

The Third Door



EMILY RODDA



Scholastic Press • New York

Text and graphics copyright © 2012 by Emily Rodda

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920* by agreement with Omnibus Books, part of the Scholastic Group, Gosford, Australia. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rodda, Emily.

The third door / Emily Rodda.

p. cm. — (The three doors trilogy ; bk. 3)

Originally published: Parkside, S. Aust. : Omnibus Books, c2012.

Summary: Sonia, Rye, and his brothers have survived the perils behind the golden and silver Doors, but Weld is still under threat from the skimmers, and the companions must pass through the ancient wooden Door in a last, desperate effort to save their world.

ISBN 978-0-545-42994-8 (jacketed hardcover) — ISBN 978-0-545-42995-5 (pbk.)

1. Brothers — Juvenile fiction. 2. Magic — Juvenile fiction. 3. Monsters — Juvenile fiction. 4. Adventure stories. [1. Brothers — Fiction. 2. Magic — Fiction. 3. Monsters — Fiction. 4. Adventure and adventurers — Fiction.] I. Title. II. Series:

Rodda, Emily. Three doors trilogy ; bk. 3.

PZ7.R5996Tg 2013

823.914 — dc23

2013007883

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 13 14 15 16 17

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First American edition, October 2013

The text was set in Palatino.
Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi



THE SALTINGS

It was past midnight, but no one slept inside the stronghold of the Master. The day just ended had been eagerly awaited, but instead of triumph it had brought disaster. The Master's rage had been terrible. The gray-faced supervisor now in charge of the vast Harbor complex had decreed that there was to be no rest until every room had been restored to order.

The flooded basement had been partly drained, but the workers there still toiled knee-deep in oily water thick with drowned slays. Surveying the bloated bodies of the ferocious beasts she had bred from far less dangerous stock, the supervisor felt no emotion. That was not surprising. She was no more human than the gray-clad guards laboring around her. Like them, she existed only to serve.

She was already calculating how long it would be until she could begin the breeding program again with

The Third Door

the handful of slays she had left. She was also deciding that very large quantities of the red substance known as jell would speed the process. The slaves in the Diggings would have to work harder.

It did not occur to her to wonder why the Shadow Lord, who had such powerful sorcery at his command, required an army of deadly flying beasts that could attack by day as well as by night. It was not in her nature to ask such questions. What the Master wanted he must have — that was all that mattered.

The thing he wanted most at present was the capture of the four enemy spies who had dared to interfere with his plans. It had been early morning when the spies fled the Harbor, leaving havoc behind them, but the supervisor had no doubt they would be caught, even after so long a delay.

Soon the Master's giant birds would recover from the feeding frenzy that had left them gorged and unable to fly. At daybreak, they would be released to hunt the criminals down.

The prisoners the spies had saved would go free. By now, they would have scattered, and with Slave Hunter Kyte dead, there was no one to identify them. Mine rats all looked the same to the supervisor and to most of the other workers in the Harbor.

The four spies were different. They would be easy to recognize. They were well fed, and two of them were copper-heads. They had the means to make themselves invisible, certainly. But the birds were the

The Third Door

Master's creatures, not natural beasts like slays, and the Master's power would sharpen their eyes.

The spies could not remain hidden forever. There would be no escape for them.



Rye, Sonia, Dirk, and Sholto were at that very moment trying to prove the supervisor wrong. Hand in hand, sped by Rye's magic ring and invisible beneath Rye's hood, they were gliding over the parched plain called the Scour. The clouded sky was dark, but not so dark that they could not see their way, and thanks to the charmed feather Rye held, their feet did not touch the pebbled track that guided them.

The four had not dared to move in daylight, though Rye and Sonia now had brown hair instead of red, thanks to a dark powder given to them by Cap of the Den, who had taken them into hiding. They had slept through the day in the Den, and even when night fell, they had lingered. They knew that their lanky friend Bones, who had given them such valuable help at the Harbor, would raise an outcry if he saw his "magic ones" leaving him. So they had waited till Bones was as deeply asleep as everyone else in the Den before slipping away.

"It cannot be helped," Sonia whispered, feeling Rye's guilt as they reached the place where they had first seen Bones — the pyramid of stones at the edge of the Saltings wasteland.

Rye sighed. "If only we could have taken Bones

The Third Door

and the others home with us! And Bird and all the people from Nanny's Pride farm, too!"

"I agree," Dirk growled. "But if we are to stay in Weld only briefly, and then see what is beyond the wooden Door, we will have to stay hidden. Bones and the rest would make that impossible."

"Indeed." Sholto grimaced. "Imagine the Warden's panic if he saw a horde from beyond the Wall pouring into the Keep! Faene — that girl you tell me you smuggled in through the golden Door — sounds as if she could pass for a Weld person if she had to. The same cannot be said for Cap's tribe — or Bird's."

Rye knew his brothers were right. The ragged men and women of the Den, wretchedly thin, with wild hair and scarlet jell-stained hands, would seem terrifying to the orderly citizens of Weld. The small, fierce people from Nanny's Pride farm would be almost as frightening.

"And they could not have hidden in the tower with Annocki and Faene," Dirk added. "There would not have been room to move!"

"Who is Annocki?" Sholto asked.

"The Warden's daughter," Dirk said with a grin. "Sonia's friend, and the lady you are to marry, brother, if there is any justice! You were the one who found the enemy of Weld and destroyed the skimmers — the slays, as they call them here. You should win the Warden's prize!"

The Third Door

“Do not be ridiculous!” Sholto snapped. “I have no wish to marry anyone — let alone a woman who has been forced to accept me!”

Sonia shot him an approving glance, but made no comment. “The people here would not follow us through a sorcerer’s Door to Weld even if we asked them, Rye,” she said instead. “They are terrified of magic — all of them except Bones. They were grateful to us, but still they left us to ourselves as soon as they could.”

There was a strange, sad note in her voice. Her face was a pale blur in the dimness as she turned her head to stare over the Saltings. The dark, lumpy ground stretched away as far as the eye could see, so seething with moving snails that it seemed to ripple like water.

Rye tried to send her a message of comfort, but her mind was closed to him. Perhaps, he thought, she was imagining what Cap, Bird, and the others would have felt if they had known that Rye had opened the way for the Master’s invasion by causing the death of the tyrant Olt. Sonia had always refused to believe that Olt’s power protected Dorne from the Lord of Shadows, but surely she accepted it now.

“We had better get on,” Dirk said. “Sholto’s trail of pyramids will guide us. As I recall, there are ten in all. The first we found — the one that had the remains of your notebook inside it, brother — is very near the silver Door.”

The Third Door

“Possibly,” Sholto muttered, “but I could not find the Door when I looked. Of course, I was not in my right mind at the time.” He had tried to speak lightly, but he looked sick as he stared out at the creeping sea of snails ahead.

Rye and Dirk glanced at each other. Sholto had said very little about what had happened to him before he reached the Harbor, and they had not pressed him. They knew there were huge gaps in his memory, and that this disturbed him greatly.

“I have never felt so despairing,” Sholto went on, his voice very low. “I thought I had gone mad. It seemed to me that one moment I was in a cave, in a forest I took to be the Fell Zone, and the next I was in a snail-infested wasteland with my mind like murky soup and only my notebook and lantern to remind me who I was.”

“You were enchanted, no doubt,” Sonia said calmly.

She shrugged as Sholto’s eyebrows shot up. “There are magic beings in the Fell Zone, Sholto. They are called the Fellan. Dirk did not see them when he went through the golden Door, but Rye and I did.”

As both his brothers looked at him, Rye nodded, though his skin was prickling. He had sworn never to tell who had given him the little bag of magic powers he wore around his neck, so he had thought it best not to mention the Fellan to Dirk and Sholto at all. It shocked him that Sonia had blurted out the name so heedlessly.

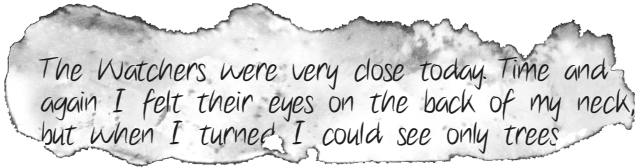
Sholto was digging in his pocket, pulling out the

The Third Door

snail-eaten pieces of his notebook that Rye had given him. He sorted through them, squinting in the gloom.

"Your light, Rye!" he said. "Just for a moment."

Rye took the crystal from the bag and let its light fall on the fragment in his brother's hand. His voice rising in excitement, Sholto read the words aloud.



The Watchers were very close today. Time and again I felt their eyes on the back of my neck, but when I turned, I could see only trees.

"There!" Sonia crowed. "Your 'Watchers' were the Fellan!"

Sholto looked up. His troubled face had cleared. "I *was* in the Fell Zone, then!" he exclaimed. "I did *not* imagine it!"

"Of course not!" Sonia laughed. "You had only been in the Harbor for a few days when we found you, Sholto. But you have been away from Weld for over a year! Plainly you did not spend all that time in the Saltings — you could not possibly have survived. So you were somewhere else, and the Fell Zone is the most likely place. It fills Dorne's center, after all."

"So . . . I came through the silver Door," Sholto said slowly. "I found my way over the Saltings to the Fell Zone. I stayed in the forest, searching for the source of the skimmers, for over a year, and then —"

The Third Door

"Then for some reason the Fellan drove you back into the Saltings," Sonia finished for him. "And it is not surprising that you remember nothing about it. I daresay they wanted to make sure you did not come back."

"I daresay," Sholto drawled.

"So that is settled," Dirk said, relieved to see Sholto looking and sounding more like himself. "Let us make a start. The journey will not take long. Rye has learned to use the feather much better during our time here."

But he had spoken too soon. After only a few minutes, they were moving no faster than walking pace, and their feet kept brushing the snail-covered rocks. Every time this happened thousands of ravenous snails reared horribly, trying to slide onto their shoes. If it had not been for the protection of the armor shell fixed to Rye's finger, the companions would have been dragged down and reduced to skeletons in minutes.

"By the Wall, Rye, can you go no higher?" Dirk whispered.

"I had forgotten the metal that lies among the rocks here," Rye said shakily. "It is affecting the feather's magic."

And the magic of the armor shell, too, he thought but did not say. He could not help noticing that the snails were not bouncing away from their shoes, but merely failing to get a good grip.

Sholto had plainly seen the same thing. "Use the light, Rye," he urged. "We are far enough into the wasteland by now to risk that. I am sure that it is only

because I managed to keep my lantern going that I survived my night here.”

Sure enough, though the light of the crystal was far dimmer than usual, it was enough to keep the snails back. The moment the glow hit them they withdrew into their shells and stayed there.

The light made it far easier to pick out Sholto’s pyramid trail, too, so the journey became less tense. Progress was still slow, however, and by the time the tenth pile of stones came into view, the sky was beginning to lighten.

“I remember building that pyramid so clearly,” Sholto said in a low voice. “Putting stone upon stone, trying not to think of the night that had just passed, fighting the fear that I had lost my mind . . .”

“Do not think of that,” Dirk said quickly. “Think of what you and Rye did! Think that, because of you, no skimmers flew over the Wall last night, and the people of Weld slept safely for the first time in years!”

Sholto half smiled, swatting at one of the giant insects that had begun buzzing around in the past few minutes. The creature fell to the ground, and in seconds the snails had made short work of it.

When they reached the pyramid at last, Rye swept the light crystal around.

“The Door is here somewhere,” he murmured. “It is concealed, that is all. Sonia, can you see it?”

But Sonia did not answer, and suddenly it came to Rye that she had not spoken for a long time. He

The Third Door

turned to her, and with a stab of panic, he saw that her eyes were glazed. He had been depending on Sonia to find the silver Door, as she had found the golden one. He had forgotten how badly the Saltings affected her.

Sonia! he called to her in his mind. *Can you see the Door?*

Slowly, Sonia turned her head. A slight crease appeared between her eyebrows. "Of course," she mumbled, and pointed.

And there, very near, glimmering slightly in the gloom, was the ghostly shape of the silver Door.

Rye gasped with relief, and after a moment, so did Dirk. Sholto, dumbfounded, simply stared.

They floated awkwardly to the Door, which was hovering a little way above the ground and seemed more solid the closer they came to it. Like the golden Door, it had no handle on this side, but Rye had expected that. He fumbled in the brown bag for the charmed key.

"Look at the snails," Dirk muttered uneasily.

Everyone looked around. Every rock in the Saltings was still. The snails had all retreated into their shells.

"They sense that the sun is rising," Sholto said, glancing at the sky. "Make haste, Rye!"

Rye stuffed the red feather and the light crystal back into the brown bag. His feet thudded down onto the snail-covered rocks as he drew out the tiny key and pressed it to the Door.

The Third Door

To his dismay, nothing happened. He tried again, but still the Door did not move.

Sholto cursed under his breath. "The Master's birds!" he hissed.

In terror Rye looked up, following his brother's gaze. Two dark shapes were speeding toward them beneath the red-stained clouds. Between one blink and another, giant wings, snakelike necks, and cruel talons became visible. A harsh screech split the air.

"They have seen us!" Dirk yelled.

"Keep trying, Rye!" Sholto urged. "You must be touching the wrong place!"

"No!" Sonia cried. "Rye, we got through the golden Door without a key. It opened when you ran at it, remember?"

"I cannot see —" Sholto began, but Rye was willing to try anything. He drew back a little, then threw himself heedlessly at the Door.

There was a sound like a clanging gong as his hands, his boots, and the stick in his belt struck the silver surface. And with joy, he saw a strip of blinding white light appear down one side of the Door.

"Hold on to me!" he shouted as the strip widened. "Hold —"

And then they were all tumbling into the light, and the Door was slamming behind them, shutting out the screeches of the diving sky serpents cheated of their prey.