

From Unification

Quincentennial

***B**uild walls of the soul, and strengthen the Walls of Nation. Only from within can we find the strength to conquer what is without.'*

The Seeker's wisdom, always pervasive, was inescapable during the Quincentennial, especially the day of the joint military parade. Passages from *Nine Principles of the Internal Victory* reverberated from every speaker-post, louder and more piercing than the usual background drone. On the rooftops, sending walls of sound bouncing from building to building all along the canyon of the avenue, huge speakers boomed, specially fitted for the day.

'Where once there was waste, there shall be Freedom. Where once there was vanity, there shall be Unity.'

The voice reading the ancient maxims was female and was shrill with passion. Kelbee knew the words by heart, had done ever since the narrow-eyed schoolmistress in her village put them there with a switch of the cane. Every day living in Debrayn piped tinny reminders through speakers attached to every streetlight and hanging off every corner.

With gravity ringing from every syllable the woman on the recording read, audibly pumping every ounce of verve into her words; as the winner of a capital-wide ballot she'd been coached for the occasion by state dramatists – Kelbee had seen the posters. But despite the woman's efforts the trench of city made a mockery of her, jumbling words into one another, obscuring some while others rang out with a screeching intensity. People would occasionally turn into their coats, trying to disguise a wince as a cough or sneeze.

From her spot on the bleachers of the wives' enclosure, Kelbee could see around half a kilometre of the parade route. Crowds lined the avenue, some in enclosures like her own, others milling behind ropes. Buildings had been draped with giant red and blue banners, unfurled from the rooftops and hanging all the way down to the ground, some emblazoned with the words *Balance, Loyalty, Victory*. On others, His face beamed out, perfect teeth in a fixed smile as white as snow, the eyes beatific with wisdom and love.

The mid-morning was bright and unseasonably hot. The trees were still yet to bud, the skeletal branches caught off-guard by the heatwave that had the women around her muttering and sweating in their heavy formal clothes. Some shielded their eyes with their hands, some wore dark glasses against the glare; Kelbee contented herself with squinting. Her eyes followed a banner from its tasselled tip and up to the roof of the opposite building, coming to rest on a soldier who stood there watching. She couldn't see his face but his body was alert. His foot rested on the parapet and one hand gripped the strap of his rifle. There was a speaker nearby and the noise up there would be deafening – his helmet must have ear protection. The barrel of his high-powered rifle was a thin silhouette against the bright sky.

Crimson and sky-blue were everywhere, on every corner, flag pole, arm and throat. Yellow felsea petals had been strewn a fist deep along the avenue. Every speaker-post was hung with a striped tabard: the blue of mourning, the red of victory. The crowds jostled for the best view and everyone was turned out in their very best. Kelbee felt the weight of her sash on the back of her neck, the heavy two-tone silk rubbing uncomfortably. It was hung with rows of medals, a proud testament to the Major's career. All of the wives wore them, some hung with only a couple of commendations, others sagging under the weight of metal, the blue and the red beneath barely visible; some of the frailest ones had brought a daughter or niece to bear the burden of glory for them. Kelbee rubbed her fingers together at her side; she'd been up before dawn, burnishing the medals to a mirror sheen, and her skin still held the tang of polish.

Every year the people of Debrayn gave thanks to the Father of the Nation on his birthday but this was different: five hundred years of peace – and happiness – inside and outside the Walls. Instead of a single day of celebration there would be three. Alcohol rations had been increased, as

had the number of the police in the streets. Attendance at today's parade was mandatory, of course. It was duty. It had never even occurred to Kelbee to do otherwise, though she'd been surprised to see police roaming the corridors of her apartment building that morning. It seemed strange to her that anyone would deliberately miss the day everyone had been gossiping about for weeks, and yet there they were, eyes intent, running their scanners over the walls and checking for absentees. One of them had glanced at her as she passed and she'd felt her cheeks go warm – it earned her narrowed eyes but nothing more. It was only later that she realised what had made her react like that.

She'd never had anything to hide before.

Kelbee mopped her brow and waited for the parade to start. The Major would be there, alongside his soldiers, and as his wife it was her duty to witness. In the close press of the enclosure she was five rows from the back. Up here her view was better than those at the front but carried less prestige – the higher the husband's rank, the closer you got to the front. Her calves were already aching and it was still early, so she flexed them under her long dress, stretching up on to her tiptoes then back down again, hoping no one would notice her head bobbing. To pass the time, she ran her eye over the other wives, starting at the back and working her way forwards.

Back when she'd been a girl, she'd come across a smooth, round stone in a grassy field. The stone had split down the middle into two halves; its interior was ringed, just like a tree. She'd showed it to Mother who'd told her the layers were built up over time, each ring the passing of an age. They reminded her of that stone, these women, age and prominence rolling downhill, accumulating as it went.

Behind her were the junior officers' wives, little more than girls, looking new and afraid. Then came her peer group: slightly older, quiet and watchful, some with gazes downcast, others throwing quick glances around as though checking the world for sharp things. A few rows on the women became notably older. One row from the front were bowed, frail-looking creatures, hiding their years with bangles and piled-up wigs, made to look threadbare by the girls they'd brought to carry their sashes.

By contrast, the entire front rank was full of perfect young women. Fresh-faced, with exquisite features and dressed in garments worth a year's cloth ration. Younger even than Kelbee had been when she'd first come to

Debrayn, each one a true marvel of wide eyes and glossy hair. What a miraculous regeneration, Kelbee thought, a promotion can have on a man's wife. The thought came as a shock, as if another person had spoken inside her head. She lowered her gaze, hoping the thought hadn't shown on her face.

She made out snatches of conversation from a few rows in front. Oblivious to the silent ranks behind, the middle-aged wives seemed content to swap gossip; everyone wanted to know everyone's business.

Meli loves the new school ...

... and Sardum is vice-captain of the Squares team ...

Did you see what she was wearing? I'm not surprised ...

Kelbee almost envied them their bubble, a little world they'd created among themselves. She didn't have much of a social circle, not yet. She watched them as they complimented, sniggered and pointed fingers. A casual observer might think they hadn't a care in the world, though she knew how to spot the signs: a worried frown when they thought no one was looking, a furtive glance towards the children's enclosure further down the route. Even buried under years of socialising and flattery, the fear remained.

There was a clarion of trumpets and the triumphant voice on the speakers faded away. A roll of drums came rumbling down the avenue. Kelbee looked up, and saw that the soldier on the rooftop had turned towards the new sound, his rifle now in his hands. A hush fell over the crowd and the air grew thick; feet shuffled, the heavy emptiness of thousands holding their breath. In the distance, there was a retort of gunfire, three volleys in quick succession followed by the deep boom of an artillery piece. A voice drifted over the silent crowd, the clipped roar of an approaching drill sergeant. The drums grew louder and were joined by another sound. Rhythmical and sharp, the tramp of thousands of feet approaching in perfect step. The stands began to vibrate and Kelbee felt a sickening lurch in her stomach.

The cheering started in patches and grew to an all-enveloping roar as the head of the parade came into view. Marines in crisp white uniforms, each in perfect time, rifles held slanted over shoulders, peaked caps pulled down low over their eyes. The other wives were cheering and Kelbee joined in, though she felt like a bird was trying to escape from her chest. They filed past, the red and blue of their armbands stark against the glaring white of their dress jackets. Every dozen or so ranks came bannermen holding

gilded regimental crests high above their heads. They all looked so similar, right down to their severely cut hair; all the same height, stern eyes fixed on the man in front. Something about the precise, pendulum-like swinging of those hundreds of arms moving up and down in time made her feel even more nauseated. She swallowed hard.

Following the last row of marines was a slow-moving skimmer-car carrying a colonel in an elaborate white and gold uniform. He held himself steady on a raised handrail and every so often the other arm would flash up in a salute to the crowd, though Kelbee wondered if it was to stop his large round hat from blowing off. As he came closer, she saw that his eyes looked bored. Seated around him were his staff members, Captains and Majors with stern expressions. She wondered how it felt to be there, riding through all that noise; not one of them looked like they were enjoying a single minute.

After the marines came the infantry in night-black fatigues. Their timing was different, their feet moving two steps for every beat. They seemed to bob up and down on the spot, the tramp-tramp of their boots cracking on the road. They carried rifles over their chests and their eyes were hidden by skull-like, black-visored helmets. Spaced throughout the formation were wheeled gun carriages carrying their crews on board. Soldiers filed past and wives cried out as they spotted a husband or brother or uncle.

Kelbee's legs gave another throb of fatigue and she wondered how long it would take for the mechanised divisions to make it this far, and with them her Major. The thought of her husband made her stomach lurch again and the rolling stamp of boots on the avenue rumbled right through her, shaking her inside. The cheers of the crowd assaulted her ears and the heat was like a physical weight. She shut her eyes for a moment, feeling the vibrations through her eyelids, then forced herself to open them again. She knew she couldn't risk missing something important. She had a duty to observe. And in the centre of this crush of bodies and noise and heat, she herself was being watched.

The infantry battalions tramped past, and in their wake came war-walkers, each one towering ten metres above the road. Their heavy gun-arms were hung with yellow garlands and the pilots' heads poked out of the open cockpits between the machines' hunched metal shoulders. Their legs

were reversed, like those of a larg, and as each heavy foot fell the ground trembled. There were gasps amid the cheers and as the hulking machines came closer Kelbee caught the sharp tang of burning fuel and the growling of engines. Pebbles popped under massive metal feet; each step brought a whine as servos fought to keep the lurching tonnes of metal upright. As they drew level with her she felt a rise in her throat and that terrible, uncontrollable tightness in her jaw that told her she only had moments before it happened.

She pushed past her neighbours and ran for the steps; just before she reached them an older woman with mousy hair took a step backwards into her path. Kelbee bounced off the woman's shoulder, her momentum carrying her on towards the metal stairs that led down the side of the bleachers. She heard the woman give a surprised gasp but she was already bolting headlong down the short flight of steps, her hand clamped over her mouth.