

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-scropio 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 Thalador? 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.