



SIEBENQUELL

The Sons and Daughters of the Masquerade



QUELLENANGABE: FOTOGRAFIERENDE © UNSPLASH

Joanna felt some of the burden lift from her heavy heart. A member of the Guild of the Storytellers, she had returned to Guildhall to seek the counsel of her old teacher. The majestic building that sat atop a promontory overlooking a wide gently flowing river gave her a sense of calm. It was a homecoming for her. She has discovered much of her talent and all of her heart on these grounds. The seven fountains that lay interspersed throughout the spacious and expansive gardens had been her favourite places to read and learn and listen.

The library of the guildhall was a jewel within a jewel. The main reading room of 32 walls formed a large circle. It soared up into a vaulted ceiling, each wall covered with wooden bookshelves of the finest white pine wood. Every square inch of the room was decorated with intricate carvings of the flora and fauna, the characters of the innumerable stories housed here: the shelves, desks and chairs, the walls and window frames, the stone and the wood. The entire guildhall was a story unto itself.

She spotted her teacher easily, surrounded by piles of manuscripts and books, lost in the depths of the stories he was reading. Occasionally he would run his ink stained fingers absentmindedly through his grey beard. She walked to his table and took a seat. He looked up and smiled. His words of greeting were warm and welcoming, but they were but repetitions of the welcome she has already seen in his smile.

Like many who have found an attentive heart, she easily poured out her tale of grief. So she told him the troubling tale of her encounter with a woman who had first manipulated her and then went on to betray her. Joanna had offered her a warm welcome, made time for the encounter and had been kind, open and trusting during the conversation. But each grace she had offered had later been twisted and used against her. She felt betrayed and, even worse, somewhat sheepish. She hurt. She ached. It had shaken her confidence in her ability to judge the true character of others.

Her teacher waited until the telling was done. Then he said. »Ah, my friend, that is a tale as old as time. The sons and daughters of the Masquerade have populated our stories since we began telling them, because they are always walking among us. When they appear in a story, they bring spice, intrigue and excitement with them, but it is never as pleasant to meet them in real life. They nearly always leave scars behind on the souls they ravage, and self-confidence does not flourish where their shadow falls. The only way to combat them is not to become one of them. That is not as easily done as you might expect. Surely you have already felt the urge to raise your own mask, hide your feeling and genuine intentions? You will tell yourself, that it is all in the name of self-protection, of course. Yet, already their poison is at work, edging you to become more like them, while in fact you are becoming less than yourself. The only way not to join them, is to pierce to the heart of who they truly are, to slice through the shroud of secrecy in which they envelope their true selves.«

Leaning back, he looked at his former protégé, openly and without guile.

»My friend, the sons and daughters of the Masquerade don masks in order to project to the outside world an illusion of what does not exist in their inner world. Their world is forged of smoke and mirrors. The God of all creation never made a mask. He created that most beautiful part of the body, the human face. Every part of it helps us to tell our stories: the eyes that crinkle or widen, the mouth that purses and pouts, the forehead that folds itself in wrinkles and then is smoothed into relief, or the nose that twitches or lets its nostrils flair. The face is the place of encounter. It is a privileged place of storytelling.

The sons and daughters of the Masquerade do not trust the places of true storytelling. They put on masks to exude a clinical detachment they do not feel, to project a strength that does not course through their veins and to conjure an illusion of invincibility that must desperately cover their fear of all real life and encounter. Some will even wear them to induce fear or terror in others.

They will only let you see their eyes, but never unveil any part of their face that is truly communicative and would help us interpret what their eyes are truly saying.«

With this, the elderly storyteller rose stiffly from chair and gestured for Joanna to follow him. He led her to the furthest alcove and pulled open a large set of double doors. There, on an enormous mahogany table, sat »the Good Book«, the prized possession of the Guild of Storytellers. This bible was made of the purest, clearest glass. The words were etched onto page after page of the finest delicate glass sheets.

Her teacher carefully turned the pages. The grand artisans who had created had ensured that the very delicacy and fragility of each page would make the reader take more time, be more attentive to every movement and encounter with the stories. The very making of »the Good Book« was a story unto itself.

Finally the old man found the story he was seeking. His long and slender index finger rested on a verse as he turned to Joanna and told her to read the words. »Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.« (Mt 23, 27-28)

When she was finished, he invited her to take a seat behind the glass book. »Now look through those same words into the world, my friend, and you will see with the eyes of God.«

Joanna peered through the glass page, the etched words at first obscuring a clear view. But then the words began to swirl, before parting like the Red Sea before a people hungering for the other shore.

Suddenly she saw a woman pass by, a daughter of the Masquerade. The moment the woman passed by the front of the book, Joanna saw her as she truly was. To her surprise, the mask was still there. The book did not reveal the woman's true face. What startled Joanna even more, was what the book really revealed, namely the genuine heart of the woman. The very sight of it shook her to her depths and she shot back in her chair. The heart of this woman was a pathetic sight. In the place where the deep heart of human being should beat was a shrivelled, dried out leathery husk. Leaning forward again to look more intently at this heart, Joanna realised, it had been hollowed out. Then the woman passed by, the words flowed back into place and she saw again the word of Jesus: »Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.« (Mt 23, 27-28)

With frightened eyes, she looked at her teacher, who stood next to her, grim but reassuring.

»Are all the sons and daughters of the Masquerade like that?«

»Yes«, he replied. »It is the darkest and oldest secret of the mask. In order to work, it needs to draw its strength from the human heart. They think they are hiding their faces, but they are, in fact, draining their hearts.«

Then he smiled wanly at her. »I am truly sorry to hear how much that woman brought heartache to you, but the reason it hurts, is because your heart is still there. Now come and drink a coffee with me. Then, we you leave the grounds, stop at the edge of the cliff above the river, and toss the masks you hide in yourself into the waters below. It is not worth it, my friend. It is not worth it.«

With bright eyes, she looked at her teacher before the words burst out of her. »Teacher, I thank you, I feel better already. I came with my pain and you gave me a story.«

With a mischievous grin upon his lips, he simply replied: »What else, my friend, what else?«

Erik Riechers SAC

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