

BEAUTIFUL WORLD

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WEBSITE

CHAPTER # 1

ANNA - SEKA

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COURT #2



She stared. Nothing. The shapeless mist rose up in front of her like a frosted curtain, hanging lank against the pale light and stirring in the slight, chill breeze. Nothing.

She moved. She paused. She moved again. She was like a ghost against the mist, her eyes wide, her head tilted to catch the slightest sound. All about her the air was heavy with silence, drenched, cold and unknown. She stepped forward, carefully measuring each stride. Her boots sounded in the emptiness as they sank up to the lacings in the sodden turf, and then squelched as she eased them clear.

There were two broken pillars hung with rusted iron work, directly ahead of her. They loomed out of the mist like ancient sentinels. She approached and they let her pass. Again she paused.

Just in front of her, it must have been no more than three spear lengths, she could make out several huddled shapes almost lost against the greyness.

She waited yet again: watching, listening, sensing the chill against her cheeks and fixing the shapes in her gaze. Still, there was nothing, no movement at all.

‘Well, all right,’ her lips moved in a whisper. At the same time, one hand slid to the hilt of the sword at her hip, and she eased it carefully out of the scabbard. ‘No sense taking any chances.’ She glanced to the left and right. It was still day but there was not enough light in this broken place to catch her polished blade and warn someone of her approach.

Once more she moved. The shadows did not stir to meet her coming, nor did they melt back into the mist. They stayed where they were, motionless almost lost and unknown.

She crept forward as a hunter.

And as she came towards them, like figures in a dream the shapes revealed themselves. With a slight gasp of relief, she saw that they were statues, no more than statues. But they were strange statues: squat, rounded, colourful and weirdly childlike.

Despite herself, she smiled, reached out and touched the painted surface of the nearest one: it was ice cold to the touch. For a moment she studied it: the statue of a unicorn, its paint chipped and worn but with eyes that were big and round, black on white and edged with red and gold. The twisted horn of this abandoned unicorn had been broken near the

top, and the carved mane, once purest white, was stained with mud and the touch of many little hands.

She smiled again, but unwilling to be distracted, and then straightened and looked around. What was this place?

As the breeze rose and the mist stirred and swirled, more shapes appeared. Some she recognised, some she didn't, and those that she recognised were only vague memories from books that she had found among piles of rubbish in empty houses on empty streets: an elephant, a camel, a zebra with one leg missing, and a crocodile with a carved seat moulded onto its back.

At last the sun pushed through the gloom, glowing like a mirror of polished pearl and making dull shadows beneath the silent figures.

Anna-Seka of the College of Scouts, lifted her sword and rested it across her shoulder. Was this a temple, or was it a burial place? She shook her head. No one would bury their dead like this, nor would they gather priests here and make sacrifice.

A branch cracked, and she looked to her left. Out of the melting mist something living appeared. It was a deer, a young deer, dappled with the coat of early spring and wide-eyed to see a stranger in its world. They stared at each other: human and forest creature in a lost world of statues. And then in a moment the deer was gone, searching out the grey cloak of mist with a turning step and a toss of its head. Gone.

'Well, there goes supper,' muttered the young scout and crouched down for a moment. She peered into the tree-lined edge of this abandoned and mysterious place she had come across. There was, she thought, always a chance another deer might choose to stray across her path. Slipping her sword back into its scabbard, she un-slung the bow from across her shoulder, took an arrow from the quiver at her hip, and carefully nocked it.

How long she waited, she could not tell, but she did not relax the bow until the mist had risen to the tree tops. Slowly it broke up, drifting like skeins of silk among the jagged spires of the shattered towers of decaying concrete that lay beyond. Nothing.

She sighed, straightened once more, and for just a moment, leaned on the bow stave.

It was that slight movement that saved her life.

The barb-tipped bolt that had been fired at her head, grazed the back

of her neck, struck the unicorn high on the shoulder in a shower of plaster chips, and careened away into the gloom. With the skill of practised reflex, Anna-Seka sprang to one side, reached again for an arrow, and raised her bow. But even as she did so, she knew that it was hopeless. Several figures had appeared from the tree line. They were all armed with cross-bows, and all making ready to let fly. There was not much time.

Slowly, deliberately, Anna-Seka lowered her bow, then sank to one knee. She raised one hand in the sign of peace, paused, then put her finger to her lips. It was a movement that she hoped would be instantly recognised by these outlanders and might even save her life: the sign of a stranger come in friendship.

Outlanders or Stainers: that was what these bowmen were. They were members of the strange and scattered tribe that dwelt outside the great city in the wild and desolate region men called the Stain Kingdom. One of them stepped forward as she waited: a giant of a man, but stooped and ragged, with a straggled beard and a gaunt chiselled face that had seen more than a score of seasons of sun and rain and snow. He gazed at the woman in front of him.

‘What brings ye here?’ he said, his voice heavy with the local dialect, common among outlanders.

‘Give me your name, and I’ll give you my name and my reason,’ replied Anna, trying to keep her voice steady.

The man smiled. ‘It’s my bolt that nearly knocked your pretty head off those shoulders of yor’n,’ he replied. ‘I think ye owe me your name before I give you mine.’

Anna did not return the smile, but she sensed herself to be safer than she was a moment ago. ‘My name is Anna-Seka,’ she said. ‘I am a scout of the Great City.’

The man shrugged. ‘A viper, then, and come to rob poor folks of what little they have among these ruins.’

Anna frowned. ‘I steal from no man. We are sent to find that which is abandoned and bring word to our masters. This is a lost city. No one owns it.’

‘Aye, but we live near it.’ The man turned to gesture towards the men and the woman who waited behind him, and Anna saw the tell-tale stain running across his neck.

Anna nodded. 'Then that is well. We are taught and trained not to take from those folk we may come across, and to leave them in peace.'

The man gave a harsh guttural laugh, secretly taken by her unexpected beauty. 'Well, they do not teach ye very well, lassie. Only last week we came back from a hunt to find that our stores had been raided, and half of our grain supplies taken.'

'They were scouts from the City?'

'They were, and as my name is Bepsi of the Loca clan, we caught up with them before they reached the crossing point.' He frowned. 'We made them pay a price they won't forget.'

'You killed them?'

The man shrugged. 'I'm not sure, but they carried away three of their number on their backs, and left our grain where it should lie.'

Anna frowned. She had heard only yesterday that one of the city patrols had been ambushed near the Crossing. 'I steal from no man,' she repeated.

The man smiled again. 'I can tell from your eye that you are telling the truth, Anna-Seka, and that will be enough to make sure that you live to breathe another day.' He laughed again, but without bitterness. 'Faith! For some strange reason I am glad now that I missed ye!' He paused. 'Where are ye bound?'

Anna looked around. 'Well, I'm not sure where I am, so I've no idea where I'm going.'

To her surprise, all the Stain folk laughed. And then the man called Bepsi-Loca came forward and offered her his hand. 'Come with us, lassie. We've a camp nearby, and food to share. You've no business out here, wandering around on your own. This is a cursed place, and only the cursed stay here.'

Anna took his hand. It was a firm, calloused grasp. 'I have been in other cities and waste spaces before, but I have never seen such a place as this. What was it?'

The man shook his head and turned again to wave the other folk forward. 'We are not sure, but we think that children once, long ago, played here. We have found their toys and dolls scattered about, and even a cradle on wheels. It was all twisted up and half buried.' He pointed. 'Just over there.'

Anna shrugged. 'Nothing worth the taking, then?'

'Aye, a forsaken place.' Bepsi-Loca smiled. 'A good place to leave, and better to forget. If you are looking for things to take, we can show you.'

Anna paused. 'Not far from here?'

'Far enough to know that we will be left in peace, but close enough to make it worth your while,' the man replied. He put his fingers to his lips and whistled:

'Nike! Come here now, and bring Leviss with you.'

A young woman with a lad perhaps slightly older at her side, came forward. Their crossbows were slung from their hips, and their studded leather tunics were crossed by baldrics worked with silver-gilt wire. Anna could not help but notice that their hair was unwashed and tangled, and their knee length boots almost covered leggings that were torn and ragged, but they walked together with a stride that would have matched any guardsman: even one from the High Citadel.

'A brother and a sister?' she asked.

Bepsi grinned and nodded. 'Little demons from the day that they could walk,' he replied, 'but born hunters from the first year of their youth.'

They came, bowed together, straightened and smiled.

'Uncle,' said the young woman, 'What's to do?'

'Well, first show yourself civil and give your hand to our visitor, Anna-Seka from the great city. She has lost her way, and is looking for something to take back home to her masters.'

For a moment the girl named Nike, scowled, but then she suddenly brightened. 'Can we play a trick on her, uncle, and lead her into the Badlands, and leave her there for the Wasters?' She glanced at Anna as she spoke and cheerfully winked:

'Do not fear, Anna-Seka. You are safe with us. A friend of my uncle is also mine.' She turned again to Bepsi. 'There are some strange mechanical things in the Glass Tunnel down by the Water Pit three stadia beyond those high towers.' She pointed. 'We could be there in two hours, and back in time for supper.'

'Is that so?' Bepsi frowned even as he smiled. 'Well, I'll take a reach to the left beyond the precinct and meet you on the other side somewhere between here and home. Make sure you are clear of the iron thickets by sundown. We've lost folk there before y'know.'

Nike nodded. 'Don't worry, uncle,' she said. 'We won't be taking any risks.' She waved as the man called Bepsi-Loca moved away and then she glanced at Anna. 'Are ye handy with that bow?' she asked.

'Handy enough,' replied Anna, and without pausing she reached for her bow. In an instant an arrow was nocked. She lifted the bow in one smooth movement and let it fly. On the other side of the open space where there was a low brick wall, a large buck hare was just about to clear the wall and hop away into the undergrowth. The arrow struck it at the base of the neck and it was dead before it flopped to the ground.

The Stain Folk stared for a moment. 'You'll do,' said Nike, and she gave her brother a wink. 'What d'ye think, Levis?'

Leviss grinned. 'I think I know nothing more than what we're having for supper,' he said. 'Come on, let's be going.'

An hour later, Anna-Seka found herself on the eastern side of the city. She scarcely knew how. The two young outlanders had led her on a narrow, twisting and almost hidden route. They had stayed away from the main streets, tracked across piles of rubble, made their way through the lower floors of abandoned buildings, and found their way along narrow, winding alleyways and covered passages. Twice they went down broken concrete steps into the darkness of subways lined with ancient tiles that curved above their heads and glistened with water. Strange lettering decorated the walls, and coils of thick and coloured wiring hung from the ceiling, or trailed across the broad hallways. Once they climbed down onto a narrow iron-railed track and followed it into a tunnel for a short distance before Nike thought better of it and ordered them back. 'Wild folk live down there,' she had muttered. 'I can smell them.'

It was a relief to Anna when at last they made their way back to the surface and found themselves in a kind of open square lined with bare trees, and strewn with rubbish.

'Not far now,' said Leviss. 'The iron thickets are just ahead. Mind how you go now, and not a word.'

Anna had been in other quarters of this city, but she had never come this far, nor seen anything like 'the iron thickets': it was a wall of twisted metal, about two spear lengths in height, and stretching at least a hundred yards either side of where they had emerged.

'What is it?' she asked.

Leviss shrugged. 'Who knows,' he said, 'but if you look closely you can see wheels in among the wreckage, and cables, and ribbed panels and all sorts of strange things.'

Anna-Seka gazed at the metal hedge. 'It once moved,' she said slowly. 'See, those iron bars, held by wooden beams? They make a road for it. Just like we saw in the tunnel back there.'

'You think so?' Leviss put his head on one side, studied the wreckage and smiled. 'Well, whatever it is, or was, it's nothing but a nuisance now. We have to climb through and over it to get where we are going. Don't touch those cables, by the way. They have something in them that will strike you down, and burn you up from the inside.'

'And sometimes even the iron itself,' added Nike. 'Only touch what I tell you to. Leave the rest alone.'

Anna swallowed hard. 'Lead on,' she said.

It took them half an hour to work their way through the thicket, a distance of no more than twenty paces. Twice Nike had to shout a warning when Anna was about to reach out and grab a steel girder, and twice they had to stop while Leviss checked some cables and moved them to one side with the butt of his spear.

But at last they emerged safely on the other side and found themselves in an open yard with a large building on one side.

'Are you all right?' asked Nike, offering her hand to Anna as she stepped beyond the last of the iron entanglements.

Anna nodded. 'Thank you,' she said. 'We never did anything like that in training.'

'Training?'

Anna unslung her bow, and looked around. 'Yes,' she said, 'training. Every scout from the Great City, from Serenity itself, must undergo a year's training in the School or College for Scouts. After that we are each assigned a mentor, an experienced scout who will take us on our first patrol, and thereafter be our constant companion and closest friend.'

Nike raised her eyebrows. 'But your mentor, he is not here now?'

Anna shrugged. 'He may be, he may be not, but he will know exactly where I am.'

The outlander girl gave a short laugh. 'Is he a magician then? Some sort of wizard from the olden times?'

Anna shook her head. 'It does not work like that.' She paused. 'I cannot explain. It's difficult to understand, but,' and here she hesitated, 'it is all about friendship, and training, and trust.'

Leviss, who was impatient to move on, tapped his spear on the ground. 'We need to get going,' he said. Without waiting for a reply, he began to move away across the yard, and the others followed him. He pushed on ahead, looking to left and right, and walking steadily with a slight crouch and spear held at his hip. Nike came alongside Anna:

'This mentor you speak of, what is he named.'

For a moment, Anna hesitated then she replied:

'He is called Hartley, lord Hartley and there is no better scout in all of Serenity. He is to me as a father. I would follow him anywhere.'

Nike shrugged. 'But here you are now, all on your own and following two strangers into the heart of you know not where.'

Anna did not reply at first.

But as they approached a line of battered, rusting vehicles, she nocked an arrow once more, paused and then spoke: 'Lord Hartley sent me on this mission. He knows the risks, but he also knows me. He would not have sent me if he thought I was not up to it.'

'I would like to meet this Hartley. Is he like our warlords, do you think?'

Anna had heard of the northern warlords. They were fierce warrior-leaders of the stain-folk and outlanders and they ruled over different areas of the stain-lands. There were five chief warlords, called the Big Five, and they ruled the lesser warlords who in turn ruled over the folk below them. Although they never tried to come near Serenity itself, they resisted any groups from the city who came into their territory. She thought for a moment:

'Hartley is not a warlord, but he is a man of high honour and status within the city. My parents told me I was very lucky that my name had been chosen to be mentored by lord Hartley. Names are always chosen by ballot. There is no personal favouritism or special influence when scouts are assigned their mentors.'

Nike shrugged again and then gave a low whistle. Leviss turned round. She raised one finger, and he replied with three, then went on. Nike smiled. 'Three more stadia until we arrive,' she muttered. They walked on

together past the vehicles, some of which were burnt out, and made their way down a broad street between two towering buildings.

‘Our warlord is Delsea,’ she suddenly said.

‘I have heard his name, but I have never seen him.’

Nike knelt down, studied some tracks that ran across the dust covering the tarmac, and then straightened: ‘It is better to hear of him, than to see him,’ she said quietly. ‘Much better.’

‘You keep out of his way then?’

‘I doubt if he knows we exist, Anna-Seka.’ Nike studied the flawless beauty of the woman in front of her: she was so like a child, and so unlike any of the folk that Nike knew. ‘He rules this area with an iron fist, but he pays tribute to the great warlord: Chesterman,’ she added.

‘Tribute?’

‘Aye, taxes: mostly in form of food and weapons, but sometimes in the form of military service. Such a service has not come to our village in my lifetime, but every year the lots are cast, and a village is chosen to send their young men and women to the stain capital.’ She stopped for a moment, scanned the area in front and behind them, and then gestured to Anna to walk on. ‘Once there, in the city, we call it the Burgh or Brokinburgh, they are taken through a training and selection programme. The lucky ones are chosen to join the outlander army that Chesterman himself leads.’

‘And the rest are allowed to return?’

Nike frowned. ‘Those who have managed to survive are allowed to return home.’ She glanced at the sun as it dipped lower, throwing deep shadows across the street. ‘Last year, the settlement next to us sent thirty of their young people to the city. Seven returned.’

‘That is a heavy price,’ said Anna, watching as Leviss just ahead of them, gave a wave and disappeared down a narrow alleyway.

Nike shrugged. ‘There is no alternative. That is the price, and it is the price we pay to keep these lands safe. It has always been so.’

‘Ever since the Great Burning, the time that the sky caught fire and the lands melted,’ replied Anna quietly.

‘Just so,’ said Nike. ‘The Burning was a day of fury and a time of madness, as my father used to say. My grandmother told me that the sea itself boiled and the deepest lakes and rivers ran dry.’

‘Perhaps it is just a legend,’ said Anna as they entered the alleyway. Leviss was silhouetted at the alley-end, about thirty yards ahead.

With a shake of her head, Nike put her hand to a half-scorched wall of broken brick and cracked plaster. It crumbled to her touch. ‘Myth or legend or history, it matters not. Whatever happened, there was fire and this is what it has left us.’ She paused. ‘Come on! I don’t want Levis to get too far ahead. This place is not safe.’

They did not catch up with Levis until they had cleared the buildings of the wide street, and found themselves in a strange parkland. Most of the trees had been reduced to blackened stumps, and what bushes that remained were little more than dried and stunted patches of undergrowth. But it was what lay beyond the parkland that caught Anna’s eye. It was a large, tunnel-like building made of glass and iron. It gleamed in the fading light, and its soaring, polished sides appeared perfectly preserved.

Anna stopped. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said.

Levis, who had stopped to let the other two catch up, laughed. ‘Well, you should understand,’ he said. ‘It was built by your people, and not so long ago neither.’

Anna stared. ‘A resource centre!’ she said. ‘It’s a resource centre.’

‘Hah! Is that what ye call it? We called it the Eater, ‘cos that what it does or used to do.’ He smiled at the girl’s confusion, and yet he still wondered at the smooth perfection of her face and form. ‘Your people from your city came here about ten years ago,’ he went on. ‘They built this monster and sucked the land dry hereabouts until we drove them out.’

Anna looked around. ‘There was fighting here?’

‘Aye, but before my time. I was too young to serve, but my father and brothers fought in Delsea’s legion. One brother did not come home, and my father was wounded, but when the fighting was done, this land was ours once more and your Serenity had crept back to lick its wounds.’ He raised his spear as if saluting the Glass Tunnel. ‘There are strange machines in there,’ he said, ‘All smashed, but still strange. No one goes there now.’

‘Except us?’ Anna-Seka smiled nervously.

Levis chuckled. ‘Are we no one? I think not. We are the children of Delsea. Besides, we have a daughter of Serenity to guide us.’ He glanced at Nike. ‘Shall we press on, sister? The day is slipping away on us.’

Nike sighed. 'It has taken us longer than I would have liked, but there is little point in turning back now. Besides, once we clear the Tunnel, there's an easier route home by the Water Pit, and we might still make it before sunset.'

The entrance to the Glass Tunnel was partly blocked by a fallen tree and the wreck of a burnt-out bus, but with Leviss leading the way they squeezed between the obstructions, pushed open the entrance-door and entered.

Although it was still light outside, the interior of the building was almost lost in shadow. A heavy, damp gloom pushed out from the depths of the tunnel despite the huge glass ceiling, and the high, over-arching pillars of polished steel. The first thing Anna noticed was the smooth, ice-white floor, strewn with debris but still gleaming softly in the shadowy light. And then as her eyes adjusted, she saw the familiar shapes of processors, generators and storage silos. She looked around uncertainly. It was just like being in one of the giant Resource Centres that lay just beyond the great city itself. During her training programme she and other recruits had visited such places. And she remembered the time when Hartley was mentoring her only a year ago: he had taken her to one of the larger centres that lay many miles from Serenity. It was far from the city but still came within the borders of the Safe Lands in the northern province of the kingdom. She had not enjoyed that day.

'These are your reason for living,' Hartley had said to her as he showed her around the machines. 'Such machines cannot supply Serenity with processed resources, unless the college scouts tell Rebuild where to find the raw materials. You find them, you report back, and the working parties will retrieve them.'

Anna-Seka remembered how many folk there were in that particular Resource Centre, working quietly around each machine and so intent on what they were doing that they seemed almost unaware of her presence, and only ever looked up when Hartley spoke to them. The air was filled with the gentle hum of the generators, and the deep rumble of trolleys weighed down with materials and being pushed or dragged by teams of white-coated workers. They looked, all of them, hollow-eyed and weary. She felt uneasy and did not like what she saw, but accepted what her mentor had told her, even if she promised herself that she would try and avoid

entering such a place again.

But here she was now, on her own except for two stain-folk, and standing in the heart of an abandoned Resource Centre. It was like being in a tomb.

‘Any use to you?’ asked Nike.

Anna hesitated. ‘I never knew that we had built centres so deep in the ...’

Nike smiled. ‘The stain-lands? Yes, don’t worry. We know what we are, and what you think of us.’

For just a moment, Nike and her brother noticed how the girl blushed and dipped her head. ‘I am sorry,’ she said.

‘Ah, don’t be lassie!’ laughed Leviss, still fascinated by her unmarked complexion, but at the same time seeing in front of him someone who was in so many ways just like them.

‘There’s nothing to be ashamed of,’ he went on, ‘we are who we are, and that ain’t gonna change. Some of us outlanders were born this way, and some of us had the stain come upon them when they were younger and living as citizens of Serenity itself.’ He paused. ‘And before you ask, both of us here were born as stain-folk, but our parents were from the great city.’

Again, Anna-reddened. ‘That must be difficult,’ she said quietly.

‘Hah! There you go again! Apologising, and ducking that sweet head of yours. Look up now, and tell me what you see. My sister and I don’t say sorry to no one, and don’t expect the same from anyone else neither.’ He grinned. ‘but if you catch us staring at ye for longer than we should, it’s perhaps because we t’aint seen anyone like ye before.’

Anna looked away, looked back, and smiled. ‘Let’s check those machines,’ she said.

Even as she spoke, unknown to any of them, a silent watcher was studying the entrance to the Glass Tunnel, and the doorway they had just entered.

He also was a scout, but not of Serenity. His forehead carried the stain, and his armour and weapons set him apart as a soldier of one of the higher warlords. He also carried something not often seen, a spy glass, and it was this he had been using when he spotted Anna, Nike and Leviss crossing the open ground towards the Glass Tunnel.

‘My lord Chesterman will be interested in this,’ he muttered, easing himself to a better position behind the pile of discarded rubbish, and putting the spyglass to his eye once more. He could just make out the shadows of the three scouts moving about in the Glass Tunnel. The evening sun caught the sheets of polished glass and lit the interior of the tunnel for at least part of its length. He watched and he waited. The minutes crept by, and then the shadows all at once disappeared.

Cursing under his breath, the stain-scout stood up. ‘What are these kids up to now?’ he muttered to himself, and picking up his crossbow, set off down the mound of debris where he had taken up position, and headed for the entranceway to the tunnel. He had to go carefully. The sloping mound moved under his steps, and all sorts of broken and abandoned rubbish threatened to trap his ankles, or wrap itself around his boots. And he knew that if the others heard him coming, they would either put an arrow in his chest, or vanish away into the depths of this building they were exploring.

He reached the doorway, slipped a feathered bolt into his crossbow, and eased the cable back. A soft click told him it was ready. Taking a deep breath, he entered the Glass Tunnel.

All was quiet within. And still. He knelt down and put his ear to the floor, listening for the sound of distant footfalls. There was nothing.

Working his way carefully between the machines, he peered into the darkness looking for any clues that might tell him where these strangers were now, or where they were headed. But there was not a sound, not the least movement, and not even the distant echo of booted feet, nothing that would tell him of their presence. And so for a time that was longer than he was comfortable with, he stood stock still and waited. The gloom deepened, and the dust hung like golden curtains over the machines in the last copper glimmer of sunset.

‘They’ve taken the dark way,’ the scout whispered to himself. He knew he should follow, but he feared to. The dangers of the outside world he could endure, and even look to be part of, but not the deep, dark fastness of the Tunnel. He should light a torch, he knew that, but it would only give away his presence, and make him an easy target for an unseen crossbow, or a sudden dagger thrust. ‘Well, all right,’ he thought to himself and stepped back, ‘I will report back to my lord Chesterman. I lost them in the

Tunnel, but they must come out on the great eastern road, and we have scouts aplenty on that route.'

He glanced around again. The machines slept, the light of day was all but gone, and it was time to leave.

Even as the stain-scout left the Glass Tunnel and cut away across the barren parkland and into the night, Nike led Leviss and Anna-Seka up the long flight of steps that led to the far exit.

'We're here,' she said.

Anna shook her head. 'You must have eyes like a cat. I couldn't see a thing back there.'

Nike smiled. 'Perhaps that is why they call me Missy Cat,' she said. 'I sometimes think I see better in the night than I do in the day.' She put her hand on the polished handle of the door. 'Watch how you go now. This quarter is not always friendly. Chesterman counts this area as his and his alone. He does not take kindly to intruders, whether stain-folk like himself, or people of the Great City.'

'Aye,' whispered Leviss coming up alongside them. 'The beautiful people can expect no mercy if they fall into the hands of our lord Chesterman.'

Anna-Seka frowned. 'And yet you have befriended me. Why?'

Leviss shrugged. 'You interest me,' he said. 'You're the first creature of Serenity I've seen close up, and . . .'

'And likely the last, if you keep wittering,' hissed Nike. 'Come on! We can't stay here any longer. The Eastern Road will be watched for sure, so we must keep to the shadows and move quickly. The moon will be rising soon, and the road we must take will be lit for miles.'

They left the Tunnel, followed a sloping track-way between two ruined buildings, and then skirted a large pool, inky black beneath the dark sky. For the first time that day, Anna felt tired and hungry. Perhaps it was because there was at last the prospect of safety, and a warm fire and a meal among folk she could almost trust. She wasn't sure of anything in this place, but if her sudden weariness dragged at her legs, her hunger spurred her on. She followed after Nike, with Leviss close behind, keeping a watch in case they were being tracked, or had been spotted by wild folk or some hostile scouts.

At last with the Glass Tunnel far behind them and the large pool now lost in the darkness, they moved shadow-like along the empty streets,

turning this way and that as Nike led them steadily east, then north east and finally on a direct line with the pole star which gleamed above them. All was quiet, except for the occasional call of a hoot owl, and once the faint sound of scrabbling as a jackal darted away in front of them and disappeared.

With the moon now rising bright and full against a star-pocked sky, they hugged the edges of the buildings, and crept along beneath any awnings or covered ways they came across. Glass from shattered windows was strewn across the pavements in this quarter of the city, and it slowed their pace as they stepped carefully to avoid making any noise and drawing attention to their passing. Then, with the second hour of night almost passed, they cleared the broken canyons of high-rise buildings and found themselves in an abandoned, low-roofed suburb of ruined houses.

‘Another mile and we’re home,’ whispered Nike, and Anna-Seka gasped with relief. At least, she told herself as they pushed on past battered shop-fronts and burned out homes, she would have something to show Hartley and the resources committee for her latest reconnaissance: the position of The Glass Tunnel, and the state of the machinery still intact inside it. If she made it back safely, that is. Otherwise, she would just be another scout that had disappeared without trace in the wastelands of the northern kingdom.

For it was true that not all scouts returned from such expeditions, and there were occasions when whole patrols simply vanished and were never seen or heard of again. Although Serenity itself was safe behind its multi-walled defences and watch-towers, the border-regions had never been less than dangerous, and the interior of Stain-land was seen as a continual threat. The king of Serenity, as ever, was confident of ‘ultimate victory’ over the warlords of the Stain-kingdom. He constantly assured the people of this in his feast-day speeches, and the courtiers and palace officials were practised at seeming calm and confident as they moved about the city, But everyone knew that despite the northern wars, there was a single ominous threat which hung over every citizen of Serenity and led to a constant but unspoken fear: the stain-plague. Or put more simply: the Stain.

No one, high-born or low-born was immune to that disease, and although it was rare within the boundaries of the kingdom, there was not a citizen, young or old, who was not aware that it could strike at any time

and without warning. Once a stain appeared on the surface of the skin, there was no cure, and therefore no prospect of recovery. And accordingly, no treatment was offered to those unfortunate enough to catch this plague. The worst affliction, of course, was the stain that appeared on the face or neck, visible to all and instantly recognizable. But any stain was bound to be found out at the compulsory health checks held every six weeks. The reaction of the authorities was always swift. The sufferer was sent for diagnosis by medical staff, then committed to an official trial. The court judges always delivered the same sentence. It was not a death sentence, but the alternative was almost as bad: instant and summary imprisonment or sometimes banishment without right of appeal. All property became the property of the state, and all relatives were themselves likely to suffer long term quarantine within the massive prison complex beneath the central tower of Serenity itself.

The victim, if banished, was given three days rations, escorted to the borderlands by a small detachment of the security forces and abandoned to the barren emptiness of Stain-land, or the outlands.

It had always been that way and, as Anna-Seka had been taught from her youth, it would always continue to be so. It was a question of beauty. Beauty was the touchstone of virtue and therefore beauty must be protected at all costs. ‘The beauty of the city, is the beauty of its people’ as one of the official mottos read: the same motto which was inscribed on the walls of the civic temple, and over the gates of the imperial palace. At the entrances to the schools, universities and colleges another motto was often seen: ‘Power is beauty, and beauty is power.’

All honour lay in beauty, and every citizen’s duty was to defend and uphold that honour. It was enshrined in law, and most perfectly expressed in the presence of the king himself, and the royal family.

Anna had always understood that, and along with her sister and her cousins had always accepted it without question. But ever since she had become a scout, and particularly since she had been brought under the mentorship of Hartley, she had come to see that the world was not as simple and straightforward a place as she had at first believed.

After all, the stain-folk themselves had for the most part originally been citizens of Serenity, or at least their ancestors had been so. And they were not like the wild folk, not totally alien and hostile. They were simply

abandoned, cast off, rejected, and spilled into the outlands: that strange country she herself had been sent to scout. So, here she was now, in the company of stain-folk, dependent on them, trusting in them, and even admitting to somehow liking them. Well, almost.

A sudden sound brought Anna out of her thoughts. Ahead of her, Nike had given a low whistle, and stopped, half crouched, with her crossbow raised. Leviss knelt and waved Anna down. Moments later, he looked beyond Nike, then raised three fingers and smiled.

‘They have come for us,’ he said. As he spoke, three figures emerged out of the darkness. It was Bepsi-Loca and two other stain folk. They carried their spears at the hip, and their bows were slung across their shoulders.

‘You’re late,’ said Bepsi, smiling as he came up to them. ‘Mother has kept the soup cooking longer than she would wish, and the fire has no more than two hours left unless I can persuade these idle nephews of mine to go and scavenge some more wood.’

Nike gave her uncle a hug, stepped back and nodded to the other two men. ‘We were delayed,’ she said. ‘at the Glass Tunnel.’

Bepsi-Loca grunted. ‘That’s no place to idle about in,’ he said. ‘The whole area is crawling with Chesterman’s scouts.’

‘Is that so, uncle? Well we didn’t see one, did we, Anna-Seka?’

Anna smiled. ‘Is camp far?’ she asked.

For just a moment, Bepsi gazed at her. ‘You look tired, lassie,’ he said. ‘Come on! It’s not far, and there’s food in the pot, and a warm bed awaiting ye. It’s little enough, but it’s home, and we are happy to share it with you.’

CHAPTER #2

THE FEAST

THE KING
COURT #0



Meanwhile, far away across the vast and trackless wastes of the borderlands and beyond The Fence and the plains of the southern kingdom to the great city of Serenity itself all seemed to be peaceful. If you stood on the outer walls of that city and looked inwards to its heart you would be able to make out in the upper distance, the many-towered spires of the palace all brightly lit for the evening watch and hung with flags and banners.

Today was a feast day. It was a feast day in honour of the king, and many of the important nobles had been invited to the palace to help the king celebrate.

Although the king, renowned of course for his beauty, was respected and loved by many of his people, it was only on rare occasions that he appeared in public. On such occasions, his appearances were only brief, and usually to give a prepared speech, or award medals and decorations to members of his council, the armed forces or perhaps the security services. He was something of a recluse, isolated in his exclusive royal apartments, and even if there were few who dared to doubt his power and authority, there were a significant number among the highest rank of citizenry who whispered that he had perhaps passed the best of his days. As long as anyone could remember, the throne room remained empty, except for the ceremonial guardsmen who stood before the throne itself. But no one talked of abdication, or if they did it was in secret. Any criticism of the king invited arrest at the hands of the secret police, the feared Triple S.

As for the rest of the royal family, they had for the most part disappeared from public view, and only the upper courts of the city knew what had befallen them.

But today was a happy day. It was a feast day, called as it was every year to celebrate the last great battle. It was a battle which had seen the defeat of the enemy, and the destruction of the Old Town all those centuries ago. And with that victory had come the dawning of the age of Serenity. Of all the feast days, it was the only one to rank above Glam Gel Day: the feast which honoured GlamTech and celebrated the discovery of the apparently miraculous formulation that had transformed the lives of almost every citizen of Serenity. While the common folk would celebrate any feast day as best they could with gatherings in market squares and food and drink shared from house to house, the higher ranks were re-

quired to attend more formal events held within the precinct of the palace itself. The activities went on for most of the day with displays by military bands, teams of marching girls, and choruses of specially trained singers all dressed in white robes. There were also strictly organised dances where dozens of competitors from each district whirled and pirouetted in elaborate routines before a panel of grey-masked and velvet-cloaked judges.

In Upper Town, which was divided into the different 'courts of the nobles', separate ceremonies took place, designed to celebrate and emphasise the differences between each 'court'. It was here that the relative strength and influence of the great 'colleges' of Litra, Rebuild and Glamtech were most on show. The rivalry was obvious, and each college strove to make its presence felt, but the singular dominance of Glam Tech was difficult to miss. It was even suspected that the king and his royal officials encouraged that rivalry, while making sure that no one college became too powerful in its own right. The pre-eminent status of Glam Tech, however, was perhaps no better indicated than in the unexplained and unchallenged determination of the senior technician of Glam Tech, lord Shadwatch, to go everywhere without a mask.

The wearing of masks by all citizens was written into law, and rigidly enforced with only one or two statutory exceptions. For example, if a member of the nobility was a contestant in an 'outshining', he did not wear a mask, and this always caused a stir of interest and gossip. Everyone was keen to see a celebrity unmasked, and an outshining was just such an opportunity. Also, at a particular event known as the 'day of the domes', nobles and celebrities appeared unmasked for a short time within the protective shelter of glass domes. Their 'beauty ratings' could then be observed, discussed and of course, admired by the normal citizenry who were encouraged to buy tickets for such events. Teams of officials called 'Graders' visited every house at least once a year to assess every citizen's rank and beauty. 'Re-gradings' were not uncommon, and certified in law. And the mask was a symbol and badge of rank within the city.

But lord Shadwatch went everywhere unmasked, and no one, not even the security services or imperial police tried to intervene or arrest him. And no one was ever heard to comment. It was simply accepted, even though the mask was perhaps the pre-eminent symbol of Serenity and its declared independence.

Now, on this particular feast day, the factories were closed for one full shift and only the military units tasked with manning the defences of the city remained on duty. Street vendors in their merchant-masks roamed the crowded squares and high lanes selling all kinds of food and drink, as well as trinkets, silks and precious spices from unknown places far beyond the walls of Serenity.

As expected the weather was fine, but if you had climbed to the topmost tower of the palace citadel and looked to the north and west, you would have been able to see in the distance, on certain days, a dark and lowering cloud that hung over a high mountain on the borders of the Stain kingdom or outlands. It was from seasonal scrub fires, lit to keep the immediate area north of The Fence clear of vegetation. Today was such a day. But that did not dampen the spirits of the people of Serenity. Especially the spirits of those of the highest rank lucky enough to have received an invitation to the Royal Feast to be held in the great banqueting hall of the imperial palace that very night.

To be invited was a great honour. To attend was a great privilege. To be looked upon by the king, for even an instant, was a memory to be treasured. But to be spoken to by the king was a dream that few beyond the inner circle of the court ever realised.

And so when the trumpets sounded at sunset from the speakers on the ramparts of the imperial palace, the guests in all their careful finery and matchless beauty (but with their faces concealed and protected by masks according to rank and to law) made their way from the outer wards. They passed through the Lion Gates, across the Court of Peace and into the elevators which led to the closely guarded sanctuary of the palace-basilica itself.

Normally – and this was a long standing tradition – masks were to be worn throughout any royal feast, despite the impossibility of eating or drinking while wearing a mask. Food was always served, and it was always of the highest quality, but it was only there to act as a symbol of royal wealth and generosity. It always remained untouched throughout the feast, and guests had to content themselves with the pleasures of conversation and occasional entertainment.

Every so often, however, this tradition was suspended at the discretion of the king. No explanation was ever given, and the announcement was

always made at the last minute.

And so on this particular day the guests arrived as usual in their festival finery and masked for the feast. However, some of the more favoured guests had already heard, by messages discreetly passed to them by senior officials of the royal household, that indeed on this night at this particular feast, the king had issued a 'feasting decree'. He decreed that when the feast commenced no masks were to be worn: for a period of no less than thirty minutes, and for no longer than an hour.

At every gate, at every entrance way, at every turn of a corridor or crossing of a bridge, the guests had to have their palms checked and the rankings of their masks verified by members of the Serene Security Service or Triple S. At this point they were then told that this particular feast was to be mask free. Accordingly, all food served at the feasting tables could be eaten. Of course it was seen as only a formality, but all was excitement, chatter and smiles as one by one, or in husband-and-wife pairs, the guests, with their masks now temporarily removed – according to the announced protocol of the palace for this particular feast - made their way to the outer reception area of the banqueting hall itself. There they assembled, and waited in hushed expectation for the moment when the high chancellor of the Chancellery and the supreme head of Glamtech (the developer and manufacturer of Glam Gel) invited them to enter and take their places. At last the members of the inner court arrived, nodding to the waiting guests as they filed past them and into the hall. After them, came the high officials of Litra and Rebuild, the academic and engineering colleges of the Serene Kingdom, and second only to Glam Tech. Then, when all were received, the chancellor resplendent in his robes of office, and escorted by two torch bearers arrived and gave a short speech of welcome. Moments later they were all seated about the long table in the centre of the glittering chamber called the 'high banqueting hall'.

The golden chair at the head of the table remained empty: the king would arrive later. At a signal from the Governor of the Feast, servants brought the first course, while musicians seated to one side on a raised platform, quietly played traditional harvest songs and country tunes. For a long time, no one spoke. Everyone knew the procedure. Only the king could break the silence, and the king was not present.

Nor was the queen present. The queen had not been at a royal function

for some considerable time. Nor had she been seen outside the palace precinct. Nor within it.

The queen had gone, disappeared, vanished. And she had vanished along with her children and immediate family. But no one dared speak of this: certainly not within earshot of the king or his officials. Rumours abounded in the lower quarters of the city, but within the Upper Town and the palace precincts it was well known what had happened: the queen had been arrested, put on trial and exiled. Some claimed a worse fate had befallen the queen, but such stories were simply not believed. Not even the king would allow such a punishment. The queen had been exiled to a remote corner of the kingdom: that was customarily agreed among the nobility, most of whom knew exactly where she was, but there were few who dared to talk about it in public.

But, back to this particular feast:

The second course came and went. The musicians played on. The mask free edict was still in place. A certain nervousness grew among the guests, even as they ate: hushed whispers, sidelong glances, and an awkward stirring in seats. Only towards the head of the table, where the highest officials sat, was there an atmosphere of relaxed calm. And those guests, at the lower end of the same table, if they dared to glance towards the golden chair, would have noticed a particularly beautiful couple, a young man and woman, sitting opposite each other. The woman, of noble birth, was called Taessa. She was the daughter of Akton, the high chancellor. Even among the courtiers, her flawless beauty was renowned. Her name, in the ancient tongue, meant 'Sunrise', and her family was well-known and honoured throughout Serenity. The man, also a noble, was called Barvarik, a name popular in certain quarters of the upper town. He was known and well spoken of among the upper circle of courtiers, and his reputation rested on his prowess as a warrior. His name meant 'Strikes like a bear', but his tall, angular frame belied such a title. It was only the fierce light in his jet black eyes that revealed the measure of this soldier, and his strength. But now, as he leaned forward, cradling his wine cup and gazing at the woman opposite him, he whispered softly to her as if to someone he held in deep affection. And there was only gentleness in his expression.

It was a gaze that she returned, and anyone close enough to where they were sitting could tell at a glance that they were very much in love.

‘Our Talessa has lost her heart to that young man,’ whispered the high chancellor to his wife, as he flashed yet another look towards the doors to see if the king had arrived.

‘And he to her,’ replied his wife, hiding her comment behind her napkin.

There was no more time to reflect on this, for she had no sooner spoken than there was a sudden, crisp blast of megaphone speakers, the main doors swung open and the king at last entered the banqueting hall, escorted by his bodyguard. He wore no mask.

Everyone stood, saluted with right hand to left breast, and bowed their heads as the king swept past them. It was only when he arrived at the head of the table, that he acknowledged any of the guests or courtiers. He nodded in the direction of some Glamtech officials, paused to smile at the chief of staff, and his wife, and then at the last stopped and extended his hand to the High Chancellor.

‘Is all ready, Akton?’ he asked in a voice so quiet it could scarce be heard beyond a few paces.

The high chancellor took the king’s hand, knelt and kissed the golden ring on the royal forefinger. ‘All is ready, my lord,’ he replied and then stood.

‘My apologies for my lateness,’ muttered the king, glancing towards Talessa for a moment. ‘Affairs of state, you know.’

‘You were not late, my lord,’ said the high chancellor quickly. ‘As you see, we began the meal on the hour,’ he paused, ‘as you instructed.’

The king grunted, waited for his bodyguards to take their station behind the throne, and then took his seat. For a long time, he sat motionless staring down at the table in front of him, as if waiting for something to appear. Then, suddenly he sighed, raised his eyes, and sat back. ‘Continue,’ he said.

Everyone, except the high chancellor sat down, but still no one spoke. A deep quiet, quieter even than the one that had preceded the king’s arrival, filled the hall. Even the servants who had come up from the kitchens to serve the third course waited silently to one side of the entrance way. Somewhere, far along one of the corridors, a dog barked and its master called it to silence. The echoes died away. No one moved.

Then Akton, as chancellor, raised his cup. ‘Welcome to this happy

evening,' he said. 'And welcome to this great celebration of our great city in honour of our mighty king.' Then he nodded to a servant who stepped forward and filled his cup:

'A toast to our king! Who will call the toast?' The governor spoke and rapped his staff of office against the floor.

At first no one moved. At last, further down the table, a middle-aged and slightly stooped man got to his feet. He was of the merchant class, chosen for his wealth and skill in trading, but clearly less handsome than those above him. His name was Elfraed, and he had a reputation for plain speaking. It was not lost on the king, nor anyone else at the table, that Elfraed had left his cup on the table, and ignored his wife's nervous gesture that he should pick it up.

'My lords,' he said, his booming voice echoing around the gilded walls, 'let us toast our good king.' He paused. 'But let us also add our heartfelt wish that one day soon the queen and the rest of the royal family might one day return to Serenity and grace us with their presence. He paused again, and that the queen herself might sit alongside her husband once more in the throne room of Serenity.'

There was a gasp that ran along the length of the table. The guards that lined the walls straightened as one and brought their weapons to their chests. The king stared, his eyes dark beneath furrowed brows and his hand clenched about his own cup. Everyone of the guests knew, or at least suspected that their queen along with the rest of the royal family had been banished to a place called The Island some years before. It was an event that it was unwise to speak of, not even in the streets of the city, let alone within the palace, and in the presence of the king himself.

The high chancellor stepped towards the king and leaned forward as if to whisper to him, but was waved away. 'Hold your peace, Akton,' muttered the king. 'One of my citizens has spoken before you.' Then, without taking his eyes off the merchant Elfraed, the king slowly stood and raised his cup:

'To absent friends,' he said, and drank.

As one, the guests repeated the toast and raised their cups. The king nodded, and then gestured for Elfraed to be seated. 'I see that you have not forgotten our queen, Elfraed,' he began, 'and neither have I. Nor have I forgotten the reason for her departure, and the reasons which prevent

her return.’ He glanced down at his cup and then looked up again. ‘Do you trust your king, Elfraed?’

The merchant looked surprised to be addressed directly by the king. He scrambled to his feet. ‘Yes, my lord,’ he said quickly. ‘I would trust you with my life.’

The king gave a thin smile. ‘Would you? Well, you may indeed have to entrust your life to me one day, especially if you let that wine in your cup do all your thinking for you. Do you understand what I am saying?’

The merchant gave a hasty bow, painfully aware that the captain of the king’s guard was glaring at him. ‘Yes, my lord,’ he replied. ‘Of course, my lord.’

Again the king smiled. ‘Then tell me what I am saying, sir merchant.’ He paused. ‘And choose your words carefully.’

The merchant felt his wife’s hand touch his, but he did not look down. He took a deep breath. ‘My lord king,’ he said carefully, ‘you are saying that the queen and her household offended against the laws and constitution of Serenity, and therefore according to those laws, the queen was banished to The Island until such time as the high court might determine that she is able to return.’

This time the merchant lowered his head when he had finished speaking, and did not attempt to sit down.

The king grunted, and turned to his high chancellor. ‘What should we do with this fellow, Akton? Tell me now.’

The chancellor did not hesitate. He looked up at the king. ‘You are the law, sire. As you speak, so we do. But you do not have a rebel here, my lord. I am sure of it. He is of good family and good reputation. As you have rightly observed, the wine has become his master this night. Deliver him back into the hands of his good wife, and doubtless she will box his ears, and remind him how close he came to the gallows. That should make him one of your most loyal subjects.’

The king sighed. ‘Ah, mercy. You offer me mercy as your answer.’

The chancellor nodded. ‘Mercy is the gift of princes, my lord. It is more precious than the jewels in the royal crown.’

Now the king gave a short, bitter laugh. ‘By the heavens, Akton. I look for judgement like a thunderbolt to sweep this simpleton away, and yet you counsel mercy.’

Again the chancellor nodded. 'Are we not taught that great kings place mercy over judgement, and you are without doubt a great king.'

'Am I? Am I so? I had not noticed.' At last the king sat down. He slumped back in his chair, and gazed up at the golden banner that overhung the table. 'Give me music, and give me wine. I need laughter. Not wisdom.' He gave a careless wave. 'This hall echoes like a tomb.' The high chancellor nodded to the chief steward who clapped his hands, and pointed to the musicians. Almost instantly there was music: a happy, tavern tune that fell strangely across the silent banqueting hall until at last the guests, relieved that at least no one had been arrested, began to talk quietly. And then after a while, they began to chatter amongst themselves and even laugh. The third course was served.

Talessa, who was seated within earshot of the king, took advantage of the welcome hubbub to lean across the table to Barvarik:

'Have you ever seen such courage?' she whispered, glancing in the direction of the man called Elfraed.

He smiled, and leaned forward himself, noting that the king had been distracted for a moment by the chancellor. 'Courage, you say?' he said softly. 'I saw a man who decided to play the fool, and ended by telling us all the truth.'

Talessa's eyes widened. 'Have a care, Barvi,' she replied, using the familiar form of his name. 'The king has shown you favour, but that will all be forgotten if he hears one word . . .'

She stopped, as Barvarik gently put a finger to her lips:

'Hush, Talle,' he said. 'And do not fear. I am all discretion.'

At that moment, a maid appeared carrying a silver dish of pastries. She nodded to Barvarik and then turned to Talessa:

'My lady,' she said, 'can I interest you in some of our cook's finest creations?' As she spoke, she presented the dish and placed it on the table between them. It was that movement that took Talessa by surprise. Normally, the dish would be held, and the pastries served with silver tongs or a slide, but instead, before Talessa could sit back, the dish had swept in front of her so that the edge caught her on the forearm. It was the lightest of touches, but Talessa felt a scratch, and when she looked there was just the trace of a red weal on her snow white skin.

'Oh, my lady!' The maid let go of the dish, and put her hand to her

mouth. 'Forgive me!'

Talessa shook her head, content with the look of alarm on the maid's face. 'Think nothing of it,' she said. 'It is a scratch, no more. A little bit of Glamegel before I go to bed this evening, and it will be gone by the morning.' She paused. 'You are perhaps not used to serving at table?'

The maid blushed and lowered her head. 'I am from the lower town, my lady. We were sent for by the steward's commissioners, my sister and I as well as some of our friends. My parents were told that there were not enough palace servants this year to wait on table for the feast day. My father is an apothecary. I work in his shop.'

'I see.' Talessa smiled. 'Well, rest easy. I will not be reporting you to anyone, least of all the steward.' As she smiled, she glanced in the direction of the king, who was still talking with her father the chancellor. Then she turned to look at Barvarik

'What say you, my lord Barvarik. Shall we forgive this poor girl?'

Barvarik pretended to frown. 'Well, I don't know,' he said. 'She gave those pastries a fright, and if I hadn't caught them . . .' He smiled. 'No harm done. All is well.'

The maid smiled gratefully, and curtsied. 'Thank you, my lord.' She reached forward and picked up the tray. 'I must get back to the kitchen,' she said and disappeared.

'She was a strange one,' said Barvarik, then he touched Talessa on the arm. 'Is it serious?' he asked. 'We should get that scratch looked at. The medical team at the palace will want to check you out.' He paused. 'We can't be too careful. You know that.'

Talessa blew on the scratch. 'I'll live,' she said lightly. 'The poor girl was just nervous. It's a mercy that she didn't hit me over the head with that tray.'

But even as she spoke a medical team, alerted to the incident, came up to the table, bowed to the king and then turned to Talessa:

'You are wounded, my lady?' said one of the team, a Glamtech nurse.

'It is nothing,' replied Talessa, 'just a scratch.'

'We will be the judge of that, my lady,' the nurse answered crisply, and coming forward, quietly took hold of Talessa's arm at the wrist and examined it. 'It is as you say, a scratch,' she said, 'but we must treat it in accordance with regulations.' Without waiting for a reply, she waved to a

paramedic who quickly brought a medical bag to the table.

Moments later, with the treatment complete, the medical team left, after giving Talessa a stamped form with a pass code to show to security personnel at any checkpoint she had to pass through during the next three days.

Barvarik watched them go, and then turned to Talessa:

‘It is just as well that scratch wasn’t any deeper,’ he said, ‘or you’d be in a hospital treatment bay by now.’

They both laughed, the evening drifted on into happy conversation, and the incident was soon forgotten.

But a young man sitting on his on further down the table, had seen what had happened. From the moment that the maid had appeared he had not taken his eyes off her, and only when she had brushed passed him and gone on towards the entrance to the kitchens, had he switched his attention back to Talessa.

The young man was Shadwatch. He bore an old clan name from before the Great Burning and was well known as the senior technician at Glamtech. Next to the palace and the court administration, the department of Glamtech was the most powerful in the kingdom. It was said that all that was good and all that was evil came out of Glamtech. This was of course an exaggeration, but Glamtech had a fearsome reputation for developing and producing all kinds of innovations: tools, weapons, lighting and medicines. GlamGel was its most famous and utilised invention, and this in the minds of many gave Glamtech, or Glam Tech, pre-eminence over the other government departments, including the commissariat and security services. Most of Glamtech’s work was top secret, and its top officials reported directly to the king and no one else, not even the high chancellor.

Of course Akton, working within the chancellery had his own network of spies and informers so there was not much that emerged from Glamtech that he did not already know about. Nevertheless, there was an unspoken tension between Glamtech, the palace administration and the chancellery. Moreover, the talk in the marketplace was that Glamtech had more influence in the affairs of state than was healthy for the kingdom. But with the sole rights to Glam Gel firmly in Glamtech’s grasp there were few folk who were willing to challenge their authority and influence. Of

the other two departments or 'colleges', Litra worked more closely with Glam Tech, and was even capable of producing its own technical innovations, such as the Litra-light, widely used in the homes and apartments of Upper Town.

But all that is an aside: the fact is that on this particular evening the young Shadwatch had recognised the maid when she first entered, and seemed puzzled to see her. He also took an interest in what was going on, because he had a deeper and secret interest in Talessa. They had grown up together, and although circumstances had drawn their paths apart some years before, he had never forgotten her. She was beautiful, but then so was everyone in the upper quarter of the city: breathtakingly beautiful. That was understood. Beauty was the passport to anywhere that mattered. However with Talessa, her beauty was quite something else. It was not simply the physical beauty of form, of complexion, of graceful movement. No, it was the beauty that springs from deep within: a beauty of the soul that wells up within a person and shines out of their eyes, and is heard in the very words they speak and the way that they speak them. And this was what Shadwatch saw and heard in Talessa. In short, he was fascinated by her, and quietly amazed that almost no one else had seen what he had seen in this noblewoman. Almost no one. Yes, there was the rub. In that single word almost, there lay the rub. One other man had discovered what he, Shadwatch had known for so long, and now that man, the object of Shadwatch's resentment and the man they called Barvarik, was Talessa's close friend. If something was not done about it soon, Shadwatch decided, this Barvarik would within the year become her chosen man.

And so the lord of Glamtech ground his teeth as he watched the young couple. Well, he decided, if he could not stop the wedding, at least he would never attend it, even though all such high-born events were always graced by senior Glamtech officials, as a matter of form and government compliance. Someone tapped him lightly on the shoulder and he looked up: 'Mother,' he said quietly.

His mother, tall with raven black hair and milk-white skin, smiled and sat down next to him. 'We were hoping you might leave your place and join us,' she said, gesturing along the table to where a group of palace folk, men and women, were chattering and laughing.

Shadwatch turned away to look towards Talessa again. 'I am perfectly

comfortable here, mother,' he said, his voice cool and drained of emotion.

She reached out and touched his hand. He pulled it away. 'You still miss your father,' she said quietly.

Without shifting his gaze, her son replied; 'I will miss him until the day he is avenged, mother.'

'The king's brother?'

He murdered my father, mother. You know that. I will not rest until the debt is settled.' He paused. 'Blood for blood.'

'The blood of a prince?'

'The blood of a murderer.' Shadwatch drummed his fingers on the table. 'Go back to your guests, mother. Leave me to my unhappy thoughts.'

The lady Jetta, that was her name, tossed her head and smiled sadly. 'You have the same stubborn courage as your father.' She stood. 'Use that pretty head of yours before you act, Shadwatch. It was never proven that prince Marlin killed your father, even though it does seem likely.' She hesitated. 'But whatever you may think, that prince whose blood you desire has now fled the kingdom and lives somewhere among the stain-folk.'

Jetta's son frowned, and at last he looked at her. 'The king's brother will return, mother. He must. I know him. And when he returns, I will be waiting.'

Jetta glanced along the table, and gestured towards Talessa: 'She is beautiful, isn't she?'

In that moment, Shadwatch's expression softened. 'There is no greater beauty in this room. I would die for her, mother.'

Jetta gently squeezed her son's shoulder and turned away. 'You may have to die for her my son. I fear that her heart belongs to another.' She bowed to the guests sitting opposite, and moved away.

For a long time, Shadwatch stared at nothing. The music played on, the guests ate, drank and talked, but he sat alone, motionless and lost in his own world.

It did not go unnoticed. The king leaned towards Akton, the High Chancellor. 'Our young Glamtech lord seems distracted tonight,' he whispered.

'You mean Shadwatch, sire?'

'I do. He sits alone, scarcely acknowledges his mother when she speaks to him, and spends more time than is wise staring either at me or the

noblewoman Talessa, I cannot tell.’

Akton smiled, and dipped bread into his wine. ‘He is now of the age, sire when he will far more readily stare at a beautiful woman than he will even glance at a king.’

The king chuckled. ‘Perhaps you are right. So even a man who seems to have nothing in his heart but science, and invention and endless formulae can find room in some corner of his thoughts for something we lesser mortals might call love?’

The High Chancellor nodded. ‘Just so, my lord. He is of marriageable age, and since his father died . . .’ His voice trailed away as he saw the king suddenly frown. ‘forgive me, my lord,’ he said hastily, ‘I did not mean . . .’

The king waved his hand. ‘I know exactly what you mean, chancellor, but fear not, you said nothing to deserve my displeasure.’ He paused, and glanced again in Shadwatch’s direction. ‘Your words reminded me, that’s all.’ He looked up at the gilded rafters of the ceiling. ‘Shadwatch’s father was a good man: brilliant, loyal, trustworthy and hardworking. That’s a rare combination these days, and we lost him to that rogue brother of mine. Cut down he was, without mercy, and all because of my brother’s thirst for power, and his rage against the law of this land and the traditions of our fathers.’

The high chancellor took a deep breath. ‘It was never proven, my lord.’

‘Hah!’ The king slapped the table, and several of the guests looked up. ‘You always were the lawyer, Akton: so careful with legal niceties, and apt to miss the uncomfortable truth when it’s staring you in the face.’

Akton nodded. ‘Certainly the evidence weighed heavily against prince Marlin, my lord. On the same night that Shadwatch’s father was murdered, he fled the kingdom, and has not been seen since.’

Raising one hand, the king studied his fingernails, then smiled. ‘We send our scouts into Stain-land on the first day of every week, and on the last day they return and make their reports.’

‘They do, my lord.’

‘And yet, although they bring us all manner of information about all manner of people and places, not one of them, not one!’ (for a moment he raised his voice) ‘has been able to bring me any news of that brother of mine.’

‘Lord Hartley tells me that he is confident of success, and expects to be

bringing good news to the palace any day.'

'Does he now? Does he indeed? Well, perhaps he knows more than my own spies know, but I see precious little sign of this good news he talks of. Where is he, by the way? I expected to see him tonight.'

Akton coughed nervously, and glanced towards the doors as if hoping to see Hartley come marching into the banqueting hall. 'He sent word, my lord, that he had been delayed. There's a patrol come in late from the north-western quadrant of the Stain-lands. He was keen to see them the moment they had arrived.'

The king grunted. 'He's a hard worker is Hartley, I'll give him that. He knows where his duty lies. No lounging around here among all these overfed creatures of the courts and Upper Town. What say you, chancellor?'

Akton looked steadily at the king. 'It is a formal celebration, my lord king, decreed by the will of the assembly, and upheld for generations. Your people have come to do you honour.'

'Yes! Yes!' The king waved his hand. 'I know all that, Akton, but look at them man. They've come for the food, and they've come to be seen. They can sit here before me with their masks off, simpering away like so many fish in a bowl, and hoping they might catch my eye and be tossed some morsel of what-have-you.' He glared at the table. 'Well, all that is going to change.'

'To change, my lord?'

'Yes, to change and to establish something new by royal decree, and decree absolute.' He paused. 'From this day, all formal festivals of feasting at the palace and within the royal precincts will require that guests wear masks throughout, according to our precious tradition.' He paused. 'The royal protocol known as mask free is to be withdrawn on a permanent basis. From tomorrow it will be as if such a protocol and mark of favour on my part never existed. As I am sure you will agree, masks will henceforth be worn on all occasions as a mark of respect to myself, the king.' Again, he paused, then went on:

'We need to tighten things up, chancellor. These people have grown fat, sleek and over indulged during these past months.'

'My lord!' Akton lowered his voice, and leaned forward. 'If the people hear you, they will not understand.'

'The people, you say?' The king gave a short laugh but then lowered his

voice. 'The people? You know them, Akton. Look at them, now! They are all of royal blood or the first three ranks. There are none here below noble rank, apart from one or two hangers-on from Litra.'

'Hangers-on, my lord?' Akton glanced around nervously.

'Yes, hangers-on: simpletons brought up from the lower city on supposed scholarships and sent to do courses at the Litra Halls of Learning. You should know, chancellor because it was you who introduced the whole idea.'

'And it bears your seal of approval your majesty,' replied Akton holding his gaze.

The king stared back. 'So it does. So it does.' He hesitated. 'Tell me, high chancellor, are these scholarships of yours bearing fruit?'

Akton risked a frown. This conversation was not going well. Was the king already drunk after so little wine?

'My lord,' he said quietly. 'Only yesterday the dean of Litra academic studies told me that all the Fourth Rank scholars, both men and women, were excelling in their courses.'

The king smiled and filled his cup. 'Well, that's lucky then,' he muttered, and looked away as if wanting to end the conversation. But even as he turned he caught sight of a figure who had appeared in the doorway at the far end of the hall. It was a man, tall and broad-shouldered, with almost pure white hair hanging straight to his shoulders. He wore the deep blue cloak of Rebuild, and carried a golden staff in one hand. He had already removed his mask, and the king who had the eyes of a hawk, recognised him in an instant.

'Ah,' he said, and clapped his hands. 'Calmeron. Here's an honest fellow, come all the way from the outer defences to pay homage to his lord.'

Akton nodded: 'There is much to do on our border defence works, sire. The scouts of the stain-folk are getting bolder, and even some of the wild folk have been spotted near one of our border forts. The Rebuild engineers have been busy.'

'Rebuild has all the resources it needs?' asked the king raising his eyebrows.

'Yes, sire. Calmeron met with me last week. He presented his latest construction programme, and said that his men had built a new highway to bring supplies and salvage from the interior of the north-western

quadrant.’

‘We can afford this, Chancellor?’

Akton shrugged. ‘We don’t have any choice, my king. If we stop building, and cut back on our expeditions into the outlands, we will soon become vulnerable to attack. It is just as well that the assembly voted through the extra taxes and tribute levies last month.’ As he finished speaking, Calmeron, who by now had made his way along the length of the banqueting hall, approached the king and saluted.

‘My lord king,’ he said crisply, ‘I bring greetings from the high council of Rebuild.’

The king acknowledged his salute, and gestured for him to sit down. ‘And where are the council of Rebuild based at present?’ he asked.

Calmeron took his place by the king. Reaching into his tunic, he pulled out a flask and carefully poured it out so that the contents slowly spread on the table. A map slowly appeared in the pool of Glam Gel liquid. It was an accurate, detailed and colourful map. Without hesitating, Calmeron carefully turned it so that the king could see it better, and stabbed with his finger at a point part way up the map towards the centre.

‘See, my lord,’ he said to the king. ‘We have established a new Rebuild site just beyond the Great Wall or Fence in the third quadrant, due north of our main base at Arx. It overlooks the imperial highway that we finished constructing last spring.’

The king leaned forward and frowned. ‘That must be at least two kilometres north of original Fence-line. Is it safe?’

Calmeron smiled. ‘Perfectly, my lord king. It has four high towers, curtain walls twelve metres thick and two defended gateways.’

‘And a permanent garrison?’

‘Of course, my lord. And we have increased the number of master-armorament technicians and weapon specialists. It also has the latest Glam Tech searchlight batteries complete with Litra lighting systems..’

‘You have done this because members of the high council are based there?’

‘Precisely, my lord. The high council is keen to be at the sharp end of things, so to speak, and the imperial highway runs directly into the heart of Stain-land for at least forty kilometres now. Whoever controls the highway, holds the key to the ancient kingdom, or what’s left of it.’

Leaning back, the king smiled. 'Ah, at last! Some good news: progress on the northern borders, and the first clear sign for months that we have a foothold in the third quadrant.' He looked at the High Chancellor. 'What say you Akton?'

Akton nodded to the king, reached out and slid the map closer. He studied it, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, and leaning forward for a moment before sitting back. 'It looks reasonably secure,' he said, 'but I think we should get some experts from Litra to go with Calmeron to assess it. If we let the council at Arx know, they should have no objection.'

Calmeron raised his eyebrows but said nothing. The king shook his head. 'What do those stargazers and philosophers know about defence systems,' he said, clenching and unclenching his fist, a sure sign that he was irritated to the point of anger.

The gesture was not lost on Akton. He gave a slight shrug, 'As his majesty pleases,' he said, his voice level. 'Litra has a well-established department of technical and military studies, and supplies Glamtech with specialist research on weapons development, but that of course is no reason for them to have an opinion worth listening to.'

There was an awkward silence. At last Calmeron spoke. 'The high council of Rebuild welcomes any assistance endorsed by the palace,' he said quietly, 'but it is my opinion, and also that of the Arx administration, that this particular Rebuild base is well resourced.' He paused. 'We have already had an inspection by officials of the SSS, who came with the approval of the royal secretariat and the interior ministry at Arx. I understand that they liked what they saw.'

The king gave a short laugh, and slapped the table. 'Well, that's decided then! No need to be disturbing the councillors of Rebuild. If those foxes in the Triple S are happy . . .' He hesitated, and looked at Akton: 'We are agreed?'

The high chancellor nodded and pushed the map back towards the king. 'As your majesty wishes,' he answered.

Little had been heard of this conversation. Most of the guests were too busy enjoying the freedom of the feast, and the opportunity to meet and talk without having to wear their masks. Even most of those sitting close by did not hear what the king was saying to the two officials. Nor did the servants hear. They were occupied with making sure that the last of the

food and drink was served before the governor of the feast – usually the palace steward – declared festivities to be at an end. And besides, these servants had been trained from their youth to be deaf to whatever was not intended for their ears.

But two of the guests had heard. Both Talessa and Barvarik had stopped talking to one another some moments ago. They were still leaning forward, facing one another as though they were deep in conversation, but they had not uttered a single word for some time. Even as they looked into each other's eyes, they both knew that they were over-hearing a conversation that it would surely be treason to repeat within or without the palace walls.

As the high chancellor pushed the map towards the king and the conversation came to an end, Barvarik winked at Talessa, touched her lightly on the hand and whispered: 'All is not well in this part of the forest, I think.'

Talessa smiled nervously, but did not reply. She sat back, and wiped her lips with her napkin. It was that slight movement that caught the attention of the king. He looked at Talessa, gave a puzzled frown and then smiled:

'Is this feast to your liking, my lady?' he asked.

Talessa looked at the king, blushed and then inclined her head. 'It is, my lord king,' she replied.

'Then that is well,' said the king. 'It is just that I thought you perhaps looked a little unwell.'

Talessa's blush deepened. 'I thank the king for his concern, but I can assure you, my lord, that I am quite well.'

The king stared at the young noblewoman for a moment. Again, a frown flickered across his brow, then he shrugged and turned to the high chancellor:

'Time for me to go, I think, chancellor. I believe this feast has run its course. Tell the people. The mask free is over.'

The high chancellor took his cue with a resigned shrug. He stood, and signalled towards the steward who stepped forward from his position by the doors. Then he raised his staff of office and rapped it three times on the marble floor. The hall fell silent.

'The mask free ends! The king will retire,' said the steward, his pa-

rade-ground voice filling the room.

Everyone put their masks on and stood while the king, with a discreet bow, rose from his chair, pulled his cloak about his shoulders and walked the length of the hall towards the doors. His bodyguard closed around him, without a word being spoken. They escorted the king through the doors and down the long, gilded corridor towards the royal apartments.

Although it was accepted that the feast might have continued for a little while, the steward noted the customary nod from the high chancellor and struck the floor again with his staff:

‘And that concludes the feast,’ he said. ‘Guests may leave. Remember, if you have not done so already, to re-apply your masks with the code clearly visible before leaving the hall. Security checks will depend on it.’

It wasn’t long before Talessa and Barvarik found themselves crossing an inner courtyard between the banqueting hall and the main gate. They put on their masks before the first security check, and joined the stream of guests heading for the guard of honour which had been drawn up at the great tower which guarded the entrance to the palace and the inner courts. The masks, with their engraved number and code, concealed their faces but were necessary to pass through the frequent checks of the SSS personnel.

Everyone understood that within Serenity the wearing of masks in public was compulsory, except for military personnel on active service. Developed by Glamtech, these masks offered protection against any accidental blows or scratches which might mar the beauty of the wearer, but still allowed enhanced vision, the ability to breathe and speak freely and a certain air of mystery not enjoyed by the folk of the lower sections of the Lower City. Masks were worn in the Lower City but were by law much more simply and crudely made. They were cheaper and less inefficient than those of Upper Town and the courts.

Barvarik took Talessa by the hand as they walked across the cobbled courtyard. ‘You should get that scratch seen to,’ he said quietly.

‘I told you,’ whispered Talessa, ‘but if it helps you to stop worrying, I will go to the medical centre tomorrow and get it checked.’

Barvarik gave an unseen smile. ‘Thank you,’ he replied, and paused. ‘I worry for you.’

They were approaching the guard of honour, when Talessa spoke

again:

‘I am more worried by that conversation we overheard,’ she said. ‘The king and my father seem to have their differences.’

‘They are not always the best of friends,’ said Bavarik, lowering his voice, ‘but they are both committed to the prosperity and safety of Serenity.’ He released Talessa’s hand as they came up to the gateway, and saluted the honour guard which had come crisply to attention, weapons held at ‘present’, and heads erect.

Passing between the guards, they offered their palms to the SSS officials who quickly scanned them, and code-checked their masks. They were waved on and soon found themselves in the outer precinct of the palace court along with the other guests. Carriages, chariots and other vehicles had arrived to ferry the guests back to their homes, and the whole area was lit by the bright white lights of the Litra Energy System.

Barvarik looked up at the stars. ‘Beautiful,’ he said. But even as he spoke, there was a trumpet blast via the court speakers, and rockets of every colour filled the sky. The annual fireworks display had begun. This night it was even more spectacular than the displays that had come before. With signs of trouble brewing on the borders the king had ordered that the fireworks be as dramatic and awe-inspiring as possible. Glamtech had not let him down.

The people gasped as they lifted their heads to the streams of coloured rocketry, the multiple bursts of blue, red, orange, white and green, and the fiercely glowing flares which fell like radiant blossoms above the city.

Between the echoing thunder of explosions as the rockets rose, weaved and spread their lights across the sky, both Talessa and Barvarik could hear the distant cheering of the folk of the lower city who had come out into the streets to watch the display.

‘We have a great city,’ said Barvarik.

Talessa nodded. ‘I wonder if they can even see this from the borders,’ she replied.

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