

MASQUERADE

a short story by
ELIJAH CAIN

Other Books by Elijah Cain

Blackbird
Impartation
Prelude To A Kill

Other Short Stories

The Puppet Master

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MASQUERADE

OXBLOOD certainly is the finest of all leather the chairs one can sit in. This one stood tall and had a line of brass brads that followed the curvature of its tall back, and around the front of each arm until they met with Alistair's fingertips; trimmed and clean. He allowed the rough brads to tickle his sensitive pads as he recalled the events that took place for Mrs. Bradley.

"I remember distinctly the way the light looked that evening. The sun had long since settled below the thatch eaves that ran up and down both sides of the cobblestone streets, and the flames danced inside street lamps in such a way that the fog, settling into every cleft and every crack, mirrored their seductive danse du ventre," Alistair squinted, his eyes closed tight as if imagining himself gazing into the very lamps he was describing.

Mrs. Bradley dipped her quill into an ink well and brought its moistened tip back, scratching out her thoughts as he spoke. "Go on," she said.

"Everything began that night the way they always had," he continued. "I found my solace in the same seat I'd always sat in, along the Eastern side of the parkway, my back to the old textile shop, my book open to where I'd left off. I had already become deeply entranced within its pages when my attention was stolen away by the most elegant of carriages. Pulled as it were by four magnificent Clydesdales. The rolling wheels on the cobblestone backdropped the clacking of hooves like a drum roll leading a militant charge. I was drawn to it for a moment before returning to my book. Then it stopped and the door swung wide. I looked up again to see beautiful women, three of them if I recall, all bountifully adorned in large flowing gowns with puff sleeves. Their hair all done in curls. One of them called out to me, 'Hey, you there. What has you out here all alone?' Looking around, I could see no one else to whom they may be addressing, so I responded: "Madam, I am reading under the street lamp as I often do on warm summer evenings such as these."

"Well, make haste already," she said, "the three of us are on our way to a ball and I would be most delighted if you accompanied me, arm in arm. It is not fitting for three ladies to arrive, absent the company of a gentleman such as yourself."

"Surely," I argued, "you can't expect me to arrive somewhere with acquaintances I've only just met, at a place I haven't been formerly invited, do you?"

"Don't be silly," she pressed, "no one at this ball has been formerly invited. Nor, does anyone know the person to their left or right. You are perfectly suited for such a venue, are you not?"

"And with that, she stepped off the carriage, extended her hand to me, and despite my better judgment, I relented. Her hand clasped my own and she led me onto the carriage." Alistair shifted his weight to one elbow and stiffened his posture. The scratching of the quill against linen parchment; like the gnawing of rats, he thought to himself. "The inside of the carriage," he continued, his attention no longer fixed on Mrs. Bradley, or her scratchy quill, "was of similar eloquence to the outside. Brass knobs and matching frames around the windows. Through the opening in back, I watched as my spot on the bench faded slowly into oblivion, concealed under a shroud of fog and dimming, flickering light.

At first no one said a word. The women just giggled and pressed in on me from both sides. Their hair tickled against my neck. Now, I wondered why I'd entered the carriage in the first place. After all, I was ignorant as to whom these voluptuous creatures of the night were, but also, as to what destination we would arrive. As I began to speak, one of them pushed a wadded linen cloth into my mouth. It tasted a little like I suspected she did, you know, down there. At the time, however, I suppose it just tasted used—as if held too long inside a balled up fist."

"Why didn't you just pull this "rag" out of your mouth?" Bradley asked.

"I wanted to at first, but then something happened. It wasn't what I expected, but then, I suppose what I had expected ended at the closing of my book, back at the parkway," Alistair stopped and stared at Mrs. Bradley.

Mrs. Bradley looked up, her quill suspended above the parchment. "Sir," she insisted, "please continue. There is nothing you can tell me that I haven't already heard. Or, at least some version there of."

"It hurt a little ... but only at first. I was initially preoccupied by the women at my sides cleverly slipping their arms between mine and joining hands behind me. But my attention quickly raced elsewhere and I'll admit, I stopped struggling the moment the gal across from me, now kneeling between my knees, unbuttoned me and began to squeeze, and release. Again and again. Each time the pressure increased, and each time, though terrified by what was happening, a part of me wanted her to grip tighter. The pain and the pleasure were symbiotic. Almost as if I needed one for the other. By the time the carriage stopped, I had lost all sense of where we were. And that's when the mask came out.

It was red and concealed everything from my forehead to the end of my nose, curving downward on either side of my cheeks, leaving only my mouth and chin exposed; secured with a knot around the back of my head by one of the ladies. The door to the carriage opened. The driver was standing there, I guess I hadn't really noticed his elongated face before, but his mask looked to be made of pure gold and the cape he wore, both black and red, swept the ground along the path in front of us as we made our way to the entrance of the grand auditorium."

The scratching stopped abruptly, the immediate silence had the same affect as the pounding of a gavel—the word, "Objection," which would follow an actual gavel, implied here by Mrs. Bradley's look of confused discomfort. She looked for a moment as though wanting to speak and, instead, waited for the silence to become unbearable as though the questions she had were like Calvary waiting to charge on horses which could not be mounted. Instead, she settled for a refreshment of ink from her well and a virgin sheet of parchment.

"—I felt, for a moment," Alistair began again, "What is that story where the boy is actually a king, only that, by some mistake, he'd been separated from his royal upbringing, until finally the boy is discovered and summoned at once to the entrance of his castle?" His question met with silence. "No matter," he said. "That is how I felt. The steps of granite, each one with a masked man wearing black ties and cutaways held long poles with draped tapestries suspended off the ground. I walked to the edge of the first step and waited as our driver took a bow. The two ladies to my right linked arms and curtsy'ed; the other, to my left—looping her gloved arm through mine—timed her gesture with my own. An usher led us inside. Bright crystal chandeliers were suspended from the ceiling at balcony level, with staircases encircling both sides of the grand ball room. The marble floor was teeming with dancers, all of whom wore masks similar to the one I'd been given. Men in red were matched with female companions veiled in white. Other men wore gold, their companions wearing black masks, feathers protruding from the top and sides, all matching.

Had I had stumbled upon a cult? Or worst, a secret society that, once my identity was discovered, would criticize my audacity for appearing as an outcast, not having succumb to some primitive ritual of initiation? I could feel dozens of eyes on me. It seemed every turn, every sudden stop of a spun partner, ended with a fixed gaze upon me, and, for a moment, I considered letting myself out just as quickly as I'd arrived. As the night wore on, I would come to wish, more and more, that I had done just that. It was at that precise moment that I was drawn by my hand into the middle of a waltz. I found the steps came to me quickly. I was being led by a true master, and before long I was stepping in time, staring awkwardly into the eyes of another man. The shade of my face and the color of the mask that hid it could not have varied much at that moment.

I switched partners four times and wondered where their lady friends had gone. When they returned, they brought with them my partner from the carriage. I asked her if my actions on the dance floor, absent her company, were rude, as I could ill afford to ignore the woman who had plucked me from the familiarity of my reading bench and escorted me into lavished uncertainty. Her eyes reflected a soft smile that remained emotionless and cold on her ivory surface. We spun away from each other, and I landed in a sea of hands. The tempo changed and the lighting in the room darkened. Everyone was rubbing against each other—against me. I searched for my lady friend, my eyes darting every-which-way. The surface of the floor began to soften beneath my feet and become uneven. My heel tangled inside of something and I looked down to see what it was. It was black and torn. I tripped and hit the floor hard."

There was a long pause. About half-way through it, the scraping of quilled parchment also paused. Alistair could feel eyes on him and he looked up to meet them.

"Is there a problem?" Mrs. Bradley finally asked. "If you need a break, I can have some water fetched from the kitchen, would you care for some?" Not waiting for an answer, Bradley gestured, holding up two fingers to one of the men standing at the door.

"Pardon my hesitation, Madam. I am not comfortable continuing this story in the presence of a lady. You see, I requested the counsel of another man, and thought it quite unfortunate to find a "misses" attached to the front of your name when I arrived."

"Thank you for your concern, Alistair. Very thoughtful, but I am a professional and I assure you that your testimony will be welcomed in the full detail in which it unfolded."

The man approached him from the side and with a turn of Alistair's head, a glass of

cool water was tipped slightly against his lips. He nodded and the man returned to standing at the door, setting a full glass in front of Mrs. Bradley on his way.

"Please, continue whenever you're ready."

"Would you mind terribly, covering me with a blanket? I am ashamed of what might occur during the recalling of certain ... things ... if you'll pardon my being vague," he said.

A moment later, his waist was covered and he began again. "It became difficult breathe. The next thing I recall were my feet being swept out from under me. Bodies were pressing in around me and on top of me. My pants gave way to the tearing at them by unfamiliar hands, and I soon felt smooth skin against my legs. Somehow, I managed myself free and struggled to my feet against the mob. My heart racing inside my chest. I was scared; genuinely terrified. The lights brightened some and I grabbed for my mask, dragging my feet toward the edge of the floor. A hand grabbed hold of me, and I heard a familiar voice. The warmth of a whisper like a summer breeze against my neck. She said, 'Do not remove the mask. You don't want them to know who you are. Come with me,' and she led me toward the stair case. I pulled away. I wanted to leave, but as I turned toward the door, I saw men standing in the way, blocking the exits. Men wearing nothing but masks of gold. On the floor, nearly everyone else was nude. At least partially, most from the waist down. 'This way,' she said, leading me back toward the staircase. On every five or so steps stood a lascivious nude woman covered in gold paint; face as black as the night. I felt odd as I ascended the stairs wearing only one shoe and no pants at all to speak of and I kicked it off, sending it bouncing down the stairs.

When we reached the top, all seemed quiet. At least for a moment as we made our way down a long red hallway. I wondered where the other hallways—the ones painted gold, black and white, and leading in different directions—lead, and then decided I was better off not knowing. I tried again to remove my mask, and again, my hand was stopped. 'You may never remove it. Even when you believe you are all alone, the mask must never leave your face. They will kill you.'

The red hallway with its marble flooring felt cold and slippery against my feet causing me to move cat-like, as if nearing a precipice suspended above a shallow pool. There were partially open doors on either side. I could hear noises: Cries of pain; Laughter; Panting and moaning. I tried my best to make out what was behind each of them, but for the most part it was just sound. Horrible seductive sound. Part of me wanted nothing more than to be back at my bench, leafing through the pages of my book; the other, desperately curious and aroused by

the images which flooded my mind with each muffled cry and heavy exhale. My face felt flush. Feverish even, and I leaned against a doorjamb, my left arm shaking as though weakened by everything my mind was attempting to perceive. And then it happened.

I'm still not sure if I was pulled inside or pushed from behind, but, before I could react, I found myself inside one of the rooms, enveloped in darkness. All that remained for my senses was the sounds. That wordless begging. As if pleading for the torture to stop and hurt more at the same time. I'd never heard such things before, I had to see it with my own eyes. To give meaning to the painted images of my imagination; to understand the pain and pleasure filled screams all around me. I reached out in a sweeping arc for a surface to guide me, and my fingers met with one. Cold and smooth, and I slid my hand carefully along its surface, placing one careful step in front of the next. For a moment, I wondered how I had come to end up here in the first place. From my lonely seat on the parkway to this haven of oddities. Where was I? I wondered, only for a moment before the room filled with light. Reflections of myself filled the room from one end to the other. Every way I turned, there I was. I moved backward and my back bumped a surface. I moved to the left, yet another. In every direction I turned, I hit an impasse.

I vaguely remember hearing a laugh. Yes, that's right. She laughed and as she moved into view, she, too, was everywhere and no where, all at once. Her dress, loosened around her neck, exposing a smooth shoulder, and she drew me toward her with a finger. It was naughty at first, moving from side to side as I took a few steps toward her. Then, as I turned, it became welcoming, curling in toward her. I stepped, and the light went dim again. Another two, maybe three steps and then ..."

Mrs. Bradley let out an involuntary gasp. Alistair looked around the room nervously. Each exacerbated second of his pause marched on, one after another, in sync with the clock resting on the mantle behind where Mrs. Bradley was sitting. The sound was becoming unbearable and she stood up, smothering it with her coat. Once satisfied, she returned to her seat, glancing around the room in search of strange stares from confused bi-standers. Meeting with none, she fixed her gaze upon her notebook. Her eyes drawn to the places on the page where moist droplets from her brow had blended with inked markings. She refreshed her page and quill. "Please, Alistair, whenever you are ready."

"I'm sorry," he said, returning his attention to his testimony. "Where was I?"

Glancing back at the last turned page, "The lights had once again dimmed, you said, and you took but two or three steps and then..."

"Awe, yes," jumping in, he continued. "There she was, the light flooding the room to reveal her once again in every surface, resting upon her bosom like a soft satin shawl. Her finger, once again, drawing me to her. Not more than the toe of my sock touched the surface in front of me and all was, again, shrouded in darkness. I proceeded carefully, though, all the more determined to reach her. I managed four, five, even six steps in the same direction and the light returned, as did my mistress. I felt my heart begin to flutter as nearly the only portion of her supple body not fully bared to me in every reflective surface was wrapped, but once, inside a silk sheet draped low enough to reveal the cleft of her buttocks as she turned away from me. Her eyes, the last of her to depart from my own as the room fell back into darkness. She's toying with me, I thought. Like a child tempting a serpent to strike by tapping on the outside of its enclosure.

I quickened my steps, coming against one surface after another. Feeling anxiously for the soft warmth of skin and finding only hard, cold glass in every direction. Another step followed, then another, and another. 'Stop,' she said, and I obeyed. Glad, at once, that I had. For as the room became visible again, so did the sharp obstacles protruding from the walls and the surface of the floor around me. Knife-like edges leading to pin-prick points were but inches from piercing me in every direction, as if thrust toward me by some mechanism to punish me for my haste.

Alas, within splashes of reddish glow which shimmered across the jagged surface, emerged bodies swathed in capes bound to bare flesh by straps of leather. They weaved in flamboyant gestures under and over and around the spikes, never so much as brushing one until they were next to me, joining hands, but a moment. As their hands separated, they moved around behind me, stretching a black cloth between them which they used to cover my eyes, securing it from behind. Now blind, I felt hands as they slid down each arm, hanging for a moment at the fingertips, and then they were gone. Only the subtle cooing of a silky feminine voice remained, prompting me to step once left, twice forward, and stop. Then to turn, a bit more, another step, and stop. Side-to-side, one more step, and stop. She giggled in playful seduction, and her voice trailed off.

I waited, longing for her guidance, afraid to move unprompted, but nothing came. I called out to her, "Madam?" My own voice was all that was left to mock me. Its echo returning void, and I realized that I must have moved to a different room. I reached for the folded cloth around my eyes, half expecting my actions to be abruptly halted, but as the veil unravelled and fell freely to the floor, I found myself alone and hopelessly lost. Disoriented. And now I didn't even have the distant screams of mournful pleasure as welcomed company. All around

me felt drafty, as if even the air around me was distant and unsettled.

I inched forward. My toes feeling the sting of cold stone beneath them. Finally, as my eyes began to adjust, I began to make out a faint and distant reddish glow. About the size of child's face. As faint as it was, and as distant as it appeared, I stepped toward it. A bit cowardly at first I'll admit, but slowly feeling more confident with each unhindered step. As I neared it, the faint light remained as dim as it always had, but the surrounding area started to focus around it and I began to see why the light appeared suspended in mid-air.

The framework of an iron door, contrastingly darker than the corridor leading up to it, encapsulated a small viewing area of which only the faintest remnant of a glow, like dying embers, could reach from somewhere deep beyond it.

When I reached it, taking a firm grasp of the handle, I longed to shy away and hoped that the door would be locked, forcing me back the way I'd come; that, beyond the door, were mysteries meant for someone else to behold. After all, people like myself seldom find ourselves lost, cast into darkness, led by our own curiosity. My courage had always seemed drawn against a bank of fears, doled out in pitiful portions by a credit merchant at heavy interest. So there I stood, one hand on the door leading to more uncertainty. Back the other way, fear of certain death. Fear of strangers in masks hidden in every corner, and subjecting themselves willfully to whatever horrors lay behind me. I froze there a moment, wishing for my inevitable death to come quickly. That I could put this whole horrid dream behind me, releasing me from my paralysis. But death didn't come, and there was no where else to go but forward. To seek out the death I both feared and longed for. And with that I pulled, and the door swung upon hinges that cried out in otherworldly fashion. Stepping through, I foolishly allowed it to close behind me and I sunk, fearing I had made the gravest of decisions yet.

Locked! The damn thing only worked one way.

There was only one way left to go now. Toward the inferno of dim red light that seemed, in contrast to its surroundings, like the Star of David. Perhaps, I thought, maybe I'd made a giant circle. That the reddish light was actually just a distant view of the red hallway that started me on the path to here—wherever here happened to be.

I was startled by the crack of a whip. Two, three times. One right after the other. The screams were torturous, though distant. And to my right and left, the sound of chains being drug along the ground. Grunting and heavy breathing feathered between the scrubbing of metal against stone. Even squinting, I could only make out the crudest of shapes and debased

activity. I managed to force 'Hello?' through restricted vocals but not at any volume. At least none that could compete with the slapping of skin and lashing of whips that seemed to occupy whatever ghastly beasts I had unwittingly caged myself with. I thought that if I just moved past them that, maybe, I could find an end to this nightmare. I wondered where the three ladies I had arrived with had ended up. And how, by god, was I going to find my way home, even if I did manage to find a way out. That is until I spied one of them, the same one who coaxed me onto that goddamn carriage in the first place, I think; only, she wasn't wearing a long flowing gown with puffed sleeves. All that had been shed. What little she was wearing was difficult to make out, even though my eyes had begun to adjust to the darkness.

Her white mask was all that remained of the things she once wore, and as I reached her, I realized why her nudity had remained so elusive. Leather straps cut into her skin and flattened her breasts to her chest, connected in the middle by a metal ring. Dozens more extended from the bottom portion of the ring, wrapping themselves in such a way that the leather seemed to gouge the skin. Below them, one singular strand ran from behind her, in between her legs, up and tight into her pelvis. The other end fed through the ring like a leash. She handed it to me and said, 'Pull.' I did, and she screamed, 'Harder!' I gave the lead a taut jerk and she let out a cry, squeezing her bottom lip between her teeth and clenching the lead between her butt cheeks. 'Yes! Yes! Yes! Again, Harder.' I pulled and this time held the tension, the strap between her legs spreading her in front, and above, her breasts flattening further under the tension I was providing. As I released, they filled out again and the nipple filled areola on her right breast slipped outside the strap, erect and inflamed. I pulled again, this time hard enough for her to arch away, dropping her head back as she tugged at her hair and moaned. I could feel myself sliding out from between the loose folds of the fabric of my ..."

(underpants)

The sound of a glass being knocked over followed by the rap, tap, tap of water running off the edge of Mrs. Bradley's desk and onto the floor below brought the story to a screeching halt. She stood up at once, and a gentleman standing in the room rushed over to towel off her desk, carefully dabbing the papers where the edges had moistened. "Clumsy. I must have bumped it with ... never mind. Will you fetch me a fresh one, and offer Alistair a refreshment as well. Perhaps this isn't an entirely bad time to pause. Would you care to stand and stretch your legs?" She motioned and two men came over and helped Alistair to a standing position, and he clawed with what little mobility he had at the blanket which hid his bulge (aroused by his own reflections) from view of the lady. He shook his head desperately, and the gentlemen set him back in his chair. "I'm fine, thank you. I just want to sit."

Mrs. Bradley's eyes narrowed in a scowl and she nodded reluctantly, returning to her own seat as she did. "That will do, thank you," she said to one of the men who had just placed a fresh glass of water at the extreme edge of her desk, away from derelict elbows.

The moment she inked her quill and looked up, Alistair began again. "I was protruding out through the open slit in my underpants. I don't know how she noticed so quickly, but she dropped to her knees and began to tease the tip of me with her tongue. I had only begun to relax enough to enjoy it when she pulled the end of her leash through my loosened grasp, looping the end around my shaft and testicles with a tug. She withdrew from me. Standing up, she pulled me along at an uncomfortable pace. Though fearful at first, I thought it odd that I did not lose my erection. The anticipation coupled with the adjacent cries and the palpable sting of pungent sweat dripping from the ceiling, kept the blood throbbing past the tightened strap. I felt myself jostling along like a puppy, not yet comfortable with his leash, yet, eager to attend.

As we rounded the corner of a wall, constructed of rough-cut stone blocks and dampened with the same moisture that danced along the ceiling in clouds of passionate slavery, I could see it all: Men, asses bared and blistered from repetitive lashings; to women, chain-stretched from the wrists and ankles against palates of wood and metal brads."

Alistair's finger nail clicked off the edge of a metal rivet in the arm of his chair and Bradley jumped a bit, her quill making an involuntary character at the end of his sentence.

"I could feel the heat rising from pools of boiling water which rested upon grates above a furnace of molten steel. There were other men who walked freely, clothed in black leather pants and full leather masks like executioners. One of them pressing the hot glowing end of a spear tipped rod into the places where their skin had split and bled. The victims eyes were filled with hunger as if wanting more, and begging for anyone willing to accommodate them. I had nearly lost myself inside this fantasy, feeling weak at the knees from euphoria. Until, that is, I was jerked by my genital strap. This brought me to full consciousness and I became acutely aware of the predicament that I was in. Two men in executioner masks forced me backward until I became pressed against metal spikes hard enough for my skin to fill the gaps in between them. Warm beads of blood began trickling down my back and a hand ripped my shirt cleanly from my body.

Then a thick rope tied in a noose was lowered down and seated under my chin and around my ears. I tried pleading with them, but was unable to form words as the pressure

from the rope drew tightly up under my chin and the sides of my neck. I could feel my mind slipping some, and I fought to keep focus, struggling for each breath. I expected to feel the sharp bite of a spear tip burning into my chest, or the sting of a whip splitting my skin wide, and I braced myself for it. But what I felt, in between labored breaths and panic-stricken sobs, was the warmth of human breath against my genitals. A tug from the leash and then a moist, soft tongue. Then teeth, gentle at first and then a bit firmer as they slid back up me, loosening some around the tip. I began to wonder if the rope had slacked some as I found myself able to draw deeper and deeper breaths through its grasp. I began to focus on whomever was below me, but I couldn't see anything. I could only feel. That soft flesh closing around me, back and forth. And then a braided handle was placed in my hand, several braided straps extending from the top. Then the rope around my neck loosened. I looked down to see that the woman below me had backed herself up into me, allowing me to penetrate her from behind. My breathing became sporadic, almost uncontrollable, and I thought I would lose myself inside of her. That is, until a reddened spear tip touched my arm, blistering me immediately. My mind pulled violently from ecstasy into pain filled spasms. I wanted to pull out, but then my lust took control again and a vigor reached my eyes that I can not describe other than to liken it to something you see in wild animals stocking prey. She screamed out at me, 'Whip me,' and I did. 'Yes! Again.' I swung the whip harder, realizing that I was controlling her orgasm, holding her release just shy of climax, and I throbber inside of her, harder than I thought humanly possible. I was then handed a harness that one of the masked executioner fed over the woman's head and into her mouth and I realized at once why none of the masks had bottoms to them. I pulled and she moaned through the stifling gag. I could no longer withhold myself, and I released my seed inside of her at a force unexperienced before in all my days. It lasted through what seemed like minutes of intense ejaculation, until all of me was spent and she let out a scream.

The rope around my neck slacked, and I fell limp upon her back, breathing heavily into her skin. The men on either side of me grabbed at both arms, standing me back up. One of them handed me a rod with a bright yellow tip and spoke into my ear in a low whisper, 'Finish her. Run it through her heart.' I looked at the black mask with horror, and he said, 'Once seed has passed, they cannot be reused. Run her through!'

They were demanding that I kill this woman; a woman whose loins held me only seconds earlier. With whom I shared the most intense moments of passion I'd rarely dared to imagine before then. I didn't know what else to do. I plunged the tip with all the force I could muster down through her spine. The heated end seared the flesh with a snake-like hiss, and her chest heaved in and out, her throat gargling back blood and saliva, blocked by the gag in her mouth. And all at once, the shock of what I had just done reached my stomach turning

end over end until vomit splashed against my feet and up onto my shins and knees. I pushed myself free of the board and began to swing the heated tip, waving it around widely while moving away from the masked men. They just stood there, staring at me, like they knew I could never escape what lay before me. They didn't advance nor did they retreat. They just stared at me, as though I had gone mad. I turned, dropping the metal prod with a clank against the stone floor, and ran as fast as my feet would allow. They stung with each hollow slap against the hard surface, but that didn't slow me. For at that moment, I feared nothing like I feared the pain which lay behind. Especially now, having complied with their murderous wishes. They would never allow me to leave, and it struck me. That smell. What I had been smelling the whole time. It was burning flesh, boiling up from the molten graveyard that ran along the left side of the room. Past cages, suspended over the lava-like ooze, and bodies chained by neck and wrists to the walls on either side.

I looked behind me to see who was advancing on me, and saw only confused stares with no pursuers. I kept on running anyway until I reached a door on the other side, but, as I passed through, I slipped on a stream of what smelled like raw sewage. The path sloped abruptly, and my head slammed hard into fluid as I clawed at the slimy substance unfruitfully. I was picking up speed as more inlets joined this one, increasing the flow of acrid fluids, until I was jettisoned out a spillway into an outdoor cesspool below. I worried that the open sores mixing with what I believed to be decomposing bodily remains would eventually morph into deadly infection if left untreated, and I found myself wishing I had kept the heated rod so I could sterilize my gashes and cauterize my wounds.

I crawled out of the sludge on my hands and knee's until I collapsed in the street. When I awoke, I found myself in your care, and that's the last thing I can remember."

"Sir," Mrs. Bradley interrupted. "Do you expect us to believe that you can't remember anything more than what you have told us? That you don't remember purchasing the place we found you twenty years earlier? Or, that the place you described to us had once been an insane asylum which you renovated solely for the purpose of warehousing your sick and twisted fantasies? The same asylum that you were once committed as a young boy?"

Alistair could feel sweat beading up on his brow and he lifted his arms together, as far as the straps on the straight jacket would allow, rubbing his forehead on the mid-way portion of his sleeve.

"Do you also expect us to believe that the men and women who were found tied and bound to the walls of its basement, some of whom were only skeletal remains, all died during

the brief few moments of your escape? Most of them had been dead for months by the time you were picked up by police; the skeletal remains, much longer. You can't seriously expect a jury to buy this hogwash? Masquerades, rooms of mirrors, dungeons of sadomasochistic orgies, and you; an innocent victim in the whole debacle?"

Mrs. Bradley looked up at one of the guards, "We're done here," she said. As Alistair was being helped out of the room—his feet bound in shackles which scraped at the floor as he walked—she could hear nothing but metal against stone in her mind. Cracking of whips and moistened tongues and ...

(Moaning)

"Not that it matters," an arresting officer spoke, leaning against the edge of her desk, her momentary trance broken, "but, he was wearing a mask when we found him. And there were scars all over his back and a large burn on his upper arm. Though, no recent injuries that I recall, other than a fresh blow to the head. Knocked him a good one, whatever the cause."

"Thank you," she said. Her gaze fixed on her notebook, unfazed by the officer's account. After he left, closing the door behind him, she found herself alone with her thoughts.

She stared blankly at the pages and then pushed them aside, disgusted with herself for allowing her own emotions to succumb to such wild imagination. She grabbed for her file, photographs of the bodies spilling out on her desk. She picked her notes back up and began flipping through the pages until she stopped somewhere near the end and spread the photographs in a neat row across her desk. She began to read the last of Alistair's account, glancing frequently at the photographs as she did. Imagining the men and women in the photographs the way he had described them. Images of their reported acts, flickering in her mind.

Days, months, even years later. In her moments of quiet solitude, she would find her thoughts drifting back to them. Recalling the moans of pain filled pleasure and the smell of pungent sweat. She would discover that they lingered with or without her feeding them, as though already dead but waiting to be explored.

Weeks had passed since the trial which found Alistair Blain guilty of dozens upon dozens of accounts of murder, rape, kidnapping and necrophilia, based mostly on circumstantial evidence with no witnesses to the contrary. Mrs. Bradley sat at her desk staring blankly in the direction of the oxblood leather chair which had cradled Alistair as he recounted his

testimony. One phrase, repeated over and over in her mind. The one Alistair said as he stood, facing the gallows, about to be hung from the neck until dead. He stood there repeating, over and over, "They removed my mask. She told me never to remove it, that they would kill me. And now it's happening. She told me never to remove my mask, that they would kill me. They would kill me, she said."

She pulled out his file, adding a fresh page to the top of the stack. Her closing notes: "As I think back over the hearing and at the faceless crowd that had gathered at the execution. The black mask of leather worn by the executioner, I begin to wonder what would become of the rest of us if we took off the masks society presented us with? What would become of me if I removed my own, if they knew which parts of his testimony I omitted from the record. Both for their own good, and because it is utterly unbelievable; mostly, however, because of the sick pleasure I derived from the most damning parts of his account. An account better left buried with the shame I will undoubtedly carry through the remainder of my life as I say to myself, "Never take it off. They will kill you if you take it off."