



# MASKS

COMPUTER THREE



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# MASKS: A PREVIEW

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## CHAPTER 1

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### CHANCE ENCOUNTER

Vincent Staccato  
English, Mr.Mills  
October 20XX

**“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask  
and he will tell you the truth”**

-Oscar Wilde

*Why do superheroes wear masks? The answer is simple, to protect their loved ones.  
Or at least to the distant observer that is the answer. Because if that is all it took to protect the  
people you loved then everyone would be wearing a mask. So what is the real reason for the  
mask? Selfishness.*

*Superheroes are very selfish because they don't want anyone to know their real identity.  
They create an alter ego to become famous and deal with worldly matters while they continue to  
live their regular lives. If they took the full responsibility without the mask their life would be a  
mess. Masks in general are worn for selfish purposes. People conceal their identity because they  
do not want to be found. If no one knows who you are, then they cannot harm you; and that is  
precisely why superheroes are idolized.*

*If you could live two wildly different lives the possibilities would be endless. The  
experience would be as close as you could get to living in parallel universes. Superheroes  
are able to follow their natural human instinct of being selfish and uphold society's ideals. Their  
powers are the tools that allow them to live as they wish. This freedom over life's constraints is  
the real power that common people are envious of.*

“Mr. Staccato, do you really think this is an appropriate paper for the topic of common ideals of modern society?” Mr. Mills asked while attempting to stare me down.

Honestly, the guy didn’t have much presence when he was a good six inches shorter than me. Not to say that he wasn’t tall to most students, but it’s just that I was a little taller than most people.

Okay, to be exact I stand at 6 feet two inches, but it’s not like I try to make a point of that, really I tried to be intimidated by Mr. Mills. Of course this all went away when I gave my response.

“That’s just the beginning to the paper Mr. Mills, you haven’t gotten to the best part,” I argued in my defense.

“Vincent!” he thundered, “There is no best part to this paper. The best part is at the end when there is nothing to read.”

He was exactly right; the best part was at the end, because that was where I made a summary of my entire paper and

logically made my point. However much I wanted to say this I didn't, because I felt a little sorry for him. It's not like he was dealing with the average student here, I'd rate myself over most of the people in the class.

"Now, what you're going to do is redo this paper and turn it in by next Monday," he ordered.

"Yes sir, I'll do my best to clarify this paper so the common man can read it," I said sarcastically.

"Don't be a smart ass Vincent. We both know the problem with this is that most people would actually be convinced by this," he said, "If only you put your effort into the right things and let people know who you are." He sighed and motioned me to leave, "Go on now, I don't want another one of your papers on the teacher's lounge declaring the rights of students."

As I left the classroom I thought about his words, my real self. This paper was as close as I'd ever let people know what I was really like. Masks really are ingenious things; they can hide



things in plain sight without anyone noticing the difference.

I'm not referring to physical masks, those are outdated and I made that clear in my paper. The real mask is the one I use for my personality. It's fun, no one will know who I am and when I meet new people I can adopt a new persona to fit the situation. Verbal attacks are rendered useless because nobody knows how to go about insulting me. All they can do is attack a shadow that I've left behind in my wake.

Then comes the next problem, the royal court of sociable people who notice me. Holding constant with human history, affiliation with royalty will always bring trouble. Some of them can see through the first layer of disguise and think that I'm lonely. Out of the pity of their hearts, which is really their attempt to gain public adoration, they try to include me in activities.

In reality, loneliness is far more distant from me than from them. They're busy with keeping good relations with everyone and attempting to backstab someone else. Girls will spread gossip

and boys will puff up their chests. I get to enjoy this crazy circus show and laugh as I learn the characters' motives.

So now I'm a cynical self-serving asshole, or at least to common observer. I don't mind though, because as long as that's the only visible part then I can hide my real feelings. In truth I might just be looking for someone I can actually talk to. Or maybe someone I can hold onto for comfort.

My thoughts were interrupted when I pulled open the door and I was greeted with the crisp autumn air outside. Nothing unusual about the weather, except for the fact that along with a light sprinkle it seemed to be raining girls. Well, not really, only in some crack show would it actually be raining girls. I classified this case as being bulldozed over by a girl.

As soon as I opened the door a girl in a running outfit outside was gunning it for the school doors; apparently the very same door I just opened. Out all of the different scenarios that could have happened she let out a frightened scream and jumped

straight at me curling herself into a ball in the air as if she was going to break through a window. I managed to raise my arms halfway up to my chest before impact and I was sent flying back a good four or five feet.

“Ugh,” I mumbled in a daze from being knocked back into the building.

“Er, sorry about that,” she said as she got up, “I’ll make it up some other time, but I really have to get something!”

“Wait!” I called out as she dashed away towards the stairs.

Bitterly, I stopped my pursuit and turned to leave. I would’ve liked some compensation for getting knocked flat on my ass. More than that, I was interested in who exactly she was. I wasn’t certain, but for a second right before she jumped I saw that she had a mask like me. However, her skills were lacking because in the heat of the moment she let her mask fall off completely.

I decided that I’d find out who she was later, after all, there

were only so many places one could run to in school. Besides, her running and clothes clearly marked her as an athletic type meaning she must have been on a sports team. I made a mental note to record all of these facts when I got home.

The next day I committed myself to sitting in the back row of my classes to see if she was in any of them. A tall girl around 5' 10" with dark hair that fell approximately five inches below her shoulders. Possibly part Asian ranging from one eighth to one half.

Most likely seen in athletic wear or carrying an additional sports bag. The addition of the sports bag would no doubt incur a trip to the locker creating a window for conversation, I thought to myself as I took my seat. If she was smart enough to mask her personality in high school then surely she would be in upper level classes, I reasoned. Unfortunately classes that posed more than a minimal intellectual challenge were in the afternoon.

In light of this realization, I decided that first period

chemistry would be spent taking a nap. The regurgitated sludge of subject high school curriculum transformed sciences into barely deserved a thought. Photographic memory is really quite useful when you don't want to do anything in school. Or in my case, it was useful for applying my brain on more interesting things, such as tracking down the girl that hit me.

As the day continued I watched the door again and again in every class. By fourth period I was a little exasperated and let out a sigh as I took my seat. Watching the door, I counted the groups of people entering: three, two, five, four, one.

“Found you,” I muttered under my breath as I kept my eyes locked on her.

The social system for high school is quite simple. People in pairs are either a couple, best friends or acquaintances lumped together by the same class. Any number of people from three to five is an intentional group formed for simple social interaction. Typically the group will meet outside of school and the bond

between group members will grow at almost the same rate.

From six people and on I classify the group as a hierarchy. There is a leader with the most popularity, followed by their inner circle and finally an outer circle. The larger the group is, the more layers the outer circle will be divided into, but the inner circle usually stays the same. However, a group will always function in the same way, which is why the final category, individuals, is the most interesting.

Individually, people can change at any moment to whatever they feel like. When people are in a private place alone they can do whatever they want. If they want to sing, they can sing. If they want to dance, they can dance. To find out the truth behind somebody's personality is to enter their private realm and observe them without being seen. As soon as somebody realizes they're being watched their behavior immediately changes.

I waited for the names to be called off on the attendance list so I could put a name to her face. At the same time I wondered if

she also changed her voice to match her disguised personality.

“Vincent Staccato,” Ms. Revani called out.

“Here,” I said, quickly snapping myself out of my thoughts.

“Emma Steinhart,” she called again.

The girl at the front quietly raised her hand and responded, “Here,” in a crystal clear voice that pierced the room.

I was completely shocked at her voice, not only was it the polar opposite of the awkward, fuzzy yell that I heard, but this voice sounded as if she was ready to kill somebody that stayed in her way for too long. I made a second mental note to myself that I should pay more attention to the people in class instead of falling asleep. Emma wasn’t a fitting name for such a cold voice so I decided I would refer to her in my notes by a code name, Ice Queen.

Throughout class she stayed fairly silent, only responding

when a question was directed at her. Attempts to have a conversation were conducted by Michael Blauss, Ara Ren, and Kelly Yang, all of which were her group members. The longest conversation held was by Kelly, clocking at one minute and fifty six seconds.

However, the person that had the highest frequency of quasi conversations was Michael. In the span of twenty minutes he was shut down thirteen times. I never believed that a person could be so dense and persistent. Although the fact that he was the lacrosse captain and wasn't getting what he wanted may have been a factor. In any case, fourth period ended and I prepared myself to follow her during lunch break.

For a moment I had to pause and think to myself for a little bit. Was I being creepy? Argument, if government collection agencies aren't creepy then there wouldn't be any to improve the situation. Conclusion, my actions were merely observational and as long as I did not come in contact with the subject then everything was valid.



I maintained a distance of fifteen feet only speeding up when she turned around corners. We arrived at her locker on the second floor, which to my dismay, had nothing particularly interesting inside from what I saw. My prediction about her sports bag remained true when I saw her rearrange a small drawstring bag in her locker.

After ten minutes of tying my shoelaces and pretending to walk the other direction it was clear that the only thing she intended to do was sit and eat her sandwich.

## CHAPTER 2

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### INTEREST

Anyone who hasn't realized that waiting for someone to use the bathroom sucks is probably the one using the bathroom all the time. There's an unsettling feeling when you wait for that person to come out. What's more is that you have to find something to occupy yourself so no one else thinks you're hopelessly lost.

In my case the activity I chose was, once again, tying my shoes. I'm not a perfectionist, and for those who are, I pity them because tying the perfect knot on your shoe takes about as long as it takes a female to change clothes. That is to say, a female not under pressure, because if she was under pressure then the time would be reduced by at least fifty to seventy percent.

In the half hour I spent kneeling over my shoe I came up

with the possibility that the women's restroom might exist in an alternate time dimension where time passes slower for them. The end result was worth it, because what came out of the bathroom was the spitting image of the girl that ran into me.

As I trailed her I checked my backpack making one last check I had the supplies required to disguise myself. Once she made it to the field I stayed behind the school wall so I wouldn't coincidentally arrive at the same time as her.

After she covered one fourth of the track I slipped on some glasses and walked along the track to a grass hill on the side. I found a dry spot to sit down and pulled a blank notebook out of my backpack. Looking at the field I clicked my mechanical pencil twice and started to draw. Of course I had no intention of putting any real effort into my drawing, but I needed a good cover up story.

She ran by me a few times without looking at me, but by the third lap I notice that she would occasionally glance at me. I

tried my best not to break any movement patterns so she wouldn't question why I was there. However, that became increasingly difficult when I saw her staring from across the field.

I'd begun to think that she was a robot when she finally took a break after her tenth lap. She took a drink of water and started to pace around in a circle. To avoid suspicion I intently stared at my drawing and waited for her to run again. A few seconds later I inhaled sharply as I heard footsteps treading on the grass in my direction.

"Excuse me, do you need something or are you going to keep staring at me while I run?" she asked staring down at me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize that I needed student permission to fulfill an assignment for a drawing class," I said glancing up at her face. After all that running I was surprised that her face showed no weakness and maintained the cold stare she had in class.

"As long as I'm not in that picture," she said starting to turn

away.

“Don’t worry about that, the world could use one less person,” I called after her.

Just out of earshot I heard her mutter, “Ass.”

I sighed with relief that she either didn’t recognize me or tried to ignore the fact that she hit me. I knew glasses were a good way to change my appearance from a distance, but this worked out better than I expected. I turned back to my drawing and started erasing a figure in the background.

For a while she stopped checking on me and returned to running rigidly. Then, something strange happened. On her sixth lap instead of returning to her bag she walked over to me. I mentally braced myself for what was coming, but instead she extended her hand.

“Look, I think we got off the wrong foot back there, I guess I was being too cautious,” she said apologetically, “My name’s

Emma.”

I couldn't believe that she gave in so easily; I thought that I would have to apologize first. Putting on my best look of wariness I looked up at her and shook her hand, “Vincent,” I said introducing myself.

“So, do you mind if I take a look at your drawing?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said offering my sketchbook to her.

“Hey, this isn't bad,” she said sitting down next to me, “Looks like you almost got it except one part.”

“What? Where?” I asked examining the drawing.

“That smudge in the background, must have been a big mistake,” she said pointing it out.

“Ah, yes, I suppose I did. I'll fix it another time,” I said.

“So does that mean you’ll be coming back?” she asked while staring down.

“Well, yeah, it’s an art project so I’ll have to complete multiple drafts,” I explained.

“I see,” she said trailing off. “Oh, you have something on your glasses,” she said pointing to the rim.

“Um, thanks,” I said taking off the glasses to wipe them, “You know-”

“You’re that guy!” she exclaimed, “You’re the guy who I accidentally hit, yesterday.”

I’m dealing with an idiot, I thought. “Yeah, no hard feelings though,” I said putting my glasses back on.

“It must have been really weird to see me here and sorry for being rude again,” she said apologetically.

“It’s not like I didn’t get to insult you back,” I said, “Anyway, I should get going. You’re done for today right?”

“Actually, I have some more stuff to do, she said handing my notebook back.

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said turning to get my backpack.

“Before you go, can I ask you to pretend that you don’t know me at school? It’s not that I don’t trust you or anything, but people have a different image of me,” she pleaded putting her hands together.

“Sure,” I said turning away.

“No, really, it’s nothing personal,” she said catching up to me.

Smirking, I looked her in the eye and told her, “Don’t worry, I completely understand.”



She didn't say anything after that and returned to her exercise routine. I exhaled with relief that she was unaccustomed to the social system and accepted my appearance at the field. From then on I made it my goal to collect the sufficient data to tear her apart.

The next few days passed with my usual routine with the exception of my after school activities. I would continue pretending to be an art student and observe Emma. Since I found out that she stayed longer I extended time at the field and had a total of two conversations with her each day.

In any other person's eyes I was getting to know her, but for me it was learning the blueprints of her structure. Nothing too important was revealed, but as they say the structure has to start with the basic framework. This new routine went smoothly for ten school days until I was held back after school on a Friday.

Usually when Mr. Mills gives me lectures on how I'm wasting my intellect on trivial matters I do my best to prove him

wrong in every way and make him even more upset. However, with my newfound activity and the fact that it was a Friday no less I simply stood there and gave him a blank stare. All I could think about was leaving the building and heading down to the field.

I found this highly peculiar because I rarely found myself so focused on one task, especially one so mundane as sitting on a hill watching a girl run. Unusual thoughts on an unusual afterschool lecture, I thought amusing myself. After listening to Mr. Mills prattle on for half an hour I decided that he had his fair share of my time and without any hesitation I made my leave.

“Mr. Mills, thank you for your wisdom, I will see you again on Monday,” I said turning to leave.

Just before I made it to the school entrance I saw the rain heavily coming down. I wondered if she already stopped running. Given the weather and the time I wouldn't have been surprised if she wasn't there. Also, even if she was still running there wasn't going to be a place for me to sit and watch.

Logic told me that I would be better off driving home. As I opened my umbrella and started to walk towards my car I stopped. On that strange day of odd occurrences I followed my instinct.

## CHAPTER 3

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### HER PAST

#### **Emma's Perspective**

When I entered high school I thought that I could finally leave demands of my parents. Since I was a child my life revolved around memorization and reading textbooks. Between my dad working as a lawyer and my mom as a doctor, home was the first school I attended. From the time I could understand my parents I loved them unconditionally until middle school.

That was when I realized that the story of the dancing electron princesses and the proton princes was not a common book that parents read to their children. It took me a while, but I accepted and appreciated everything my parents had done for me. When they looked at me they saw the opportunity to correct

their pasts and create a better future for me. Still, I was growing up and needed to live my own life.

Finally, in freshman year I was ready to meet people. Unfortunately, no matter how much I wanted to meet people they always seemed to have their own groups. Finding another person that wasn't already talking to someone was like finding the speed and location of an electron; it was impossible.

After a few weeks, and a lot of lonely lunches, I thought of a solution, sports. People involved in sports seemed to have a constant flow of attention around them; logically if I was also a member of a team then I would meet people. I was sure that my parents were going to reject the notion of me spending time exercising instead of studying, but surprisingly they full heartedly agreed. However, their agreement wasn't without some conditions.

As a lawyer, my dad was used to writing up contracts, and one for his own daughter was not something he was going to take

lightly. Since I never had any experience in technical movements they limited my options to the two things I had done before, running and swimming. Secondly, I had to show my commitment to the activity by doing it before school hours.

For the pool that meant taking extra time to go there and travel to school. Given my choices I stuck with running. That was the best choice I made in high school, because it was there where I made my first friend.

Kelly Yang was the fastest freshman and was known to scare the crap out of people that messed with her. In short, I was terrified of her and it just so happened that she was the only person to run on the field at 6 AM.

Right after I entered the field I was shocked to see her running along the track next to me. I panicked and quickly turned away pretended to check my bag. Only after she passed did I start walking to the field to set my bag down and start running. My plan was to avoid eye contact with her and just jog until I could

go to school. For forty minutes my plan worked until I had to take a break.

Exhausted, I kneeled over my bag trying to find my water bottle. Pulling it out of my bag I lifted my face to breathe in and looked straight into the eyes of Kelly.

“Hi,” she said squatting down to my eye level, “I’ve never seen you around before, are you new to running?”

“Um, yes,” I said nervously. For such a supposedly intimidating person I was surprised by how soft her voice was.

“I’m Kelly,” she said sticking out her hand, “Kelly Yang.”

Gingerly taking her hand I replied, “Emma Steinhart.”

From then on I ran with Kelly in the morning. When tryouts for the track team started I begged my parents to let me join, but they refused saying that it would take up too much of my study time. That pretty much killed my hopes of easily meeting people

and made me spite my parents a little.

My bitterness quickly went away when I found out that Kelly would continue running with me despite the fact that she still had practice. According to her, she couldn't leave her best friend all alone in the morning. Morning running, school, followed by even more lessons at home; that was my daily routine up until the beginning of my junior year.

After our first run of the year I was feeling great. "Feels good to be back in school," I said walking up to Kelly, "I missed running in the morning with you."

"Yeah, I really am going to miss this," she said averting her eyes from me.

"Wait, what do you mean you're "going" to miss this? You're still running right?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, I should've told you sooner. This last summer I've been working part time to help my family pay the bills



and recently my mom got her hours cut at one of her jobs,” she said, “I need to help my family pay the bills and save up for when I can’t work during track season so I picked up another job delivering newspapers in the morning. I should’ve told you sooner, but I just wanted to do this one last time like we always have. Sorry, it was really selfish of me.”

“Don’t be sorry, I’m just glad that you told me about it. I’m your best friend, so I’ll always be here for you,” I said giving her a hug.

“Sweaaaaaatyyyyyy,” she complained pushing me off of her, “I don’t want to ruin the day with that news so let’s wash up before school start.”

“I’ll run enough for the both of us then,” I said picking up my bag.

“You better run a lot more than that,” she said.

With her newfound predicament I changed up my running

schedule to the afternoon and used my mornings to study the material I learned at home. My change in schedule often caused me to forget my bag in my locker and I would have to run up the school to get my bag before the janitors locked the doors.

It was on one of these days I literally ran into a guy who suddenly opened the door. Out of embarrassment I quickly got up and ran off not wanting to meet his face. The next day I decided to ask Kelly in sixth period what to do in case I saw him again.

“You know, somehow I’m not surprised that you did this,” she said, “On the outside you look very dainty, but knowing you for two years made me realize how awkward you are.”

“Don’t act like it’s entirely my fault,” I pouted, “Who doesn’t pay attention when they open a door?”

“You’re right, only people that expect to get hit open doors with caution,” she retorted.

“Okay fine, but what do I do if I see him again?” I asked.

“This is scarier than when I met you and that was only eye contact! This is physical contact!” I exclaimed.

“Calm down Emma,” she said patting me on the back, “Now let’s move on to the first step. Was he cute?”

“Was he what? Does it really matter in this case?” I asked confused at her question.

“I should’ve known your hormones are also awkward,” she said giving up on the matter. “Anyway, if you happen to see him again, just apologize, maybe you’ll make your second friend in high school,” she said.

“I don’t know how you can be so confident about this,” I said.

“It’ll be fine,” she said, “Just remember, I stay number one on your friend list.”

“Thanks for your help, I’ll let you know if I run into him

again,” I said getting ready to leave class.

“Let’s hope you don’t actually run into him again,” she said laughing.

“Still not funny. Good luck at work,” I said as the bell rung.

As my luck would have it I did meet him again, only I didn’t recognize him from the glimpse I got earlier and treated him in the worst way possible. While I continued my workout I remembered Kelly’s advice and wondered if it would also apply in the case where I verbally assaulted a stranger. It took three more laps, but I sucked my pride in and approached the boy drawing on the hillside.

Only after our initial conversation did I find out that it was the same boy that I hit the day before. Luckily, it seemed that my rudeness didn’t deter him and he said that he would continue to come and draw. Even if it was for a school assignment I was relieved that for once I might have done something right.

The next days changed my running habit again, with Vincent on the side drawing I couldn't help but look over. Having him on the side was almost like the calm feeling I had when Kelly ran with me in the morning.

I was glad that it hadn't rained yet because I was sure that there would be no reason for him to come if he couldn't draw. The fact that his sketchbook was the only thing that kept him coming to the field was oddly irritating. I hoped that I could actually become friends with him, but that didn't come up in any of our conversations.

On the Friday following the week I first met him I noticed the light rain coming down when I left for the field. My fears had come true and the chain of dry weather was broken. Although he probably wasn't going to come I had to keep running, it was routine.

During my run I kept checking for him to appear at any of the entrances. The more laps I ran the more the rain picked

up. By the end of my first round I was soaked, but I felt more concentrated. I thought that a break from having Vincent on the hill was just what I needed.

That thought immediately changed as I saw some people enter the field near the school wall. A small part of me hoped it was Vincent and he ended up bringing some other people on accident. That quickly changed when I saw the faces of the people.

Stacy Briant was a popular girl that seemed to be at the epicenter of all attention. It was unusual to see her without at least five other people hovering around her. Even more unusual was seeing her on the field on a rainy day.

As quickly as these thoughts came I shook them off and tried to concentrate on my running. I started my second round, but when I made it around I found Stacy and three other girls blocking the path. I slowed to a stop to see what they were doing.

“Is there something I can help you with?” I asked walking

towards the girls.

“Yeah, why don’t you fix that attitude of yours?” Stacy said walking too close for comfort.

“I’m sorry, I think you might have the wrong person, I don’t really talk to you,” I said moving towards my bag.

“No, I definitely have the right person, Emma Steinhart, the girl who thinks she’s better than all of us,” she said following me.

Noticing the other girls were surrounding me I protested, “I don’t think-”

“Shut up you bitch,” she said pushing me, “This is exactly what I’m talking about, you think you’re too good for everyone and ignore us. Well you’re not!” She shoved me hard to the ground.

I tried to get up, but before I realized it the other girls were keeping me down with their feet.

“You’re going to learn what happens when you don’t know your place,” Stacy said unleashing a kick to my side.

The other girls started joining in, kicking my sides and stomach. With their feet no longer pinning me down I curled up into a ball. I’m being bullied, I thought. I was surrounded in all directions and terrified. I felt their eyes boring into me trying to take away whatever mental shield I had left, and it was working.

I couldn’t make out the insults they were yelling or distinguish the new pain from the stinging of the old kicks. I stayed curled up until I couldn’t feel anything anymore; my hands were numb from holding my legs to my chest and the rest of my body was senseless from the beating it took.

Slowly I uncurled myself and sat upright. I looked down at myself and realized that I was too dizzy to stand up. Without the means of moving I sat in the rain letting it wash away the turf and dirt that was on my clothes. Moving some hair out of my eyes I inadvertently pushed some of the rain water into my mouth,



strangely they tasted a bit salty.

## CHAPTER 4

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### BEGINNINGS

#### **4-1 A Slight Thaw**

I saw the rain fall in front of me, but I couldn't feel it anymore. For a moment I panicked, was I afflicted with one of the various sicknesses my mother constantly warned me about? I jerked my head up to check that rain was still falling on me, but instead I was met with Vincent holding a black umbrella over me. I thought that he left right after school when he saw the rain yet here he was behind me.

“Can you stand?” he asked squatting to my level.

I tried to get up, but couldn't find the strength to lift my legs. “Sorry, I don't think I can get the ‘push off the ground’ part right,”

I said half-jokingly.

“That’s a no,” he said sternly. “Hold on and I’ll get you up,” he said putting my arm around his shoulder.

The warmth of another person was comforting, but the situation wasn’t right. As soon as I was upright I tried to distance myself and immediately started to crumple back to the ground.

“I know you can handle yourself, but you aren’t your usual self right now,” he said catching me before I completely fell. “Can you tell me what happened?” he asked looking at the stains on my clothes.

I avoided his gaze and shook my head. I couldn’t tell him that I just gotten the shit kicked out of me by three girls. While the help was nice, my problems were my own and he shouldn’t get involved unless it directly affected him.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked,” he apologized. “If you don’t want to talk about it, maybe I can just take you home or

something,” he offered.

“No, not there,” I said sharply. I feared that if my parents saw me in this state they would revoke my rights of outdoor activities.

“Then where?” he asked while looking around for people.

My first thought was to go to Kelly’s apartment, but since she had a job that was out of the question. I would have to take this problem on my own and think of a solution. I was sure that I could have figured something out with all of the knowledge I accumulated over the years.

“I’ll be fine, just leave me,” I said walking to my bag. My legs felt heavy and sore, but I wanted to get away so I wouldn’t have the humiliation of being viewed as a feeble girl.

“I would, but it doesn’t sit well with me to leave someone looking like they tried to fight the ground all alone,” he said, “If it’s not too much trouble maybe you could come to my house and

clean yourself up before you go home.”

I hesitated; this kind of situation merited a red alert. A male just offered to take me to his house. Under any normal circumstances I would have given a stout refusal, but the last hour had been anything but normal. My head was throbbing trying to make the right decision, could I trust him?

“If it’s any comfort to you, my sister will be home and she’ll probably be the one to stick around you most of the time,” he said trying to persuade me.

Rubbing my face I looked up him and said, “I hope I’m making the right decision by going with you.”

He picked up my bag and walked at my pace making sure that I wouldn’t fall again. His car was parked at the far end of the street, which didn’t help the condition of my legs. Finally when we reached the car I sat down heavily in the passenger seat, relieved to get a break.

“Make yourself comfortable, it’s kind of a long way to my house,” he said starting the car.

About ten minutes into the drive I felt the heat from the car kick in and my body finally relayed how exhausted it was. Seeing as we hadn’t reached his house yet I thought that I could just close my eyes until we reached his house. I wasn’t going to let myself fall asleep and let him do anything to me, I resolved. A few seconds later I slipped into the unconscious.

When I woke up I rolled around my bed trying to enjoy the comfort for a bit more. Reluctantly I opened my eyes and tried to find where I put my sweats. I noticed that I’d left a lot of clothes on the ground, more than usual.

Looking around for my desk I saw that the room was a miniature department store and more importantly, it was definitely not my room. As I got out of the bed my foot got caught on the blankets and I fell on my face. Pushing myself up, I used my left hand to fix my shirt into its place and let out a gasp as I slid to the

floor dragging the blankets with me.

I looked down at myself and muttered, “Not my bed, not my room, not my clothes, not even my underwear, the universe just loves to play jokes on me. I hope I at least have my own virginity.”

Putting all jokes aside I wrapped one blanket into a makeshift dress and used the other to cover my shoulders. Considering that the room had so much clothes I was sure the owner wouldn't miss a set of clothing in the whole mess. Glancing around I found the pants section and navigated my way through the stands to it.

On my way I noticed that all of the clothes were the same high end brand. Whoever owned all of the clothes must have really loved the designer. I started to doubt whether I should be wearing their clothes, but the embarrassment of missing my own clothes was greater than my regret.

Flipping through the jeans I tried to remember what I was

doing before I ended up in the bed. I knew I was probably doing my afternoon run, but the details after that weren't so great.

Holding a pair of jeans I was considering I paused for a bit and listened to the rain tap the window. Then everything came rushing back to me as if a switch for my memory had been turned on. Stacy and her friends beat me up and I was found by somebody. Vincent. That was it, Vincent told me to go with him in his car. So that left one question, where was he?

I felt a tap on my shoulder as someone said, "Excuse me."

Startled, I let out a yelp and whirled around only to trip over the blanket sending me to the ground. Looking up to the person who tapped me I saw a woman who looked like she was in her early twenties.

"Don't wear those jeans, I think you'd look much better in this," she said holding out a bluish gray skirt.

"Um, thanks?" I said cautiously picking myself up. "Sorry if



I'm being rude, but who are you again?" I asked.

"Jessica Staccato," she announced, helping me to my feet. "I believe you know my younger brother Vincent. He never brings anyone home so I was quite surprised that you ended up here," she said turning around to another clothes rack. "So how long have you two been dating?" she asked handing me a shirt.

"What? Dating?" I exclaimed almost dropping the shirt, "Did he say anything like that?"

"No, but he's been coming home later than usual so I assumed it had something to do with courting you," she said handing me a pair of knee high socks. "And please, start changing, I'm sure these will look good on you," she said.

"We really aren't dating," I said again to get my point across, "But I'm sorry for intruding and using your clothes."

"Don't worry about it, I'm still testing them," she said.

I took the blankets around my body and started to put the skirt on when someone knocked at the door.

“Vincent, don’t come in, she’s still changing,” Jessica said moving towards the door.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said through the door, “If I did it might be considered a nightmare instead.”

“Shut up, she’s better looking than any other girl I’ve seen at your other schools,” she said.

“Only you would compare a prepubescent to a fully developed girl,” he retorted.

“At least we all know where you’ve been looking this whole time,” she replied.

After her last comment I felt my cheeks burning from embarrassment. Luckily Jessica was moving towards the door and didn’t notice.

“You’re impossible to deal with,” Vincent said before going silent. “I finished making dinner. Let her know that there’s food for her too,” he said as I heard his footsteps go away from the door.

“I’ll be going ahead to eat. Vincent usually makes boring meals, but since you’re here it’ll be something that fits you,” Jessica said.

Puzzled, I asked “What do you mean something that fits me?”

“He’s always been good at understanding physical mechanics so when he began to have more social interactions in his life it wasn’t surprising that he started to read people like books. Although judging by your reaction, it looks like he hasn’t done anything of that sort to you,” she explained. “Anyway, I’m going to reap the benefits of you being here and eat as much as I can,” she said walking towards the door.

“Um, thanks again for letting me borrow your clothes,” I

called after her.

”Don’t worry about it, I was looking for someone to put them on anyway,” she said turning around, ”And one more thing, whatever you do, don’t tell Vincent who the girls were that beat you. Jealousy can be a vicious thing, but there are things they shouldn’t have to feel.”

”O-okay,” I said still trying to understand what she meant.

I finished putting on the blouse and took the cardigan off the hangar. The material was thicker than the blouse, but had the same smooth silky texture to it. If Jessica was going to give away these virtually unused clothes I wondered what else their family could afford to throw away.

Flipping the cardigan over I understood why Jessica kept telling me to not worry about the clothes. I felt my heart sink as the clothes turned from a gift to a liability. On the left breast of the cardigan was the name ”Sica” in italics. In the recent years the designer brand Sica experienced an explosive growth in sales

and surpassed the value of several existing brands. Unlike old styles, Sica was universally appealing to all ages, weaving several aesthetics into one.

Previously, I only looked at the brand with Kelly on her "pick me up days" where she took me to the mall and glossed over everything she couldn't afford. I never understood the point of those trips, but they always made me feel more connected with her. However, this time the clothes had a familiar feeling to them. Out of the few things I could understand from a social standpoint tests were easily my favorite.

Just like any academic subject I could think about a question or situation and solve for an answer. I thought back on the motto my mom taught me, tread lightly and act confidently; it was time for me to get a grip and freeze whatever relationship I was forming.

## **4-2 Opportunity**

### **Vincent's Perspective**

”Despite the image you have to maintain, you keep finding ways to try and destroy it. I’ll have to schedule a new workout plan for you” I said to my sister who continued to eat whatever appeared on the table.

”I can’t help that your food is so delicious,” she retorted, ”Besides, you wouldn’t make your girlfriend fat so I know you changed the ingredients to something healthy. I’m still not entirely sure how you got such a beautiful girl to come to our house.”

”First of all, I don’t ever recall developing or announcing a relationship like that between us. Furthermore, she goes through more exercise daily than a racehorse so I’m sure she could handle something with more substance than your lazy ass,” I replied.

”So cold, you’re all ”tsun tsun”, but I bet as soon as you leave you’re going to be all ”dere dere”,” she said taunting me.

”I seriously think you spend more time watching shows than doing work,” I said.

”You should worry less about me and more about your princess, there isn’t much food left and she’s already here,” Jessica said clearly enjoying the fact that she cleaned out the food I cooked earlier.

I turned around to see Emma walk down the stairs in some of my sister’s clothes. Although I had seen the clothes many times before, I was surprised at how well she wore them; for one my sister was right in that she resembled a princess. Then again that applied to the underlying fragility of her current state.

I took a quick look at the table and saw that my sister had gone above and beyond in her efforts to eat as much food as she could. All that was left were a small plate of salad and a bowl of soup, it would take someone approximately ten minutes to eat the

food at a moderate pace. In other words an order from my sister, satisfy the girl with a meal made in the allotted time. I covered up the ghost of a smile and turned back to Emma,

”Give me a little bit and I’ll make a proper meal for you,” I said.

”Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine with what is left,” she said sitting diagonally from my sister.

For some reason the tone of her voice irked me. Instead of opening up like I had expected she retreated behind her emotional barriers. Someone interfered causing enough trauma to override my work and reset her guard. I already had a considerable head start because of the guilt trip I caused her when she knocked me over, but now I had to work past the full wall she had.

In a way I could see why people nicknamed her the Ice Queen, getting her to open up was like breaking through a glacier, a painstakingly long task. But just like she was ready to stop any advance, I was ready to follow through with my plan until the



end.

I grabbed the meat I was going to use for dinner tomorrow out of the refrigerator and started shearing thin slices off of it. At the same time I skimmed the top layer of the remaining soup in the pot with a ladle. Setting a burner on high heat I place a pan on it pouring the ladle and meat onto it. While the meat started to sizzle I grabbed a few spices and cornstarch out of the cabinet. Halfway through the time I spent adding spices to the soup I stopped to flip over the meat.

Despite the situation I hadn't enjoyed cooking like this in a long time. The pure immersion I experienced made the rest of my time pass quickly as I shifted everything around to form the final product. As Emma was finishing the last of the soup I finished placing the meat on top of some risotto I had on the back burner.

"If I let you go home hungry it would look bad for my family so please eat," I said placing the plate next to her.

She looked at the plate for a second and then said, "Thanks

for the food,” as she replaced the soup with the plate.

I hoped by switching from something formal to a more comfortable food like curry I could loosen her mood by a bit. Unfortunately whatever she felt stayed beneath her skin. Undeterred by her demeanor I decided to move to a verbal attack.

”Sorry I didn’t show up as usual today, I could’ve helped you before you got hurt,” I said taking the seat across from her.

”I only got these scratches from searching for a hairpin I lost in the bushes,” she replied, ”It’s not a problem at all.”

I could easily tell she fed me a poorly thought out lie. First of all I found her by the side of the track away from the bushes. Secondly, she never had any ornaments on except the occasional bracelet that was meant to match Kelly. Despite this I went along with her story to see how she would back it up.

”Wow, that must be a really important hairpin. Did you find it?” I asked.

"It belongs to my mother so I had no choice but to find it. I don't usually wear it, but sometimes my mother insists on me wearing jewelry," she said.

"Speaking of your parents shouldn't you give them a call?" I asked nonchalantly.

"I was supposed to meet someone else, so this is essentially the same thing," she said, "It would be hassle to make my parents to worry over some scratches."

"In any case, it's getting late," I commented, "What's your address?"

"What for?" she asked.

Before I gave her a witty response I realized that she had given a serious response and wasn't being sassy. "So I can give you a ride home," I said.

"Oh, right," she said with a hint of embarrassment, "I

couldn't trouble you anymore, I'll just take the bus home."

Before I could deliver a finishing line Jessica interfered with her own intentions.

"Don't worry, as a proper adult I wouldn't think of sending you home with a boy your age," Jessica said, "I'll have my assistant take you home and naturally I'll be coming along; I still have things to discuss with you as well as giving your parents a real explanation for why you're out this late."

Defeated by my sister's responsible adult act I couldn't do anything except agree with her.

"Right, that would probably be for the best since I need to prepare for tomorrow," I said in resignation.

"Should I get ready to leave now?" Emma asked looking at the remainder of her food.

"Go ahead and finish, it's like Vincent said, it would be

bad if we didn't give you adequate care," Jessica replied, "My assistant will take her time getting here."

"Then I'll be in number five while you two get ready to leave," I said excusing myself from the table.

As I walked towards the food preparation room I let the bitter taste that had been sitting in the back of my mouth wash over me. It wasn't that Jessica just stole my target away, but that someone else at school wanted to get at Emma before me. Whatever they wanted to do would have to wait until I was done.

Of course that didn't mean they would standby just because I told them, but if they were somehow to become incapacitated then they wouldn't have a choice. In a way it wasn't so bad, I always wanted to try being the savior, and as a bonus I would have the chance of getting more than just my foot in the door.

"You know, it's really satisfying having an advantage over you," my sister said coming into the room, "It's a little thrilling to steal someone's girlfriend".

”First of all, as you already know, she’s not my girlfriend,” I responded to my sister, ”And secondly, no matter what you do I will find out what happened as much as you’re trying to hide it. There’s no way someone can get bruised from searching for a necklace.”

”Sometimes I think you’re so smart that you over think things,” she said nonchalantly,

”That girl is going to be one of my next models so please don’t scare her off.”

“And how did you manage to do that?” I asked, “Threatened her parents into bankruptcy?”

“How rude,” she sniffed, “Not everyone is completely unreasonable like in the business world. All I did was explain what a great asset she would be to my work. And of course they get to review every potential image before it is released.”

“Fun. . .” I said considering my options, “Then as your

brother and resident of your house I will support you in bringing over your new employee to your studio.”

“Che. What’s with that one eighty attitude,” my sister said, “Just when I thought I would get to have fun teasing you. Well, either way I don’t lose out.”

“I’m going to sleep now,” I said passing my sister as she dug around the fridge.

“Don’t stay up too late,” she called out before drinking from a carton of milk.

## CHAPTER 5

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### THE MASQUERADE

#### **Emma's Perspective**

In the mists of my mind I started to dream. I found myself in front of the gates to a very extravagant estate. The entrance was an obnoxiously large gate that loomed over me. Although it appeared to be made of gold it didn't reflect light, but had a matte design.

On the right side I saw thousands of people moving in a single file line through the gate. Each person wore a different kind of formal wear. Some wore ornate, others simple, but the most striking feature was that each person wore a mask. The designs of the masks were completely unique from person to person. As far as I could tell, the only thing people had in common were the



occasional color schemes.

The next person that approached the gate was a woman wearing a blood red dress. Her dress was a slim fit, but it also seemed to flow like water around her. Every step caused a small ripple of change in the dress, almost as if it took on a new look every time.

She wore a pink mask that only covered around her eyes. Although the area was small it felt like it hid all of the attributes of her face. In addition to the alluring color, the mask had a faint glow that made it hard to retain observations I made. I found myself constantly noticing how the decorations of the corners of her mask discharged the glow into a lingering swirling pattern that trailed behind her as she walked.

When she approached the gate she produced a thick envelope that had a red seal on the flap. Apparently the seal was all that mattered because guard gave a cursory glance at it, handed it back, and waved her through. As she walked through the gates my

eyes followed her and I finally noticed the garden past the gates.

I wasn't sure if I never saw it before or if because I was watching this woman it appeared in my dream. Either way, I found the garden was a mix of several styles. The front was composed of a hedge garden that made several paths to different attractions. The term "front" was relative because the garden expanded the whole distance between the mansion and the arches.

Suddenly, an elderly man emerged from the hedge maze and walked towards the crowd. Immediately, everyone went down on a knee or gave some kind of respectful greeting. The old man had a simple mask that covered the upper half of his face. Oddly, the mask didn't seem to hide much because the contours and detail of the mask matched what was probably the face he had under.

His hair was the same silver color of his mask, which made the transition from his hairline to his mask a little awkward. Coming out of the gate, he approached me and my initial thought was to attempt a bow of some kind. However, I found myself

unable to move anything. I realized that moving a body part in my dream would be extremely difficult, but moving my point of view or my entire body shouldn't have been that hard.

He stopped in front of me and said, "Welcome to everyone new to The Masquerade. I imagine all of you were anxiously waiting for me to deliver your certification. Before I give it to you I would like to remind you that once you enter you must return what I am giving to you in full."

Hearing his words I looked behind me and was surprised that there were quite a few other people behind me. All of them looked a lot more steeled than me and carried grim expressions. Whatever this masquerade was, it seemed like it wasn't the happiest place ever, maybe this old man was a loan shark with insane interest rates.

"Although you aren't here yet, you will be in a few days. Luckily, you will get a preview of the venue tonight," he continued. With a wave of his hand everyone suddenly had an

envelope similar to the one the woman from earlier handed into the gate.

Shifting my view, I looked down into my own hands and saw nothing. I guessed I wasn't actually part of this scene and was just a viewer. That changed when the old man walked closer to me and held a flat metal box. It looked to like a necklace box that stores would have on display, except on the box were metallic lines that bloomed into complex swirls on the box.

“Yours is a little different than everyone else,” the old man said directly to me, “You have been summoned by a lord, there is no option.” His eyes contained a bit of interest and pity.

At the appearance of the box every person in the line at the right of the gate shifted their gaze over to me. Looking at their eyes they looked like a pack of wolves waiting to devour me. Despite this being a dream I was still a little shocked by their reaction.

This box definitely transformed me into the prey of a

thousand eyes. Despite the fact that I held off most people at school with a blank stare, in front of this crowd I felt uneasy. Unlike the immature people at my school, every person here seemed to have overwhelming willpower.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” the old man asked motioning the box towards me.

Reluctantly I took the box from his hand and lifted the cover off. To my surprise, the contents of the box were quite ironic. Fitted into jewelry packaging was a simple silver chain necklace with a single pendant on it. Although the chain wasn’t excessive, the pendant was alluring because of its reflective properties and, in my mind, it looked like a Mobius strip. Stuffed on the side of the box was a folded note that I took out.

I quickly scanned the writing which said, ‘Now you have a backbone to your lie. With a talent like yours I suspect you will have more troubles in the future’. If Jessica had any impact on me, it was probably that her attitude had pervaded into this dream

and onto this note. That was freakish talent that she had to make a large impression on me. I looked for a signature at the bottom, but the only writing I saw was a little heart which, quite frankly, freaked me out more.

I had no intention of attempting to put on the necklace, but the old man and the crowd kept staring at me like they were frozen in time until I did the right thing. So I took the necklace out of the box and pulled it around my neck while unhooking it.

Since there weren't any additional hooks I reattached the hook at the original point. This caused the Mobius strip to land lower than I liked hanging between my breasts. The second shocking thing I noticed when I looked down was the gown I wore. It was strange how I never noticed it before since I typically felt dresses were impractical and uncomfortable, but this seemed to fit better than most.

On the other hand it was much more....liberating than any of the clothes I had. The gown stuck to my body line a lot more

closely than my regular clothing, which made everything stick out more. Secondly, on my left side was a slit in the dress that ran from my ankle all the way up to my hip. In fact, this made me question if I even had underwear on in this dream because I could feel every bit of wind brush against me.

Luckily the dream seemed to obey part of my will and the wind did not excessively blow at this spot. Finally, the worst part about the gown was the top component. There weren't any straps which left my shoulders exposed. To make it worse, the collar line that started above my breasts dove sharply when it should have converged. This made the pendant the centerpiece of my upper body and would undoubtedly draw the attention of people.

However, my upset was overthrown by the pattern of the material of the gown. At the slightest movement it would shimmer in a wave following the motion. The wave had reflective properties and made it all the more eye catching. When I didn't move it stayed a vanilla color without any trace of the shimmer. I was tempted to experiment more with it, but people continued to

stare at me and I decided that I would have to wait.

“This way please,” the old man said extending his hand in the direction of the mansion.

I followed him under the arches towards the mansion. I didn't make it past twenty feet into the garden when a young man stepped in front of my path. Well, I couldn't definitely say he was young because he wore a mask, but using my best judgment of the rest of his physical appearance I would put him in his early twenties. Although he wasn't too much taller than me, he was surrounded by an intimidating feeling.

“Miss, are you going in?” he asked staring at my bare face.

“I suppose,” I said hesitantly.

He didn't say anything, but it was apparent that he my response made him displeased. From his left a young woman came to his side.



“Don’t be stupid,” she said knocking against his shoulder, “She’s obviously lost. Look, she’s even going bare faced, you know she wouldn’t do that if she was with a family. We should help her.”

“This...,” he began hesitating.

“She reminds me of your sister,” the woman said softly.

He looked at me for a while as if validating the woman’s statement.

“Take this,” he said giving me a black box, “Before you get inside you need to be able to put on your mask. I don’t know who invited you, but it was clearly a mistake. For now this will hold off most people if you use it as a substitute mask.”

“I knew you’d help,” the woman said squeezing his arm.

“She’ll be paying me back in the future,” he said turning away.

The woman turned to follow him, but suddenly turned back towards me. “I know, take this,” she said producing an item from sash tied around her waist.

It was a simple hairpin made of wood that had a thick end tapering into a thin point. The thicker part had a small round cyan ornament that looked like it contained a murky gold colored fog.

“The pin is an artifact I made; it can pierce through anything lower than a seven star rank with ease. Past that you’ll have to get stronger yourself for it to be of use. As for the orb, it’s called ‘Little Planet’, if you break it we’ll come help you, but you shouldn’t have the need for that until much later,” she explained.

“Mm,” I said, not knowing a single thing she said.

“Don’t worry, you’ll understand in a bit,” she laughed as my confusion was clearly shown. “Take care,” she said leaving this time.

After she left I turned to the old man who I found was

kneeling on the ground. I thought he was in pain, but he got up like nothing happened.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Your amazing luck,” he replied, “The man was one of the four Deathgods and the woman was his fiancée, she is a Fate Weaver. It seems like they are giving you the backing of their family, the Indusia Solta.”

I looked at the items they gave me in my hands, this dream has a fetish with boxes, I thought. The old man continued to look at me until I felt uncomfortable again. I guess this dream wouldn't progress unless I opened the damn box.

Opening it up, I saw a mask with the same color as the orb on the hairpin, but it didn't have traces of the gold colored fog. Instead it had thin black lines tracing around it. On the top part was an insignia that I couldn't identify, it probably had something to do with the family the old man talked about.

I wanted to satisfy my curiosity and see what was so different about wearing a mask. I put my hair in a bun and secured the hairpin with it. Then, I took the mask and lifted it to my face. As it approached I heard a faint rhythmic buzzing noise. I did my best to ignore it, but it grew louder until it filled the whole space.

“Fuck,” I said trying to pull the mask up to my face.

At that moment I woke up wide eyed in my bed. I glanced around and saw my phone buzzing with a call, it was Kelly.

## CHAPTER 6

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### SPARRING PRACTICE

#### **Vincent's Perspective**

Logging onto my computer I opened up my messaging system. I clicked on my friend Vajra Pratel preparing to send him a message. Before I could send anything off he started a call with me. I answered the call and got my microphone ready.

“What up Vincent,” Vajra said as soon as I picked up.

“I’m going to need you on the other end of the virtual training room,” I said not wasting any time. If I let Vajra talk more he’d be more likely to spout out an insult.

“Haha, I knew you’d ask,” he replied, “Your sister told me

about your little girlfriend. Or actually not so little, I saw the picture of her, I'm surprised you found someone like her."

"Damn it, she really wants me to get involved doesn't she," I said seething at my sister's actions.

"You didn't deny it, so I'm going to say it's the truth," Vajra said gleefully, "Now where should I post this? Oh, maybe I should ask for the footage of you carrying her, that would be good."

"Yeah, no, get in the room so I can beat your ass," I said attempting to placate him.

"Don't do to me what you did to that girl," Vajra said getting the last word in before hanging up.

"You're done," I said as I got off my chair.

I walked over to the training room on the lower level and prepared to open up a gate. One of the advantages of being part

of the other world was that with enough money and resources you could have access to futuristic technology and borderline magic. Of course the magic was a lot harder to transfer over, but it was well worth it.

The training room I was going to use was one of those feats of technology and magic. I could open up a space and meet up with Vajra to beat the shit out of him. Well, almost, the room comes equipped with suits that absorb energy according to the settings that are programmed and dispel that energy in the form of light. Looks cool, but it's stopping me from trashing Vajra unless I use grapples. I'll have to pretend to be weak and bait him into a spar without the suit.

“Let's go Vajra,” I said once I had my suit on.

“Ready when you are,” he said tapping his fists together to make a light red light emit from his elbows.

Wasting no time I put my legs slightly wider than shoulder length and bounced on the balls of my feet. I would practice

my kicks on him first. I inched closer slowly and on the third movement I pushed off moving in for a kick aimed at his hip. In response to the explosive movement, Vajra moved back a bit and used his hand to push my foot down. I planted that for down and used the momentum to turn backwards and sweep my heel towards his head. In my peripherals I could see him duck down and lunge for the opening I left.

I accelerated my foot to the ground and crossed my arms to block the punch he was throwing. It wasn't pleasant to say the least as I saw dark blue light explode towards my face from the back of my arms. I shifted into a regular guard to see Vajra retract his fist. The perfect moment to initiate the end of this spar.

I used my left arm to throw a jab towards his face forcing him to put a guard up higher. As soon as he couldn't see I drove my arm in a slight uppercut into his ribs. Feeling the discomfort he made a small hop back and threw out his own jab. My response was grabbing his arm and pulling it towards me to increase the power of my next strike which was on his chin. His



head tilted back emitting a violet light from the back. Feeling him pull his arm back I let go of it and launched into a southpaw kicking stance. Upon my set up he hopped back panicking and put up a hasty guard.

I made one side shuffle in his direction and lifted my leg as a fake out. Vajra reacted as I predicted and raised his own leg to counter my kick. I switched to a standard stance and snapped out a kick towards his midsection. This time it connected causing his body to fold. I grabbed his head and used it to catapult my knee to his face.

Right before contact he yelled out, “No! I can’t fail here!”

When my knee connected with his face a miraculous shield took all of the force and Vajra slipped out of my hold retreating far away.

“So we can use powers now?” I said smirking at his desperate escape.

“Well if your aim is to kill me then yes,” he replied.

“You said it,” I said taking off my suit.

Putting on my mask I felt the surge of power run through my body. In reality my powers could be activated without the mask, but that was only once my power was sufficient. In earlier stages the mask was a catalyst to get my powers going.

My mask resembled a lion’s head made from a tribal artistic style. The colored lines on it were pure with little gradients causing there to be a contrast from one area to the next. Two holes were left for my eyes and one for my mouth. Unlike masks made in the regular world, this mask didn’t put any restrictions on breathing, nor did it add weight onto my head. The mane was made of the flames of my powers, golden yellow flickering in response to the air consumed by them. Although to be more accurate, flames were the most rudimentary form of my power.

“The hero never backs down against the scary monster,” Vajra said as he put on his own mask. “I’ll save the damsel in

distress from you.”

In contrast to mine, Vajra’s mask was more modern than mine. The mask was made of a pliable solid red material and covered his entire face. A matte black visor covered his eyes and had a white outline. If I really had to give a description of it, I’d say it looked like the kind of mask you’d see in a show with a team of different color themed heroes.

“One day I’ll beat the smart ass responses out of you,” I said preparing a flame to throw at him.

We spent the next three hours sparring, most of which was a blur. In spars like these I didn’t need to analyze myself along the way because of the cameras present in the room. Later I could go back and review it if I desired, which by today’s standards, I didn’t. At the end of the time Vajra and I were both battered, but he more so than I.

The intercom in the room clicked on and a voice came through, “Vincent, I’m hungry, cook something,” my sister

whined.

“You couldn’t find anything from yesterday? I cooked enough to feed a family of four,” I said in fear of the amount she had eaten.

“I don’t want any of it anymore though. I think I want a salad,” she responded after a bit of silence.

“Really? Practically everything is there, all you have to do is put it together,” I said sighing at her stubbornness.

It wasn’t that she couldn’t do anything, but she didn’t want to do anything. However, knowing my sister there was probably at least three other reasons she wanted me out of the training room.

“Better go to your duty,” Vajra said getting up from his resting position, “I’ll be in touch on the other side. Let me know if you find any more cute girls, I could always use a self-esteem booster.”

“You have enough self-esteem from playing hero with yourself,” I said flippantly.

## COMMENTARY

This is a “preview” of *Masks*. The first four chapters were taken from the original draft. Actually, I lied, the fourth chapter is truncated for convenience and readability. The last two chapters are excerpts, chosen to give readers an idea of what to expect.

Reading the story in its infancy, I was struck by the prose. While dealing with powers much like my story, it goes about it in a different way. The narrative structure is much tighter and the words positioned in more strategic and professional approach. This is a good thing. A style that gives off a different impression but yet approaches the same topic is a nice reprieve.

*Masks* gives more commentary on self-evaluation and one’s interaction with society and those within it. Much like the title

implies, it also examines roles people take on, appearance wise and personality wise.

In terms of things to look out for, “Sica” and Jessica Staccato make appearances in my story. You may also find other references sprinkled throughout. I hope that *Masks* will entertain you as much as it did me. Maybe enough to even coax a few more words from the main author himself. Until then, enjoy!

-delta0G, author of *Heroes of the Past*