

5 • The Most Beautiful Player of All

The Dagoda of the Enchanter loomed in the middle of Enchanted City, so that none would forget the watching eye of the Fire Wizard. Close by, and a happier place, was the Palace of the Players. Here the people of the city, filled with weariness and heartsickness, came and forgot for a time their griefs and fears and pains.

Thespia stood in the wings of the stage, brushing her long and luxuriant hair. She was the most beautiful of all the players, and even now she could hear the house chanting her name: “Thespia! We want Thespia!” Many suitors sought her hand, but she turned them all away.

“Flowers from the Dagoda!” the assistant stage manager called. Thespia yawned and instructed the gift be delivered to her suite in the Palace.

“Four minutes! Four minutes!” the callboy warned. Thespia straightened her gown and took one last look in the mirror.

Through a crack in the thick velvet curtain, she could see the theatre was full. It was almost time for the play to begin. *Poor ones. Poor, poor ones. Forget for a while, then home again, only to remember your empty half-lives.* She whispered this hollow blessing over them.

“See you t’night,” the lead actor shouted as he hurried to take his position.

“QUIET!” warned the stage director.

“But—” Thespia wanted to protest to the actor; then she shrugged her shoulders and turned to wait for that always-

thrill, the curtains rising and the stage filling with the sudden radiance of spotlights, then the sonorous voices of trained players. She particularly loved tonight’s play. *The Return of the King* had been banned for years, but recently, several old myth cycles had been restored to the Palace repertoire.

We need a king—Thespia quickly looked around, as though the stagehands could read her innermost mind. Treason, this thinking; she knew it. Careful, or the most beautiful player of all would play a final roletied to a stake at Burning Place. The first rule all children of Enchanted City learned after branding was: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A KING. DEATH TO PRETENDERS!

Senseless! she thought, and looked around again. *If there’s no such thing as a King, why such a fuss?* The placards, the lectures, the propaganda songs—“No king, no king, the Enchanter’s the thi-ng.” Silence would have helped her to forget, but each protest made her wish all the more: *If only there really were a King!*

“Three minutes! Three minutes!”

As a lonely understudy, Thespia had determined to be the finest player in all Enchanted City. Unlike other actresses, who became arrogant and haughtily cut all ties with their pasts, Thespia perfected her art in the streets. She refused to become enamored with the sterile practice rooms, the posh living suites, and the luxuries of the Palace of the Players. She bound up her flaxen hair with common cloth and walked the marketplace, listening to how real people spoke words.

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Often she went back to her own people, to Moire Oxan where they lived, to the stacked hovels where she had been raised. There she carried old grannies' burdens that weighed their bent backs double, and she brought tidbits of food for the always-hungry waifs. She wept when orphans were taken away to the Orphan Keeper, and she felt the cold whistling through these always-night lives and remembered what it was to never have enough fire or power.

Their pain became her own, and their small and meager joys as well. Because she did not despise them, she was loved; and it was they, the street people sitting on the gallery floor, who called her name.

One night, one terrible night, her cousin's wee babe wriggled in agony in Thespia's arms while searchers hunted its mother, who was foraging in a city-edge workshift. It squinched up its tiny face, took a last, long breath, and died. Shuddering with sobs, Thespia hid in a tower of the Players' Palace. How *could* she act the next night, play the comic, with this terrible knowledge—that in Enchanted City, babies died who shouldn't die. She grieved with new understanding—there was little she, or anyone, could do.

Placards in the tower proclaimed: "IT IS FORBIDDEN TO WATCH THE DAY." Her bitter soul declared: *Another ridiculous rule. I will watch the day—and if it slays me, then I am slain!*

As the golden sun rose, burning her eyes with grandeur and casting a brilliance over Enchanted City, Thespia thought she had never seen anything so beautiful. That moment of magnificence marked her soul as truly as the branding iron had marked her body. *There must be more*, she thought. *This*

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Whenever she stepped on stage, whether it be for ordinary performances or for gala premiers or for command entertainments at the Dagoda, this was the moment she resurrected—the light rising, shining gloriously over the city. That memory filled her with a special power.

In time, Thespia had become what she had vowed to be—the greatest player of all. The simplest twist of her wrist, a motion of her hand, the arch of her eyebrows, one half-turn of her slender waist, left audiences amazed and delighted.

Thespia took deep breaths to calm her familiar stage anxiety.

"Orchestra and beginners!"

There was a backstage scurry as actors and actresses took their positions—stage left, stage center front—then a pounding, the one-minute signal, then the houselights dimming, then a hush as the audience quieted, then the lovely melody of an ancient hymn as the violins began their lilting music. Thespia loved the words of this overture.

*"Let us go down, go down
and clasp hands
and breathe life
and taste the jagged edge of pain
and sing songs of the better place,
the better time,
the better day."*

No wonder she had fallen in love. For too long Thespia had watched the Breakers cudgel men and women in Moire Oxan;