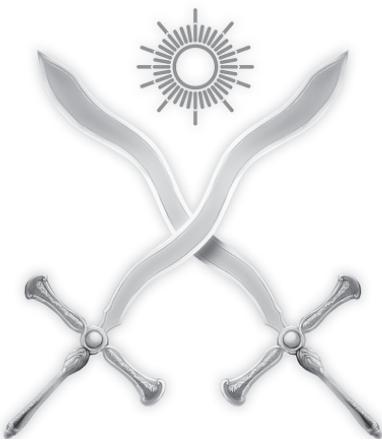


DANIEL AND THE SUN SWORD



NATHAN LUMBATIS



Daniel and the Sun Sword

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D E D I C A T I O N

For my Heavenly Father who adopted me.
For my earthly family who showed me His love.

– Nathan



1

DISAPPOINTMENT

Adoption.

Daniel couldn't believe it was happening. After spending the first thirteen years of his life in the Holy Moses Home for Bleeding Heart Orphans, someone finally wanted him.

He rushed around his tiny room, snatching up all his possessions—two white t-shirts, an extra pair of jeans, a martial-arts uniform, and a spare sock—and stuffed them into the shabby backpack on his bed.

He glanced down at the clothes he was wearing and frowned. His shirt was so stained he couldn't remember the original color, and the holes in his jeans were beyond count.

"You're leaving us, aren't you?" someone wheezed from behind.

Daniel turned as Jerry, a short, pimply twelve-year-old with asthma and a perpetually snotty nose, shuffled into the room. In the hallway behind him, two squealing girls chased each other into the large common area right outside.

Daniel sighed. "Shut the door."

Jerry wiped his nose with the back of his hand and pulled the door closed. "You're so lucky."



“Lucky? You get to visit your parents every month. I don’t even know who my parents are.”

Jerry took a puff from his inhaler. “Yeah, but they haven’t given me up for adoption. I’m stuck here until I’m eighteen. At least you’re getting to leave.”

“Only if my new family likes me,” Daniel muttered. He tried to imagine how he’d appear to them: bushy, brown hair; brown eyes; raggedy clothes.

Nothing special.

Would the people sitting in Ms. Julie’s office at this very moment still want to go through with the adoption after they met him?

He glanced at Jerry. Well, at least he was tall for his age and didn’t have a snotty nose and pimples.

Daniel brushed his hair to the side and felt a little better, but the nervous churning in his stomach didn’t go away.

“Daniel, come to my office, please,” Ms. Julie’s voice blared over the speaker in the hallway. “And bring all your things.”

Jerry sniffed. “Can I walk up there with you? I want to see what they’re like.”

“I don’t think so. I just want to be alone right now,” Daniel said and threw his backpack over his shoulder.

“Okay. But I’ll miss you. Will you miss me?”

Daniel paused and hooked his thumbs through the backpack straps. He’d been at the orphanage so many years it was hard to feel a connection with any of the other kids.

Jerry, on the other hand, was new, and he latched on to anyone who gave him attention. And his feelings were so easily hurt.

Daniel shrugged. “Yeah. I’ll miss you, Jerry. Uh, maybe you can write to me or something. Bye.” He patted Jerry on the shoulder and walked into the hallway.



As usual, the long corridor leading to Ms. Julie's office was crowded with kids running in and out of their rooms, fighting over toys, or screaming about who-hit-who first.

He passed several rooms with music blasting from under shut doors, their teenage owners attempting to drown out the chaos of the younger kids. If anyone had ever bothered to donate a radio or an MP3 player to him, he'd probably have done the same. Daniel didn't say goodbye to any of them. Most of them had been in and out of the orphanage so much, goodbyes were pointless.

Piles of toys littered the stained carpet. He kicked a few aside to clear a path. Despite Ms. Julie's attempts at keeping the playing in the common area, the hallway usually looked like a toy store had exploded.

Daniel stepped over a tangled mass of stuffed animals and almost twisted his ankle on a lone action figure as he put his foot down on the other side.

A kindergarten boy burst out of a room and snatched up the toy. "You broke my Galaxy Ranger! I'm telling."

Daniel ignored the kid. He was too preoccupied with the questions racing through his mind.

What would his new family look like? Would they love him? Would he love them? Would he finally feel like he belonged somewhere?

He pictured a perfect-looking family like he'd seen on TV, the kind where everyone was beautiful and happy. Was that what it was really like?

Daniel reached the end of the hallway and paused, resting his hand on the latch of the office door.

"No. Absolutely no record of who his parents are." Ms. Julie's muffled voice came from the other side. "That's why we've never given him a last name."



Daniel sighed. That was him, Mr. No-Name. Mr. Doesn't-Belong. He hoped, maybe, that all that was about to change.

He turned the latch and stepped into the office.

Time slowed. His heart beat hard as he took in every detail of the room before he could bring himself to look at the family that was waiting for him. Ms. Julie, wearing her usual navy blue, button-down shirt with the Bleeding Heart logo on the chest, sat behind a rickety metal desk while twirling her black hair. The TV flickered in the corner, showing an anchorman reporting on wars in Peru, Africa, and China. A pile of paper forms threatened to blow off the desk every time Ms. Julie's fan oscillated in their direction. And—

“And here he is!” Ms. Julie waved Daniel in.

Someone stood up from behind the door. As he pulled it shut, Daniel suddenly found himself dwarfed in the shadow of a ridiculously buff girl with a low forehead and pig tails. She gripped a power bar in one hand, an energy drink in the other, and wore a tight work-out shirt that said “Pain Is My Dessert.” She looked at least sixteen years old.

She sneered. “What a scrawny little twerp. What do you feed these kids, rabbit food?”

Ms. Julie cleared her throat. “Well, uh, we do what we can with the funding—”

“Gator, don’t be so rude.”

Daniel glanced past the girl. A thin, shaky man wearing a red hairpiece that barely covered the top of his head, and a sweat-stained tank top was trying to pull her back into her seat. Daniel bit his tongue to keep from laughing. Either the man had bright red chest hair bushing out of the top of the shirt, or he was smuggling gerbils.

“Gator” shook off his hand and plopped down into her chair.



"That's better." The man dabbed his sweaty upper lip with a handkerchief before resting his hand near Ms. Julie's on the desk. He tapped her fingers. "Ms. Julie might think we aren't so-plis-ticat-ed enough to adopt Daniel if you talk like that."

Ms. Julie cleared her throat and pulled her hand away. "Yes, well, let me introduce you all properly. Daniel, this is Barth Gurge, your adoptive father."

Barth stood and wiped his hands with the handkerchief before offering Daniel a handshake. "Pleased to make your aquain-stan-st. Oh," he pointed to Daniel's shirt, "I see we share a similar taste in clothes."

Daniel forced a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes and slowly stuck out his hand. Hopefully, there was nothing worse than sweat on the handkerchief. "Hello."

"And this," Ms. Julie continued, "is Gator Gurge, your new sister."

"What's up, Twerp?" Instead of shaking Daniel's hand, Gator slapped him on the back. He lost his balance and fell into the bookcase, knocking several magazines on parenting to the floor.

"Gently, dear. Gently," Barth said, reaching up to pat Gator on the shoulder. "Not everyone is as strong as you. I'm so sorry, Daniel. Gator's on the varsity wrestling squad at her school and doesn't know her own strength."

Gator flexed.

"That's my girl!"

Daniel braced himself back into a standing position before shooting Ms. Julie a confused look.

She smiled and gestured for him to take the seat next to Gator. He hesitated.

Ms. Julie nodded at Gator. "That's wonderful that you're so active. Daniel, as a matter of fact, is quite athletic too. He's taken karate for several years, and is..."



Daniel eased into the chair, only half-listening while studying the Gurses out of the corner of his eye. Certainly this was some kind of joke. This couldn't be his family. They were nothing like he expected. And Ms. Julie was crazy if she thought he would go home with them, much less feel a part of their family.

Gator whispered behind her hand. "You better try to fit in, unless you want to get smacked around."

Daniel frowned. "Huh?"

"What was that, *Dear?*" Barth grabbed Gator around the back of her neck. "I think I misheard you, and I know Ms. Julie did too."

Gator straightened up. "Uh, I meant at school. Because, uh, there's always bullies and stuff."

Daniel rolled his eyes. Certainly Ms. Julie wasn't going to buy such a lame excuse.

Ms. Julie opened her mouth to say something when Barth snapped his head back around and cut her off. "Girls will be girls. Now, what was this I read about Daniel never being in the foster care system? That doesn't mean he's trouble, does it?"

"I, uh...well, as to that, no." Ms. Julie waved her hand dismissively. "Daniel's never caused any trouble. To tell you the truth, I'm not exactly sure why he's never been in foster care. Determining which children go into that system is something the higher-ups in Child and Family Services do, and they've always denied my recommendations for Daniel. Which is why I'm a little surprised they approved his adoption so quickly, especially before my interview with you." She thumbed through the papers again. "In fact, I've never seen an adoption move so fast. Did they do a home-study? Or a background check? I couldn't find either in your file."

Barth ignored her. "What about it, boy? You going to be trouble? We aren't looking for a troublemaker."



Gator leaned back and pretended to pick up something from behind Daniel's chair. "Yeah, just someone who can take orders," she mumbled.

Barth stuck out his foot and tipped Gator's chair over backward. She crashed to the floor with a cry, startling Ms. Julie up from her papers.

Barth shrugged. "Poor thing doesn't realize how top-heavy she is. Happens all the time." He winked at Daniel. "What Gator was trying to say was that we hope you really find your place in the family, Daniel."

Gator scowled as she climbed back into her chair. "Yeah. That's what I meant."

Daniel turned to Ms. Julie. How could anyone have considered them a good fit for him? It was clear they weren't looking for a real son. Most likely, from what Gator had said, they wanted a slave—a kid who'd been so hopeless after years in the system that he'd put up with anything.

Well, that wasn't him. He wasn't going to put up with anything from anyone.

He jumped out of his seat. "Is this some kind of joke? Can't you see what they're up to?"

"Oh, how funny, Daniel!" Ms. Julie exclaimed nervously, rushing around her desk. "But never mind that. Can I see you in the hallway?" She ushered Daniel out the door. "Be right back," she sang with a backward glance to the Gurses.

After closing the door behind her, she put her hand calmly on Daniel's shoulder.

"Daniel, please think carefully before you write off the Gurses completely. I was a little surprised at first too. But some of the nicest families I know look rough on the outside. Inside, though, you might find them to be caring people."



Daniel pointed at the door. “Those *things* in your office are not caring people. They’re just interested in having someone that’ll do whatever they want. Didn’t you hear what ‘the Gator’ said?”

“Teenagers never know how to treat adoptive siblings at first,” Ms. Julie said, shaking her head. “There’s always some jealousy to work through. Listen, Mr. Gurge said he always wanted a son. But once his wife died—”

“Did Gator eat her?”

Ms. Julie closed her eyes and sighed.

Daniel immediately knew he’d disappointed her. He dropped his eyes to the ground and put his hands in his pockets.

“She died of cancer when Gator was a baby,” Ms. Julie said after a long pause. “She never knew her mother, just like you never knew yours. I should think you’d be able to look past some of her behaviors. Who knows? Maybe you’ll find you have a lot in common.”

Daniel pulled away from Ms. Julie’s touch. Just because Gator didn’t have a mother didn’t mean anything. Most of the kids he knew had lost one or both parents.

“Gator and I are nothing alike,” he said. “But what would that change anyway? Didn’t you hear what she said? She threatened me twice. You can’t really expect me to go home with them.”

Ms. Julie crossed the distance between them and gripped his arm. “That’s just sibling rivalry. Think about it: she’s been an only child—an only girl, no less—her entire life. There’s bound to be an adjustment period for her. And besides, didn’t you see how Mr. Gurge stepped in each time she got out of hand? Can’t you give them a chance?”

She scratched her head. “Child and Family Services did approve them, after all. More than approve, really. They basically ordered me to rush the adoption process. It’s so strange. I still



don't understand how they were screened so quickly, and with so few objections. But think, Daniel. You've never...well, people don't come looking to adopt you every day."

Behind them, two girls started fighting over the remote control to the TV. Daniel turned and looked around. Several other kids sat alone in corners or in the doorways of their rooms. That was life in the orphanage—chaos or loneliness.

Ms. Julie did have a point. What if this was his only chance to leave? And besides, what did he know about how families worked? If anyone knew how kids reacted to an adoption, it was her. Maybe Gator was just jealous.

Daniel let his eyes wander down the hallway to where Jerry still lingered in the doorway of Daniel's old room.

What did he have to lose by going with them, anyway?

"Fine," he said. "But what happens if things don't work out?"

Ms. Julie took a deep breath and slowly blew it out. "I'm always here. If you need me, just call."

Daniel nodded and walked back into the office.

"Okay!" Ms. Julie said as she followed him in. "Sorry for the delay. Let me just get a few papers in order and everything will be ready to go. Oh, but there is one other thing." She winked at Daniel. "Since moving into your home will come with so many changes, I believe the familiarity of Daniel's martial arts class would help with the transition. If you'd like, I can provide you with the dojo's contact information so he can continue attending." She scribbled the name and number onto a blank post-it note and handed it to Barth.

Gator and Barth exchanged smiles.

Ms. Julie stood and gathered her papers. "Well, it was nice meeting you all. You've already signed all the necessary legal documents and Daniel has all his things in his backpack. It's been a pleasure."



She paused and pulled Daniel into a side hug. “Goodbye, Daniel. I love you, and I’ll be praying for you every day. And remember, I’m always here if you need me.”

Daniel couldn’t find the words to reply as she pulled away and steered him and the Gurses out the front door of her office and into the lobby of the orphanage. It was all so strange. Ms. Julie was the only mother he’d ever known, and he was about to leave her behind. He felt a sudden urge to run back into her arms and just call the whole thing off.

He hesitated but then heard the unmistakable click of Ms. Julie’s door closing behind him.

There. It was decided. The way back was closed, and he would try to make it on the outside. At least he was still in Ms. Julie’s prayers.

Daniel frowned. As if that would help anything. How many years had he prayed to be adopted before realizing it didn’t do any good? He obviously wasn’t high on God’s to-do list. If there was a God.

Daniel pushed his thoughts aside and followed after Mr. Gurge.

Mrs. Nancy, the old receptionist, stuck a pencil in her hair bun and waved as he walked past her desk.

“Goodbye, Daniel,” she said in her cracked voice. “We’ll miss you.”

Daniel stopped to say goodbye, but Gator shoved him out the double glass doors of the orphanage before he could answer.

“Get in the car, Twerp.”

Daniel spun around. An old station-wagon was parked under the awning.

Barth stepped in front of him and opened the car door. “You heard her. In.”



Daniel's face flushed with anger. "You obviously have me confused with a dog. I—"

"In!" Gator shoved Daniel into the seat and jumped in beside him. Before he could react, she yanked him down into a choke hold.

Daniel gritted his teeth and struggled to get free. "Get off me!" He pushed against Gator's side but couldn't wriggle out of her grasp.

The driver's door creaked open, and Barth slid into his seat. Maybe he would intervene like he had before.

"Mr. Gurge! Help!"

"Can it!" Barth snapped, slamming the door shut. "You start shouting for help, and I'll really let Gator go to town on you."

Daniel grabbed the door handle and tried to pull out of Gator's hold.

"Look, Dad." Gator laughed and gave Daniel a wet-willy. "I think he's trying to escape."

Barth snorted. "Try all you want, little boy. Once Gator gets you in one of her grips, it's over. And I wouldn't hold out hope for someone coming to help you, either. You belong to us now. You're a Gurge."

"I don't belong to anyone!" Daniel coughed from the pressure of Gator's grip around his throat. As his own words sank in, though, he gave up struggling.

I don't belong to anyone.

He craned his head to look out the window, hoping Barth was wrong and that Ms. Julie or one of the other office workers were coming to help.

No one was there.

He'd made the wrong choice. He should've trusted his instincts and marched back to his bedroom when he had the chance.



Barth pulled away from the Holy Moses Home for Bleeding Heart Orphans, and a sick feeling settled into the pit of Daniel's stomach.

Through the window, he caught one last glimpse of the only home he had ever known before the station wagon turned a corner and sped down the highway.





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