

## Chapter 1: The Big Announcement

Hanna walked to the well to get water. It was set in a small field with woods around half of it. A crowd was waiting around.

“Hurry!” a lady called. “We must hurry. Roderick will be on soon, and apparently, there is some kind of big announcement today. We all need to get to screens.”

“I know,” another lady scolded as she pulled her first bucket from the well and put the second on. “I’m in a hurry too. I can’t go faster. Just wait!”

“I don’t have time to wait!” the first lady argued. “You’re taking too long.” She pushed the lady aside, which made her stumble and spill her bucket of water. Then she proceeded to put her bucket on.

The other lady got up, and Hanna thought they might start a fight, but a man in a dark charcoal gray cloak and white mask stepped from behind a tree and walked over to them. He took the lady, who shoved the other down, by the wrist, and the lady shook as he shocked her. She screamed in pain and fell to the ground. No one was sure if she was unconscious or dead, but no one said anything or came to her aid. The masked man looked around with glowing green eyes to see if anyone else wished to cause trouble, but no one even moved or made a sound.

The cloaked, masked man then drew water for the other lady and sent her on her way. He proceeded to draw water for

all the people around the well, which made it go much faster, as he was incredibly strong and moved quickly.

The cloaked man motioned to a handsome young man to bring his buckets.

“Let the lady go first,” the young man said, pointing to Hanna.

The cloaked man motioned to Hanna, and she came over. He drew her water and handed it to her. She wasn’t sure if she should thank him or not. After all, he was a Nameless, and most people were afraid to talk to the Nameless.

She started home with her bucket, which was very heavy to her, but she carried it anyway. She wasn’t weak for her size, but she was small, not much over five feet tall. Her dark brown ringlets, soft brown eyes, and cheerful smile made her look even weaker than she was. She hadn’t gone far when the handsome young man caught up with her.

“Can I carry that for you?” he asked. “I only have one bucket. I have a hand free.”

Hanna looked over at him. He had brown hair and deep blue eyes. He seemed to be pretty strong and was definitely well mannered. “Thank you,” she said, handing him the bucket.

He took it from her. “I’m Neil.”

She smiled at him and said nothing.

He waited for a response. When one didn’t come, he spoke up again. “I know some of the characters you’ve played, but I don’t know your real name.”

“Hanna,” she answered. “I’m sorry. I never know what to say when I’m not on stage.” She smiled at him. “So, you’ve seen me perform?”

Neil smiled. “Yes. I go to everything I can that you are in. You are quite a wonderful actress.”

Hanna blushed. “Thank you.” She suddenly looked over her shoulder with an odd expression on her face.

“What’s wrong?” Neil asked.

“I’m not sure,” she answered. “I feel like we’re being followed by a shadow. Do you think a Nameless could be following us?”

Neil shrugged. “Possibly. They seem to be everywhere.”

“Well, they aren’t often at our well,” Hanna countered. Then she added, “Not that I come to it often.”

Neil smiled at her. “Don’t worry about it. The Nameless are harmless.” Then he added, “Unless you are breaking the law. Then they’re very deadly, of course.”

“They make me nervous,” Hanna admitted. “I know they are just here to protect us, but I’m afraid of them. Where do they even come from?”

“I don’t know,” Neil answered. “You know the story as well as I do. After the wars, our society was structured so it would be peaceful, and since that time, the Nameless have been protecting us and enforcing the laws.”

Hanna glanced behind her, then looked forward nervously. “I know. They just seem creepy to me.” She almost grabbed his arm but stopped because he was carrying the buckets.

“Don’t worry,” Neil laughed. “Let’s just get you home and see what the big announcement is.”

Hanna’s eyes went wide. “I hope it’s a good one.”

Neil raised his eyebrows. “It should be.”

Hanna’s bounced excitedly. “Do you know what it is?”

Neil shook his head. “No, and anyone who does couldn’t tell anyway, not without answering to the Nameless.”

“True,” Hanna agreed. “I’m just curious.”

“You’ll soon find out,” Neil assured her as he walked her to the porch in front of her house. He handed her bucket of water to her. “And I’m sure the problem that has everyone’s indoor pumps not working will be fixed soon.”

She took the bucket. “I hope so.”

Neil smiled at her. “Then again, perhaps I don’t want it solved too soon. I have enjoyed walking you home from the well. Might I visit you again sometimes?”

Hanna blushed. “Yes.”

The door to her house flew open, and her mother, Fiona, stepped out. She took the bucket of water from Hanna. Then she noticed Neil. “Hello. Who are you?”

“Neil,” Neil answered. “I live across town.”

“And you’re coming to the well over here?” Fiona asked. “You won’t make it home in time for the announcement. Would you like to come in and watch the announcement with us?”

“Thank you,” Neil stated. “I would appreciate that.”

They all went in the house which was small but nicely decorated with hand-quilted quilts on the sofa and fresh flowers in a vase on the table. The smell of dinner filled the room.

Fiona pulled two loaves of bread from the brick oven and put them on a wooden table that had six chairs around it. She told everyone to get their bowls and handed one to Neil. Then she had each of them come to the fireplace where she dished cabbage soup from a pot into each of their bowls. They sat down at the table, cut the bread, and began to eat.

Neil took a bite. "This is very good. Thank you."

He was introduced to the entire family. Hanna's father, Glenn; her younger sister, Lucia; and her older brother, Duncan.

"So, what do you do?" Neil asked Glenn.

"I am a carpenter and actor when Hanna needs me," Glenn stated. "Duncan does carpentry and blacksmithing."

Neil glanced over at Duncan. He looked like he should be a blacksmith. His arms were very large. No doubt, he could lift an anvil.

It wasn't long before their meal was interrupted and a large screen on the wall turned on. A very handsome man with a three-piece suit appeared on the screen.

"Roderick is very handsome," Hanna noted. "I see why he speaks for the king."

She was right. Roderick was very handsome. He had sandy blond hair and broad shoulders. They all watched intently as he

began his speech. “Be content. Peace is perfection! It has been one hundred and fifty years since the wars ended, the kingdom of Frazier was formed, and that motto was adopted. Never has there been a society as perfect and peaceful as ours. Frazier, the founder of our kingdom, had a vision of a perfect society, one with no contention and one where all are equal. This is why no one knows who the king is. Since our king is unknown, he is one of you. He lives as you do, and he lives under the laws he makes. He gets no special treatment and no pay. This is the perfect system where the king has your best interest in mind, as your best interests are his too.”

The crowd on the screen that was watching him cheered wildly.

Roderick continued, “Our king cannot break rules, as the Nameless also hold him to the laws as they would any other citizen. We are grateful for the Nameless, their sacrifice, and their service. They are incorruptible peacekeepers and worth the taxes we pay for their service.”

A polite applause rose from the crowd. Many of them looked over at the walled-in castle where the Nameless lived. It shone with some sort of artificial light and was incredibly beautiful. People longed to go past the gate and see what was inside, but that was a crime punishable by death. The Nameless were not to be disturbed. That was a law even the king couldn't change.

Roderick raised a hand to emphasize his announcement. “In celebration of our kingdom's victory in war, the overthrow of an oppressive government, and the institution of our perfect system, the king declares Saturday a holiday. There will be activities all day. At the beginning of the day, each township

will send a champion to compete in an Olympics. It is an old custom from before the wars where people compete in events to see who wins. Everything is safe, so competitors do not need to fear. The games will take place during the day, and will be broadcast on the screens, with an awards ceremony following. Then there will be a feast and a dance in the evening.”

Cheers rang from the crowd. Besides games and dancing, the king’s spokesman had just announced a feast – real food!

Roderick quieted them down. “I know you are happy, as you should be, but there is more! The winner of the events, our champion, will receive a ton of wheat for his township.

Vociferous roars rang from the crowd! A ton of wheat – that would make many loaves of bread!

Roderick again quieted the crowd. “You have four days to decide how to choose your champion from your township. Whether you do it by vote or by contest is up to you, but prepare for Saturday, and eagerly await the events. More instructions will come in the morning.”

Roderick put his fist over his heart and said, “Praise our king! These are his words.”

The crowd also put their fists over their hearts, and Roderick walked off.

The transmission ended and the screen went blank.

“Wow!” Hanna exclaimed. “Saturday sounds exciting!”

“Indeed it does,” Neil agreed. He sat staring for a minute as if in thought.

“What is it?” Hanna asked.

He took a minute to think. Then his eyebrows scrunched up. “It just wasn’t what I expected.”

“Well, we never know what to expect from the king,” Fiona added. “I sometimes wonder if he really is a common—” She stopped suddenly. “Pardon. I know my place.”

“You are afraid to speak?” Neil asked.

“Aren’t you?” Fiona responded.

Neil nodded. Yes, he was afraid to speak, although probably for different reasons than Fiona.

“Speaking against the crown is a crime punishable by death,” Fiona reminded him. “I have no desire to encounter a Nameless.”

Neil nodded. “That law has been in place since the beginning of Frazier so that there won’t be contention. Our society is based on peace. Peace is perfection.”

Fiona laughed a mocking laugh. “Freedom is perfection,” she mumbled.

Neil heard her. “That’s an intriguing thought. I hadn’t looked at that law as restrictive, but as intending to keep the peace. What do you think the king should do about it?”

Fiona rolled her eyes. “You’re not trapping me. For all I know, you could be a spy. I hear the king has them.”

“I’ve heard the Nameless do,” Neil countered.

Fiona picked up a dishcloth. “It doesn’t matter who they work for. They certainly aren’t on our side, or we wouldn’t have to live in fear.” She started to clean off the table. “I’ve said too much. I pray you aren’t a spy.”



“I’m not,” Neil assured her, but it was no assurance, as a spy couldn’t legally admit it without pronouncing a death sentence on himself.

Hanna thought it a good time to change the subject. “Who do you think should be the champion from our township?” she asked.

“Perhaps your brother,” Neil suggested. “He looks strong.”

“But we don’t know what the contests are,” Duncan pointed out. “I don’t know if I’m the right person for the task.”

“I don’t know,” Neil agreed. “But you look stronger than I am. I’m sure you could beat me in a wrestling match.”

Duncan looked over Neil. Neil looked strong and was fairly tall, probably close to six feet. He obviously worked pretty hard. Still, Neil was right. Duncan could beat him in a wrestling match. He did have at least two inches on Neil and quite a bit more muscle. “Perhaps I will throw my name out for consideration,” he agreed.

“If you don’t, I will,” Neil informed him.

“You look pretty strong too,” Hanna told Neil with a slight blush. “You could be our champion.”

“No, I couldn’t,” Neil stated. “Really, I couldn’t.”

“Oh, what do you do?” she asked.

“I have a farm on the other side of the town,” he answered. “I raise horses and cattle. I have a big garden too.”

Fiona looked a little embarrassed. “Well, I’m sorry you just got cabbage soup tonight. I’m sure you’re used to steak.

Unfortunately, actors and craftsmen don't make much money. Cabbage soup is a normal meal for us."

He waved his hand, dismissively. "Oh, I don't eat steak every night. Cabbage soup is fine. I like cabbage."

"Well, you won't get much better from anyone on this side of town," Fiona retorted. "And I hear other towns are in worse shape."

"Really?" Neil asked. "I don't get away from my farm much. I assumed everywhere was similar to where I live."

Fiona started to say something, but then stopped herself. "I really think you are a spy. You are way too bold." She turned and walked out of the room.

"Me? A spy?" Neil laughed. "I'm just a farm boy from the other side of town."

"It does look suspicious," Hanna pointed out. "After all, why would someone from across town come to the well over here when the indoor pumps aren't working?"

Neil smiled at her. "Perhaps I came to meet my favorite actress?"

Hanna blushed and stood up. "Would you like to see something I've been working on for my next show?"

"Sure," Neil accepted.

"Then go out back. I'll be right there. I have to change first. Wait for me."

Neil went out back and looked around. He spotted a Nameless peering out from behind a tree and nodded to him. Nameless were creepy. Not only did they wear dark charcoal

gray cloaks and white masks, their eyes glowed a bright green. Neil saw the two green eyes glowing at him.

It wasn't long before Hanna came out. Neil was shocked that she'd replaced her rather plain looking dress with a pair of tight-fitting pants and a fitted shirt. Her hair was pulled up. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get that?"

"Sorry, for the shock," Hanna stated. She suddenly blushed. "I'm not trying to embarrass you, but the skill I am about to show you is dangerous if done in loose-fitting clothing." She then picked up two chains, one in each hand, that had balls attached to the end. She lit the balls on fire and started spinning them around.

Neil's eyes went wide. "That is amazing!" he exclaimed as the fire spun intricate patterns in the air.

She stopped for a moment, swinging the balls as she spoke, so the fire would not burn her. "Tell me if my hair catches on fire. That's my biggest fear doing this." She then began to spin again. The sound of the fire and the streams of light had a mesmerizing effect that Neil would never have expected. He was entranced.

Her hair didn't catch on fire. She put on an amazing show, and since it was starting to get dark, the fire really blazed brightly. When she finished, she doused the fire.

Neil applauded. "That's amazing! You should do that at the celebration on Saturday. It should be a grand event, and that would make it grander."

"It should be a great event," Hanna agreed, "but I wouldn't even know who to tell that I do this. We have no idea who the

king is. Roderick is from a different township. I don't even know which one, and I would never talk to a Nameless. I would be too afraid. My mother is right about—"

"Can I see your balls?" Neil interrupted. "What are they called?"

She came over and handed him the balls. "They are called poi," she answered. "It is an ancient art I read—"

Again Neil cut her off as he reached for the balls and whispered, "There are green eyes in the woods."

Hanna nodded. She couldn't mention what her mother said, and she couldn't mention a book from before the wars. Anything from before the wars was forbidden in their society. She started to say something but stopped. "If only," she muttered.

If only what? Neil couldn't ask her, not there, not with green eyes watching. "May I visit you again?" he asked. "I would enjoy that."

She blushed. "You know where I live."

He handed her back her poi balls. "I'm glad I do. Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow. I will make an effort, but it's late and I must get home. My horse is tied back by the well. I'd better get him and leave."

He bid her goodbye and walked off. As he left, Hanna noticed the green eyes in the woods follow him.