

Masks

by

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The wheel spun.

Laughter and glitter and muted light reflected from teardrop mirrors. Candlelight, chandelier, candelabra. The wheel spinning. The laughter louder.

Across the room, through the crowd, his vision focused. Blue and gold capes crossed his line of sight. Blood red lips parted and laughed near his ear. A hand slid down his arm. The flash glimpse of a black beauty mark on powdered skin.

The wheel spinning constantly. No music but the voices and laughter and sound of the wheel. A low drone, humming, beating, pounding. And across the room, ice-clear eyes behind a midnight blue mask met his gaze. No music but the whispers: *You want this, you need this, you want this.*

There was something he needed to remember and couldn't. It held him like a weight. A stone of imperfect memory at his feet, holding him back. He was frozen. The ice-clear eyes froze him in their unwavering stare. Bodies pressed in around him. Powder, blank masks of white and red, swish and hiss of velvet and satin, and the laughter, louder, spinning.

You want this, you need this, you want this.

No longer frozen, he took a step forward. Walked through the crowd, through the press of flesh in velvet and satin and powder, their hungry vulturine faces slashing through this vision in quick violent gashes. And across the room, conquering the ice-clear gaze, melting it. Grabbing hard, tight, and kissing the full, soft lips beneath a velvet mask the color of starless night sky.

He was held. Crushed and kissed and devoured. The wheel spun around them, the room disappeared in tatters and torn remnants of laughter and broken mirrors. Nothing mattered. The weight was gone. They held and kissed and fell together through a cloud of velvet and satin.

They were alone now. In a dark room, candlelight crying, in a dark bed, curtains falling. Naked but for their masks. Nothing was real, he thought, but this, and yet they had to hide. It made no sense but he understood it.

He was held, crushed, devoured. He welcomed it. He grasped for it. Grabbed and held tight, and kissed those full, soft, sweet lips for some short eternity. They made love. They fucked. In violent hunger, in starved desire. They spent themselves in harsh, aching need, and fell together, touching with new tenderness. And made love again, slow and sensual and savoring.

The spinning stopped, and he woke up in a huge bed of crumpled sheets, curtains hanging from the ceiling around it, grey daylight bleaching his vision. A heavy warmth weighted him down: the body of a sleeping man entwined with his, holding him. Short, soft brown hair

tousled over a dark blue velvet face mask. Full lips parted beneath it.

He touched his face and felt his mask. Smooth and tight against the bridge of his nose. He took stock of his situation. He knew very little, it seemed. His body ached with strange bruises, small scratches, tired muscles. He knew why. He also thought he knew who. With a last, wistful touch along the shoulder of the man sleeping in his embrace, he disentangled himself and slid away.

He took off his mask.

The wheel spun.

"Jack?"

"Colonel?"

Hands on his shoulder. Jack blinked and looked around. Carter's worried face drifted into his vision. Next to her knelt Daniel. Teal'c stood behind them, watching Jack steadily.

"What happened?"

Daniel glanced at the others, licked his lips, and said, "You fell asleep."

Jack frowned and looked around again. He was sitting on the hard, stone floor in a high, circular room, all stone. Light streamed in from a tall, narrow doorway. Memories uncloaked.

"We were at that shindig," he said. "With the Laqasi." He remembered another stone room, with tall windows. Sitting at a huge table, surrounded by his team, watched by sedate strangers.

He held something in his hands. He rubbed it with his fingers and glanced down. It was a white, shaped cloth. He unfolded it. It was an eye mask, solid, very plain. More like a blindfold. He frowned again.

"Our host gave that to you," Teal'c said.

"Yes," Daniel said. "It's their custom for newcomers. You wear the mask for a night."

Jack's head hurt. He stared at the mask, folding it between his fingers. "What for?" He had a strange, heavy sensation that he'd forgotten something important.

"I'm not sure. It's probably symbolic." Daniel gestured vaguely. "I haven't been able to determine what their religious or mythological beliefs are, exactly. In any case, you passed the test, whatever it was."

Jack looked at Carter. "It's been a whole night?"

"Yes, sir. After Umhela gave you the mask, you fell asleep. They brought you in here. Teal'c stayed in the room to make sure you were okay. Daniel and I tried to find out more about their power supply."

Jack folded the mask and stuffed it in a pocket. He rocked forward and stood up. Carter and Daniel rose. Carter handed him his P-90. Jack strode to the doorway. On the other side was the banquet room, completely empty and spotless. He walked through it and two more huge, empty rooms, heading for the gate.

"Where is everyone?"

"Umhela said she would meet us by the stargate," Teal'c informed him.

Jack glanced over at Carter. "Did you find out anything about their technology?"

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Carter shook her head. "Not as much as I was hoping for, sir. Umhela wants to help, but the concepts she's trying to explain are so far beyond our science."

"I think the Laqasi are having trouble speaking to us so we can understand."

Jack looked at Daniel and raised an eyebrow. "Trouble speaking down to us?"

Daniel cocked his head. "In a manner of speaking."

They reached the vast room that housed the stargate and DHD. Umhela and two of her assistants were waiting for them. Umhela smiled sweetly at them. She was short, like the rest of the people here, and looked so young, Jack kept thinking of her as a kid. He wasn't sure of her age, but she was no kid.

She approached him and took one of his hands. "It honors the Laqasi to meet Colonel O'Neill. Return to the Laqasi soon."

Jack smiled at her. "Yes. I'm sure we will."

He remembered the mask. He fumbled in his pocket, pulled it out, and pressed it into her hand. "Thank you for your hospitality," he said.

Umhela's eyes widened and her smile faded. "Colonel O'Neill must keep the mask," she said earnestly. She folded it into his palm. "Most important that Colonel O'Neill keep it." She smiled again. "It will bring Colonel O'Neill."

Jack gave Daniel a sidelong glance. "Bring me what?"

Daniel was smiling blankly at Umhela. He murmured to Jack, "I have no idea."

Jack twitched an eyebrow and slipped the mask into his pocket. Umhela walked over to her assistants. One of them dialed the DHD. Carter tapped on her GDO as Teal'c and Daniel stood next to Jack, watching the gate spinning.

Umhela and her assistants bowed their heads as SG-1 climbed the gleaming, polished platform and stepped into the wormhole, going home.

"Basically, General," Sam was saying, "the Laqasi seem to have harnessed an uninterrupted and infinite power supply. With it they keep the complex the stargate is in climate controlled, and they control the light. They even keep it clean by using surfaces which retract when dirty, replaced by new ones. It all happens seamlessly."

General Hammond clasped his hands over the briefing table. "And what's outside this complex?"

"A city," said Daniel. "While Jack was asleep, Sam and I toured part of it, and it's incredible. The Laqasi can build or reshape structures at will to suit their needs. When Sam and I wanted to sit down, stones formed a bench underneath us."

"But you couldn't determine how they were doing this?" the general asked.

"No, sir," replied Sam.

Teal'c said, "Perhaps a technology similar to the crystals the Tok'ra use to construct tunnels."

Daniel glanced at Teal'c. "I thought so, too, but the Laqasi didn't seem to understand what we meant by 'crystals'."

Teal'c raised one eyebrow slightly and looked at Sam.

"I can't explain it," she said. "Not without further study."

"We told Umhela we'd be back, General," Jack said. "With your permission."

General Hammond nodded. "This technology, if we can arrange a trade, could be critical. You're to return to P9A-459 tomorrow at 0800."

After the briefing, Daniel returned to his office to go over his notes on the city. He'd jotted down parts of conversations they'd had with the Laqasi, trying to understand their characteristic style. He suspected they were using formal, polite speech with SG-1. He'd never managed to overhear them speaking to each other, though, so he had nothing to compare it to.

"Hey." Jack wandered into the office.

"Hey," Daniel said, glancing up from his notes.

Jack picked up an ornamental footed bowl and peered inside it. He set it down, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and stood by Daniel's desk. "I was going to head out soon. Grab some pizza with Teal'c. Wanna come with?"

Daniel looked down at his notes, then back up at Jack, who was tilting to one side to read the spines of the books on the bookshelf. Daniel twirled his pen in his fingers, considering. "No, that's okay. I really should work more on this."

Jack straightened up. He lifted both eyebrows. "Okay." He turned to go, hands still in pockets, then stopped. He slid one hand free and came back to the desk. "I almost forgot. Here." He dropped something on top of Daniel's journal.

It was the mask Umhela had given him. Daniel picked it up and unfolded it. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

Jack shrugged. "I don't know. But it's from our mission. Catalog it, I guess."

Daniel looked up at him as Jack wandered out of the office. Catalog it. That was easy. One eye mask made of cloth similar to cotton. White.

Daniel smoothed the mask out over his desk and got out his ruler to measure it. He jotted down the dimensions, and stared at it. No eye holes. That must be significant. What did it mean in the Laqasi culture to wear it? Why would they make newcomers wear it for a night? Not all newcomers -- just the leader, apparently. Daniel lifted the mask and rubbed the material. A bit silkier than cotton, but it wasn't silk. Curious, he took off his glasses and placed the mask over his eyes. He tied it in place.

A rush of wind, a hot breeze burning, and he was falling.

Into the night, into the woods. Forest thick with trees and sounds. Loud cackling bird overhead. Watching and mocking. A low drumbeat from all around, telling him he had to run.

He ran, skirting trees and vines and tall ferns. Moist ground beneath his bare feet, the hot breeze licking his bare back. It was night, but he could see. Stars or moon above, casting pale light through the canopy of trees. A cackling, laughing bird following him.

Following too close. He stopped and crouched next to the shattered trunk of an ancient tree. Catching his breath, and watching from behind his mask.

The mask was heavy and stiff, covering his head down to his nose, shaped perfectly to fit him. He watched through the eye-holes and waited. Sure he was being followed.

He heard rustling in the trees. Moonlight broke through the forest into a tiny clearing. The rustling came nearer and nearer. His heart pounded as he watched. Above him the cackling bird laughed at him, sitting on a branch. Hot air swirled around him, thick.

His hunter stalked into the clearing, slow and alert. Naked but for the wooden mask which covered his head, eyes, and nose. Strange symbols were painted on its forehead. The man circled the clearing, searching.

He took his chance and scrambled into the clearing and caught the hunter by his arm. The hunter spun around, and he saw deep, dark eyes behind the mask, reading him. Shaken, he let go, and the hunter grabbed him. Grabbed his hips, his ass, pulled him close, and the drumbeats were louder. The cackling bird circled them. He held the hunter's hips, and tried to see those deep, dark eyes again. The hunter's mouth was a grim line below the mask. He kissed it, needing to consume, needing to be consumed.

You want this. You need this.

Their bodies moved together, arcing, dancing. They kissed, devoured. Held each other, scraped their hands down each other's skin. The light in the clearing grew brighter, and they fell to the ground together. Writhing, circling, bodies moving together. He pulled the hunter close, the hunter wrapped around him. Squeezed him, kissed him, bit him. Nothing was real anymore. They were all alone here, but they had to hide. He didn't understand how he knew this.

He rolled over and the hunter licked down his back, licked between his legs. Clutched his hips and fucked him with his tongue until he shuddered and arched up toward the moon. Needing it all, wanting this hunger, this ferocity. The hunter entered him and fucked him hard, their bodies crashing together in the heat and sudden silence of the forest. Trembling together in each other's arms, they kissed, they made love again, and collapsed onto the forest floor.

The heat of sunlight warmed his face. A heaviness weighed him down. The hunter slept, embracing him. He stroked the hunter's back, watched his mouth, soft in sleep, no longer grim. Felt dizzy and sore from the night. He ran his hand down the hunter's arm and caressed his fingers. Familiar fingers. He could name his hunter, at last.

He touched a hand to his own mask, felt its rough, wooden shape. He gave the sleeping hunter a last, soft kiss, and slipped away. Crouching next to a tree stump, he lifted his mask.

"Daniel?"

Daniel blinked and sat up. His shoulders were sore. He blinked again, unable to focus, and fumbled for his glasses. He slid them on and looked around. He was sitting

at his desk, in his office. What had he been doing? He felt like he'd forgotten something.

Jack stood next to him, hand on his shoulder. He patted it and asked, "You okay?"

A wave of fierce, throbbing pain rolled through Daniel's head. He waited until it subsided and rolled his shoulders and neck. "Yeah. I guess I dozed off."

"Dozed off?" Jack cocked an eyebrow. "It's nearly O800. We have to get ready."

Daniel stared at him. "O800? It can't be. You just left, and I was cataloging the mask, and I dozed off."

Jack patted his shoulder again. "Daniel. It's tomorrow already." He stood back and gave Daniel a critical look. "Maybe I need to order you to get a life, too."

Daniel frowned. "Huh?"

There was something under his hand, lying on the desk. He glanced down. It was the cloth mask. He rubbed it and lifted it up.

Jack stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Just... go home once in a while, okay? You're almost as bad as Carter." He wandered out of the office, shooting Daniel another critical look from the doorway.

Daniel rubbed the back of his head and stared at the mask. He folded it up and tucked it into one of his pockets.

Umhela greeted them at the stargate, bowing politely as they stepped down the platform. The chamber had changed since their last visit. The colors were more vivid, the light stronger. Umhela nodded to her assistants and they walked ahead, leading SG-1 to the banquet room.

Sam was eager to ask questions, Daniel could tell, but the banquet was a formality of greeting visitors. Besides, he wasn't sure how they were going to get any specific answers. Perhaps the Laqasi had lost the knowledge of their technology and couldn't explain it.

Jack was restless. Daniel couldn't tell why, but noticed him fidgeting, and answering Umhela's questions about Earth distractedly. Once or twice he gave Daniel a pointed, bail-me-out look, but Daniel's questions to Umhela got only vague, unsatisfactory replies.

After the banquet, Umhela agreed to take SG-1 on another tour of the city and try to answer their questions. They left the huge reception building the stargate and banquet room were housed in, and strolled down a long, smooth walkway between clusters of high-walled buildings. It was sunset, and the brilliant orange in the sky gleamed against the polished surfaces of the road and walls.

Daniel slowed his steps and let the others pass.
"Umhela, I'd like to ask you about something else."

Umhela paused, smiled, and nodded once.

Daniel pulled the cloth mask from his pocket. "It's about this. What does it do, exactly?"

Umhela stared at the mask for a moment. She looked surprised. "This is the mask of Colonel O'Neill."

Daniel nodded. "Yes."

Umhela looked at Daniel, and it seemed she was studying him, looking closely. She smiled again. "Umhela understands." She started to turn away.

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Daniel touched her arm. "I'd like to understand. Please. I wore the mask and fell asleep, and it was like time disappeared. Does the mask do anything?"

"The mask brings Colonel O'Neill."

Daniel took a breath to keep his patience. "Yes, but what does that mean?" Umhela just looked at him, smiling apologetically. He had another thought. "Do you ever wear the mask?"

Umhela bowed her head.

"What does it do when you wear it?"

Umhela reached out and took the mask from his fingers. "It brings Umhela the Laqasi. It brings the Laqasi Umhela."

Daniel watched her fingers smooth the cloth and fold it carefully. "So it connects you to your people? To your culture? It represents your ancestors?"

Umhela tucked the folded mask into a pocket in her sleeve. She smiled at him again, softly, privately. "Umhela understands." She turned and walked away, joining the others.

"I wish I did," Daniel said to himself, following her.

Night fell as SG-1 toured the city, and were shown buildings which lit by themselves, and walls that closed completely for the night, their doors disappearing. It was a clear, warm night with a perfect breeze. That, too, seemed to be controlled by the Laqasi. Somehow.

Carter wasn't getting many answers, and Daniel seemed distracted ever since he'd taken Umhela aside for a private chat. Jack had no idea what that had been about. Whatever it was, Daniel was still puzzling over it. Jack wasn't surprised. The Laqasi's answer for just about everything was, "Laqasi." The closest they got to specifics was when Sam asked about the reception building. When and why the room around the stargate had changed.

"SG-1 appeared," Umhela said. "The room changed."

"We caused the room to change?"

Umhela paused. "The Laqasi welcomed SG-1. The room changed."

They were heading back to the reception building now. Jack noticed tall streetlamps lighting the way, although there hadn't been any on the way out. In front, the group stopped, and Umhela said, "Umhela will show Major Carter the source."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Just Major Carter?"

Umhela bowed her head, which was 'yes' on this planet. Jack glanced at Teal'c and Daniel. "And the rest of us...?"

"Colonel O'Neill and Doctor Jackson will wear the mask, as is custom. Teal'c may watch over, or may visit the source with Major Carter," Umhela said. "Umhela understands."

Jack frowned. "I already wore the mask. And why Daniel?" He glanced at Daniel again, who was frowning thoughtfully.

"It is custom," Umhela said. "Umhela understands."

Jack shrugged. "Yeah, okay, why not. Carter, you go explore. Teal'c, you can watch over me and Daniel. Make sure we don't stumble into any walls or anything."

Teal'c nodded. Carter just barely contained her eagerness to run off and see whatever the hell the source of power was. Umhela's assistants led Jack and Daniel and Teal'c into the reception hall, through the empty, plain corridors, and into an empty room like the one Jack had woken up in last time.

"Colonel O'Neill and Doctor Jackson will sit," one of them said.

Daniel took off his backpack and sat down on the floor, cross-legged. Jack looked at the floor -- smooth stone, and if he remembered correctly, damn hard.

"Can I have a chair?"

The assistants bowed. One of them gestured for Jack to sit. Jack looked around, and behind him was a plain bench with a back, like the ones in the banquet room. Jack sat down, and Teal'c took up watch position, standing a little apart and keeping an eye on the assistants.

Each assistant pulled a white cloth mask out of a sleeve pocket. Just like the one Jack had worn before. Daniel took off his glasses, folded them, and tucked them away. One assistant handed him a mask. The other held a mask out for Jack. Jack took it and looked it over. "Okay. Here goes."

He lifted it, put it into position, and tied it.

For a moment, he was in a hall of mirrors, and the room was spinning. Too fast to see anything but color and flashing, glinting light.

Then everything stopped, and he was here, in a big, empty stone room. Naked and alone.

Not alone. There was Daniel, sitting on the floor, cross-legged. And completely naked, except for the mask he was wearing. A shiny blue half-mask fit to his brow and nose and cheekbones, with holes for the eyes.

Jack reached up and touched his bridge of his nose. Felt his mask. Soft, like velvet, and tight across his face. From the edges visible around the eye holes, he could tell it was a dark color.

You want this, you need this, you want this. The whispering was all around, spinning.

Jack stood up. Daniel rose from the floor. There weren't any words, and none seemed needed anyway.

He held up his hands, palms outward, and Daniel did the same, and their palms touched. Jack curled his fingers until they were clasping hands. Holding hands, arms outstretched, their bodies touched, and they kissed. Slow, soft, sensual. Then hungry. Starved. Ravenous.

They grasped each other, kissing, devouring, consuming. Dragging their hands across each other's skin. Scraping. They sank to the floor together, entwined, embraced.

The masks meant nothing, because there was no need to hide. Jack could see through Daniel's, like it had melted away. He touched Daniel's cheek and felt the warmth of smooth skin. Daniel kissed his palm.

Hungry -- always hungry -- they moved together, feeding off kisses. Grasping, grabbing, pushing. He made love to Daniel; he fucked Daniel. Hard and furious and famished, until they spent themselves together in a dizzying rush, then fell into a crushing embrace.

They touched with new tenderness, fingertips on skin, on lips, on eyelids and lashes. And the hunger rose again, and they clutched each other, always moving. Daniel made love to him; Daniel fucked him. Hard and fierce and relentless, so sweet it burned, until they tumbled together into a flash of raw, aching bliss.

Tangled together on the floor, they pressed their palms together and held hands. Daniel smiled softly, sadly. Jack half-smiled back. He understood.

They let go. Daniel reached for Jack's mask. Jack reached for Daniel's. They lifted the masks off together.

Blue light swirled in front of his eyes. Jack blinked and focused, and the light retreated into a dull white.

"Colonel?" Sam stood in front of him. Teal'c helped Daniel stand up. Jack looked at Daniel and quickly glanced away.

"Don't tell me," said Jack. "It's been all night. Did anything happen?" he asked Teal'c.

"You and Daniel Jackson fell asleep. I observed nothing else."

Jack stood up and slid the mask into a pocket. He glanced at Daniel. "What about you? Remember anything?"

"No. Nothing." Daniel picked up his backpack and fidgeted with the straps, looking away from Jack. "Sam, what did you find out about the power supply?"

Carter frowned a little. "I'm not sure. Umhela took me to a huge underground room filled with people. They were just sitting there. She said they were the source."

"Sitting?" Jack raised an eyebrow.

Carter furrowed her brow. "There's something else. Everyone there was wearing a mask. A red mask, with no holes for the eyes. No one moved or spoke. There was a low sound, a sort of droning. It was... strange, sir."

A vivid picture of a room of people sitting and wearing identical masks formed in Jack's mind. He adjusted the brim of his cap and fought back an involuntary shudder. "I'll bet."

"You didn't find any machinery? Any generators or crystals?" Daniel asked.

"No. But it was a huge room. I couldn't see the end of it. And when I asked Umhela, she couldn't tell me anything other than this was the source."

Jack headed for the doorway. "Well, kids..."

Daniel fell into step beside him. "We're just leaving? Without knowing?" When Jack glanced at him, Daniel met his eyes for a moment, then looked away, at the floor.

"No. But I don't think we're going to get anything else out of Umhela or anybody else, do you? Not anytime soon. Have you ever gotten a straight answer from her, about anything? An answer you could understand?" Jack paused. "I'll recommend to Hammond that we send one of the science teams here. Maybe, eventually, they can learn something useful."

He glanced at Daniel, expecting that sour look of disappointment, but Daniel didn't protest. He nodded and fidgeted with his backpack again, not meeting Jack's gaze.

Umhela and her assistants were waiting by the stargate. She bowed her head and smiled at them while Carter

dialled the DHD. Daniel went up to Umhela, looking determined. One last try.

"Sam saw red masks," he said. Umhela bowed her head. "Jack and I had white masks. What does red mean? Why did we have white instead of red?"

Umhela frowned and thought it over. Jack tapped his fingers on his P-90 and watched the wormhole engage, waiting for Umhela's answer to everything: 'Laqasi'.

Carter sent the GDO code and she and Teal'c went ahead. Jack glanced at Daniel, who was still waiting for answers. Jack sighed and climbed the platform to the gate.

"Red brings power," Umhela said at last, just as Jack started to step through. "White brings truth."

General Hammond had only agreed to think about Jack's recommendation. It was the best they could expect. Daniel stayed in his office late into the night, refining his reports to stress the importance of further contact with the Laqasi.

It wasn't emptier, or darker, or more quiet, in SGC at this hour. The mountain kept its own hours. But Daniel felt the lateness in his bones as he walked to the locker room and changed clothes. Alone, because everyone else had already gone home.

Outside the world was still, and chilly, with a touch of rain in the air. The streets were deserted. The traffic lights reflected on the damp gloss of the pavement. The elevator in Daniel's apartment building seemed unnaturally loud as it dinged and whooshed open. He had his keys ready, and silently unlocked his door.

He flicked on one light and didn't bother with the others as he shed his clothes, shed the day, and climbed into bed. In the darkness, he lay on his back and stared at nothing for a while, before reaching over and picking up the mask. Carried from pocket to pocket, through the gate, out of the mountain, in through his front door. Such a small, unremarkable thing. A plain, white fabric mask.

At first, he couldn't figure out why time disappeared without memories when he wore it alone, and why the second time was different. But then he knew why the second time was different.

White brings truth. Truth was knowledge, but this wasn't knowledge it was easy to know. Or knowledge easy to forget.

Daniel lifted the mask to his eyes and tied it in place.

Across town, in the dark and still and empty space of Jack's house, Jack lay in bed, staring at nothing. He held the white mask loosely, absently rubbing it with his thumb.

The first time he couldn't even remember. But the second time had been different.

Truth. He didn't know how to know this. Maybe he didn't have to. He felt it, instead. Understood it without knowing it.

Jack lifted the mask to his eyes and tied it in place.

(the end)

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Notes: Thanks to Thevetia for beta reading and helping out