



BLOOD MASK



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Snore23

Jordan was born the son of a baker in the capital city. His parents, Balthazar and Mary Crustleaf were good-hearted people that were determined to see that their son had a better life than they did. They scrimped and saved during his entire childhood life, while Mary read whatever books they could get their hands on by candlelight to her young son. Most were dry books on the history of the empire, but some were adventure stories of a daring renegade fighting in dark alleys and harbors of the world to protect poor folk from injustice.

By the time he reached ten years of age, he realized the stories were just that, stories. The real world was much harsher than he had been led to believe. Now a year into his basic classes, he struggled to excel in any of the subjects provided in the class. He wanted to make his parents proud, but the constant goading and the jeers of his peers made it very clear that he was not welcome in their upper-crust world. Despite diligent studies and good marks on all his papers, he was washed out by his fifth year for “poor performance” while even the most imbecile of rich boys easily passed and went into their family businesses.

Jordan was unsatisfied with that. He did want to make his parents proud, and returning to them empty-handed was more than he could bear. He left the center of the city, eventually making his way to the docks and seedier portions of the city. He fell in with a rough crowd, picking up the lingo and arrogance of the docks. It was here, too, that he learned various fighting styles from travelers and sailors that came to port. Quick with his hands, he soon mastered seven styles of stick fighting, eight of knife, but only two of sword as those were only allowed to nobles.

The defining moment of his life was when he had been leaving a tavern with an acquaintance from the docks and happened to look at the market next-door. A handsome coach stood there with four glossy chestnuts in the braces and an immaculately attired footman nearby.

I wonder what he is doing here amongst us gutter-rats? He found this curious enough that he affected to lounge in a nearby doorway, idly playing with a bit of rope he found in the garbage heap nearby and pretending to repair it. All the while he kept an eye on the coach out of the corner of his eye.

He did not have long to wait, for a portly man with balding head came strutting out of the market, a grim and victorious smile on his face, ignoring the small urchin clutching his leg; she was being drug along with his moments and weeping bitterly and calling on him to give back her doll. Jordan looked in surprise and found a small black-haired doll clutched in the fat-man’s fist. The father came out, a poor looking man with fish juice staining his formerly white apron and a dingy cap on his head, looking angry and protesting. The footman intercepted him and the fat man glared so fiercely at him and murmured something threatening and the father clutched his child to him, suddenly wild with terror. He stumbled back into his shop much to the amusement of the fat man.

Jordan eyed the coach as the fat man got in and the footman whipped up the chargers. *I should be getting back to the docks now, seeing if there’s any work for me down there.* Somehow though, he found himself striding casually along behind the coach, its passage easily marked by cursing pedestrians picking themselves off the sides of the street or smashed goods.

As the sun began to set, Jordan found himself outside a high gated wall leading into a large manor. The wrought iron was beat into fancy shapes that Jordan ignored. He, like any man, knew the value of those as guards. He was far more interested in the coming and goings of the house. There seemed to be dozens of servants, plus several armed guards. However, all the servants but one left the house before the sun finished setting and a larger number of guards came out from the small guardhouse and patrolled the grounds.

Paranoid. Jordan shook his head. *Doesn't even trust his own servants under his own roof! And these guards! This man is also cheap! They barely even make an effort to search the grounds.*

Jordan eyed the last window to go dark thoughtfully. He had no idea when he had decided on his course of action, but it did not matter to him. The image of the little girl weeping as the little doll she loved vanished from her world drove him now. He would see the pieces of her world picked up and put back together before this night was over.

Sliding stealthily over the wall, he easily evaded the guards. Most men make a *little* noise when they pass, but not Jordan. Not even a weasel would have twitched a whisker at his passing. He easily gained access to the house through the kitchen window.

Now Jordan found himself in a very dark house. This didn't deter him in the least; a lifetime down in the dark wharves and dock houses had taught him to use various senses and spells to see. One never knew when he could be ambushed from black alleys while walking home. Seeing your enemy first was the greatest advantage.

Moving carefully from room to room, he made a tentative survey of the bottom floor. To his eyes, the moon in the window gave plenty of light. The rich paintings, delicate tapestries, and statues wrought of gold deepened his wonder. Why would a man, with all this wealth, take a child's doll? It didn't make any sense.

Jordan shelved the mystery. It would not be wise to concentrate on two things at once, and stealthily made his way upstairs. As richly appointed as the downstairs, he checked each step he took for loose floorboards or other giveaways to his presence.

Fortune remained with him, and on his first room he stumbled on a vast horde of dolls. They lined the walls and several stood in cases. Many had gems of immense values for eyes or teeth, and others seemed carved of the most basic wood and in barely recognizable shape. Jordan couldn't be sure in the dark, but he thought some were very old. They weren't his concern tonight, however. There, under glass in the center of the room, was the doll he had seen earlier.

Placing the doll silently in his pocket, he retraced his route back outside the manor and disappeared down the street, leaving the manor with no more noise than when he came in. It would be a different matter entirely in the morning, Jordan was sure, but after all; the man had deserved it.

Sneaking into the family's one room shanty in the market was much harder. Easing back the current so it made no betraying rustle, he frowned at the multitude of sleeping forms in the dark. Which was the girl's? How could he be sure? He could not risk even a little light to check as it would wake them. It was then he

noticed one of the forms wedged between two of the largest forms, who he assumed to be the parents. He nodded. This would be her.

Noiselessly he placed the doll under her arm, as well as a note telling her to never reveal it to anyone or say she had gotten it back. As he stepped back, her arm went around the doll and her sleeping face smiled slightly, the frown vanishing. Leaving her there, he made his way back to the docks.

The next day Jordan sat at his favorite barstool, regaling his friends with stories he had heard from a sea captain when the footman from before walked in. An expectant hush fell over the crowd as his eyes scanned the room. When they settled on Jordan he made his way over quickly, nose high in the air as if afraid to breathe in the fine odors of honest men, good fish, and great beer. Jordan smiled, he felt as if he should be insulted on behalf of these fine folk!

"Excuse me, are you...er...Jordan?" the footman asked, unable to provide a last name, exactly as Jordan had intended.

"I'm a Jordan." He smiled up at the man from his barstool. "But there'n be lots of folk with mah name. Pr'bly one 'r two here now." There was general laughter.

"I'm quite sure I have the right man." The footman insisted stuffily. "Your description was quite accurate. You are to come at once to the Duke of Closterham."

"Never heard of him." Jordan replied testily. "And why should I go see a high-mucker like that anyways?"

"Because if you don't, then the guards will come and seize you on suspicion of robbing the Duke, which will result in your death." The footman smiled nastily.

"Oh, sure." Jordan laughed. "I've seen the guards around here. I can easily vanish. Try your threats elsewhere."

"My master will make it worth your while." He said.

Jordan cocked his head. "Not buyin'" he told him. "I've seen how your master handles folk in the way o' his wagon." There were angry mutters.

"Regardless, you are to come with me immediately. My master will pay you handsomely."

Jordan felt about digging in his heels, or telling the little rat where to jump to, or mebbe showin him to Sally's to loosen him up, but thought better of it.

"All right, if you're in such a hurry." Jordan stomped out the door. The footman quickly followed, not wanting to stay anywhere near such a crowd that he had driven through yesterday.

The Duke greeted him warmly as he was shown into the study. A blazing fire was set despite it being the middle of August and the room was oppressively hot. *How can the tub of lard stand it?* Jordan wondered.

"Greetings Mister Jordan. I hope I haven't inconvenienced you." The man's eyes ran over his worn clothes and sneered slightly. Jordan felt his ire rise, and decided to give him a shock.

"Indeed you have not." Jordan easily slid into the speech he had picked up at school. "Your man was most insistent. May I inquire about what this is all about?"

The Duke blinked, completely thrown. "Ah...I was told you were watching my carriage yesterday at the unfortunate end of a *legitimate* business transaction." He said tentatively.

Jordan thought about lying but decided against it. He wanted to find out why. "I was." He shrugged. "It did not appear to be much of one, merely a slip of a girl wanting her doll back. I could not find what was so important about the doll that you would take it from her."

The fat man's eyes narrowed at the word *take*. "I did not *take* it sir, though it may seem that way. I bought it from one of her brothers. Unfortunately, the chit reneged on the deal, trying to give me back the money when he said she wouldn't sell. I took my property from the wretches. All my property." He was practically spitting at this time. "The doll is an original Mona LikTulfar from the far seas. How the brat got hold of it is beyond me, but they are extremely rare. Only four are in existence at this time. The one the girl had was extremely expensive. I was simply claiming first right on it before another collector did."

Jordan nodded, collectors bought strange things all the time. However, the implied theft of both doll and money rankled, and he doubted the man even bothered to pay even a token of its worth.

"With all your money, surely you could have come up with a deal to satisfy the girl and her family." He pointed out.

"Ha! As if I would stoop to such dealings with gutter-tripe as that trollop's leavings." He sneered. "However, I've decided to forgo any action against the family and you, if you steal it back for me without any scene. I do not desire to make any more trouble for myself in the docks, which are unfortunately the only way to get my next set of imports in. I will make it worth your while."

"No." Jordan told him calmly. He could see the rage in the Duke's eyes, and he felt the sheath of his knife down his back. The footman hadn't been all that thorough in his search, and he suspected the duke was armed as well.

His thought was proven right when with a snarl of rage the fat man pulled a shortsword from behind his back and swung at Jordan. Moving nimbly aside, he twitched his back and felt the comforting weight of his dagger fall into his hand. Blocking another blow by the Duke, he slashed at the belly with all his speed, the knife a blur in his hands. A gash appeared in the shirt and a thin red line appeared.

"Is that all you can-" the duke sneered. His words were cut off when the skin lost its grip on the other and his stomach spilled onto the red floor. He stared at the mess and slowly sank to one knee, the sword falling with a clatter and his hands going to hold the wound closed.

The door banged open behind Jordan, revealing the footman and three guards. They spotted the Duke on the ground and let out a roar of rage. Running into the room they pressed Jordan back almost to the fireplace,

but were forced back by the blurring blade in his hands. Time and time they would come either singly or in pairs against him, and each time his quick knife movements and sudden strikes with his feet kept them back. One fell before him with a scream of pain as his knife stabbed into his heart, and another fell without a word as a kick struck him in the temple.

The footman, furious, leaped into range of the blades. His sword cut a long, savage line down the side of his face, narrowly missing the eye, and down his jaw. He paid for that wound with an equally long slash along his neck. He fell with nary a sound.

The remaining guard, seeing the fall of his leader and friends, knew how outmatched he was by the assassin in front of him. Making a quick decision, he ran out the door next to him. Jordan watched him go, making sure he'd truly left, before turning his attention to the carnage of the room. To his surprise the fat Duke was still alive and glaring malevolently at him.

He gurgled something, but so much blood bubbled past his lips it was impossible to tell what he was saying anyway. Jordan walked up to him and bent, trying to listen. After two more tries he gave it up. He looked down at the fat man.

"I should make you suffer for what you did." He told the duke, his grey eyes cold and hard. "But I won't. Maybe I'm soft, but even a gutter-whelp like you don't deserve to die like this." And with that he plunged his dagger through the eye of the duke.

Jordan left the mansion with bulging pockets just as the fire engulfed the great house in flame, a black pillar of smoke rising against the night sky. His face would never heal; he would always have that cruel scar running down the side of his face. However, he was much wealthier after some trading on the black market, and purchased for himself a special mask from over the sea, as well as finer clothes and a long black cloak with arcane symbols embroidered on the cowl.

Jordan's world moved ever in the shadow from that moment onward. He wore the black cloak with the cowl pulled up until even his unmasked-half remained in shadow. The mask itself glittered in the dark like ice fire, a symbol of his brand of justice. He would take back anything that was stolen from the poor or helpless and see it back into the right place. But if the villains he fought ever spilled innocent blood or threatened death on the defenseless, then his half-mask would turn red, the color of blood, and his blades would appear around him and the one who had done such wrong would see it in the night, as the last sight before death claimed him.

To his victims and the city at large, he as Blood Mask. But to the poor and down-trod he strove to protect, he was simply *hero*.