to us, stealing is wrong.”

“I’m sorry mom,” Doratin felt tears well in his eyes as he looked down at his lap. He meant for the day to be special. He wanted to give his mother something nice, but she was upset.

His mother rose from the table and moved over to kneel in front of Doratin. “Oh baby, don’t worry about it. You know you’ve done wrong and can learn from this right? Remember to learn, and these things can be forgiven ok?”

Doratin nodded without a word. His mother sighed and pulled him close, a warm hug to comfort his troubled mind. “Come now Doratin, why don’t you tell me what you brought me?”

A little spark flickered in Doratin’s heart. Hesitantly, he reached for the package and handed it to his mother. The ribbons were still wrapped perfectly, the contents inside safe. His mother smiled as she accepted the box and unwrapped it.

She gasped as she removed the petite cheesecake, the smell breaking through the fragrance of chicken and rice. She took in a deep whiff of the fragrance before taking a small bite from the edges. She chewed it with delight, and Doratin felt the smile rush back across his face in an instant. His mother smiled, not remembering the last time she had Eastwood Cheesecake.

“Doratin, this is quite the surprise,” she placed the desert back in the box, though not before taking another eager bite. “No more stealing though, that’s not a good thing. But this? Well, it would be a shame to let it go to waste. We’ll have this *after* you finish your dinner.”

“Ok!” Doratin chuckled, elated.

Together, the two enjoyed their meal, a feast by their usual standards. They enjoyed small conversation of their day, though Doratin chose to leave out the part about being chased through the market. Instead, he talked about the bizarre colors, and the fragrances, and the general excitement he felt every time travelers from far away visited the city. His mother nodded during his tales, smiling, and adding in little comments to spur his thoughts as he went on.

When the meal was finished, his mother used her hands and split the soft cheesecake in half. Doratin enjoyed the sweet creamy filling and the crumble underneath.

“Did you manage to taste any of it?” his mother laughed as Doratin finished his half.

“Of course I did, and it was delicious!”

“Good. You certainly take after my taste then,” his mother said between small bites of her own half. “Now that you’re done, why don’t you get started on all these dishes? Afterall, it is my birthday. You wouldn’t want me to be working too hard today, would you?”

Doratin groaned but obeyed, moving about the hovel, and completing the chores as needed. He walked outside briefly and splashed water over the used dishes, then scrubbed away the remnants and stains as best he could with the rags they collected from old clothing. He placed them in the corner to dry before clearing the remains of the table. Afterwards, he made the beds, laying the blankets flat against the straw mats. Finally, he got himself in bed and took out a little book.

It was an old worn-down journal with brown bindings entrapping yellow, stained pages. It was an old diary, apparently written by his father. It was the only piece of writing in their little hut. Doratin read a page or two every night before bed because his mother believed he needed to learn to read. Some pages were orcish, some were common; he read both languages fluently. The writing inside was rather simple, often just describing work. But every so often, a passage about his mother came up: a piece of beautiful prose. Those few pages were the ones that made Doratin feel connected to the man he never knew.

His mother came over and kissed Doratin on the forehead and took the little diary, placing it down beside his pillow. “Good night, Doratin. Thank you for your little surprise.”

“Good night mom,” Doratin beamed as he rolled over, pulling the blanket close around his body. “Happy birthday.”

His mother gave him a soft peck on his cheek before extinguishing the fire. Darkness came, the moons just leaking through the overhead vent. The peace of the night had no wind, and Doratin was soon fast asleep, dreaming of cakes and riches.

#

A bang against the front door pulled Doratin from sleep.

Above, the moons were shining directly into the little hut illuminating the small space in a purple glow. It was still late in the night. Doratin rubbed the sleep from his eyes and considered rolling back over. He thought the noise a mistake, a stray animal wandering the streets for trash.

The knock came again. Two hands grabbed Doratin and shook him desperately. He turned with a start to see his mother overhead. She was frantic, arms shaking his shoulders, urging him to get up.

“Doratin, up now! Quickly!” She spoke in a whisper, the urgency in her tone scaring him.

Doratin rose and instinctually grabbed the old journal beside his bedside. Scared, he imagined his father’s spirit in the pages, giving him strength and courage. His mother looked ill, her skin white and stare distant as if she saw a ghost. Still, she tried smiling at Doratin as she urged him on silently. She opened her mouth, ready to give her child instructions...

The door burst open. Three guards walked in. Two of them were humans; they were dark of skin, dressed in the regular mail armor of the night watchmen. The third guard was one Doratin recognized from earlier, a half-elf that was now sporting a broken nose and missing his captain’s pin.

“That’s the orc boy,” the half-elf scowled, a gloved finger extended towards Doratin. “Seize him and take him with the others!”

“No!” His mother stepped in front of Doratin, standing between him and the two guards.

“There’s no need to be taking a child.”

“Melonia,” the half-elf chuckled to himself. “I should have known this brat was yours. He has your eyes, and your stench too.”

“You have no right to seize him!” Melonia commanded. “That was the promise. I was to be left alone. Me and my child!”

“Yes, well your orc spawn is a traitor, Melonia,” the half-elf smiled. “He attacked me today in the market, leaving me with this nasty little bruise. He is an orc sympathizer. I believe that is enough to break your little truce, wouldn’t you say?”

Melonia flashed her son a quick look, disappointed he had hidden such information from her. Doratin felt the stare and looked away, his face red with embarrassment as well as fear. Meanwhile, the two guards were now hesitant, confused by the conversation unfolding.

“Lyndor, I’m going to say it once.” Melonia stood firm now, her hand itching by her side. “You will leave us alone. You are not doing this to me again.”

Lyndor smiled and gave a quick whistle. The guards obeyed the new order and drew their swords, approaching their target. Doratin saw the flashes of steel and felt his body tremble, but his mother remained steady.

In a flash, she grabbed the poker from the fire and swung it at the nearest guard. The man was too shocked at her attack to parry, taking the metal iron straight to the head. While he wore a helm, the blow sent his ears ringing and vision spinning as he toppled to the side.

The other guard moved to attack, swinging his sword directly at Doratin. His mother was there in an instant, placing her arm out to catch the blade before it hit her child. The sword cut

deep, drawing a stream of blood as it bit into her skin. His mother ignored the pain and cudgeled the guard's head with the poker. He fell faster than the first one.

Lyndor stood blocking the door and stared at his two guards. He locked eyes with Melonia, a wicked grin crossing his snake-like lips. He drew his own sword, a nasty scimitar, and stepped into the hovel.

"I must say, I never thought this was how my night would turn out," he hissed. "It's always more interesting when the prey struggles!"

He lunged for Melonia, leaping over the fire pit. She tossed Doratin aside and rolled the opposite direction. She grabbed one of the guard's swords, smacking him across the head with her poker again as she did. She turned to face Lyndor, sword in one hand, poker in the other. Lyndor stood wary of his opponent, his own sword at the ready.

Doratin frantically rose from where he had fallen. He lashed out to grab the journal and moved to a sitting position. He stared at the half-elf that stood between himself and his mother. He was terrified and confused. He moved backwards in a daze until he was against the wall, his breath coming in rapid fits he could barely control.

"Melonia, you can't win this," the half-elf snickered. "Lay down the weapons and let us take the child. Then go make a new family. It shouldn't be hard for an orc slut like yourself!"

He lashed forward, swinging his scimitar. Melonia blocked the blow with the poker then swung her sword at Lyndor. The half-elf was a master bladesman; his sword moved as fast as two and easily deflected Melonia's swings. They seemed to be in stalemate, but Melonia's blows came slower, while the scimitar continued to whistle about in flashes of silver.

"Run Doratin!" Melonia yelled through the struggle.

Doratin heard the words, but his body refused to obey. He was panicked, watching the metal bang against metal. Captivated by the movement, he failed to notice the second guard rising to his feet.

The man's vision cleared, though the ringing in his head continued. He immediately noticed the child just a few feet away from him. A grin crossed the guard's face. He reached for Doratin, an ungloved hand wrapping around the child's arm.

"Doratin!" Melonia shrieked and flailed at Lyndor with savage intensity, but her savage blows were in vain. The half-elf held his ground, mocking her as they fought. Melonia cursed as the fallen guard grabbed Doratin and dragged the child from the hut. "Doratin please! Baby please! Run! Run, Doratin!"

As Doratin was dragged from the hut, his hands felt numb. His fingers refused to work and dropped the journal. He watched the worn pages fall from his hand as if in slow motion, crumbling into the dusty ground. Yet as the pages let out a puff of dirt, he began to come to his senses. He felt the hand dragging him by the arm, but more importantly, he heard the shrieks of his mother.

Run.

Doratin looked at the ungloved hand and tried pulling at the fingers, but the guard was too strong, and his hold never weakened. Desperate, Doratin did the only thing he thought of: he bit the man's fingers.

Doratin's orc-blood gave him exceptionally sharp teeth, especially in his two tusks. They cut through the man's flesh drawing blood immediately. The guard released his captive shocked pain, grabbing for his bleeding hand.

Free, Doratin grabbed his book from the ground and turned to run. He slipped past the guard that seized him and went out into the night. He spared one look back inside. His mother was pinned, the scimitar finding holes in her defense. Cuts and tears were covering her skin and clothes, yet her eyes seemed to glow as if she were victorious. She made eye contact with Doratin for a moment, but it was enough for him to feel her love and well wishes one last time, before tears flooded both their eyes.

Fear took over; Doratin turned and flew. He ran with the lights of Thalandor's towers behind him. He ran through the slums, filled with screams and cries as guards stormed orc homes, seizing all they pleased. Fires began to burn in a few hovels, smoke rising above to mesh with the dark starry skies.

Doratin was oblivious to it all. His vision was blurred as his legs ran. He stormed forward, ignoring shouts and stray hands that seemed to reach for him. He clutched the journal against his heart and continued running down one alley, around a street corner, over the hills. On and on he ran as fast as his little feet could carry him.

Only when the street ended did he finally stop. He collapsed in the sands of the desert on the very edge of the city itself. In front of him lay nothing but miles and miles of sand. Behind him, fires spread across the entire slums. He turned around slowly, staring through teary eyes at the tragic scene.

Somewhere, his mother was fighting the half-elf. Or at least he hoped she was still fighting. Perhaps she had won already and was on her way right now to meet Doratin and tell him it was ok. Perhaps she was dead or dying, alone in an empty hut.

An internal battle raged on inside of the child. The thought of his mother tore away at his soul. He wished to run back and save her, to stand by her side and protect her, but he knew deep

down he would never stop those guards. If he could not fight, he should run. He could put his back against the city forever, leaving behind all the dirt and must and just run. He did not know where he would go or how he would survive, but he knew he had to do something.

Without warning, two strong hands grabbed him and pulled him from the ground. A cloth was suddenly thrown over his head, and the city of Thalador disappeared, his mother never to be seen again.

Chapter 3

A firm hand held Doratin's shoulder yet maintained a gentle steadiness. The cloth was pulled tightly downward, and his little head poked through to see the night and desert they were walking towards.

The cloth was a black cloak meant to hide Doratin's features as the city was left behind. Screams and the smell of fire still hung in the air, but they faded away as the stranger led him forward.

He dared to glance up and inspect the person guiding him. It was a human woman dressed in red silk garments covered by a similar black hood to the one Doratin now wore. Her light skin marked her as a clear foreigner to the desert. Brown hair peaked out of her hood as it fell to rest over her chest. She looked down at Doratin and gave him a sad smile, her two hands squeezing his shoulders in reassurance.

"I know this is all scary right now," she whispered down to him. "Just trust a stranger for now though. Stay quiet and keep your head down until we're safely indoors. Can you do that for me child?"

Doratin managed a weak nod.

The woman sighed to herself then looked forward again, walking with extra urgency in her step. Doratin felt he should pull away and run. He was taught not to trust strangers, especially strangers in Thalador, especially if the strangers were foreigners. Yet he had no fight left. He imagined his mother, alone and dying. For the first time in his life, he felt small and helpless.

Resigned, he allowed himself to be pulled along. The pair remained hooded while maintaining a brisk walk away from the city. There was nothing but sand for miles and miles, but if the city was in sight, stray patrols were still present. One such patrol appeared over a sand dune, rising directly in front Doratin and his strange escort. They were on horseback. A patrol of three guards armed in traditional chain mail approached, their spears at the ready. They were ordinary soldiers, none of them sporting colors of rank or high station.

Upon seeing the two wandering through the desert, the three guards brought their horses forward and surrounded the pair. The woman held Doratin tightly. She faced the first guard who looked down upon the woman and pointed his spear at her.

“Halt and state your business in the desert at such hours,” the first one commanded.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” The woman spat at the man.

“I am a member of Thalador’s security, and you shall treat me with-”

“What? Decorum and respect? For cornering an innocent woman and child in the middle of the night?”

“You are beyond the city limits and travelling in unauthorized-”

“Unauthorized? Sir, we have been staying out in the desert the entire week! We run into town for your little shows, then scoot on out because you can’t be kind enough to welcome us in!” The woman shouted at the guards, though her hands never left Doratin, holding the hood in

place against the night winds. “So if you must be knowing my business, I’m taking me and the child back to the tents! Our campsite!”

“We have no reports of troupes on the outskirts,” the guard insisted, though his voice did little to hide his uncertainty. He glanced to his fellow riders for support, but they merely shrugged.

“No reports?” the woman shrieked. “We’ve been her all week! So unless you intend to escort me and the child all the way to the camps, you better be riding your sorry mounts back to the city to find that report!”

“Calm down woman,” one of the guards finally cut in. “There’s no need for the hysterics. We can’t be letting people out and about the city, not during...”

The guard trailed off as the first one gave him a deathly stare.

“During what? An average night? During the market festivals? What?”

“We’re sorry for your time, ma’am,” the first guard said curtly. “Make your way to the camp and be careful. Reports of a lot of orc movement recently; tread with caution.”

Without another word, the guard signaled to the other two and put his horse into motion. The three galloped on, a cloud of sand rising in their wake. The woman kept her hard expression and stiff posture until the riders and sand clouds were completely out of view. She released her held breath only when she was sure they were alone.

She knelt beside Doratin and placed a hand on his cheek. “How are you holding up child?”

Doratin felt the tears and cries building in his chest. He forced them back and remained silent, instead looking down at his bare feet sinking in the sand.

“I’m sorry for what is happening,” the woman said. “Things like this are outlawed in most places, yet the desert seems to have some pardon from the rest of the world. But don’t worry you’ll be ok now.”

She wrapped her arms around Doratin and pulled him into a hug. Her arms were warm and comforting; it was enough for him to return the hug. As he did, tears welled in his eyes, his breathing growing hard to control as emotion boiled inside of him.

“It’s ok, you’re almost safe,” the woman pulled out of the hug and stood, taking Doratin by the hand instead of the shoulders. “My name is Leah, by the way. You don’t have to tell me yours, but at least now I’m a little less of a stranger.”

They walked for nearly an hour, trudging along through the ever-deepening sands. The first light of day was still several hours off, the sky above dark and ominous. If either had looked behind them, they would have seen a soft glow of fires on the horizon as the inferno raging in the slums grew hotter and spread throughout the hovels. Yet even that glow disappeared until only dunes were visible surrounding the two wanderers.

Eventually, a small yellow glow appeared over the hills, followed by several more spread across a deep valley. Dunes blocked the wind below, where a full travelling troupe lay scattered about in various tents and wagons. One large bonfire lit the very center with four massive tents pitched nearby. The faint sound of laughing and singing rose in the air to meet Doratin and Leah as they entered.

“Well, here it is,” Leah smiled shaking Doratin with excitement. “You can come share my tent. Come on!”

Leah led him into the valley. One wagon stood apart from the others and had no fires or tents nearby. Two reymadons were tied to the cart, lounging in the cool sand. Their scales had

grown dark in the night, but they would regain a bright bronze color come morning. The lizard like things slept with their tails curled around their bodies, spikes on the end readied should they be roused. The two opened their eyes and watched the newcomers enter the camp but returned to their slumber when they saw their master. Leah rubbed a hand along each of their heads in turn, then ushered Doratin to follow her into the wagon.

It was a red wagon, with a square slit serving as a window on either side. Six wheels held the wagon up; they were thick and wooden, adorned with various textures for traversing various regions of the world. The front featured a chair covered in worn brown leather, while the back was one massive double door. Through these doors, the inside was an entirely new world. A blue rug lay across the floor while various shelves lined the left wall. These housed books, clothes, weapons, and other oddities. The right wall held three wooden panels that could fold down to form a pseudo chair and table. The far wall held a bed of sorts, covered in silver blankets and pillows embroidered with blue to match the rug.

“Welcome home! Please, make yourself feel comfortable!” Leah removed her cloak, hanging it on a hook along the doors and hung Doratin’s on another. “Would you like anything to eat? Water perhaps?”

Doratin said nothing, instead staring down at his feet in the soft rug. Leah shrugged and opened a shelf, removing a pitcher and two cups. She poured the water out and handed one to Doratin. He accepted reluctantly, though he did not drink from it. Leah sat down on the bed and sipped from her own cup, staring at Doratin in silence.

Timidly, Doratin looked up at Leah. He realized she was still young herself, much younger than his mother. She was dressed in red silk that covered her legs above the knee and

her chest. Her arms and calves were unhindered, pale skin turned pink from the sun. Brown eyes and a soft smile looked over Doratin with a friendly welcoming he was unaccustomed to.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Doratin.” He whispered.

“I’m sorry, you have to speak up child.”

“Doratin.” He said barely louder than before.

“Doratin? That is a lovely name,” Leah said. “Tell me Doratin, what brought you out on the streets during the cleansing?”

Doratin dropped to the ground silent. The cup clattered from his hands, spilling the contents of water as his arms shook violently wrapped around his body. Tears fell freely, overtaking him in an instant. He could not think; he could not breathe. His chest felt heavy, and his stomach felt nauseous.

“I’m sorry, Doratin, I’m so sorry,” Leah placed her own cup down and knelt in front of him, wrapping her arms around the crying child. He nuzzled his head into her shoulder, tears puddling in her shirt. Leah pulled the child in closer. “You’re ok, Doratin. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

He felt sadness overtake him until no more tears could be cried. His breath slowly returned to normal, but his insides remained hollow. Sadness turned to numbness, to exhaustion. He allowed his body to sink deeper into Leah’s arms, until sleep overcame him.

Chapter 4

Doratin awoke in terror surrounded by strange walls. Shelves and furs were everywhere, and he was wrapped in a blanket that smelled of rose petals. He threw it off and tried to stand, wobbling as he realized the room moved as if propelled forward.

Panicked, he stumbled his way to a set of double doors. He pulled the handle and fell as they opened, landing face-first in the desert sands. Overhead, the sun raged, drawing sweat from his skin despite the early hour of the morning.

Laying on the ground, Doratin felt hungry and scared as the events of the previous night flooded his memory. What had felt like a terrible dream was reality, a reality that left him desolate and empty. He managed to push himself onto his hands and knees, watching as small drops of tears soaked in the yellow sands.

Behind him, the wagon continued to roll on, but Leah leapt off to gather the child. She heard the doors swing open and left her perch guiding the reymadons, knowing full well they would continue their slow trudge behind the other five wagons. The troupe moved slowly across the desert, for no roads had been paved across such massive expanses. Centuries before, men had tried and failed under the blistering heat. Instead, travelers were forced to traverse the desert at

their own peril, though the rewards that awaited in Thalador and other settlements were well worth the journey.

“Well, good morning, sunshine,” Leah called as she hurried to Doratin’s side. He did not look up or respond, instead struggling to regain composure. “Come on, I’ve got some food and water waiting for you.”

Leah bent over and picked up Doratin. As a half-orc, he was larger than most children his age, but she managed to lift the boy with ease. Doratin nuzzled into Leah’s shoulder as she hurried through the sand. She caught up to the wagon and hoisted the boy up in the front seat, then climbed on herself.

“Listen, next time you wake up and we’re already moving, just knock on the walls,” Leah said with a laugh. “I’d rather not make this a regular morning routine, ok?”

Doratin nodded.

Leah sighed and rummaged around on the floor by her feet. Earlier, she prepared a loaf of berry bread, a few slices of dried meat, and a skin filled with water for the boy. She handed them to Doratin, urging him to drink. He hesitated at first but accepted the items, his dry throat relishing the cool water. He nibbled the bread, a stale product though still sweet, and chewed off pieces of the meat. In between, he sucked down long swigs of water until the skin was nearly empty.

“I figured you would need something like that,” Leah said. “We’ve been travelling for a while now and the desert isn’t kind.”

Doratin finished the water skin then placed it down beside him. The troupe moved along, the yellow sand and desert dunes moving past like gentle waves. Above, the sky was clear, and the sun continued its ascent. Doratin was still dressed in the shirt and trousers he wore to bed

yesterday; they were dirty and smelled of sweat. He noticed Leah had changed, wearing a full brown cloak and a white cloth wrapped around her head to block out the sun.

“You hot?” Leah asked. Doratin did not respond, but he did not have to. Leah handed him a similar cloth to wrap around his head. “Throw this on. It does a decent job keeping the worst of the sunlight away. No, not like that. Here, let me just...”

Leah reached over and took the cloth from Doratin. She wrapped it about his head until he was completely covered with only his face still visible. She nodded in approval and, for the first time since they returned to the wagon, picked up the reins. She leaned back and held them casually, humming a little tune to herself.

“You know, you may not do much speaking, but I don’t really blame you. I know you need time,” Leah said. “But, eventually, you’re going to have to say something. I’ll break those walls down, don’t you worry.”

Leah returned to her humming, allowing Doratin to sit in silence. The boy was still processing the night's events. In an instant, the comfort and familiarity of home had all vanished. Ahead was an unknown journey of sand and heat, behind him sorrow and defeat.

Silently, he sat beside Leah until night fell and they set up camp.

#

The group stopped in a similar valley as the previous night, with high dunes on either side blocking the wind. The ringed housing also allowed them to hide from any wandering eyes that may be out at night, though they would be severely outmaneuvered should bandits dare an assault. Still, such risk was necessary when other creatures and sandstorms were frequent threats so deep in the desert.

The wagons established their ring, though Leah kept some distance between her and the neighboring ones. She brought the reymadons to a halt and proceeded to remove their reins, allowing them free space to roam, though they never strayed far from the wagon. Turning, she beckoned Doratin over to her side.

“Alright, it’s time for you to begin earning your stay,” Leah said. “I may be doing you a favor out of the kindness of my heart, but others won’t feel the same way. You are going to have to earn their respect, and that starts by carrying your weight.

“Inside the wagon, on the right side as you walk in, there are two large buckets stacked inside of each other, as well as a faucet. Take the faucet and attach it to the bucket with blue metal, then turn it on. That should run water out to fill the red one. When the red one is filled, bring it over for my babies, ok? I’ll give you more to do afterward.”

Doratin nodded and trudged over to the wagon, his feet barely lifting from the ground. His arms hung limp by his side as he moved, his eyes glossed over as if in a trance.

He entered the wagon and found the buckets. He attached the faucet to the red bucket and turned it on. Nothing happened. Frustrated, he tried again, but still, nothing happened. It was the third attempt, tears beginning to build in his eyes when he realized he was doing it wrong. This worsened his mood. On the verge of breaking down, he dragged the bucket through the sands to the reymadons. He was too drained to feel fear in front of the creatures and walked right to the beasts, placing the bucket in front of them. Immediately, long tongues shot from their mouths forming a spout that sucked at the water. It was quite the spectacle to behold and briefly relieved much of the drain Doratin was feeling.

His respite was brief as the approach of shouts came from the wagon. One voice Doratin recognized as Leah’s, the other shouts that of an angered man.

“You brought another mouth! Gods be damned woman!” the voice shouted in exasperation. “Never once asking if it was ok, or should it be done, or even if we could afford to do something so fucking brash!”

“He was alone outside the city!” Leah responded. “What was I to do, leave him out there to die? You know what happens during--”

“I know, woman, I know,” the voice cut in. “Why else do you think we were off in the desert instead of sleeping with a nice little roof over our heads? We were supposed to be miles from the place! Miles away! Not inside the epicenter of disaster!”

“I’m sorry, but he’s here now, and I’m not leaving him!”

“Leave him? Why, that is a brilliant idea! We’ll just take the little shit and--”

The man stopped as he came around the corner and saw Doratin. The man was large with dark skin and a bald head. One eye was black while the left eye was covered by an eyepatch, a nasty white scar peeking out from the edges like a spider’s web. He wore red pants and a large green sash about his waist. His shirt was white and had no sleeves, showing two massive arms covered in tattoos of mystical dragons running up and down his skin. He was an intimidating figure as he stood over the half-orc.

The man stopped and looked over the child. He saw an orc’s grey skin and pointed ears as well as the tusks beginning to protrude from his lower lip. However, the man also saw a boy with all too familiar eyes.

“Ah, shit,” he sighed to himself.

“You see it too, Jax, I know you do,” Leah wrapped herself around his arm. “He’s one of us, no matter what he looks like. You see that.”

“Leah, I see it, but...” Jax stared at Doratin in troubled silence.

“He’ll do well with us. Look, he’s already begun to train, see? He brought the reymadons water, and he’ll be doing more to set up my camp tonight. He’ll be worth the trouble!”

“Leah, he’s got orc blood!” Jax snapped. “It’s subtle now, sure. We can pass him for one of us as we go along and travel, keeping his ears hidden. But eventually, he won’t be something we can hide. He’s not some side act or show like the others. He’s an orc. It’s going to cause trouble.”

“Jax, he’ll be fine. He’s human too. I’ll take care of him! I’ll bring him under my wing, he’ll ride with me, and you’ll never have to notice!”

“Leah, you’re only going to break his heart.” Jax's eyes were sad and looked at the boy. “This is your decision; I won’t intervene. But remember who chose this.”

Jax turned to leave. Doratin stood in silence. Maybe Leah was a nice person, but he felt he was weighing her down. Worse, he felt unwanted. He recalled days in the city, walking through the slums filled with orphans begging for anything, dressed in rags and dirt. They were beaten, ignored, and eventually removed. Doratin was one of those orphans, and the pain was only just beginning to settle in.

“Well, now that’s settled we can really begin to...” Leah trailed off as she noticed Doratin begin to cry. It was subtle and soundless, but the shudders and gasps for air were unmistakable. Leah embraced the boy, holding him tightly. “Hey now, it’s ok. You heard that you’re a welcome member of our troupe now. You’ll get to ride with me, too, doesn’t that sound good? Hey, come now, why the tears?”

“I’m just going to be trouble,” Doratin managed to gasp. “You should go without me.”

“No, don’t say that. I don’t want to hear you say that again, alright?” Leah held the boy steady and locked eyes with his. “Maybe you and I are going to have trouble, but there’s nothing

wrong with that. Makes life interesting, that's all! Truth is, you need me now, and I need you. We'll be better together than we were alone, you'll see."

"I know I'm just causing trouble," Doratin sobbed. "Let me just go before something else goes wrong."

"Hey, you listen here, and you listen good," Leah continued. "You've got a dark past, and you've got shit to carry. We all do, and it sucks. It never really goes away. But you can learn, and you can grow. That will only happen if you give people a chance to help you, alright? Maybe we're strangers now, but in time we'll get to be best friends. It'll be tough, but you're made of great things. Wonderful things. Stick it out, and people here can teach you more than you ever imagined! There is a whole world out there we are going to see!"

"I'm sorry for the tragedy that led you to me, but I'm thankful for the opportunity we have," Leah smiled and wiped a tear from Doratin's face. "Give us a chance at the very least, ok? Promise me that much?"

Doratin felt hollow and wished to disappear. Yet a part of him was reminded of his mother, and he found himself nodding, a smile almost crossing his face as he fell into a hug.

"Alright, let's get moving then," Leah jumped up. "There's a lot that needs to get done before bed. You've got work to do!"

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.

#

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.

#

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 leapt 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.”

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-smelling 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?”

#

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.

Chapter 7

The meeting with the camp came that night when the caravan's depleted troupe gathered to rest. They formed a triangle with just enough space between each wagon for people to walk between, guarding the center where the campfire would be.

Doratin initially remained in the back of the wagon when they stopped. Leah went about outside, locking the wagon down, unhitching the animals, and preparing their tray for feeding. Doratin shortly joined her outside with food and water for the reymadons, then turned back to the wagon for their meal.

Leah grabbed Doratin by the shoulder. "Not tonight. There are only a few of us left, so we need to stick together now. Besides, I'm sure the rest of the caravan would love to meet our little troublemaker."

Doratin swallowed his nerves and nodded, then allowed Leah to lead him inside the ring of wagons. The fire was already started, the soft orange glow and crackling inviting them onwards. Jax added wood to the growing flames. He looked up at Leah and Doratin and nodded slightly, then turned his attention back to the flames.

Two bald elves sat nearby, bickering. They were slender folk, with simple brown jerkins and matching pants covering their pale-skinned bodies. Matching tattoos of green vines and blue waves twisted about their limbs, dove under their garments, climbed up their necks, and spread across the tops of their heads. They paid no mind to the two newcomers, continuing their argument in elvish.

Leah sat cross-legged beside the fire and patted the ground for Doratin to join her. Doratin obeyed, his eyes still shyly studying the twins from across the flames.

“The others are taking longer than usual,” Leah said.

“Only because they have more to do,” Jax replied. “Half the wagons are gone, but more than half our troupe left last night.”

“All because of some stinking kid,” one of the bald elves laughed. “Frankly, I think they’re a bunch of *t’elyivash* for leaving in such fashion.”

The second elf snorted a chuckle. “I concur. I mean, look at the little guy. Looks like an orc, sure. But clearly there’s some human in him. He’s only half bad!”

Doratin blushed and curled his legs in, desperately wishing to disappear. Leah placed a reassuring hand on the child’s shoulder while glaring at the elves with eyes like daggers.

“Oh, relax, sweets, we only jest,” the second elf said. “Please allow us to introduce ourselves. Child, if you would give me your eyes?”

Doratin looked up at the two elves, both with large grins across their faces. He could see the differences between their faces, the slight variations in their jaws. More noticeably, one had eyes as blue as the sky, the other’s were as green as emeralds.

“My name is Finnilius Azmodiarri,” the green-eyed elf bowed slightly. “Though I much prefer that non-elves refer to me as Finn. I hate when people ruin a good name.”

“And you may call me Tillius,” the blue-eyed elf smiled.

“We are the trees and water,” they spoke together now. “May our acts of coordination dazzle and amaze you.”

With that rehearsed line, the two resumed their conversation in hushed tones. However, they did not have long for their conversation as a stout dwarf came waddling into the circle shouting aloud as she went. She wore white clothes under a black apron. Her hair was jet black, darker than the midnight sky. Her eyes were brown and wide, giving her a half-crazy look as she ran about, slapping the two elves with her wooden ladle.

“Ye two twat sticks!” the dwarf woman yelled. “The hells d’ye two t’ink yer at? Drinking ‘alf me damned beer like it were fucking water! It was for the sausages! The sausages! How do ye expect me to go ‘bout making sausage if I don’t have the damned beer!”

“Oi oi oi!” Finn squealed. “What else would you expect of us? We’re in the desert, and we were absolutely parched from the day’s work!”

“Come along, Marigold, how can we tell the drinkable booze from the cooking booze? It’s all just booze, isn’t it?”

“Ye best put yer heads on straight and ask before ye go ‘round taking me stock!” she shouted with one last emphatic smack to each of the elves’ hands. “I tell ye over and over, ask before ye go ‘bout taking me t’ings! We don’t pass the mountains oft enough to just drink away evert’ing ‘cause yer little throats get a wee bit parched!”

The dwarf woman turned in a huff to storm back out of the ring but paused as she noticed Doratin. Her big brown eyes settled and she smiled at the young half-orc, a warm, gentle smile that made Doratin feel at ease.

“Well, 'ello there lad. You must be our new member the others were babbling on about. I say yer quite the cutie, with such lovely skin on ye! Well, I’m pleased to make yer acquaintance. I’m the cook for what’s left of this wee family, and you may call me Marigold. Oh, we have such tales to share when I come back!”

Marigold turned and parted, her mood suddenly bright as she whistled a merry tune to herself.

“See what I mean?” Leah said to Doartin. “Our troupe is kinder than you think.”

“Well, the ones that are left,” Finn chimed in. “Though as I said before, good riddance to the others. Honestly, they were all a little grumpy for my taste.”

“Enough about you,” Tillius said. “Tell me, child, what is your name? What makes you go? Honestly, tell us anything you wish to share, as there’s so very little of you we know!”

Doratin said nothing at first, looking to Leah for reassurance. She gave him a comforting smile and nodded for him to continue. He sighed deeply before timidly addressing the two elves.

“My name is Doratin,” he began. “I’m not really much to speak of beyond that though. I had a mom, and I came from the city of Thalador. But now I guess I’m one of you?”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Tillius sighed. “Thalador is the bottom of the barrel, scummiest of the low for sure. I suppose you don’t have much of a father to speak of, do you?”

Doratin’s voice caught in his throat. He knew he had a father, and he knew his father had been taken away. But there was nothing more he could say.

“Tillius!” Finn smacked the other elf upside the head. “Why would you go there? Let us try to keep the conversation light and merry! Stars know we’ve all been through enough these past few nights.”

“Oh, hush,” Tillius sassed his companion. “Why dance around the bush when it’s who the child is? Why run from the things that make us unique, whether good or bad?”

“The two of you shut up,” Jax said, stepping away from the fire and leaning against a handmade chair he brought with him.

“My, aren’t we testy.” Finn scoffed.

“Half my fucking troupe is gone, Finn. Yeah, I’m a little pissed off right now. I’d prefer not to lose another member of our troupe tonight if you don’t mind,” Jax growled as his hand played with his sword, loosening it from its sheath across his lap. Finn scowled but swallowed his words. An awkward silence came over the campsite, the crackling of the flames rolling on as the troupe stared at nothing, but Doratin did not mind the silence. He much preferred saying nothing than sitting through an interrogation of a life that seemed to belong to another person.

The silence did not last long, as Marigold returned with two steaming-hot pans. They sizzled with the smell of spiced sausage wafting through the open night air. Doratin ate well with Leah, but none of it smelled as wonderful as the coming dishes. The two elves both clapped their hands together in glee, their eyes fixated on the pans as the dwarf hobbled over. Doratin would have done the same, had a more awe-striking individual not appeared behind the little dwarf.

Behind Marigold stood a giant of a man, wearing nothing but a pair of undersized britches. He wore no shirt, showing off massive muscles hidden under a blanket of hair. His biceps were the size of Doratin, his face covered with a thick black beard hiding most of his features. The man carried a large pot of some type of stew and had a small sack hanging from his shoulders. Each step of his covered ten of Marigold’s.

“Dinner is served!” Marigold squeaked as she laid the pans down. “I present beer-battered sausage – severely lacking in beer – and my own desert stew!”

She placed the two pans down on a rock near the fire and clapped twice. The giant man behind her placed down the stew, then pulled eight plates and matching silverware from the sack. He handed the two stacks to Marigold.

“Thank you, Bullswan,” Marigold nodded and passed the wares about the fire. Doratin counted seven people in their little camp, one shy of the prepared utensils. He figured Marigold had yet to adjust to the smaller camp until a shadowy figure appeared from behind Bullswan.

Doratin’s heart immediately fell. Pysus.

Apparently, he was not dissuaded when the information of Doratin’s return spread through the camp. Leah tensed her muscles, jaw clenching as she held in her disappointment.

“Come now, Leah, no need for such dreadful stares,” Pysus said with a laugh as he sat opposite Leah and Doratin. A smirk crossed his lips as he grabbed his utensils and continued to pass them about the circle.

“I’m surprised you decided to stay,” Leah scoffed. “Especially considering it was your fault we nearly died last night.”

“The events of the past matter little with such a small troupe, wouldn’t you say? How can we possibly allow such animosity to exist when we really should be coming together as a family?”

“I suggest the two of you stop there,” Jax chimed in. “Pysus, you say another word, and I’ll gut you myself. Leah, you keep at it, and I’ll leave you to the beasts. Clear?”

Leah and Pysus nodded in understanding, though neither one removed their gaze from the other.

“Well, I’m not one for knowing what that little spat be about,” Marigold lied. “But I say we chow on me cooking before it gets cold!”

“I couldn’t agree more!” Tillius exclaimed between mouthfuls of sausage he was already scarfing down.

Doratin did the best he could to ignore the tension that now electrified the air. He took the utensils and waited as Marigold circled the little fire, dishing out generous servings of food to everyone.

“A little extra for the growing lad,” Marigold winked as she gave Doratin two sausages instead of one.

He then received the stew from the giant man who followed a step behind Marigold. The stew was more of a gelatinous mass which maintained its grey, lumpy shape as it plopped down on the plate with a jiggle. Despite its appearance, the smells of various spices mingled in the steam rising from the food.

With his mouth watering, Doratin dove into the meal. The sausages were plump and shot out grease as he bit through them, but the taste of the meat was better than nearly every meal he had consumed in Thalador. The stew maintained its shape with every scoop he took, but it melted into a wild array of garlic, salt, and basil within his mouth. He ravenously consumed it all without uttering a word.

“Well done once again, Mari!” Finn exclaimed. “I must say, even without the beer, this sausage was truly delectable!”

“I don’t want to hear from ye!” Marigold yelled, unable to suppress a giggle. “After all, it’s yer own doing that left me short of my main ingredient!”

“Yes, but we really spared the sausage such a grueling drowning!” Tillius laughed. “Nay, the sausage truly shone with such sizzle without the beer.”

Bullswan grunted in what Doratin thought might be a laugh.

“Speaking of beer,” Finn continued. “I have this little thing I’ve been saving for a special occasion. Seeing as we’re all a little sour for mood today, I think this is a necessary occasion.”

The flask Finn retrieved was made from a large bone. It was pure white, with small veins and cracks running down an otherwise immaculate surface. Gold rings hung about the top, bottom, and middle; the rings connected to a bronze handle and bronze cap held on top.

“Well, what a treat!” Tillius grabbed the flask from Finn and drank greedily before passing it along to Jax. Jax accepted the flask but did not drink, merely passing it over to Pysus. Pysus took a long swig, focusing his eyes back on Leah afterward. The big man was the next to drink; he passed it on to Leah.

Doratin looked quizzically at Leah when she finished. She looked to Doratin and made to pass the flask, then paused as if questioning the decision.

“Let him have a little taste!” Finn called out. “The kid is old enough for his tusks to start showing; he’s old enough to have a beer!”

Leah turned to Jax for support, but he gave little more than a half-hearted shrug. With a sigh, she handed the flask to Doratin.

“Just a little sip though,” she instructed.

Doratin took the flask with curiosity and smelled the contents. The aroma was that of honey and wheat. He looked about the campfire as seven pairs of eyes focused on him. He was nervous but took a small sip. A bitterness immediately cast over his tongue, followed by a very subtle sweetness. Doratin grimaced as he swallowed, just short of gagging. It was a shock such a beverage was considered so wonderful among the adults. He wasted little time passing it to Marigold.

“Ha! He kept it down at the very least,” Tillius laughed. “Poor boy, learning the hard way that it’s best to leave such delicacies to the adults!”

“I’m surprised he even managed to take that first sip,” Pysus snorted. “You’d think liquid like that might be poisonous to his kind.”

“I assure you it’s no less different to him than us,” Jax spoke before Leah could.

“Come now, Jax, why so--”

In a flash, Jax was up and knocked Pysus off his little rock and into the sand. Pysus landed flat on his back, the wind knocked from his lungs.

“Enough,” Jax growled over the man. “I’ve had it with your shit. You say one more word and I swear on the gods above, you won’t walk out of this caravan again.”

Pysus said nothing. He rose, still gasping for air, and stalked away from the fire. The big man, Bullswan, rose from his place and followed the slighter man away to their caravan, which they shared with the elves.

“Listen up and listen well,” Jax turned to the rest of the crew. “Doratin is one of us. I know you all know that, but I’m reminding you others won’t feel so generous or welcoming. You watch his back like you would anyone else in this troupe. You don’t, and I remove another bad apple from the family.”

He looked around the fire at grim faces, all fixated on him.

“We’re going to be arriving at the first outpost out here tomorrow. Doratin and Leah will ride with me after we pass over the red river. Marigold, you will take their wagon until we pass from there. In the future, Doratin will spend time with all of us, learning what we do and how we do it until we find his role in this operation.”

The others nodded. Satisfied, Jax returned to his seat as Marigold finally took a sip from the flask.

“Oi, wait a damned minute!” Marigold jumped from her seat, looking from the flask to the elves. “Is this another o’ me beers?”

“One of your beers?” Tillius asked.

“Surely not,” Finn laughed nervously. “No, I’ve had this for some time now, I swear!”

She took another sip, then screamed at the elves. “Ye filthy vermin! ‘Ere I was t’inking me golden oat from Baldrak was missin’, and ye bunch of thieves had it!”

“Now, now, Mari, it is all pure coincidence!” Finn rose from his seat and began backing away as he spoke. Tillius followed close behind.

“Truly, there’s no harm by it--”

The two elves turned and ran with Marigold shouting after them with her ladle and flask, pausing every few seconds to take another sip. Jax shook his head at the display. Doratin laughed and laughed as he watched the chase continue around the camp. He couldn’t remember the last time he laughed so much.

Maybe life with the troupe wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Chapter 8

The population of the Kaldiron desert was sparsely settled. What few established villages or towns existed originated as trade stops and military outposts, many of which grew to hold a handful of permanent residents. A few places created taverns, inns, and stables for travelers, though such buildings were small and rarely used.

The troupe progressed slowly over the yellow sands, the hot sun beating down overhead. Earlier in the morning, Doratin and Leah parted their wagon and entered Jax's, where they were told to wait inside until given further instruction. The two were still inside the stuffy wagon, when they approached their destination: a small village.

This village began as a military outpost. From the outside, all one could see was a stone wall standing nearly fifteen feet tall. No towers or rooves could be seen over the walls. The troupe would not find shelter or beds to sleep here, but they would be able to restock their water and supplies in exchange for a performance.

Doratin felt his excitement brewing. He never ventured far beyond his little neighborhood in Thalador. He did not know what to expect from the people he would meet, or what they might look like. He imagined the war stories they must have about fighting for the Free Cities's

grand army. He wondered at the potential items they possessed, the delicacies and far-off goods he may have never seen before. Even more exhilarating was the thought of watching the troupe perform for the first time. Back in Thalador, while performers came and went on a regular basis, such shows were always expensive and for those of middle or upper classes. Even street performers begged for a fee and scoffed at those who failed to present any form of payment. Doratin and his mother could never afford such shows.

“Settle yourself, Doratin,” Leah whispered. “You’re shaking the entire cart with that leg of yours!”

He placed a hand on his leg to stifle his energy, though it proved no easy task.

“I’m sorry, I’m just excited!” Doratin whispered. “I’ve never seen a real performance before, and I’m very excited to see what you guys do!”

Leah did not respond but returned a pitying smile as she looked over the boy. She had not shared the news, but Doratin would remain in the wagon at this stop. Seeing his excitement melt away would crush her, so she spared the child, for the time being, and let his imagination wander as they drew nearer their destination.

The wagons continued another hour before reaching the outpost. They came to a slow halt as soldiers inspected their visitors. Leah rose as they stopped and motioned for Doratin to remain still and silent. She parted, leaving him alone in the dimly lit wagon as conversation commenced outside. He could just make out the sound of Jax’s voice and another man’s voice, though he could not make out the words they exchanged. Doratin’s heart raced, and his foot itched to move. It took all his will to remain silent and still while the conversation carried on. Occasionally, Leah’s voice chimed in, but the conversation remained primarily between the two men.

Eventually there was a small spat of laughter, followed by footsteps. The metal of military boots clinked softly as the soldiers backed away from the wagon. Leah reentered, careful to open the back doors only enough to slide through herself.

“So, what happens now? Who were you talking to?” Doratin whispered as Leah sat beside him. The wagons rolled forward, rocking slightly, as they began a slow progression into the center of the outpost. There was a faint sound of gears turning as a large gate opened for the visitors.

“We spoke with the captain, and he has agreed to let us inside,” Leah explained. “In exchange for their protection for the night, as well as some much-needed food, we will perform for them.”

“So, I’m really going to see you guys perform? How can I help you?” Doratin asked.

“I’m sorry, Doratin,” Leah spoke softly. “I don’t think you’ll be able to help tonight. Maybe some other time, but not here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think it would be best if Jax explained it to you. For now, I need to get dressed. Please, turn around.”

Doratin obeyed and turned his back to Leah, but he was terribly confused. After the speech Jax gave last night, calling the little boy part of the family, it made little sense for Doratin to not participate in the performance. He crossed his arms, his face pouting. His tusks, which were growing slightly longer every day, pushed against his lips as he stared at the wagon’s door, awaiting Jax to come and explain everything.

Shortly after passing through the gate, the wagon came to a halt. The outpost’s interior was rather unimpressive. There was a long wooden barracks, a small banquet hall, and a small

stable, with a few small one-bedroom huts littered on the outskirts. The center of the outpost was clear, apart from a small pit used for fires, festivals, or other gatherings. The roads were not made of stone, but instead compacted sand made flat for individuals to roam about the outpost.

The wagons pulled up to the clearing created a small half-ring around the center pit. They would be used as sort of guides later, allowing the performers to change in and out of costumes and various scenes as if they were actually performing in a grand amphitheater.

Jax left the front of his wagon and climbed into the back. He followed Leah's strategy and opened the doors barely enough to slide through. When he closed the doors and turned to the wagon's occupants, he was greeted by a scowling child.

"Leah told you?"

"Yes," Doratin huffed. "Why can't I watch?"

"Because you'd make things very complicated for us," Jax said.

"But you said I was part of the family!"

"You are Doratin," Jax sighed. He bent down so his eyes were level with Doratin's. "Look, there's no easy way to say this so I'm not going to try. These people hate you. They would try to kill you. For your own good, we're keeping you inside."

"But I'm just like everyone else!" Doratin whispered.

"You're an orc, Doratin," Jax said. "These people wake up every day and sharpen their weapons, waiting to see if any orcs decide to come looting or killing. They're at war, and you're the enemy."

"I'm not like those orcs though," Doratin said, tears beginning to well in his eyes. "I'm not like them!"

Jax said nothing but looked to Leah. She had finished changing and wore a long red cloak draped over black leather pants and a black leather vest. Her hair was loose, falling in wild curls that formed a mane around her face.

“Leah, if you’re ready, can you check on the rheymadons?” Jax asked.

“Sure,” Leah said. “But if we don’t have to perform for a bit, maybe I can stay with the boy?”

“It’s best the soldiers think everyone with us is outside already,” Jax said. “Less chance of someone walking in on him here if the only people they’re looking for are out there performing.”

“Jax...”

“Now, Leah.”

Leah looked ready to object but followed Jax’s command and left the wagon.

“What about me?” Doratin asked.

“Stay put,” Jax turned and lit a small candle, then handed Doratin a book. “You know how to read?”

“I used to read every night,” Doratin said, struggling to hold back tears.

“Good. Try reading this and then tell me all about it tonight before bed, alright?”

Doratin nodded, his jaw clenched to hold back his sobs. Jax smiled and ruffled the boy’s hair, then turned and left, locking the wagon door behind him.

As soon as the door locked, Doratin let out the tears. He kept his jaw clenched tight, struggling to hold back the sound of his sobs. His body gasped for air, alone in the candlelight, staring at a dumb book. In anger and frustration, he flung the book across the wagon, watching it slam and slide against the floor.

Upset and alone, Doratin curled into a ball and wept.

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The candle fuel ran dry by the time Doratin moved from his huddled position. He did not remember if he had slept or merely stared at the floor. Either way, the sound of music and clapping from outside sparked movement in his bones. He could just make out Jax's voice, magically enhanced to carry over the assembled crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, soldiers of the Free Cities! Thank you all for your wonderful hospitality,” he began. “Tonight, I am delighted to present to you a performance unlike any you have ever seen before! We bring forth dances with fire, songs of delight and sorrow, and acrobatic acts that defy the laws of nature! I invite you all to sit back and relax, and tip kindly if you can!”

This received a few laughs, then everything went silent. From the silence, the soft melody of a flute began. Long, slow sounds blended, forming a melody of sadness that began to bring tears to Doratin's eyes. The melody continued in a long crescendo, accompanied by a low round of applause from the audience. Then, the flute erupted into a rapid melody while a burst of flames shown through the small windows lining the wagon. Colors of orange and red flashed in rapid succession, while the audience members gasped in wonder. The sound of rolling thunder suddenly erupted as the outside flashed purple before everything was dark and silent.

This time, it was not music, but the voice of two pestering elves that broke the silence. Doratin could not make out the elves' words, but they brought laughter and cheers from the crowd. Suddenly, fires erupted again, and the music chimed as all acts began to merge into one grand piece.

Doratin knew not how long he sat listening to the outside world, hearing joy and sadness, laughter and cries, filtering through the wagon walls. His heart sank with each passing moment, the sadness weighing heavily on his young shoulders. He tried on multiple occasions to climb the walls and peek out the windows, but he feared for what fate awaited him should anyone see his little face.

Doratin hated himself in that moment. His skin grew darker every day. His tusks were becoming harder and harder to hide, no longer able to fit under his upper lip. His ears held the distinct point of an orc, and his hair was jet black. He looked about at the troupe around him, and every performer had lighter skin, kissed by the sun to look like caramel candies. Their hair fell naturally long and straight. They all walked and talked with the same eyes and laughter, all of them looking more akin than Doratin ever could.

Unable to shake his misery, he sat back against the wagon wall and lay still. He forced his mind to go blank, staring emptily at the wagon floors.

He was in this state many hours after the performance finished, when Leah finally came to check on him with dinner. The military men and women ate poorly but had prepared a half-decent soup for their guests. She claimed an extra bowl for the child and snuck away from the groups to check on him.

“Hey, how are you holding up?” she whispered as she entered the cart. “Doratin?”

Doratin looked up at her but said nothing. His expression remained blank as she crouched down beside him. She handed him the bowl of soup, which he accepted apathetically. He began to eat, his eyes continuing to stare blankly ahead.

“Doratin what’s wrong? Are you feeling alright?” Leah asked.

“Why am I so different?” he whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“Why am I an orc? Why couldn’t I just look like my mother? Or like you? You have such nice skin and nice hair. And you all look so happy all the time. Why am I so different?” Tears began to well in Doratin’s eyes as he rambled on. “All this time everyone does such cool things, but all I can do is hide and run away! Why am I so different? What is so wrong with me?”

He broke down, and Leah wrapped her arms around the boy, hugging him tight. “There is nothing wrong with you, Doratin. Nothing wrong with you at all.”

“Then why do I have to hide?” Doratin sobbed. “Why can’t I go out there and be with everyone else?”

“Some people aren’t like you and I,” Leah whispered. She lifted the boy’s chin, so his eyes met hers. “People like you are special, but others won’t ever understand that. You’re different than anyone else – you’re stronger and kinder than anyone can imagine, and that is special. You never want to be a burden on anyone, and that is a wonderful thing. You hurt now because you care. You will always be different because you will always be better than them. You’re like Jax. No matter how you look inside, your heart is open and ready to be filled.”

“But he looks so different than I do,” Doratin moaned. “He’s nothing like me!”

“True, he looks different. But that just means he doesn’t have to fight like you do,” Leah kissed the boy’s forehead. “Give it time and you’ll come to understand.”

Doratin laid down, his head falling in Leah’s lap. She stroked her hand through his dark hair, humming a soft lullaby as she did. Doratin still wanted to cry, but still fell asleep to the soft melody of Leah’s voice.

Chapter 9

As the weeks rolled on, Doratin continued to spend more time hidden inside the wagons, and less time out in the sun. While some villages the troupe visited held more houses, or taverns, or markets, the boy continued to remain hidden in the wagon under Jax's instructions.

Despite the welcoming atmosphere villages presented the group, Doratin was always told to remain quiet and stay out of sight. Jax wanted to maintain a reputation and wished to avoid any unwanted rumors or attention spreading about the desert. While the others ate merrily and enjoyed soft beds, the boy continued his growing familiarity with darkness and solitude, broken up only momentarily by Leah's occasional visits, sneaking him meals whenever she could.

Fortunately, the time the travelers spent in these villages was broken up by the long days of travel over the hot sands, leading to nights spent camping under the stars. During these nights, Doratin resumed his chores with Leah: caring for the rheymadons, preparing food, and cleaning the wagons. Occasionally Doratin joined the rest of the camp for Marigold's fine dining experience, or as close as one got to fine dining so far from the rest of society.

The troupe recently finished a long performance, having stayed in a village for three consecutive nights. The Baldrak Mountains were now visible on the western horizon; the winds

carried with them a cool breeze and hints of moisture, though most of the rain never made it over the massive peaks. This night, they were all joined together, Marigold having cooked a simple stew that, once again, maintained a relative gelatinous mass in Doratin's dish. Conversation was light, words sparse as exhaustion still hung over the crew, many of them content to simply enjoy the brief moments of silence the desert provided.

Doratin sat for a while staring at the fire, when he felt the eerie feeling of eyes staring sharply at him. He spared a glance up and made eye contact with Jax, his intense glare falling solely on the child. Doratin looked away quickly, yet he still felt the eyes lingering over him. Only when Jax choose to speak did he break his gaze.

"Alright everyone, listen up," Jax said. "We're about to enter the mountains so the animals can get a break from the sun. It is rocky, and our only performances will be for the dwarves. In other words, there will be more drinking than watching over the next few weeks.

"I've pondered what I would do for a long time now, and I've decided we should remain in the mountains for a while." Groans erupted from the elves and Pysus, but Jax raised his hand to silence their protest. "We are making little gains in reputation or cash out here. A change of scenery will do us all some good.

"However, this is not the only reason I wish to enter the mountains. As we all know, Doratin has spent most of these past weeks hidden in our carts, and for very good reason," Jax addressed Doratin now before turning back to the rest of the camp. "He has yet to see our performance, or learn how to aid any of us during our journey. He is receiving a free ride and free food, despite earning nothing from us."

"Oi, so we plan on letting the little shit go in the woods then? Let him run free in the mountain like his filthy-"

Jax stood to strike Pysus, but Leah acted faster. In one quick movement, she launched the bowl like a disk, hurdling it at alarming speed. She hit her mark, the clay bowl shattering against Pysus's head. He yelled out in pain; Bullswan rose to retaliate, but hesitated when Jax laid a firm hand on the man's arm.

"I'll suggest leaving you in the desert to rot before I leave the child behind," Leah emphasized her point spitting in Pysus's direction. "Remember your place, or I swear to the gods I'll leave you remind you."

"You both need to step back and hold your tongues," Jax interrupted their exchange before either could retaliate. "Pysus, you are really starting to piss me off. Bull, you need to step down and remember this isn't your fight. No one here was exactly welcome when we first met, so don't begin to pretend Doratin is the only one with that problem."

Pysus held his head, tears forming in his right eye, but bit his tongue. Bullswan nodded to Jax and shoved his arm off, then sat back down beside Pysus. The elves whispered quickly to each other, but otherwise they and Marigold remained quiet observers.

"As I was saying, Doratin needs to start earning his stay, same as everyone else here," Jax said. "Starting tomorrow, he will spend a week with each of you, alternating in a cycle until we have trained him in skills that add some value to our group. I expect each of you to teach him something unique. Basic survival skills are a must, but otherwise, you are all free to teach him as you wish."

"I do say, I quite like this idea," Tillius clapped his hands with glee. "Oh the boy will do quite well with our little act don't you think? The physique, the strength..."

"We are not adding a third to our little ordeal," Finn said adamantly. "However, I do believe he may still learn some wondrous things!"

“I want the ‘las in a week’s time then!” Marigold blurted out. “We be heading for the mountains and there be plenty o’ good cooking and food fer us to gather from the local dwarves. Twill be the perfect chance to teach the lad some real tricks around the fire. I’ll make him a right good cook I will!”

“I won’t be taking the little shit,” Pysus snapped at Jax.

“Good,” Jax smiled in return. “I was hoping you’d be so accommodating. Afterall, with everyone else taking up childcare duties, we’ll need someone else to pick up the leftover duties. You’ll be on shit cleaning duty until further notice.”

Pysus’s face turned bright red, and he stormed off in a huff, kicking up a cloud of sand as grumbled to himself. Bullswan watched him leave and began to rise, but thought better of it under Jax’s intense glare.

“If you plan to object, I’ll be giving you the same detail as Pysus,” Jax warned.

Bullswan grunted and sat back again: silent and still as usual.

“Leah, you can take him until we reach the mountains. I’ll have Marigold remain in the wagon with the two of you over the last leg of the trip so she can help you manage the rheyamadons and watch the campsite. You’ll begin his training tomorrow morning, right at the crack of dawn.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Leah smiled. “Kid has been stuck inside that cart far too long for my liking. He needs the fresh air.”

“He needs to learn and blend in,” Jax corrected her. “Whatever good he gets out of it is just a bonus. This is for the betterment of our camp, nothing more.”

“Whatever you say,” Leah shrugged, a knowing smile across her lips.

“Wait a minute,” Tillius spoke again. “What about Doratin? Does even want to be wondering about and learning from people like us? Should we ask the child first?”

“Doratin is welcome to speak as he pleases,” Jax shrugged and took a deep drink from his flask. “Thing is he doesn’t have much choice.”

“I mean, I think I’d just like to get out of the wagon.” Doratin shrugged. “Being alone is starting to be too much for me...”

“That’s quite possibly one of the saddest things I’ve ever heard,” Finn sighed heavily. “Don’t worry child. Pretty soon you’ll be wishing for that isolation again! We’re absolutely dreadful company.”

“Well then, here’s to dreadful company!” Tillius raised his tankard of ale, a bright brown foam dripping over the side as he did.

“To dread...” Marigold paused and stared at the tankard, then explode in rage. “You son’s of bitches! That’s me amber ale aint it? The one I specifically said, don’t go about touching!”

The elves glanced at one another than ran from the campsite, the little dwarven woman rushing after them with her spoon held high like a warrior rushing to battle. In the commotion, Bullswan took the opportunity as a chance to part and followed the footsteps towards Pysus hidden somewhere behind the carts. Jax finished his little flask, then left the fire, leaving Leah and Doratin alone together.

“What do you really think, Doratin?” Leah asked him. “You can be honest with me. No one else is around to hear anything.”

“I think I’m ready for it,” Doratin said. “I mean, I don’t want to be in the cart forever, and I do think that some of the people here are strange, but it would be nice to be a part of it all.

Being alone every night, it gives me a lot of time to think. I don't really know if I like all the thinking it leaves for me."

"I understand," Leah nodded, staring ahead at the fire. "Still, I think this will be good for you. You may not be excited, and you may be nervous, but I think this experience getting to know everyone will do wonders for you."

"I don't know. I mean I was good at reading and math back in Thalador, with my mother and all, but that was all I ever knew," Doratin sighed. "I didn't learn anything else."

"Don't worry about the past now," Leah smiled. "You have a future that looks to be brightening, with some great opportunity ready to be had. You'll see, I promise."

Leah leaned down and gave Doratin a gentle kiss atop his head. He blushed a little, feeling warm inside. The feeling reminded him of home, the fire and intimacy of the moment like those nights his mother used to speak to him before bed. He felt like crying, partly because he missed the comfort of home, and partly because he felt like he may begin to call this troupe home.

"Let's get some rest," Leah got up and clapped, the fire extinguished in an instant. "You have a long day waiting for you in the morning."

Chapter 10

As promised, Jax wasted no time in beginning Doratin's lessons with the rest of the troupe. Each week, Doratin found himself staying with a different person, following various routines, while learning new skills, whether for performances or general survival.

The first week, he spent his time much the same, following Leah closely. The days were rather the same, riding the cart and watching the yellow sands continue rolling past as the mountains loomed larger ahead of them. It was at night that things changed. Marigold took over their usual work caring for the rheyamadons and managing the campsite. This left Doratin and Leah to spend their final hours practicing new skills and learning new lessons.

Leah taught Doratin practical skills, as she called them. She taught him how to sew, focusing primarily on patching holes and repairing torn cloth, using some of his own clothes from Thalador as practice work. They would work at this until Doratin's hands were bloodied from mistakes with the needle, and his eyes hurt from straining at the tiniest stitch work in the fabrics.

Mornings their work began early, with Leah teaching him a much more dangerous task. Leah once trained to be a mage before she decided she preferred the freedom of the road. During

her brief training, she learned various alchemical concoctions that specifically reacted to various forms of heat. Her act relied on this and her dancing experience to create a wild show of fire that dazzled her audiences. While Doratin would not be able to learn the conjuring of fire as Leah did, he could learn to mix powders and chemicals to create various explosions, ranging in their levels of heat, color, and destruction.

The mixing process was done far from camp, early in the morning before the rest of the camp began the day. They gathered their various powders, herbs, and other materials, and went to the middle of the desert where they could cause no damage to the wagons or others.

At first, there was no real mixing of the materials, but just simple prep work. Doratin would be handed herbs and told to mill them into finely crushed powders which Leah then cased in various viles and other containers. Doratin was shown how to distinguish between the various materials, learning how different ingredients would smell, look, feel, and in rare cases, taste. Additional instruction was given as Leah went over various safety measures, and what to do should explosions ever get out of hand. The boy tried listening through all of this, but even after that first week, it was hard to retain everything being taught to him.

“I know its overwhelming, but I’m not letting you try anything until you show me you understand all of this,” Leah said. “Granted I don’t expect to begin any of this too soon. Afterall it took me nearly five years to just begin putting together explosives and the like. I hardly expect someone would be able to manage anything in such short time.”

“Can I at least see what the explosions look like?” Doratin asked. “What’s the point of learning all of this if I don’t even know what I am learning it for?”

Leah paused and considered the child's words, then gave in to his quizzical nature. "I suppose you may have a point. I'll show you a very small spectacle, but you have to wait from atop that dune alright?"

The wind was blowing from the mountains, east over the desert. Doratin would await on the dune and be opposite the wind so, should anything go wrong, he would likely be out of harms way. Doratin rushed up the sand dune and signaled to Leah he was ready. Leah nodded in response then set to work preparing a small show.

For her normal performances, she spent days preparing each of the various ingredients, running over the timing and choreography until she had memorized down to the smallest detail, every second a perfect roadmap in her mind. Improvising a small show for the boy should have been simple, but she never was great at improve.

Carefully, she looked over the various materials that Doratin had prepped that morning. A few of them she would need for the performance in the mountains, whenever they found the first dwarven settlement, but the other powders were rather potent and stronger than she would prefer to use for a simple street performance. However, the nature of their predicament left her little options.

Resigned, she carefully began laying out a few of the files in a line. They would grow in intensity, each one setting off a different color. At the end of the line, she laid down a thin line of white powder known as hydrophillium. It was a white powder that, under extreme heat, absorbed various energies around it. It was a popular tool in any mages lab as it put out fires of any nature almost instantly. However, it had deadly side effects should anyone come to close, potentially leaving burns along the skin and within the lungs like extreme cold would create.

Checking once more that Doratin was far enough away, Leah ran back a few yards, leaving ample space between herself and the row of powders. She snapped and conjured a small ball of fire in her hand, barely larger than her fist. She focused on capturing the fire's energy in a nearly solid state, then tossed it forward, so it landed in the first row.

As the fire struck the powder, an explosion of purple erupted on the ground, flames stretching out like the tentacles of an octopus before disappearing altogether. In quick succession, the other explosions followed. The second was a burst of blue that shot upwards like an arrow, before bursting in a soft pop. The third explosion was bright red, then turned orange, before fading to a soft yellow. The fourth in final was the most destructive of all, a great blue flame that catapulted upwards at unbelievable speeds, before crashing back down to the earth in a fireball of light. But when it landed on the ground in the sand, it disappeared almost instantly, as if no flames had been there at all.

Doratin watched the spectacle from the dune in pure wonder. Never before had the boy seen such color. The rapid succession of the scenes, the loud sparks and explosions, the patterns within the individual flames themselves, came together to create a truly magical site to behold. He jumped up in a great applause as he rushed back down the dunes towards Leah.

Leah gave a small bow as he approached, then took his hand in hers and began walking him back to the campsite.

"That was incredible," Doratin said.

"That is barely scratching the surface of what I can do," Leah laughed. "One of these days you'll see what I can really do. When that happens, I expect a full standing ovation and calls of an encore out of you!"

"Will I be learning to create things like that on my own?" Doratin asked.

“Magic, likely not,” Leah spoke truthfully, causing Doratin’s face to fall. “But you may be able to replicate some of my tricks. Only time will tell.”

Doratin nodded in understanding. While he was discouraged, a glimmer of hope sparked within him, adding a little extra pep in his step as they returned to the other members of the camp just beginning to stir for the day.

Chapter 11

The mountains ahead consisted of dried cracked earth. Crevices plummeted deep into the dark world below, with little vegetation growing along its sides. The days were blistering hot as the sun landed directly on the mountain face, while nights were near freezing. The trails were few and far between as sheer cliffs and jagged rocks twisted about the mountain range.

The troupe arrived near the evening, the sun long ago disappearing behind the massive range. Shadow surrounded them now, near black as night itself. Doratin was in the rear wagon and marveled at the size of the rocky structures rising above them.

“Pretty incredible ain’t it?” Marigold asked, noting the curiosity in the boy’s eyes. The two of them were sitting on top of the wagon while Leah directed the rheyfadons. It was Marigold’s turn to tutor the boy, and she wished for him to remain by his side until the week was up. That included clambering up the edge of the wagon to ride along its curved roof.

“I never knew anything could be so...big,” he said.

“Well, don’t go losing yerself in the sky ere,” Marigold replied. “Ye see there’s lots of wee critters that call these stones home, and they’d kill you in an instant. Scorpions, spiders,

snakes, and even some creatures we best not name in the darkness of night, all lurking and eager for a wee bit of snacking.”

“It can’t be any worse than the things we see in the desert though.”

“Aye, you’d tink dat, and dat be just why yer going to die out here if you ain’t careful,” Marigold chided him. “Don’t stray from the camp these next few months and you’d be auright.”

“Months? We’ll be here that long?”

“There’re sh’aint be a clear road for at least the next three days. Maybe we find a dwarf or two out here, settling for some mining or trading enterprise, but udderwise there ain’t much reason to try carving roads in this hellish place.”

Doratin suddenly dreaded the adventure of the mountains. As the stories sank in, the landscape around him suddenly shifted. The rocks that towered above appeared like fangs; the great crevices were the mouths of beasts eager to swallow him; the slight movements in the shadows all hidden fiends biding their time to strike in the night.

“Don’t worry though, we’ll be just fine,” Marigold assured the child. “Afterall, we make a trek around these parts every year or so, and we’ve been doing just a fine. Reckon if we charted ourselves right, we be meeting some dwarves on the morrow. Then the real lessons can get going.”

These words did little to comfort Doratin.

#

As Marigold predicted, the first dwarven settlement they came to appear the next day, though it was well into the night when they arrived. Jax had wished to camp in a safer location than the open face of the mountains, so the troupe had trudged on into the late hours. They had

begun to worry they had mapped their ventures wrong, when the first light of fires appeared atop a shallow cliff.

“There we are! Whatta say?” Marigold yelled when Leah sent the news along. “Now I wish I waited afer cooking!”

Marigold and Doratin had begun prepping the group’s meal for the night nearly an hour earlier, when the dwarf’s confidence of finding a trading post had waned. Doratin did little in terms of cooking, merely handing spices to Marigold as she prepped a broth and cut the food apart. As she did, she provided instructions and reasons for her method, though she had yet to allow the boy to try any tricks for himself. This was mostly because she did not trust the boy not to cut his own fingers off with the rickety travel of the wagon across the mountainside.

Marigold stared down at her work, a new pep in her step as she began modifying her routine. She was humming to herself, a bouncy melody that sounded cheery, though Doratin did not recognize it.

“What are you humming?” he asked from the side of the wagon, merely a spectator to the dwarf’s work.

“Oh me? Fergot you don’t know much bout music do you?” Marigold said. “It’s an ole folk tune of dis part o the world, a wee story bout a boy a fallen in a crack and breaking his mum’s back!”

“That sounds horrible,” Doratin said.

“Well ain’t all the rhymes we sing about bad at heart. Just a bit o fun is all.”

Marigold continued to hum the tune and work away at her food, while Doratin continued his silent spectating. The scrambling dwarf worked until the wagon rolled to a rickety halt, at which point she stopped and ran for the wagons doors.

“Don’t just stand dere standing,” Marigold shouted. “Yer ma helper afterall! Let’s get amoving and meet the locals!”

Doratin quickly followed Marigold, stepping out onto the rocky face and following her up the hills. They were stopped on what resembled a road, the surface carved into a flat ramp that rose towards a stone gate. Jax was already dismounted and by the gate’s edge, speaking with a stout dwarf. The dwarf wore little clothes beyond his trousers, the only thing covering his upper body bronze shoulder pauldrons and a golden helmet with a horn sticking out from the forehead. A thick black beard covered much of the dwarf’s features, dropping out of the helmet to the top of his belt. Two axes were just visible over his back, strapped to the same leather holding up his armor.

Marigold and Doratin were too far away to hear the conversation, which abruptly ended as they approached.

“Well I don’t believe it,” the dwarf whistled. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s little old Marigold herself, in the flesh!”

“Borbin?” Marigold cheered. “Me gods ye got fat!”

“Fat from nights of flowing ale and loads of feasts!” the dwarf laughed. Then his face grew stern as he stared at Doratin, who was already closer in height to Jax than the dwarves.

“Your company has changed, Marigold.”

“Aye, we have a new one ere!” Marigold smiled, patting Doratin on the back. “Dis is Doratin, and he’s a right good lad from Thalador!”

“I can see he’s from Thalador,” Borbin growled. “You don’t get features like that anywhere else in the Free Cities.”

“He’s unique ain’t he?” Marigold smiled, looking from Doratin to the other dwarf. “He’s been wit us awhile now, a good little addition to the troupe fer sure!”

“He certainly is unique...”

“Oh none of that now!” Marigold crossed her arms, pouting at Borbin. “Come now, yer better dan dis, Borbin.”

“I suppose I am,” Borbin sighed, though his eyes never left Doratin. “You can’t blame me for my surprise though.”

“No one is blaming you,” Jax chimed in. “But we would prefer to be inside the gates tonight rather than outside them.”

“Well, I’ll leave it to Marigold then,” Borbin said. “She knows what lays beyond the gates should you all choose to enter.”

“Aye, and I know what lays in the dark should we not,” Marigold laughed. “Ye tink anything in der is worse than out here? Please, I’ll take me chances with four walls around me, tank you very much!”

“If you say so.”

Borbin sighed and walked towards the gate. He paused and took one of the axes off his back. It was a thick black blade on one side, with a flat edged hammer face on the other. He took the hammer and rapped it along the gate’s exterior four times, releasing a loud gong-like sound. A few moments later, the gates began to open.

“Righty then, let’s get a going!” Marigold grabbed Doratin’s hand and began to pull him forward, until Jax stepped in front of them.

“Marigold, maybe it’s best you stay by the campsite tonight,” Jax said.

“Oh wait at the camp eh? In a dwarven town? Ye know what fat chance is?”

“Marigold, I’m not trying to limit you. I just want you to think about-”

“I already ave,” she huffed. “The child is with me and ain’t leavin me side the next week and beyond right? Well tat be the ways wit tings, and tat how tey be! Der’s soup and such in the wagons. Eat away and don’t wait fer us to start! I be showing the lad a bit o culture!”

She stepped around Jax and pulled Doratin along. Jax released an audible sigh as they passed, though he offered no further form of protest as the two entered the dwarven settlement.

The small settlement was built into the side of the mountain. Just inside the gate stood a large clearing that split into four different stairways carved into the earth. These stairs led upwards to rows of small huts carved out of the side of the mountain, with the longest row consisting of six distinct huts. There were fifteen different huts in all.

“Ain’t it beautiful?” Marigold smiled, breathing in the fresh air and looking around the small area. “You smell dat? Dat’s the smell o erbs and the like you ain’t getting in the lowlands! Come on, there’s more te see!”

Doratin followed the dwarven woman up the farthest staircase, the one that led to only two huts. They walked to the rear hut, a small stone structure that appeared smaller than the one Doratin called home in Thalador. Marigold knocked on the stone huts door, a solid piece of wood, and waited. No answer came, so Marigold knocked again.

Underneath the door, a faint redlight began to leak through. There was some shifting, then the door burst open, revealing a dwarf in a dark robe, holding a readied metal hammer overhead.

“I swear to god you’re going to regret waking me at such a late-”

The dwarf stopped midsentence as Marigold lept forward and hugged him. The man dropped his hammer and grabbed Marigold with two hands pushing her back. His grey beard was

ruffled out of shape which he quickly fixed, then he stared at her. His face quickly changed from confusion to joy, and he returned the hug in increased vigor.

“My gods, if it isn’t sweet little Marigold!” the dwarf laughed as he released Marigold from his grasp. “I should’ve known you’d be coming by around this time of year!”

“Who else would dare knock on yer door at these hours eh?” Marigold laughed.

“Well, I suppose no one else would deary,” he said. He quickly turned his attention to Doratin however, his expression dark. “I see your company is a little different these days.”

“The lads a new member o the troupe,” Marigold said. “Meet me young ward for the week, Doratin. Doratin, meet me ole friend, Jorgin!”

“Ward eh?” Jorgin asked, eyeing Doratin up and down. “He doesn’t look like he’d be of much help to you, not with... you know...”

“With what?”

“His...” Jorgin sighed shaking his head. “His hands.”

Doratin looked at his hands in puzzlement, and Marigold slapped Jorgin upside the head.

“His hands be just fine tank ye vary much,” Marigold scolded him. “Tat’s not the proper greeting I came expecting from you of all people.”

“You’re right of course,” Jorgin sighed. “I suppose you’d like to come in and spend the night here then?”

“I dunno,” Marigold crossed her arms. “Maybe I’ll go a lookin somewhere else for a more hospitable accommodation.”

“Marigold, please, I can clear an extra room for the boy, no trouble at all!” Jorgin begged. “Forgive an old dwarf his error!”

Marigold thought about it for a moment, then giggled and walked past Jorgin into the hut.

“Come on Doratin, we’ll be sleepin ere for the night!”

Jorgin shook his head and followed behind Marigold. Doratin stood frozen for another moment, staring around him. The night was dark, and the streets were practically empty. He could see the wagons beginning to roll into the village, and he saw the troupe setting up the campsite for the night. Maybe he would be better served returning to the camp...

Marigold returned to the doorway, grabbed Doratin, and shut the door, all in one swift movement.

“You don’t live in a barn lad! Ye gotta close the door and get inside!”

Inside was a small room, the size of the hut, with shelves holding armor and various cloaks around the wall edges. A red, spherical crystal was attached to the ceiling, emanating the glow Doratin saw from the outside. The room itself was rather forgettable, except for the stairway that led deeper into the ground at the far end.

Marigold took Doratin’s hand and led him down the steps. Doratin was forced to duck his head, as the ceilings and passaged on the lower levels were designed to accommodate the height of a dwarf, not a half-orc. They descended two levels, passing by several locked doors, into a large gathering area. There was a large wooden dining set, a hearth burning a strange orange color, shelves filled with various books, and a couple of red chairs.

“Please, have a seat,” Jorgin gestured towards the dining set. “I’ll be but a minute in gathering some refreshments. Marigold, I assume you want some of the desert ale, but what for the...child?”

“E’ll have a desert ale all the same,” Marigold thanked Jorgin and led Doratin towards the table. She sat in one of the chairs and motioned for Doratin to sit beside her. Doratin’s legs

were awkwardly folded near his ribs as he sat in a seat made a little too small for an individual of his girth.

“So? What’re yer thoughts?” Marigold asked.

“It’s a lot,” Doratin said. “I mean, it’s more than I was expecting when I just saw the place from the outside.”

“Aye, it’s magnificent ain’t it?” Marigold said. “The best part o dis ole thing is Jorgin’s place is one o the small ones! Other homes about ere are even larger!”

“It’s amazing how much space they have here.” Doratin stared around the chamber.

“That’s why dwarves stick to the mountains child,” Jorgin said, handing each of them a matching mug of some red ale. “There’s space below the ground beyond mortal imagination. And only the dwarves have the imagination to make it pretty!”

“Cheers ta dat!” Marigold raised her glass, as did Jorgin, before gulping half of it all in one go.

Doratin watched and did a half raise, before taking a tentative sip of his own. The liquid was harsh on his tongue, a spice to it he had not anticipated. It was hot and made his eyes water, and yet he seemed to enjoy it. He took another sip, then a couple more, before finally putting down because the heat on his tongue was too much to handle.

“Doratin, you ok?” Marigold chuckled. “Yer face be redder than the ale!”

“He isn’t a dwarf, it’s no surprise he can’t handle this,” Jorgin shook his head. “What’s the point in you mentoring the kid anyways? He clearly won’t be able to follow along with your talent.”

“Yer right,” Marigold sighed. “He ain’t got the coordination te be crafting food on the wobbling of wagons and carts out on the road.”

“Then why bring him along?”

“Well te meet you!” Marigold smiled. “We’re gunna be staying wit ya fer the next couple o weeks, so we can really hone in on the little tings!”

“Wait what?” Jorgin turned red himself, staring over at Marigold.

“Ye heard me! We’re staing wit ya fer the week!” She smiled and clinked her glass against his again, then downed the rest of the liquid. “Besdies, leaves us plenty of time fer catching up, it does.”

“Gods give me strength,” Jorgin sighed. “Never though I’d have a orc living under my own roof.”

“Half-orc,” Doratin scowled. “My mother was a human woman, and I’m her kid. I’m not the enemy here.”

“No, I suppose you’re not,” Jorgin took another deep swig and rose from the table. “You can sleep here tonight, Doratin. Pull up a chair and get comfortable. As for you, Marigold... Well, my door will be unlocked, I’ll leave it at that.”

“Tank ye kindly,” Marigold spat. “But if ye ain’t giving Doartin a bed, I ain’t taking one meself.”

“Stubborn old fool,” Jorgin spat in return. “Fine, have it your way. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

With a huff, he turned and left the chamber, the stomping of his feet echoing down the passage, until they were cut off by the loud slamming of a stone door.

Doratin finished his ale, despite the searing pain, then slumped down. His stomach was gurgling and his head hurt, so the alcohol made a nice distraction. Marigold rose from her own chair and put a hand warmly on Doratin’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry too much bout all tat,” she said. “He’ll be just right come the morrow.”

“It’s ok,” Doratin said. “I mean, it just is what is at this point right? At least I got to leave the wagon here. It’s certainly nice not to hide for a day.”

“Aye, and don’t ferget, we ain’t gotta see Pysus and ‘is dumb ole face tonight!”

“He certainly is the worst,” Doratin agreed.

Marigold and Doratin walked over to the chairs and move some of them together, forming two sort of beds near the artificial heat of the hearth. Then, they each climbed into a different spot. Marigold fit nicely, while Doratin had to fidget, twist, and turn, until he gave up with his legs and arms dangling over the sides. The discomfort made it hard to rest, but his warm stomach and pounding head eventually proved too much for his little body.

Sleep finally came, and he did not wake again until morning.

Chapter 12

Unfortunately for Doratin, his time in the dwarven home was cut short.

That morning, he awoke to the smell of dark black coffee entangled with the smoke rising from the hearth. However, it was not the smells but the heated argument that stirred him from his dreams.

“Wha’da you bloody mean!?” Marigold hollered.

“I’m not taking the little shit!” Jorgin yelled in return.

“Why da hells not?” Marigold stammered. “Ye don’t even know the lad! Ye haven’t given ‘im a fair chance!”

“I haven’t, and I won’t,” Jorgin stated. “You don’t understand, I can’t be going about just taking in strays like him and teaching him the craft. My reputation, and the reputation of this entire settlement, would immediately be in jeaporady! Frankly, I’m surprised your little crew was even allowed to enter in the first place!”

“We been coming round ‘ere for years now! Obviously, we’d find a warm welcome, though I expected better from you!”

“And I expected more of you, but you fucked up first!”

Doratin slowly rose from his position in the chairs. He had somehow tucked his chin against his chest, his legs trapped in a twisted mess. His entire body ached, his neck worst of all, as he began to stretch out and barely rise to a sitting position. Rising, he could see Marigold and Jorgin standing on opposite ends of the table shouting at each other. Mugs of coffee had been knocked over, spilling their contents on the floor, while pastries, cakes, and other sandwiches lay smashed or ripped apart.

“I’m shocked I is,” Marigold laughed. “Of all de bloody tings to go bout doing, and you say I fucked up for ‘aving a ‘eart?”

“You’re not thinking right is all,” Jorgin sighed. “Look, I understand how I can seem unreasonable, but try to understand the position I currently find myself in! I just can’t risk the exposure that would come from undertaking this task!”

“Aye, your wee ego ain’t got the balls to stand it!”

“Marigold there’s no need to-”

“Oh shut yer yapping, Jorgin,” Marigold waved him off, just now noticing Doratin stirring from his space on the chairs. “Oh good yer awake. Excellent, we’ll be ‘eading on out o ‘ere now!”

Marigold walked over and helped Doratin get up to a full stand, then immediately pulled him along to follow. Her feet moved quickly, her little legs stomping in rapid succession up the stairs and out into the air that lay above ground. All the while Jorgin was clambering behind, shouting for Marigold to reconsider. Eventually, the shouting turned to anger, and Jorgin kicked the two out the rest of the way.

“Get the hell out then!” Jorgin shrieked, hands on both Doratin and Marigold, shoving them out the door. “I Don’t want to see you back here the rest of your stay, or I swear to the gods above, I’ll send you to your maker!”

Marigold turned to respond, but the door slammed in her face before she worded her final quip. Her face was blood red, her fists balled up so tight her knuckles began to turn white. Doratin watched all of this and said nothing, feeling ashamed knowing this was somehow all his fault.

“I’m sorry, Marigold,” Doratin sighed. “I feel like this keeps happening...”

“Ain’t no reason to apologize for another’s stupidity,” Marigold said. “Let the dwarf rot for all I care. No good wastin about with people like that anyways.”

Marigold began to walk down the short path of steps, and Doratin followed close behind. The sun was just beginning to rise in the east, covering the settlement in sunlight. The little clearing that lay in front of them housed the three wagons, with Jax, Leah, and the elvish twins sitting together by a fire. Pysus and Bullswan were nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, and here our chef finally returns,” Finn hollered. “I pray you have returned with our morning meal, because I’m positively starved!”

“Can it elf, or I swear I’ll make ye eat no’tin but words for breakfast!” Marigold grunted.

“I take it your night didn’t go exactly as planned?” Leah asked tentatively.

“Oh no, it was all peachy! We made cakes, drank and sang- Of course it was a disaster!” Marigold yelled. “That dwarf ‘as no’tin but rocks in ‘is ‘ead!”

Marigold stomped past the campsite and towards Leah’s wagon which was temporarily housing all of her food supplies. Doratin watched her go, curious if he should follow or give her space to calm down.

“Are you ok, Doratin?” Leah asked.

“Oh, that child is perfectly fine I’m sure,” Tillius said. “Right Doratin? Nothing breaks down a boy with a spirit like yours!”

“Shut up, I was talking to the kid,” Leah growled. Tillius held his hands up in innocence and held his tongue. “What happened in there?”

“Well the short of it is I got kicked out,” Doratin shrugged. “I don’t know, Marigold seems upset and everything, but I guess these things juts happen.”

“Damn,” Jax spat. “I admit, I figured we’d find a little leniency in the mountains, but even the dwarfs tend to hold ancient grudges.”

“Well, the grudge isn’t that ancient,” Finn chimed in. “Afterall-”

“-we’re still at war!” Tillius finished.

“Wars is a bunch of propaganda at this point,” Jax said. “No battles have occurred in anyone’s territory in nearly a century. It’s all just a bunch of border skirmishes and raids. These dwarves haven’t fought or raised a weapon to an enemy before. Not one of them.”

“Well, it’s not like they don’t know the stories. Maybe these little settlements are worse off than we anticipated...” Leah pondered.

“Well we’re not leaving,” Jax stated. “I’m going to finish what we came for, not matter the resistance we may get.”

“Oi, Doratin!” Marigold shouted from the back of the wagon. “Fer fuck’s sake get over ‘ere and ‘elp me with the food! Yer still me assistant til the end o’ the week, and I ain’t done witcha yet!”

Doratin turned from the fires and hurried over. The back of the wagon was wide open, and the smell of cooked eggs met Doratin before he saw the entire set-up Marigold had crafted in

just a short while. A small fire had been lit, and over it was a massive pan with several cracked eggs searing away. Some bread had been crumbled and stacked on a plate left on the wagon's edge. Inside the wagon itself, Marigold was back at work pulling out a large box that would open up into a small travel-sized kitchen.

“Ere grab a side and pull with me,” Marigold ordered.

Doratin obeyed, and together they hoisted the kitchen out onto the rocky ground. Margiold pressed a lever, then stepped back, letting the contraption unfold into six separate tiles. In one tile lay a small cutting board and knives, the other several plates and forks, another held a heating stone, and another still held a large cauldron. It was rather impressive and useful device, crafted by magic in the deep halls of the Baldrak Mines far to the north.

“Perfect,” she nodded. “Now Doratin, go grab some o’ the onions and peppers and set to choppin, while I keep at me job out ‘ere.”

#

The meal that Doratin and Marigold prepared was met with great applause and enthusiasm. However, even when the last bite was finished, the troupe remained quiet. Marigold still fumed; her face not yet returned to normal colors. All were cautious and feared angering the dwarf further.

While the troupe sat about their campsite, a group of three dwarves walked down to meet with them. Two of the dwarves were young and bald, with blue traditional tattoos running across their face, chest, and arms. They wore chain mail pants, but their chest was bare, covered only by their thick red bears that fell in tight braids to their waste. The third dwarf who led the little group was older, lines beginning to show on his face and around his eyes. He wore his gray hair back in tail that went to his knees, his long grey beard wildly falling about in tangles and curls.

Seeing them, Jax rose from the camp to meet them, but the elder dwarf raised a hand, motioning for him to sit. Reluctantly, Jax returned to his place, his eyes locked on the newcomers.

“Friends, it is nice to see you yet again,” the elder dwarf said.

“Likewise, Gorgin,” Jax replied. “Though I must say, it is rare you visit us rather than await for our audience in your own chambers.”

“Well, this visit has come with rarities to these parts of the desert,” Gorgin remarked. “Afterall, it is rare we find one of orcish blood in our presence.”

Gorgin looked to Doratin, his glossy grey eyes sizing up the child. Doratin felt like melting, wishing he could disappear into the rocks and logs they now sat upon.

“He’s of human blood too, don’t forget,” Leah hissed beside the dwarf.

“I understand, and I mean no offense by my words,” Gorgin said, though his eyes never left Doratin. “It is fascinating though. The boy must be what, eleven now? Maybe older? And yet he already looks more the size of a full-grown man.”

“He eats well, as do we all,” Marigold retorted.

“Yes of course, as I’m sure everyone would under your expert craft,” Gorgin smiled. “Yet this is all distraction from the real purpose of my visit.

“As you are well aware, this ground that you are now standing upon is sacred ground. These mountains, and this very settlement, were created in ancient times as the furthest south any dwarf had ever gone,” Gorgin gestured about him as he spoke. “As such we keep this place in pristine condition, with every detail of the structures and rocks the same as it was in ancient times.”

“You should skip the history lesson,” Jax said. “We know the history.”

“Yes of course, I mean no insult,” Gorgin apologized before continuing. “Now, what I mean to say here, is that certain things have never happened here, not in thousands and thousands of years of war. One such thing, is a member of the Resolute has never touched this land, and I pray one never does. However, this brings us to the root of the problem...”

Gorgin paused and looked at Doratin again, his words dying off.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Leah nearly laughed. “You’re telling me he’s resolute blood? You’re full of shit you know.”

“Orc blood does not come from our own lands,” Gorgin shook his head. “I cannot allow such work to be allowed into my people’s sacred homes.”

“You’re something else, you really are,” Tillius stood up pointing at the old dwarf. “What is it with you people and accepting strangers? You’re worst than the elves right now, and believe me, I would know!”

“Silence yourself elf,” Gorgin’s tone turned to rage as he growled at Tillius. “Be thankful we are even allowing one of your blood to stand before us at all!”

Finn grabbed Tillius and pulled him down, silencing him before he could object further.

“Now, back to the matter at hand,” Gorgin’s tone grew harsh as his patience waned.

“Orcs are not allowed here, and I will say this only once: the boy must go.”

“No,” Jax stated. “The boy is from Thalador, a Free City, same as any of us. He goes with the troupe.”

“Then the whole troupe must leave with him,” Gorgin countered. “It would pain me to see you all go, but if that is what you wish, I will not stop you.”

“You’re serious right now?” Jax scoffed. “A kid is here, a human kid, and you can’t let him enjoy some of your famed hospitality? You’re really kicking him out just like that?”

“I’m removing corrupted blood, as is my duty as the leader of our people here,” Gorgin roared. “I will not be questioned or disrespected by outsiders, who we allowed to be our guest. That invitation of hospitality has run its course, however. Now, it is high time you leave, or I will bring my warriors down upon you!”

Jax stood then and walked towards Gorgin. He looked the dwarf up and down, then turned without saying a word. He motioned for the camp to follow soot, the silent command to pack up and leave understood and agreed upon unanimously.

“It is sad that this is the choice you have come to,” Gorgin called out as the troupe parted. “I cannot wish you well, but I wish you no ill will on your further journeys.”

“I pray this mountain provides you with all you deserve,” Jax hollered back.

Quickly and quietly, the troupe packed the wagons in less than hour. The gates were opened almost immediately, and the wagons began their long trek out and back into the mountainous wilderness. At this point, the sun was high overhead, casting the entire world in a bright, intense heat.

Marigold sat at the back of the wagon with a few tears running down her eyes. Doratin sat beside her and placed an arm around her shoulder, unsure of what more he could do. He felt guilty at heart, knowing full well that it was his fault the troupe had been banned from the small town.

“I’m sorry,” Doratin whispered. “I really tried to fit in, but I guess I’m not very good at it.”

“You did alright lad,” Marigold sniffled. “It ain’t you who needs to be apologizing. Those idiots can’t see what a gift ya have, not like we do. It ‘urts to think dey and me share the same blood is all. I never knew me own folk could be so gods be damned cold.”

The wagons rattled on, and Doratin and Marigold watched in silence as the settlement shrank behind them, until it vanished from their view.

“Well, that’s enough o’ me brooding for the day,” Marigold brushed aside a few tears and rose, patting herself off. “WE gots work ta be doin!”

Chapter 13

A week with Marigold flew by, and Doratin was soon off with the elves, learning surprisingly more than he figured. They were expert marksmen with bows, and they were incredible fishermen. They hailed from the coast just outside a city they called Leeria, so fishing came naturally to them and the rest of their people.

While Doratin did not master these skills overnight, the elves gifted him a bow and fishing line for him to use as practice. Towards the end of the week, “practice” became all he did, as Finn and Tillius took the lessons as an opportunity to lounge and drink.

Despite their lack luster methods, Doratin still enjoyed their company. They were talkative and cheerful, a welcome change of heart from the gloom that seemed to loom heavier over the group with each passing day. They remained deep in the mountains, keeping close to rock formations by night and travelling slowly during the day. The days themselves grew longer as sun rise came earlier each morning. Once the sun rose, the hours of the day were impossible to discern, until the heat vanished behind the mountains and the world was once again plunged into darkness.

They were still in the mountains when Doratin began his week of training with Jax. Doratin was both eager and anxious for his lesson, as the elder man's stoic demeanor and strict attitudes posed a challenge unlike many of the others.

At the same time, the group broke from the desert path and suddenly began travelling inward. Each day, they rose in elevation slightly, the rocks swallowing the wagons and travelers whole the further they went.

"We're getting into dangerous territory," Jax instructed Doratin that first morning. "We're leaving behind sun for a long while. I know Tillius and Finn had you running outside the camp playing with bows, but I assure you that ends now. You do not leave my sight, and you do not leave the camp. Under any circumstances. Clear?"

Doratin silently nodded.

"Good. Now hop up and steer," Jax instructed.

Doratin jumped onto the wagon and sat beside Jax, taking the reigns of the oxen that pulled the lead wagon. While Leah used rheyamadons, Doratin learned Jax disliked the reptilian beasts and preferred more traditional work animals.

Doratin did not know where they were headed, but Jax insisted he just keep the sun behind him. If they went further into the mountains, there was no wrong direction. The boy shrugged and managed as he was instructed, directing the group further and further into the desolate valleys and canyons that lay ahead. He did little steering, save to avoid a few treacherous obstacles, and Jax offered little direction. Instead, Jax took out a bottle of some form and drank from it slowly, his eyes constantly darting about the ridges rather than the path that lay ahead of them.

After hours of leading the troupe seemingly nowhere, Jax perked up. He stared ahead at strange mountain top; the top rose above the others, then split into two distinct halves, like the tip of a snake's tongue. He squinted, then sealed his drink.

"Stop," Jax instructed. "We're staying here the night."

Doratin drew the oxen to a halt. The other two wagons pulled into line beside the lead one, forming their usual triangle shape to set up camp for the night. The two elves, as always, were the first ones on the ground, scurrying about and stretching their legs, followed shortly after by Leah who came up to the cart, not for Doratin, but for Jax.

"You saw the peak?" Leah inquired.

"I did," Jax nodded. "We're getting close."

Doratin wished to ask what they meant but was too nervous to speak without Jax's approval. Instead, he followed Jax's lead unloading things from the wagon, while Leah returned to do the same and care for her rheyfadons.

The valley was shrouded in shadows, but above one could just make out the hint of orange glow, the sun not yet set completely for the day. Doratin found it peculiar they were setting up camp at such an early time, as the late evening hours were almost always used for one final push. Yet no one else in the troupe seemed bothered, all of them carrying about their usual tasks as if they were ready to turn in as they do any other night.

"Stop gawking at the sky," Jax shouted. "Finish getting the camp set up would you? We don't have much time."

The urgency laced in Jax's voice puzzled Doratin further. Still, he went about his usual nightly duties setting up camp. He fed the oxen, gathered water for them, then went over to check on Marigold, who shooed him away. He returned to Jax's wagon and sat down, awaiting

further instruction that never came. Jax was too occupied staring at the twin-pointed mountain, unaware of any of the comings and goings in the camp around him. Leah was beside him as well, the two of them silently staring while the rest of the camp worked.

After their meal, Jax gave Doratin no further instruction and himself went to rest. The others followed suit, leaving Doratin with more questions than answers as night began.

#

The next several days continued in eerily similar fashion. Doratin guided the group, directing the oxen pulling the wagon on which way to go, judging as best he could how to progress forward. Every day, in the late afternoon, Jax would find another strange landmark and direct Doratin to stop their progress for the night.

While the others seemed unbothered by the daily routine, it began to infuriate Doratin. The restless energy grew inside him in parallel to curiosity and annoyance. Still, his fear of upsetting Jax overshadowed his emotions, forcing his mouth shut. Yet the silence only added to the questions, all of it boiling inside him until it threatened to explode.

Sleep came harder and harder to come by, until it eluded him completely. He tossed and turned, yet the day's boredom and questions ran circles through his mind. Yet this lack of sleep eventually played to his advantage.

That night, he lay awake in the wagon, when he heard the faintest of footsteps coming from outside. The soft crunch was subtle, yet there was no mistaking it for anything other than the sound of boots on the rocky terrain. Curiosity got the best of him, and he crept silently from his place to the back. Cautiously, he opened the doors just a crack to investigate.

Outside, Jax was dressed in his black leather armor, two swords strapped to either side of his belt. Curiously, Leah was also awake, dressed in similar attire, save magical bombs and powders on her belt instead of swords.

The two whispered in hushed tones, too soft for Doratin to hear, before they left the camp. Doratin watched them leave his vision, then decided against his better judgement to follow them.

He was no climber, nor was he much of a sneak. But with the darkness and many rocks his ally, he managed to move with relative silence, hopefully unnoticed, from the camp. He went off in the direction of Leah and Jax, just seeing them in a small valley before they disappeared behind a series of jagged rocks.

Doratin rushed after them, charging full on into the rocks that awaited him. He forced himself to press on, climbing and squeezing between cracks, struggling to keep Jax and Leah in sight. They moved with relative ease, as if they had made the journey through the landscape hundreds of times before. Their pace was not frantic, yet Doratin felt his legs begin to ache not long after leaving the camp. Things were made increasingly difficult as he dodged and ducked repeatedly, hoping to avoid being spotted.

On the brink of exhaustion, Doratin was granted a moment of relief. Just over the ridge, he felt a draft. There was a break in the mountains, a clearing of sorts ahead of him. As he came closer, he noted that Jax and Leah were no longer running. They stood apart, Jax standing on the edge of the clearing while Leah stood further in.

Cautiously, Doratin moved to the edge of the ravine, staying as close to the darkest shadows as he could. He edged closer, daring to move just far enough to see into the clearing. Jax turned on occasion but seemed not to notice the half-orc creeping behind him.

Doratin found a vantage above one of the larger rocks and saw clearly into the clearing. It was flat, with pebbles and rocks littering the ground. In the very center, there was a pyre of rocks, stacked up no higher than his waster. A single red cloth hung under the top rock, moving ever so slightly in the draft.

Leah fell where she stood, letting her body fall to her knees. The faint sound of crying reached Doratin's ears as emotion overwhelmed her. He could see her shoulder's trembling as she knelt there, staring at the pyre of rocks. He forwent all stealth and caution, leaving his perch and entering the clearing, his eyes never leaving Leah.

"It's ok, Doratin," Jax said, his back still to the boy. "Go to her."

Without hesitation, Doratin ran to Leah's side. He knelt beside her and wrapped his arms around her in a hug. Leah continued to cry, but returned the gesture, wrapping her arms around Doratin and holding him close.

"Thank you," she managed to gasp between sobs.

He knew not how much time past as they knelt in the darkness. Maybe minutes, maybe hours. They only moved when Jax came forward, informing them it was time to move on.

"We've stayed too long already," Jax whispered. "I can feel more eyes on us the longer we wait. It's best we leave now before we draw any unwanted predators."

He stepped forward and helped the two up, then turned to head back to the camp. Leah wiped the last of her tears away, blowing one final kiss to the pyre, before turning her back on the clearing and venturing back into the rocks. Doratin followed close behind, keeping pace as they retraced their steps in absolute silence. Jax's eyes scanned their surroundings, his hand never too far from his blades. Doratin began to feel the eyes staring into his back, only finding relief when camp and the ongoing light of magical fires came into view.

Upon arrival, Jax immediately took Doratin aside.

“Don’t ever pull something like that again,” Jax scolded him. “You are lucky we heard you behind us when we did. You were practically begging for something to find you out there. You could’ve been killed if we hadn’t allowed you to catch up!”

“I’m sorry,” Doratin whispered. “But you’ve been sneaking around not telling me things for days now! I could not help it! I had to know what was going on!”

“It was none of your damn business,” Jax hissed. “If you need to know something I’ll tell you!”

“You don’t tell anyone anything!” Doratin blurted. “You never say where we’re going, what we’re doing, or any of that! You keep me in the wagon like a caged animal you’re embarrassed to have! Don’t blame me for going out there!”

“You little shit,” Jax spat. “Don’t turn this on me! We’re talking about you and your stupid mistakes!”

“That’s so stupid!” Doratin yelled.

“Enough, the two of you!” Leah cut in. “I swear, I don’t know what to do with either of you right now. Is now really the time to be fighting this out?”

“No it isn’t,” Jax sighed.

“I don’t know!” Doratin fumed. “I don’t know what’s even going on! All I saw was you guys sneaking around, then crying, and now I’m the one causing problems!”

“Lower your voice,” Jax hissed.

“Jax, please,” Leah spoke softly. “I’ll take it from here ok? Please, just, let me? I’ll send him back to bed when I’m done.”

Jax still fumed, but he allowed Leah her space. He stalked away, slamming his wagon door closed with an aggressive slam so only Leah and Doratin were left outside.

“You really should be more patient with him,” Leah sighed. “He’s one of the best people you’ve met, and he really has your best interest at heart.”

“He never shows it,” Doratin huffed.

“That’s just who he is.” Leah smiled down at the half-orc, then motioned for him to follow. Together, the two of them went back to Leah’s wagon where the rehymadons were still sound asleep. She opened the back of the wagon, sat on the edge, and invited Doratin to join her. He sat down reluctantly.

“You don’t know this, but this troupe of ours used to travel far and wide all across the Free Cities,” Leah began. “So many of us were gathered from different corners of this little world of ours, and we made one big happy family. Jax was the head of all, even when he was just a young teen. He was a loner, so he surrounded himself with other loners, and built a home.

“One day, he finds this girl and her little brother, performing little acts on a street corner in some village in Eastwood. They’re a happy pair, and they put on wonderful performances. Jax invited them in without thought, and they were happy.”

Leah paused then, looking up at the black night sky before continuing. “They were excited to see the world, and for a few years they did just that. They were blown away at the size of the cities, the colors of people’s clothes, the smells of different foods. It was all so fun and joyous, and they loved every minute of it.

“The thing was, traveling can be dangerous, especially through the mountains. Jax wished to cross back over to the forests because he was getting sick of the desert. Everyone was ready to leave, following his lead with the utmost confidence. Thing is, he couldn’t find a guide

to take them through the mountains. But he was determined, so he led the group into the mountains himself, confident he could lead them through.

“Problem was, it was raining. Rain never comes to this part of the world, not with the mountains blocking any chance water has of crossing over. When it rained, the mountains were slick, and the earth itself began to collapse all around. Still, Jax trusted his judgement and moved on into the mountains. We all followed, ready and eager to be rid of the desert sands ourselves. Visions of the forest, the coastline, and everything beyond excited us!”

“Well what happened?” Doratin asked.

“WE never made it through the mountains,” Leah said as tears began to form in her eyes. “Some people fought with Jax, telling him we couldn’t possibly get the entire troupe through the mountains. Stubborn as he was, he decided to scope ahead for himself. The boy and the girl? They decided to go with him and scout the land ahead. But the rocks weren’t safe. The earth was constantly moving under their feet, until one cliff collapsed under them.

“Jax sprang away and managed to grab a hold of the girl. But that little boy, the poor boy, he was just too far. Jax couldn’t reach him, and the boy fell all the way down the rocky slope, buried under all of the rocks...” Leah wiped away her tears, flowing down her face now. “When they went to check the rubble, their worst fear was realized. The little boy was no where to be seen, his body dead and crushed under the rubble. All that was left to find was a bit of his shirt sleeve, torn off and thrown away from the rubble. All because the rocks weren’t safe.”

Leah broke down then, holding her face in her hands as she wept. Doratin placed one hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her.

“He blames himself of course,” Leah managed to say as she pulled her tears inward. “Jax, he still thinks it was all his fault. He hasn’t ever tried to cross the mountains again. Those of us

that stayed with him, we haven't left the desert in nearly a full decade now. Jax is too afraid to cross the mountains again. The only respite we get from the sands is our brief weeks travelling to this very spot every year, so we can remember the boy lost in the mountains."

"Why stay with him then?" Doratin asked. "Why not try to go somewhere on your own?"

"The same reason you haven't run away from us, Doratin. We're all too afraid to be alone."

Doratin did not respond, his silence saying all that needed to be said. In the silence, the two sat, not a word exchanged until the faintest orange glow began to creep over the rock's edge.

"Well, I guess we'll be starting our return to the sands soon," Leah said. "You should go back to Jax now. You're still his ward until the week is done."

Doratin rose to go but paused before leaving. "Before I go, I have to ask. The boy who died... was he your brother?"

"Yes," Leah's voice was soft now, her gaze lost in the sky above. "His name was Mikal, and he was the only family I had ever known."

Doratin turned back to Leah and climbed onto the wagon. Gingerly, he gave her a soft kiss on the forehead, blushing bright red as he backed away.

"Well, we're a family now, right?"

"Yes, Doratin," Leah smiled. "Yes we are."

Part II

Beginning in 457 of the Fourth Age

Chapter 14

The crowds cheered as the finale began, the fire erupting in one final burst of orange and purple. The music reached its crescendo, the flute a long trill over the noise, before dying away with the flames. The performers bowed as the village showered them with praise.

Doratin saw none of this. The light of the flame leaked through the windows of the wagon, a nice burst of color in an otherwise black wagon. He had tried writing today, but his efforts were in vain as boredom and the noise from outside sapped away his small ounce of motivation. Frustrated, he put out the magic lights and sat in silence, listening, and imagining the performance.

He was good at timing the show now, knowing every ounce of the act by heart. On days they were outside of villages, he watched them all rehearse, each one making the slightest tweaks to an otherwise constant performance. He knew when Finn and Tillius would twirl and toss knives; he knew when Jax would step in and build anticipation among the audience; he knew exactly what sound of the flute cued Leah's entrance, beginning a string of explosions that Doratin believed was the greatest performance in all Valandria. Unfortunately, he had yet to enjoy their work in front of a live audience.

The years were monotonous, though Doratin seemed not to mind. While happiness eluded him, he found content in his steady routine. Besides, there was a comfort that came from their meals around the fire, enjoying silly stories and banter while eating whatever concoction Marigold would whip up.

Outside of the villages, Doratin himself was given responsibilities of his own to tend to. He fed the rheimadons and prepared different explosives with Leah in the early morning before they set out to ride. During the day, he took one of the horses Jax won in a sword fight a few years back, and scouted ahead, watching for bandits and potential game to hunt. He discovered he was a natural with a bow and quickly became the best hunter in the group, surpassing even Tillius and Finn for best shot in the group. When the evening hours came, he found joy in cooking with Marigold, despite the struggle and torment she tended to put him through. While he thought of himself as a decent chef, he had yet to impress the little dwarf.

Unfortunately, not all was perfect during his years with the troupe. As time went on, Doratin developed more orc than human. His skin remained human, but the hair on his head grew obsidian black in matts atop his head, unlike the hair he remembered his mother having. His tusks now stuck out over his upper lips, impossible to hide no matter how hard he tried. His muscles exploded seemingly overnight; he rivaled the strength of Bullswan despite standing barely taller than Jax.

All this meant was Doratin carried more weight for the troupe, and spent more and more time hidden in their wagons. Jax insisted it was for Doratin's best interest, but it failed to make the experience any less infuriating.

The applause ended and footsteps began to surround the wagons. Jax and his performers would be speaking to the townspeople now, haggling over sleeping accommodations for the

night and the various goods the troupe would take. A small feast would be put out for them all, and songs and music would be sung. They would celebrate a truly stellar performance, before turning in to enjoy soft beds and warm baths.

Doratin crouched low and practically crawled his way to the end of the wagon. He was careful not to rock it all, wishing to avoid drawing any attention to strange sounds and movements coming from what should be an empty wagon. He made it to the back wall where leftover meat and fruit from the previous night had been dried. He took these and a flask of thick brandy and leaned against the back wall. He drank deeply before chomping through his meal. He left no scrap to waste, nor any drop spared.

Filled and slightly drunk, he wrapped the blanket tightly about himself before falling into a fetal position, turning in for the night.

#

Doratin's sleep was interrupted by creaking of wood outside the wagon. The lock rattled as someone tried to undo the chain that held the wagon shut.

Silently, Doratin moved into a crouched position. He grabbed at the nearest object, a small runestone, and prepared for whatever intruder came through. IF any villager found him, he needed to be ready to run before the rest of the town was awakened.

Slowly, he moved beside the door. He pressed against the wall, raising the runestone above his head as the door began to creak open-

He lowered his stone immediately when Leah poked her head through the gap.

"Sorry," she whispered. "Did I wake you?"

"Well yeah," Doratin said, helping her into the wagon. "I wasn't expecting to see anybody until we were back on the road tomorrow."

“I know, I’m sorry but hopefully you weren’t too rattled,” She sat down heavily against the wall, taking in a deep gasp of air. She looked up at Doratin and noticed the stone still clutched in his hand. “A runestone? Of all things in here, you chose a runestone?”

“In my defense, I was still sleeping!” Doratin whispered. He threw the runestone aside and closed the doors to the wagon, praying Leah would be the last and only unexpected visitor for the night. “Enough of that though. What are you doing up?”

“Oh, I can’t really sleep,” Leah admitted. “Every time I go to lay on my side, I feel like someone is sitting on me, crushing me.”

“Are you ill?”

“Oh probably not,” Leah laughed. “Come now, I haven’t been ill in ages. No, I’m sure it was something the villagers had burning in their homes. I don’t know, I think I just needed to feel the fresh air, be out where I belong, not stuffed in a bed.”

“I would think bed would be pretty nice,” Doratin said as he sat beside Leah, handing her some water. “It’s been what, six weeks on the road now since our last stop?”

“Who knows anymore, time is all fuzzy,” Leah shrugged. She thanked Doratin for the water and drank deeply, emptying it in nearly one go. “Damn, I really needed that.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have anymore,” Doratin sighed. “I won’t be able to get anymore until we have our supplies filled back up.”

“Not to worry,” Leah smiled at Doratin. “Well anyways, I’m feeling quite tired today, so I think I better turn in for the night. Don’t worry about me though, I’ll be just fine.”

“If you say so,” Doratin shrugged and crawled back over to his corner of the wagon. He curled up again, pretending to sleep, though he kept one eye on Leah the entire time.

When she thought he was sleeping, she let out a weak gasp for air; her shoulders slouched and her head fell. It took time, but she managed to steady her breathing for a few minutes. She did not move to her cot, but instead folded to the side where she was, falling into a deep and troubled sleep.

Doratin watched her sleep, then crawled over to her. He placed a hand against her forehead, but she felt normal. Thinking of little else to do, he took his own blanket and placed it over. In her sleep, she pulled the blanket tight about her, a faint smile crossing her lips for a moment.

Doratin leaned against the opposite wall and watched her. He watched until his eyes grew heavy, and he too slept.

Chapter 15

The sudden lurch of the wagon awoke Doratin instantly. His body ached from his twisted position on the wooden floor, his stomach gurgling in hunger.

Slightly dazed, he stared about the space as he attempted to clear his head. Across the way, he noted his blanket thrown aside in a small heap on the edge of the wagon. He had slept without any last night, after he had given it to Leah...

In an instant, the concern from the previous night returned. Doratin stood up as best he could, wobbling as his legs regained their balance, and slid to the edge of the wagon. He peered out the tiny slit of a window and saw no signs of civilization. As far as he could tell, they were safely away from the previous village and back in the yellow sands of the Kaldiron deserts. Yet as a precaution, he sat down and waited for more time to pass before exiting his temporary prison.

When he finally parted, he lept out into the sands at the back of the wagon. The rheyfadons were moving at a easy pace; Doratin easily jogged ahead to the driver's seat. Leah was already up, the reins firmly in her hands. She wore a red cloth tied tightly around her head, slouched over under the heat of the sun.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Doratin asked as he climbed up beside her.

“Fucking awful,” she wheezed. Coming closer, Doratin noted the ghostly pale complexion that had come over her skin he had not seen in the dark of the prior night.

“You’re pale as a ghost,” Doratin noted.

“I haven’t seen myself as of late, though Jax already told me so this morning,” she mumbled. “I don’t know what this is, but I’m sure it isn’t anything to worry over. People get sick all the time out here. Things pass.”

“I suppose,” Doratin shrugged. “You didn’t have a fever or anything last night.”

“See? Nothing to worry over.” She tried to smile to Doratin, but immediately hunched over as a fit of coughs wracked over her body. It was course, originating somewhere deep in her lungs. The coughs passed for a moment as she inhaled, before immediately falling back into another fit of violent coughs.

“You need some water,” Doratin said. He handed his water skin to Leah, then took the reigns from her hands. “Drink up. I can guide the rheymadons for now.”

Leah took the water greedily, draining most of it in one go. She slumped back against the wagon and closed her eyes, pulling the cloth down over her eyes as she did. Doratin let her be, allowing her to drift off into sleep. He knew she had slept little last night; she could benefit from a midday nap.

#

Doratin finally woke Leah when they stopped to camp for the night. Even after her rest, she still seemed fatigued, moving slow and struggling for air. She managed to exit the wagon herself, but Doratin remained close.

They went to the rear of the wagon and began their usual routine. However, Doratin realized early on Leah would be of little assistance. Without air, she could barely move, let alone carry the food and water for the rheymadons.

“Leah, wait by the fire tonight,” Doratin commanded. “I can manage with the animals well enough on my own.”

“Don’t be silly,” Leah shoved Doratin playfully. “You can’t do this all on your own.”

“I can, and I will,” Doratin held Leah still, locking eyes with her. “Please, rest.”

Leah coughed lightly, and her shoulders sagged as she ceded to Doratin’s wishes. She turned and trudged to the center of the wagons where a fire had already been started, and the elves were already drinking.

It was easy enough taking care of the rheymadons. The two lizards and Doratin had grown close over the years. It was a genuine pleasure to spend his time with them. There were no orders, no worried looks, and no judgement from the lizards. They were simple creatures, with big hearts. They ate their meal eagerly, drank from the water gifted to them, and turned in to sleep, curling up close to the wagons.

Satisfied, Doratin went around the wagon exteriors over to where Marigold was cooking. Her hair had greyed over the years, but she was otherwise unchanged; she was still the same bubbly dwarf he met day one. She danced around her little cube, cooking up some meat they were given at the last village and pouring out the last of the dwarven ale they procured nearly a month prior.

“Well ‘ello there Doratin!” she whistled when she noticed him. “You come over to lend a ‘and today?”

“Of course,” Doratin nodded. “You’re always fun to work with, and I could use some good conversation after spending last night trapped in the wagons.”

“Aye, ‘tishn’t a great trade-off I know, but it is a small evil,” Marigold sighed. “Well, since you’ll be o’er here, grab a knife and start yourself chopping!”

Doratin grabbed a knife and began cutting away at the vegetables Marigold stacked up on the block. “By the way Marigold, have you seen Leah since yesterday’s performance?”

“Leah? Aye I saw her this morning. She looked a little white and worse fer ware, but nothing I thought much about,” Marigold said. “Still, I s’pose you’re worried ‘bout it eh?”

“Well she can’t seem to breathe, let alone move,” Doratin sighed. “I know people get sick, but this seems different somehow.”

“Well let’s finish this up ‘ere and I’ll take a look at her,” Marigold promised. “I’m not an expert, but I know a wee bit o’ medicine that could ‘elp.”

“Thanks. I appreciate you doing that.”

“O say not’ing of it! We’re all family ‘ere!”

They finished their meal prep and went to the fire to serve it to the crew. As had become common lately, Pysus and Bullswan were not around the fire, instead choosing to eat on their own. Only six plates were handed out, though eight beers were still distributed. The elves graciously volunteered to take the extra two, as it would be a shame for any to go to waste.

Marigold finished her duties, then went over to Leah.

“Alrighty lass,” Marigold said. “Remove yer outer layer and lemme ‘ave a listen!”

“I’m sorry?”

“Come now, the lad is worried bout yer health. Now off wit’ it so I can get a listen!”

Marigold began to pull at Leah's clothes to get down to thin undergarments. Leah offered little resistance, but shared her displeasure as she glared daggers at Doratin. He shared a shrug as Marigold continued to do her work.

"Alright breathe deep for me," Marigold pressed her head against Leah's chest. "Well go on, breath deep now!"

Leah tried to breath deep, though even from Doratin's position he could hear the labor in each inhale. Marigold's face grew increasingly troubled as she listened. After a few minutes of listening, Marigold backed away, shaking her head and turning to Jax. He had been watching this interaction from across the fire the entire time.

"Jax, I 'ate to say it, but I think we need a professional," Marigold called over.

"She sounds bad?" Jax asked.

"Horrid actually," Marigold sighed.

"Then let her rest," Jax dismissed the dwarf. "We've all been sick at some point or other out here. She'll recover just fine."

"Jax, you ain't 'earing me-"

"She's sick, Marigold," Jax shrugged, lounging back where he sat. "I respect your opinion, but unless Leah asks for it, we're not taking any side trips. We stick course and continue on our little tour of the villages per usual."

"Are you kidding me?" Doratin nearly laughed. "This is unbelievable."

"Shut it, Doratin," Jax spat. "You're lucky we've continued to carry you along this whole time. Don't go trying to sabotage this because your emotions are clouding your common sense. Leah is sick. We all get sick. Let it be."

"Something is different about this," Doratin pleaded. "Leah, tell him!"

Leah looked at Doratin, then to Jax, then back to the half-orc. She hung her head, tears welling in her eyes, before she looked at Jax.

“Jax, I know I’m sick,” she gasped. “But I’m scared. They’re right, this may be worse than normal.”

“Shit.” Jax hung his head and crossed his arms, contemplating internally.

“Jax, you know what we have to do,” Doratin called over.

“I know, but you’re not going to like it.” Jax said. “There’s only one place I know of where we’ll find a real medical opinion, and you’re not going to like it...”

Doratin knew what Jax spoke of. For years, they had avoided the place, but it seemed that time was coming to an end. If it were the only choice in saving Leah, then it must be done.

“We’ll do it,” Doratin said.

“Fuck. Alrighty then,” Jax decided. “We’ll head out in the morning.”

Chapter 16

It was a three-day ride to Thalador, and Doratin dreaded every second of it. Yet despite his dread, he found some beacon of hope may yet lay in the city.

As they journeyed on, he was forced to take over more of the responsibilities maintaining the wagon and carrying for the animals. Leah would wake in the morning seemingly better than the day before and would aid Doratin where she could. But as the day progressed, her state deteriorated. Her coughing fits grew increasingly violent as the day went on, and she struggled to draw breath. She still ate, though her appetite waned with the worsening of her symptoms. She was the first to bed in the evenings, and the last to rise in the mornings, a stark contrast from her usual energetic routines.

It was with mixed feelings of relief and fear that came over Doratin the afternoon of the third day. As with most days, the sun was high overhead, providing them a clear view of the seven spires rising high in the horizon, reflecting the sun in a golden sheen like a beacon. With each dune they crested, the city came closer, the rest of the city becoming visible as the spires continued their ascent upwards, towering over the rest of the world below.

It was an odd sight for Doratin. Despite his days in the city, he had never ventured from his own home. While the spires had always been there, staring down upon him, he never realized their sheer size until now. Seeing them so gold and luminescent, while the rest of the city was rocky and bare, was shocking to say the least.

“Doratin,” Marigold called as she climbed up to sit beside him. “Jax says we be getting’ close. There’s a chance patrols and soldiers may yet come out, so it’s best you head back in the wagon.”

“There are half-orcs here. And regular orcs too,” Doratin argued. “I’ll be no different than any of the others.”

“Lad, ye know there’s not’ing doing for any orc kind here,” Marigold said. “You can stand bout like one, and y’ell end up like one. That’s a fate ye don’t want to be ‘aving, not when Leah needs ya so.”

“I’m not hiding. I’ve done enough of that. I should be out there in the city with herm helping to find her help!”

“We’ll manage al fine on our own,” Marigold assured him. “Please lad. The best thing ye can do is go to her now. Be with her now and practice patience.”

Doratin wished to protest further, but he recognized the futility in his efforts. With great reluctance, he surrendered the reins to Marigold and climbed into the back of the wagon.

Inside, things were as he left them this morning. Anything loose items that could bounce around were all tied down, the shelves sealed tight. In the center of the wagon, he had torn the bed from its place and laid it flat for Leah to rest in. She was awake, sitting against the back wall with a book in hand. She was not reading however, her eyes merely watching the blue sky through the small window sits as the wagon rolled along.

“How are you feeling?” Doratin asked.

“Silly question isn’t it?” Leah wheezed. “Yet we ask all the same. Sick, pain, trauma, we always ask how the other is feeling as if it could somehow change their answer.”

“Leah, that’s not what I meant.”

“I know, I know,” Leah sighed, then placed a hand beside her, inviting Doratin to sit. “I suppose we’ll be riding out the last leg of this journey together then?”

“Yes. You get the full Doratin experience today,” Doratin quipped, taking the seat beside Leah. “It’s not that bad though. There’s not much to see in Thalador anyways.”

“No, nothing at all,” Leah laughed. “There’s no markets or things. No cakes or ales, or...”

Leah paused as she noticed Doratin’s expression. “Maybe I should be asking you how you’re feeling after all?”

“I don’t know,” Doratin admitted. “It’s been what, six years since I was last here? I have not thought much about my final night in the city, but there are so many questions I suddenly have that I didn’t even know were bothering me. I certainly don’t know if I want the answers.”

“Sometimes not knowing is better,” Leah wrapped an arm around Doratin as she spoke, resting her head gently against his shoulder.

“I still think about her, you know. Not every day, not like when I was younger. But sometimes in the silks we sew, the food we eat, the way the stars shine overhead... I just see her in those little moments.”

“I still see him too,” Leah smiled weakly. “My brother, of course. I see him sitting around the fire, laughing like he used to. I hear him in the sounds creatures make, trying to mimic them.

I see him in you too. The way you always look out for me, it's eerily similar to what he used to do for me."

"I would've liked to meet your brother," Doratin whispered.

"Someday, we may all meet again."

#

Doratin knew they crossed into the city immediately. The sand began to level out, but the city itself had paths of sandstone for streets. The cart immediately rode smooth and straight, the rheyfadons pulling it along with relative ease.

Outside, the sounds of merchant chatter and various bells and ringing jeweler replaced the ominous silence of the desert. Familiar smells that Doratin forgot began to waft through the window slits; the blue sky became hidden by stone buildings and shadows.

"It's alright, Doratin," Leah reached a hand over to comfort him. "You won't have to leave the cart and face anything you don't want to."

"I know, I know," he whispered. "But that doesn't make me feel any better."

Doratin remembered once when he was much younger having eaten some rotten food. He did not remember the food, but he remembered the feeling, the queasy nausea deep in his stomach. As the wagon rattled on, the nauseous feeling crept over him. Millions of butterflies fluttered in his gut as he listened and watched the city passing them by outside.

They travelled for what felt like hours, taking seemingly random turns as they navigated the dense outskirts of Thalador. All the while, Leah seemed increasingly nervous, but Doratin could offer little comfort when he felt his own anxiety taking hold. The two of them shared impish grins as they noted the weakened looks and heavy breathing of their friends.

"I'm sorry, which one of us is facing strange illness in a foreign city?"

“Who can say anymore,” Doratin jested. “Maybe we both are.”

At long last, the wagons drew to a halt. Understanding the situation, Doratin ducked low in the back of the wagon, hoping to avoid being seen as Leah exited.

“Be careful,” Doratin whispered. “And please, come back, alright?”

“Don’t worry,” Leah smiled. “I’ll be back before you even notice I’m gone.”

With her final words of encouragement, Leah opened the wagon just a crack. Jax was already waiting outside and assisted her dismounting, then locked the doors.

All Doratin could do now, was wait.

#

Several hours past night fall and Leah had yet to return.

Doratin was growing anxious, his nerves reaching new levels of stress. The city outside entrapping wore at him as the day progressed. He felt trapped in the wagon, claustrophobia encroaching upon him like never before. His deepest fear urged him to break out of the wagon and run after them, yet some small voice inside told him he would only bring the full danger of the city upon the group should he venture outside. He was trapped between his battling thoughts, frozen still in the shadows of the wagon.

No members of the troupe came knocking on his wagon. No one came to offer him comforting words or ask how he felt. Instead, he listened to the chatter of a few guards and the last of the merchants far off as if in another world entirely. He felt heavy and distant, his own body weighed down outside of himself.

Relief came not a moment too soon as he heard whispering. While he could not make out the words, it sounded like a man and a woman: Jax and Leah.

He found the will to move in his battling state and rose from his position. He moved slowly. His legs had grown stiff, and standing was difficult. Leaning heavily against the wagon for support, he stumbled his way over to the door, eagerly awaiting Leah to step inside.

He waited as the voices stopped just outside the wagon's entrance. While the words were hard to interrupt, he now knew without a doubt Leah and Jax had returned. They spoke in hushed, hurried tones. Their speech suddenly stopped, and the handle to the wagon began to turn.

Doratin immediately stepped back to prevent himself from showing as the door creaked open. Leah appeared at the wagon's edge, her face pale and sunken. She seemed exhausted, though she still managed to flash Doratin a pleasant smile as she clambered onto the wagon. Once safely inside, she closed the door and looked to Doratin and collapsed in his arms.

"Oh my gods, what a day," she confessed. "I have to say, I am ready for sleep."

"I believe it," Doratin said. "Before you rest though, please tell me what happened."

"When the time comes, Doratin."

"What? No, I hardly think that any of today's events are worth waiting on," Doratin insisted. "You guys were gone for hours! You can't expect me to just let that go!"

"Doratin, not now, ok? I just need to rest." Leah's voice broke as she said those last words, her smile dissipating as sorrow took hold. "Please, not now."

"Something happened," Doratin whispered. He stood back from Leah and bent over so they were facing each other. "What happened?"

"Doratin, I really can't... please just let me..." Leah avoided Doratin's gaze, her fists clenching and unclenching as she looked for an escape. "I just can't do this..."

"Leah, I'm scared. Come on, you can't leave me guessing right now."

"Doratin, I haven't... I mean I don't even..."

Leah's eyes rolled back, her body going limp as she collapsed backwards. Doratin watched her collapse in slow motion, her body crumpling against the wagon door. It had not been locked, and she began to fall backwards out into the street beyond. Doratin tried to grab a hold of her, but he had stepped back just beyond her reach. All he could do was watch as her limp body fell over into the sandstone streets, releasing a cloud of sand as she fell.

Without hesitation, Doratin leapt out of the wagon to Leah's side. He cradled her head, checking for any injury the fall may have left her. Leah opened her eyes and focused on Doratin, raising a hand to caress his face with a soft smile, despite the tears now trickling down the sides of her face.

"What the hell just happened?" Jax roared, rushing from his own wagon. He had remained out to watch over the troupe and clear his head. He watched Leah collapse out of the wagon and reacted with the same speed as Doratin. "What did you do?"

Jax pushed Doratin aside and checked on Leah. "Doratin, what the hell happened?"

"I don't know," Doratin stammered. "We were both in the wagon, just talking, but she fell backwards, completely limp, and then I tried to catch her but I was too far, and then--"

"Get back in the wagon," Jax growled. "Leah will stay with me tonight."

"What? No, Jax that's really not necessary. I can take care of her; I promise this won't happen again."

"Doratin, I'm not asking."

"Jax, please, I can't be alone right now! I'm suffocating, and I don't know what's going on, and I just--"

"Now Doratin!" Jax roared.

His command was followed by the sound of armored feet. Two city guards out on patrol heard the commotion and began to make their way over to assess the scene. Jax's yells garnered a frantic response, and the two guards dove into a hurried sprint, drawing weapons as they did. The shoulder pads and chain mail vests jingled as they approached, freezing suddenly when the wagons finally came into view.

Doratin turned to face them and immediately knew his mistake. He had left the wagon, in the middle of the night of all times.

The two guards looked at Doratin, then to Jax and Leah, then back to Doratin.

They readied their weapons and charged.

Chapter 17

“Shit,” Jax spat.

He laid Leah’s head down then stepped between the guards and Doratin, his hands wide as he stared them down. They kept their weapons readied but paused in front of Jax.

“Move sir,” one of the guards commanded.

“There’s been a misunderstanding,” Jax said. “There’s no need for your services.”

“No need to be a hero tonight, sir,” the second guard replied. “We heard the commotion, and we’ve seen enough. We can handle it from here.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Jax reiterated. “I won’t need you tonight.”

The guards shared a quick glance to one another, then stared back at Doratin. The entire time, he observed the exchanged between Jax and the guards ready to turn and run at a moment’s notice. Despite Jax stepping in, the guards were not deterred. At any given moment, at least one of them had their eyes locked on Doratin, their weapons never wavering.

“Sir, I’ll only ask this one more time,” the first guard said. “Step aside.”

“No.”

The guards charged forward with their spears, lunging for Jax. Jax managed to dodge both strikes with relative ease, drawing his own dual sabers in the same motion. He ducked below another set of strikes and took one guard out by the legs, dropping him to the dirt street. The second guard threw his spear aside and drew his own sword. He met Jax blow for blow as they dueled in the night air.

“Doratin, run!” Jax shouted.

Doratin did not hesitate. He immediately broke into a run. He hustled past Jax and the guard he was fighting, both trapped in combat and unable to react to the half-orc barreling past. Doratin continued past them and lept forward, wrapping his arms around the second guard drawing. The guard had regained his footing and drawn his own sword, ready to take Jax from behind, until Doratin stopped him.

The two fell into the street, rolling about in a cloud of sand and dust that rose around their bodies. The sword and spear lay just out of their reach. The guard pushed Doratin aside in their struggle and began to lunge for his blade, but Doratin managed to grab the man’s ankles and pull him back into the scrum. They rolled around, trading blow after blow, struggling to gain the upper hand.

Meanwhile, Jax continued to trade blows with his own opponent. However, the longer the fight endure, the greater the advantage for Jax. He taught himself years ago to endure and outlast his opponents. He moved his blade in rapid succession, never missing a beat. His opponent could not keep pace, his own blows slowing until an opening revealed itself.

Jax reacted quickly, knocking the guard’s sword free of his grasp and stepping in for the kill. Only Jax did not lay the lethal blow, instead bringing his pommel up to meet the guard’s nose. The man dropped limp to ground immediately.

Jax turned his attention to Doratin and the struggling soldier, but his assistance was unnecessary.

Doratin gained the upper hand and pinned his adversary to the ground. He followed this up with a series of blows to the head, his fists repeatedly bashing against the man's face. The guard's nose was bloodied, his eyes swelled shut, and his lip cracked under the assailing blows. The blows did not cease until Jax stepped in to remove Doratin from the unconscious body.

"Hey, enough!" Jax hissed as he pulled Doratin back. "That's enough!"

Doratin stood up and wiped the dirt from his face. Sweat gathered on his body, causing the sand and dirt to clump around his clothes and skin. He breathed heavy, letting the adrenaline rush come down as he stared at the two felled guards.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jax shoved Doratin in the chest. "I told you to run! Why the hell didn't you run?"

"The guard was ready to attack," Doratin shrugged.

"I could've handled it," Jax snapped. "Know what I can't handle? Explaining to someone why there are two guards and an orc in the middle of the street in the dark of night! Do you know how bad this looks?"

"Well, they attacked first!" Doratin growled.

"Yeah, because of you!"

"I didn't do anything! You and I both know that!"

"You're right," Jax conceded. "Look, I don't have time for this. Get in the back of the fucking wagon and get Leah in there with you. I'm grabbing Marigold so we can leave this damned city before shit gets worse."

“Wait, Jax,” Doratin reached over and grabbed Jax’s arm as he tried to go away. “What about Leah? What happened today?”

“Not the time, kid,” Jax sighed. “Besides, it isn’t my place to say.”

Jax pulled out of Doratin’s grasp and rushed to the lead wagon. Doratin followed his orders and lifted Leah from the ground. She was covered in dirt, but there were no visible cuts or bruises. Despite the excitement, she managed to fall asleep where she lay. Doratin was careful in lifting her, gingerly placing her comfortable in the cart before locking the wagon doors.

Shortly after, they lurched forward. They rolled on for nearly an hour before their progress slowed. The smooth ride of paved streets changed to the slow, rolling pace of wagon wheels over desert sands, the city Thalador once again a distant nightmare.

#

The troupe did not stop their ride from the city until the following night. Jax wanted to cover as much distance as possible, despite the grumblings of his performers. None of them knew exactly what happened that night. The incident with the guards remained a secret, though Doratin believed the others had their own suspicions.

As they rode on, Doratin grew increasingly anxious. Leah was not well, that much was obvious. Yet she seemed grim and frightened when she came to the wagon. The worst possible scenarios were running wild through his mind, nightmares playing over and over his head. He felt like a child again, hopeless to nothing for the ones he cared about.

“Doratin! Doratin, what the hell are you doing? Doratin!”

Marigold’s distant shouting brought him back to the present. The other two wagons were parked to his left, finding a clearing between two larger dunes as a campsite. He was so trapped in his thoughts he missed their sudden turn, instead rolling on right past them. His cheeks turned

a bright red as he turned his wagon about towards the other two. He waved an apologetic hand towards Marigold; she responded with a shake of her head before returning to the rest of the camp.

He brought the wagon alongside the other two, forming their usual triangle, then attended to the animals. Once done, all his attention was devoted squarely on Leah. Whatever she needed, he was prepared to give her.

Opening the wagon, he found her still sleeping in the back. Her eyes opened as the sunlight crept through the open doors and greeted Doratin with a soft smile and fit of coughing. Still, she managed to stand alright and walk towards the open wagon. As she stepped out into the desert air, her skin seemed paler than normal, her eyes marked with heavy bags.

“How are you feeling today?” Doratin asked, aiding Leah as she exited the wagon.

“Fine as I can be, I suppose,” Leah shrugged. “I admit I haven’t slept much since last night’s incident, but I bet no one really has.”

“Jax made us leave in a hurry,” Doratin said. “It was my fault. I should’ve just stayed in the wagon. I never should have-”

“None of that, Doratin,” Leah huffed. “I will not sit here and listen to ‘should’ or ‘shouldn’t’ from you. You did what you thought was right in the moment, and that’s the best any of us can hope to do.”

“I know, but-”

Leah placed a finger to his lip to silence him. “If you know, then let that be enough. You can wallow in regret all you want, but it ever does it make you miserable. Just let it be, Doratin.”

Doratin nodded, resulting in a sly smile from Leah who nodded in approval.

“Now help me get over to the camp. I owe everyone an explanation, and I’d rather only tell the story once.”

Doratin swallowed his questions and helped Leah reach the campsite. As usual, the elves were about drinking, waving and hollering as the two came to join them.

“Oh ho, and here we are!” Finn declared. “The renegades of Thalador out again in the night! Tell me, what trouble hath ye caused this evening, hm?”

“My apologies to you both,” Tillius sighed. “As you can see, he decided our long wagon ride called for more drink than the norm.”

“What? Are you accusing me of being drunk sir knight? I swear to the gods, I shath penetrate thy armor with my blade should such rambunctious accusations persist!”

“Finn, for the love of all things, shut-up.” Tillius sighed once again and took a drink of his own, which he offered to Doratin and Leah. Normally, Doratin cared little for drink, yet tonight, it seemed appropriate. He accepted and drank from it graciously before sitting with Leah.

Their banter continued for a short bit, until an unusual member joined them around the fire. Jax walked over, followed closely behind by Bullswan and Pysus.

Doratin soon lost all track of the conversation as he watched Pysus sit, their eyes locked on one another. Pysus glared with evil eyes, burrowing daggers through the half-orc. He knew. Maybe he did not know the exact details of the night, but his expression made it clear, he knew their frantic journey was Doratin’s fault.

Marigold joined the circle shortly after, breaking the tension with a baked beans and dried meats. She complained about the preparation, going on about being unable to prepare any “real food” with the constant shaking of the wagons.

“Ye ever try making a soup with a wagon shaking yer wares?” She said. “Impossible wit the liquid splashin all round the place!”

Doratin was barely listening. He gnawed on his food but could shake the feeling of Pysus’s eyes still fixated on him. He could not shake the dread and worry surrounding Leah, barely eating her own food right beside her. The only relief came when Leah decided to stand before everyone to address the group.

“Since we’re all here, I guess I should just get this out of the way now,” Leah spoke softly as she looked around the group. “I’m sick. There’s no denying it any longer. But it isn’t some natural cold or anything. It turns out I’ve been building this sickness over the years, and now it is taking full effect.

“The wizard we met in Thalador, she watched me as best she could. She tried herbs, concoctions, all of this weird craft, while constantly tearing through pages of old texts. Her conclusion was less than ideal...”

Leah did not look at Doratin as she caught her breath, choking on a few coughs that came over her. He prepared water to hand to her, but she pushed it away as she managed to regain control.

“My lungs are ruined,” she managed to say, forcing down sobs to relay her barely audible words. “I guess they don’t have much time left. And when they go...”

Silence fell over the troupe, the only sound the crackling fire. Doratin himself was shocked as his worst nightmare became reality. Around the circle, they all held their breath, no one truly knowing what they should do next.

“How long?” Pysus whispered.

“I don’t know. Maybe a few days, maybe a few weeks, maybe a few years.” Leah spoke with a bit of laughter now, the tears running freely from her eyes. “I guess we just have to wait and see.”

“We’ll be heading to the mountains beginning tomorrow morning,” Jax said. “Our days will be longer as we want to reach them as quickly as we can. That is Leah’s request, and I fully intend to see it through.”

The group nodded in agreement. Then, without another word, Jax turned and left, heading to his wagon, and shutting himself away in isolation. Pysus and Bullswan followed shortly after, followed by Finn and Tillius. Marigold stopped and gave Leah a long hug before she too parted.

“So there’s nothing we can do?” Doratin asked when they were finally alone.

“Nothing in this world, no,” Leah conceded. “But you can understand why I couldn’t tell you yet, right? I myself still can’t really wrap my head around it all...”

Doratin didn’t need to hear more. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly, and wept. She did the same, crying with him as the fire died away, the dark of night creeping over the still camp.

Chapter 18

The next day's ride was somber. Doratin directed the rheyfadons and followed closely behind Jax's wagon, having moved closer for Leah's sake. Should something happen, Jax wanted to be nearby to help. Marigold now rode with them and moved all her equipment, including all the food and medical supplies she owned, into the back. It was cramped back there with all the extra clutter; Doratin often spent the nights outside under the stars because he could not fit lying down in the wagon.

Leah managed alright. Despite the warnings the magician gave, she seemed like she would last for months to come, not days. She woke up in the morning, some semblance of her normal color returning to her skin and enjoyed a meal with all the others. She even took a seat next to Doratin and attempted to enjoy the morning with him. Unfortunately, Doratin had yet to shake the fear from the night before and remained quiet, his eyes unwavering from the wagon he followed. Worse, Leah only managed to remain outside for a few hours before she felt ill and returned to the wagon to sleep away the rest of the day.

Doratin was alone when he noticed Jax part his spot at the front of the wagon. It continued to roll forward, and he came to sit beside Doratin in the second line. He looked at the

half-orc with a sort of half-smile, then looked out over the sands, as if he had never seen them before. They remained in this awkward silence for some time before Jax spoke up.

“I know you care a lot about her,” he said. “I do too. It’s going to be hard on all of us.”

Doratin nodded in agreement.

“Listen, I don’t really know what to say here,” Jax admitted. “But I can tell you this much: you’re going to miss her when she’s gone. We all will. Don’t miss her while she’s here.”

Jax placed a hand on Doratin’s shoulder for comfort, then left. He returned to the lead wagon and continued leading them on, once again leaving Doratin alone with his thoughts.

Doratin thought about those words and felt guilty as he did. He had wasted that morning. Leah tried to sit with him and talk, yet he did nothing but ride on, staring at wagons and ignoring her. Guilt and sadness began to lump together in his stomach, forming knots that began to physically hurt. He felt the tears coming to his eyes, though he pushed them back as best he could.

Memories began to play in his head. He remembered leaving Thalador, with stranger’s hands offering some semblance of comfort despite his fear. He remembered the night he nearly killed them, when Jax came and saved them. He remembered her wistful smile and the flashing colors of fireworks and explosions dancing around her like she was a princess. It was enough to bring a smile to his face, despite the tears still rolling in his eyes.

Doratin suddenly saw his mother. It was her crying face trying to speak to him, but he could not hear her. He had forgotten her voice, and it pained him to realize how time had passed him. He felt numb, until the image began to fade into something new. Suddenly, he heard words, but they did not belong to his mother. Now, he saw Leah, and he could hear her cheerful voice comforting him in dark times.

Maybe he had wasted the morning, but that would be the last moment he missed.

#

The mood amongst the troupe members remained the same that night. While Marigold created a wonderful selection of food, it did little to alleviate the burden everyone felt. Drinks were poured back freely, but there was no joy or banter to accompany it.

Doratin sat at his usual place beside Leah and absently gnawed his food. He spent the day thinking of ways to liven the mood. One idea continued to come into his head repeatedly, but he was unsure if he could follow through with it. He felt ridiculous thinking it and prepared to let it go. He thought he could wait for someone else to make a move or bring up some old story to tell. Yet looking around the circle, he knew there would be no revelation forthcoming.

“Are you alright?” Leah whispered. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’m fine,” Doratin responded. “I think I’m nervous is all.”

“About what?” she asked.

“This...”

Doratin rose and left the circle. Leah watched with sad eyes, assuming he was leaving for the night. He felt slight guilt at parting so abruptly, but he wanted to act fast. He moved to the outside ring of the wagons and only walked a short distance to find what he was looking for.

Pysus and Bullswan were sitting together smoking some strange herb that absolutely wreaked. When they noticed Doratin, then rose in unison, each of them puffing out their chests and drawing a snarl that almost made him laugh. They approached him until the three of them were just steps apart, eyes locked in angry glares.

“The hells you want?” Pysus snickered. “Shouldn’t you be ruining someone else’s day?”

“Believe it or not, I need your help,” Doratin said.

“Oh, this isn’t surprising,” Pysus laughed. “The half-orc needing real men for help is a story as old as time itself.”

“Great, then I’m sure you’ll be more than willing to assist me,” Doratin spoke through clenched teeth, swallowing his pride.

“Fuck off boy,” Pysus spat.

“Please,” Doratin pleaded. “It isn’t even for me, really. It’s for Leah.”

This drew a pause from Pysus. For the briefest moment, his face softened as if he were about to cry. But as quickly as the emotion showed, it disappeared, replaced once again with his hideous snarl. However, Bullswan seemed more malleable to Doratin’s plea. His arms fell from their crossed position and a deep frown spread across his face.

“What’s your plan?”

Doratin had never heard Bullswan speak before. Hearing the deep guttural voice through him off balance for a little bit, shock clear in his expression.

“What’s your plan?” He repeated.

“Well, I was thinking we could liven up dinner...” Doratin recovered from his surprise and laid out his plan for the two men. They were skeptical, sharing glances and shrugs with one another. Still, by the end of his tale, both Pysus and Bullswan seemed ready to play along, albeit one more begrudgingly than the other.

“Damn it kid, fine,” Pysus sighed. “We’ll meet you by the fires.”

Doratin thanked them both and returned to the fire, trying to keep the excitement and nerves fluttering inside him from showing on his face. There was an extra pep in his step as he returned to his seat, one that did not go unnoticed by Leah.

“I’m glad you decided to rejoin us,” she smiled meekly. “I’ll be honest, I thought you were just going to leave us for the night.”

“No, nothing like that,” Doratin grinned, unable to hold his excitement back. “I just had an idea I needed to take care of is all.”

“What are you talking about?”

As if in answer, the soft sound of a flute began to play. It was a slow soothing introduction at first, drawing the attention of all those around the circle. Quizzical glances were shared as the melody picked up speed, flying through a series of uplifting notes. A second sound began to come in with the first before it too grew in volume in speed. Before anyone knew it, the sound of a violin and flute were mixing and unison as Pysus and Bullswan came into view, playing away a lovely little fiddle.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Pysus declared. “May I present you with some dinner entertainment?”

Doratin clapped along enthusiastically with the beat as Pysus and Bullswan continued their tune. He looked around, but no one seemed impressed; they all just seemed confused. Doratin continued to clap as spirits slowly deteriorated, his idea seeming to be bizarre and foolish.

Then Leah joined in.

Doratin turned and saw her smiling, clapping along to the music. Finn recovered from his drunken stupor and began to clap as well, a goofy grin crossing over his face. Before long, everyone joined the merry tune, clapping and hollering. Even Jax wore a sheepish grin as he clapped to the beat.

Leah rose from her spot with a grin and grabbed Doratin. She wrapped her arm around him and took him full circle around the little fire. She stopped at Finn and Tillius and pulled them up as well. Marigold needed no coaxing, leaping into line hooting and hollering louder than everyone else. Jax was hesitant, but even he fell victim to the atmosphere and joined the dancers circling the fire with laughter and merriment.

Their fun lasted for hours. The drinks continued to be shared, dancing feet never sat, and Bullswan and Pysus played endless tunes. Even their usually morose faces wore blazoned smiles. They went on until exhaustion overcame them, at which point the fire was little more than a few glowing coals, and the sky above was nothing but stars.

With laughs, they all parted and went to rest. Doratin and Leah were the last to leave, the former holding much of the other's weight as they made their way to the wagons. While the festivities had left Leah gasping for air and struggling to breathe, it seemed such a little worry in the emotional high they were all riding.

"That was fantastic," Leah giggled to herself. "I hope you have more surprises like that up your sleeves."

"I'll try my best," Doratin promised. "For now, I think we can agree we both need some sleep."

"Oh, I won't argue with you tonight," Leah laughed. "I've spent more energy than I even knew I had left in me."

They said their final good nights and went to sleep. Doratin aided Leah into the wagon before walking over to the sleeping rheyfadons. He lay on his back, letting his head fall to rest on one of their legs, finding this preferable to any other sleeping arrangement in the sand. There was comfort in the animals steady breathing and the sound of their heartbeats.

With a smile and the images of the night still fresh in his mind, Doratin fell into deep sleep. He slept soundly, never waking until the sun heralded the beginning of a new day.

Chapter 19

Following their night of revels came weeks of relative peace. The awaiting tragedy that loomed in their future did not dissipate, some moments laying heavier on the groups than others. But for the most part, the little troupe was able to press the burdensome emotions away and simply enjoy their moments together.

Doratin found those weeks to be the fondest of his time spent with the troupe. There were no shows to perform, so their usual regiment of practice was limited, if at all, during that time. Instead, the days were filled with riding along their travels at a leisurely pace, with the occasional stop to share drinks and banter to break the monotony of their ride. At night, the fires were high as conversation and booze flowed freely. Not all nights were filled with dancing and music, but all nights enjoyed a new show. Sometimes it was stories of Marigold's past life in the Baldarak Mountains; some nights saw Finn and Tillius act out crazed comedies of ancient heroes and kingdoms. Even Jax would join the fun every few nights, talking about past members of the troupe and all the mischievous acts they achieved.

None of this mattered to Doratin. While he enjoyed the banter and the lively energy the group adopted, it was the constant smile on Leah's face that made him so happy. He still had

nights when reality weighed heavy on his heart. On those nights he faked a smile with the group before crying himself to sleep alone with the rheymadons. But most nights now, he felt a strange calm.

Leah had seemed well enough. Her illness still showed in her coughing fits and shallow breaths, and she slept well into the morning beyond her norm. Yet despite all of it, she still walked beside the wagon just to feel the sun each day. She laughed and joked with Doratin during their daily trek. She joined the fires with the rest of them every night, her smile the largest of them all.

During that second week, the camp set up for the night as usual. Doratin had finished his nightly routine, ready to join the troupe around the fire for the evening. However, he was intercepted on his walk over by Leah. She skipped over to him like a young girl in an open field, a huge smile over her face.

“I thought of a brilliant idea for the night!” Leah gleamed as she grabbed Doratin’s arm. “Come on, you’re going to love it!”

Doratin did not question Leah and allowed himself to be whisked away. They immediately turned their back on the campsite and went out into the open desert. Wherever they were going, it seemed they would be a while as Leah carried a small sack of supplies over her back.

She led them across a series of dunes until they crested a final dune that stood over the rest. From the vantage point, they could see for miles around the desert, including the small fire of their campsite now just a tiny dot of light in the distance.

“It’s not a bad view...” Doratin said.

“Oh, shut up,” Leah nudged him. “You know damn well I wouldn’t drag you out here to look at sand. Just be patient and sit down.”

Doratin shrugged and sat down in the sand. He removed his shoes and let his toes curl into the sand as Leah began to unpack her sack. Inside were two slices of a fruit cake, some dried meat, and a bottle of whiskey likely stolen from Marigold’s stash.

“Does Marigold know you took this?” Doratin asked.

“Nope. She never would give me permission, but I’m quite sure she won’t stay mad at me for long,” Leah jested. “Oh, come on, you can laugh. I’m hilarious after all.”

Doratin rolled his eyes and took the whiskey from Leah, as well as one of the pieces of fruit cake. They shared the meal and laughed between one another for a few hours, though Doratin continued to grow impatient. The sun had completely set, and the desert was now dark, a blanket of black sands interrupted by a single orange light that marked their campsite.

“Do they know we’re gone?” Doratin wondered aloud.

“I told Jax not to look for us tonight,” Leah replied. “That was good enough for him.”

“Ok fine, but why are we here?” Doratin groaned. “Seriously, it’s pitch black. Last time we were out this late in the middle of the desert, we nearly died.”

“Gods you’re so dramatic sometimes,” Leah chuckled. “You were just a kid, and it was a minor inconvenience at most. Nothing more than that. Besides, we don’t have to wait much longer. Just look!”

Leah laid back in the sand and pulled Doratin down with her. Doratin allowed her to do so and was met with a spectacular sight. Overhead, the sky was alight with endless numbers of glittering stars. They lit up the night sky with different shades of blue, red, and purple against the black curtain. Occasional streaks would rocket through the sky, leaving behind long tails of light.

Doratin had seen stars before. His first time seeing them was in the campsite as a child when he watched the sparks of the fire drift upwards. He thought that's what all the stars were: embers of flame that floated too high. But looking up at the sky, he was amazed at the multitude of lights he never knew existed.

"This is incredible," he gasped.

"You can't see this when we're in camp. The fire is too bright and blocks out the entire experience," Leah said. "I'll bet you never saw anything like this in Thalador either."

"Never. The sky there is just dark. Maybe we can see the moons, but never anything like this."

Leah smiled and pointed to some of the stars in the sky. She began tracing pictures with her arm, creating portraits and silhouettes of legendary heroes and creatures immortalized in the sky. She told their stories too. Some of them Doratin heard before, remembering them told over warm fires in small rooms. Others were new to him, filled with tragedy and heroism he found great joy in.

"You see that one right there?" Leah pointed to a baby blue star, brighter than all the others and alone in the sky.

"Yes. What is that one?"

"They call that the Little Orc," Leah explained. "One day, it got lost on its way home and became a prisoner of the humans. He fought in gladiator bouts and spent his nights all alone."

"That's horrible," Doratin mumbled.

"It is, but it has a happy ending." Leah began to trace a line through the sky, following six stars that led to a bright red star. "That's the trail of winter. See, one winter, he escaped and forged his own path, eventually making his way into a dragon's lair. The dragon was long gone,

so he claimed it and made it his home. It eventually grew into a strong clan, and he became their first chief.”

“Is it true?” Doratin wondered aloud.

“I have no idea. You’re the only orc I’ve ever met,” Leah shrugged. “Still, it gives me hope. You might be the little dwarf right now, but I know you will find your path out there. We all do eventually.”

“Why now?”

“What?”

“Why now?” Doratin lifted himself to a sitting position to speak with Leah. “We’ve been out in the desert for years and could have come out here anytime to see the stars. Why now are you finally doing this?”

Leah looked away for a moment and closed her eyes, a heavy sigh passing through her lips before she answered. “Truth is, I usually come out here alone. Many nights I come out to see the stars and just think. As long as we’re close to the camp, it’s usually safe. It’s peaceful and looking up at everything gives you perspective you never have anywhere else.

“I always felt like this was my place out here. The night sky was my little secret.” Leah turned to Doratin and gave him a smile. “But if I go, well, the sky will get lonely. I need someone to watch it for me and keep it company. And I couldn’t think of anyone who would be more understanding than you.”

Doratin laid back down and stared up the stars so Leah could not see his tears. They sat in silence, neither one knowing what more they should say. It was only after some time that Leah moved to head back to the camp.

“I think the cold is starting to get to me,” Leah sounded hoarse suddenly. “Maybe it’s time we head back.”

“Sure,” Doratin nodded and rose with her, providing stability as they made their way back to the campsite.

The fire was mere coals and the stars stayed with them, watching over them until the dawn sent them away.

Chapter 20

That night marked the beginning of the end for Leah.

As time rolled on, she began to deteriorate. Her coughing fits became more regular. Her skin paled as she could no longer venture from the wagon. She spent most of the day sleeping, and even when she was awake, did little more than gasp for air and drink water. Food was difficult to eat, and she lost weight rapidly.

All this time, Doratin was never too far away. He no longer went with the others to eat around the campfires, nor did he go out to find wood or supplies. He stayed with the wagon all day, relying on visits from Marigold or Jax to obtain food or water. He kept the rheymadons healthy and did his best to comfort Leah, but there was little he could do except wait.

Despite the worsening symptoms, Doratin was impressed by Leah's resolve. She maintained her optimism throughout the worst of it, smiling and sharing a laugh with Doratin when the two were awake together. They reminisced in their shared memories, the good and the bad, while finding joy when their hearts were heavy with fear.

"I need you to promise me something," Leah gasped one night.

"Of course," Doratin nodded.

“No matter what happens at the end of all this, I want to see the stars. Just one last time, I want to see them all overhead.”

“Of course,” Doratin nodded. “Hell, we could go see the stars right now!”

“No, no that’s ok,” Leah laughed before coughing fits took over. “No, we need to reach the mountains. Nothing is more important than that.”

#

The mountains could not come soon enough. Doratin felt every day grow longer, as if time itself slowed. The sun seemed hotter, and every little thing infuriated the half-orc: Pysus’s glares and scowls; the dryness in the back of his throat; the endless yellow sands. The only time he was not irritable were the few moments he spent in the wagon when irritation was replaced by an overwhelming helplessness.

Even the site of the mountains finally rising over the horizon did little to soothe the anxiety flowing in Doratin’s veins. He did not see a destination and salvation, but an end. He knew that this was the last time he would come to these mountains with Leah.

“How ye holding out ‘ere?” Marigold asked as she climbed up to sit beside Doratin.

“Fine,” he lied.

“Doratin, ain’t no need fer the brave face and-”

“I said I’m fine,” he snapped. “Shouldn’t be with Leah in the wagon?”

“Alright lad, don’t get snippy wit me, ya hear?” Marigold flicked the side of Doratin’s ear. “You ain’t the only one facing the abyss now are ya? No, ya certainly aren’t!”

“I know,” Doratin sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Aye, as ye should be!” Marigold huffed and sat in silence for a while before continuing. “Leah is sleeping at the moment. That’s why I ventured out ta see ya. I’m not thinking we have much time left wit our friend.”

“We’ve been saying that for a while, but she’s still kicking around.”

“Aye, true enough. But it’s different now. I don’t know how te say it exactly, but it feels like te end is coming,” Marigold wiped her eyes as she spoke. “Whatever big plans you ‘ave for her, tonight is te time ta do it. I don’t know she’ll make it to te mountains after all.”

“She’ll make it to the mountains, Marigold. No doubt she’ll make it.”

“Hoping is good lad, but don’t tarry too long on that precipice.” Marigold sniffled and jumped back down, returning to the wagon with Leah.

Doratin rode the rest of the day alone in silence, all the way up until the wagons stopped to start camp for the night. He took a moment to himself then, watching the sun finish its decent over the mountains before finally making his move.

He rushed about his usual routine before entering the wagon. Leah was awake, a rarity now. Marigold was feeding her some form of soup, or at least attempting to. Leah only managed small mouthfuls before coughs splatted most of the liquid onto the wagon floor. She looked pale, and her skin seemed stretched over her face. Her eyes had dark black bags under them, yet she still managed the briefest of smiles at Doratin.

“I was wondering when you’d come in,” Leah wheezed. “It’s a little late for you, isn’t it?”

“I had to wait,” Doratin said. “We’re going out to see the stars tonight.”

Leah was silent for a moment as moisture gathered in her eyes. “Of course, the stars. It has been a while since I’ve seen them, hasn’t it?”

“Too long,” he nodded. “We should really think about doing it more often.”

“I’m sure we’ll get plenty of chances in the future,” Leah chuckled. “But I guess we are dwelling too much on that aren’t we?”

Doratin nodded and walked over to where Leah laid. As he approached, Marigold grabbed his arm, squeezing tightly as she gave him a sad smile. Then she left the wagon, leaving the two of them alone.

“Can you walk?” Doratin asked.

“Not even if I wanted to,” Leah sighed. “I’m honest, I can’t really feel much of anything right now. I doubt I could move.”

“No worries.” Doratin crouched down and lifted Leah easily with two hands. He grew strong over the years, but she weighed nothing in his arms.

She placed her head against his chest and seemed to be falling asleep as they parted the wagon. He scanned the horizon searching for a dune that rose above the rest. Sure enough, there was one a short way off shrouded in darkness like a silent shadow vigilant over the rest of the desert.

He trudged on over the desert sands, passing between valleys of dunes, until he reached the base of his destination. It towered above higher than he anticipated, the sides steep and difficult to walk even without the extra burden of Leah in his arms.

Undeterred, Doratin began the climb. He kept both arms wrapped tightly around Leah and marched upward. He was careful with each step, finding solid ground despite the sliding sands before continuing upwards. There was a slight breeze in the air pulling against his clothes and growing stronger the higher they went. Leah shivered and nuzzled deeper into Doratin’s arms against the cold but never complained as they ascended.

After nearly an hour pushing against the sands, the two crested the top, coming onto a large landing big enough for an entire wagon to fit on. Doratin laid down in the sands and sat beside her. Staring out over the desert, the sky was clear. They could make out the small firelight of the camp in the distance. A warm breeze passed unencumbered, bringing shivers over Leah.

Overhead, the sky was perfectly clear. The stars shown with a bright intensity, casting the world in a soft glow of light. The moons were absent from the sky tonight; the stars were center stage against the black curtain.

“Leah,” Doratin placed a hand against her and shook gently, forcing her to awaken.

“Leah, we’ve made it. We’re here.”

Leah’s eyes flickered open, and she looked at Doratin. She turned to where he was pointing, and a soft smile spread across her face.

“They’re beautiful, Doratin,” Leah whispered. “I’ll never get over such a sight.”

“There’s no moon tonight either,” Doratin croaked. “Look, you can see all the old heroes. Anduin and the dragon. There’s the Little Orc there, proud as ever. And then there’s-”

“I know, Doratin, I know,” Leah wheezed. “I’m really going to miss them.”

“No, don’t say that. They’re not going anywhere. You’ll see them all the time, every night with me. We can look up at the stars and see it all!”

“We’ll see them all,” Leah sighed, her eyes beginning to close. “They’re forever in my mind, just like you.”

Doratin looked over at Leah and lay down close to her, grabbing her hand. It felt icy cold to the touch, despite the warmth of the desert night. Still, it grabbed a hold of his and squeezed. She turned and looked at him and smiled.

“Thank you, Doratin,” she whispered. “I really do love the stars. You’ve made this something special to say the least.”

“Of course, of course,” Doratin smiled. “I made a promise after all.”

“Don’t forget about them,” Leah whispered. “Don’t forget to see them.”

“I won’t forget,” Doratin nodded, tears running freely. “I’ll never forget them.”

Leah smiled and turned her head to look up at the stars one last time. She closed her eyes, the smile still on her face, and let sleep overcome her. Doratin watched her until the hand holding his lost its strength, the fingers no longer holding on to his.

“Leah?” Doratin whispered.

He reached over and nudged her gently, but there was no reaction. No breath. No response.

The stars were the only witness to the cries of the half-orc.

Chapter 21

Streaks of orange marked the early break of dawn. The camp's fire was a pile of coals long since cooled during the night. The wagons were still, the troupe not yet stirred for the morning.

Doratin moved in a daze, his feet dragging across the sand. His arms ached, though Leah was easy enough to carry. He held her delicately, balancing her head against his shoulders. His chest ached, a pain he wished never returned.

He did not stop at his own wagon, continuing to the furthest one at the end of the camp. Jax would be inside resting. He needed to be the first to know what transpired during the night.

With little choice, Doratin lay Leah down in the sands. He made sure to lay her flat on her back, wiping the hair from her face as he did. Soft teardrops fell onto her wrinkled clothes and pale skin. He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her forehead, her skin cold against his lips. With a heavy heart, he forced his body towards the wagon, knocking meekly against the back doors.

A brief stir came from within, Jax responding with great haste. The doors flew open in an instant. He had slept poorly, if he slept at all, with dark bags and thin lines marking the anxious

waiting that plagued them all. He regarded the half-orc before allowing his eyes to wander to the corpse laying in the sand. He hung his head and stepped out into the desert.

“When?”

“Last night,” Doratin croaked. “I couldn’t get myself to come down until now. I’m sorry...”

Soundless tears overcame the half-orc. Jax echoed the half-orc’s emotion and grasped him a strong hug.

“I miss her too.” Jax whispered.

Eventually, the two released their grip and the man walked over to the body. He knelt beside his friend, his hands resting softly against her cheek. A slight smile crossed his lips, though the tears never waned.

“She was proud of you, you know,” Jax said. “She always told me how you were the best in the group, a real man through and through.”

Jax rose to stand before the half-orc, then stared out over the desert. They were surrounded by endless yellow sands, the mountains still a day’s ride away in the west.

“We should rouse everyone and head for the mountains,” Doratin said. “Leah wanted to be there when it ended. We have to see that through.”

“I agree,” Jax sighed. “I just don’t think you should come along with us.”

“What?” Doratin was stunned.

“You need to go now, Doratin,” Jax said. “You’ve been with us for a long time and done a lot for us. But the troupe is falling apart; it has since you joined. I’m afraid it’s time we all went our separate ways.”

“I’m not going, not at least until we reach the mountains,” Doratin argued. “Please, you can’t just cast me out.”

“I’m sorry, but without Leah why stay?” Jax turned to Doratin. “Her love was the reason you were here. Now that that’s gone, so is your reason to be with us. We’re not your family, Doratin. You need to go find that on your own.”

Doratin stood in somber silence. He wished to argue, to lash out and pummel Jax. But looking in the man’s eyes, Doratin knew Jax was right. He did not enjoy casting the half-orc out, yet there was little choice. Leah was the half-orc’s home, not the troupe.

“I’ll let you take the final wagon if you’d like,” Jax sighed. “But after that, there’s little help I can provide. I’m sorry it ended like this, but you can understand it’s best for us all.”

Doratin silently walked toward Leah and bent down, saying one last goodbye. He kissed her softly on the forehead, staring through blurred vision over her laying corpse. With great pain, he managed to rise and turn, walking away from it all.

Doratin stopped at none of the other wagons, walking straight to the end. He went through the motions, awakening the rheymadons and attaching them to the wagon. They nuzzled against him as he gave them each comforting rubs on their heads, before he prepared to venture out. He turned to climb up front, but was stopped by a dwarf woman staring back him with tear filled eyes.

“I’m so sorry, lad,” Marigold sniffled. “She was a great friend to us all.”

Doratin smiled softly and walked towards the little dwarf. He easily lifted her in his arms and hugged her tight. She squeezed him tightly, her arms barely able to wrap around his neck before he set her back down in the sands.

“I’ll miss you too, Marigold,” Doratin smiled as he climbed onto the wagon. “Perhaps we may see each other again yet.”

“Aye, just maybe,” Marigold smiled and waved a final goodbye.

The wagon lurched into motion as the rheyamadons were urged forward. The wagon rolled slow and steadily over the yellow sands, leaving the camp and all its occupants a distant memory as they faded from view.

#

Doratin directed the wagon north, using the mountains to the east as his guide. The sun ascended to its apex, the heat of the noon desert sweltering around the half-orc. Ribbons of heat were seen radiating from the sands. He could no longer tell if his face were wet from tears or sweat.

As the wagon continued, a soft sound of hooves began to approach. At first, he thought it a trick of the light, but as they drew closer, there was no mistaking it. This far into the desert, only bandits would be found riding alone. There were at least two riders Doratin could make out, placing him on high alert. There were a few knives and daggers that Leah once kept with the wagon, but in the dismal state of his departure, Doratin failed to prepare any weapons at his seat.

Rather than spur the rheyamadons forward, he slowed them slightly. He hoped to lure his assailants into a false sense of confidence, hoping that may give him time to react should they attempt to rob him.

The two riders split as they approached the wagon. The pounding hooves were loudest on the left, a greater sense of urgency in the rider’s pace. Doratin released the rheyamadon’s reins and crouched low, inching towards the edge of the wagon. As soon as the horse came into view, Doratin leapt.

The rider had an arrow notched in his bow prepared for the half-orc. Shocked at the sudden attack, his reflex released the arrow. It sank into Doratin's unarmored side as both half-orc and rider collided, tumbling in a heap in the sand. They rolled in a tangle of bodies before they managed to release themselves.

Doratin rose, a hand at his side checking the damage. He snapped the arrow, his face a deep snarl as he faced his opponent, until he realized who he now faced.

Pysus stood before Doratin, two swords drawn as he stared the half-orc down.

"Why?" Doratin asked.

"You son of a bitch, you killed her!" Pysus shrieked. "We were all fine, until you brought your bastard blood into our family! She was beautiful, and perfect, and you took from me! And now she's gone forever!"

"Fuck you," Doratin spat.

Enraged, Pysus ran screaming at the half-orc. Doratin braced himself gripping the broken arrow shaft tightly in his hand. He allowed Pysus to come close, then waited for the swords to start swinging. He began to run through the moves Finn and Tillius taught him, easily dodging and side-stepping the swinging blades. Pysus grew desperate, his anger driving his strikes wild until he lost balance.

Without hesitation, Doratin struck. He took the splintered arrow and drove it deep into Pysus's back, throwing the human's body past. The shaft broke from Doratin's hand, lodged deep in the stumbling man's back. Swords fell from his hands as a painful howl broke through his lips.

Doratin prepared to finish the job when the second rider came barreling down on him. The half-orc barely managed to dodge, moving into a roll just inches from the giant man's club.

Pysus scrambled for his swords as the second rider made for another pass at Doratin. Doratin lept at Pysus, knocking him down and grappling with the man in the sands. With a mighty kick, he sent the man rolling a few feet off, then raced to grab one of the fallen swords.

The second rider charged again, but Doratin did not budge. He faced them head on, leaping into the horse as it charged. The legs pummeled against him, dazing him briefly, but the horse took the worse blow. Legs buckled as the horse was sent toppling over, the massive rider thrown clean from the saddle.

With no time to spare and adrenaline rushing, Doratin shook the haze from his vision and charged at the downed rider. He was unarmed and soon found himself overpowered in a barrage of blows. Doratin lashed out, fists flying in rapid succession as they battered the man's head until blood began to pool from his cracked lip and broken nose.

The man kicked out, sending Doratin back into the sand. The rider grabbed for his club and turned to swing at Doratin. Before the swing had begun, it was cut short, as a sword stabbed through the man's back and out his chest.

"You shouldn't have come, Bullswan," Doratin whispered to the man.

Doratin kicked Bullswan off the bloodied blade and went to finish Pysus.

Pysus was scrambling, his body bruised and sore, covered in layers of sweat and sand. His eyes were mad, like that of a beast, as he grabbed his discarded sword. He rushed at Doratin, his blade flailing about in desperation. He screamed as he unleashed a fury of swipes, but each one was knocked aside.

"God damn orcs!" Pysus screamed. "I knew you'd do this! You'll kill us all! You filthy, rotten, orc!"

At this, Doratin heard enough. He channeled his cold anger and knocked Pysus's blade from his grasp with a clean strike. He wasted little time and cut downwards, lodging the blade into Pysus's shoulder, the strength of the blow carrying the blade deep into his ribs. Pysus tried to scream, but his words were cut short by blood.

"She was never yours," Doratin said. "Never."

Doratin released the blade and turned his back on the carnage behind him. He turned his attention to the fallen horse and aided the horse to its feet, surprisingly uninjured from their earlier collision. The second horse ran off in the battle while his rheyfadons continued to carry the wagon on a great distant ahead.

Doratin mounted the horse, pleased at the comfort of the saddle. Bullswan was a big man; his frame matched the half-orcs well. Fortuitously, there was a bedroll, provisions, a hunting knife, and provisions stored in the horse's saddle. Bullswan would no longer have need of such tools, and Doratin was happy to claim them for himself.

He spurred the horse forward and easily caught up to the wagon. Tying the horse securely to the wagon, he resumed his trek, the final chapter of his time in the desert drawn to a close.

Chapter 22

Doratin's journey brought him north. After facing off with Pysus and Bullswan, the rest of the trek passed without incident. He lit fires every night to ward off predators and kept the wagon moving along during the day. He kept the mountains on his left as before, using them as an anchor in the otherwise indistinguishable sands.

After the first week, the sun's heat waned slightly. Above, normally perfectly clear skies were spotted with small wisps of white that grew larger the further he travelled. The sands shifted less, the smallest inkling of grass and flowers becoming more common. Even the mountains, red and yellow in the distance, began to turn green and grey with bits of white painting the peaks.

After the second week, the desert seemed to disappear behind him. The ground was covered in small blades of fine grass growing from much softer earth. He saw small bushes lining the mountains, the tops now covered in snowfall. Real clouds of white and occasionally grey became common overhead.

Soon after, Doratin experienced rain for the first time. It started slow, little bits of water puzzling him as they dropped against his skin. It took some time for him to realize the water fell

from the cloud overhead that seemed to blanket the usual blue sky. Shortly after those first few drops, many more came pouring down, soaking through his clothes. It was a marvelous feeling and let out a laugh at the wonder of it all. The horses seemed perturbed by the rain, but the reymadon's shared in Doratin's glee, enjoying the free bath nature provided them.

However, far over the horizon, flashes of purple appeared. They were unidentifiable from so great a distance, but Doratin did not trust them, whether magic or otherwise. As the days went forward, he was sure to proceed with caution.

#

While the grass grew taller and thicker, and the rain fell more frequently, civilization was sure to follow.

The sands had long since been forgotten when Doratin came across the first village. A small monastery of stone stood at its center, with several little huts surrounding the area. At first, he thought to greet them. His supplies were running low after so many weeks on the road, and it would do his animals good to rest in a proper stable. He figured he may even be able to trade the horses for some food or water, maybe even tell them one of the stories Finn or Marigold used to tell, if he could remember it right...

He turned his thoughts elsewhere before they could dwell on the idea. Jax made it clear it was time for Doratin to move on; there was no point letting memories of camp come to mind now. He instead thought of the villagers and how best to approach them. A lone traveler in a wagon would not be intimidating and should find ease making friends, at least temporarily.

He directed the wagon further, trying his best to ease his breathing and soften his face. He had not spoken to anyone outside of their troupe in many years, but he was confident he could manage well enough on his own.

He happened upon a farmer first. The farmer was a short, middle-aged man dressed up in simple trousers and a shirt. He carried a shovel and bucket as he walked, whistling a simple little tune. He turned when he heard the creaking sound of a wagon, his eyes intrigued at the sight of the reymadons. Curious, the man stopped and waited for the wagon, until he saw its driver.

Doratin locked eyes with the man and waved, trying his best to share a smile. Yet the farmer did not wave back. He dropped the bucket and shovel and turned into a run, dashing off the dirt road and into the grass on his way back to the village.

Doratin pulled the wagon to a stop and watched the man run. The man never looked back, head low as he bobbed in weave awkwardly onward until he disappeared into one of the village huts. Doratin watched the man, then looked at the other huts. His heart sank as he looked down at his hands. They were normal hands, but they were covered in thick grey skin. He smiled to himself and placed a finger in his mouth. The tusks nearly reached his nose, his other teeth pointed like an orc's.

He pulled hard on the reins and turned the wagon east, leaving the mountains and village far behind.

#

Villages were still dispersed randomly throughout the plains, but the few Doratin came across he gave wide births. While still rare, he began to see travelers during his journey, a mix of magic people, church goers, merchants, soldiers, and explorers. He often took his wagon off the road, eventually deciding to avoid roads all together.

Eventually, the sky overhead began to darken as rainclouds moved in from the east. However, Doratin immediately noticed something was off. The wind did not move as normal. It came rushing around him, harsh and unwelcoming, rocking the wagon as it crashed against its

sides. The rain came shortly after, a slow drip changing seemingly instantly into torrential downpours. The wind carried the falling water sideways, creating drops that stung Doratin's body as it smashed against his flesh. The horse whinnied in protest, the reymadons even groaning against the elements.

Then lightning struck.

Doratin felt the air grow warm around him. The hairs on his skin were set on edge and a sinking feeling began to fill his gut. Then, without warning, a bolt of purple blasted the ground just inches from the wagon. The explosion knocked him from his seat, the horses freed in the chaos running wild out into the plains.

Stunned, Doratin began to get to his feet when a second bolt erupted, the force of the blast once again stunning the half-orc. Desperate and dazed, he attempted to run back to the wagon. The elements blinded him as he stumbled through the thick grass that seemed to grab at his ankles, yet by some miracle, he managed to get hold of the wagon.

Hurriedly, he whipped open the back doors and hoisted his frame inside. He pulled the doors shut as another blast rocked the wagon, throwing debris everywhere inside as it shook. The pattering rain filled the interior with a pounding cacophony as echoes of thunder boomed outside. Wind forced water through the small window slits, searching furiously for the half-orc inside.

Cold and shivering, Doratin crawled to the corner, praying to some unknown god that he might survive the storm.

#

The storm lasted nearly an entire week.

Doratin had a vague sense of time as the sun and moon were completely blocked by the dark clouds blanketing the sky. Daylight provided little light in the wagon while night shrouded it in complete blackness. He moved little and only when necessary. He dared not cook or eat more than the thin rations within arm's reach. He used one bowl to gather some of the rainwater to drink, another bowl used to relieve himself. The wagon quickly reeked of piss, sweat, and damp half-orc.

On the sixth day, the rains slowed. While they did not stop entirely, the lightning seemed to have disappeared for hours.

Hesitantly, Doratin pushed open the doors and dared step outside. The rain no longer stung as it fell, and the wind no longer assaulted the wagon. However, the damage had been done. The wheels were splintered, if not broken off entirely. The tiling on the roof was virtually nonexistent and the reins that once held the reymadons were completely worn through. It was well beyond any amount of repair Doratin had the knowledge to complete.

Scanning his surroundings, he saw neither of the two horses. They had run off in the storm and disappeared. However, the reymadons seemed perfectly fine, each of them looking at Doratin with sheepish eyes, roused from their naps.

With a sigh of relief, he returned to the wagon and began scouring for items he could salvage. He left behind many of the luxurious items, like the extra clothes, bedrolls, blankets, silverware, and the like. He took instead a few knives, fishing line, and rations that required little cooking. He armed himself with a sword, bow, and managed to create a makeshift quiver for the handful of arrows he still possessed.

Satisfied, he went to the reymadons. Their harnesses were mostly destroyed, their reins practically useless. Instead, Doratin used spare cloth the wagon possessed and wound it together

to form sort of leads juts big enough to fit around each of the creatures' necks. He did not tie them tight, for he knew they would follow him easily enough once they understood.

With reymadons in tow, Doratin set out deeper into the plains. However, he scanned the horizon with greater vigilance.

Should another storm come before he found shelter, he knew his journey would end.

Chapter 23

Not three days later, a storm was threatening on the horizon. The black clouds were swirling together, sparks of purple fluttering along the edges. It seemingly appeared out of nowhere. One second, the sky was clear, the next darkness.

The storm formed some distance off, yet the wind already whipped around the half-orc. Doratin cursed to himself and urged the reymadons move with greater haste. Despite his efforts, he failed to find any shelter. The land around him was flat, stretching for miles seemingly without end. While the grass grew longer in spots, there failed to be any trees, hills, valleys, or anything else that could be used for shelter. He was beginning to regret leaving the wagon behind. Despite the damages, it may have been his only choice for survival.

Desperate, Doratin grabbed a hold of the reymadon's makeshift reins and pulled them south- or what he believed was south- in one last effort to find shelter. He pushed them onward through grass that stood several feet above his head. He no longer saw where they were going, but anywhere would be better than the open plains. Behind him, the reymadons did not protest, keeping perfect stride with the half-orc as they continued their forward march.

The storm continued to edge closer, the wind's intensity growing. The grass bent under the onslaught and blinded Doratin as he ran. Soon after, the rain began to fall. The first drops were quickly followed by the torrential downpour soaking him to the bone. Grass began to stick to his body as water stung his eyes, but still he pressed on.

The crack of lightning broke Doratin's spirits. The entire world turned dark under the clouds as they overcame him. Then everything became purple as the first flash of lightning shot forth. The crack of thunder echoed through the air, momentarily blocking out the sound of the pounding rains. Before the ringing in Doratin's ears stopped, another bolt shot into the plains even closer than the last one.

While he no longer believed he would survive, he kept his legs moving, leading the reymadons forward. However, the third bolt of lightning struck just a few feet away. The purple energy arched down, the explosion hurling the half-orc forward. He was air born and crashed through the blades of grass, preparing himself for impact.

Only he did not hit the ground.

As Doratin flew, he watched the ground suddenly drop. The untamed grass ended, replaced with pebbles and dirt on a downward slope. A few boulders grew a dark red moss, but otherwise there was no life present. He fell forward and eventually slammed into the rocks. He bounced before eventually rolling to a painful halt.

Pain flooded his brains as new scrapes and bruises bled freely along his body. He spat out dirt and pushed himself up, taking in the strange surroundings.

He had been blasted into what appeared to be a massive bowl. All around him, the sides sloped up back to the untamed grass of the plains he was accustomed too. Where the plains met the edge was a sharp cutoff where all wildlife stopped growing. The bowl was nothing but rock

and dirt, with the strange red moss growing on some of the larger boulders. There were a few massive rocks, black like obsidian, lining the edges. A few stood straight up with jagged peaks eroded to smooth edges over centuries of rainfall. Others littered the ground in pieces, toppled over and broken debris.

One such pile of debris peaked Doratin's interest. A few of the black stones had created a sort of tunnel in the bowl. Water from the rain pooled at one end and ran freely through the fallen boulders, cutting a smooth pathway between. The hole was no cavern, but it appeared large enough for an orc.

Hope filled Doratin again, and he scrambled to his feet. The rain had not stop and the lightning continued to blast, flashes of purple appearing along the edges with increasing frequency. The reymadons were nowhere to be seen, but he could look for them another time.

As quick as his legs allowed, he hobbled his way to the tunnel of rocks. The crack of thunder filled his ears, the rain and winds continuing to resist his every move, as if the storm itself were attempting to force him to his knees. He roared aloud and pressed onward, defying the elements that burdened him.

With a last exasperated effort, he made it to the formation of rocks. It was smaller than it initially appeared, but he still managed to crawl into the space. Inside, the rain echoed above and the flooding through covered his legs, but he was away from the worst of it. He was sheltered from the wind and pounding rain.

With a sigh of relief, Doratin curled up and prepared to wait out the storm.

#

Shuffling feet startled Doratin from sleep.

He sat still and listened. He discerned there were more than two sets of feet, maybe four, currently moving around the rocks under which he lay. They seemed to be moving in a circle, encompassing the half-orc. He shifted his body slightly, careful not to make too much noise, as he watched for the passing of the feet.

He was relieved when he saw a scaly foot pass through his field of vision.

Slowly, he began to move his body, stretching his limbs. His body ached and a few scabs began to reopen as he shifted about. He shimmied out back through the gap and out into the strange bowl. The ground was still wet from the rain, though there were no clouds in sight, and slipped several feet outside before stopping.

The reymadons stopped their circling and looked over him with their big eyes. He managed to reach a sitting position, at which point both creatures stepped over and laid beside him. He smiled as he scratched at their necks and began to properly examine his surroundings.

The bowl dropped much further than he originally thought. The walls were steep at the very edge, though they appeared manageable for someone of his ability to climb over. The strange red moss looked almost like puddles and was thickest at the very center of the strange crater. The obsidian stones looked like they were deliberately placed around the edges in ancient times, though most of them now lay scattered in pieces like the ones he hid under. Otherwise, the crater consisted of normal looking boulders, pebbles, and dirt.

Slowly, Doratin rose to his feet, leaving his belongings on the ground. He walked the short distance to the obsidian rocks and examined them further. They were laying on top of each other, somehow balancing despite the storm they just endured. He believed he could move the rocks. An idea formed in his mind.

Bracing himself, he pushed against the obsidian stone. The stone was much lighter than he originally thought. His powerful shove sent it flying off the other side, rolling a few feet in a cloud of dirt before finally stopping. Despite its weight, the stone appeared undamaged, the other rocks barely leaving a scratch.

Doratin set to work around the space. He found two large boulders relatively close together and began to push them together. He found more boulders higher up and rolled them down the slope to meet with the others. He grabbed every rock he could find of decent size and began setting them in place, like a puzzle, as he built up walls. Finally, he grabbed manageable pieces of the obsidian and hoisted them on top, forming a roof to his new shelter.

The sun fell and the moons were high overhead by the time Doratin completed his work. While it was nothing glamorous, his makeshift hut stood tall enough for him to walk through. It was larger than the hovel he lived in all those years prior, though this held boasted neither a door nor a window. Its entrance was like that of a cave: just a large open hole. Still, the half-orc looked over his work with pride, a slight smile crossing his face.

Work done, he looked up at the moons above, their light enough to illuminate the night. While the hour was late, he decided to explore. He ventured out of the crater, back into the plains, continuing in the direction he believed to be south.

The grass swallowed him as he stepped back into the wild. The night was peaceful, the grass wavering only slightly to the calm breeze under clear skies. It was surreal to Doratin to find such a peaceful place could be so harsh. He almost enjoyed himself as he moved through the plains. He allowed his thoughts to wonder and reveled in the calm of the night.

A sound pulled him from his day dream. It was quiet, but Doratin thought he recognized the sounds. He crept forward until he heard the sound clearly: the sound of running water.

He rushed forward and broke through the grass onto the bank of a small river. The water was dark, glittering under the light of the moon.

Doratin went to the edge of the river and bent over, splashing it over his face. The water was cool and refreshing. It was pure in his hands as he cupped it to his lips. He drank greedily, enjoying water that did not taste like dust or sand for the first time in his life.

He let himself fall back and stared up at the sky. There were no fires or magic lights to block out the sky. The stars were out in full, a spectacle of colors sparkling overhead. Leah would have loved it here.

“Don’t worry,” Doratin whispered. “I’ll make sure they don’t get lonely. I promise.”

Part III

Beginning in 463 of the Fourth Age

Chapter 24

Doratin lounged on the stream's bed, humming softly to himself. The sky above showed no signs of clouds, the air still and cool around him. A fishing rod was plunged into the ground, the line out in the water bobbing against the calm current.

The half-orc lay bare-chested, his shirt and armor discarded in a heap by his side. His sword was readied, though it had been nearly three months since he last had to sue it. The bandits learned to stay out of his part of the plains, leaving him to enjoy his days under the sun.

As he sat humming, the line grew taut. He reacted quickly, grabbing hold of the line, and pulling the fish in. It was easy for the half-orc, for no fish in this little stream offered much resistance. He gave one last pull and hoisted the little thing out of the water. It was not much bigger than his hand, silver scales sparkling as it dangled about. However, Doratin was pleased with his catch. Of all the fish that he caught, the silver ones always tasted best.

He carefully went about removing the hook, using some tools he acquired from a wrecked caravan years ago. The metal was rusted, but it still did the job. He successfully freed the fish from the hook and tossed the animal into a small sack, adding it to three others he

recently acquired. He took the rod from the ground and recast the line, then retook his seat, playing with the grass as the day rolled on.

Eventually the sun began to dip behind the western horizon. Doratin put his clothes back on and set in place his armor which consisted of loose pieces of chainmail and plate he took from various bandits of similar size. He threw his satchel over his shoulder and removed the rod from the ground.

He made his way back through the high grass following a small walking path he wore into the ground over the years. It was a short walk back to the crater which had evolved over the years. Two mound of rocks stood at the edge, pyres for the two reymadons since passed. Doratin paused and commenced his daily ritual, placing a hand on each pyre and whispering a little prayer before continuing down to the crater's center.

Once a simple square of rocks, Doratin's hovel grew over the years to encompass most of the crater's center. He gathered rocks, pieces of abandoned wagons, and other building supplies over time to expand his little home. The obsidian rock was stronger than any other man-made or natural substances he encountered and made excellent tools.

The first room of his home was the largest. A cave-like opening showed a place inside with rocks for furniture and a large fire pit in the center. The roof was completely sealed; smoke trickled out the massive cavern entrance. It allowed him to craft fires and cook meals even during the worst storms.

Three rooms were built onto the backside. One was the original structure Doratin made, now used for storing weapons and supplies he found from stray caravans and bandits. Next to that, the middle room was completely empty. It was once made for the reymadons, but they

never used it. The final room was filled with the various cloth and homey supplies he acquired, including an old, tattered bedroll he slept on every night.

Doratin removed his armor once inside, laying his sword against the wall. He had never had trouble in the crater. For some reason, no traveler ever ventured through the crater, even by mistake. He set about starting a fire, then tended to the fish.

All together he managed to catch five fish, enough to get him through the next day or two, depending on how sparingly he ate them. He went about removing the scales and pulling apart the bones, then through the meat onto a piece of plate armor. This hung on a piece of metal wire that hung over the fire, the perfect makeshift pan for cooking.

The fish began to sizzle against the metal and Doratin sat on his usual rock. He lifted his waterskin and enjoyed a few sips as he watched the fish cook. When it made enough progress, he took an old knife that once belonged to Leah and flipped the fish. Some of the pieces flaked and stuck to the pan, but most of the meat turned well enough. He began humming again as the fish finished.

Satisfied, he removed the meet and placed it in a bowl. He enjoyed a few pieces he skewered with his knife before having his fill. He forgot to pace himself, eating nearly half his catch in one sitting. He would be forced to go out again sooner than he liked.

Before the day ended, he decided to go practice his shooting. Outside his home, he created dummies from dried blades of grass wrapped tightly around one another. The sky above shown with the moons as night fell over the plains. However, his orc eyes could see even without the moons to aid him.

He drew back his bow and fired an arrow, then fired two arrows, then fired one more. He repeated this cycle from different spots around the crater, taking different angles and grips as he loosed one shot after another into the dummies. He never missed one.

When he exhausted his supply of arrows, he dropped the empty quiver and climbed his makeshift home. He lay back atop the roof and gazed up at the open sky where the stars were out in full. He watched the stars until the sun began to shine on the horizon, and a new day began.

#

It was a summer day, though the seasons varied little on the plains, with a harsh wind blowing from the east. The sky remained clear, but a storm would arrive before the day finished.

Doratin went to the stream, bathing in the cool waters. There was enough fish and herbs from past foraging to last him at least a week of storms. He took the time to clean himself, for he found his stench grew exponentially when he was trapped in his home.

He was floating on his back, slowly drifting along with the current, when he heard a clatter some distance off. The sound was faint, barely audible, but it was there all the same. Doratin let his feet touch the river's bottom and stood still, listening for the sound again. Sure enough, another clatter came, followed by a low rumbling.

He swam quietly to the edge of the stream and gathered his things. He strapped his armor on tightly, loosened his sword, and grabbed his bow. He readied an arrow and began to wade through the grass towards the sounds.

As he came closer, the clattering sound ended abruptly. Doratin froze as a moment of silence hung over the plains.

Suddenly, a burst of orange appeared over the grass. A plume of black smoke rose high overhead as the sound of metal boots and jingling armor sounded. Screams began to fill the air, followed by the clang of metal on metal.

Doratin cursed inward and slowly began to back away from the sounds. However, he froze and ducked low when a rustling of grass came from his right. He whipped around and aimed his bow when a human stormed from the grass. The man was a bandit, dressed in a random assortment of armor, some too large, some too small, gathered from various travelers and warriors. The man froze for a moment when he saw Doratin, then lowered his spear.

“Oi fellas! We’ve got one that’s-”

The man’s voice cut-off as Doratin’s arrow pierced his neck. The man collapsed with his weapon underneath. The metal made more sound than Doratin liked as another set of footsteps sounded from his rear. He dropped the bow and whipped around with his sword as another bandit burst from the plains.

The man said nothing and charged at the half-orc. Doratin stepped aside easily enough and let the man’s momentum carry him forward. In one quick movement, he cut at the man’s exposed heels, rendering him immobile as he crashed into the ground. The half-orc made sure to finish the job quickly.

Doratin reclaimed his bow and ducked down low, but he heard no further footsteps nearby. The battle continued to rage on a short way off. While the sound of weapons clashing against weapons continued, less screams were audible. Now would be the perfect opportunity to sneak away back to his crater before any other trouble befell him. He could always return after the storm to loot what valuables may have survived.

Yet as much as he wished to step away, curiosity began to draw him forward. He fought bandits regularly, often taking their weapons and gear to replace his own. He found the wreckage of the occasional caravan filled with goods and took what he needed. He paid little mind to the comings and goings around him so long as they let him be. But despite his years out here, he had never actually witnessed the bandits raiding people.

Doratin proceeded with the utmost caution, despite his better judgement, toward the sounds of the battle. As he drew closer, he began to make out shapes through the tall grass. There was the unmistakable silver and grey of bandit's armor roaming about, but there was another color that puzzled him.

Slowly, he crept to the edge of the grass where it opened into a small clearing. Two carriages lay in wreckage at the center, with ferocious flames consuming the wood. A group of bandits, maybe ten all together, were surrounding the survivors. There were more bodies of woman and children laying in the clearing than there were people left to defend the wreckage. Yet seeing the survivors made Doratin's heart skip a beat in shock.

These were no humans, nor elves, nor any other race Doratin had seen before.

They were a traveling group of orcs.

Chapter 28

Since departing Thalandor as a child, he had never seen an orc. The orcs there were typically grey skinned, as he was, with small tusks and dark hair. Many of those orcs dressed as the others did and tried to remain inconspicuous.

These orcs were different. Their skin appeared in various shades of greens and reds. Their hair was as diverse as their skin – black, grey, purple, silver – styled in long braids or ponytails that fell past their shoulders. Many of the fallen and screaming wore regular clothing. Those who still stood armed themselves with leather armor and vicious looking melee weapons.

One woman seemed to be leading them, with an extra vest of chain mail, wielding two long-swords as aptly as one would wield two daggers. She managed her own, striking down bandit after bandit that assaulted her. Doratin noted she received many cuts and bruises of her own, though none as horrid as the blows she delivered. Unfortunately, the rest of the group fared poorly, unable to withstand the surprise attack of the bandits. The orcs were easily outnumbered. While only five orcs still stood to fight, Doratin counted at least a dozen bandits with various plate armor assaulting them. Even as he watched, another orc fell, further dwindling their numbers.

Watching the battle unfold, Doratin knew it was a losing battle. He should turn back and return after the storm. There was a chance supplies may survive, and the leather armor from some of the fallen appeared to be in half-decent shape. He could easily repair such items.

He began to creep back through the grass and away from the turmoil when something caught his eye. Among the wreckage of the wagon there stood a small child. He was the only orc with dark skin, like Doratin's. He stood next to the wreckage with one orc hand clutched tightly in his hand. Tears were visible on the orcs face as he wailed, crying for a mother that would never respond.

Rage flooded over the half-orc. He readied an arrow to his bow and fired into the bandits. His arrow flew true, striking the bandit in the knee, rendering him useless. The orc woman was surprised by the random hour but wasted no time in capitalizing on the fortuitous moment. She cleaved the bandit's head clean off before striking down a second bewildered bandit.

Dorati shot another hour into the bandits. His shot was not perfect, but still managed to clip one of the bandits in the arm. An orc struck a blow quickly with his great axe, leaving the bandits down another soldier. However, as the battle continued, another orc fell, outnumbered three to one on the outskirts of the fight.

Doratin realized then that firing arrows would not provide relief quickly enough for the desperate orcs. While the losses were three to one in favor of the orcs, they were still outnumbered three to nine. He fought back his rage, calling the fight hopeless. He prepared to turn back and find shelter for himself.

Instead, he drew his own sword and burst from the plains, rushing into the melee. A few of the closest bandits turned in confusion. One met Doratin's sword, placed perfectly through a broken breast plate, killing the man instantly. The other was cut from behind as the female orc

slashed away mercilessly. Yet the bandits were not the only ones surprised by Doratin's sudden entrance into the fray. One orc's surprise became his demise as two bandits with hellish spears shredded through flesh and armor alike. The final orc managed to avenge his comrade, slaying the two, before he paid with his own life.

The bandits now devoted their entire attention to Doratin and his orc companion. He found himself back-to-back with the woman as the final five bandits circled around them. The smell of fire continued to rise in the air as dark clouds began to move in from the horizon. The sun disappeared as the wind picked up around them, the smoke swirling around the battlefield. No weapons were dry, no armor clean, all marred by some stain of blood or dirt.

"You sure no how to pick a losing fight," the orc spat at the bandits.

"Shut the fuck up you filthy scab!" a bandit charged, aiming to strike with his spear. Two other bandits followed suit, charging in with spears of their own.

The orc used both swords to knock aside the first bandit's spear, then using the momentum of her swing, came down and countered the second bandit's strike. The third aimed for Doratin. Doratin dropped his sword in the dirt and grabbed a hold of the man's spear. He twisted and yanked, throwing the bandit aside, before swinging his new weapon down. The butt of the spear cracked against the bandit's exposed head, rendering him unconscious instantly.

Behind him, the orc brought her blades down on the first bandit, skewering him, then cut through the man. Blood flew over the second bandit's face as he watched his companion fall dead. He did not retrieve his weapon, instead turning to flee, screaming as he did. The orc let him leave, instead turning her attention to the next bandit.

This bandit was the leader of this little group. He wore a silver helm stolen from elves, while chain mail from Thalador soldiers protected his upper body. He fought with an axe forged

by dwarves, and a shield from a blacksmith in Eastwood. He snarled at the orc; she returned his challenge with one of her own.

In a fury of blades, they came together. The orc matched his strength, her swords moving with tremendous speed. Yet she failed to land a blow as the man bobbed and weaved around her swings, his shield easily deflecting any he could not avoid. He bought his time, rarely striking with his axe, until the orc grew tired. One swing carried her too far, leaving her side vulnerable. He took his opportunity and struck with his axe, lodging deep in her ribs where it stuck. It ripped from his hands as the orc stepped back in agony. He advanced on the orc with just his shield and began swinging it like he would a fist, battering the orc until she collapsed, swords falling to her side.

During their exchange, Doratin made handy work of the final bandit. While the man tried to put up a fight, he was no match for the ferocity that overcame the half-orc. After a quick bout, Doratin landed a killing blow.

He turned from his victim and saw the bandit captain standing over the wounded orc. He quickly switched the grip of the spear he claimed and threw it like a javelin. The throw was awkward, as he had never trained with such weapons, but it did enough to distract the bandit, clanging against his helm, sending him off balance. The woman kicked out with her leg and tripped the man, then drew a concealed dagger which she used to end the man's fight.

Just like that, the battlefield became quiet. Doratin looked around and took in the final scene. Two orcs, not counting the woman he fought with, still lived. There was the child, still crying near the wreckage, and an elderly orc he had not seen before. The old orc wore a black robe with strange red symbols lining his sleeves. A red scarf hung over his neck and down to the

ground where it scraped against the dirt. He was watching the half-orc but said nothing. They locked eyes for a moment, sending a shiver down Doratin's spine.

He turned away and walked over to the orc woman. She had drawn the axe out, but that allowed blood to flow freely from the gash on her side. She was pressing her hands against it, but it did little to stop the bleeding. Doratin crouched down to help, but she threw a hand to push him away. Doratin ignored her and came at her again, to similar result. Finally, he grabbed her arms and held them still.

"Let me help you idiot," he growled.

She pulled her hands free but allowed Doratin to examine the wound. He ripped the sleeve of his shirt off, then ripped that in half. He created a makeshift bandage that covered the wound.

"It's temporary," he said. "You need a real healer or something for that."

"Allow me then," the old orc said as he walked over.

Doratin stepped aside and allowed the orc to examine the wound. Magic glowed around his hands and over the woman. Instantly, the bandage stopped absorbing new blood as the wound scabbed over.

"That should do then," he whispered. "As for you child, may I have a word?"

But no response came. The elder turned around confused, only to find Doratin had already begun to leave the orcs. He was now searching over the fallen bandits for stray supplies or coin that could be of use. However, he knew he needed to act fast as thunder began echoing on the horizon.

The old man called again walking over to Doratin. “Excuse me sir, but I must thank you for intervening when you did. We were lost until you stemmed the tides of battle. You are truly a hero!”

Doratin grunted and continued to search over the bandits. All he found of use was a dagger. The blade had several notches but was otherwise in good repair.

“May I know your name then?” The orc persisted. “Or perhaps, we may accompany you to your place of shelter? Or caravan would be most grateful of your services!”

Doratin continued to ignore the man, instead turning to head back into the plains towards his little crater. He should have returned a long time ago instead of stopping to aid these strange orcs. The skies were continuing to darken, and flashes of purple began to make themselves visible. Time was growing short; he did not have time for these orcs.

“Leave him Gartok,” the woman shouted. “He only came for the loot. Let him take what he needs and go, we don’t need him.”

“Mordra, would you shut your yap?” He retorted. “He’s our savior! We need him!”

“He’s a waste of our time,” Mordra laughed. “He doesn’t help and we’ll end up fried in the storm. We need shelter!”

“She’s right,” Doratin mumbled.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Gartok asked.

“She’s right,” Doratin repeated. “Storm is coming and if you don’t find a place to stay... well you should’ve let the bandits kill you.”

“But child, you are sent by Gromsh himself! You are our savior! You will lead us to shelter!” Gartok was enthusiastic now, rushing to step in front of Doratin so he could not leave.

“You can lead us back to your home! We will find safety there that will not find without you! You must know this to be true!”

“Fuck the gods,” Doratin spat and shoved past the man.

“You’re hurt. You’ve lost many, I know,” Gartok said. “But you are not the only one in the world who has suffered. However, you are the only one who can save us from a fate that is otherwise sealed. How many people in the world wield such power? None but one, by my count.”

Doratin clenched his jaw tight as he stared out over the horizon. Rain was beginning to fall. Soon, it would be a torrential downfall that would bring with it the stinging winds and deadly lightning. He needed to move quickly if he were to survive. He resolved to move forward, whatever the cost, when a hand grabbed his.

The hand was tiny, barely large enough to fit in Doratin’s palm. As he looked down, he saw the young orc child, eyes red and face wet. He grabbed Doratin’s hand and sobbed.

“Please, can you help her?”

“I don’t know...”

“Please! My mom needs help! Please she’s trapped! Please!”

The boy’s screams grew more desperate as the sobs overcame him. Doratin turned and looked at the wreckage where an arm lay outstretched. The fires were slowly creeping over it, the lifeless form it belonged to hidden in the blaze. There was no helping her.

Doratin lifted the child then in his arms. He pulled the boy into tight hug, then turned to Gartok and Mordra.

“Follow me,” he said. “Don’t stop for anything, and don’t grab anything. Follow me now or die in the storm.”

Without waiting for a response, he turned and pushed into the plains back to the crater and shelter. Gartok and Mordra made after him, struggling to keep his brisk pace. They pushed through the long grass now bending in the wind, the rain stinging their skin as it fell in droves from the sky. The boy in Doratin's arms fought when they first left the camp, screaming for them to turn back, but he had since grown quiet, allowing the half-orc to carry him to safety.

They managed to enter the crater as the first strikes of lightning rained from above. One blast was too close to Doratin, sending him off balance. He dropped the child as he collapsed into the crater, the two rolling in clouds of rocks and water. Doratin came to the stop against the edge of his shelter, but the boy was not so lucky. He rolled past the shelter to the center of the crater. Mordra rushed past Doratin, sprinting towards the boy as Gartok helped the half-orc to his feet.

All three were helpless as a bolt of purple came crashing from the sky, striking the boy. In an instant, the boy was gone, vaporized by the lightning's power. Mordra was thrown backwards, striking her head, and toppling over as the rain washed away any evidence the boy ever existed.

Doratin tried to ignore the events and focus on Mordra. He kept his eyes from wandering to the center of the crater, instead grabbing the woman around the shoulders. He dragged her as quickly as he could back to shelter as another round of lightning struck the earth. Eventually, Gartok ran over and aided the half-orc, until all three were inside Doratin's little home.

Once inside, Doratin left the two orcs alone in the cavern entrance. He crawled his way to the back room where he curled up and laid over to sleep. Alone in the dark, he finally allowed himself to cry.

Chapter 29

The storm still raged on when Doratin decided to rejoin the other orcs.