

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.