

The Mask of Deception

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Chapter 1:

The Mask is Made

Nor Gan admired his masterpiece. He took the cold steel mask into his blackened hands. Its edges were rough and unfinished, but its belly and top were as smooth as glass. Delicate filigrees were etched into the metal, creating a tangled web of vines and thorns around the eye sockets.

His father, Martog, spoke to him gruffly with a smile. "Take care you mind those burrs. Remember, file diagonally. Buff and polish clockwise, son."

Nor Gan clamped the piece into position on his workbench and began the laborious task of putting a glimmering sheen on the edges of the metal masterpiece. The young apprentice pounded the his father's planishing

hammer against the steel here and there, evening it out by feel rather than using the measuring caliper. Over and over the hammer fell. Sweat blurred the boy's vision. The metal sang as he kept the beat to a song only he could hear. After several hours, the ringing in his ears was almost as loud as the hammer. His father's planisher was given him by a merchant who was mauled by raiders, and left for dead. Martog had nursed the man back to health. Nor Gan smiled. His pa was too simple to realize that the traveller was a bard; runes on the hammer were magical.

He kept more secrets from his father. Some he went to great lengths to keep undiscovered. After a delivery to the town's old wizard, the old man had shown the boy the easiest of incantations; he now whispered it as he worked, to add power to his blows. His arms would certainly be sore tomorrow, but 'hard work builds character', his father always said. He kept his back to the door, to keep his magic hidden, lest his father walk in and see his lips moving.

Hours later, when the forge's fire had died down to embers, he finally lifted his head from his work. The hammer fell from his hand; his fingers were simply too tired to hold it anymore. Its blue glow diminished, but remained low and pulsing. Sweat dripped down his nose, and his neck held

a menacing cramp. Sliding his work into a pocket, he walked out into the cool fresh air of the night and dipped his head into a cold water barrel. Tossing his head back, he looked up into the stars until his neck made that familiar and relieving crack. Above him the red moon slid over the silver moon. A night of ill omen. But the blacksmithing family paid little attention to the superstitions of previous generations, passing them off as old wives tales.

The men of the village had concluded their workday hours ago, and were now sitting on the porch of the tavern smoking pipes and drinking black ale. Martog motioned the boy to come closer, again with that ever-present smile.

The boy strutted up to the group, returning the smile as a clear sign of victory. "The headpiece is finished, father." Nor Gan stood on his toes, so that all could get a glimpse as he passed it into his fathers dark hands. The cold steel faceplate was glimmering in the orange moonlight, flawless. "Is it ready for the clasp, chain and the glass lenses?"

The old blacksmith ran his course hands over the piece, flipping it over again and again. The other men leaned forward to see the detail in the

eyeslits. "Well, son, I don't know how you did it in just a few hours, but this piece is ready. Tomorrow we'll fit the rest of the components together. I've made your clasp and chain, and your glass eyes came today."

The boy beamed at the recognition, and tried to hide a smile. He knew the lenses were enchanted, but did not tell his father. He'd probably never suspect. And if he did, he'd never suspect that they're from a wizard inside the Underdark. Another secret to keep.

The townsfolk murmured their approval as well, which brought Nor Gan back to his senses. One slapped him on the shoulder, making the boy flinch from soreness. A hearty laugh erupted all around. "Run along now and put your piece on the top shelf in the red box. It has all the other components. Then, go and get some supper."

"And some ale?" the boy quipped, picking up one of the half-drunk flagons. He held it just shy of his lips, awaiting his father's approval.

Martog's brows turned down for a moment, then lifted in an amused chuckle. A wide smile took over his face. "Might as well" his father replied. "You've earned it. But just one!"

Parched from hours at the hot forge, Nor Gan lifted the flagon to his

mouth. He went to chug the liquid as if it was cold water. The burn from the strong ale was like frostbite in his throat, and he spewed the liquid out, coughing. The townsfolk broke into an even louder round of laughter. Nor Gan smiled, drank the ale slowly, and in a few moments, finished the cup. He slammed the empty flagon upside-down onto the table, as he had seen the other men do countless times. A cheer arose from the men. Nor Gan felt the heat of the brew warm his blood, but he also felt the warmth of his brothers' acceptance. He could see scars on their arms and faces. Marks they earned from defending the village, the kingdom. His father had even spoken of a battle for all the Realms... Men of this village were metalsmiths, carpenters, builders... all strong of arm and knowledgeable of weapons. He knew that any man here would give his own life, fighting and dying to defend the village. He knew in his heart at that moment that he would do the same.

Nor Gan wandered out into the forest, until he could just barely heard the periodic uproar of laughter from the tavern, and just see the light of the bonfire. The weather was warm, a perfect night for sleeping under the open sky. Finding his favorite tree, he laid on his back and looked up at the stars. The red moon was passing over the silver moon, and he watched it until his

eyes grew heavy. Exhausted, he fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 2:

The Village

Nor Gan's eyes popped open at the sensation... a rustling leaf tickled his nose. He awoke to find that he was covered with a palm leaf. His father had shown him how to hide from danger in this way while hunting. He could only guess what kind of danger was near, if his father had found him, left him asleep, and covered him with the palm. The boy looked quickly around for his father, but he dare not call out loud. He used the whistle he had learned. No response.

The boy instantly knew something was wrong. He walked quickly past a few tall trees, and stopped at what he saw. Before him stood columns of smoke. It could only be the remains of his village. And then it hit him. The night of Ill Omen was real. Everyone he knew had been Taken by the DragonThrong.

He ran up to his home, the town's blacksmith shop. The entire

building was one massive fire. Still in shock, he approached it closely. The heat singed his clothes and hair, the smoke forced him to cough and gag.

Then, to his horror, he saw it. The husk of a burnt corpse, the cacoon of a huge man. It had to be his father. The charred remains still clutched the huge planishing hammer. It had survived, unscathed. The runes on the blue-gray metal was glowing eerily, the wooden handle was unburned. He knelt down and grasped it. Its handle was cool to the touch.

He stood up and looked around. Laying next to him were five or six men in black armor. They were all laying face down, and each had massive head wounds. He could imagine how they died at his father's hand. He looked back down at the planishing hammer in his hand. Blood ran down the handle, and not so much ONTO the runes, but INTO the runes. They seemed to drink up the liquid and glow even brighter.

The shelf where he kept his work lie on its side, engulfed in flames. He kicked some debris out of his way, and there it was - the red box, shattered. His metal eye-mask stared up at him amid orange embers. A beacon of light shined in his heart. It is not lost, he thought. He grasped it madly, ignoring the pain and the smell of his seared hand-flesh. It had split

down the middle. Some careless boot-step had broken the delicate filigrees, ruining it. The clasps had been attached. Martog was known to rise early, and he must have completed that step near dawn. The glass eyepieces were perfectly intact, blessed by some magical enchantment.

The fire coming up from the forge had never been higher. Timbers from the roof beams had fallen into the brazier, and the flames were taller than the building had been. He grasped the hammer in one hand, and the mask in the other. Approaching the forge, he tossed the pieces of the mask into its hottest depth. When the white hot glow from the metal matches the burning rage inside his mind, he began to pound. He did not whisper the incantation this time - he shouted it. He did not try to hide it from listening ears - let them hear and come right now at this very moment. He would slay them all with his father's hammer. He shouted his syllable, sobbing with the intensity of his loss. His arms cramped, but he felt the magic surge through him. It invigorated him, and he worked the metal through the darkness of the night. He joined the two pieces. Only when the sun came up did he toss the finished piece into the water and collapse.

The woman

The next day he awoke with a start again. The hammer lay on his chest, the hilt stuck to his blistered fingers. He tried to remove them, but the blisters and blood were too thick. He winced in pain, then gave up. He looked around for any sign of the DragonThrong - still nothing. He listened intently, but heard only birds. He stood up and walked over to the forge. Some force had burned the entire building - even the bricks of the forge itself - and melted them into a black heap. Even the trees standing fifty feet away were charred on one side.

The boy slid the two glass lenses into their slots carefully. They clicked into place with a reassuring sound. The piece glowed with a piercing orange light for just a moment, then slowly faded. He didn't know much about magic, but he knew the enchanted glass made a connection with the metal mask. He smiled for a moment in silent victory. Inhaling deeply, then holding his breath, he slid on the mask.

He was instantly dizzy as his vision was completely altered. He gasped in wonder as all life and motion came in to focus around him. The

blurry shadow of a bird landed on a branch just before the bird did. A streak coming down from a pine tree caught his attention - just then the pine dropped its cone to the ground. "I can see the future!" he thought.

He sat in what was left of his home; one wall and a blackened dirt floor. He was covered in grime and filth anyway, so he sat down and huddled for warmth. He stretched out his feet to lay down. Beneath the dirt, he kicked something solid. Brushing his hands through the mud, he uncovered his family's cooking pot, now shattered into countless pieces. Exhaustion and hunger overtook him, and he began sobbing at the loss of his family, his village. Hot tears poured down his cheeks, fogging the lenses of his magical mask. "So it repels stains from the outside, but not from the inside." He tried to pull the mask off, but to his surprise, it wouldn't budge. He pulled it left and right, up and down. It was no use. The mask seemed fixed to him permanently.

"I wonder if the future can be altered." he wondered aloud. He set up a candle, a rope and a rock. He lit the candle, which burned the rope, which dropped the rock. Satisfied, he conducted the experiment again. This time he gripped the rope securely. No shadow was seen. Interesting. He did the experiment a third time. On this attempt, he put his hand near the rope but

did not grip it. When he saw the shadow, he quickly reached out for the rope to prevent the rock from falling. Success! So the lenses are not perfect. Perhaps they show what is most likely to happen. Or perhaps they show what will happen unless I intercede. But what if another person intercedes? So many unanswered questions. Not having another person around to run the experiment again, he put that question into the back of his mind. Then he closed his eyes and went to sleep.