

9 • The Orphan Exodus

T*he Dagoda: a palace of brooding towers and iron gates, of council chambers to devise unjust deeds and of courtrooms to sentence the innocent, of Fire Priests' cells and the secret-service garrison, of prison and torture chambers, of the Orphan Pavilion where frightened orphans are drilled under the cruel hand of the Orphan Keeper. From this evil center the Enchanter casts his dark spells.*

The King and Big Operator approached the Dagoda. Burners guarded all entrances, their pokers glowing luridly in the dark while squads of Breakers boot-stomped in and out, cudgels held attack-ready. Both men knew it was a dangerous night.

The King whispered, "The Enchanter is readying his forces for assault. Our time is short." Big Operator nodded. They must do what they had come to do quickly lest their bold plan be aborted.

For days, the drivers and dispatchers had watched the King and the chief huddled together behind the glassed-in office of the City Taxi Company—another rescue strategy was in the making. All sensed the bond of love between the two as they concentrated on unfolded maps on the desk, but none knew the plan they were devising was so desperate it could well be Big Operator's last.

Shortly, vanguard orders for an orphan exodus appeared at the dispatcher control panel. The next night the fleet of swift taxis crept with dimmed headlights through the streets, disconnected from the power source, and took to back alleys. They were to surround the Enchanter's Dagoda, await the

signal, and then whisk as many escapees from the Orphan Pavilion as possible to the edge of the garbage dump, where the King himself would accompany the children to Great Park.

The Orphan Pavilion was to one side of the Dagoda, enclosed by a high wall with a surrounding courtyard. A sign beside the tall gate proclaimed "WE LOVE CHILDREN / Orphan Keepers' Association," but everyone in Enchanted City knew that children were loved only because they provided forced labor to do the dirty work of the Enchanter.

Two huge wolves the size of lions guarded either side of the entrance. They growled as the men approached; the creatures bared their teeth and drooled. A soft light gathered around the King. The wolves stared, whimpered, and then hid their heads in their paws while the two men passed them by. All closed places opened to the King when he so willed it.

Inside, a squad of orphans wearing tattered rags scrubbed the courtyard. A Keeper's assistant with a whistle around her neck chanted, "Clean-clean-clean!" and stood ready to beat the slow workers with a long stick. Another work detail, a long line of children tied together at the ankles with rough sections of rope, were getting ready to collect the city garbage which citizens tossed on the street. A whistle blew—*Hweet! Hweet!*—and the crew marched to the waiting carts while another assistant prodded them with the sharp tines of her forked shovel.

Huge vats of water boiled while children stirred the dirty clothes within. The hot water splashed on the orphans' rags, burning them one moment and then soaking them to the skin in the cold night. An assistant prodded them with a long wooden turning spoon. *Hweet!* She blew her whistle and

shouted, “Scoundrels! Dimwits! I’ll boil *you* if you spill any more wash water!” *Hweet!*

All the orphans, boys and girls, wore the same haircut, making it nearly impossible to tell one from another. Their clothes were an identical gray, which grew increasingly threadbare during washings as they were passed down from one child to another. Skinny, sad-eyed, covered with sores from the lack of proper foods, not one orphan smiled or laughed or told jokes or chased another in games of tag. Games were forbidden, and play had been outlawed. No one belonged to any other—brothers and sisters were separated. There were no holidays and never any birthday cakes.

Lanterns cast a dim light in the dark courtyard. Big Operator and the King could see another work detail carrying brooms, preparing to march out to sweep the streets. The workers were all barefoot, and the night was cold.

“Hey-ya!” shouted their assistant Keeper, and bleated on her whistle *Hweet! Hweet! Hweet!* As one, the troop centered the broom handles on their shoulders. “I told ya t’keep t’line!” yelled the guard again, and she stomped on the foot of a little child who had stumbled. “Got’cher!” shouted the Keeper cruelly as the child dropped the broom and grasped the poor foot but uttered not a sound. The penalty for sobbing was a hot poker prod.

Big Operator seethed with enormous rage. It was against this abuse that he had given his life, against this outrage that he had masterminded the Resistance, against these indignities that he had worked for the Restoration. He wanted to yell and shout; he wanted to take that guard and shake her by her shoulders.

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The King restrained him with his hand. Then a young voice demanded, “What you doing in here? No outsiders allowed on the premises!”

It was an older child dressed in faded blue—an orphan who had come up through orphan ranks and was now dressed in the uniform of an assistant in training. He was still barefoot; only full-fledged assistants were issued footwear. Their food rations were also increased from one meal a day to two, and they were given whistles. For some, that was reason enough to mistreat one’s fellow orphan.

“Hello, Jason,” said the King. “We’ve come to speak to the Orphan Keeper.”

At the sound of his name, the boy’s eyes widened. Orphans were addressed only by number and rank; the last person who had spoken his name had been his mother, years ago—so long ago he could scarcely remember her face or the sound of her voice. The boy cocked his head as though listening to something far away, something almost forgotten. He moved closer. “Who-who are you?” he whispered, his voice very low.

The King answered in the same way, gently, careful not to frighten the orphan. “I am the King.”

“How—how did you know my name?”

“I know all the names of the ones who belong to me.”

Suddenly a siren horn blared, whistles blew—*Hweet! Hweet!*—and all the orphans closed ranks *hup-to! hup-to! hup-to!* and stood at attention. The assistant Keepers saluted in front of their squads. All was quiet in the courtyard, except for the sound of orphans’ snuffling runny noses and the *stamp-stamp-stamp* of frozen feet on cold hard stones and the wailing of the