



Passions Subtler Than Those

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"The theater, bringing impersonal masks to life, is only for those who are virile enough to create new life: either as a conflict of passions subtler than those we already know, or as a complete new character"

- Alfred Jarry

"No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true"

- Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 1

I sit, staring at the dispenser, waiting.

I sat in my dressing room, staring at the dispenser, mind blank as I waited for the buzzer. These moments of suspense, between giving up one persona and adopting another, are the worst. I have never overcome the shivering, numb sensation that creeps over me as I wait, turning my muscles into clay, my bones into frozen twigs, my skin into a senseless tight shell no more real than the masks. I could hear my heart drumming in my ears, and I rocked gently in my seat as my pulse pushed my back against the chair - on, off, on, off.

Sometimes I hear the buzzer before it goes - or I think I do, at any rate. A hallucination, perhaps, or maybe the echo of a buzzer going off in someone else's dressing room. Are they all like mine, I wonder? I have no reason to believe otherwise, but... Well, this is foolish. Let us assume that the dressing rooms are the same. The others seem to me to be in the same situation that I am in, I can say no more. So the buzzers must go off at different times, then. A buzzer goes off in the changing room that the silent woman uses, let us say, and I, hearing the echo in my own room, think for a second that my time has come. I jump, start from my chair, turn (if I have turned away) towards my dispenser and am surprised to find that it is empty, that what it took from me a mere half hour before it has not returned, that I still, for the moment, do not know who I am.

There is a mirror in my dressing room, a mirror surrounded by lights. I do not like to look at it, not while I wait. The sight is too raw, and scares me. In the past I have stared into those eyes, those idiot eyes that are the only unchanging part of my face. I've stared for so long, for too long I think. I've stared until the edges of the mirrors begin to warp, until the parts of that under-face, that hidden face, begin to slide like raindrops across each other, all of them moving but somehow keeping their place. I've stared until other faces were visible, shadowy shapes behind me and within me and around me.

So, for that reason, I did not look into the mirror but waited patiently at the dispenser - all the time waiting for the sound of buzzers, either my

own or those of others - that would tell me that this ordeal was over, and that I would soon discover what ordeal I was to face.

My buzzer rang, a short angry yell from a giant mechanical bee hidden somewhere in the machinery. I jumped, I always jumped, even knowing that the buzzer would ring I could never anticipate it enough to stop myself from jumping. After the buzz came a sliding, scraping noise from the dispenser, and with a pop the cradle flipped up and my mask tumbled over forwards. I leapt forward to catch it before it could fall out completely and drop onto the floor - another, perhaps irrational.. No, I will tell you about that later. For now, the mask.

Our masks are simple - a simple white shape that covers the face, with two holes for the eyes and two holes for the nostrils. Our mouths can move behind the masks easily enough for us to talk, but we can see nothing of each other's faces except for the eyes and (maybe, sometimes), a hair or two poking out of a nostril. For the men, of course, not so much the women. Since I have been here - and perhaps, I think, before - I have not seen a human mouth other than my own, and that, as I have said, I do not find pleasant. No, I think I must have seen other mouths before. I can bring to mind the shape of a pair of lips, not from a book (for the books here, the curious books we are sometimes required to recite from, have only words and no pictures), but from somewhere in my imagination or somewhere in the past. I can, if I concentrate hard enough, almost trace the necessary curves, feel the angle between the slightly waxy surface of a lip and the smooth skin that surrounds it. He, the voice, tells me so, and so it is. In my head, I run a finger across a set of lips redder than my own, smoother and more compact. Have I had that experience?

The masks. I have not told you about the most important feature of the masks, of course. Although each mask I receive is the correct size for my face, fitting comfortably - not tight enough to constrict, not so loose that I am unable to talk - each one is different. This one before me is one I know that I have worn before, on many occasions. In the center of the mask, running across the eyes, up to the forehead, down to the nose and the tops of the lips, is a large red number.

Four.

This was the role that I played that day, the face that I was to become.

Four.

Allow me to explain - or no, better still, I will show you.

My hands were still on the mask, and I withdrew it carefully from the cradle inside the dispenser. Turning it over in my hands, I saw that four was the number written on it. I knew what that meant, of course. Once, I

think, I must have been unsure about the role of four. I cannot remember that time now, although logically it must have happened. Was the role explained to me? Did I receive a script? No, not a script, I think. What I had to do, I knew. What I said, how I did it, that was up to me. A book, perhaps, a set of orders or duties, a simple sheet explaining that at this time I was to do this, and in response to that event I was to do that. That seems likely, although I do not remember ever reading such a thing. It is logical, though, and I have yet to come up with any better explanation for my familiarity with the role.

I put on the mask. Above the ears two white velcro straps ran around behind the head to fasten it in place. The velcro always seems new when the mask emerges from the dispenser - no hair, no little specs of lint, nothing that would affect the ability of the straps to do their job, to secure the mask in place and prevent any of us poor players from ever seeing the face beneath the face, the face we all wonder about in others but wish to protect in ourself. I reached behind me and laid the soft strap down first, then pulled the hard strap into place and pressed them together. I waggled my head a little, as I have learnt to do, to test that the mask was on firmly. It stayed in place, and I was satisfied.

Four, as a role, is confined to the chronological middle of events. As four, I am required to wait for some time until events have begun to unfold, then perform my necessary tasks, then step aside. There is nothing passive about the role - indeed, if I were now as I was then wearing the mask of four - if I was four, you might say - I would argue that the role of four requires a narrow minded passion that can be equalled only by one other role, a role with which, wearing that mask on that day, I was to clash. The role of one.

Those roles that are not the center of attention are still required to act in some way, if only to keep them ready for their inevitable entrance. As four, I would have to wait for a summons from eight, and then come to him as quickly as possible. The events leading up to that call being known to me very well, I would have plenty of warning. That day, I chose to wander the outer circle around the labs and the audience room. These corridors (conveniently close to my dressing room) surround the scene in which I (as four) was required, and so I would not witness much of the beginning of events but would be close at hand when required.

I have the dressing room next to the silent woman (whose buzzer I may or may not be able to hear), and I emerged at the same time she did - if her buzzer had sounded earlier, she at least took longer to get her mask on than I did. Our doors clicked locked behind us, and with that

subtle noise we became four and seven. The silent woman strode purposefully past me, almost brushing me out of her way, and off towards the long corridor that lead to the other half of the complex. As seven she left, and as seven she would return here soon, and indicate by signs that which would lead to the beginning of my role. I watched her go, closed my eyes and listened to the sound as her footsteps faded into silence.

When she was gone, I turned right and began to walk. The outer corridor in this section is long, and marked on its outer edge by six equidistant points. Five of those points are dressing room doors - mine, that of the silent woman, and three others belonging (in turn) to those that I recognize as the actress, the aggressive guy, and average guy one. The sixth point is a corridor which leads away from the cluster of rooms to the other half of the complex - it was along this that the silent woman had vanished. The other three had all gone to their places - either following the silent woman to the other cluster, or heading into the center of this one to find an office or lab. I paced the corridor, hearing the hollow echo of my own footsteps. An odd feeling, this, waiting for action - but it is at least preferable to that other, nauseating sense of being unmade that accompanies the dressing room. I had a purpose, and although I was not yet required, I would be. When I was called, I would go to..

But no, let me tell you of things as they happened, in the order they happened. There is no sense me getting ahead of myself. That is a thing that we all agree on - events, the events that happen, must happen in the right order. If there is some audience we play for, if someone is watching, then they must see a proper rendition of events rather than some meaningless mishmash of random speech, things carried (for one thing I must do is carry) from one place to another for no purpose at all, embraces and gestures with no sense behind them.

These corridors, these featureless white corridors through which we move, somehow retain their cleanliness despite our tireless work. I, as number four, must travel into the darker tunnels that travel between the two complexes. They are dirty, lined with algae, water dripping from their rough ceilings. Sometimes I can hardly find keep my footing. I wonder if the others...

Despite the mud, the water, that I leave behind in footstep-shaped puddles on the pristine corridors, they are always clean by the time I emerge from my dressing room. They last as long as they are part of the story, and then they are gone, reset, cleaned by some unknown agency. One of the others, perhaps?

While I, as four, walked around the corridors, I could hear the faint sound of voices, the faint echoes of the conversations that would lead to my own part in things. As I reached the exit to the other complex the silent woman passed me again, turning slightly to glance at me as she passed. Seven. I would be needed soon. She crossed the outer corridor and entered the laboratory complex. From within I could hear eight quizzing her, and the strange pauses between each question in which the silent woman replied.

"What do you want from me?"

Silence.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

Silence.

"Aah, you love. And you want me to help you?"

Silence.

"To make him forsake her?"

Silence.

"And love you, is that it?"

Silence.

I walked on, out of earshot. I could tell that eight was one of the men from the other side of the complex. It would take longer, I realised, with him as eight. Longer for me to be called, and longer in the debate. I could make another round, and probably another. I prefer to walk when possible, especially as four or one - the exercise allows my legs to warm up, I suppose, and I must walk for the role. It is better, I find, to embrace those aspects of the role that you can naturally love.

When I had circled another time, I could hear no voices. Seven had presumably returned to her place in the other complex. Now it was the time of nine, then one and six. Then I would be called for, and sent on my way. The silence was eerie, although I knew that it was necessary - if there is an audience, they must not be distracted from matters of substance to idle chit-chat among the roles. I personally would not know what to say at any rate. I have kept my own counsel (and listened only to that of the voice), and to my knowledge the others have done likewise.

Small talk, the voice reminds me. Talk need not be dictated by my role, he says. I do not understand what he means, but it has the ring of truth - as does everything he tells me. Sometimes I am suspicious of that fact, sometimes I feel that those things that seem most true are to be trusted least. But if that is the case, how am I ever to decide?

As I reached the entrance to the labs again, eight emerged. He was about to call when he suddenly spotted me, and I saw his eyes widen in

surprise behind the mask. He beckoned me towards him, a gesture aped from the silent woman who is seven, and I walked to him.

"Come quickly," he said, and darted back into his lab. "I have work for you."

I followed him inside.

"There is a package, an important package. You must travel the tunnels and find my slave, who has it now. Take it to this address, to the woman there. Do you - the woman I speak of, do you know her?"

"I can find her," I reassured him.

"This package is important," he reminded me. "Do not let anyone but the woman herself gain hold of it. If it reaches anyone but her we are all in trouble."

"I understand," I told him.

"Good. Then, please, go now."

Chapter 2

I took the mask from the dispenser and turned it over carefully. Six. I had been six only a few days ago, but with a limited number of us and a limited number of roles we often play the same role two days running, even. I think I remember the boyish girl playing three for four days in a row, once. I have often wondered why - were the audience (if any exists) particularly taken with her in that role? Who- or whatever force dispenses the masks, had it or he or she decided that it would be that way? Or was it just chance, the way that a die will roll six four times in a row no matter how unnatural we may feel such behaviour on the part of a knucklebone? In those four days I played different roles. I loved her twice, counselled her once, and spent one day entirely indifferent to her. I grew used to her as three, comfortable even, so that when the fifth day came and I never saw her I felt uneasy, as though there were something wrong with the world. I assume that she became nine that day. Was it odd for her, did she feel, at the end, as though she were giving herself the answer she sought, or had she accepted that she was nine then, that all the roles she had played in the past and all the roles she would play in the future were meaningless?

I turned the mask in my hand, and tried to risk a glance to the side. I could not - the fear was too powerful. I strapped the mask on, and only then could I look in the mirror, to see the scarlet number blazoned over my face and the familiar white nothingness beneath it from which only my eyes peeked. It felt right. I was six, and that was the way it always had been and always would be - at least for today.

That short delay while I looked in the mirror left me the last to emerge from my dressing room, so I did not know at first who I was to meet. As six, I was required to perform two main tasks, both of them heavy on speech and light on action. But I also had the first duty of the day, which was to travel to the other part of the complex to be there at the introduction of two and three. Many of the others would be present there as well (one, five, ten, and - naturally - seven), but six (which is to say, I) would be the catalyst who would start the whole thing running.

Despite being the last person masked, I knew that I would be given some grace time. It is always awkward when the early roles are assigned to the players in the laboratory section of the complex, since we are further away from our marks. But it does not seem to matter, because the action will wait for us. If we delay deliberately, though - well, I do not know what might eventually happen. Delaying makes me feel wrong - guilty, the voice tells me, and of course he is right. I feel guilty, because I know that I am letting the audience down.

No. I know no such thing. I fear that I may let down the audience, because I suspect that they exist, and that they care about my role. I have no evidence that I am right, and evidence is all that I can accept, no matter what the voice says.

I hurried, to stave off that feeling of guilt. On the way I caught up with one of the men from my side of the complex - the one who has the fourth dressing room down from mine, with the silent woman and the actress between us. As I passed him I glanced at his mask and saw that he was two. I allowed myself to slow down slightly - not so slowly that I was walking with him, but enough to allow me to relax. As six, I would have to conserve my bodily energy and concentrate it in my wits.

Ahead of us I could see the back of one of the women from our side of the complex (which one I could not tell, for the actress and the silent woman are both of a similar build, with long dark hair - the silent woman's hair is longer and darker, but not enough to distinguish her without the actress being present to compare). I sometimes wish that the masks we wear were two-faced, so that from behind I could discover who it was I was following. The voice tells me that I should be able to recognise a person without being close enough to see their number. I think maybe that would be useful, although if you asked me to explain why I would not be able to tell you.

Arriving at the other half of the complex, I made my way into the central suite. There are a number of rooms here - the banquet hall, six's office, and the separate chambers of three and seven. In these four areas we do all that we need to do. The simple layout of these four rooms amazes me, even now - the banquet area is not particularly large, but it is large enough for the party, and for the fight, and to house the stage area from which five can see into three's chamber (without being noticed). It is simply furnished - the same white walls, white floor and ceiling as all the rest of the complex, comfortable biege chairs around low tables, and ornate frames on the walls containing portraits of the ten roles, although

you might hesitate to call white canvases with simple red numbers on them portraits.

When I arrived, all of the others were present - except of course for two, who was behind me and arrived a mere ten seconds later. It had been deathly silent, but as he stepped into the room we began to talk, and I (as six), was required of course to talk the loudest, and quieten the others.

"Welcome one, welcome all," I began (as I am wont to). "I thank you all for attending, on this the most important of nights. Let the wine flow, let conversation thrive, let all dance who will. This is the night on which we celebrate, and tomorrow be damned."

The others clapped politely - except for seven, who I recognised as the one who had been eight the day before. Minus one, I thought to myself, and I myself have increased by two. It was fruitless, as it always was, but I find myself obsessed on occasion with trying to discern some pattern, no matter how many times I have failed to in the past.

"Thank you, thank you. Now please, let the music start, and everyone help themselves to the drinks and food they require."

Another smattering of polite applause, and the others began to move around. Each one, on passing one of the low tables, leant down as if to pick up an invisible champagne flute, and brought it up in mime of drinking. I saw them glance at each other, trying to pick up the hints of beat and rhythm. I have always found the otherwise unremarkable woman (whose dressing room is in this part of the complex) to have the best sense of timing - and I was glad to see that she, today, was three. As she began to tap her toes to whatever music it is she carries in her head, the others gradually caught her cues until everyone (save the silent woman, who I saw now was one) was dancing in time to that same imagined music.

Circulating through my guests, I greeted one (my underling) with an earnest speech about her duty to society, seven with a commiseration on the scar he had received in duelling practise, and five (the boyish girl who had been three so many times in a row), with a pointed question about her financial debts, and her habit of hanging around in places where she had no business.

"Have you nothing better to do?" I concluded jovially. "Still, enough - I have said my piece, and I would not have it said that I, I of all people, was an ungracious host. Here it is, the night of celebration, and you must have a good time. Things will catch up with you soon enough, I am sure, but that time is not today."

"Of course," she replied coolly. "I would not let that be said against you."

I slapped her on the shoulder and turned to where two and three were waiting, their separate circulations having brought them to opposite sides of the room. The others had cleared the path between them, and noticing my movement seven (who was talking to two) tried to angle himself so that he could not be excluded from the conversation. I was of course faster, and managed to cut him out.

"Come, my dear child," I called her, and she stepped forward. I took her by the elbow, and led her gently across the room towards two, who turned attentively towards us as we approached. "Allow me to introduce you," I said, then (in part aside to three): "He has lately returned from the war, and I am told covered in much glory."

"It is not something I wish to discuss," two warned me, an edge in his voice that would have recognised him to me even if we had been in pitch darkness. "But who is this young lady, tell me quickly."

"She is the daughter of my cousin," I told him, "a gentle maid, but learned - a scholar, you might say, if such a title does not disgrace a lady."

"I see no reason it should," three said. "There is no dishonor for a man in claiming scholarship as a profession, and for good reason. Many things can be found in books, and wisdom and nobility are not excluded."

"In the war there are no scholars," two asserted. "Such learning is useless, wisdom absent, and nobility too often lacking."

"Do you deny the fair lady's point?" I asked.

"No, of course not," he said testily. "But such matters are complicated." I had my hand on his elbow as well by this point, and I could feel it trembling beneath my fingers. "Please, do not press me on such matters tonight."

"Of course not," three said calmly. "Tonight, of course, is our host's celebration, and I do not mean to attack anyone. Come, sir, let us sit and talk of better things."

"Indeed!"

I withdrew, the important part of my job done for the moment. I had two more minor things to attend to, but neither of them would take long. First, I had to go to seven and be rebuffed by him. After that, I would have to find one and withdraw. I was annoyed that the silent woman was one today, because it would make my job slightly more awkward.

I crossed the room to where seven was standing, and made a big show of greeting him. As was required by his role, he gave me the cold shoulder and went off to talk to five, who had perched herself on one of the comfy chairs. I stared after him for a second, then went to find one. She had leant against the wall near the door that led to my (six's) office, and I crossed my arms and tapped my foot until she came to attention, which she did in an odd, expressionless way - neither snapping to attention as some of the others did, nor slouching in the sullen resentful manner that the current three often adopted when he was one.

"Come on," I told her. "It is time you got to work, and I must explain your duties for the time to come. There will be other celebrations. Perhaps one day, even a celebration in your honour! But you must work hard for that. Tirelessly! As I have worked tirelessly. That is the destiny of a humble servant such as myself, or an even humbler servant such as you."

I waved her after me pompously and led her through into my office. White walls, white ceiling, white floor - as I'm sure you will have guessed by now. A large pine desk, heavy and carved in a style that made it look (the voice tells me) as though it should have been made from mahogany or some more illustrious wood. In front of it two modest chairs (again, pine), and behind it one larger chair (pine yet again), the chair that for today was mine. I walked around the desk and carefully lowered myself into it. It was comfortable, but set too low. It is always set too low. I stood up and adjusted it (a wooden cog at the back can be turned, raising the seat against the legs - there is about a foot of movement, enough, I think, for it to be comfortable for any of us).

I gestured the silent woman to take a seat opposite me, which she did. Our parts at the banquet fulfilled, we had now to wait for some time, until by some signal we knew that nine had performed the ritual.

Among many puzzling things, our knowledge of when to begin our conversations when we could not know that others had performed the pre-requisite tasks required of them is perhaps the one thing most puzzling to me. It felt nothing like guessing, more a comfortable certainty as if in a dream (do I dream, you will ask me? I do, but that tells you little. You must ask me something more). I have never experienced a fault in timing, either my own or another's, so whatever sense it is seems real enough, in effect if in nothing else.

Once, a while ago (how long exactly in days I could not tell you - more than ten, definitely. More than one hundred? possibly), I became convinced that in such situations an audible cue had bene presented to us

(or me, at least). A subtle, almost subliminal drumming, just at the edge of audibility. I listened intently for the cue, and never failed to hear it when I needed to. Only after weeks did I wake in the night to hear the same drumming. I had missed my cue, the wake-up buzzer, the roles had been assigned, but I had not picked up my mask! I leapt from my bed in a cold panic, and realised that it was still pitch black. The drumming hastened, and I suddenly knew that I had been listening to my own heartbeat, grown strong and quick with anticipation. I felt for the edge of the bed and lay down again.

After some minutes the certainty came over me, and I saw that one felt so too. I sat up straight, and gestured for her to do likewise - which she did.

"Here are your duties," I began.

Chapter 3

"These are the duties I would like you to perform," six began. I nodded attentively, and reached up to smooth down my hair. Six was one of the women from the other complex - the overweight one. She had adjusted the chair up a few inches before sitting down. The chair creaked slightly and settled under her bulk. "Your responsibility is to ensure the safety of our fair town. Can you imagine what would happen to our town if no-one took care of it? Terrible, terrible things."

"So I'm to protect it," I said.

"Yes, I'm sure you will."

"Against what?"

"Against anarchy, against destruction and vandalism." She paused dramatically. "But most of all, against fire."

"Fire?"

"Fire. An anarchist with his molotov cocktail, an arsonist with his canister of petrol, even the tiniest spark from a match dropped carelessly. Anything could strike off a fire, anything! But you will protect me, I know you will."

I froze, aware of the slip and suddenly more conscious of the audience than I had ever been. They could not have failed to notice that, whether they existed or not. Six coughed, and then continued.

"You will protect the town to the best of your ability." She waved her hands airily. "Patrol the corridors, patrol the tunnels, make sure that your tools are ready. This is your duty - to prevent fires, to fight fires, to make sure that everyone is ready in the event of a fire."

I nodded carefully, and reached for the piece of paper on the desk between us. Before I could get to it, six snatched it back - as she was supposed to.

"By signing this," she said carefully, "this contract between us, I give you the power of deputy. You will fight fires in my name, and by doing so bring honor to the town. You must never dishonor the contract, and you must live, breathe, eat and drink your duty. Never must it be far

from your thoughts. I see you understand." She paused. "Tell me you do."

"I do."

"Good, good." Six's hands fluttered suddenly and grasped each other, freeing the piece of paper. I leant forward and picked it up - it was, of course, blank. I took the pen from the penholder nearest me, and made an X at the bottom of the paper. I then passed it to six, who did likewise. "It is done. Go in my name, and do your duty as a man."

I stood up, saluted, and picked up the contract. Folding it carefully into three, I tucked it into my jacket and left the room.

"Take care!" Six called to me as I closed the door.

You are wondering, no doubt because I mentioned my jacket, how we dress. Each of us dresses identically from the waist up - with the exception, the voice reminds me, of bras for the women. He must be right, although I have no evidence of the fact. The women, like the men, wear long-sleeved white t-shirts made of a sturdy, stretchy material. Cotton mixed with something man-made, I would guess. Over these shirts they wear white jackets - thus obscuring any visual evidence of the existence of bra straps. From the waist down, the clothing differs - sometimes. For the men, plain white trousers are the only option. The women appear sometimes in similar trousers, but occasionally in long white skirts. When a woman is cast in role three, I have found, she is more likely to appear in a skirt. I assume there must be some choice in the matter, however, because I have seen all five of the women at one point or another wearing the mask of three and trousers. Perhaps the women choose themselves, knowing what role they are assuming, or perhaps the choice is made for them when they wake up. It is something I suppose I am destined never to know. Or will that be explained?

I find my clothes comfortable, and easy on the eye - they are not garish, but neither are they dull. Living in the complex, one's eyes get used to a constant bright background, and I imagine that brightly coloured clothes would be painful to look at - although sometimes, in nine's grotto, it seems as though the clothes we wear are coloured. I concede that that is not too terrible.

I have left out underwear and shoes, although I'm sure you will be able to guess. White socks (woolen, I think, but not thick), white leather shoes with white laces (matt, not shiny polish), and white boxer shorts made, again, of the comfortable cotton mix. There are no extremes of temperature in the complex - well, of course, there are barely any

changes of temperature except those caused by the lights being turned off at night - so this one uniform suits for all occasions.

Perhaps the uniformity of our clothing is supposed to promote an egalitarian spirit between us - the only visible difference in dress being the number on our mask. Or perhaps it is simply a matter of aesthetics. I can only report the facts as I know them. When we sleep - or, if I am being scientific, I should say when I sleep, for I cannot speak for others - I remove my clothes and place them in a pile on the chair beside the table in my dressing room. When I wake, they are replaced with identical clothes, neatly folded - or the same clothes after washing. Which, I do not know. These clothes do not show any sign of wear and tear, although I have been wearing them for years, perhaps. I have fought in them, and I have even, on occasion, bled in them. I may tell you about that later.

I stood in the banquet hall, with the closed door of six's office behind me. After a few deep breaths, I walked across the room to the entrance to seven's chamber and knocked. No answer. I stepped inside and looked around. Nothing, of course, was out of the ordinary, and as I emerged seven appeared behind me.

"What are you doing, oaf?" He demanded.

"By order," I said quickly, pulling out the contract from my jacket and showing it to him. He carefully examined the two crosses, then sighed heavily.

"What is the meaning of this?" He asked.

"I am to check for fire risks," I told him.

"As you can see, there are none here."

I coughed politely.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I will be the judge of that. That is my duty."

"Well, then be quick about it!"

I nodded, then slowly and precisely folded the contract back up and slid it into my jacket. I turned back and looked around his room once more, painstakingly checking each leg of the table, each sheet of paper on it.

"Stop that," he told me. I looked up.

"If you wish to be vulnerable to fires," I shrugged, "What can I, a loyal servant of the town, do?"

"Get out, fool."

I nodded, and left. Next, I was to go to the chamber of three, where I would surprise two and three in the middle of a romantic exchange. I

crossed the banquet hall carefully, knocked once, and barged in without waiting for a reply.

"Oh!" Said two, sounding more as though I'd pointed out a speck of food on his face instead of walking in on him in the middle of confessing his love. He started to get up, but three reached out and placed a hand on his arm.

"What is it, officer?" She asked.

"My apologies, miss. By order, I am to secure the area against fires."

"Then your work will be easy, because all the fires here have already claimed their victims."

I looked around, feigning alarm.

"Fires, my lady? Victims?"

"I.. err.. indeed," two stammered. "I know of what the lady speaks. You'll have no work here."

"Explain, I beg of you."

"These fires are of the heart," three told me. "They can harm no-one but those in whom they already burn, and like a hearth fire they only harm when untended." She turned back to two and raised a hand to his mask. "These fires are the gentler sisters of the flames of hell, warming but not consuming. I would stay by this fireside forever, and if thou, officer, were to try to quench it you would find that all your sand buckets, all your pumps and cloths would not avail you - for my fire would only die with a harsh word from this gentleman."

"That word would never come," said two. I saw his hand move as if to cover hers, but he thought better and replaced it by his side. "Now go, officer, and be about your duty."

I bowed, made my apologies, and left. Now it was time for me to begin my proper duty. I left the central rooms and circled the complex. My walk was brisk, because the conversation with two and three had run a little on the long side, and I would have to get round to the tunnel entrance in enough time to intercept four as he emerged.

The corridor that joins the two halves of the complex is interrupted in the middle by a slight widening, and near each end (perhaps a hundred meters in) by holes that lead into the tunnel complex. The border between the clinical state of the complex and the unruly hewn tunnels seems to speak of some violence. I have often wondered if the role of nine is quite as old as the other roles. What if, once upon a time, there had been no nine? Eight could perhaps have performed some of his duties, being in reality what the nature of events requires him to claim to be. The walls around the tunnel entrances are warped and twisted, as

though something had torn its way into the complex from the tunnel system. A giant mole, the voice tells me, and I smile behind my mask. If such a thing (whatever it was, mole or person) had forced entry into the complex and changed the environment of the play, where had it come from? The tunnels led out in all directions, and although as four (and, in some cases as nine and one), I had had taken many different routes through that maze, I knew that there were many branches that I could have taken but never did. What if one of them led - where? Outside? Logic tells me that there may be something other than the complex, but what that thing might be, I have no idea.

The voice contradicts me. You know what the outside is like, it tells me. You cannot have been born here, so you came from somewhere else. Can you remember where that was? I cannot. I try to concentrate on a childhood, perhaps the face of a mother - but there is nothing special, nothing definite. I can bring to mind images of mothers with babies, but so many of them. They are ideas that I have, not memories. None of those babies is me, none of those mothers mine. The others, perhaps? But no, I obviously cannot have memories of their childhood, and neither can I ask them.

I entered the tunnel system. Although it branches often, and is (as I have said) more extensive than I know, the requirements of our roles are that I should meet four within the entrance between the tunnels and the corridor, at the end nearest to the banquet-hall. If I chose the wrong branch four would be forced to wait while I searched for him, doubled back, and searched again. Since four must deliver the package to seven, he does not wish to stop - which means that it is in his interest to ensure that I (as one) know where he is. This is more difficult for some of us than it is for others.

I heard four whistling loudly, and hurried down the first right branch of the tunnel towards him.

"Halt!" I said, as he came into view. He stopped.

"Out of my way," he told me. "I am on important business."

"Well for that matter, so am I. The most important business, in fact - the safety of the town."

"What concern is that of mine?"

"It is everyone's concern," I said, puffing up my chest. "But particularly mine. Now, state your business."

"I am to deliver a package."

"To whom?"

"To he to whom it is addressed, of course. Who else should I deliver it to?"

"Show me this package."

"I refuse."

"You refuse an officer of the law?"

"I refuse no such person," he blustered. "At the moment, I refuse a six-pence dolt who impedes a lawful courier in pursuit of his rightful business."

I reached inside my jacket and pulled out the piece of paper, then held it up so that he could read it. He stepped forward and reached for the bottom of the contract, which I whipped out of his grasp.

"As you can see, I am charged and bound to protect the town from fire. I suspect you as an terrorist, and demand that you surrender your package to me at once!"

"This is an outrage."

"An outrage would be a peace-loving citizen refusing to give up a suspicious item to an officer whose only wish is to save the law-abiding people of our town from the flames of anarchy! I demand that you hand over your parcel - again I demand it! Do not make me demand it thrice."

Four sullenly held out the package. I took it from him, undid the string, and unwrapped the white sheet of cloth in which the bottle was bound. It was a delicate glass item, decorated with a crystal cut pattern and stoppered with a cork. Inside it a small amount of blueish liquid sloshed around as I handled it.

"This looks like an incendiary mixture to me," I said.

"It is nothing of the sort."

"Then what is it?"

"... I am just to deliver it."

"It sounds to me as though this should be taken for analysis. If you truly don't know what it is, perhaps you should consider your own safety. No, I am taking this back to my superiors."

"But I must deliver it!"

"Yes, you must deliver you know not what to he that you will not name. It is all perfectly clear to me. No, I repeat, I will take this to my superiors. You must complain to them if you wish it returned."

"My client will hear of this!"

"Then so be it."

From the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of movement, and turning round I saw, in another branch of the tunnel leading into this one, a figure. It stared at us, long enough for me to make out the vermilion five

across its face. In a quick violent motion it dashed to the floor a rock that it had been holding, and then vanished.

Chapter 4

Six made his way through the crowd, and bowed before me.

"I trust you are having a good time," he said. I nodded once in agreement.

"I am - although I really must return to my studies soon."

"Nonsense, my dear boy. Here, you cannot spend the party alone, let me introduce you to someone. I'm sure the two of you will get on like a house on fire." He tutted. "Not like a house on fire, better than that. Hmm, that reminds me." He looked around, and spotted one loitering near the door to his office. "That good-for-nothing... Ahem, where was I? Oh, yes - of course, introductions. Please, please, come this way and allow me to introduce you."

Taking me by the arm, he led me on a roundabout course across the room, as if threading through a thronging crowd - stopping once as if to take a wine-glass offered by an invisible waiter. He offered it to me (I feigned acceptance), and then took another.

Two was on the other side of the room, talking to seven, who looked tiny beside her. As we approached, they both turned as if to greet us, but six pushed in front of seven, putting her out of the circle. She stamped her foot, then turned away and strutted past us towards the middle of the hall.

"Have the two of you met?" Six asked. I shook my head, and two shook hers, her eyes behind the mask fixed onto mine as though anchored in place. Her mask shifted slightly, and I realised that underneath it she must be smiling. I bowed. "Allow me to present the lady who has won so much glory as our ambassador to our enemy, who stayed at her post until the very eve of the war and ensured that so many of our citizens could escape before being arrested."

"Not enough," two said sadly. "I would have done more for them."

"I'm sure you did more than any three of our other ambassadors might have. Do not deny it, there are people in their homes tonight who owe their lives to you."

"Enough flattery, please. Who is this charming gentleman? I assume that you brought him here to introduce him to me, and not merely to tease me with that possibility while you recount my minor accomplishments as though I was the very image of Boudicca herself?"

"Indeed, of course! I have not time enough to catalogue those feats, and it were better spent in my duties as a host. Allow me to introduce my uncle's grandson, a scholar of some repute."

"A scholar, you say?" (Then, aside to six): "But I find before me no bespectacled professor, hair awry and fingers stained with ink. This one is most pleasing to the eye, and does not bring to mind such as study books by the light of cheap tallow candles." Then, louder: "I had many scholars working for me as clerks at the embassy, and I do not believe I do them an injustice in saying that for work they were excellent, but I never saw any who I would like to pass time with as much as I think I might with you."

"All students of philosophy do not conform to the stereotype of unworldly changelings," I chided her. "I am sure I could introduce you to any number of professors who could change your mind about the delightful aspects of learning."

"No doubt," she agreed. "But learning has its place in the service, and sometimes that place is subordinate to charm."

"Perhaps we magnify our differences," I suggested. "On this day we should be focussing on the shared happiness of the event."

"Indeed, indeed!" Our host interjected. "I shall leave you to get acquainted now, it seems my work here is done - and I must attend to another." He threw a sharp glance at seven, who I saw was sat glaring at us from one of the chairs. "Oh, and of course yet another. Good lord, is my work never to be done, even on a holiday!" He threw his hands into the air and walked off towards one, muttering to himself.

Two gestured towards one of the sets of chairs - the one nearest my chamber, with just two chairs facing each other across the low table. I sat with my back to the room.

"I blush to say it," Two spoke, "but I had been hoping for such an introduction since I first saw you enter the hall. I hope you will not think me to forward in saying it, but I believe you to be quite the most enchanting person I have seen for a long while."

"If you blush to say it, think how I must blush to hear it. You are the heroine of the hour, every man in the room must be cursing me for taking up your time."

"Let them curse, for not a one of them could make me as happy as you do. You are a rare one, do you know that? Most of them think me a competitor for honor, and see my womanhood as a lever through which they must push me back into my place rather than a clue of an untapped tenderness. But you have yet to treat me as anything other than an equal - you debate me when others would patronise me, and your compliments seem honest."

"It is well that they seem so," I implored, "because that is the meat of them. I do not hand out laurels idly, but save my tongue for those compliments for which it is worthy."

"Then your tongue must be the match of the lips which hide it, for they are noble." She looked round, as if checking that no-one was watching (although, of course, she was checking to make sure that one particular person was watching), then leant forward and reached out a hand to touch the space on my mask where the mouth would be. I could feel the pressure on my own lips as she gently ran her fingers across. "I have seen these lips," she whispered suddenly.

"What?"

"In my dreams," she corrected herself hastily, and withdrew her hand. "In many dreams at night in our foeman's land. I dreamt of lips like these, those that would soothe me and become a welcome rest. These are the lips I have worked for, yet I knew not that they actually existed, nor that they would grace such a face as yours."

"What was it like," I asked, "the country of our enemies?"

"Have you not read about it?"

"I have, but not all books tell the same story. You must understand that history is written by many people, and that where you have two historians, you have two opinions. It is the same with scholars of foreign lands. I know what I have read, but I would rather trust the word of someone I could question. How did you experience those foreign lands?"

She sat back in her chair and considered my question.

"It is different, but the same." She said at last. "I found my expectations confounded at every step, for all the things that I thought would be alien to me I soon found out were universal between their people and ours. At the same time, such things that I had taken to be universal often confused my hosts, and simple issues of manners often came between us, despite the best wishes of both sides. It is a shame that it should come to war, because secretly - do not tell anyone of this, I beg of you - such men and women as live in that land are as admirable comrades as one would find in our own homes."

"I could hardly imagine anyone would think the less of you for expressing such opinions," I protested. "Surely a love of all beings is what we are taught from our infancy, to mock it in adulthood would seem like a cruel trick to play."

Two laughed, and covered the lower half of her mask with one hand.

"Now you make fun of me," I complained. She waved her hand no.

"Indeed not, sir - please do not think that! It is most noble to think thus, for it shows that contrary to rumour one can sometimes judge a tome by its bindings - you, who are so pure to the eye, also carry a purity in your heart and mind that humbles me, and would shame most men in either country. If only all believed as you did, we should not be scanning our borders for invasion nor preparing our own armies. You speak truthfully, and the truth can be startling when one is so accustomed to hearing it veiled in layers of silk, as have I."

"Such a heroine as you deserves to hear the truth told."

"Hush, my ears tire of hearing of my triumphs - more of them are phantoms than are real, I assure you."

"Tell me, then, how it is that everyone speaks of you in such glowing terms. Did you not assist our citizens in returning home when they might have been seized by our enemies?"

"It is true that I did what I could, but surely you must see that it was my job?"

"That may be so, but that you did it to the best of your ability is surely to your credit," I insisted. "If what you say is true, many another might have seen in their position an opportunity for escape rather than an obligation to promote the safety of others."

She nodded ruefully.

"Sadly, you are right."

I looked around.

"It seems like the banquet is beginning to wind down," I observed.

"Indeed - but I find that I am still in the mood for conversation. You do not need to leave, do you?"

"I should return to my books, but if you would like to accompany me at least part of the way, there is no need for us to part just yet. I would not object to talking with you some more."

"My heart rejoices to hear you say that - I would gladly walk with you, for you interest me greatly. What do your books say of my experience abroad, pray tell?"

"I would gladly loan them to you," I suggested. "If that would be of interest?"

I got to my feet, and extended my hand. She took it and rose - carefully, I noted, lifting much of her weight on her other arm so that little of it was transmitted to me.

"You have the strength of a knight," she told me. I did not know what to say to that, so I just offered my elbow. She slid her hand around the inside of it and squeezed gently.

"This way."

I led her around the room, while seven watched us resentfully and five tailed along behind us, taking care at each turn to feign conversation with one of the other spirits that might have attended the banquet. When I reached the door to my chamber five clambered onto the stage and took an intense interest in the portrait of one (which was closest to her).

"These are my chambers," I told two regretfully. "I will fetch you the books."

"Must we part?" She begged. "I would not take my leave of you yet, for it is not the dark of night where you are."

"I must study."

"Then let our conversation be part of your study. Could you not read to me, for such a combination of learning and the calm music of your voice would, I am sure, render an education most efficacious, and so pleasant to my ears that I should surely be counted among the great lovers of knowledge. Be a schoolmaster to me, and I will gladly endure lectures."

"It would give me great pleasure to pass on what I have learnt," I told her, "and especially to so attentive a pupil."

She gently pushed against my arm, and I opened the door and ushered her inside. My chambers were decorated in a spare white, and contained a large bed, a pine bedside table upon which stood a vase of lilies, a bookshelf, and a student's desk. A chair beside the desk was pushed back as if I had risen in a hurry (Perhaps, I have often wondered, three is always intended to be late to the banquet. It is unnecessary, of course, since six will stall somewhat even after three has arrived, but perhaps there is something important in the appearance of things). Two looked around the room, and nodded approvingly. She reached under the head of one of the lilies and leant down to smell its scent, then turned back to me and gestured to the bookshelf.

"Read to me what others have said about our enemies' customs," she said. "I would hear the wisdom of others, but that wisdom could not be more preferentially presented to me than it were in your sweet voice."

I studied the bookcase carefully. The shelves were empty apart from one book, but as usual I made a show of tracing the spines of my library, deliberating over which book I should choose today. The book was one of the larger ones, slim, bound in white leather with no name on the spine. After a few moments mine I gave a little gasp of recognition and plucked the book out, holding it out for her approval. She nodded, and I turned over the first page. As always, I did not recognise the book's contents. Two sat down on the bed and patted beside her. I sat down, slightly further away than she had indicated, and began to read:

"These folk live two lives - one of prudery and correct behaviour, and one of debauchery. During carnival, the anonymity given to each member of the society by the masquerade allows what every person dreams of in their heart - the opportunity to act without consequences, without the judgement of their peers. This effect can be seen in many situations in modern societies - the increase in violent riots when police wear riot headgear which appears uniform and protestors take to wearing scarves which protect them from recognition (and therefore prosecution). It is well established that without fear of censure, the inbuilt moral inhibition against wrong-doing is frequently not powerful enough to overcome the lure of criminal behaviour. A similar effect occurs in prisons when prison guards are allowed to wear mirror-surfaced sunglasses."

I turned the page, but as I expected all of the rest were blank. I looked up carefully to two, who was staring at me solemnly.

"Yes," she said. "That is what it was like. It was like that exactly."

Chapter 5

I waited in that cavern, listening to the water dripping from the ceiling and waiting. Of all the roles, this is the one I think most about - perhaps it is because I have the most leisure to think when I am wearing the mask of nine. Is it true, as I wonder, that the role of nine was added later than all the other roles? It seems an intrinsic part of the story, but I could easily be wrong about that. My grotto is part of the tunnel system, the unruly tunnel system that is so at odds with the cleanliness and order of the rest of the complex, the tunnel system that seems more than anything else to have been burrowed into our complex by violence.

Sometimes, sitting here, I strain to hear that monster which may have created the tunnels. I fear the tunnels - I have done ever since... But never mind. I imagine a terrible creature, part dragon, part eel, the gnawing teeth of a rat and the paddle claws of a mole, a blind and furious thing that emerges from a side tunnel to ambush me, or one of the others, and leave the body torn and bloodied somewhere, alone in the endless (or so it seems to me) maze of passages. Would that one of us feel a secret relief as the jaws closed around them, or at the last would they fight for life, fight to return to the complex and to the comforts of life, of our assigned roles, of the thought of the unseen audience and their approval?

What would become of the rest of us then? Would we continue in our roles as they are, always pretending that there were, indeed, still ten of us? Would we gesture to the missing part and treat them as if present, just as we do to the guests in the banquet hall? Perhaps I have it all the wrong way around. Perhaps there were, in the past, more of us rather than fewer. That banquet hall might once have been filled with yet more people, an eleven, a twelve, a thirteen. Did we, like the ghosts I read about once as three, retrace steps we learnt when once there were real people to avoid on our way from our marks? The voice tells me that I should be able to imagine being six and walking across a crowded room to introduce two acquaintances - or no, not six. Someone else.

It is useless. I am neither six, nor that other hypothetical person. I am nine, and as nine I waited in my chamber and thought. That is the way it

is with nine. Nine waits for his instructions, and nine does what he is told. Only at the end, only then can nine suggest, cajole, and finally bring comfort and closure. Nine keeps the secrets of eight, nine keeps the secrets of three, and nine helps three to end the cycle of events.

Somewhere, I knew, seven was talking to eight - demanding, or flattering, or bribing her to solve seven's problem. That was the trail that, once stepped on, would lead to me - would lead four to me. But before then I must learn the secret that was required of me.

Let me describe my grotto. The tunnels, unlike the corridors of the complex, are the one area where other, unfamiliar colours are allowed (or just tolerated, perhaps). It gives them an unworldly look, something which is enchanting at first, but which one soon begins to feel unnatural and disturbing. It contributes, perhaps, to my fear, and I am painfully conscious of the slipperiness of the footing - algae, green and yellow, lines the floor and traps the water that drips from above. Occasional tiny blue lights twinkle in the tunnel ceilings, and there are more of them in the grotto itself, casting an eerie cyan wash over my equipment. The diffuse white lighting of the complex corridors, the delicate glass chandelier that lights the banquet halls, all are missing here. Torches burn in sconces set into the tunnel walls (and does something replenish them when the complex is cleaned?), the blue lights allow one to see dimly into other areas. Here in my grotto I am also lit in certain poses by the glowing liquids in their arcane glassware, and the flickering yellow wash of a bunsen burner.

There are no chairs in my grotto, not even a stool, but four workbenches are arranged chaotically around the cave, with no seeming of purpose in their scattering. I must, when I am required, move from one to another, mixing, turning, heating, cooling - all the alchemy that turns the raw ingredients of the philtre into their final form, suitable for decanting into the tiny glass bottle and handing to four. These glasses, you understand, are real - not the bodiless phantoms from which we drink in the banquet hall. Why should they exist, I wonder? Is their existence important where that of the imaginary champagne flutes is not? Is there something important that the audience must grasp? I have a sequence of actions I normally follow when I am nine, but I do not believe that I follow it religiously - in fact, I know that I have occasionally missed out steps or reversed them deliberately and felt no pang of conscience, no feeling that I am disappointing anyone. That feeling of guilt does assail here, but it pays no attention to the recipe's order, or ingredients - only to its length. I feel I must give the impression of a lengthy and mystical

process, but as long as that impression is given there is nothing more required of me. Could I demonstrate that with mimed equipment, I wonder?

The ingredients themselves are arrayed in a set of tiny shelves that resemble (so the voice tells me), a spice rack. There are a number of small vials of liquids, various powders, and then other things - tiny eyes, gibbets of flesh hanging in unmarked glass jars, twigs, and a set of corked test tubes that seem to contain nothing but constantly moving coloured smokes. Not all of these ingredients are used in making the philtre, not all of them each time. I am free to choose, of course, and although there are ingredients of which I am fond (the coloured smokes in particular I find fascinating, and use at every opportunity), equally there are others which I use one day as nine and not another. The eyeballs I find quietly disconcerting, and try to avoid. I said earlier that I dreamt, and that is true - I dream particularly frequently after I have played the role of nine. Those dreams are disturbing - in one I walk between masks that are numberless - ahah, in both senses of the word - and from their eyeholes the tiny eyes from the jars stare at me accusingly. In other dreams I mix the ingredients just as I do in my role, but the sequence is endless and troublesome. Every time I think that I am finished, the voice from the speaker chides me with something that I have forgotten, and each time I turn away from the ingredients I am working on they rebel - the coloured smokes pouring from their jars and rising around me, choking, the powders scattering across the floor, the globs of flesh writhing in my hands.

These are the dreams I sometimes wake from in the night - although more recently I have dreamt of the tunnels, of a sudden coldness. Those wake me up clutching at my face, covered in a cold sweat. I feel the mask in its place, the edge of it cutting uncomfortably into my jaw where I have slept on it. I am, for a moment, reassured - but then the voice speaks to me, reminds me, and I know that what it says is true, even after I try to apply my new scepticism. Those nights are long, but even lying there in the dark, in the absolute dark of my dressing room, in the absolute silence of the complex, I hear nothing of those unknown movers, the forces that collect my clothes and replace them, that polish the floors, that replace the ingredients in nine's grotto. Once I decided to check whether they had already visited, and I climbed carefully out of bed and felt my way towards my chair. My clothes were where I had left them, the mask lying on top (this was a long time ago, you see, before I began to sleep in my mask). I returned to bed and tried to stay awake,

but without success. When the lights rose, I started awake to find my clothes - or the new clothes that had been assigned to me, at any rate - neatly folded, pressed, cleaned, and stacked on my dressing-room chair, the mask on top, ready for me to place into the dispenser cradle, to see it whisked off and feel - more even than when I took it off for bed - that loss, that sense of being in a between place, neither one person nor another.

One of the workbenches is placed against the back wall of the cave (by back, I mean that it is furthest away from the two entrances - or rather, the one entrance and the one exit, for four always comes by one way and leaves by the other). A horn speaker is embedded in that wall, and that is the source of my mistress's voice. I waited patiently for my cue, and soon enough I heard eight calling to me.

"Slave, slave! Confound you, you accursed fiend, answer me!"

I rushed to the speaker, and bowed obsequiously to it.

"Here I am, mistress, your humble servant, the most humble of all servants, the most humble, I might say, of all possible servants."

"Enough prattle, you foul creature. I have need of your services."

"Naturally. I exist only to serve, of course."

"Be quiet and listen to me, and cease your interruptions. There is a matter of importance, a matter which falls within my realm to alter, and in which I wish you to do your duty. I require a potion, a particular kind of potion." She paused.

"What nature of potion?"

"Don't interrupt me, you insolent demon! I am coming to that. A certain gentleman requires that a certain lady's heart should be his, and his alone."

"Do you not, then, love him, mistress?"

"Not me, you imbecile," she spluttered. "Another lady. You are quite insufferable, I should send you back to where you came from."

"Oh, you don't want the potion now?"

"Quiet, dog. Listen carefully - a philtre to steal a heart, that is what I desire you to make. Make that, and nothing else. I will send a courier to collect it from you, have it ready by the time she arrives."

"Hmm, difficult."

"What? Can you not do it? I have told the gentleman that I can provide it for him."

"Oh, assuredly, mistress, I can make it. But it will be difficult."

"Then bother me not with your doubts, they are irrelevant. Just make the charm, and deliver it up to my messenger when she arrives. Can you understand that?"

"It is as clear as you have made it," I agreed. "I will do as you say."

"Good. Then get to it."

I gestured obscenely to the speaker, then turned to survey the room. I would have enough time to make the potion before four got here - that had always been the case in the past, and no doubt four would whistle on her way, giving me advance warning of her arrival. I just had to begin the process, and see it through until I felt satisfied that I had played my scene for long enough. I studied the rack of ingredients and picked out my favourites, then arrayed them across the four workbench tables.

The process is simply one of mixing, of heating, of stirring, and of cooling, but I never fail to find it fascinating. It seems magical that a coloured liquid should change into something else simply by being passed through a heated coil, that my smokes should fall out of the air as liquids when cooled, that solid objects should dissolve and vanish. Perhaps I see in these transformations some analogue to the essential nature of our existence, a comforting one perhaps. It is as if we are one day smoke, then in the darkness of night we are cooled and emerge a fluid that wears a fluid's mask. The next day we are powders, and although this should seem odd it does not, because that is the nature of matter, to change from one thing to another, and another, and another.

So I worked, taking globs of flesh to a glass beaker, heating them, pouring in yellow powder, condensing smoke, mixing, stirring, examining the results as they coalesced into a crimson fluid within the final piece of glassware. I followed my usual method, but the ingredients as always were slightly different, and the colour was one I had not seen before in the final result - so close to the red that numbered us. It seemed mystical, as though it was a sign. This is what gives us life, I thought to myself. Those that control us might take this and daub my face, making me a new person.

I froze suddenly, hearing for a moment a shuffling, looming, monstrous noise coming from one of the tunnels - but as I stopped moving the noise twisted in my brain, resolving itself into the sound, far off, of whistling. Four had arrived, then, and on time as expected. I turned the tap and allowed the blood-red liquid to fall out of the glassware and into the ornate bottle that held it. I corked it, and held it up to my eye for examination. Could I tell what had gone into it, I wondered? Was it the flesh that imbued it with its colour, or the slight opacity? Or was that the

smoke, or the yellow powder? It was impossible to judge, and I lowered it to the table as the whistling grew louder.

Four emerged from the darkness, walking carefully but quickly, her slim hips sliding from side to side with each footstep. A sudden rush of pounding blood raced into my ears, and I rested my left hand against the worktop to regain my balance.

"I am here to collect the package," she said. I positioned myself so that she could not see the potion behind me, and nodded carefully.

"I must wrap it," I told her.

"Indeed," she agreed.

Turning so that the bottle was always hidden from her, I gathered white paper and wrapped it - layer after layer, until the shape of the contents was hidden completely. She must not know it yet, but she would find out very soon, when she was stopped by one in the tunnels.

Chapter 6

There are times when the voice is stronger, and times when it is weaker. When I sleep I rarely hear him, although I wonder whether he appears in different guises in the dead of night. Is he behind one of those infinite ranks of masks? Is he the voice that emerges from eight's speaker, or the hand that clutches at my ankle and sends me tumbling.

The light came on, and with it I emerged from a more pedestrian dream, a dream of the banquet hall full of people. I lay in bed with my eyes closed and felt the increasing heat on my eyelids until finally the light had finished growing in intensity. I waited a few more moments until I felt that my eyes would be able to take the brightness, then opened them. I was in my dressing room - of course - and to my left was the chair on which sat my white clothing, neatly folded but minus my mask (which I was wearing).

On the table in the middle of the room sat a glass of milk, a plate, a knife, and a fork. On the plate today: a fried egg, a white muffin (in halves, lightly toasted), and two small pots (one honey, one butter - very pale butter, styled to look more like cream, but definitely butter). There are three breakfasts that we are served - like the masks, completely at random. I once tried to keep track of their patterns and relate them to the roles that I was subsequently assigned. There is no correlation, or at least none simple enough for me to decide on.

I got dressed, then moved the chair from its position on the opposite side of the table from the mirror. Wherever I left it in my room, it would always end up there in the morning. I could not, however, eat with my mask on, and it would not do to be facing that way with my underneath face visible.

Unpeeling the velcro from around my head, I gently removed nine's face and set it down. The morning feeling of cold on my face (sweaty and warm from the inside of the mask) felt at once disconcerting and refreshing, and I had come to rely on it as a wake-up tonic. Nine stared up at me, mute now that I was unable to talk for him. I nodded to him, and began to eat.

If there is an audience, I sometimes wonder, do they ever see inside the dressing rooms? There seems no reason that they should not be able to, not if they are able to see into the complex itself, but would it spoil whatever effect they would look for in our roles? To see nine eating just the same food as eight (for I assume that must be the case), to see the similarities in two and seven rather than their differences. Such questions, I am sure, are unanswerable - for the longer I think about them, the more unsure I become of any position I take. Regardless of this, I cannot stop considering them.

I ate my breakfast, using one half of the muffin to mop up the runny yolk from the fried egg, and spreading honey on the other. Bees, the voice said to me. Somewhere, there must be bees, and hens, and cows - and a field to graze them in, and to harvest the wheat for the muffins. Oats, for the oatmeal breakfast, and a greenhouse for the grapefruit and melons and oranges that made up the fruit breakfast . This last is rarer than the other two - I get the fruit breakfast perhaps once every ten days. Does this mean something? Maybe the greenhouse is smaller, yielding less food than the other sources yield. That sounds plausible, but is there any way I could test it? This place, this other place from where the breakfasts come, must be coterminous with the complex, or the tunnels (in fact, both, of course), but how do I travel there? What path must I take through the tunnels? Dare I, with the slippery tunnel floors and the possibility of the beast, travel that route?

I do not, and it would be foolish of me to suggest otherwise.

When I had finished my meal I put my mask back on and became nine again - just for the short time until the first buzzer went. At that cue I took off my mask and placed it in the dispenser. With a pneumatic whoosh the dispenser flipped up, flinging the mask back into its depths and then returning to the open (and empty) position. After a short time I began to hear those ghostly echoes of the buzzer which so plague me at these times, and the mask of five rotated into the dispenser. So, five. I put the mask on and fastened it carefully, testing it to ensure that it was tight. After briefly examining my new face in the mirror, I left the room. The silent lady (two) walked past me, and as we came to the T junction we fell in behind the non-descript man who had been the courier a few days ago. We walked behind him as far as the tunnel entrance (where the man revealed himself as nine by disappearing into that maze to find his grotto), and then I followed two as she made her way to the banquet room. As we walked, I focussed on the repetitive clack-clack-clack of her shoes (women's shoes are a half heel, unlike the simple flat leather shoes

that the five of us men wear). I wondered if it were possible to recognise her from that sound, that rhythm. Surely her walk must distinguish her from the overweight lady, or the smaller woman? From the actress and the other, the average, woman, I would guess not - all three of them were roughly the same build - and knowing no better, I assume they walk with much the same meter.

Closing my eyes, I tried to concentrate on just the sound, fixing it into my memory. Clack, so, and clack, just so. With no distinct light in the corridor, it is impossible to see that you are moving once your eyes are closed - in the tunnels this is just about possible because of the torches. I imagined the noise of her footsteps blending into my own heartbeat.

With a sudden shock my shoulder crashed into the wall, and I stumbled against it, catching myself with my left hand just before my face would have hit. The surprise and sudden rush of terror sent a wave of frost through my muscles and into my gut. I froze there for a moment, and when I looked up I saw that two had turned back to stare at me, mute as always. I quickly recovered myself, brushed the creases off my jacket, and stood back up in the middle of the corridor. She nodded once, subtly, an almost imperceptible tip of the head, and then turned back to her path. I stared at her back and forced myself to breathe, deeply and slowly. I checked my mask. In place. A euphoric relaxation turned me to jelly, and I hurried after her.

When I got to the banquet hall, the others were already there. I glanced at two, who met my glance for a second or two, enough to make me feel that she were telling me to pull myself together. She looked away - at three, of course.

Six gave his welcome speech, everyone clapped, and I watched him give one a little motivational speech - she responded with a mocking salute which sent him almost into a rage. I found myself a comfortable area and picked up an imaginary glass from the table while he moved on to talk to seven - the actress this time around. When he had finished with her, he stomped directly towards me, paying no heed to the rest of his guests, who would have had to dive to one side or the other to avoid being run over by this juggernaut.

"Well there," growled six. "I see you've turned up again, like a bad penny. I should throw you out on your ear, but this is a celebration. My hands are tied."

"Of course they are," I replied. "That's how you like it, no?"

"Why, you guttertrash voyeur! I should.." His hands clenched into fists.

"Yes, you probably should. What a pity that everyone is... watching."

He stepped back slightly, his fists still clenched.

"Listen to me. Keep your nose in your own business."

"Of course," I said, feigning offence. "I would hardly wish to tread on your territory. Keeping your nose in other people's business, that's your job, isn't it? Yours, and that lackey of yours." I gestured towards one, who was sitting in a chair swigging champagne (you will understand what I mean by that) and picking her teeth with abandon. Six glared at her for a minute, and then in one swift movement his fist rose up to my face - I flinched, but it stopped a mere inch from my nose. His knuckles were white with rage.

"You watch your tongue." He hissed, and then laughed - a loud, aggressive bark. "Ha! Yes, by jove, watch your tongue. That way your eyes won't be able to feed it with anything that will get you in trouble."

He withdrew his fist, and with a last angry look he swept away to his next duty. I stepped back and sat down on the nearest chair, forcing myself to calm down again. Everything was difficult today, everything.

Six talked to three, then led him (well, ordered him in fact) over to talk to two. I watched them intently, three gently leading the conversation in such a way that two could answer him by gesture alone, filling in her half of the conversation and interpreting her signs as best he could to tell the story. I saw her shake her hands to deny six's flattery, hold her finger to her chin in skepticism about the role of learning in worldly affairs, open her arms to accept three's rebuttal. She touched his elbow gently and led him to the sofa, rolling a wrist to indicate that he should continue to talk. Her movements were a poem written in the language of angles, of fluttering fingers and slow movements of the shoulders.

"Look at them," seven said to me. "She comes here with her tin medals and steals him away from me. What right has she to lord it over the rest of us?"

"She is a hero, it is said."

"A hero. Pah!" She waved an extravagant dismissal. "War takes a thousand men, kills nine-hundred and ninety-nine, and the last one standing is proclaimed a hero. A noble spirit doesn't make a hero, the luck of drawing the long straw makes a hero." She looked from left to right, an exaggerated comic show of checking that we were not being listened to that no-one could have missed were it not their business to miss it.

"It looks like drawing the long straw works in love, as well," I observed.

"Someone cuts the straw," she intoned. "Have you ever thought of that? That is the job of reapers, to make sure that everyone has a straw of the same length."

"You would level the playing field?"

"Level it I would. I would level it by the force of the blade."

"Still," I said carefully. "Perhaps you have nothing to fear. How do you know that you do not already hold the straw you talk of?"

She huffed, and crossed her arms angrily. Then, a second later, she gasped with inspiration and pointed at me.

"You!" She cried.

"I?"

"I have heard tales of your prowess in observation. I hesitate to call you a spy, and yet.."

"Continue to hesitate, I pray you," I said coldly.

"I take your point," she agreed. "And yet, were I to sweeten that title, to say that you are a scientist, a wise man, one who sees all, surely you would accept that I meant it not as a pejorative, but as a compliment."

"What would you have me do?"

"You see! You have seen, you have observed, you have pierced to the heart of the matter immediately. I would have confirmation. I cannot observe these two, for I fear that I am under observation myself, and that my presence on their path would not go unnoted. But you, you have the way of it. If you could observe them, and reassure me that I have nothing to fear, that my wooing will win the day... "

"It may surprise you to know that I also, am not clear of suspicion."

"And yet that has not stopped you from exercising your skills in the past."

"..indeed not, but this time.. I would be risking a lot."

"I could make it worth your while," she suggested. "You know that, I am sure."

"So..." I paused. "It is a deal, then. I will report to you what I see."

"Excellent." She rubbed her hands together gleefully. "You will find me a most useful friend."

"Indeed, and I hope that our purses shall get along as well."

She laughed, and got to her feet. Behind her mask her left eye winked, slowly and ostentatiously, and then she turned away, her skirt whirling up gently around her calves.

Two and three began to process around the room, so I got to my feet and started to weave my way through the crowd in their wake. Six had walked over to one, and dragged her up by her arm angrily while she

sagged truculently in his grip. He pulled her through the guests so violently that I thought for a moment he would dash her against the wall, but at the last moment he drew his hand away and she almost stumbled before regaining her feet. So distracted, I almost walked past the edge of the stage and towards three's chamber before I realised that they had stopped. Three told two that he had to study, and she nodded slowly, bowing her head in disappointment. He then suggested that she come up to get one of his books for her own edification, and she nodded again, more enthusiastically. They went inside and closed the door, and suddenly all around me it seemed like doors were closing as seven went off to her chamber, and six pushed one into his office. I was left in the silent, empty banquet hall, all the ghosts dissipating with the last click of a latch as surely as if it had been a priest with bell, book, and candle.

I clambered carefully up onto the stage, and took my place. From the leftmost side of the stage one could see through a specially cut window into three's chamber. I could hear nothing, but I saw two clasp her hands together as if in prayer, then open them up like a book. She reached up to three's mouth, and fluttered out her fingers from where his lips would have been. Read to me. He picked the book from the shelf, mouthed his way through the one printed page, then put it back - his head was tilted slightly, giving him almost a quizzical look. Was he thinking about what he had read, I wondered?

Two leant forward quickly, and grasped the back of his head. In an instant their masks were pressed together in a kiss, and seconds later his hands crept round to rest on her shoulder blades. I watched them embrace for a few moments more, pulse pounding in my ears, and then turned way. Clambering down from the stage, I made my way to seven's chamber door and knocked.

"Enter!"

I pushed open the door, and found seven polishing a wooden sword as though sharpening it.

"What news?" She asked.

"I fear you must use that as a sickle," I told her

Chapter 7

I stood in the tunnels and watched one walk away from me, carrying the package that I had been entrusted with. That was the way of things - anything one had could be taken away by another, with no better reason than that they had signed a piece of paper and received the sacrament of authority. I sagged down against the rock surface - and recoiled, suddenly aware of the dampness seeping through my clothes. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and saw five standing there looking at me.

"I.." she began, but then thought better of it and turned to rush away. She would have work to do, reporting to seven that something in his plan had gone awry. What had she been intending to say? There was nothing that needed to be said between the two of us, nothing was ever said between five and four. Although perhaps such sudden whims could explain where all of our discourse came from - imagine a chance encounter between six and five in the banquet hall. A small exchange of words, accidental at first, but then observed by the others and expanded, elaborated on in the next cycle.

I tried to remember whether things had been different in the past. Very different, the voice told me. Very different indeed, don't you recall? I did not. Images came and went, but just things from dreams. The rows of masks, me entering a small chamber and sitting down to wait for something or someone. Such things as were indeed different but which had never been. I shook my head - I was forgetting my duties, of course. I would be called soon, and I would have to make my way back to my half of the complex. This time, of course, I could take the simple way.

I left the tunnel system and walked back up the interconnect corridor to the half of the complex where eight's labs and ten's audience room were. I would have some time before I was needed. The others would have to come from the other part of the complex to trigger the events I was required to participate in. Knowing this, I kept my legs limber by walking around the encircling corridor. Despite my usual desire to keep moving while I am four, I found that day that I paused slightly each time

I passed my dressing room door - or rather not my dressing room door, since I was four, and not the cold, scared, person who lived in there. The temptation grew with each time around the corridor, but every time I remembered that I was a wronged person, one who would be called soon to explain his case. I could not simply take time off and test a theory.

I counted my laps. The first ten laps produced nothing. Then, on the eleventh, I saw seven and six travelling up the long corridor from the other complex. By the time I had done the twelfth lap, they were at the midpoint, and one lap later I passed them as they emerged - at great speed - from the mouth of the interconnecting corridor. The two of them disappeared immediately into ten's rooms, and for the next few laps I could hear shouting and demands, pleading from one side or the other, the calm, measured tones of ten attempting to tease the facts from each of them. I knew that I would be required soon, and after one more lap I stopped walking and waited outside the door. More talk - then suddenly everything was silent. I let the silence brew for a few more seconds, then pushed open the door and walked in, nodding to a doorman or warden who might or might not have been there.

The chambers in which ten holds her audience are grand - although the unobtrusive nature of all decoration inside the complex means that that grandness must be hinted at rather than spoken aloud. Subtle lines on the ceiling give the impression of a far larger hall than reality has provided, and ten's chair is raised on a slight platform which makes her appear taller and more majestic than those supplicants who sit before her. Her desk is high, like a wide lectern, and carved in the manner of six's desk to give the impression of expense that the pine wood it is constructed from cannot. There are rows of hard chairs at the back of the chamber (where eight will wait while I give my testimony), and two chairs at the front (occupied at that time, as always, by six and seven).

"Step forward, messenger," Ten called to me, her voice identifying her as the actress. "Your testimony is required on this matter, and I believe you have some complaint to make."

"Indeed I do, madam. But I see not the one against who I must make my complaint. Here, I see, is the client of my client, who was to have had a parcel. But who is this other gentleman?"

Six stood up, and puffed himself up grandly. It was the nondescript guy from my side of the complex.

"I am here as a representative of law and order. It is my responsibility to protect this town and the citizens within. I am the source of authority."

I nodded.

"I see, so it was your woman who stopped me?"

He turned to ten.

"My officer, in the course of her duties, had cause to believe this man a dangerous anarchist. You must be aware, revered one, of the dangers we face both from within and outwith. My officer is charged with carrying my authority to every corner of the town and applying it without prejudice to everyone found within those boundaries, be he the humblest child in town, or the most important grandee. She intercepted this man moving in a suspicious manner through the outskirts - coming from who knows where? Since she was not familiar with the stranger, she took the most prudent step of assuming him to be a potential vessel of our enemy."

"It is clear, your madamship," I interjected, "that this man is the fount and wellspring of idiocy which was bottled in his officer and served to me earlier today."

"Listen to his acid-tongue, revered one!" He jabbed his finger at me. "Listen to the subversive talk which issues from this barbarian mouth! Surely you cannot find it hard to believe, with such lack of manners and aggressive tendencies, that this one might be numbered among that cursed race with whom we now find ourselves at war? Why, his very insolent demeanor speaks of the icy villages and towns of that place, where relaxed and civilised discourse is a thing unknown, and the cold air fosters a taste for sharp, shrewish statements."

"What is this nonsense about cold air?" I demanded.

"Indeed," said ten. "Explain yourself."

"It is well known," six began, "that the tendency to short words one finds in the northern peoples, our sworn foes, finds its exacerbation or cause in the frigidity of the atmosphere. Our speech - relaxed, pleasant, and well-mannered, is fostered by the relative clemency of our natural environment. In warm air, the tongue can do its work slowly, unchallenged by frost which might attack the delicate sense surfaces of that dextrous organ. However, those races in whom the blood runs tepid due to the chill in their air are rendered incapable of mannered speech by the necessity to protect themselves from such unpleasant effects."

"This is clearly balderdash, your madamship. Are we to joust words with this simpleton?"

"That will not be necessary," ten informed me. "Your place here is not as a disputant, but as a witness to the events which are disputed."

"Is such a thing possible?" Six complained. "As I have just demonstrated, this man's testimony can hardly be an unbiased and reliable

history of events. He is vexatious towards my cause, and - I might add - towards the cause of order, and that of decency, and that of all which our town holds dear."

"That which you hold dear, you mean."

"See how he attacks me, the very centre, the one who is most responsible for fending off the chaos which would be ancilla to his master's invasions?"

"My masters? My only master in this matter sits at the rear of the room, presumably waiting his turn to be insulted by this uniformed baboon. Your ladyness, you have kindly informed me that I am not called present as a disputant, but as one that the assembled persons wish to quiz regarding the events which are of import to them. But here I am, insulted and accused of treachery before I have even begun my history."

"Not by us," ten assured me.

"Even so, I find it incredible that in a civilised society such accusations should have their place. This man is overboldened by his position, and seeing everywhere his own enemies he hastens to label them the enemies of all. Well, this is not the case. If I am to be counted an enemy, I will gladly admit to that."

"Ha! Revered one, hear him condemned by his own tongue! I stated as such, and now he admits it! Please continue, you storm crow, you messenger of treachery, you harbinger of doom!"

"Indeed I shall continue! I call myself an enemy, but you in your haste to condemn recognise not that I proclaim my opposition not to this town, or this state, or the people of it, but only an enemy of idiocy, of bureaucratic buffoonery, of pomposity. That is to say, an enemy not of all, but of you!"

Six spluttered.

"I have never... " he began.

"Yes yes," ten interrupted. "I'm quite sure of that. But all of this is getting us nowhere. Master courier, have you said your piece against this man?"

"Not by a long shot, your madamship. But if I understand you aright, your question was not intended thus."

"Indeed not."

"Then I have said all that I care to say for the moment, and would gladly place myself in the position for which I was summoned, namely that of a provisioner of answers, a source of facts, and a wellspring of any required information."

"I am glad to hear it."

"I have something more to say," six appealed.

"Indeed, and you shall have time to say it. But now is not the time."

Six crossed his arms in a sulk.

"Master courier," ten began. "I would like you to tell me what became of you in the tunnels, and how you came to meet up with the officer of which you speak?"

"I would be glad to. Earlier today, on an errand of some importance, I had the misfortune to be stopped in the tunnels by a mule in human form, who confiscated the parcel with which I was charged. I take my duty seriously, your ladyship, and in such affairs it is considered that a respectable courier should not be stopped in the carriage of his business. This gentleman's assistant - by which I intend the officer, who clearly helps out when the burden of foolishness grows too much for his master - had the temerity not only to halt me as one would a dog, but then demand the package from me. This package, which I had sworn would go to its intended destination and no other. Where is it now, your madamship? I implore you to return it, so that I may complete my quest."

"I have it safely," she told me, "and it will not be returned to you yet - not until I am satisfied in myself about the rightness and wrongness of things."

"Philosophers have wrangled with such matters for many a century," seven observed. "Are we to wait that long, because the urgency of my affairs suggests that the whole situation may be moot by that point?"

"Thank you, sieur," Ten said acidly. "Master courier, what was the nature of this package?"

"A glass container of liquid, madam, although when I took it from the source I knew it not, discovering that fact only when the lady officer opened it up, against all decent thoughts of privacy for the parcel's true recipient."

"That liquid could have been flammable, reverend one! My officer was merely following her orders, the orders that I gave her."

"It could have been flammable, indeed. But is that likely? What next, will your woman be travelling around banquets and dinners, confiscating the gentlemen's brandy? Why stop there - surely they must have something to light their cigars with, too! If, as it seems, the prevention of fires is the gravest threat our civilisation faces, we should give up cooked food."

"I should see you forced to give up food altogether," six said pointedly.

"As long as I am kept in your company I should prefer to give up my ears rather than my tongue," I retorted.

"Enough, gentlemen, enough. And I use the term gentlemen with some degree of inexactitude. Please tell me where you received this parcel, master courier."

"Of course, madam. I travelled to a remote cave to receive the parcel from one who had been expecting me, a slave of some sort."

"Had you met this slave before?"

"I had not - indeed, from her appearance I will wager that I was the first person ever to have met her. She did not seem the sort of person to keep much in the way of civilised company."

"And you received the parcel from her? Did you see her put anything into the parcel?"

"I did not, your ladyness. She wrapped it up with her back turned to me - and I did not attempt to see, for that would infringe my client's privacy, and the recipient's privacy. I did not see until the officer so rudely tore open the package, in defiance of centuries-old honor and practise among my kind."

"I see. So you were told to pick up this parcel, and from whom, and to whom to deliver it, but you were not informed of the contents of the package?"

"I was not, your madamship. That is my client's business."

"And who is your client, pray tell?"

"You must know it already," I said, "for he sits at the back of your audience chamber, behind me." I turned round to point to eight. "That is he."

Chapter 8

When I lay in bed, in the darkness, there is often no way for me to tell whether I am awake or asleep. After I remove my clothes I climb into my bed and pull the sheets up over myself. Then I shuffle until I am comfortable, and rearrange my pillow so that it can accommodate the mask that I continue to wear while asleep. By some signal I must show the complex, or the movers, or the audience (if they can see into my dressing room through some unseen window, as five observes three), that I am ready for sleep. I do not know what this signal is, but it seems to match my mind unerringly, for there is rarely more than a few seconds between my feeling finally comfortable enough to sleep and the lights in the room turning off and plunging me into an all-enveloping darkness.

This darkness, then, must mirror some internal state of my own, for once it has fallen I am unable to discern that edge which separates wakefulness without light from sleep itself - at least, until I dream. And those dreams themselves are so convincing that I never realise that they are dreams until I awake, no matter how illogical they might be. I stand between those limitless rows of masks, staring at one or the other and seeing my gaze thrown back at me by the tiny, glaring eyes behind them. There is no sense that I have stood - or imagined I stood - there before, in another dream, on another night. I experience it as if for the first time, and although afterwards I can see no sense or reason to the phantasm, at the time it makes sense, and I am afraid of something.

Perhaps I have never awoken during the night, as I believe, but have merely fallen into another dream, one in which I stagger blind around a room like my own, sensing the untidy piles of clothes that lie on the chair where I left them. Could that be true, I wonder? In reality do I still rest prone in my cot, sheets pulled up to my chest, my face sweating behind that mask that I have tied so tight? Then those who are responsible for cleaning the floor, for preparing my breakfast, they could no doubt be plying their trade while I lay insensible. The thought of them walking around my dressing room is disturbing, a violation of my privacy, a blunt knife pressing into my side. In the past, if this is the case, they must

have seen me lying in bed without my mask on. I shudder to think of that, and wonder if there is some way that I can prevent them from coming into my room. The voice tells me that a chair wedged under the door handle would prevent entry. These doors open inwards, certainly - I doubt that these people, be they servants or masters, can defy simple mechanics.

That night I put off such thoughts, although they came back to me during the morning. I took off my clothes, piled them into a lump on the chair, made myself comfortable in bed and fell into darkness just as I was thinking that I would. I dreamed of simple matters, uncomplicated by fear or other failings - I dreamt of walking the corridors, of passing people in their masks and greeting them as friends, even those whose roles were opposed (or would in reality have been opposed) to mine. That was a dream I had had before. Not often before, it is true, but certainly more than once.

I awoke with the light, and remembered the dream. Clambering down from my bed, I pulled on my clothes, rearranged the chair, then sat down to my breakfast: half a grapefruit and a plate of slices of melon, together with a glass of orange juice. A small bowl of honey allowed me to mitigate the acidity of the grapefruit and the bland crunchiness of the melon.

When I had finished, the buzzer rang. I put my mask (four) into the dispenser, and waited. The clammy, cold feeling on my face was more unpleasant than normal, and I wondered if there was something wrong with me. You could check yourself in the mirror, the voice told me. I ignored it, of course - some advice is too insane even to be considered.

The buzzer rang (this time I did not hear any other buzzers, and was taken by surprise), and I leapt forward just in time to catch the mask of eight as it toppled out of the dispenser. I was relieved - I did not feel like hurrying that morning, and since eight would not be required at the banquet I would have some opportunity for leisure until I was required. Not leisure in the sense of the evenings, but at least the chance to marshall my thoughts, and to sit in eight's (my) laboratory and not feel the need to keep my eyes on the others as they weaved the start of our story.

Having donned my mask, I strolled to the center of my half of the complex and entered the laboratory that eight inhabits. In stark contrast to nine's grotto, the laboratory is clean and orderly - in fact exhibiting a periodicity of uncanny nature. Four workbenches are arranged across the room, and on each workbench there are the same sets of glassware - all empty, all set up in the same manner. At the near end of each bench is a workstool, and on the end of the bench nearest to the workstool an

open notebook - white pages and cream covers - held open by a wood-coloured pencil.

On the far side of the benches, against the walls, there were four bookshelves - each shelf carrying a single book. I crossed the room, and picked up the first book. Unlike the book (or rather, the series of books) in three's chamber, eight's books are always completely empty. I flicked through the pages and confirmed that that was the case. Then I did the same with the second, third, and fourth books. There was nothing in any of them, of course.

There are no chairs except for the stools in eight's laboratory, so I took one of them (from the fourth workbench), and stood it against the wall in the nearest corner so that I could lean back without toppling off. I would have some time to wait until seven came to see me, and there was nothing I could really do. I had to wait here, so I couldn't walk around like I would if I was four. Then again, there were no crowds that I could fake conversation with, no colourful ingredients that I could examine. I rested my head against the wall and thought to myself.

What would happen, I wondered, if I were to follow the voice's suggestions? Prop closed the door in my dressing room, then wake up the next morning and see what had happened. If the chair was moved, that would prove either that my precautions were insufficient, or that the movers were not entering through the door. I could not really believe that, but it seemed pointless to rule out theories when I had so few of them. If they did not manage to make their way into my dressing room, then it would suggest that they came in through the door, which in turn suggested that they were in the complex - hiding somewhere, perhaps. Or perhaps they came in through the tunnel system, knowing some route that was too obscure for me to have found.

What if they didn't come? If I woke up to find the chair still propped in the door where I had left it, and my clothes (let's say, for I could no longer leave them on the chair) still on the table. There would be no breakfast for me, no clean clothes. I would take the chair down, move it so that it was facing away from the mirror, and sit down. Would the buzzer still go? Then I would place my mask back into the dispenser, and sit, hungry, while the masks were collected and the new masks were distributed. Would my mask be taken? Would a new mask return, or would I wait in vain? I imagined myself sitting in the chair in front of the dispenser, hearing the buzzers go in the dressing rooms nearby and each time feeling a rush of relief, that I had been forgiven for my sins. Would my hope rebound each time, realising that I had been mistaken, but that

there was still time for me? What would I do then? Could I leave my room? No, it would be like being back in that tunnel.

I shivered, and put all such thoughts out of my head. It would not be long now, not long before seven would come looking for me, his (or her) thoughts all in a rage of jealousy over two and three. I would have to put the stool back in its place, so that everything was arrayed in order when seven arrived. It was customary for me to be examining one of my experiments when seven arrived, so that my credentials would be sufficiently established. Was that part of the - the what, the script? There was no script, of course, just custom and tradition. I wondered how it had been, long ago, when first the eight of the day leant down and examined his glassware as seven rushed in. Was that the first time? Could there even be said to be something that we could call a first time, or had this thing been going on forever? I could not tell, and the voice remains silent on such matters. I have told you already, he says. I have told you already.

Knock knock, said my laboratory door.

"Hello?"

"I need to speak with you."

"Eh, uh, what?"

"I need to speak with you. It is a matter of some urgency. May I come in?"

"Of course you may. The question is, can you?"

Seven pushed open the door, and peered round. He found me peering into a beaker full of air and nodding my head as if it meant something.

"It is I," he said.

"Good lord, so it is. What brings you here? Surely you are no student of science. I distinctly remember otherwise. Have you undergone a conversion, a-hah, a-hah, no, of course not, for no such thing is possible. What could you have been converted from, and what into? Heheh, ah-hh..." I sighed, and turned back to my beaker.

"I have need of your assistance," he said.

"Oh, what?" I looked up. "Oh yes, you."

"I have need," he repeated slowly, "of your assistance."

"Oh quite, I'm sure you do. What kind of assistance, though - that is the question. What problem ails you that it is to science you turn, rather than money or politics?"

"A maiden."

"Oh, indeed. A maiden. Well, science tells us much about such things, although I doubt I will ever see one in my lifetime, a-hah! You should have paid much more attention to your books, my boy, then you would

know everything that there is to know about women. Did you know, for instance, that the skeleton of a woman and a man are quite distinguishable, even lacking those features of which much notice is made, each by each other?"

"I did not," seven said coldly. "But that is not... "

"Of course, I should imagine that those amongst us who believe in some form of demiurge would claim it far easier than it in fact is. They would hold women made of some baser clay, perhaps. Fools!" I suddenly thundered. "The pelvis has it, as any small amount of thought would no doubt have predicted, but which science has proved. Science!"

"This is all very interesting, I am sure... "

"Indeed, interesting indeed! But that is not all! Can you imagine telling the age of a corpse much as you would age a felled tree, by counting the rings? My work has shown that the bones of a man grown in such a way that this is far from some moon-induced fantasy! Archaeologists may now bring their famous samples to me to determine how old their charges were upon death. No doubt I shall become famous for it."

"But my matter concerns not the dead," seven broke in. "It is, in fact, a matter famously reserved for those whose blood pumps hot through their veins, whose hearts are vital rather than decayed, who use their nights in the pursuit of pleasure rather than mouldering in the grave."

"Oh," I said archly. "It is of reproductive matters you speak?"

"This is the nature of science, always reductive. It is of love that I speak, of love usurped by the unworthy. The maiden I spoke of, I wish to remove a rival for her affections - a rival who beguiles her unfairly and is, I fear, of little honour."

"Oh, do you come to me as an assassin's apothecary? Fie on your murderous thoughts, you blackguard. I should hardly expect anything else from you. Although, it is true, I can provide many poisons. Here is one," I walked to the nearest bookshelf and plucked the one book it carried. "Now, where is it - here, here, here. Ah, here!" I pointed to the book, then held it up to him. "Quite clever indeed, the product of a common flower. In beauty lies danger, my boy, you would do well to remember that with your leman. You see, the effect is to temporarily halt the.."

"I do not wish to murder him," seven interrupted.

"Not murder?"

"No."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it." I closed the book and looked at it forlornly. "Although I had already calculated how to improve the... and it would have been nice to try... Hmm. Quite! Quite, my boy! Leave murder to the

soldiers, who have it as a trade. Science is progress, and for the greater good. I will leave you with that thought."

"I wish her affections to be turned towards their rightful temple," he said. "Namely, me. What have your books to say about that?"

"Oh, well, um, yes. Of course." I examined the book on the third shelf, flipping through its empty pages fruitlessly. Then, tossing that untidily to the floor, I tried the book on the second shelf. Again, there was nothing of use. Discarding that I went on to the first book. "Perhaps... No. Um , what if I.. No, not that. I could always - but that only works on bees.."

"Can you do it?"

"I - that is to say, it is a complicated matter. There is much we do not understand about.."

"It is as I feared," he sighed. "Science is useless, as usual. I scarcely know why I came here."

"SCIENCE USELESS?" I screamed. "TAKE THAT BACK!"

"You cannot help me, so what good is all this learning?"

"Can't help you? Of course I can help you! I'm famous for it, the most learned man in all the town. People come from foreign cities to - why, of course science can help you! Return to your mansion, you doubting lack-a-wit, and I shall send what you require posthaste. Your lady shall be swooning for you before the day is out, let me assure you."

He nodded graciously.

"I await your solution with great interest," he said.

Chapter 9

That morning I awoke with the light to find breakfast and new clothes. I stared at the chair, sitting across from the mirror, and realised that the thought would stay with me until I acted upon it. Could I control my emotions, seize the moment, force that chair into place before going to sleep?

I went through my morning routine (eggs and muffin breakfast that day), and waited for the buzzer to go, safe in the knowledge that I could put off my anxiety for another day. Maybe a day after that, too. The buzzer went, and I found myself as seven. Seven, two, and three are inextricably linked. Should seven be a man, as today, then two would be also - and three would be a woman. If seven was a woman, then so would two be, and three a man. All of the other roles were independent, and as likely to fall to one sex as another. This should be obvious, although the voice tells me that it does not necessarily follow, and that I should not rely on it as an absolute or be surprised if it is someday otherwise. I knew, then, that I should be opposing the desires of the angry man, or the timid man, or one of the other two - who, like me, had no discernable characteristics that I might easily label.

Why should I focus on these characteristics, I wonder? I have identified (at least for the purpose of this narrative) six of the others: The angry man, the timid man, the actress, the silent woman, the overweight woman, and the boyish woman. Four I have identified by their personalities, two by their bodies. The other three - average man one, average man two, and the average woman, I can identify only by a lack of any simple characteristic I can judge them by. Do I pay more attention to the others, I wonder? Do the identities I have imbued them with make them more notable to me? Do I really notice them at all? There are clearly differences, but we have a duty, a duty to play our roles. That is the important thing.

I left my dressing room, and turned off to the left to make my way through the corridors to the other half of the complex. Before me the two women from my half of the complex walked, almost together, and I

wondered whether it was one of them that I would be obsessed with today. The silent woman on the right (I could tell by her long hair in side-by-side comparison), or the actress on the left. Either way, I would be seven.

When I got to the banquet hall I discovered that it was neither of the women from my side of the complex who were to be the object of my desire today, but the overweight woman. The silent woman was six, and the actress one. I took my place on one of the sofas near to my chamber, and waited. I could not identify my rival, one of the average men. Presumably the one from this side of the complex, since I had not followed him down the corridor, and there had been no-one behind me.

Six clapped twice, then twice again until everyone, real and imagined, was looking her way. Then she stretched her arms out in welcome, and up in a jubilant gesture. With a sweeping motion she scooped up a drink from a nearby table, indicated it with her other hand, and then took a swig. Placing it down gently, she took up an equally non-existent plate and took a delicate bite of a cucumber sandwich. She indicated the plate with her hand, and then swept her arms out to encompass all of us. Finally, she clapped again twice, and then twice again. The banquet was started.

That duty done, she made her way over to one, tapped her wrist twice in indication of a watch, and then took one by her shoulders and stood her up stiffly and brushed at imaginary epaulettes. After completing her pep-talk she turned back to me, while one reached up to flick her chin in mockery at her departing superior.

Six wove towards me, raised one hand in greeting. I bowed.

"A quite marvellous banquet," I said, looking around. She pointed to my mask, and then drew a small line down her own cheek. Her head tipped to one side quizzically. "Oh, my scar? Indeed, a negligible wound only. I received it in a matter of honour, honour which the other man suffered for in a manner far less likely to contribute to his portraiture."

She nodded gravely, and then passed me a glass. I raised it in toast of her, and bowed as she turned away - to silently harangue five in some manner, of course. Putting the glass back down on the table, I made my way through the crowd to where two stood, silently watching three.

"You are returned newly from the border dispute, I take it?"

"Today," he replied. "You have not been assigned yet?"

"Not yet, although of course I can barely wait to go to the front. My sword arm grows weary of marking the faces of insolent whelps, it longs for the true exercise of defending the land against the northerners."

"Quite admirable," he said. "Curious, though."

"Oh?"

"It's just - but, no... " He paused. "A man should put no faith in idle gossip."

"Gossip? What has gossip to say on any matter?"

"It is nothing, give it not a second thought."

"If I am being wronged in the speech of others, I should hear about this whispering campaign."

"Why waste your breath on the talk of idiots?"

"Then why bring it up in the first place? Come, I demand to know!"

He shrugged.

"Very well, if you insist. I was simply told, by an officer I know, that you had been called in the draft more than two months ago, but that certain members of the staff had determined that it would not be politic to send you to the front."

"Certain members of..?"

"Certain members of staff who might be acquainted with your father."

"This is intolerable! Are you suggesting that I might have taken advantage of my birth to avoid my country's calling? Dare you accuse me of cowardice?"

"Calm yourself, friend. I accuse you of nothing. I merely repeat the words of others. Here, let us talk of something more pleasant. Surely you do not wish to spend the evening indignant against some hidden other that you have never even met?" He looked around, and gestured towards three. "Delightful, isn't she?" He asked.

"Quite delightful, yes."

"Do you know her?"

"I know her well enough. I have known her since a child."

"Indeed? She was always a pretty lass, I've no doubt."

"It is exactly as you say."

"And is she betrothed? It seems to me that a maid so delightful to the eye must surely be the sweetheart of some lord."

"On the contrary, she is the fiancée of no-one."

"How extraordinary. Is there some impediment?"

"No impediment except her own mind, since she is a scholar of some repute."

"Surely not!"

"I assure you. It is the worst waste of a beauty, certainly one such as she who might rival a Helen."

"I agree. But are there no suitors?"

I coughed politely.

"Well, I know of one, of course."

"What? Who?"

"Myself!" I said indignantly. "I have known her since childhood, she is kindly disposed towards me."

"Kindliness is hardly the cradle of a marriage."

"On the contrary, it is the only crib on which that institution finds a stable base. I await the end of her studies with some hope. She has said that courtship would distract from her learning, but I am willing to wait until she is finished, when I will press my suit. I am confident that I will not be rebuffed. My money will assure her the life she is accustomed to, and her learning will make her quite the hostess when I entertain."

"Well, your hope is quite admirable."

"You think it in vain."

He turned to me and smiled, and behind him six crossed the room from five and took two by the elbow.

"We shall see," he said. "We shall see. Oh, look - she is coming this way!"

Six led three gently across the room. I opened my mouth as if to say something to the two of them, but six suddenly put a finger up to where her mouth would have been, and turned neatly to her left so that she slid in between me and two, leading three into place before him. Before I could object, she suddenly stepped backwards and leant slightly forward at once, bumping me away with her bottom against my hip.

I took the hint.

Stalking back to a chair on the opposite side of the room, I watched the odd combination of fluttering hand signs, and listened with half an ear as three and two bantered and began their bonding. Six walked towards me, her hands wide in a gesture of compassion, but I turned away from her. I could see that five was beginning to move towards me, chair by chair, and when I judged the time was right I put him out of his misery by getting up and walking over.

"Sickening, isn't it?" I asked. "You think you know someone, and then all of a sudden they're accusing you of cowardice and muscling in on your territory."

"Re-really?" He replied.

"Of course. You might think a man is a friend, you might account him the most honorable in all the land, but secretly he is thinking other things. Placid, docile, like a lake on a windless day, but do you know what you're seeing in that mirror surface? Yourself! Your projections,

what you want to see. Underneath it all, that's where the truth lies, horrid shadows moving in the darkness, twisting in clouds of mud at the bottom of a man's heart. Mark my words, you might think a man dependable, but he is liable to surprise you. He's liable to ignore the rules that civilised people put their faith in."

"Perhaps... Perhaps that is what makes him a hero?" Five suggested.

"Is that all it takes to be accorded a hero?" I scoffed. "To deny the rules that others live by, to step over the bounds that society has put in place? Is this the way all heroes are constructed - do they start off as queue-jumpers, or by stealing apples from the man next door? If so, I wouldn't give a fig for all the heroes in our country."

"But it is not those rules with which a hero is concerned. You speak of the rules of society, but what rule is more important to a man than those laws with which he governs himself? All men find such laws within their hearts, and if they allow themselves to be ruled by them they quickly find that they are known by other names - blindness, cowardice, idiocy. These are the rules that make us what we are, and it is only by challenging these rules that we can achieve the ends we hope for."

"I would find out whether that man is such a man, a man who ignores both his own rules and the rules of others, and harvests the grain that has been tended by other men."

"And h-how will you find out such a thing?"

"That is the question, indeed. If only I knew one who had the skill of observation, who had found his way into many a place considered secret. I would pay handsomely for such a man, his testimony could do much to assuage my worries - or, if they should not by rights be calmed, to give me alarm and warn that my interests are in danger. Would that I knew such a man."

"Well... "

"Yes?"

"I do know one such. Not far from here, in fact - not far indeed! This man has made a study of his fellow man, and has acquired such skills as you desire. And, I feel, he might not perhaps be unamenable to your employ... "

Many hours later, my back cold from lying on the complex floor, I returned to the half of the complex that held my dressing room. In my room my chair had been moved back to the side of the table that faced the mirror and my evening meal had been laid out on the table. Chicken in a pale white sauce on a white plate, soft olive-oil bread on the side, and a bowl of sweetcorn that provided the only colour in the room save

the number on seven's face. I lay that on the table while I ate - my back to the mirror again, since I followed this personal custom at dinner just as I did at breakfast. I ate slowly, popping each sweetcorn in my mouth and letting the juice roll over my tongue. All the time I stared at the door, thinking, willing myself to do what I had told myself the day before was impossible.

When my meal was finished, I put my mask back on and became seven again. I laid my knife and fork carefully on the plate, then put the empty bowl that had held the sweetcorn on top of the bread plate and moved everything to the opposite side of the table. I stood up, removed my clothes one by one, and laid them on the floor. When I was finished, I lifted the chair up - careful not to catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror - moved it to the door and wedged it in place beneath the handle. A gentle pull assured me that it was in place, and when I moved back it stayed there.

I crossed the room and clambered into bed. It was difficult to get comfortable while ensuring that I could still see the door (and the chair) through the eye-holes of my mask. Eventually I found that by pummeling the pillow into shape I could get the edge of the mask over it and therefore lie partly on my side. It was enough. I was ready for sleep. I waited. And waited. The lights flickered suddenly - with what? Annoyance? was I being warned?

Then, darkness.

Chapter 10

I woke before the light, but not by much. I had woken in the dark before (or thought I had, at least), but always in the middle of the night, exhausted and afraid. This day I woke full of energy, tense but excited, and in the dark. For a moment I did not understand why, but then with a horrible shock it came to me and I clenched my fists beneath the sheets. I had, of course, no idea whether I had woken minutes or hours before the lights would come on, but fortunately it turned out to be closer to the former than the latter. Even so, I do not think I have spent a longer subjective time waiting for anything in my life.

The lights came on with none of the flickering that had attended the turning off the night before. I had had my eyes open, and was blinded temporarily, even behind my mask. As the world came back into focus I saw that the chair had been moved back to its normal place, and that sitting atop it were freshly folded clothes. A bowl of oatmeal on the table completed the scene.

I worked through breakfast with a numb feeling in my body. Nothing had changed, clearly, and yet something within me had - just for that moment the previous night. I had never done anything like that before, and even knowing that it had had no noticeable effect, I felt as though something in the complex had changed. The buzzer rang, and it was with some reluctance that I placed my mask into the dispenser. Here was the moment of greatest potential for misfortune - would I be punished for my actions, or would the mask disappear, as usual, and be replaced by another? I was suddenly overtaken by a terror that caused me to grab for the mask of seven - but alas, too late. My fingers did not have time to grasp more than its edge before the dispenser whipped it back and away, tearing it out of my grasp and sending it back to oblivion. I tried to force the machinery, to pull the moving parts back somehow before they could lock in place, but it was all in vain. I could not get purchase on anything, and the smooth hard plastic pieces remained firmly in place.

I stumbled back against the table in my madness, knocking the bowl to the floor - it bounced without breaking, and rolled to the wall beneath

the mirror. Following it with my eyes, I could see that other person, that raw-faced one, from the corner of my vision. I looked down, stooped to pick up the bowl, and so did he. The mask must come, I thought to myself, or that is who I am to be today. I did not know what that person would do - who should he talk to? Was he an enemy of two, or a supporter? Must he work, like nine? My heart pounded in my chest and ears, and I collapsed onto my bed in a dizzy faint. My feet and hands were like cold putty, able to move only with difficulty and feeling nothing.

My buzzer sounded - an angry bark of noise that cause me to convulse in shock - and with a grind of gears and a pneumatic thwop the cradle flicked itself over to reveal the new mask, which then toppled forward under its own weight, and fell onto the floor. I stared, terrified, and the world seemed to slow almost to a crawl as the mask floated down. I could not move to catch it, and in my mind's eye I was sure that I saw the mask hit, nose first, a compression wave moving from the nose up through the material of the mask until it reached the back, shattering it into a cloud of sharp fragments and sending two pieces of velcro flopping separately to either side.

I blinked, and when my eye opened again I saw the mask, intact, bounce slightly - just like the bowl - and flip over. Ten's face glared up at me from the floor, accusing but compassionate. Regaining my feet, I walked over and scooped him up, then fixed his face in place over mine. Endorphins rushed through me, and I felt invincible and infallible. Here was the mask, the forgiveness for everything I had done. Or was it forgiveness? Perhaps my act of rebellion had not received censure at all. I had got away with it! I had rebelled against normalcy and remained unpunished, had shown that I had what it took to take my life into my own hands!

I turned to look into the mirror, and ten looked back at me. As I stared into his eyes the feeling of elation began to slowly fade, replaced by something darker and more realistic. Of course, I had done what I had planned, had taken that step. But what had it changed? Nothing. Here I was, wearing the mask, in freshly laundered clothes (or new ones maybe). I had eaten my breakfast, and done everything that I might normally do to begin a day. My actions had done nothing to change anything.

I left my dressing room, hearing the door click shut behind me. I would have a lot of waiting to do today, and not a lot of travelling. The room in which I held audience was less than a minute's walk away, in

this half of the complex, the other half of the central set of rooms which also housed eight's laboratory. I made my way there, passing no-one else. Most of them must be needed in the other half of the complex, I thought. Like the tunnels, it strikes me as odd sometimes that so much of the story takes place in the other set of rooms. Surely there must be a better way to arrange things? Could those who made the complex not have made it one single area, rather than two arranged like dumbbells on a central axis?

Ten's chambers, as I have told you already, are subtly decorated to make them appear larger than they are and to impart a grandiose sensation. From in front of ten's lectern you feel (or rather, six, seven, eight and four feel) belittled, as though their concerns are somehow lessened in front of that matriarch or patriarch whose intrigues and thoughts must surely be so much more important, loftier than their own.

From the other side you see things differently. I made my way to ten's chair and sat down, and as always was amazed by the way that the same optical illusions that exaggerated the chamber to those looking up made it seem humble and cozy when looking down. I felt as though I could almost reach out and touch the row of seats at the back of the chamber where eight (and later, four) would take their places. The chairs which six and seven would occupy were like nursery stools before a teacher's chair, and I knew that when the time came to adjudicate I would feel a fatherly sense towards them, as if I was looking down on my own children (But you have none, prompts the voice).

In the bright, even light of the complex I sat in that chair and considered my own actions - or the actions of the seven that I had been last night. Was what I had done right? Could I justify it morally? I had hurt no-one, I supposed. Unless, of course, I counted myself. I had definitely been terrified when I woke, would that constitute harm? And if one harmed oneself but no-one else, was that still immoral, or did it count for nothing in the scheme of things?

I leant forward and picked up my gavel, the one item in the room that wasn't a piece of furniture. It was pine (of course), and I examined it carefully. Neither end of the head showed any sign of wear or impact, just as if it had never been used. That was certainly not the case (although equally, it was not used every day). If I were to strike my lectern now - or, for the sake of propriety, during seven's complaint - would the damage I caused the gavel be vanished tomorrow as if it had never existed? What if I were to hit seven himself? Would he bleed? (I was sure he would, for I had bled myself that day in the tunnel) Would

his wound be gone the next day, or would it too be fixed? My wound had sealed itself before the hour was out, but I had been able to see it for days afterwards. Even so, it had eventually faded completely - now, examining my hand, I could not see where it had been at all.

If I inflicted such a wound on seven, would that be wrong of me? Certainly it would be wrong while the blood was still flowing, but what of it after the wound had healed? Once everything was back the way it was, could anyone be said to have been wronged?

I dropped the gavel back onto the lectern and waited. Another thought came to me: I had seen no-one that morning. What if I had been wrong in my assertion that my rebellion had hurt only me (if even that)? Had I somehow upset the natural way of things in some manner that was detrimental to the others? Would that be wrong - was that my punishment?

I stood up and went to the door. There was no-one outside, but far off in the distance I could hear voices arguing violently. Six and seven, I hoped. I wanted to wait there to confirm my hopes, but I was afraid that I would be caught by one of the others - four, perhaps, if she was today someone who (like the four that I was) liked to exercise in the ring corridor. I ducked back inside and took to my chair. After a few minutes, someone began to pound angrily on my door.

"Enter!" I called. The door flew open and seven and six strode in, arguing all the while:

"You've not had enough exercise in your office, the fat has grown into your brain!"

"And you, sir, have attended one too many duels. The constant shock of metal against your helmet has unseated your own cerebellum."

"Gentlemen!" I cried. "Please, desist from this bickering at once. This is a place of reason, and you are men of honour. What business do you bring before me, for if it is nothing but a childish exchange of names I will have my bailiff escort you out this very moment."

The two of them stopped talking.

"Now. What is this about?"

"Your honourous," seven began. "This man has taken something that belongs to me - or rather, had his servant seize it from she who was to bring it to me. Now he refuses to return it, for no good reason!"

"For every good reason," six retorted. "Who will answer to the people of this town should your so-called belonging turn out to be the very agent of destruction we are warned to fear? My officer stopped that messenger quite lawfully, and the item we have confiscated remains unexplained by either the courier or this - this gentleman, although I hesitate

to accord that honorific to one so clearly acting in a manner most ungentle."

"Why, you fat-bellied bureaucratic cuckoo!"

"Silence!" I roared, slamming my gavel down on the lectern surface. I imagined it shattering seven's skull, blood splashing up and away, over the floor, over six's no doubt shocked face. Seven would collapse to the floor - and then what? An end to the day's proceedings, a victory for two without any loss. Would three then never seek the comfort of oblivion? Would return to our dressing rooms and wake up, days later, to start the scenes again, or perhaps to complete those that we had not today?

The two of them stared up at me mutely, and I carefully put down the gavel.

"What is the nature of this package?" I enquired.

"It's nature is my own private business," seven snapped. "But it is mine, and this... man has no right to seize it. If this is a land of laws, he must return it to me."

"If you wish me to say one way or the other, I must know the facts of the matter. I cannot simply decide for his party or yours on the basis of one person's word against another, surely you understand that?"

"Of course," he conceded. "But the contents of my possessions are not material to this case, not in the slightest."

"They are the only material in this case," six contested. "Surely the matter at question is whether, as this man says, his suspicious package contains nothing of consequence to the public at large, or whether it contains some poisonous or flammable substance which might bring aid to our enemies and woe to our kinsmen."

"Then I ask you, instead: What is the nature of this package."

"It is a small glass vial, your judiciousness."

"How small?"

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the bottle. Carefully measuring it against his thumb, he then replaced it, and held up his hand for me to see - indicating with his index finger how far along his thumb the length of the bottle reached.

"This small, your honourous."

"Buffoon!" Seven exploded. "Give me that bottle immediately!"

"I refuse!"

"You'll hand it over to me or I shall rifle through your pockets while you are unconscious!"

"From which army will you entreat assistance?" Six asked. "From the one you have avoided being drafted into, or the one approaching our northern borders even as we speak?"

"Enough!" I cried. "This is getting farcical. I will hold onto the item in question until I have made my decision. Hand it over." I reached out my arm towards six.

"But sir... "

"No buts - and you too, master duellist, would also do well to accept this with silence. Now hand it over."

Six reluctantly reached into his pocket and withdrew the bottle. Once it had been passed to me I held it up and examined it carefully. The pattern cut into the glass was the same as ever, but a light cyan liquid sloshed around within the bottle and gave off a similarly coloured fog above it.

"I do not recognise this substance," I said, carefully placing it on my lectern well out of reach of any sudden movement by seven, and plucking up my gavel in case it was required in the bottle's defence against grasping hands. For a moment I considered smashing the bottle itself - surely that would solve this problem? But of course I did not do that - I could not - and so I did what I could.

"I will need someone to identify this substance. The eminent scientist - bailiff, go and visit her, and bring her here on a matter of some urgency." I thought for a moment. "And while you are about it, we must hear more of the actual facts of the matter. Find the courier. Bring her as well."

Chapter 11

I am tense at such moments. No matter how much I may accept that the battle will be forgotten by tomorrow, that I will wake, put on my clothes, return my mask to the dispenser and become another - no matter how much I may know this, I still feel the fear within me. As two, I am to come to an end. All the roles come to their own ends, of course. A mask is put on in the morning, played out through the day, discarded in the evening - or worn through the night perhaps, but sooner or later the mask is removed for good, and that is the death that comes to every role. To be forgotten. A man or woman once carried you, lived as you. But now they are someone else, looking out from behind another's face.

That role will be taken up by another, of course, but the continuity of memory - of experience - is broken. All of ten's wisdom, when I removed him that morning, all of his sage advice remained with me, and he took nothing. Another would make his decisions, and their memory would be the only source that could be used to arbitrate from. My words and thoughts would most likely be lost and unable to influence that judgement - or, at best, the role might be played by one who had heard me yesterday. I might hope (or ten might hope), that that third-party memory would colour her decisions, so that there was some progress in the world. It is said (or unsaid, for I have read it in a book as three) that a closed system tends towards entropy. If that is true, then no progress can be made here - just degeneration, as our minds become more and more tired of the endlessness of our existence. If the tunnels lead nowhere, if the audience does not exist, if those unseen hands that clean the complex and reset after each day's work are just mindless machines hiding somewhere in the walls. If all of those things are true, then we are truly doomed. We prove nothing, and we will keep going forever, winding down and down until finally we, like our roles, end.

A morbid thought, of course, but my mood at that time was morbid. To know the hour of your ending - even if something of you will survive that end - cannot engender happy thoughts. Change is frightening (as much as, even more so perhaps, than no change at all), and death is the

ultimate change - from the white, clean, bright corridors of the living into the dark, rough, cold tunnels of oblivion.

I stood in the banquet hall, waiting for the wheels to turn and bring seven to me. I felt unarmed, at the mercy of chance. What if seven simple came for me? I would be slain where I stood, my arms battered and broken if I should try to raise them and save myself. I thought how I had only the day before imagined smashing seven's head with the gavel, and that fantasy now rebounded on me. Seven, walking calmly into his chambers and returning with his sword - then a snarl of fury, the power of his jealousy blowing him forward like a storm wind. He would raise the wooden sword and bring it down - once, twice, on my bare head. The crunching of bone, the blossoming dark pain above me, and I would collapse to the floor unconscious. Would he consider that revenge enough? My blood spilt in the banquet hall? Would I awake in my dressing room then and pull myself to my feet, reach up to feel for the bruising and swelling but nonetheless eat my breakfast, become my new role, and go about my business?

I could, if I wished to forestall this scenario, go to seven's room and take the spare sword - the one that he would, under normal circumstances, give to me. Then I would be able to defend myself, and it might be either he or me who would be knocked unconscious. Those were at least more pleasing odds. Better still, I might take his sword as well. I could hide it - under the stage, or behind one of the chairs, or possibly beneath three's bed if I dared also to enter her chamber. I might then have the upper hand that he had sought, and chosen in myself whether or not to dash his brains on the banquet hall floor. Could I do such a thing? I had imagined it no earlier than yesterday, but then I had dealt with it merely as a flight of fancy, for I was set in place as his judge and ombudsman and not his foe. Today if I were to consider a pre-emptive attack I would have to do it as an equal who stood to gain from his death or defeat.

At any rate, lost in my thoughts, I dallied too long to make a decision. With no ceremony, seven burst into the room.

"You!"

I said nothing, and he circled the room warily.

"To think I trusted you amongst my friends," he said. "What have you to say for yourself, cur?"

"For myself, I say that I am ill-treated by such an insult."

"Ill-treated, you say? I might claim to lavish on you the highest of praise with that choice of words! What would you call a thief who comes in the dark to steal his peer's rightful possessions?"

He moved around to the left of me, and I paced to the right to keep some furniture between us.

"I would say that such a man deserved harsh punishment. But what has that to do with me? I have taken from no man what was not offered - save those of our enemies I slew, and they and I understood the nature of war's bargain."

"How? You deny the crime we both know you are guilty of?"

"I scarcely know what such a crime might be, let alone my own culpability. I would advise you to cease this, or at the very least describe to me the villany of which I am so basely accused. Come now, surely this is merely a misunderstanding - for I have no idea of what it is you speak."

"No idea?"

"None indeed."

"Then I will spell it out for you," he said calmly. "Knowing that I had pledged to wait for the maiden we discussed when we were last together - in this very hall, indeed - a gentleman might not have made it his business to seduce her!"

"Seduce her? I see. And what makes you think that I should have woo'd this one you claim?"

"A witness," he proclaimed. "A witness who has seen that you, pronounced hero in our people's sight, think nothing of overstepping the bounds of decency, of entering a lady's house unchaperoned and late at night."

"What witness?"

"That is not important. You stand accused not only of entering her home, but seducing her. Ruiner of my plans, enemy of the estate of maidenhood! That you should be held above other, greater men is the most ignominious failing in our history."

"This witness of whom you will not speak - this voyeur, who spies on the abodes of gentlewomen. How can you place any faith in his testimony when all decent men would condemn such behaviour as his out of hand? Sir, I do not believe that you can accuse me so on the hearsay of such a prying fishwife of a man as your informer must be!"

"I would accuse you on half such evidence as that! In an instant I would accuse you, for I see - you think I do not see, but for all your bluster, your attempt to cloud my ears, I hear from you no denial. Do you deny escorting that maid home?"

I paused for a moment, then drew myself up to my full height.

"I do not."

"So all your dissembling leads to this," he sneered.

"A wise man understands before replying, before taking any action."

"Oh, you think yourself wise?"

"Wiser than you, my friend. For I know that I have no claim on that fair lady. You deceive yourself if you think it so for you."

"I have every claim!"

"You do not, for she has never accepted your pledge. Never, if I speak you right, has she even heard it! And rightly so, for you know as well as I that she would reject it. I say I have no claim on her, and for you it is the same. She has a claim on us, and although I accept that you deny it, to your detriment."

"The words of a thief, trying to deny another's possessions so that he might live in a world where all is his."

"It is you who would deny another's possessions, if you believe that you have a right on her that even she cannot deny. You would deprive her of her own heart, her own mind, her own choice."

"That choice was made long ago!"

"It was never made, save in your imagination. You may protest it so, but this is not politics, and thus your claim does not give birth to the fact."

"If she made the choice, would you stand by it?"

"You propose to put her heart to the test?"

"I do."

"Without let or hindrance, a fair test of her own mind?"

"I..." He hesitated. "Of course!"

I made a feint of considering his idea, stroking my chin and pacing the room with many a thoughtful hum.

"Well? What say you?" He demanded.

"I say... "

"Yes?"

"I say that I would sooner trust a snake not to bite than trust you not to try to interfere!"

"What!"

"I know about your plan, you fool. I have known all along. You come to me here, accusing me of theft, when you would steal away her very mind from her!"

"She is mine!"

"You do not deny it, then?" I shouted. For a moment he stopped pacing, then suddenly he made a fist and pounded on the back of the chair between us.

"She is mine! Mine!"

"She belongs to none but herself."

"You think to steal her from me. You with your tinselled sleeves, spinning tales that no-one alive can verify, you use your fame infamously to seduce the one you knew that I loved!"

He mimed tearing off a glove and threw it at me so harshly that I recoiled instinctively even before I realised that I should.

"Is that a challenge?" I asked. "I have no second."

"Neither have I," he said.

"Then with no stock of seconds, let us waste no minutes either. I shall return to my quarters and retrieve my sword."

"Mine are nearer," he told me. "I will return with enough edges for the both of us."

He calmly went to his quarters and after a moment returned with the two wooden swords that he had stored there.

"Your choice," he said. I made a show of examining them carefully before picking one. They were identical, of course, smoothed pine four feet in length, with a wooden crosspiece attached by some sleight of carpentry that I could not fathom. The crosspieces were painted beige, but the blades were simply lightly varnished to show the native colour of the wood.

"This one," I said, taking one, and stepping back: "En garde".

No narrative can describe a fight truly, not so truly as it can describe a horror, or a grief, or a joke. You may tremble, or cry, or laugh, but read once a man's account of a battle against a foe, and you understand nothing but tactics. Until you have fought, even such a fight as we fought, you will not know that each shock of sword on sword (be they nothing more than sticks) travels through the bones of your body, so that even if you do not receive a single blow you will tire as the fight goes on, becoming more and more exhausted and less and less able to defend yourself. Even now, reading these words, you who have not fought will not feel the ache in your upper arms, the trembling that affects every part of your being.

So I will skip over the battle between seven and me, and tell you instead that as we fought three came upon us and cried for us to stop, pleading us to think of ourselves, and then of her, and then of the law. She called to seven to remember that as children they had played

together, and he rebuffed her by calling on the hopes that had been dashed when she asked me to escort her home. She called upon me to think of our future happiness, but I was too blinded by the thought of seven's deviousness, and swore that I would end him in order to protect that future.

In the end, it was neither of us who was to prevail that day. Three, throwing herself between us, almost caught a blow from seven's back-swing, and pushing her to one side for her own safety I struck at his neck. Alas, at the same time his sword pierced my heart (that heart that I carry between my left side and my left arm, you understand), and both of us fell, mortally wounded. Three screamed in horror, staggered back, and screamed again. In a second, one entered in a rush - and seeing us there, set up an alarm to call a doctor (who, not existing, would of course not reach us in time).

Three, overcoming her terror, rushed to my side and knelt there. Her slim, tiny body looked as frail as a mouse's, and I felt that it was for moments like this that she was so often chosen - if there were any rational choice being made - for the part of three. She seemed truly fragile in the face of such monstrous events as we enacted.

"Do not die, dear heart, I beg of you."

"I fear I have no choice," I said weakly. She leant forward and swept her arms gently around my neck, and leant forwards until her whole body was pressed along the length of mine. I felt the vital beat of her heart and my own racing to match it. For the first time I noticed her scent, an almost floral cloud that enveloped me. Her body lay along me, hot and soft, and to my surprise I began to feel something in my loins.

"Noble hero, how cruel you are to come into my life and then leave."

"It was my hour when fate decided," I maintained, "and it is fate that is cruel, to have brought such an angel into my life on earth so soon before snatching me away to the darkness of the far shores." My hips felt as though a wire were pulling them towards her, but I could not move. My hands, one on my chest, one under her, yearned to move, to grasp her, a yearning so strong that it was as much as I could do to stop them from trembling. The suppressed desire must have sounded in my voice, I was sure, and I bit my lip under my mask.

"How can we blame this tragedy on fate?" She cried. "I must blame a jealous heart, and a false belief in honour. You, who I would have had as my life, you have done this to yourself - and your accomplice, my childhood friend, he has helped you. Between the two of you you have robbed me of both my past and my future."

She pushed me away, and the sudden cold and rejection was something I had not felt in... forever, I think.

The voice tells me otherwise.

Chapter 12

Three's body was a warm weight against me, and I gently lifted my right hand from my chest and placed it on her shoulder. Beneath the fabric of her jacket I could sense the heat of her skin, and I let my fingers drop, burrowing under the fabric and pulling back to reveal one olive shoulder. I leant forward to brush my lips against it, and felt her shift against me.

"Come with me," she whispered in my ear, and that shoulder pulled away from my mouth. Three's tiny hands pushing against my chest, she drew herself up to a sit. I felt a sharp pain from my abdomen and looked up at her face, the two dark eyeslits and the three garish red dots; one on either cheek, one on her forehead. She smiled behind her mask - or I think she did, anyway, for her mask lifted slightly - and looked down at my stomach. "Gather that up, you'll need it."

As she stood up, I lifted myself up into a sit, and saw that my shirt and jacket were torn by a jagged wound. I carefully reached into the hole with my right hand, and when I withdrew it I saw that it was dripping with blood. The pain had faded, but I had felt that something was missing.

"Look around you," three told me. I did so, and saw that the banquet hall was more like a slaughterhouse floor. The chairs and tables were splashed with blood, and it pooled around me and beneath me so that everything was red. Looking back to three, I could see that the right half of her body, where she had lain against me and the floor, was stained crimson. "Gather that up," she repeated. "You'll need it."

I pulled myself up to my feet, and saw that blobs of flesh were strewn around in the gore. Some of them, I could tell, were mine. Some of them must have been seven's. Seven himself was collapsed over one of the blood-soaked chairs, and as I saw him three seemed to notice him too, and helped him up. His throat was a ragged mess where my sword had torn at it, and as he stood more blood tumbled out of it - and a chunk of meat, too. Three twisted her feet sideways, bent her knees in one sinuous movement, and scooped up the gobbet that seven had lost. Incoherent

gasping noises came from his throat, and when she stood up again he reached out a begging hand into which she deposited the blood-stained lump. Seven reached up to feel his throat, and then carefully pushed the meat back inside.

"Better?" Three asked. He took a few sucking gasps, and then nodded.

"Better," he wheezed - then coughed, a wet sucking cough that came out of his throat and his hidden mouth at the same time.

"Help him," three told him. "He needs all of this." She swept her arms out to encompass the room.

"I refuse."

Three leant down again, and gently dipped the index and middle fingers of her right hand into the blood. She straightened up and reached towards seven's face, fingers spread wide to add two more dots, one above each eye.

"Help him," she repeated. Nine bowed, and began to gather up all the blood and gore. Three watched him for a few moments, and then turned back to me. "I'm going to the other side," she told me. "You'll need all of that if you want to come too. Gather it up."

I nodded, and saw that what she was telling me was true. I watched her leave, and then turned back to the room and started helping nine to collect all the things that I was missing. It was hard work. The blood was sticky and warm, and the bits that I needed were strewn around the room almost as though I had exploded - bits of flesh strewn over chairs, splatters of blood against the wall, the tiny metal parts already beginning to rust as I picked them out, the wood components sodden with red. We worked and worked, picking them out, all the time knowing that three was getting further and further away. Nine piled everything he had collected onto one table, and I piled everything I had collected onto another. We worked until the tables were piled high with meat, and blood, and nick-nacks, and then we stopped.

"We need more tables, master," nine suggested. "Perhaps we should put some of this back inside, just to make room."

"It won't all fit," I said, looking down at the tables.

"It all came out, master. Look." He wiped his hands on his shirt until they were clean of blood. Then he stuck out his thumb and slowly drew it across his chin, wiping out the three dots that ran across his lower jaw. "It's just a matter of organisation! Everything here must know it's place. Everything here must do it's part!"

Six began to pick the pieces off the table and push them back into my belly - anonymous grey tissue, cogs, my heart (still beating and pumping

out splashes of blood onto his hand with every stroke), a broken piece of a wooden sword, pens, torn and red-soaked pages from a book, magnets, a wadded piece of fabric that I knew was a shirt. As he did so, he spoke carefully to each piece: "Now then, what you are charged with is an important duty, a duty that required the authority that I am about to place in you. Do not disgrace me! For when you disgrace me, you disgrace yourself and our fine town."

But for all that, as each piece went into me I felt no more whole than before. I knew that there were more pieces to go in, that we would have to clear up everything in the room before I could go after three. Looking around, I could see that we had hardly even begun to clear up - I was ankle deep in gore, and the piles of collected detritus on the table were beginning to shudder from within, slowly erupting with more flesh, more rubbish. I pushed six away and began to gather up more from the floor, just shoving it into place, while he complained behind me.

"That won't do! Everything must be in its place, not just higgledy-piggledy! It's anarchy, that's what it is - do you want everything here to lead to chaos? The enemy is near - nearer than you think. You have to do your duty, follow your orders, play out the part that society has seen fit to assign you!"

I had to get some breathing space, just while I sorted things out. I would come back to this, I had to come back to this, because I had to follow three to get to wherever it was she was going. But at that moment I needed breathing space, so I waded through the carnage towards the door to three's chamber. It opened easily, a slick wave of flesh toppling into the room and almost carrying me off my feet. I managed to keep my balance by grabbing at the door frame, though, and carefully clambered out of the muck and through into three's chamber.

I started to walk to the other side of the chamber, the sounds of six's complaints and the wet sound of moving flesh growing fainter and fainter behind me with every step. My feet began to dry, and instead of squelching they began to tap and tap, each step echoing around the corridor. I dared not look around me, because I had begun to see things out of the corners of my eyes - white shapes in the darkness to either side of me. As I continued to walk I had to lower my head further and further to avoid seeing them, and the sick feeling in my stomach grew heavier and colder. Eventually I could not look any further down, and I slowly raised my head. Stretching out on either side of me were endless rows of blank masks, and staring out of those masks the tiny black glistening eyes. As I saw them they turned, almost as one, to look in front of me. Ahead, the

long chamber began to narrow, and I hurried forwards - each step taking me nearer and nearer to that venturi. As the walls grew closer together the hated faces, rather than crowding closer in on me, began to thin - always staying a certain distance away from me. I knew that I had to return to the other room, to collect myself together and run after three, but I would go and do that - I would do that as soon as I had got to the end of the tunnel and escaped from all of these others, this hideous audience that stared and stared and never made so much as a sound.

The ground began to change beneath my feet. Rougher and more slippery, I fought to control my footing and realised that I had travelled so far that I was out in the tunnel system. A roaring noise up ahead made me freeze in fear - it rushed closer, and closer, until suddenly it burst out on me, a gust of freezing wind that knocked me against the wall of the tunnel. My right foot slipped out from under me and suddenly I was falling sideways, my face crashing against the wall with a sudden shock. A sickening tearing noise came from the back of my head and as I hit the ground I saw the inside of my face fly away onto the floor, velcro tabs flapping behind it. I reached out for it, but before I could grab it I heard a gasp from behind me, and I looked around to see a blinding light that grew and grew.

Behind the mask of two my face was drenched with sweat, and against all my usual practise I reached up quickly to pull it off. The room was so much brighter, and I had to squint for a few seconds while my eyes got accustomed. My right foot was trapped in a fold of sheet where I had kicked and twisted over, and I had to kick with my legs to free myself and get up.

On the chair lay my clothes, and, freezing cold from the sweat I was covered in, I pulled them on. My shirt clung uncomfortably to my arms and back. When I had them on, I moved the chair around to the back of the table and sat down to eat my egg and muffin and drink the glass of milk that had been left for me. I felt tired, still, as though I had not slept at all that night, and when it came time to return the mask to the dispenser I could barely bring myself to traipse over to the other side of the room. After a short while the buzzer went, and eight's face appeared. I took it from the cradle. For a moment the number on his face looked odd and unfamiliar, and I turned the mask over in my hand: Eight. Infinity. Eight. Infinity. Eight.

I became eight, carefully fastening the velcro straps behind my head - then, unsure that I had done that correctly, unfastening and redoing them - then once more. I wagged my head. The mask did not feel right,

but it did not move, and I turned carefully and did the same thing facing the mirror. Again, it did not move. I tilted my head sideways. Infinity. Straightening up, I grabbed a little fold on the front of my shirt and flapped it in and out a bit to dry it (which didn't work very well, but it did separate it from my chest hair), then smoothed down my jacket arms and left my dressing room. The silent woman was just emerging from her own, and began to stare back as she saw me watching her. We both closed our dressing room doors together, and then stood for a few moments. There was silence from the rest of the complex.

Finally, unable to hold my ground any more, I broke her gaze and wheeled around to go down the corridor. Behind me, I could hear her slow, measured step. I hurried to my laboratory door and hid inside.

The four regular rows of workbenches reminded me uncomfortably of the rows of masks, and I grabbed one of the stools and dragged it into the corner. Facing out from the center of the room, I rested my head - one side of the mask on one wall, the other side on the other, the whole thing pressed slightly askew by the weight of my head. I could feel with each out breath half of the stream of air pouring out of the mask, the other half being redirected against my face.

All of that, did it mean something? What could I read into it, what could I learn? Could I learn anything? The details had already begun to fade, but the emotion, the sinking feeling of reaching for my mask, remained. I understood that, of course. But the rest of it? I turned it over and over in my mind, but there was nothing that I could grasp - and with each moment that passed more and more of the memory slipped away from me, until I could not tell whether what I was worried about was something that had actually happened in the dream, or just something I imagined (or even, perhaps, something that had happened in reality). So I passed that morning, right up until the moment that seven knocked on my door.

I rushed to put the stool back in place, and arranged myself so that I was peering into my apparatus.

"Who is it?" I called.

Chapter 13

That morning I awoke again. Without any dreams (or at any rate, without any that I remembered) I felt fresher and more awake, and when I was given the mask of six I felt as though that were a role which I had woken to play. I fastened the mask on, double checked it (it was alright this time, no need to remove and re-fasten it), and left the room - early today, and as far as I could tell before anyone else did. I had not heard more than one buzzer, so it is possible that I had simply got lucky in how fast my mask had been dispensed. I allowed myself to believe, however, that it was my own get-up-and-go which was responsible, and the feeling made me light on my feet. Was it happiness? Or just relief that after the terrible time I had spent two nights before I was having a day that seemed more normal, things running on clockwork rather than just sluggishly trickling along. Perhaps I could, properly applied, keep up that momentum and ensure a day of plain sailing. Everyone in their role, everyone in their place, and no oddities - no strange desires on my part, no hideous nightmares, no slip-ups or mishaps to embarrass me.

I reached the banquet hall first (beating even the handful of people who had only to travel a short way from their dressing rooms), and let myself get into the swing of things - mingling, bustling about as if organising drinks and hors d'oeuvres, miming the telling off of waiters and the direction of an unseen musical band. I imagined the audience watching me bustle about as they readied themselves to watch our story. In a playhouse there might be a conceit much like this, I thought to myself. The audience would take their places while last minute scene-shifting was going on. If the curtains were open, one of the actors (playing a role not unlike six) could come on before the first curtain as a stage-setting device, ordering the stagehands around as if they were caterers and servants, presiding over the orchestra (if there was one) as they tuned up, giving the impression that they were actually part of the cast, musicians playing for a society banquet to which all of the parts were invited.

I do not mean to imply some kind of connection between the greasepaint arts and our own stories, you understand. As you can see,

there are very few similarities between those disreputable companies and our own complex. They come together for short periods of time, merely reciting a few words memorised parrot-fashion from the scripts of some itinerant hack writer. Our work is, I think, important - whereas theirs is a low, transitory thing, providing momentary entertainment for a small crowd. A run of six weeks, with one performance a day? A mere forty-two shows, stamped out identically from the cookie-cutter of script, sets, and stage direction. Incomparable to the nature of existence here.

The voice tells me all these facts, and I pass judgement on them. Thinking hard, I can picture a theatre and a play, but I cannot (as with the images of mothers and babies) lay claim to it as an actual memory. It would seem strange to have been somewhere like that, since I am here, in the complex, and the only way in (or out) lies in the labyrinth of tunnels - and perhaps not even there! I think that I cannot have been to such a thing as a play, and the whole idea in fact seems ridiculous. Yet the voice tells me that such things do exist somewhere, and he must be correct, for (as you may point out) I clearly understand what features and properties make a person (a woman in particular) seem like an actress. On the other hand, I am compelled to deny his insistence on certain points of similarity.

A troupe of actors and actresses, although perhaps blinded by a foot-light to some extent, know for certain that they have an audience. Or, put another way, they are conscious of whether they have an audience or not. We (or I, at least) have no such certainty, and when I speak of an audience, though I do not always take care to qualify my statements, you will understand that I refer only to the possibility or potentiality of such a thing. I do not know whether an audience exists, but it is sometimes simpler to explain my actions and the actions of the others with reference to a hypothetical third person (or, of course, persons) who observe us. In my waking and rational moments I make no assertion that the audience exists at all, and I certainly impute no motive to them. Should they watch us it may be for entertainment, or for education, or under some order, or for some purpose entirely alien to my own way of thinking. They are therefore even in my imagination a faceless, homogenous crowd, their existence uncertain and their purpose unfathomable. Perhaps when I dream of the endless rows of blank masks and the emotionless eyes that peer from them, that is the representation or figure, in my mind, of the audience that I talk of. The mind working in solid symbols as it does, they could easily be the embodiment of my hopes or fears for the existence of our observers. Can I tell something from this, I wonder,

something about how I feel about the concept? In my dreams that audience (if it is they) appear in a menacing form, always attended by great anxiety. If they symbolise the audience of which I speak, I must, below the surface, fear our overseers profoundly.

There, I see, is another difference between an actor and me - his audience must use their imaginations to create the character he is playing. My role is a concrete thing, a person in potentia, but I must use all of my mental powers to imagine my audience.

Eventually the others required for the banquet trickled in - first the members of the love triangle: the actress as two, the unremarkable woman and man from this complex as seven and three respectively. They began to mingle, seven (as was her skill) already marking out the unheard beat and allowing the other three of us to synchronise our rhythms. After we had swirled around for a minute five came in (the timid man), and finally the overweight woman (in the role of my subordinate, one - as you will know if you have been keeping track). She, spotting me, became fittingly attentive in pose and took her seat nearby, perched on the edge of it with a ramrod-straight back.

"Welcome one, welcome all! I should like to thank you all for being here on this night. I realise that the storms of war are rapidly approaching our fair country, and they blow with them much in the way of worries. Some people might say that events such as that tonight are mere frivolity, that they signify nothing and that they waste time and money that would be best spent to enhance our efforts towards the defence of our civilisation. To those people I say fie!

"Our civilisation is founded on the bedrock of gentle society, which provides for us a temporary distraction from the everyday work of our lives. Our enemies, those who mass to the north, would conquer our lands and deprive us of happiness, pleasure, and the consoling presence of our families and friends. It would be a tragedy if we should allow them to do so, certainly. But what greater a tragedy it would be if we at our own hand were to deny ourselves the very things that our enemies would? If we abandon everything that makes us a great people, that makes our country worth fighting for?

"I call upon these nay-sayers to suggest how morale might be kept when all the jewels of our society are dashed to the ground. Would a soldier on the front line fight for her freedom to return to endless labour and the relentless routine of a slave's life? She would not! These are the very things which our soldiers fight against, and unless we would withdraw their reason to continue, we must ensure that the life of the

homeland continues as they have known it. Those who watch our revels from a distance must be made to feel that it is being done for their benefit, and they themselves will feel cheer, will be entertained by what they see."

My rhetoric was met with polite applause from the other five, which I chose to interpret as thunderous applause from all supposedly there present.

"Thank you, thank you. Thank you again, please - please," I made a damping motion with my hands, and allowed the phantom cheering to die down until I could again speak over it. "Now that I have said my little piece I beg of you all to take my words to heart, and to drink, eat, dance, and discourse amongst yourselves in the manner you would wish our brave soldiers to be able to upon their return from their vital duties. Music, please!"

I tried to imagine an orchestra somewhere below and in front of me (as they would be in an orchestra pit), but the whole idea was too preposterous. They would be on the stage behind me (the stage that five would later use to spy on the profession of love between two and three), playing some chamber music or other.

Turning to one, I saw that she was staring up at me earnestly.

"Now then," I began.

"Yes?"

"Now then, I see that you are here, although perhaps your duties should at some point call you elsewhere. Have I explained your duties to you?"

"You have not, sir, although I earnestly desire that. My duties are of the utmost interest to me, and I would bring to them the greatest dedication."

I looked at her suspiciously. This was an unusual tack for one to take, although not unheard of. This speech was usually intended as a quick goading of one into action, for most times one began the day with only the vaguest idea what she was to do, and it would take the talk in my office, together with the authority vested in them through the medium of the note of authority, to move one to her appointment and arrest (if you will call it that) of four in the tunnels later on.

"Are you being earnest with me," I asked, "or making a jest at my account? For I tell you now that I consider insubordination a great sin in the officers of the civil service of this fine town. There is nothing more harmful to discipline than a feeling in the ranks that all are equal, and that none are exempt from the sharp tongue or the sly look."

"No, sir, I am earnest indeed. I would have you treat my every word as honest truth, as I in my turn intend to bring to this position a belief in the infallibility of my superior's commands."

"I, well - I would hardly claim to be infallible," I replied, with a patronising tone in my voice. "I am sure that the record of my life would show one or two mistakes in the ledger. Not serious ones, of course, but aren't we all human?"

"I believe so," she nodded enthusiastically. "Indeed, I am more aware of the fact now than I have been in many a month."

"Quite, quite. I am heartened to hear, then, such enthusiasm in one in your position. Too many of the employees of the state are lackadaisical desk-warmers, whose greatest desire is no more than to feed themselves at the public trough while providing nothing in return. Lazy pigs! To eat up the grain of our great city and labour not - no, to call them such is an insult to honest swine, who though devouring all at least have the decency to provender us with bacon, gammon, and pork! The so-called servants that infest our halls and offices are no more than rats or locusts, devouring all and leaving in their wake nothing but trouble and hunger. Truly, the only benefit they provide is one of defence, since if there were any more of them they should leave our enemies nothing worth the bother of invading us for!"

As I spoke, I watched the others out of the corners of my eye. For the first speech between six and one to carry on so long was unusual, but not completely unheard of - any exchange might go on for as long as was necessary, of course. Seven had seated herself carefully nearby so that she would be close by when I had finished talking to one, and five was mingling with the crowd, always careful to be seen to be staring at one or another of us at any time. Two and three were at separate sides of the room, arrayed along the wall nearest to the stage. Three appeared oblivious to the long-distance attention of two.

"I assure you, sir," one replied, "that I am not one such as they. I shall take my duties seriously indeed, and should I see one of those that you mention, a lead-swinger or gold-bricker, I shall endeavour to shame him into action by my own example."

"Well, splendid! I am glad to hear that, and I shall watch your progress with great interest. You may have what it takes to climb the ranks, young woman. Indeed, you might one day find yourself in my chair!" I laughed.

"Oh no," she said quickly. "I have no ambitions for such progress. I wish merely to serve - to serve my country, that is, and to see that the wheels of society turn smoothly on their axes."

As though reassured that she was not the sort of underling that I would have to protect my own job against, I nodded and took her hand to shake, grasping it firmly with one hand and holding her elbow with the other.

"In that case, I would like to welcome you to the service of the town. I beg you to enjoy the party, eat heartily and drink a little - not too much, for once I have attended to my duties as a host I will meet you in my office and explain the nature of your duties."

She nodded as I spoke, and when I had finished there were a few moments of silence. Suddenly she squeezed my hand and whispered, fiercely and earnestly - too low for the others to hear.

"I would do anything for you."

Chapter 14

I woke still wearing the mask of six, and glad that it had been rare for me to wear the same role more than once. Although I had felt energetic in the morning, it had gone strangely. After talking to one I felt nervous, and I grew something of a conviction that the audience did indeed exist somewhere above us, looming and leering and judging everything that we said. It coloured the day, and made the interview with her even more fraught. Her earnestness then looked more and more like a brash disregard for everything proper, a hubris in front of those silent witnesses that could no doubt understand everything that was wrong with how we acted. I must have seemed as though I was physically afraid of the contract, so quickly was I done with it, and I took such pains to prevent us from touching when I handed it over that I almost threw the thing at the poor woman. She reacted just in time to catch it, and for a moment she was herself thrown and her speech developed an edge that made her sound hurt. After a few sentences she got over it, though, and her tone became more mechanical as she accepted her duties within herself. After she had left I felt a wash of elation, as if just getting through that one interview was perhaps the most stressful thing that had happened to me in weeks (although clearly it was not, as you have seen).

After that the rest of the day was not as bad, although I felt shallow and disconnected from everything. When one returned to give me the philtre I dismissed her in what seems, in hindsight, to have been a rather curt manner. At the time I did not think anything of it, but I feel now as though I was somewhat harsh. It is not uncommon, of course, for six to adopt such a standoffish attitude towards his underling, but since one is normally rather insolent to all that she meets, it does not ordinarily seem out of place that she should be the recipient of some scorn as well. But with one so bright and orderly, to have been so brusque seemed rather unpleasant, and I wish in hindsight that I could have travelled back in time and made a more pleasant show of receiving her. She was doing her duty, after all.

After moving my chair to the other side of the table and eating my breakfast, I put my mask back on and waited for the buzzer. If our dressing rooms are identical - and I have no reason to believe otherwise, as I say - then to describe mine will act as a description of all of them. Entering from the circumferential corridor you find yourself in the middle of the near wall, holding a door handle with your right hand - the doors open into the dressing rooms, which gave me my impression that I might somehow be able to barricade myself in. What foolishness! The handles, like all door handles in the complex, are simple elbowed pieces of carved pine that rotate up to pull a little latch in. There is no visible locking mechanism that I can see, although I have reason to believe that the doors do indeed lock during the day while we are about our work. Perhaps the mechanism is within the hinges, or inside the handle. The voice tells me that he can think of at least three ways by which such a device might work, all of them kept strictly invisible within the body of the door itself.

So, the door swings open and to the right, and opens directly in the middle of the near wall (which looks to be about a hand's length in thickness). To your right you would see a plain wall with a long, low mirror in front of it, and in front of that a long desk or shelf built into the wall and supported occasionally by pinewood legs. It is about three hands-length deep, and the same height from the floor as the table in the middle of the room. The mirror itself is surrounded by lights - small points, LEDs, I would say - embedded in a perforated pattern in a metal frame. They give a bright and even light, but if you sit too close to them the light becomes overwhelming and you can see little of the room behind you - do not stare too long.

In the middle of the room is a small table, just big enough for one person to eat - or perhaps two people if they faced each other. One of them would have to bring another chair, however, for there is just one. You could make some judge of the time by the position of this chair (but only in my dressing room), because at certain times of the day (breakfast and evening meals) it would be to the right of the table, facing away from the mirror. At other times, it would be to the left, facing away from the dispenser.

The dispenser itself bulges from the wall to your left. A half-column rises out of the wall, and roughly at chest height a device of white plastic and metal is embedded into that column. The dispenser has a hole in the center of it, roughly the size of a human head. Two metal shutters are normally closed across that hole. If they are closed they are impossible to

pry open with the tools available in the rest of the dressing room, or with the edge of a mask, for instance. At the top of the column, again embedded within it, you will be able to see the surface of a speaker, with a white mesh grill across it. When, each morning, this buzzer sounds, the two metal shutters of the dispenser will retreat to the left and right, opening up the mechanism within. This is a simple bowl-shaped cradle into which a mask can be placed. The cradle rotates around an axis parallel to the floor, lifting the mask up and delivering it into another chute which becomes visible when the cradle is moving. The cradle, I should add, moves quickly, and the motor that moves it is stronger than me. Unless you are much stronger than me, I do not recommend attempting to stop it - you would certainly be at risk of losing a finger if you did not move fast enough (I did, and all my fingers are intact).

After that mask is gone, some period of time elapses and to the accompaniment of another blast from the buzzer the cradle swings down again, carrying a different mask (usually). The cradle's motion can propel the mask out of the dispenser and onto the floor sometimes - in which case the shutters close immediately again. If the mask remains in the cradle, the shutters will close automatically only after the mask is withdrawn. The shutters remain closed for almost a whole day after that.

So that is the left wall and the right wall, and the things inbetween. The room is longer than it is wide (by a touch), and the far wall has two things of note about it. To the right, taking up most of the wall space, is a bed. A single bed, just large enough to be comfortable for one my size, and covered in white sheets. Two white pillows are placed at the head end, which is against the right wall. There is some space between the bed and the mirror's table, enough that you would not be able to reach it from bed and that the table does not impede your view of the door if you are lying in bed (assuming that you had turned to face that way).

At the foot end of the bed there is another door, which I have not mentioned yet for the simple reason that it is quite mundane. We eat, you have observed, we live, and we sleep. This door leads to a room in which those other functions necessary to life are performed. Go through that door and you will find a sink, a toilet, and a shower cubicle - arranged in that order along the far wall of a room that is as wide as the dressing room, but much less deep - just deep enough, in fact, to be able to walk along the near wall and get to the shower. A towel hangs on a shower rail, toilet paper beside the toilet. In trays above the sink and in the shower cubicle there are neat little soaps, such as (the voice tells me) you might find in a hotel. Everything except the soap bars is white - even the

taps are white plastic instead of chrome - and the bars themselves are beige. This, each evening, is where I perform my ablutions and wash away the dirt of the day. Like my clothes, I find the towel replaced with a clean one each morning (or maybe the same one, but laundered and dried). The soap and toilet paper are likewise renewed in the night.

If you were there as I woke that day, you would see me rise from my bed, dress, rearrange the furniture, and then eat. I would hope, as I ate, that you might avert your gaze - for the thought of being seen in that state of vulnerability is unpleasant to me. I would sooner that you made some polite excuse and went outside for the time, rather than examining each in turn the left and right walls, the table, the bed, the room beyond where I wash. You might feel differently. You, after all, would have come into the complex - something that I think beyond me (since it must, I assume, require the same skills or fortune as leaving the complex).

Let us say, therefore, that you have come into the complex by some means unknown, but yet you think enough of me to respect my wishes regarding being put under the microscope. You would step outside, and after some short period of time you would hear a buzzer come from within my room. Later, that buzzer would sound again - then I would emerge, a figure wearing a white mask with the number nine written large across it.

Without words I would lead you down a curving corridor to the entrance to another corridor - and, shortly inside that one - to a gash in the wall where something had broken through. This, I imagine, is where you might have come from. I would lead you through rock-floored tunnels, treacherous and slippery, until we reached an opening large enough to deserve the description: cave. This is the cave that I have described before, with its many colours, and the four workbenches. Still I would be mute, because you (wearing an unnumbered mask), would not exist to me. Perhaps I might address you occasionally, in the manner of one spirit addressing his fellow fiends, but my words would not, I think, mean anything to you - and I would ignore your responses.

After some time another (a man of average height with short brown hair, wearing a mask with four on it) would come to me. I think he would be as astonished to see you as I would have been, but I think that he too would not be able to query you about your sudden appearance. He would have a duty to perform, and he would perform it. After some business I would hand him the glass bottle of which I have previously spoken at some length, and then he would leave.

If your appetite for observation were still unsated, I can advise you that you would do well to wait more. After a short time you would hear a barking report issue from the horn speaker in the wall of my cave, and I would make my way slowly back through the tunnels, making sure to hold a steadying hand onto at least one wall to guard against falling.

I wonder if you would be able to point out to me the way that you came, when you came in from outside? Could you attract my attention? You would have to step directly in front of me and show me the way to... to wherever you had come from. I imagine the audience would be as confused by such an occurrence as they would be by your presence at all. No, I think it best not.

We would soon regain the corridor system with its reassuring floors, flat and dry. A short trip back into my half of the complex, and we stop off in eight's laboratory, where eight is fuming to himself. We would creep away, then - before he saw us. He would never see us, I should explain, but he would always nearly see us as we went - and that is the important thing.

Making my way furtively back into the corridor, I would hear voices from the other room. I would tiptoe in, and should you follow me you would see what had caught my interest. A woman, with longish dark hair, complaining to another woman - this latter one, turned towards us, wearing a mask whose right eye was in the middle of a big red one, and whose left eye was encircled by a red zero.

I shall not describe that conversation, for you would hear it better and at length if you were indeed there. If you exist, I implore you to consider such a visit. I fear you do not, however, and all such imprecations are worthless.

Soon, soon enough at any rate, the story of woe would finish, and the silent woman behind the high desk would indicate, in her way, her sympathy. But bereft of the power to bring the dead back to life, she would also signal her inability to help. Then the woman before her would turn to leave, and we should see the three upon her face. Withdrawing, I would wait until she had left the chamber and then follow her, closer and closer, until I caught her in the opening halfway down the corridor that connects the two halves of the complex.

"What are you?" She would say. "What do you want with me?"

"I am no-one. But I think that I can ease the suffering you feel."

I think, then, that it would be time for you let me be, and to return to your tunnels alone. I would make my way back to the grotto, of course, but after a short while. Now that I think about it, I should not wish to be

tempted to follow you on your way, for the rushes of wind and the sound of that beast that carved the tunnel complex frighten the curiosity out of me.

That beast - was it you, I wonder?

Chapter 15

When I woke that morning, still in the mask of nine, it was again before the light. For a long while I lay there in the pitch black of my dressing room, eyes open, staring out into the void around me. I could see nothing at all, and might well have been anywhere. There could have been nothing else but me and the bed and the wall next to it (those things I could feel), suspended in an unceasing vacuum.

As I kept my eyes open, however, I began to see strange flashes of light, infinitesimal in size and brightness. They appeared and disappeared, perhaps two of them a minute. I rolled on my back to get more comfortable, and the scintillations briefly increased as I moved then died back to their previous frequency. Laying there I began to get a dizzy feeling of motion. It felt like the bed was spinning to the left, carrying my whole body with it. The sensation was uncanny, and my toes began to tingle - which I interpreted as some centrifugal effect.

The sensation grew and grew as the minutes passed, until eventually it became so uncomfortable that I had to do something about it. I sat up, and saw two blotchy flashes in my eyes that just as soon disappeared. After a few moments sitting up the feeling of dizziness began to fade, but in its place another odd feeling was born. It was as if someone was in the room with me - at first, just moving around the room. Part of me knew that it was impossible, that I would surely be able to hear something if there were someone here. If nothing else, how could someone navigate the room in that total darkness without bumping themselves on the table and chair? The voice tells me now, in hindsight, that such things are possible - that I have seen such a feat performed, or read about it. It is certainly possible I have read about it. I have read many things (and had many things read to me), and I cannot consciously remember them all.

It may be that I did not wish to move, or it may be that I could not. Either way, I sat paralysed in my bed as the unknown person wandered around - closer, further, closer. I could not have told you where it was, this apparition, but I seemed to know when it was coming towards me,

and that it was. Inexorably, slowly, its meanderings brought it ever nearer. I wanted to put my hand over my head and hide, but I feared that any movement would attract its attention and hasten it. My heart seemed to twitch and beat deeply, and sometimes, to my great alarm, not to beat at all (although I was still breathing, so it must have been). Soon it seemed as though the unseen person must be leaning over me, it was so close. I imagined someone dressed entirely in black, a black mask over their face.

The lights came on, blinding me. I was convinced, at that moment, that the figure would leap forward to pounce on me. Throwing my arms up in defence, I scabbled backwards in the bed until I hit the wall. Nothing happened. Slowly I lowered my arms and looked around the room. It was empty, and just as I'd left it - except, of course, that the chair had been moved to the other side of the table and my clothes had been replaced with fresh ones. I gingerly got out of bed, and pulling on my underwear and trousers rushed into the bathroom. It was also empty. Nothing could have been here - nothing that could have got out that fast when the lights came on. I examined the room carefully - angling down to see if I could see around the u-bend of the toilet, carefully poking one of my little fingers through the drain and overflow in the sink, and the drain in the shower (none of them had any holes big enough to fit a finger - even a small one). I knocked on all the walls, but they could all have been made of rock a mile thick as far as I could tell. I was satisfied that there was no way in or out, but I felt uncomfortable.

By the time I had finished my inspection my breakfast (oatmeal) was rather tepid. I didn't feel like eating, but the force of habit is a strong thing, and so I forced it down. When I had finished the buzzer went, and I put the mask of nine into the dispenser. The unease returned - if that presence returned now, it would see me at my most vulnerable. A shiver whipped up my spine to my head, causing me to shrug my shoulders involuntarily.

Fortunately for me, however, the sensation of that person's presence was diminished greatly in the light. I still had the unsettling feeling that it existed somewhere, but I knew that it was not close, and was not coming closer. That distance between us meant relative safety, and when my buzzer rang and I was able to put on my new role (two), the feeling of security grew stronger still.

I left my dressing room, turned left, and walked to the banquet hall. I had not been there the day before (since nine is not required in the hall, or in the chambers of three, six, or seven), and forgetting for a moment

that I had been there at all since my nightmare half expected to see the place drenched in blood. It was not, of course - even had blood been spilled, those arcane servants who kept the complex clean would have seen to it by now. So, relieved, I took my mark and waited for the others to do the things required of them.

"I would hope that this banquet pleases you all," six was saying, "and if you find anything amiss please do not hesitate to call to me, for my job as host is to ensure that everything is pleasant and light."

I watched three carefully during six's speech. She sat at one of the tables on the far side of the room underneath the portrait of four, and every so often I would catch her sneaking a glance at me then looking away when she saw that I was still observing her.

After his chat with six, seven made his way over to me.

"I had not expected to see you here," he said carefully.

"Ah, but I could hardly be expected to miss this party! The social occasion of the year? Especially," I added, "since it is the only party that I have been able to attend, due to my work."

"Ah yes," seven muttered. "I trust business is well for you."

"Business is always well when entered into with an honest heart, my friend. I was sorry to hear about your own interests."

"A trifling matter," he dismissed it curtly. "We cannot all be lucky in trade."

"Indeed not. Why I myself was unfortunate enough to have my goods seized upon delivery to the north, as you may have heard. Still, fate is a see-saw that brings one fortune closer even as it snatches another away. It was due to that seizure that I had an empty hold and could do my duty by my fellow countrymen."

"Of course," seven sighed. We lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, and after a few moments I gestured towards three with my right hand.

"That lass, yonder."

"I see her. What of it?"

"Do you know her?"

"I do. She is the daughter of our host's brother, and thus his niece. As our fathers are in the business of government together, our families have dined together for many years. I have seen her grown from a delicate child into the fair woman you see before you now, and - I almost hesitate to say it - I fondly imagine that I will dine with her more in years to come."

"You are affianced?"

"Alas, not yet."

"I see."

"But I have a strong feeling that my suit will be recei... "

He was interrupted by six, who (having lead three across the room while we were speaking) arrived by interposing himself between seven and I. He shuffled nervously to one side and then the other, blocking seven while trying to avoid looking at him. After a few sallies seven threw his hands up and stalked off. Six relaxed (visibly so, I could see the tension dropping out of him), and turned to me.

"Will you permit me to introduce my niece?"

"I am honored," I said, bowing. Three offered her hand, which I was loathe to take - but as I could not refuse it at this point I lifted it gently with my own and bowed over it.

"This is the fearless merchant about whom so much has been said recently," six told her. "You may be aware that, his goods being stolen upon their arrival in the northern lands, he understood the change that had occurred in that land. Although he could have fled at no risk to himself he chose to use his vessel in the office of an ark, bringing back those of our people who could be accounted endangered by the new regime."

"How gallant," three acknowledged.

"I did but see the opportunity for what it was," I told her. "A gift given me by fate to pass on to my fellow man."

"Nonetheless, history shows us that many people are given such gifts and reserve them for themselves."

"My niece," six explained, "is a scholar, a student of some repute in the study of the past."

"Ah. A discipline alien to mine, for trade is for progress and tomorrow, not for the study of ruins and ancient languages."

"I beg to differ," she said. "Everything that has gone before has some bearing on what has yet to come. The mistakes we make today are so often repeats of those that have been made before - wars and trade included. You might learn a lot from some of the books I have read, master trader. About those who have made their fortunes in the years gone, and lost them too."

I accepted her point and we continued our conversation - six making his excuses and heading off to talk to his employee. Then (as you will guess I am sure) we talked for some time about the nature of her studies and how they might be applicable to my practise as a merchant. At length I offered to escort her home, for her own safety (although she protested that her safety had never been an issue before, and she was not - she laughed coyly - sure whether I myself were not the most she had to

fear in the town that night. I protested my innocent intentions, of course). We talked of this and that as we perambulated the room, picking up five in our wake, and finally three invited me up to her chambers while she decided on which book she might best gift me to stimulate an interest in the past and its study.

Her chamber was as it had always been, not the vertigo-inducing endless tunnel of a few nights before. I admired it, and she ran her fingers along the edge of the bookshelf, carefully considering her choice before settling on the book. Taking it down, she sat on the chair next to her desk and bade me sit on her bed.

"Are you sure that is seemly?"

"Who makes those rules?" She asked. "And for what purpose? It seems obvious to me that there can be no purpose served by blindly following tradition simply because it is tradition. Read the histories and see behind them, and you will know that these traditions originated somewhere and for some reason. But that reason is so often lost in the fog of time, and could bear examination in the light of day."

"Perhaps you have the right of it," I agreed, and sat down. She opened the book and looked through it (at, no doubt, one printed page and a folio of blank ones).

"Here is a book that may interest you," she said. "You may borrow it if you wish." She held it out, but uncertainly - I got the impression that she was afraid that I might actually take it, and suddenly the urge to lean forward and snatch it was almost overwhelming. I could not, though.

"I would hear it from you, for I doubt not that it will interest me. But yet my mind is sluggish to such matters and to overcome its idleness I would have that book's message transmitted in the most favourable manner. I can think of no illuminations, no kid vellum, no grace of script more likely to prejudice me towards learning than to hear it spoken by a voice that has much of the joyous lark about it."

"You flatter me."

"Indeed no, I serve you harshly if anything. If you hear flattery, it is your own modesty that makes it seem that way. Come, I would hear you read to me - is that too much to ask?"

"It is not. I would be happy to read always if I knew that I had such an audience."

She withdrew the book, opened it, and stared at the first page for a moment.

"The woman of who we speak," she read, "found herself trapped by her position. To thrive in such a bland environment a person must become faceless, must experience no emotions in herself."

A ball of dread seemed suddenly to be forming in my stomach.

"So she toiled, and the days ran together, each blurring one on the other so that trying to remember the week before became an impossible task - let alone remembering how it had been before she had come to that place. Every morning she performed the chores assigned to her. They were different enough that she could never find a rhythm, yet alike enough that she soon found that there was nothing in her life, nothing to ever look forward to. The same bland meals each evening, the same pokey place to call home - although she did not refer to it as that. She spoke often with her co-workers (all save one), but such conversations revolved only around work and were unsatisfying for the soul. Her despair and apathy grew and grew, and grew together, until she was little more than a machine did she but realise it.

"Then, one day, she was made to. Following one of her colleagues, she saw him stumble on a slippery floor and fall. On the ground he was wounded and vulnerable, and to her shock she suddenly realised that she was seeing him for the first time. It felt as though she had not seen another human face for a thousand years, and this one seemed the most beautiful thing she could imagine. Her heart was pierced, and after that whenever she saw him she could think of nothing else. She had let herself become something dead, and the sight of his face had brought her back from a dark land. She wished to tell him, to talk to him, but their work made it impossible. They talked in circles, but as they did she began to see that there were truths hidden under his words, as if those truths were veiled in silk. She realised that sometimes she had pretended to be a brave woman, and that pretence could become reality perhaps, if she just waited for the right moment."

Staring at her, dumbfounded, I realised that she was looking back - and that for a long while she had not been looking at the book. I felt suddenly sick, and reached out a hand to steady myself.

Chapter 16

It is a disaster. Somehow the world has begun to unravel, and I am powerless to prevent it - reduced only to the place of an observer.

As I circled through the party, I found myself in the difficult position of having to keep the others under observation without once catching their eye - for in those glances I saw accusations and disapprovals. Could they know why things had turned out the way that they did? None of them had been present at the event itself save the timid man and the overweight woman - no, I cannot call her that now. The seer, I will call her. The word seems both appropriate and inappropriate, invoking mystical powers as it does. The voice, however, reminds me that it is simply one who sees, as a fighter is one who fights, or an injurer might refer to one who injures. The seer, then. She was present, and the timid man. But only she could know the reason behind the... mistake. They could not know that - surely?

My mind had raced that night, and I had been struck with that peculiar form of insomnia in which one's mind is constantly thinking, but thinking to no purpose - simply freewheeling over and over the same thing, coming to no conclusion but unable to leave the subject of your anxiety at rest. I had had the unpleasant thought that perhaps the unseen audience were a thing that only affected me - regardless of what the seer had told me, was I the only one who truly did not understand his purpose here? Maybe the others, far from colleagues in my work, were observers of it who had taken their place here. Had they all heard, after the fact, of the seer's confession to me? Perhaps it was worse than that - perhaps they had planned it beforehand. Was the whole thing a construct designed to elicit some response from me? What response? My mind, as though in a fever, turned it over and over: constantly, uselessly. It seemed as though every time I came up with a new theory to explain the events of the day it was more horrible than the previous theory. If I had slept a minute longer, I am convinced I should have dreamt up some ultimate truth of the matter, one no doubt so terrible that I would be frozen with fear. and unable to act even now.

The seer was not present in the banquet hall that morning - a fact that I found both a disappointment and a relief. The gulf between the two possibilities was striking. Was she now an enemy or an ally? If an enemy, there was no way I could stop her, because I had no idea what end she might be working towards. But as helpless as I felt surrounded by other possible enemies, I could at least give them the benefit of the doubt as not knowing the whole of yesterday's events. That shared experience alone was enough to make me fear her as a foe.

If, on the other hand, I could count her an ally, that would explain the part of me that longed to see her so badly. She would be the first ally (save the voice, and he was a dubious ally at best) that I had had in all my time here. My questions - all the questions that I had had - was there now some chance of hearing answers to them? It might be that there was not, even then, but at least I could share them with someone else and perhaps (having brought them into the open light), dismiss some of them as impossible. I could know, for instance, whether other dressing rooms were the same as mine. It would not prove much, I admit, but it is a testimony to the paucity of information I had that I felt excited by even the possibility of proving that one tiny fact. Who knew where it might lead, anyway? And what if her dressing room were different? Depending on how different it was, that might lead to a whole host of possibilities. For once the chance of more questions excited me.

How to ask, though? It was not a simple thing, to hold in abeyance all the things one might want to know about life, fated only to be able to communicate in such a long-winded manner. She had seized her opportunity to tell me of her secret, but how long would it be before she played the role of two and I that of three? Only then, if my nerve held, would I be able to state my questions - and I should have to make them seem as though they could plausibly be part of the book that I (as three) were reading aloud. Would my nerve hold then, or seeing the words on the page would I be hypnotised by routine and simply read them out? I imagined in turn a rising or sinking feeling in the seer's heart.

Then, those questions asked, what a terrible thing to have to wait until my ally was given a chance at reply! If it were a long wait for my chance to put my questions, how long would the wait for answers seem? It could be so long that the seer might forget the questions, even.

This hope, then, was also a cruelty. For the possibility of being able to speak to the seer was so slim on any given day, and the possibility of her then being able to reply in good time as slim again. Add to that the chance that I had misread her yesterday - or that I had read her correctly,

but that she was an enemy in disguise, her word specifically designed to mislead me to some unknown end - and the situation seemed so fragile that to care about it at all did nothing more than invite heartbreak.

I felt ambiguous, also, about the absence of the man who had yesterday been seven. To be absent he would have to have been assigned the role of either ten, nine, eight, or four - everyone else being present at the moment. That was quite probable, of course, and would mean that I only had a one in four chance of meeting up with him - if he was wearing the mask of four today. Even then I would have to exchange no words, since my role as five requires me only to be present at that interception, not to comment at all. That, perhaps, is why the seer had waited so long. She had been there, I guessed, as five. Her boldness, although great by my standards, was perhaps not enough to exceed the bounds of tradition. She had said as much herself.

If he were in one of those roles I was happy that today I had been spared the problem of speaking to him. I would as soon avoid awkward questions, and the feeling of guilt would have made it hard for me to concentrate on my role (as it was doing, but it would have been more marked if he had been present). On the other hand, though, was the terrible possibility that we were short one of our number.

After the interview with ten had gone badly for him (as it would always do, of course), he came back from the other half of the complex to confront me, incensed that I had been worming my way (as he saw it) into the affections of the seer - into the affections of three, I mean. Although still half stunned, I had my wits enough about me to feign ignorance of his charges against me, drawing him out until he made the mistake of claiming a sovereignty over her charms. Then, as always, I struck back - accusing him of thinking nothing of her but only of himself, and as treating her as chattel to be fought over rather than as a human being to be won by kindness and mutuality of emotion. Enraged past rationality, he challenged me on a matter of honour, to be settled in the only way that seven knew how. I accepted, of course, and he returned to his chamber, whence at some length he emerged carrying the two wooden swords that we were to use to settle the matter in such a tragic fashion, leading to the oblivation of both our roles and - after that - to the oblivion of three in another manner.

So we had fought - he attacking first by an exaggerated overhead swing that I naturally countered with a parry in quinte. Our fight, although each blow was well telegraphed, was frightening nonetheless. Even at the best of times it is so, and with my mind at every moment

going back to that extemporised story that I had earlier been told, my reactions were slower and clumsier than usual, and several of the parries against his blows were so late that they almost failed in their intentions. Perhaps that would have been the favourable result, I wonder now. There would be something more fitting in that, rather than in the concrete manner in which my earlier imaginations had almost been realised.

The smack of wood against wood (which we pretended to hear as that of steel against steel) continued as we chased each other around the room, each in our turn depending on whether our imaginary fortunes waxed or waned. At one point, having the ascendancy, I forced my opponent back until his rear leg hit one of the coffee tables, and realising that he could not yet redouble his attack he stepped backwards up onto the table and fought against me from the advantage of height. I swept my pinewood blade at his legs and he jumped up and back again, dodging my swing by a comfortable margin and leaving me with the necessity of climbing the table myself to press my attack. I decided against such a risky manoeuvre and backed off, allowing him to circle the obstruction and make his own sorry, against which I found myself on the back foot. So, to and fro, the upper hand of the fight passed from one combatant to another at any point at which one of us seemed likely to make a fatal blow and win the day for our cause. The audience, if they existed and had not the clever wit to pierce to the root of our behaviour, must have thought us most evenly matched and would have been astounded by the constant reversals which attended the duel.

At length, though, in our roles as in life, a duel must end - and if it does not end badly for one of the disputants, that can only be because it ends badly for both of them. Three rushed into the room, and I can hardly imagine what she must have been thinking after professing to me so cleverly her secret (the secret which, I think now, I must have known myself), having to wait alone while I hacked and slashed at our colleague.

Her intervention, though, was more than it should have been. My blood ran as cold as a mountain stream as I saw her, certain that seven would himself grasp instantly what had gone on between us. She called out for him to stop (not us, you see, but him), and I saw that give him pause. When we did not throw down our arms she threw herself between us, and in a sudden fit I understood that she really might be hurt, and that only I could stop it. As seven lunged forward I stepped in and parried his blade away. So unexpected was my move that he, thinking his thrust would go unopposed, had not gripped his hilt forcefully

enough to contend with my counter. His blade came up more quickly than I had expected, and one edge of my own caught him in the side of the head.

Time seemed to slow. He cried out, and I could see that the blow was glancing, not enough (I hoped with all my being at that second) to prove fatal, but the pulling motion that I had begun instinctively drew a sharp wooden edge across his temple - traced in bright red. I stared in horror as he toppled sideways onto a chair, and three - facing the wrong way but obviously seeing the look in my eyes, turned out sideways and away from us, uttering a strangled scream as she saw seven. Then, the final irony of the fight. As he fell, his sword dropped also - but with its tip towards me so that hit my chest with a painful thud and then drew itself down and sideways as if wielded by a surgeon opening me up. With a clatter it fell from his hand and onto the floor and I could only sink down onto my knees, shocked beyond the ability to act.

I will say little of the moments that followed - only to mention that I had imagined worse than had actually happened. Three clung to me as if she feared that I were truly dying, and I lay there feeling that seven were mortally wounded - which he was not, although I did not know it. Three said some things to me, some that I refuted and some that I accepted - and while three spoke I fancy that the seer also spoke, although I had not presence of mind enough to hear her words in three's speech. After some time laying there, when events had come to their natural conclusion, seven awoke with groan and got to his feet as I did. We said nothing, but I was so grateful that it was not until I woke up this morning that I was stricken with the enormity of what I had done, and the narrow escape I had had from its consequences.

But that was yesterday. Today I did not see that man at all, not behind any mask. Even in the tunnels where four and one met I did not see him, and the fear that the wound was more serious than it had seemed (or as serious as it had seemed at first, indeed), came back to me. As I waited there for one and four to discover each other I thought I heard, way away in the tunnels, a voice singing. A beautiful high voice as clear as crystal glass. A siren's lure, calling me just a little bit further, to that place where I had myself been one, and had lost my footing and fallen against the wall.

At the end of everything I returned to my corridor, and as I opened my dressing room door the silent woman in the mask of nine passed me on the way to hers. I looked away quickly, but at the edge of my masks's

eyeslits I saw a sudden movement - she had also tried to avoid meeting my gaze.

Chapter 17

Near the end of my dream I found myself in the chambers in which eight held court - but rather than the sparse chamber room which existed in the complex, it was filled with furniture. The lectern was made from hardwood instead of pine, and the floor was lined with rows of chairs instead of just one single row against the wall. Banners of unusual design (which I cannot now describe - I wish to, but am unable through the fading of my memory) hung along the back wall, and eight (when she entered) was dressed not like the rest of us, but in a black gown. Above her mask sat a powdered white wig.

"Step forward," she called. "Say what you must."

I did as she asked, passing a small fence that divided the chairs from the rest of the room. Columns at the end of each fence supported large vases. From these sprang huge fronded leaves that I had to push out of my face to pass into the inner sanctum of the chamber. When I emerged eight was no longer alone - half visible figures sat to my right and left behind large tables, and before her lectern another shadowy form sat in front of a typewriter. I tried to look at them but they were invisible to my eyes, existing only when I turned away from them and my mask obscured them from my line of sight.

"Say what you must," she repeated. I did not know what to say, though, and tried to explain. My voice would not work. I gestured at my mouth with my hands, and they felt as though they had been tied to the ground with thousands of strong elastic cords. I was just able to move them, but with a great effort only - and each time that I relaxed, unable to keep up the motion, they were pulled back down to my sides. I knew that I was captured, that guards restrained me.

"Then that is that," eight said sadly. "If you will not act, there is no hope for you."

I tried in vain to tell her that it was not that I would not act, but that I could not - but nothing I did could get her attention and she continued to lament my intransigence. She raised her gavel.

"Release him so that he may hear his sentence."

My arms were suddenly freed, and my struggles caused me to leap backwards into the fence. My back brushed against the vase there, and it toppled to the ground with the noise of smashing china.

Everything was dark, and my heart pounded madly in my chest. Then, from the bathroom, the sound of scraping and shuffling. The hair on my arms and legs stood up. I sat still for a moment, unable to do anything, unwilling to believe that I had heard anything. Then the sound again. I thought of the seer, and was overcome with a sudden bravery. Swinging my legs out of bed, I rushed to where I thought the door was. My time in the dressing room was a blessing, for my body remembered even without the prompting of sight just how far it was, and when I groped forwards for the handle I found that I was less than a foot from the door. My hand found its aim in a second, and I yanked open the door and plunged inside.

It was still pitch black, of course, and I moved along the wall, my arms flailing in front of me in order to try to catch whatever it was that had been moving in there. I was afraid, but so full of adrenaline that I could not think about it at the time (in contrast to when it was all over, by which time I was so petrified with fear that I could barely move to turn over in bed).

My flailing did not make contact with anything, though - anything except the door of the shower cubicle, which I had left slightly open before going to bed that night and which my right elbow caught directly on the funny bone, sending a jolt of numbness through that limb. I felt inside the shower with my left arm, and there was nothing there either.

I collapsed back against the wall, exhausted by the nervous energy I had expended to get there at all. For a few minutes I stood there, naked in the darkness and getting steadily colder. Whatever I had heard (if I had heard anything) was gone now.

Slowly, though, at the edge of my senses, I became aware of something more. A sound, at first just a tone that I thought must be coming from my own ears - but then growing and fading, and following a definite rhythm - the voice, the singing voice that I had heard before. I told myself that I was imagining it, but as I listened I began to be able to make out the shapes of individual words - not the words themselves, but the spaces in between them and the intonations that told me they were something. It was as though, looking at a page, I had squinted my eyes until the written words upon it became nothing more than blotches, longer or shorter, with more or fewer protrusions up and down so that

even if I could not read it out to two, I could tell that there was something there to be read.

I moved back towards the door along the wall, and as I did I began to feel that the sound was localised, that it was coming from somewhere in front of me. Stepping gingerly forward I reached out my hands until they contacted the basin and then centered myself before it. The sound was directly in front of me. I leant forwards, and it got louder. The words were still obscure, but I could hear a mournfulness in the voice now. Reaching in, I put my hand over the plughole and the sound was blotted out. I took it away again, and the sound came back.

Putting my head directly into the basin, I managed to knock it slightly against one of the taps. Rubbing away the pain, I turned so that my left ear was directly over the plughole, and tried to make out a few of the words. It was frustratingly difficult - just when it seemed like I was getting the measure of the song the pitch would suddenly rise or swoop. I could make out a few words: "woods... .in vain... .doorway", but nothing more than those, and those few separated by a whole line or more of unidentifiable lyrics so that they could not possibly go together. The song went on and on, and I was getting colder and colder, and knew I must do something. I was afraid to leave to try to fumble around in the dark for my clothes, though. I knew that the singer might have stopped before I got back. So I turned again, and whispered into the hole.

"Hello?" Then, louder, "Hello? Can you hear me? Hello?", until finally I was within striking distance of shouting.

The song stopped abruptly.

"Hello?" I called. "Are you there? Please, keep singing!" I listened. Nothing. "Please, I.. you have to keep singing. Who is this? Can you hear me? Say something. Say something, please. Please say something."

I pleaded with the sink for what seemed like hours, until I began to shiver so hard that I could hardly speak. Eventually, conceding defeat, I felt my way back into the other room and into bed, and it was then that I realised what I had done and knew that if the other figure, the dark one from before (perhaps the face I had also seen in the mirror long ago) - if that presence had been in the corner of the room all along I would not have known - and he, seeing all, would have been able to report everything. Perhaps the voice that I heard had understood that, and had been wise to stop singing when I foolishly announced my presence to her. Will there be no end to the mistakes I make?

The light of morning could not come too soon for me, and I quickly got up, got dressed, and laid into my breakfast. I was still cold from the

night, and the warmth of the oatmeal was more pleasant than its taste, leaving me feeling as though I was thawing from the inside out. I put five back into the dispenser when the buzzer went off, then waited patiently and motionlessly for his replacement. A few other buzzers sounded faintly from the other rooms, then my own as the cradle flipped over and deposited the face of one into my waiting hands. Securing him quickly (but tightly), I left my room.

One is required for two main duties. His minor duty is to be present at the banquet hall, as a symbol of six's magnanimity in inviting an employee (and one so lowly) to his triumphant celebration. After that his real work begins - first in the conversation in which six gives him his commission, and then after that his patrol, in which he searches in vain for any fire or risk of fire. After that, as one, his time is his own. For some reason he is never required to be present in front of ten in her chambers, which sometimes strikes me as odd. Why should he not be there? Four is certainly there to make her complaint, and eight as the purported source of the liquid (although you, of course, will know better). Why not one? Perhaps it is tied up with the nature of the evolution of the play, although that theory is no more than my own grasping attempt at some explanation of the tunnel systems and nine. It strikes me now that if there were fewer roles in the past, then some of us would not have been needed. There it is, a strange argument. There are ten of us, in ten dressing rooms (let us assume), so there must always have been ten roles.

I circulated at the party and recieved my little inspirational speech. Then I watched seven (the silent woman) make her displeasure apparent at being shoehorned out of the way by six, although before I could see how she handled the discourse on treachery and the necessity of observation, six found me and dragged me off to his office for our conversation about duty - and those specific duties which I was to have laid upon me for the near future.

I had not seen the seer among our number during the banquet (neither her nor the actress were present, all the other three women, however, were there), and I realised as I was being spoken to that although my duties (both in playing out the role, and the duties the role itself endured) were strict, they mentioned nothing about what I was to do after having given the vial to six and before discovering the bodies of the two slain duellists. There was a period of time (a long period of time) which I, when I had played one before, I had spent in continuance of his earlier duties - patrolling the corridors and the near tunnels, avoiding only those rooms (ten's audience room and the banquet hall and attendant

chambers) in which the others were playing their parts. My presence was not requested at the decision over the philtre, and it was undesirable during the fight (since as an officer of the law I might be required to intervene in some manner, which would clearly prevent events from taking the required course).

So I nodded at the things that six was telling me, and put my mark on the paper, and received it from him once he had added his. Then I went about all the things that I was supposed to do. I would not have it said that I was incautious or offhand in the performance of my tasks. In particular I was careful of my footing when I travelled the tunnels. I caught four in the process of delivering seven's vial to her, and delivered it to six once I had obtained it. He expressed his admiration for my diligence, although he also let slip that he was somewhat at a loss what to do with the potion. He wished to take some kind of action but was wary of taking on a person so influential as seven, and certainly one with such close ties to his family and the town.

"These grandees," he said, "these bedrocks of the community are not to be dislodged so easily, not without dire repercussions for those such as we who shelter underneath the covering they and their kin provide. I shall have to think carefully about such action, and there is a part of me that earnestly desires a world in which you had not brought this to me. But such a world it is, and I can see that your devotion to your duty allowed you no other course of action. I shall take this now, and deliberate at length as to what should be done. You may go now."

I left, and walked to the tunnels. Patrolling there, I waited until six and seven had passed and then until four had gone on his way as well. I knew then that if I was lucky that would be my chance. When they had all gone, I followed them into my half of the complex and began to patrol. Before long seven stormed out, and as she did the others began to make their own way around. Luck smiled upon me - the seer emerged from the courthouse and walked back to her lab. Eight!

I circled around the complex once more, and then stopped outside the door to the laboratory, knocked once, and entered.

Eight looked up in surprise.

"What are you do.. I mean," she caught herself, "What, pray tell, is the meaning of this intrusion? I am in the middle of an important experiment, as you can see. My time is most valuable, and I must devote as much of it as I can to the pursuit of knowledge. Are you a student? A fellow scientist? What, I enquire, what manner of man are you, and why do you bother me? Speak up!"

I bowed.

"I beg your pardon, but I am neither of those things. I apologize for intruding, but I am an officer of the state, and my duty is to see to it that the town is safe from fire and from like accidents. It seems to me that an alchemical laboratory might be quite a fertile breeding ground for flames."

"This is no alchemist's lair," she said indignantly. "This is science, the light that shines on darkness and that is responsible for dispelling such myths as may spill from the tongue of the ill-educated. Indeed, your very words condemn you to that sad populace. Fire breeding, indeed! Fire is no spirit, no malignant creature as the foolish words of story-tellers might paint it. It is a simple product of that substance, that subtle fluid that we now know as caloric. There is nothing mysterious about it, for science has illuminated that which all others themselves use as their sole illumination."

"I beg your pardon, mistress scientist, but all of this has no bearing on my presence. Caloric, phlogiston, or what have you, it is no subtle fluid that I search for, but such fluids as all can associate with fire - oils, and suchlike, as might be used by an arsonist in a display of enmity towards our domain."

"I see," she said. "And are you satisfied with what you have found?"

"I am not," I asserted, "but I have been involved in conversation with your person ever since I arrived, and have not had time to examine the surroundings."

"Then do so," she said. I looked around the lab cursorily. When I had finished, she asked me again. "Is your duty quite finished?"

I looked her straight in the eye.

"I would have you understand that my duty is never finished," I said. "That is all that there can be, for we are pressed upon by our enemies, and to think of anything else might invite disaster. I must do what I am charged with doing, for if I do not then all may come crashing down around us."

As I spoke I could see her sag with disappointment, her shoulders dropped, her pose one of despair and resignation where before it had spoken of confidence and hope renewed.

"I see," she said flatly. I turned to go - I would be needed in the banquet hall shortly, to come upon the scene of carnage that I should sound the alarm for.

"However, I do not see it as duty today," I added, my hand on the door. "and I hope you will not view my intrusion as an unmitigated

annoyance or distraction from your work. Take heart in a moment's company, and in knowing that as long as one officer of the law exists to protect you, you are never alone."

Chapter 18

That night I had intended to stay awake after the lights went out in the hope that I would hear the singing, but they obstinately remained lit until I actually became sleepy. As the lights finally went off I thought that I was just keeping my eyes closed for a moment more, but the next moment they came on again and I discovered to my dismay that I had slept straight through the night. I cursed myself, got out of bed, and threw on my clothes. After my breakfast (fruit), I went through the ritual of handing back the mask of one, waiting my turn with the buzzer, and finally receiving my new role - seven, which I accepted with some dismay since it meant that I must fight again.

If only the shutters would stay open, I thought to myself. If I could have, I would have given back that mask, re-rolled the dice and become another person. I fondly imagined the dispenser as a one-armed bandit - I would pull a lever again and another mask would appear, and another, and another. If I gambled for long enough, I wondered, would that engine ever produce the mask that I had dreamt about, that unwounded mask which hid the faces of those unfortunate beasts, those that supplied the eyes for nine's apothecary? The prospect was at once hideous and liberating.

Still, this was the mask that I had been given, and I must put it on. I fastened it carefully and left my room. To my right, the silent woman came out of her room. I risked a glance and saw that she was staring directly at me. When I looked again, longer this time, she held my gaze and slowly lifted a raised finger up to her mask. Laying it across the void where ten's mouth would be, she held that way for a few moments and then suddenly swept it down, turning abruptly to her left and moving off. I stood motionless for a while, watching her go, but the feeling of guilt crept over me until I had to head for the interconnecting passage at a jog.

What had that been? Was she telling me to keep quiet? That she knew that I had been talking to the seer illicitly? She had been in this mask just yesterday, was it possible that she had followed me? She must have

rushed off, surely, to have taken part in the duel that I had discovered the consequence of. Was it possible that she had seen me hanging around and had realised my purpose? It was hard to imagine that if she had seen me she would not become suspicious in some way, even if she had been unable to divine the exact reason for her suspicions. It was a troublesome thing that our actions were so circumscribed by our roles that any deviation from tradition was noteworthy.

I hastened to the banquet hall, where (having opened with a hearty speech about the nature of fun, and an exhortation to us all to be vigilant against a lack of morale which would surely lead to dissatisfaction and the formation of a fifth column of intellectuals favourable to our enemies), six came to me and expressed his concern about the scar that I had developed since last we spoke.

"It is a trifling thing," I told him.

"I warn you, duelling is a sport not to be taken lightly. Your scar is testimony to the dangers inherent in any swordplay."

"The danger, I assure you, is only to the other man."

"I have heard as much," he said pointedly, and I was about to reply when I suddenly wondered if his choice of words were merely an unfortunate serendipity, or if they were in fact more than that. "But I fear that one day your opponent will be standing over a corpse in your clothing, assuming the same air of invulnerability."

"There is only one person who will stand over my corpse," I laughed, trying to shake off my unease, "and he will be easily distinguishable, for few duellists choose a scythe for their weapon."

Six moved off on his rounds - to chide five, who I saw was the seer today. I wondered what he would say to her, and then even more what she would say to him. In some short time I would be speaking with her myself, of course, and I longed for and feared what she might say behind her words in that short conversation.

I spoke to two, of course, but when I was rudely interrupted (or not so rudely, of course, since I knew that it was coming and had prepared myself a speech of polysyllables just so that the interruption might more easily come within a word) I found myself lingering within earshot rather than leaving, just so that I might discern whether there were undertones in that conversation too - undertones, perhaps, that I had missed before but which might be kin to that which had passed between the seer and me.

"This is the colonel who led the charge," six explained to the actress (who was today two). "His devotion to duty was most admirable. When his column was ambushed he held his place when others faltered."

"How exemplary," three simpered.

"It was nothing," two said carefully, and then: "Military training simply succeeded with me where it failed with someone else. A drill instructor somewhere is the one who should be lauded, because all I did was follow my duty. A blind obedience to rules, to doing the same thing the same way, is all that is required in situations like that. People say that I reacted with brilliance to a difficult situation, but my reactions were nothing more than an impulse. You might as well praise my leg for jumping when a doctor strikes my knee."

"Surely," six argued, "you do not mean to deny your own agency in the affair? I have heard it said that your decision to signal the fleet was one of the turning points in the battle - that it was that one act that transformed a rout into the orderly retreat that preserved the life of many a soldier."

"Some may say that that communication was important, but following orders was a thousand times more important than any missive."

I left the conversation at that point, unable to bear any more of this to and fro that was slowly but surely swinging the heart of my beloved away from its rightful aim and toward this mock-modest interloper. I could only take two things from that conversation. Either there were no hidden message there, or it was some pointed reference to my own discourse the day before. They might have been giving me a warning not to attempt such a thing again - in which case, I supposed, I would have to count the seer no good ally. Still, it was possible that the conversation was innocent entirely, and that it was just fate that I should hear it as some kind of comment on myself. That was not entirely unlikely - my state of mind was not, I was willing to admit, the most balanced on such matters. I was certainly prejudiced at that time to consider everything of relevance, even those things which would clearly have passed such a way with or without my presence.

I scorned six's attempt at explanation, then wandered and wandered until, sitting down, the seer approached me in the guise of five. I found myself smiling, and for a moment was worried that she might see - until I remembered that my mask would transmit nothing of my emotions.

"Good day to you," she greeted me.

"Is it good? I see no reason to suppose that."

"Oh. Is it.. Do you take position as an enemy of the day yourself, or invoke some other enemy to attack my assertion?"

"The enemy needs no invoking," I said, gesturing towards two. "Unlike a demon bound in a circle, that one appears and vanishes when it pleases him, and does not trifle with the twisting and misinterpretation of some foolish sorcerer's ways, but instead works his own mischiefs according to the timetables he prefers."

"Surely he is called the hero of the hour," she pointed out, "and is not blamed for such mischiefs but applauded for them, for such pranks as his are at the expense of those we would see overcome."

"I care not for what the herd of peasants and shopkeepers think of him. He would steal by subterfuge or persuasion that which would belong to me, and that must place me as his implacable foe. For let once such as he gain possession of those things as you prize and they are never yours again. The people would think it right that he should have gains and riches, and should those prizes be obtained from those they fear they think it even more right. Churls and dogs - let them finance their own awards, I say - but no. They would take my wealth and use it as their own to raise on high such villains as he."

"Perhaps, still, you wrong him. Is it not possible," she said carefully, "for a man and a woman to talk without such traffic as you fear springing forth from that genteel intercourse?"

I thought about this for a moment, looking away from her so that I could not see her eyes and let them influence my reply. Two and three still sat in conversation across from us, and I saw six take one by the shoulder and lead her into his office.

"I grant your point, of course. Such chatter does not lead inevitably to ruin as I may have intimated. Yet care must still be taken, for with familiarity the ears open to words of polite flattery, and therein lies a fault through which the spirits which would control our actions might enter. If, as we are taught by preachers and other such vermin, it is true that they watch us all the time."

"Do you then believe that, that there are such observers? If it were true that demons and fairies and those of like ilk were an audience to our every move we should surely be afraid to do act at all - for fear that some misstep, some slip of the tongue, would invite such punishment or possession as you speak of."

"Who can tell? There are some things between the floor and the ceiling that are not seen by those who walk there. In some ways it might be

useful if such things existed, for I might ask them then to report to me, and know those things that I would understand more fully."

"Some see more than others," she suggested.

"It is so with all things. Some are stronger, and we use them to break rocks. Some are more inclined to computation, and they figure for us. If greater sight could be turned to a skill worth of employ, we should surely be foolish to hesitate to put it to work for us."

"My skills have been employed strictly for my own benefit until now."

"Then I see no gain in turning from tradition too quickly - your benefit from such a vocation would be assured, you have my word."

"It is heartening to hear you say so, for although my curiosity must be indulged I find that I have need nowadays of something more - an ally, you might say, with whom I can share those secrets I discover without fear of censure or betrayal. It is difficult to place one's trust in those with whom you have no common care to bind together. But you and I both stand to suffer greatly should our secret surveillance be revealed, and so I do not worry that your wagging tongue will sell me into the chains of meddling authority."

"If you say that I, likewise, have no cause to fear betrayal at your hand," I agreed, "then let us shake upon our partnership."

I offered my hand.

Chapter 19

I thought I heard the singing again last night, but now that I am awake I begin to doubt my ears. It was dark when I woke, and I could hear a faint ullulation wafting from the open door (I had, the last two nights, left it ajar when I went to bed - although it was closed tight when I awoke each morning). The overall tone rose and fell mournfully, and imparted an overwhelming emotion of loss. The more I listened to it the louder it seemed to get, until suddenly I was hearing words, distinguishable words:

Warned her of that door through which
many had gone but no-one had returned,
but she replied that oblivion she
preferred to living spurned.
So turned her back on family
and said goodbye to friends,
and travelled through that door to
where the cycle never ends.

I could not tell you with any certainty, though, whether I have accurately described what I heard - for it seems to me now that my memories are unreliable about such things as occur during the night. I did not get out of bed, so I could easily be accused of imagining the whole thing and I would have no defense against such an accusation.

I must have fallen asleep again (if, indeed, I ever woke), for I remember nothing of the song after those lines and my next experience was waking at the prompting of the lights, climbing up out of bed and getting dressed. My clothes as usual were pressed and folded neatly, and I put seven aside for a moment while I ate my meal of egg and muffin. That done, I donned him again to comfort me for those brief minutes before I was called by the buzzer to return him. I did that, and it was not long before I was returned the part of three.

I reached up and put the mask on. Then, with the frightening edges of vision blotted safely out, I checked the mask by hand and in the mirror to ensure that it would not come off. The view from the eyeholes was

comfortable and right, and I knew that there was no chance of a disaster today should I lose my footing when I entered the tunnels.

I left my dressing room and made my way to the banquet hall, where I was to wait, throwing glances at two until the time came for us to be introduced. I arrived first (even before those who lived in that half of the complex), and carefully examined each of the new arrivals - first two (the woman from this half of the complex who was neither the slim small woman nor the seer), then five (the timid man), then one (the angry one), seven (the actress, who for a moment I thought might be the silent woman until she ordered a nebulous waiter to bring her a drink), and finally six (one of the indistinguishable men).

You know the order of events, of course. Six welcomed everyone to the banquet, while managing to deftly avoid the subject of what precisely the banquet celebrated. He hinted at the threat from the north, touched obliquely on some great triumph that had been achieved on the home front, but never once told us in plain language what it was we were supposed to be thankful for. Still, we all knew that we had to be thankful (save seven, who of course understood that she was to be denied her dream of marriage to me by the untimely intervention of two, to say nothing of my own opposition - or at least apathy - towards such a conjunction).

I waited, casting my coy looks at two every now and again, until my time came to be introduced. I wondered where the seer was today - was she eight or four, who I would not be meeting? Was she wondering when we would next be able to speak?

Six came to me, took me by the elbow, and led me to where two and seven stood, barging seven unceremoniously out of the way (she emitted a tiny yelp of frustration, then stamped her foot in pique and stalked off).

I talked to two and tried to discern something from our conversation, but her speech was as devoid of information as any could be. So we exchanged our pleasantries, the subtle hostilities that masked the - what was it that these two were supposed to feel between them? Love? Lust?

After we discussed the niceties of whether a martial career or a scholarly one gave more insight into the nature of human life, we went to my chamber and I chose a book (out of the wide selection I was allowed, ha ha). Then I opened it, and I looked at the words, and suddenly the day did not seem so routine after all. I just stood, staring at the book.

"Please, proceed." Two prompted me.

"I.. yes, sorry."

I cleared my throat.

"Finding himself free of obligation that afternoon, he travelled to the laboratory of the scientist under the cover of his patrol. She was surprised to see him, but quickly recovered herself and managed to ask him why a fireman had come to visit her and disturb her studies. Thinking carefully, he took his chance. He chose his words slowly, disguising underneath the dialogue that he was obliged to deliver a message to his new-found friend.

"He was afraid of getting caught, afraid that he was being taken for a fool. So he told her that they had to bow to their duties, and that little more could be possible between them. He saw her face sag, and understood that she had hoped for more, that after all of her time thinking she was alone, the realisation that she was not had bouyed her up so far that she could not see the status quo as anything more than a disappointment. He knew he had made his point, and as he left he said what he truly wanted to say - that she was not alone, that he had understood her."

I closed the book, and placed it carefully back on the shelf. Two was staring at me, and I thought for a moment that she must know, that that revelation of my story, written down in black and white, had contained everything that had happened to me before and after in some coded form. But if that were true, two gave nothing of it away.

"I have heard many such stories told in foxholes," she said. "But perhaps not so prettily written, nor so charmingly read. There is truth in what it says, no doubt, for it shows that underneath the duty that is accorded to us there must be some hope, some last thing that crawls from the box of obligations that society opens for us, and which we must accept without a chance for forethought."

We talked and talked, but nothing of our conversation remains to me now, so I could not tell you her words nor discern in hindsight whether they had any hidden meaning to them. Eventually the time came when two had to leave me, to meet with six briefly and be informed of seven's plan - so that she might meet seven and challenge her.

I sat, sometimes just staring at the book, sometimes taking it down and staring at the contents, unable to believe the words that I was reading. The last few days had gone so quickly, so much had changed within them, and now this? What could it be but a warning to me? There was an audience - or someone, something who watched us. Or, at the very least, who watched me. All the speculation I had indulged in in the past, all of the theories I had made and discarded, and made again - so many of them had skipped over or assumed one fact, the fact that I now held

proof of in my hands. It was a warning, no doubt, and if the audience existed in some form then they would surely see anything I did, but I had somehow to show it to the seer. To know something more about this place than I had been able to glean from my daily chores was intoxicating. As a warning it must surely have been intended to frighten me - and it had not missed its aim at all, not by a long shot. But whoever wrote this, did they also suspect the excitement that it had sparked in me? If they had not they had made an epic miscalculation.

The sound of raised voices and the smack of wood on wood outside called me to my cue, and the pressure of time forced my hand. Without thinking, I snatched up the book from the shelf and tore the page out, then folded it quickly once, twice, and tucked it into the waistband of my boxer shorts. Then, tossing the book onto my desk, I came out to interrupt the mutually fatal melee.

When seven and two had finally died I went to visit ten - who as expected dispensed such advice as I was not prepared to accept. She could not help me, of course, I had not expected that, but - as was required - she laid upon me a burden that enhanced my pain manyfold. I left that empty courtroom with my head low, but all the time I could feel the folded slip of paper against my waist and I knew that I would have to find some way to pass it on.

I made my way back to my chambers, but as I got halfway down the interconnecting corridor I heard heavy footsteps in clacking low-heeled boots behind me, and I turned to find the seer standing behind me, wearing the mask of nine.

"Why are you here?" I asked. Nine stepped back, head thoughtfully cocked to one side and up.

"I wonder," she said. "Still, is that not a question for the philosophers?"

"I mean, what do you want with me? I am not in the mood for trifling jousts of wit, for I had such as those earlier in the day, and now they seem so distant that they are a mere mockery of my despair."

"I know of your despair. I think that I can help. Know you of what your professed lover came to my master for?"

"Which lover?" I asked, laughing without humour, "for it seems that unbeknownst to me I had a very surfeit of them this morning, and yet now I am left with none."

"I speak of the one who was your childhood friend."

"Ah, vile age that must turn friendship into love or animosity!"

"Indeed. Do you know that she had come to my master for a potion that would make you forget your other love and fall enamoured of her?"

She proposed to steal your heart, and you would have known not that it was not your own wish that cleaved you to her."

"Alas, is there no end to these revelations of horror and evil? Is it not enough that I must lose my heart, my love, and my friend all in one day? Must I also learn from beyond the grave that those I thought most trustworthy among my allies in secret conspired against me? What now, will you tell me that the dashing amazon that courted me so earnestly did so merely for a farthing wager?"

"Calm yourself, sir," she said. "I will tell you no such thing. Your lover was just that, and whether you acknowledge it now or no, you still have friends that will support you."

"What does it avail me to have such friends if I am unable ever to speak to them of what has become of me?"

"What makes you think that you may not?"

"You mentioned a potion," I changed the subject back to that required of us. "Could your master provide such a thing? It seems to me, as a scholar, that such things are talked about much in the ancient histories that are as many parts myth as fact, but little in the recent past of science and reason. If your master has made a discovery that would allow him to effect such a change in personality as you say was the aim of my one-time friend, then such a discovery would have drawn all of his ilk to study at his feet. Yet I rarely see anyone come in or out of his house."

"He has no such power," mine assured me.

"Then what... "

"But I do. Science is but half the story, master scholar, and my master's dismissiveness towards alchemy and the mystical arts hides a secret that I would confide in you now - he employs powers that are not spoken of in scientific circles, powers that he cannot wield himself, but which he has bound me to wield in his stead. I serve in the office of a cat's paw to him, do you see?"

"You are a demon?"

"No such am I, just a humble servant. But it is to me that he came for the potion that would have wreaked its enslaving work on you, and I was more than capable to the task assigned me."

"Why tell me this now?"

"I tell you this because I think that I can help you. You have said, for I overheard you talking with the arbitrator, that death would be no worse than the punishment that you have had forced upon you - and you may be right, for to be a prisoner of such grief is bad enough, but to have had it forced upon you as though a chastisement even though you are the

injured party and not the injurious? That is an indignity laid atop a wound, and no good heart can see that and feel untouched by your plight."

"It is so. But in what manner do you think you can help me? You think me too little of a man to take my own life? It is not so, for though I am a student and no warrior, I do not lack in strength of arm, nor in courage. It would not be the work of seconds for me to take the sword that struck down my hopes for the future and with it draw a line through the sad epilogue that those hopes have written for me instead."

She waved her hands so as to stop me.

"Indeed not! I have no doubt in your strength, either that of your arm or your purpose. But there is another way, a happier way for all, that will blot out your pain and yet allow some hope of happiness in the future. Come, follow me."

She took me to the tunnel entrance nearest the banquet hall, and led me through those rock passages. At one point, a point I recognised, she stopped briefly.

"Follow me closely," she warned me earnestly, "for I would not see you lose your way.. or your footing."

My breathing redoubled as we made our way to her grotto, and a thought came to me as we proceeded. Could this be my chance? If the tunnels truly were something alien to the complex, perhaps there was some measure of privacy I could count on. As we entered the cavern where nine worked, I reached quickly for the piece of paper and dropped it behind us on the floor.

"I spoke of a potion that would make you forget your love, and cleave instead to a new one."

"You did."

"But here is the ancestor of that potion," she said, holding up another, smaller vial. "It will not make you any more susceptible to love than your own nature makes you. But the other work of which I spoke, that it will do. You have only to drink of this and you will forget everything about the last few days. Is that not preferable to death?"

"Preferable indeed." I reached forward and grasped the bottle. "What a tiny thing, to contain within it the promise of oblivion. Yet can not great forests grow from seeds that would fit this jar were there thousands of them? I said that I was more ready for death, but now that there is a choice, I find that death's attraction wanes. For what is death but another lover, the final one who will not let you go whether you will it or not? To sleep in that marital bed that has canopy, and mattress, and headboard

but has as well three other walls - that is not a rest that I am prepared to say my vows for yet, and neither would I see the only children of my body the worms who, crawling in that darkness, feasted not at my table but at my corpse."

I uncorked the bottle and raised it to my lips.

"So, spirit - for such I see you are, whether you deny it or no - I thank you for your gift. Ahead of me is rest, but such a rest as may give hope for joy. Behind me I leave everything that I have learnt these past days, these days of misery made all the deeper for the peaks of joy they followed."

I pointed back to the tunnel we had come from, and the speck of white paper. Nine looked, and then met my gaze for a few moments. She began slowly to circle around me, feigning tending her workbenches, as I looked into the mouth of the bottle. Once she had reached the cave mouth, she swiftly scooped up the paper - and I, to give a distraction, poured the bottle's greenish contents into my mouth. My tongue went numb almost instantly, so I was unable to taste the potion as it slid into my throat.

I looked up, triumphant, to see nine looking at the piece of paper. After a moment she turned it over, then over, and then over again, looked up at me, puzzled.

Both sides of the paper were blank. I remember falling to the floor, as I was required to, and then I remember no more.

Chapter 20

Let me tell you about my day - it was a strange day.

Bright lights woke me in a strange bed, in a white room. I was lying, naked, under white sheets, my head on a white pillow. I could not understand how I had got there - had someone undressed me? I stretched out my arm to the right, and found a wall. There was one above my head too, and looking around me I saw that the room was sparsely furnished - a table built into the wall nearest my head, a free-standing table in the center of the room, and on the side of the table furthest away from my head stood a chair with a pile of what looked like clothes on top of it. Past that was a door set in the middle of the wall.

When I was sure that there was no-one else around, I got out of bed carefully and quickly checked through the pile of clothes. It was topped by an odd white mask, with a pair of white velcro bands hanging off it - soft velcro to the right, the hard velcro to the left. The mask itself had two eyeholes, and nostril holes at the bottom of the nose. Where the mouth should have been, there was nothing - just a smooth white surface. There was a huge red three written across the face of the mask, which looked ragged, as though it had been daubed on by finger. Curious, I lifted the mask up to my face and held it in place. It fitted exactly, almost as if it had been made for me.

I laid that aside and held up the clothes one by one. A white shirt. A white jacket. Boxer shorts, socks, trousers, all white, and at the bottom, sitting directly on the chair, white shoes. All of them, like the mask, the right size. I didn't know whether they were supposed to be mine, or whether I was about to steal someone else's clothes. I didn't care - I was naked, and if I was meeting people for the first time (as I suspected I might be, given that I had no idea where I was) I wanted to be clothed. So I put on everything (even the jacket, since the air was cold).

On the table was a bowl with half a grapefruit in it, and next to that was a plate with slices of melon on it - and next to that was a glass of orange juice. Since I had already gone as far as potential clothes theft, I decided that I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb and sat down to

eat breakfast. Now, sitting across from the table built into the wall, I could see that above it was a large mirror surrounded by tiny lights - the only lights that I could see in the room, although they could not have provided all the illumination required and there were no shadows as there would have been behind me.

I looked at myself in the mirror as I ate, but there was no clue as to why I was here, or why I could not remember the day (night?) before. I had thought that maybe I was in a hospital, but the clothes seemed too strange for hospital garb and I could see no injuries on my face or head. I turned round to check the back of my head, and could see nothing except a strange effect in my hair. I must have been sleeping oddly, on the edge of a pillow or something, because a band of hair running around my head - from above one ear to above the other, was thinned and ruffled.

I finished my meal, and tried the door - it was locked, but when I turned from it I noticed that there was a second door that I had not spotted when I stood up. That door led into a small bathroom, as white as the other room had been, and containing a toilet, a basin, and a shower cubicle. I tried the basin taps, which worked, and splashed some cold water on my face. I suppose I somehow thought that that would help to wake me up. In a way it did, because as I did it a loud buzzer sounded from the other room.

When I returned there I found that a hole had opened in what I'd taken to be a support column in the wall opposite the mirror. Inside there was a hollowed shell. Wondering if it was a dumbwaiter of some kind, I pushed down on it so that it would lay flat for the plate and bowl. It would not, and was not big enough to hold them anyway.

Looking at it, I realised that it was just the right shape for a mask. Putting the crockery back in place, I took the mask I had found with my clothes and placed it (outside down) into the cradle. It fit perfectly. I took the mask out again, and looked around. There was nothing in the room which would fit other than the mask. I put it back in the cradle. As soon as I had withdrawn my hand the cradle flipped up and backwards by some unseen mechanism, whipping the mask away, and two metal shutters slid from each side of the hole to close it up with a tight seam that I could not even wedge a fingernail into.

Wondering if this had something to do with the other door, I tried it again. No use - it was still locked. I stood in front of the mirror again and lifted up the shirt to see whether I had any evidence of surgical scars, anything. There were no scars, no suture lines, no wounds of any kind.

As far as I could tell I was in perfect health apart from this tiny matter of not knowing where I was or how I had got here. I tried to think back, but the more I did the more I realised that my memory seemed to contain nothing more than vague specifics. Think, think! I told myself, but although I could bring to mind many images none of them seemed right. They were just bizarre images that I might have seen in a film - mothers holding children, rocky passageways, rows upon rows of tiny animals staring at me. There was nothing.

The buzzer sounded again, and the flaps slid open to reveal the little cradle, still full of the mask I had put in there. I rushed over to get it, and discovered that in the intervening time someone had scrubbed off the three and replaced it with a ten. Stranger and stranger. I tried the mask on, as I had the other, and was not surprised this time to find it a perfect fit as well. I did up the velcro straps at the back. It felt uncomfortable, so I undid them and did it again. You will not believe this of something as simple as velcro, but each time I did up the mask I felt as though I had not fastened it correctly, that it would fall off at some important moment. I eventually managed to convince myself that it was OK after the seventh cycle of removing and refastening, but I felt compelled to pull at it from every direction until I was convinced that it would not come off. I suppose I was worried that if I was not really welcome here (wherever here was) I would be recognised as an outsider if my mask fell off. It was only prudent, obviously, to get the lie of the land before I came out and asked for help. If the people here were friendly, as I was sure they would be, they would hardly begrudge me wanting to blend in while I found my feet again and worked out what had happened to me. If they were unfriendly it might be my only chance to get the drop on them.

As I put the mask on the two flaps slid shut covering the hole again, and the door clicked as though a lock had opened somewhere. I tried the handle, which gave, and pulled the door open just a fraction until I could peek outside. Through the crack in the door I could see a blank white corridor, slightly curved. I opened the door a bit more and was just about to put my head out when I heard a clacking of shoes coming closer. I pulled back inside, closing it just enough to see a foot-wide sliver of corridor, and at that moment a figure dressed all in white - a woman - walked past.

She vanished, but as I popped my head out a second time I heard footsteps again and a man walked past - a man who I could see by the straps around the back of his head was wearing a mask something like mine.

When he had gone around the corner I quickly slipped out of my room and followed him.

The corridor led around to the right, and a door which I saw closing. Ahead of me there was a T-junction which turned off to the left. Peering around the corner of the junction I saw more figures in white travelling along another, much longer corridor. I darted across the opening and found another door. Since I had not seen anyone enter this one it seemed a promising area for quiet exploration. Easing it open, I found a large open chamber. A quick examination showed that it was empty and I slid inside.

The room was sparsely furnished, a row of chairs against the wall nearest to the door I had come in through. At the other side of the room was a large pinewood desk - a raised desk with a shielded front, like that a judge might sit behind in court. In front of it were two more chairs. The desk looked like a good place to hide, so I walked up there. The ceiling was odd, with drawn-on trompe l'oeil beams that made it look as though it were some kind of modern cathedral.

The desk had a chair behind it, up on a raised stage. I walked up a few steps and - seeing no reason not to - I sat down in the chair. It felt comfortable, magisterial, and I saw that there was a gavel in front of me, which I picked up and whacked a few times on the desk. As I did so, I felt that there was something correct about these actions - that I would be needed here, and that if I remained there I would be called upon to do the job of the person that owned the chair. Strange memories seemed to be filtering up through my mind, something telling me how I ought to act.

So I waited as I felt that I should do, and soon enough two of the people here came to see me. They affected no surprise at my presence - and I, in my turn, pretended to ignore that they themselves wore the strange masks (one of them with a seven on it, one with a six). They explained that their dispute revolved around the confiscation of a small bottle containing a potion. Six, who seemed to be some kind of petty official, had had one of his underlings confiscate the bottle under the suspicion that it might be flammable. Seven claimed that the bottle was not flammable at all.

It seemed to me that the question could not be answered without some reference to the actual contents of the bottle, so I asked if there were someone who could assay it. The bureaucrat suggested a scientist who could be called from nearby, and I suggested that he be called - and also,

prompted by something in my head, that the courier who had been charged with carrying the thing be interviewed as well.

Someone must have anticipated my requests, because almost immediately the two that I had asked for came in. I did not realise it at the time, of course, because they did not look their parts. The courier was a fairly large woman - dressed as all the others were, with a red four on her mask. The scientist was a man with an eight on his mask.

The interviews were strange. I talked first to the lady courier, trying to determine whether she had known the contents of the package she was carrying.

"I did not, your sagacity. It's.." She swallowed. "It's not uncommon for such as I to be asked to carry a message but not to see that message, or to understand it."

I dismissed her. She stood there, looking up at me for a moment, and then she reached up to touch the bottom of her mask and I realised that there was a tiny drop of water there. She turned on her feet and left the room.

The scientist was one of those typical arrogant types - puffed up and somehow able to take offense (on behalf of the estate of science, of course), at almost any question I asked him. The truth came out slowly, and when I found it out, I was astonished. The liquid was supposedly some kind of love potion which the disputant had intended to use on some woman that he was no doubt losing. I decided that if I was the judge that they believed me to be I would have to simply confiscate the potion. I explained that that was the only thing that would prevent any lawbreaking (of which there had yet been none).

Six rushed off, no doubt to warn the maiden in question, and seven raged at me for a short while until he himself lost patience.

I thought that my ruling was sound, but it had tragic consequences. Some time later the girl in question (or so she explained herself - to me she was just another woman in a mask) came to me to complain that the two suitors for her hand had died in combat. I was alarmed at first, but soon realised - or rather, remembered, for I think that I had always known - that this was all part of an act. I could not really get a measure for what she aimed to get out of me, but I explained that I could not be held responsible. I sympathised with her, but lacking the power to bring her lovers back from the dead (so to speak), I could do nothing - and I advised her strongly not to mention the affair to anyone else, lest the memories of her swains were tarnished.

"Sometimes," I advised her, "We can do nothing but accept what has come to pass. You have a duty to society, and a place in it which you were assigned by providence. You may wish for it to change, but it will not."

Some time after she had left, when I had been on my own for quite a while, I began to feel very tired. Oddly satisfied with my work that day I left the chamber and encountered several of the other masked people, each returning (as I was) to their private chambers.

There was a meal waiting for me, which I ate, and then - understanding that I had not gained enough information about this place to make any definite plans - I decided that I would sleep.

That was yesterday. Today I awoke again, and ate my breakfast, and put the mask back into the little cradle when the buzzer went, and now I am thinking about what I should do next. I cannot quite grasp my memories yet, but there seems something urgent in them - almost as if they were a separate part of me, a voice calling in my head, calling me to remember something. But I cannot. So I bide my time.

I sit, staring at the dispenser, waiting.

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