

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 toward.

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 peeked 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.

“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 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. He felt small and helpless.

Resigned, he allowed himself to be pulled along. 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 of Doratin and his escort. They were on horseback. A patrol of three guards armed in traditional chain mail approached, 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 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 traveling 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!” 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 myself 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 here 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. They 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 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 tears 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 breath growing hard to control.

“It’s ok, you’re almost safe.” The woman pulled out of the hug and stood, taking Doratin by the hand. “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 traveling troupe lay scattered about in various tents and wagons. One large bonfire lit the 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 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 creatures slept with their tails curled around their bodies, spikes on the end readied should they be roused. They 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 treads 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 some water and handed it 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 a simple dress of red silk. 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 fell from his hands, spilling the contents as his arms shook violently, wrapped around his body. Tears fell freely. 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, then to exhaustion. He allowed his body to sink deeper into Leah’s arms, until sleep overcame him.