A Dance of Masks

The pale gold lights glared off the white masked dancers.  
 The woman in red stood apart from them for she could not make out any individuals she recognized. The white masks worn by all covered the full length of their faces. They outlined the lips and nose, curved beneath the chin and over the forehead. The masks were simple in design; the room seemed to the woman like a reflection of a single mime’s face.   
 The orchestra played a quick, breathless tune; the music was like fire beneath the feets of the dancers. The only sight the woman could look to without distress was the long table adorned with a flood of food that was arranged to protrude from a massive, gilded cornucopia placed at the center of the table. Silver platters held every sort of delicacy the woman could imagine: pastries stuffed with cheeses from the East, meats coated with rich sauces, and fine drinks to help all the food down.

The woman would advance and take the food; by all means she could. The mask she wore covered not her face as it did the others. It was rather simple: thin metal was assembled in curves that ran over one cheek to the other. And to complete it a single, plump red feather was attached to the corner.   
 She longed to eat, but a thought kept her at bay. No one else seemed remotely interested in the food. It was odd. Perhaps it was a rule that the masks must remain on during the masquerade ball. It did not matter, for there was another distractor. On the other side of the table from where the woman stood, was another masked figure. This one did not resemble at all the other guests save for the stark white colour of his mask. It was a peculiar thing; where there ought to be a nose was a rather long beak with black painted lines on either side. The black lines ran from the tip of the beak to just below the eyes. Eyes that were covered by clear glass spectacles. The man did not wear a black suit as did all the other men in the room. He wore a white blouse with dark pants and a black cloak that hung behind him in a cinematic fashion.   
 The woman was certain the man was watching her, though the beak was pointing elsewhere. She could see him in profile, which only magnified the distressful sight of the beak. The woman placed a hand behind her, on the table, and leaned back casually. She studied the nails of her free hand. She felt lost and was sure the whole world could see it too. *What to do, what to do? Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to get a small pastry! But the people will think you’re a slob! Only there for the food! they’ll say.*

“Hello,” came a barely audible voice from behind. The woman did not have to turn to match the voice with its person. There was only one who stood at a close enough proximity behind her. It was the strange, beak masked man.   
 She turned, hand off the table now. “Hello.”   
 The two stared at one another; the golden chandeliers above reflected light from her golden mask. Her eyes were bright; his were obscured though nothing covered them.  
 “You seem out of place,” he remarked. The woman smiled—almost.  
 “You do not?” she in turn asked. The guests danced on in their dark suits and white masks, almost as if in a daze.  
 “I suppose I do seem out of place. I *am* out of place. We both are. Is that problematic?” he asked, hollow voiced. The woman felt she could almost reach out and touch the emptiness of that voice.

“That depends on one’s perspective.”  
 “Then tell me, dear lady, what is your ‘perspective’?”  
 “Being out of place is lonely. That is somewhat problematic.” The woman was enjoying the conversation. The fear she’d felt earlier for the man had slowly diminished. It was just a man with a mask after all.  
 “I feel lonely too,” he agreed; they both turned then to the dancers.   
 “They are not lonely,” she remarked. Without turning away from the dancers, the man said, “no, but nonetheless we are better off.”  
 There was silence once more. The orchestra on the balcony seemed to slip from tone to tone, the way men slip on ice.   
 “How can we be better off?” the woman scoffed, eyeing the food: she felt hungry.  
 “Don’t let me stop you,” the man suddenly exclaimed, hollow voice now filled with character. He gestured at the swelled table. She shook her head. She would eat with the others.  
 “So tell me, how are we better off?”  
 “Do you know what mask I wear?” he asked her instead. “*Your* mask, it is the colombina, made after a plain maidservant. I envy you. That mask does not conceal you as do theirs,” he gestured at the dancers, who now began to sway to a sad tune.   
 “And yours,” the woman added.  
 “Yes, mine conceals me too. But it is a special mask: the medico della peste. It was worn by plague doctors during the old ages.”  
 “That is a strange sort of mask to wear at such a ball.”  
 “Not so strange. The plague doctors wore these masks to protect themselves from catching the plague. So you see, it is rather fitting.”   
 The woman turned to look now fully at the man, her face no doubt expressing her confusion for he added, “I do not want to catch a deadly plague present at this ball.”

He turned once more to the lifeless dancers, mirrors of each other, gliding endlessly into the night. The woman began to see the dancers in a new light. Her mouth parted in realization. She closed it.

“I see...I think. But...here we are, just the two of us, and there they are—together, They seem more lively, dancing.”  
 “Dancing endlessly, afraid to stop. Afraid to change course.”  
 The woman looked at the man, unconsciously realizing what she had to do. With slight hesitation, she turned to the banquet table and picked up a small, white platter. Upon it she placed a cheese pastry; she took a bite. The urgent music that had been playing became mellow. The woman could no longer hear the rustling of dancers. She looked up at the rainbow of faces that had appeared from behind the stark white masks. They crowded the banquet table, voices high and low; laughter rang across the room. The woman laughed too, turning to face the mysterious man. She could not find him.  
 Turning away, the woman chuckled once more to herself. All this time, they had been waiting for her. Perhaps the doctor-man was still near; perhaps he too had taken off the mask.   
 It did not matter; at last she could enjoy the evening.

Word Count: 1155