The Baby Auction

Peter Taylor-Gooby

**This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between characters, institutions or situations in the text and people, institutions or situations in the real world is purely fortuitous.**

**Author’s profits will go to Shelter.**

-To Sue

- and thanks to Diane Dane, David Ewens, James Essinger, Dawn Lyon, David Pick, Tim Armstrong and all the others who helped me with this book.

Matt was four years old and he was frightened and everything was terribly wrong. They’d gone further down the track into the forest than he’d ever been before and it was getting dark. The trees were different here, taller, packed closer together. He felt they were crowding towards him. If they got right round him he’d never find his way out.

Mummy had stopped walking. He wished she wouldn’t hold his hand so tightly. They stood there, staring down the track. You could just make it out in the evening light and then it turned at the crest of a rise and you couldn’t see it any more.

The pine trees towered over him. He caught the smell, rich and harsh, but there was another odour he didn’t recognise with sweat and iron and something like lamp-oil in it.

He gripped Mummy’s hand. She wouldn’t look at him. She just stared down the track.

‘When’s Daddy coming? I’m hungry,’

She glanced down but she didn’t smile. The sun was now touching the tops of the trees. It was night already between the trunks and the black shadows were reaching out across the track, towards them.

‘Later, Matt.’

She squeezed his hand. Now she had a different look on her face, as if she was listening out for something far away.

The forest was silent; there was no wind among the trees, no bird-song. He wished she wouldn’t grip his hand so hard. He felt so hungry he couldn’t stand still. He wished Daddy was there and they could all go back to the village together.

He heard a rattle, like a harness being shaken hard, and the clatter of hooves on the track, then the special low whinny a horse makes when it recognises the smell of its own stable. That’s when he thought it might all be all right. He shouted:

‘That’s Duke!’

Duke was his favourite, the best, the most powerful horse in the village. His father always used Duke for the ploughing. Daddy sometimes lifted him up onto the horse’s back. He loved the soft warmth of the horse’s body. He loved burying his face in the mane and stretching his arms round the sturdy neck and feeling the great muscles move under the skin.

He let go of Mummy’s hand and started to run forward. Duke rounded the corner and plunged toward him. A man, his Daddy, sat astride his back, urging him on.

‘Daddy!’ he shouted, ‘Daddy!’

Daddy drove the horse onward, towards him. All around the great trees crowded in, the shadows black as pitch between their trunks.

He saw one of the shadows move and he felt as if his heart was being squeezed in his breast. The shadow heaved forward, separated itself from the darkness under the trees and swept out of the forest onto the track. It reared up, forming itself into a shape like a man, but black as the night between the trees. The hair rose stiff on the back of his neck. He shrank back. He felt Mummy’s arms round him, clasping him against her. She was trembling.

Others came, men like black shadows flowing out of the forest. They made no noise. All he could hear was the pounding of hooves and Mummy screaming:

‘No!’

The first figure hurled itself upward at Duke, grabbing at the bridle. It lurched sideways and was dragged along, clinging to the flank of the horse. Duke’s head was wrenched round. The black shapes swarmed round, reaching up and fastening themselves onto Daddy, dragging him down. He was on his feet, throwing his body from side to side to shake them off. Then something swept up over his head from behind and he was gone. Matt stood there watching it all happen. His whole body quivered in horror.

Then he woke up and it was dark and he was eighteen and Ed was there beside him and he loved her so much he could hardly breathe and he was telling her his dream.

**Part 1: Matt and Ed**

**1**

He was standing there, right at the back of the main stand, almost against the rear wall of the City Stadium. Ed was beside him, and she had her arm tight round his waist and her head on his shoulder. Ed’s name was really Eden, but she’d told him she only wanted to be called Ed. She was eighteen too, just over a fortnight younger than him. They’d met in re-education. She had skin the colour of cinnamon, long brown wavy hair which she often tied back, brown eyes and a smile that made Matt feel he was worth something. There was a scar the width of his thumb under her right eye, healed so close to the colour of her skin that you scarcely noticed it. That warm August day she was wearing blue jeans and a crimson tee-shirt and she was the only person out of the thousands who packed the stands who mattered to Matt.

He couldn’t understand why everyone was so intent on the giant screen that dominated the stadium, on the words that kept appearing on it, all about ‘Citizens’ and ‘Exchange’ and ‘The One Law’. He was more interested in the family in front of him - a couple and a boy who must have been only about six years old. *The same age I was when they came for Dad*, Matt thought.

There were more people in the stadium than Matt had ever seen in one place before. He felt uneasy. He knew that the message on the screen and the speeches of the well-dressed people he could barely make out on the platform in front of it were part of Celebration Day and that was why they were all here. He just didn’t believe any of it would make any difference. Celebration Day wouldn’t help him find Mum or Dad.

The parents of the small boy in front of him stood rigidly at attention, chanting the words on the screen. Matt felt his heart go out to the child, who tugged impatiently at his father’s hand. He guessed from their shabby blue work-clothes and the fact that they were here, at the back, in the cheapest area, that they came from the poorest class in the city, just like him and Ed. You never got paid very much. They’d sack you if they decided they didn’t want you and that meant going hungry. They were on an outing together as a family. He thought maybe that didn’t happen very often.

The child tugged harder, almost swinging on his father’s arm. Matt watched, the familiar ache at his heart, thinking of his own father and of his mother, of what it was like when you were a child with no-one to look after you.

*All he needs is a smile,* he thought. *Don’t ignore him. It’s not right.*

All around them the crowd were shouting:

 THE ONELAW PROTECTS PROPERTY!

 THE ONE LAW PROTECTS FREEDOM!

 THE ONE LAW PROTECTS DIGNITY!

The noise battered at his ears. He saw the father swing round and glare down at the child. He felt the anger gathering in his chest. The father suddenly shoved the child away, so violently that he fell. Matt started forward.

The child picked himself up and stared at Matt with solemn, dark eyes. Matt couldn’t help himself. He tapped the father on the shoulder:

‘Careful with the kid,’ he said. ‘You’ll hurt him.’

The father, thin, his narrow face prematurely lined, made to answer. Then he caught the expression in Matt’s eyes, half pain, half anger, and turned abruptly away.

Matt felt a hand gripping his wrist. Ed slipped in front of him.

‘The One Law protects everyone,’ she said to the man. ‘That includes kids.’

The man grabbed his son with one hand and the woman with the other and pushed his way into the crowd. The child dragged behind, staring back at Matt, unsmiling.

Ed released Matt’s wrist.

‘You OK?’ she said.

‘Yes, I’m OK.’

He relaxed his shoulders and forced his attention back onto the ceremony. No-one paid him any attention. They were all gazing up at the screen, shouting out the words: ‘The One Law!’ ignoring everything else going on around them. Ed was mouthing the words on the screen beside him. He opened his own mouth in time with hers, but could say nothing, his throat constricted.

Ed looked up at him:

‘It’s OK. Just pretend you’re saying it.’

 Matt never saw the point of the One Law. They taught you about it in re-education but none of it made sense. The only good thing about re-education was that that was where he met Ed.

Matt knew he was special to Ed. Happiness tickled inside him whenever he was with her. For the first time since he’d they’d sent him to re-education he felt he could make something of his life.

**2**

Matt remembered his first day in re-education, the noise the gate made slamming behind you, the stone wall that shut out the rest of the world, the way the officer who took him there turned and marched back to the waiting transport without a glance at him as soon as she’d got the receipt signed by the guard at the gate.

He was fourteen then. He knew re-education wasn’t like the school he’d gone to in the village. He’d learned he wasn’t much good at writing and things like that, but he loved the work experience. They sent him to a farm most days and that was where he first worked with horses. The men in the stables taught him about harnessing and feeding and mucking out and combing and saddling up. Most of all they said you had to respect the horse and then the horse would respect you. They said he was a natural and sometimes they’d let him take a horse out by himself. That had been when he was with his great-aunt, Naomi.

Mummy had held both his hands in hers.

‘They’ve taken your father,’ she said. ‘I have to go to the city to find him. I’ll bring him back. We’ll be together again soon. I promise.’

When he asked her who they were, who’d taken Daddy, she looked at Naomi and said:

‘Black shadows. It was the black shadows. Don’t think about them.’

Naomi would look after him while Mummy was away.

They stood watching Mummy as she set off down the track through the forest. She turned round once and waved to him. He started forward, but Naomi held him with her thin strong hands. Then Mummy went on round the corner into the darkness among the trees.

Naomi was a cheerful older woman with a spare, lined face who had buried two husbands. ‘Neither of them as much use as a cart-load of cabbages,’ she always said.

A week passed. Mummy didn’t come back. He stood there one morning staring up the track. Naomi came out and took his hand in hers.

‘Sometimes people go away to the city,’ she said, ‘and it takes a long time for them to find their way back. You’ll be all right with me for now. Just do your best.’

So he got on with things, but the dreams came, with Daddy and the black shadows and he couldn’t tell the difference between dreams and memories. Sometimes he got angry, so angry he was frightened and he had to go away from everyone into the forest. Naomi would come and find him. She never asked him why he’d gone, she just took his hand and led him back to the village. It he tried to tell her about the dreams she just said:

‘Black shadows. Doesn’t do any good to talk about them. There’s potatoes need peeling.’

Time passed and he went to the school, then the farm. Then one day people came in a strange sealed vehicle with tracks and said he had to go to re-education. His great-aunt argued with them but they didn’t listen.

Re-education was where they sent you for something you’d done. They said it was wrong. You couldn’t undo it, you just had to go to the place on the edge of the city, three day’s journey away, and stay there behind the grey stone walls until they let you out. You were with all the others they wanted to get out of the way, all of you waiting until you were eighteen. Then they threw you out. It felt like you were in a warehouse for people who made a nuisance of themselves. Perhaps it was something your parents had done, they never told you what it was.

He remembered re-education as an emptiness. No-one had any time for anyone else. There were endless training sessions on the One Law, on Entrepreneurial Skills, on Jobs Mart Day, on Citizenship, on the Broken Lands. They kept giving you tests and when you failed they punished you. They called it ‘experiential training’. They put you in a windowless cell with blank brick walls and a mattress on the floor. You got bean stew and bread to eat.

‘This is what you’re worth,’ they said. ‘If you want better, you’ve got to earn it.’

He didn’t care. When he was in the cell he thought about what he’d do when they threw him out, how he’d walk for days down a track far into the forest and find a farm where there were horses. Then at night came the dreams and the anger. He hated them, the guards, the instructors, the people who’d brought him here, all of them.

He’d seen Ed at the front of one of the classes. She always seemed to be in a world of her own, disciplined, in control, distant from where Matt would ever be. She always came top in the tests.

One day, when Matt was sixteen, the instructor announced that they would be studying what she called ‘the good society’.

‘You, Torman!’ she said. ‘On your feet! You’re from outside. Tell us what the main cash crops from the villages are.’

Matt stood up. He had no idea what to say. He saw the faces all round him, looking up, ready to laugh at him, like they were watching a show. He felt the anger inside him. He breathed carefully.

‘We didn’t sell food much,’ he said. ‘We grew it to eat, us and the rest of the village.’

‘Undeveloped,’ said the instructor, addressing the rest of the class. ‘That’s why we have the One Law. How do you make a profit, how do you make progress, if you don’t sell things?’

Matt caught at the word.

‘Apples,’ he said. ‘We sold a few apples in the autumn, but we mostly gave them away. We had so many.’

‘Idiot!’ barked the instructor. A ripple of laughter ran round the room. ‘You’re no better than someone from the Broken Lands. Criminals against the one law. If you give things away, why would anyone work? Then if you want something you just take it. Is that what they did in your village? Is that what your parents did? Is that why you’re here?’

‘But it wasn’t like that.’

Matt realised he was shouting and lowered his voice. ‘My parents worked for everything they had. We were in the village, we just wanted to help each other, it’s what we did.’

He felt they were all against him, the instructor, all the grinning faces, then he saw Ed looking up at him. Her face no longer wore the usual detached expression. She seemed sad. Then she gave him a quick smile, like they were in a conspiracy together.

The instructor held up a hand for silence and continued:

‘Fortunately the farmers near the city have a better grasp of civilised behaviour. Market prices, profits, investment. That’s how you get high yields. The main exports from the rural sector are wheat thirty-six per cent, beans thirty-two per cent, livestock twenty-four per cent and fruit eight per cent.’

Then they were doing the test and he could think of nothing but how Ed had smiled at him.

He failed the test and spent the next two days in the training cell. The dreams came but he didn’t get angry.

He was walking slowly back along the corridor when he saw her. She was leaning against the wall. Something made him talk to her.

‘What are you doing here?’

She didn’t answer.

‘Ed,’ he said. ‘What is it?’ Then: ‘I’m sorry.’

He couldn’t think of anything more to say.

At last she looked up at him. Tears glittered in her eyes. He wanted to hold her.

‘They keep talking about primitive areas and the Broken Lands and how much better we are in Market World.’ she said. ‘What do they know about the Broken Lands?’

She looked away. He put a hand against the wall, his arm shielding her face.

‘Are you OK? Can I help?’

‘That’s where I come from,’ she said. ‘My people were civilised in their own way. They wanted to help each other. It was the soldiers.’

Then she shook her head, turned and walked rapidly away.

He hung around in that corridor a bit after that and one day she was there again. You were taking a risk, but it was one of the few places people didn’t go very much. He told her about his father and the black shadows and about how Mum went to the city and didn’t come back, and about working with horses. He didn’t tell here about the anger until later.

They started meeting after that, always it seemed by accident, always away from the others. He felt for the first time since going to re-education that he mattered to someone.

It was much later that she told him about the Broken Lands. They were standing in the corridor again. She said she was a refugee from one of the wars.

‘Soldiers came one night across the fields. They burnt everything, the crops, the houses, the church, everything. There was smoke, rolling towards us and you could see red flames in it and hear people crying out, screaming.’

She looked away and wiped her eyes with her hand.

‘We walked for days and we came to the sea. I’d never seen anything like it. It was beautiful, like wrinkled silver paper. Mum and dad got us on a boat. Everyone was frightened. They thought the soldiers would come after us. The journey took days and we were hungry all the time.’

Somewhere in the building a door slammed. Ed went on:

‘We didn’t know much about Market World. We thought everyone was rich here. We’d be able to work, perhaps people’d be kind us.’

She paused.

‘They didn’t treat us badly, they just ignored us. We didn’t have any money. We were living on the street, we were hungry. They just walked past us.’

She stopped again. The remote look came back into her face.

After a moment Matt said, as gently as he could:

‘Tell me what happened.’

‘My dad did what made sense to him. He asked someone for some money, just a loan to buy food. The woman muttered ‘Don’t pay, don’t get’ and pushed past, so he stopped the next person and asked him. This man started shouting about parasites and the One Law. Then the Enforcers came.’

‘Why?’ Matt asked. ‘Who are the Enforcers?’

‘They are the One Law. They hate anyone who asks for anything and they hate gifters. The Enforcers enforce the One Law. I hate them.’

She glanced up the corridor.

‘The Enforcers beat Dad with the butts of their whips, like he was an animal. They seized him, and Mum too. Mum screamed at me to run for it so I did.’

She touched the scar under her eye.

‘I found out how to live in the city. That’s how I got this. Then they caught me and sent me here.’

She paused again.

‘I know what happened to Mum and Dad, Matt. They sent them to a colony, a long way away.’ Her voice hardened. ‘That’s why I hate them, all of them, the bosses, the Enforcers, all of them. Anyone who loves you, anyone tries to help you, they take them away. You don’t pay, you don’t get.’

She looked up. Her eyes were heavy with tears. He felt clumsy with his tenderness for her.

‘I think I’ll never see them again,’ she said, ‘but I have to find out the truth. Don’t tell anyone.’

**3**

It was the morning of July the twelfth. Matt was eighteen. He stood at the gate watching the gate-keeper fumble at the lock. Re-education was over. Ed had fifteen days to go.

‘I’ll wait for you,’ he said. ‘By the gate.’

 ‘See you,’ she said. She moved closer, her face turned up to his. ‘Maybe.’

She kissed him and he held her close, closer than he’d ever held anyone.

Then she turned and walked swiftly down the corridor, without looking back. He stood there for a long time.

The gate-keeper fixed his eyes on Matt.

‘One thing to remember: never owe anyone more than you can pay. And don’t come back.’

He swung open the gate and gestured Matt through.

There was a road in front of him and a grey residence block, half-derelict with the windows boarded up, opposite. He looked both ways. No-one in sight.

He crossed over and found a shelter from the wind in the doorway of the block. He stood there for half an hour staring at the high stone wall that surrounded re-education.

He pulled his jacket round him and glanced up the street. One way led to the city, where they took his dad, where Mum had gone, long ago. He could see high towers at the centre, glinting in the bright sunlight. Nearer were the ranks of grey residence blocks, like a barrier.

The other way led to open country, farmland first, then rougher pastures and in the distance the forest. He knew his village was somewhere there, three, perhaps four day’s journey away. He shouldered his backpack, turned and set off down the road, away from the city. He thought of Ed. Fifteen days.

The sun was low in the sky when he reached the trees and almost instantly he was in semi-darkness. He took three paces away from the track and stood with his hand on the rough bark. He smelled the scent of the pine trees. They’d taken Dad away on the track through the forest. He couldn’t make out anything in the darkness between the trunks. There were none of the strange odours, sweat and iron and oil he’d smelled that day.

He felt somehow comforted. The forest was silent. He stood there looking out over the pasture-land and the fields, over the jumble of buildings, to the towers in the distance. A searchlight stabbed out from the tallest tower and swept an arc halfway round towards him. Just as abruptly it was extinguished. Matt edged further behind the tree. *Maybe that’s where Mum and Dad are*, he thought*.*

He moved deeper in among the trunks and found somewhere among the bracken where he could rest without anyone being able to see him. The night was warm and he pulled his coat round him. He could hear movement in the forest, small feet ruffling the twigs on the forest-floor. Once something touched his hand. He felt a tiny snout, then a tongue licking at his fingers. He moved his wrist and it was gone. Towards morning he slept.

Matt spent most of the fifteen days in the forest. He ate some fruit and roots. On the third day he found a stream that meandered down between deep pools. He remembered what his father had taught him about catching trout, luring them in over a motionless hand by dabbing at the surface with a blade of grass, then suddenly snatching upwards and flipping them onto the bank. He watched their eyes film over, the scales on their sides grow dull.

When he had a dozen, he washed carefully in the stream and made his way back to the track. After a while he reached a village. He’d watched Dad trade and he knew how to bargain. He told the villagers that he was from Fernhill. Some of them had heard of it, but no-one had ever been there. He let the first three fish go cheap, he was a stranger after all, then raised the price. Soon he had everything he needed: a blanket, some bread, dried meat, cheese, berries, a sliver of soap, and a welcome to come back next time he had some fish to sell.

He was back outside the gate half-hidden in the angle of the wall just after the sun came up. He stood there for three hours. There was no-one else waiting. Finally the bolt snapped back and there she was, a hesitancy in her stance he’d never seen before as she looked both ways up and down the street. He wished he could stop time at that moment, Ed seeking for him and him watching out for her, and all the future before them.

‘Ed! Over here!’

He ran forward and swept his arms round her. Then he was kissing her.

‘I was in the wood, I caught fish and sold them in the village. We can go there, I’m sure we can …’

She smiled at him:

‘Slow down,’ she said. ‘We can’t hide in the villages for ever.’

She turned towards the city, then glanced up at him.

‘Besides,’ she said, ‘there’s Mum and Dad. And your parents. We have to find out. There’s nowhere else to go.’

They set off up the road, Ed walking slightly in front of him.

Soon they were among the residence blocks. The buildings cast deep shadows across the streets and there were people on all sides, too many of them to keep track of. He felt he was somewhere where he didn’t know the rules. Ed grasped his hand firmly and led the way, through a maze of dingy streets, across a square and into a doorway below a flickering neon sign. She said something Matt didn’t catch to a fat man who sat on wooden chair at the entrance. He grunted.

They were in a dingy room at the top of an uncarpeted stairway. She turned and she was kissing him hard on the lips, her arms around him, tight as promises. She reached up and her rich brown hair suddenly flooded out, framing her face. They were together on the bed, her slight body powerful against his. She was kissing him endlessly, her face against his. He forgot everything. There was just this moment, just him and Ed together at last.

‘I love you,’ he said. ‘I love you so much.’

*Never owe more than you can pay.*

He owed Ed more than he would ever be able to pay, however long he was with her. It was beyond him, as distant as the moon on a winter’s night.

She ran her hand tenderly down his back.

‘We’ll be together now, won’t we?’

It was more a statement than a question.

Matt was fascinated by Ed’s competence, the way she could deal with people, bargaining endlessly, never losing her temper. The rest of that day, the first day he’d ever been in the city, passed in a rush, walking past crowds of people with his head down, keeping against the buildings, passing through alleyways strewn with litter and knocking at doors and asking about rooms. Once they ate something that smelled of beans in a noisy back-room crowded with people.

Later, they were by themselves in the room she found for them, sub-let from a flat on the edge of the city, up five flights of grimy concrete stairs. It had a cracked washbasin and a cupboard in the corner and most of the rest of the floor-space was taken up by the bed.

‘It’s cheap,’ she said, ‘and we’ll soon fix it up OK.’

They stuck some pictures from magazines on the walls. Matt liked the one he got from a calendar at the market best even though it had a slogan about cow-fodder across the bottom. The picture showed a peaceful valley with a herd of cows gathered at the trough and the farmer and his family looking on. The family looked so content in the evening light. The farmer had one arm round his wife, the other round his son. Matt knew it was just an advertising picture. You’d never really be able to support a herd of that size on that much pasture.

They spent a few days wandering round the back streets, looking for work. Matt still felt nervous in the city. He knew the anger was still there somewhere within him. He loathed the endless offers of things for sale, the way no-one ever paid you any attention as they pushed by, the endless babble of noise, everywhere the glare of light reflected from concrete walls, from the roadway, from the huge glass windows on the shops, beating down on him from above. Most of all it was the smells that overwhelmed him, the jumble of different scents and odours, none of them he could recognise, everything tangled, nothing like the village, where you could pick out each animal, each plant, each neighbour.

He tried to explain it all to Ed. She said:

‘No one in Market World’d give you the dirt off their shoes. They’re all frightened of the One Law.’

Matt found he could get labouring work, cash in hand, unloading the sacks of vegetables from the wagons in the wholesale market on the edge of the city where the farmers brought in their produce. They were from the country, like him.

‘Recognise that accent anywhere. You’re not from round here are you?’ they’d say to him. They liked to see someone they felt they could trust. The maze of streets frightened them. Matt understood they were like himself, unused to the traffic, to the crowds of people and the uproar, to the jumbled smells of everything in your nostrils all at once. They sometimes gave him produce, cheese, the best of the fruit, kept in a compartment under the seat: ‘just so you don’t forget where you came from – but if anyone asks, we bargained and you paid me a fair price for it.’

He’d share some of it with them, sitting on sacks out of the way, at the side of the market hall, but he always took most of it back to Ed. Once he traded some of the fruit for flowers. He found they had enough to keep going with what he earned and the money Ed brought back from a casual job in a supermarket owned by someone called Franklin.

Then he asked the farmer he worked for most about finding his parents. They’d unloaded the wagon and were sharing a loaf of bread. The man looked at him and felt in his pocket. He counted out the two credits he owed and put the money in Matt’s hand without speaking. Then he gave him a five credit note extra. He shook his head, turned and walked away. Matt couldn’t find anyone else who wanted him to work for them that day.

When Ed got back, he put the money on the table and told her what had happened.

‘You’ve got to be careful,’ she said. ‘Some things people won’t talk about. You don’t make friends in Market World.’

‘But how can we find out what happened to Mum and Dad?’

She took his hand and warmed it between hers.

 ‘The answer is here, in the city,’ she said. ‘I know it.’

‘But we have to do something.’

She looked up at him.

‘It’s Celebration Day soon. We’ll go to the arena. You’ll see what Market World’s really like.’

**4**

Dain felt a cold pride as he stared out over the city. He was seated at his desk, opposite the window in the room on the tenth floor with ‘Captain of the City Guard’ on the door. He knew pride was incorrect. He served where he was best fitted to serve, that was all.

He fingered the three stars at his collar that denoted his rank.

His parents had always wanted him to become a priest like his father.

He imagined what the scene in the Great Hall two weeks ago would have been like, if they had lived. He knew they’d have stood right at the front, smiling proudly, accepting the congratulations of their friends, of the Council, perhaps of President Wells herself. They would tell him how smart he looked in his new dress uniform, with the two rows of medals and the Star of the City on its silver ribbon, promoted to Captain of the City Guard at the age of twenty-six. How proud they would have been, if only everything had been different and they had been there.

But perhaps his father would have taken him on one side earlier that morning and reminded him in his careful insistent voice:

‘Dain, we are both so very proud of you. You have accomplished so much. But to serve God first and then to serve your fellow man: that is the highest duty, Dain. You would not be the first to discover that duty even now …’

No God ruled in Market World, only the One Law. It was the One Law that made Market World possible, and the higher duty was to enforce it. The Captain of the City Guard serves the people, no god and no one man. And the One Law means that no-one has to fail, as you did, my father, in the Broken Lands. He nurtured the obduracy of his heart. My duty. There must be one man steadfast in the law, so that citizens are safe to lead free lives in Market World.

Dain stared out over the city spread out in front of him: *my parish*. *I will serve you, all of you.* The great towers dominated everything, dwarfing the frail half-finished spires of the cathedral. Beyond the towers he could see the ranks of identical grey residence blocks, the streets dark canyons between them. He could just make out, yet further off, the land rising up to the darker green of the forest on the crest of the hills that encircled the city. Deep in the forest there were still villages where the writ of One Law did not at present run, where Enforcers only went on authorised pursuit.

Dain glanced at the clock, then at the silver-braided uniform cap lying on the desk in front of him. The crest of the city was picked out in gold above the glossy peak, the scales of justice with the motto in tiny letters: ‘Property, Equality, Dignity, Trade’

He rose to his feet, picked up the cap in both hands and placed it firmly on his head. The reflection of the Star shimmered in the opaque glass panel of the door. August the fifteenth. Twenty-first anniversary of the foundation of Market World.

No-one would question his right to march at the head of the Enforcers on Celebration Day.

**5**

Dain loved the way the crowd fell silent and cleared a path in front of him as he led the Enforcers through the packed streets. The entire city force marched behind him, more than three hundred men and women chosen for their stature and their air of stern authority. The crowd watched awestruck as they marched down Exchange Avenue and entered the arena.

The faces at the front of the crowd were prosperous, admiring, above all respectful. Behind them, in the cheaper stands, Dain could see the ranks of less prosperous citizens, their clothes drab, their faces leaner, their expressions blank, accepting. No-one spoke. Dain ignored them, his eyes on the crimson banners of Market World on either side of the main stand. He would enforce the law equally, without fear or favour, for all of them.

He directed the Enforcers to the centre of the open space in front of the podium, brought them to attention and raised his right fist in salute. Their black uniforms stood out against the yellow of the sand and the crimson banners draped across the front of the stands. They wore black leather gloves and boots. Their whips were coiled neatly at their belts and their helmets were stowed in the vehicles.

Dain was aware that at five foot eleven inches, he was the sole male Enforcer below six foot in height. He alone had the three silver stars of rank at his throat and the silver edging to his cap denoting his rank, Captain of the City Guard.

The others had always treated him with respect. That had been true at the College. Now he was twenty-six he understood that this respect was paid not only to his rapid promotion or his rank or the Star of the City on his chest. There was something about the direct gaze of his grey eyes and his decisiveness that he knew carried an air of calm authority. That, and his reputation for putting the Law before patronage, personal advantage or even friendship. That was his faith.

The City dignitaries saluted in turn. Franklin, Master of the Guild of Entrepreneurs, the only figure not in uniform, gave a casual half-wave. Dain glanced swiftly at the red-haired businessman in the dark suit that fitted perfectly, with his handkerchief dangling from his top pocket as if he’d just used it to clean his glasses. *You too,* he thought. *The Law is also for you and I will enforce it.*

President Rebecca Wells, Co-ordinator of the Council, looked directly at Dain and saluted him smartly, raising her right hand, fist lightly closed, to her right shoulder. Her black linen trouser suit was tailored to remind the audience of the Enforcers’ uniform, the jacket buttoned to the neck. The silver motif on the jacket pocket caught the sunlight and flashed like a row of decorations. She had intense brown eyes and shoulder-length ash-blond hair. It was known that she was fifty-one years old, but she looked ten years younger.

Dain stared straight ahead. Bright sunlight lit up the stadium. Noon, the time without shadows. The banks of loudspeakers, on either side of the podium, were flanked by the gigantic vertical crimson banners, each as high as a residence block. The banners carried the City’s crest, the scales of justice, under them now visible the words:

PROPERTY, EQUALITY, DIGNITY, TRADE

and above them, in capitals as high as a man, the order of the day:

CELEBRATE THE ONE LAW

Dain stood at the centre of the stadium, the podium directly in front of him, his Enforcers drawn up in the open space behind him. All around him he could hear the hubbub of the crowd, thousands of people, everyone in the city who was able to get there, gossiping, shuffling, pointing things out and trading, always trading. His Enforcers contributed nothing to the noise, each standing rigidly still, unmoving and alert, as if rooted. Adam Steele, his deputy, whom Dain trusted completely, stood to his side, older and fitter than any of them, the scar from the incident that had earned him his reputation running diagonally from the corner of his right eye across his mouth to his chin. Dain squared his shoulders.

The din of the crowd hushed as the image of President Wells appeared in close-up, perhaps fifty times life-size, on the giant screen behind the podium.

Dain’s mind went back to the promotion ceremony two weeks ago, when he’d first met President Wells face-to-face, the day after he’d led the raid that had smashed the price-ring in the Old Market. A few of the senior traders had controlled the entire food supply of the city. He’d stopped that and now the food shortages which meant that the poor were always hungry were at an end.

He thought with satisfaction of how he’d undertaken the operation on his own initiative with a few officers he trusted in support. Adam was the only one he’d taken into his full confidence. They’d caught the ring-leaders red-handed handing over the briefcase with the bribes in it to one of the highest-ranking Enforcers, the Chief Inspector of Markets. Dain smiled briefly. The senior officers who’d been happy to accept their pay-offs so long as they turned a blind eye were now paying their debt to the city: forced labour in the North Colony.

That ceremony was the proudest day of Dain’s life. President Wells had leaned forward to place the ribbon of the Star about his neck, her hands on his shoulders. He smelt the sharp tang of her perfume. She had straightened, looked him in the eyes and announced:

‘Enforcer Dain Lucas, congratulations! We award you the Star of the City for meritorious and exceptional service. You have more to offer us. I hereby appoint you Captain of the City Guard. You have shown that you have the integrity, the courage, the honour to lead our Enforcers.’

The applause of the City Council behind her rang in his ears. *If only my parents had understood about Market World,* he thought, *if only they hadn’t thought they had a better way, they would be here, part of all this.*

**6**

Nothing, Dain thought, could equal the intensity of President Wells’ brown eyes now, on Celebration Day, as she stared straight into the camera, straight into the face of everyone in the arena. Her voice rang out, echoing back from the sheer walls of the residence blocks around the stadium.

‘Citizens! Today is Celebration Day. We celebrate our city. We celebrate the One Law. We celebrate our Enforcers, guardians of the Law. And we celebrate that we alone do not endure the lawless life of the Broken Lands.’

She paused. There was complete silence. The only sound Dain could hear was the rustle of the banners.

‘Perhaps I can remind you of that time, not so distant, when humanity emerged from the shadows. Men and women discovered machinery, they mined, they invented, they made, they grew crops and they bought and sold.’

Images flashed onto the screen: a family, mother, father, two children, smiling as they surveyed a field of golden corn, men and women hammering at a metal blade on a bed of glowing coals, a craftsman fitting the plough-share, a woman driving a team of horses, people trading among the gaily-coloured stalls of a village market, all in bright sunlight.

‘That was our Golden Age.’

Dain noticed a sudden movement at the front of the premium stand, not twenty yards to his right*.*

A woman, her black hair neatly cut to frame her face, was standing up in the front row, her face rapt. She had deep brown eyes and her skin was strikingly pale. Her white suit stood out against the dark business clothing of those surrounding her, like a lily in a coal-yard. He guessed she was in her early twenties. She was standing in the front section of the stand reserved for the leading traders and those who had made their mark, the ‘Heroes of Enterprise’.

‘The world changed,’ the president went on, her voice sombre. ‘The gulf between rich and poor grew wider, unimaginably wide. Life for most people was no better than slavery, a life of endless poverty, without dignity, without respect.’

The images darkened. A factory appeared, a huge dim hall filled with endless rows of machines. Women, men and children bowed over the machines, ragged, dirty, moving with the exhaustion of the half-starved. Then a mob in rags fought for places around a great cauldron, their arms reaching out, their faces desperate, their feet slipping in the mud. A soberly-dressed man smiling piously, a guard on either side of him, handed down a bowl of soup.

‘After many years, men and women could no longer tolerate the burden of their lives. The poor rose up and fought the rich and their police in bloody revolutions spreading throughout the lands. The outcome was endless disorder, and finally the Great Hunger swept across the world.’

Chaotic images rushed across the screen, almost too fast to register: slaves chained to a great wagon, hauling it over a rutted road; an armoured car, its machine-gun blazing at a crowd outside a football stadium; the golden meadow seen earlier in flames, great clouds of black smoke rolling out over the village; horsemen with whips beating people away from the market-stalls, throwing them to the ground, trampling on them, the stalls smashed, a child, its face distorted with terror, screaming soundlessly, falling forward onto the camera as the horsemen swept through the crowd.

Dain glanced across at the woman. To his amazement, she was staring back at him with an expression he couldn’t fathom. There seemed to be admiration in it, and respect. He found himself wondering if she’d watched him on the newscasts.

President Wells looked intently out at her audience.

‘We drove out the rulers and we drove out the gifters. Those who would exploit us and those who would shame us. We outlawed corruption and we outlawed welfare. We burned out the cancer. Their chains and their hand-outs we gave to the furnace.’

The giant screen was filled with fire, great tongues of flame blazing up. The stadium echoed with the roar of the furnace.

‘Slavers, warlords, the charitable, the gifters, all oppressors we sent to the Broken Lands. Here in Market World we found a better way.’

The familiar map Dain remembered from the school-room appeared, a bright blue sea, with the tongue of the Great Continent reaching into it, the camera dropping down to discover far out in the ocean, beyond the tongue, the speck of an island growing rapidly larger.He’d learnt how distant from all other lands Market World was, how remote, so that no-one came to interfere with their special way of life.

Dain glanced back at the black-haired woman. Her eyes were still on him.

She stood out against the business people around her, bulky men and women, sleek as seals in their dark suits, their faces accustomed to power. He decided at that moment to make it his business to get to know her.

A sudden blare of music brought his attention back to the giant screen. The camera dived down. The image of the island expanded to reveal Market World at the centre, around it the forest: the city on its fertile plain, divided north to south by the river, the towers at its heart, the river-side park, the stadium, the market halls and then the residence blocks neatly arranged around them.

‘In Market World,’ President Wells proclaimed, ‘we came to understand that only in a society that had fair exchange at its very heart can citizens truly be individuals, truly have dignity, truly be free. No citizen a sharer, no citizen a gifter, no citizen dependent on charity, no citizen a slave to another, as in the Broken Lands*.* But in Market World all are equal, all are respected equally.’

She paused, and Dain, looking up at the giant screen, saw how her dark eyes seemed to gaze into the faces of every member of her audience.

‘Only through payment, only through trade, only through the bargain struck freely between willing buyer and willing seller is there equality, respect and dignity. All else is charity, dependence and …’

She paused again, her gaze embracing all of them. She spoke the final word with a new gentleness.

‘Tyranny.’

Her voice rang out across the stadium.

‘I give you: Another Twenty Years of Property, Equality, Dignity, Trade - and Peace. I give you the One Law.’

Dain saw in crimson letters on the great screen the words:

THE ONE LAW

Dain glanced back at the contingent and signalled with his left hand. They shouted out as one:

THE ONE LAW!

THE ONE LAW!

THE ONE LAW!

The crowd were on their feet shouting:

THE ONE LAW!

swelling the chant as it rose up, above the arena, out over the city and beyond, perhaps, Dain thought, as far as the dark forest on the surrounding hills.

**7**

The loudspeakers went on booming. Matt looked round and remembered where he was, with Ed, right at the back of the stadium. He felt the anger stirring within him. There were too many people here, he thought, people who ignored you, people who brushed you aside, people who took your Mum and Dad, who put you in re-education.

He stared up at the giant screen. A man who Matt thought must have been somewhere in his mid-forties, a man in a business suit with untidy ginger hair, stared confidently out at the crowd, his face stamped with the habit of command.

‘That’s Franklin,’ Ed whispered to him, ‘Big boss, he owns the market hall, the shop I work in, he owns everything. Look at how his suit fits, they’re the only people who can afford that kind of stuff.’

Matt watched as Franklin grinned at his audience and raised both hands to quiet them.

‘Citizens! Fellow-citizens! Fellow-traders!’

The new speaker’s gaze swept across the stadium. He spoke in a coarse, grating voice. Matt recognised the accent of the residence blocks, the run-down inner-city streets where the poor lived.

‘You know me, I’m Franklin. I’m an Entrepreneur, but that’s just a fancy word for a trader. I come from the blocks, same as you do. I started with nothing. I’m not proud. Anyone can do it.’

He stared out at them, his head thrust forward, both hands grasping the sides of the lectern. Matt glanced at Ed. She was looking up at the screen, an expression of contempt on her face.She shook her head and whispered to Matt:

‘Yeah, Franklin. We believe you. It was an easy as that. That’s why you’re rich and we ain’t. It’s all our fault.’

Franklin was still talking:

‘I’m someone who buys and sells, who gives people work, who builds the blocks you live in. I make the things you buy in the shops, everything according to the One Law. I just want to make things work, for all of us.’

Matt saw him gesture to the banners with a broad, confident smile. Franklin continued, almost shouting his words.

 ‘Everyone equal, no-one a slave, no-one a gifter, no-one a taker. Everyone with the chance to get rich and earn respect. That’s how we made Market World – and it works, for all of us.’

He lowered his voice.

‘I’m not a historian, I don’t have the gift of words, not like President Wells.’

He smiled at the president. She ignored him.

‘I say we did right when we drove out the gifters! Here in Market World everyone pays their way, no-one gets something for nothing. We don’t live like they do in the Broken Lands, where the powerful enslave the weak, and starve them if they don’t work hard enough.’

Franklin looked out over the audience, and nodded, as if agreeing with himself:

‘Best of all, there’s no discrimination here in Market World. In the Broken Lands people pick on each other just because they’re different, black and white, gay and straight, men and women.’

‘Here we have equality and respect. I’m equal to any of you and any of you are equal to me.’

He paused again. Matt saw his gaze travel across the audience to the gleaming glass and steel cliff of the New Market building next to the stadium. Franklin’s grin broadened. He licked his lips and jabbed a finger at the audience.

‘I don’t care if you’re black or white, young or old, gay or straight, a man or a woman. All I care is: can you pay me?’

Someone close by Matt started a chant:

FRANKLIN!

FRANKLIN!

The crowd took it up. Matt glanced at Ed. He was shocked at the hatred in her face.

‘Ed,’ he said softly into her ear, and took her hand. She looked blankly at him for a second, then seemed to come to herself and pulled him close.

‘I don’t forget, Matt. How can I? What they did to my parents.’

On the screen Franklin smiled as if momentarily embarrassed at the applause, despite his brashness. He pulled the handkerchief from his top pocket and polished vigorously at a pair of glasses. Matt watched as he slipped on the glasses and raised both his hands to acknowledge the cheers.

The first section of the One Law appeared on the screen. Franklin led the crowd in reading it out, squinting slightly at the words. Matt could hear the coarse voice, common as mud, echoing across the stadium, booming out over the harsh, raucous response of the audience.

ALL CITIZENS ARE EQUAL

NO CITIZEN TAKES FROM ANOTHER

NO CITIZEN GIVES TO ANOTHER

NO CITIZEN IS A SLAVE.

The words seemed to lose all meaning, the sound battering at his ears, the letters just shapes on the screen. Matt pushed the hair back from his forehead and leaned close to Ed’s ear, so she could hear him above the clamour:

‘I don’t like these crowds, everyone shouting. I’ve had enough. Let’s get out of here.’

Ed nodded and started to push her way to the side where the crowd was thinnest. The chanting kept on, waves of sound reflected from the wall of the stadium, pounding at them. The anger was there within him, growing stronger. He couldn’t make it go away.

Matt saw that Ed had found a way through, right at the back of the stand, behind the last row of people, hard against the boundary wall. He felt trapped by the amplified voices echoing from the walls of the stadium, repeating the words that stood in letters a metre high on the screen above them.

They reached the edge of the arena. Matt leaned against the side wall. The only way out was to follow it, down towards the front.

‘Keep your head down,’ whispered Ed.

Matt followed her and glanced up, between the figures in the stand, at the next section of the law:

THE ONE LAW STANDS BETWEEN THE CITIZEN

AND SLAVERY,

AND THEFT,

AND ROBBERY,

AND RAPE

He put his hands over his ears, striving to block out the words bellowing out from the throats of fifty thousand citizens.

THIS IS THE LAW OF MARKET WORLD

The voices rose together into a great shout, led by the Enforcers:

THIS IS THE LAW

Matt and Ed froze as the arena suddenly fell silent. They were now close enough to the front for Matt to see the group on the platform clearly. President Wells rose to her feet. Franklin ignored her. He raised his hands to the crowd again, acknowledging the cheers, ran a hand through his hair and stepped back.

Matt watched as she saluted the citizens, her smart uniformed figure contrasting with Franklin’s bulk.

‘Citizens! Now our Enforcers will renew their pledge to the city. Step forward, Captain Dain Lucas of the City Guard.’

Matt stared, not moving, his body suddenly tense, as a small figure marched smartly to the podium, mounted the steps and turned to face the crowd. The screen showed his face in close up, smooth-skinned, calm grey eyes staring out authoritatively over the people.

‘Citizens! All are equal before the one law. All must be buyers and sellers and nothing else.’

The screen filled with images of Enforcers marching, saluting, in riot gear, advancing in ordered ranks on a mob with banners, spilling out of tracked vehicles, always in black, always helmeted, faces covered. Matt’s chest tightened, he couldn’t breathe. The black shadows flashed into his mind, the figures at the edge of the forest. Men in black uniforms. Anger was flooding through him, like a torrent.

He shuddered.

‘It’s them! They took my father.’

He forced his way forward, angling down the side of the stand towards the arena. Ed squeezed through after him.

Matt heard the Enforcer’s voice, booming out above them:

‘Only one stands outside the market. Only one does not buy or sell. The Enforcer.’

Captain Lucas glanced down at the contingent of Enforcers standing rigidly to attention in front of him, then out across the citizens in the arena. Matt felt the grey eyes staring straight at him. He crouched as low as he could and kept on forward, past a low barrier.

Ed caught hold of him. She’d never seen such pain in his face.

‘Black shadows,’ he muttered, ‘they’re the black shadows.’

The anger drove everything out of his mind. He pushed forward towards the steps leading down into the arena.

**8**

Dain stood motionless on the podium, staring out, over their heads, past the prestige seats at the front to the cheap stands at the back, past the towers of the Entrepreneurs, past the half-built cathedral, out over the city, to the grey residence blocks where the ordinary people lived.

He smiled grimly. His parish, and the black-haired woman gazing up at him from the stand. He descended from the podium, signalled with his left hand and turned to lead the Enforcers from the arena. They wheeled and marched towards Exchange Avenue, leading back into the City. He prepared for the last ritual, the salute to the One Law.

He glanced at the twelve-foot black basalt column on which the law was engraved. It stood on its own plinth at the entrance to the Avenue directly in front of the Premium Stand. The black-haired woman was right at the front, among the Heroes of Enterprise, her jacket white against the dark suits of the wealthy businesspeople.

Behind the stand he could see the facade of the New Market Hall, Franklin’s latest investment, the largest and the most prestigious trading hall in the city.

Dain realised that the woman had positioned herself just to the side of the column, her hand raised almost in a salute. He lifted his left hand again and gave the order:

‘Parade, eyes right! Salute!’

Three hundred faces snapped to the right. Three hundred fists were raised. Dain’s eyes remained on the woman. Others in the stand were gazing at the big screen, the Enforcers or at Franklin himself. She stared only at him, Dain, giving to him alone her full attention. He became aware again of the innocence of her face, the purity of her skin, the sombre expression in her eyes. He held his back straight as a sword-blade.

He realised that Adam at the end of the rank had started to cough. They were well past the column now. His voice rapped out, without his seeming to give a conscious order:

‘Eyes front!’

As the Enforcers swept on past the stand, Dain caught side of two hunched figures bent down against the side wall. The larger of the two straightened and threw himself forward, directly at Dain, waving. He was shouting:

‘What did you do with them? Where’s my father? My mother?’

Dain had an impression of fervent blue eyes, black hair and a deep resonant voice***.***

The man was nearly on him now, still shouting nonsense:

‘It was you! The black shadows.’

Dain realised as the Enforcers swept forward that his attacker towered over him. The second figure, smaller, wavy-haired, darker-skinned, a woman he was suddenly aware, had caught up with the first. She was reaching up to grab at him, yelling:

‘Matt! What are you doing?’

Dain hesitated for half a second and a ripple ran back through the ranks behind him. Adam’s voice rang out from the end of the first rank:

‘March on!’

- and the ranks of Enforcers swept forward, like automatons, forcing the man to throw himself aside. He heard a sudden grunt as one of the Enforcers in the first row stuck the man a sharp blow to the stomach.

The attacker doubled up and another Enforcer tripped him neatly.

Out of the corner of his eye Dain saw the wavy-haired woman leap back. The man went down, boots kicking at his sides, at his belly, one slamming down just in front of his face. He rolled sideways. Adam, at the end of the rank, stepped carefully over him.

Dain heard Adam’s growl:

‘Compensate the citizen.’

The Enforcers reached into their pockets and flung the coins down hard at the figure on the ground. Dain heard nothing beyond the crunch of boots on gravel. He ached to turn his head, to see whether the dark-haired woman in the stand was still staring at him. He led his men on towards the exit.

**9**

Matt managed to get his hands over his face as the coins pelted down around him. He crawled forward and collapsed gasping at the side of the Avenue, against the front of the stand. The taste of blood filled his mouth, salt and iron. His side felt on fire, the pain forcing everything from his mind. The anger was still blazing through him. He tried to get up and fell back. The crunch of boots diminished into the distance.

He found himself staring up into the face of a black-haired woman, her eyes wide, her mouth open. She was reaching down towards him. She had pale skin, a delicate small-boned hand and startlingly red finger-nails. He gazed up into the dark lustrous eyes. He could hardly make out the division between the pupil and the iris.

He felt Ed tugging at his arm.

He realised the woman’s eyes were filling with tears. Ed’s voice was insistent:

 ‘Come on, we have to go.’

The woman in the stand was speaking, saying something to him but he couldn’t make out the words. The sunlight shone bright all around her, glinting on her short black hair. The light dazzled his eyes. Ed was still tugging at his arm.

He pulled himself slowly to his feet, gasping at the jolt of pain in his side. Ed had her arm round him, she was holding him on his feet, urging him forward. He stared up, unable to take his eyes away from the woman in the stand, just a few feet above him. He could hear Ed speaking, insistent in his ear:

‘Hold onto me. We’ve got to get out of here.

The image of the face of the woman leaning over the edge of the stand, staring after him, the sun behind her, glinting from her black hair, her skin pale, her eyes wide, drove everything out of his mind.

‘Come on.’

Ed tugged at his arm. He was astonished at the strength in her slender body.

**10**

Anna Pascal had been delighted, proud and thrilled when she was elected a ‘Hero of Enterprise’ with the chance to bid for a seat in the premium stand. Quality Catering was one of the big success stories of the city. She’d started it from virtually nothing, and now it ran everything from street-stalls to high class restaurants. The deal she’d made after the Old Market scandal secured supplies and she’d just recapitalised for further expansion. The award meant the Entrepreneurs took her seriously. *I’m only twenty-three*, she thought. *Some of it’s luck, but not all of it.*

 Her heart swelled when Dain marched in at the head of the Enforcers. She knew him by reputation, she’d followed the newscasts avidly. *He’s a risk-taker, just like me*.

She was immediately struck by the graceful, precise way he moved as he entered the arena. She gazed up at his face on the giant screen. She couldn’t understand why everyone looked back at Franklin and the President as soon as he finished speaking.

That was when the idea of standing right at the front, just next to the column, occurred to her. She found herself directly in front of Dain, no more than twenty feet away, when his head turned in the salute and the grey eyes met hers. She could find no expression in his face to answer her own, but his eyes remained fixed on her until he turned away to march forward.

It was then that the man dashed out, right at Dain, shouting something about black shadows. A woman with coffee-coloured skin and wavy brown hair was trying to hold him back. Anna gripped the rail. The ranks of Enforcers continued forward with Dain at their head.

She saw the man twist round, off balance. Dain was unscathed, but the man was on the ground, rolling over towards her, clutching his side, in a litter of small change. He tried to rise and fell back. He was directly beneath her now, staring upwards, straight at her.

She glanced towards Dain, but the Enforcers were marching away from her towards the gate, and he was at their head, eyes to the front.

She looked down. The face below her twisted in pain, then relaxed. She saw startlingly blue eyes, opened wide, a broad, red-lipped mouth and square chin. She was sure he was trying to say something, to speak to her. He gasped, his face contracted with pain. She felt a rush of feeling for him.

Instinctively, she reached down towards him. As his friend helped him to his feet and supported him, she realised he was a big man, muscular, and young, perhaps twenty. His eyes were still fixed on hers. There was a passionate intensity in his gaze.

The woman he was with was urging him along. Anna leant over the rail and stared after them. They limped painfully to the corner of the stand. He was looking back at her the whole way. She could see the blood streaked red across his forehead, soaking into the thick tangle of black hair. The woman pulled at him. They disappeared round the corner.

Anna sat down abruptly. She could hear the crunch of the Enforcers’ boots on the gravel at the end of the Avenue. Dain wasn’t hurt, she was certain of that.

The image of Dain’s face, of his gaze, calm, confident and direct, again filled her mind. She couldn’t understand why her eyes felt heavy with tears.

A voice spoke, it seemed in her ear:

‘Are you OK?’

A pale-skinned young woman with light, almost straw-coloured hair cropped close to her scalp, dressed in jeans and a white tee-shirt was bending over her.

‘It’s nothing,’ Anna replied.

She felt something soft in the palm of her hand. She looked up. The woman was pressing a handkerchief into her hand. Anna felt automatically for some coins but when she turned to pay the fair-haired woman was nowhere to be seen. She stared up Exchange Avenue. Dain and the Enforcers were gone. She could see no sign of the black-haired man and the woman who had helped him, just the coins glinting on the sand.

**11**

Matt felt the gentle pressure of Ed’s arm across his back as she helped him along the road away from the stadium. The pain jerked in his side. He let her decide where they would go. The anger was somewhere deep within him.

He was aware that she was leading him through a maze of brightly coloured stalls. On all sides people were shouting their wares. Celebration Day was good for trade. Cakes, drinks, shoes, cosmetics, T-shirts, coffee, electronics, hats, dresses, jeans, dental care, drugs, pawn-broking, you could get anything here. The noises were too loud, the colours too vivid, he felt it all as a weight bearing down on him.

Ed steered him through the mob of people, the clamour of everyone shouting, trading, bargaining, the jangling colours of the stalls. Images of the black uniforms and of his father jostled in his head. The pain retreated. He felt safer now. Ed had got him away from the stadium and they were among the crowds on the street.

After a few minutes, they turned into a side street. He couldn’t see any stalls. The racket from the main road ebbed away after they’d gone a few yards and he could hear his own footsteps dragging on the pavement. Ed pushed him onto a chair outside a nondescript café.

Residence blocks rose on both sides, eight stories of grey unfinished concrete with small shuttered windows. Matt noticed there were cracks running zigzag down the building opposite him. Someone had tried to fill them with a lighter grey mixture that crumbled and fell out in uneven lumps.

Rubbish littered the street. He could see more rubbish, cardboard boxes, bottles, rusty cans, torn plastic, spilling out of the dark alleys between the blocks. Further along he noticed some children playing. He looked at them and realised it wasn’t a game, they were picking through the rubbish, searching for anything of value. Otherwise the street was empty of people.

He felt Ed’s hand on his shoulder.

‘What the hell were you doing?’ she said. ‘You’ll get yourself killed. You scare me.’

Matt looked up at Ed, at the fear and concern in her eyes. He felt a glow of warmth.

‘Thanks. You saved my life.’

He straightened his back and grunted. The pain in his ribs had faded to a dull ache.

‘No problem.’ She smoothed the hair back from the cut on his forehead. ‘But don’t ever do that again.’

‘I won’t.’

He stared past her, down the street, trying to clear his head.

‘The black shadows in the forest. I hate them.’

‘They’re Enforcers, guardians of the One Law. If you want to live in the city, you’re going to have to get used to them. You need looking after.’

Images of life back on the farm flooded back into Matt’s mind: the meals, his mother serving the food out to the men, great steaming platefuls; the cold of the attic room on a winter night, frost patterns growing across the window as you breathed on it; his great-aunt next to him, telling him one of her old stories about the village and about dragons and heroes and goblins.

Somewhere in his memory there was a big, fair-haired man, smelling of horses, on a bright sunlit day like today, with a barrow and a cart and a vast pile of apples, laughing, sorting through them, choosing the ripest and bending down to offer it to him. He could still smell the sharp sweet tang of ripe fruit.

‘I have to find Mum and Dad. I have to find out what happened.’

He glanced down. His hand was shaking. Ed spoke carefully:

‘Best to forget about it.’

‘But it’s there, in my mind, I have to know. I have to.’

Ed met his eyes. There was a silence. Then she spoke in a hesitant voice.

‘Something I’ve never told you.’

She paused, staring at the residence block opposite them.

‘When they took Mum and Dad people were laughing at them, calling them free-loaders. “Pigs at a trough” they called them.’

She fixed her eyes on his.

‘The Enforcers liked that, the officer said, “That’s right, pigs.” He pulled out his whip and started flicking it at my father. They didn’t treat us like people. They treated us like animals. They had cattle-prods.’

Her face was close to his, her eyes glowing with tears. She was speaking so softly he had to lean forward to catch the words:

‘I don’t forget Mum and Dad. I hate the Enforcers. That’s why I’ll help you find your mother and your father.’

Her arms were tight round him and her face was no more than two inches from his. He pulled her head down onto his shoulder and held it there for half a minute, then lifted her gently back.

‘Thanks,’ he said.

There was a silence. Ed’s eyes never left his. She leaned forward and kissed him tenderly on the lips. They kissed for some time, then he gently broke the kiss. She looked down. When she spoke it was in her usual voice.

‘You’d do the same for me, remember that. But it’s going to make trouble, for both of us.’

**12**

Matt clasped Ed to him. A few moments passed and he looked up. He saw a lean, middle-aged woman striding towards them, glaring at them. Her face was careworn, her hair greying and tied back. She was wearing a creased apron with white and blue stripes.

‘If you want to sit there, you’ve got to pay.’

Ed held up both her hands, palms open.

‘The Enforcers got him, they gave him a kicking.’

The woman glanced up and down the street.

‘Bloody Enforcers, they won’t leave anyone alone.’ She sniffed. ‘They’ll say I’m a gifter, you owe me a note for those seats. You been watching my TV.’

Ed shrugged and helped Matt to his feet. He felt her arm round him as he limped down the street. The café-owner came some way after them and stood there, shouting something about credits. There was a burst of noise from the end of the street. Ed swung round, looking back.

‘There’s some kind of protest happening back there. We’ve got to get off the street.’

Matt put a hand on the wall to steady himself and looked back. He saw a confused knot of people at the end of the street. Someone was waving a banner with a slogan on it, he couldn’t make out the words.

The chanting became louder:

FRANKLIN! FRANKLIN! SHOW YOU CARE!

FRANKLIN! FRANKLIN! PAY US FAIR!

 ‘It’s a strike. Franklin’s cut the wages.’ Ed said. ‘They were talking about it at the supermarket. Going on strike’s against the law of course, damages trade.’

She glanced back up the street and tugged urgently at his arm.

‘The Enforcers will be here any minute. Keep moving.’

He stumbled on. The children had disappeared. He realised that the chanting had stopped. He could just hear a faint echo from his footsteps in the silence. Then there was a scream from the end of the street, cut off abruptly.

Ed kept looking over her shoulder. She stared.

‘Those poor people!!’ she said softly.

Matt swung himself round. No sign of the banner. Black figures in helmets, visors down, had surrounded the demonstrators. He saw their arms swinging up and down rhythmically, in unison. They were using the whip handles as clubs, battering at whatever was on the ground in front of them. He felt the anger uncoiling, his body thick with blood.

Ed shoved him forward. The street was completely empty apart from the rubbish along the edge of the pavement. He caught the sound of running feet and the blast of a whistle behind them.

‘Look out!’

He staggered back as two blond young men, handkerchiefs over their mouths, dashed by and cut across in front of them into an alley.

Ed shoved at him: ‘Get in there, quick.’

Matt stumbled forward into the alley, nearly tripping over a pile of boxes. The youths were ahead of them, their feet clattering on the paving stones.

Someone shouted:

‘Christ! A bloody dead end.’

The grey concrete walls stretched up on both sides. Matt could see that the gate at the end had a steel padlock on it. The nearest youth was staring at them, wide-eyed. They could all hear the whistles on the street.

‘Get down,’ hissed Ed, pushing the youth in the chest. ‘Hide - not you, Matt.’

Matt leaned on the wall watching her as Ed pulled at the rubbish stacked at the entrance. She threw the boxes further up the alley to cover the youths, huddled down against the gate. He felt the roughness of the concrete under his hand. He forced his shoulders to relax. The harsh sound of people running in heavy boots was nearly on them.

Matt turned to the sharp bar of daylight at the end of the alley. A helmeted face appeared, visor down, then the rest of the figure, bulky in the black uniform cutting off the light, the whip gripped in one hand.

Matt felt his heart racing. Everything seemed to go silent. Ed pushed herself past him.

The Enforcer pushed up the visor to reveal neatly cropped fair hair, bright red lipstick and the eyes of a hunting dog. She had a single silver star on her collar.

‘Get yourselves out of there, you two. What’s going on?’

Ed slipped sideways out of the alleyway, one hand shielding her face from the sun, the other holding Matt’s hand in a gentle grip. He leant back, against the wall.

He noticed Ed was standing in a way he’d never seen before, one knee bent, her hips thrust forward, her spine arched backwards, her small breasts prominent, her head tilted to one side; not four-square with her weight evenly on both feet as she usually stood.

Ed smiled warmly at the Enforcer and glanced down.

‘Nothing, officer, we were just hanging out, you know, personal trading, just him and me.’

The Enforcer looked past her, back up the street at two other black uniformed figures twenty metres away. Matt saw one of them was shining a flashlight into an alley, the other was stamping down on a pile of rubbish, kicking the shards of broken bottles across the pavement.

‘No sign of them,’ the one with the torch shouted, ‘they’re in the alleyways. I’m not going down there without back-up.’

The Enforcer turned to Ed:

‘So where were you when there was all the trouble outside the supermarket?’

Matt could see a small scar across her lower lip, behind the lipstick.

‘In the café,’ said Ed. ‘Ask her.’

She pointed across the street to where the careworn woman from the café with the striped blue apron was standing, arms folded, watching them. The woman nodded.

The other Enforcers joined them, their visors still down. Matt knew he had to hide his anger somewhere deep within him. He felt sick. One of them jerked his whip towards him.

‘What about him? He looks like a trouble-maker.’

Ed giggled.

‘Oh I don’t think so. Look at him. He’s a big guy, but he’s not up to much just now. Not worth much of a bid.’

She put a hand over her mouth, and took it away.

‘Bit of a disappointment.’

Matt grunted and pulled himself upright. He winced and fell back against the wall. The concrete grated against his arm. The one-star Enforcer was standing back, watching him. One of the other Enforcers poked the butt of the whip hard into Matt’s side. It was if someone had stabbed him in the ribs with a red-hot blade. He doubled up and fell forward onto the pavement.

The dark shadow of the Enforcer looming over him as he lay there, his cheek against the pavement. He curled up and lay motionless, his eyes filled with tears.

The one-star Enforcer glared at Matt and Ed and pulled down her visor.

‘You two can get off the street. I know your faces. If I see you again, you’re in trouble.’

She threw some coins onto the pavement and added: ‘That’s for your time, citizens.’

She turned to her subordinates: ‘Come on, back to the squad.’

Matt felt their shadows move off him. His side was throbbing with pain. He couldn’t think clearly. He watched the Enforcers as they went back up the street, one of them idly kicking the piles of rubbish across the pavement as he passed by.

The cafe-owner stared at them in silence as Ed knelt down and helped Matt roll over and get into a sitting position. He put a hand on the wall and pulled himself to his feet.

*I owe you Ed,* he thought. *More than I can pay. I’ll get back at those Enforcers for you one day. I’ll do that for you.*

He heard the cafe-owner sniff again. She said ruminatively, to no-one in particular:

‘All this talk about how they’re there to protect you. They just like kicking people.’

Ed kicked the coins into the gutter and shouted ‘You can come out now.’

Matt heard noises in the alley. One of the youths sidled out, bits of plastic in his short fair hair, and an ugly green stain on his T-shirt. The other followed him. They pulled the handkerchiefs down from their mouths.

‘All right?’ said the first. He was slightly-built, no more than eighteen, with striking blue eyes, freckles and a complexion pale as water. He kept glancing round.

Ed looked up at him.

‘Yeah. You’d better get moving.’

The youth grinned. He touched her lightly on the shoulder, then snatched back his hand:

‘Thanks, that was brilliant, the way you sorted those Enforcers. Maybe do the same for you someday.’

Matt suddenly realised that the second youth was a girl, dressed just the same as the boy, with the same fair hair, cropped short. She looked sideways at Matt with concern in her eyes.

‘Are you going to be OK?’

Matt glanced at Ed. She nodded.

‘I’ll look after him,’ Ed said, then, with sudden vehemence, ‘I hate those bastards.’

‘Come on.’ The other youth glanced nervously up the street. ‘We’ve got to get going.’

Matt could see the girl following him towards the alleyways. She paused and turned back.

‘I hate them too. See you again. Do you ever come to the park?’