A Tale of Masks and Words

Long ago, there was a kingdom called Erde, tucked away in a far-to-reach corner of the world. Erde seemed to be taken straight out of the pages of a storybook, with cobblestoned streets and quaint little cottages, populated by characters from a fairytale.

In the center of Erde was a forest, the beginning of which was green and light. But everyone knew not to venture more than a mile in; those who were brave enough to do so came back with bone-chilling stories. The air would become dark and cold, they said, and things would slither and whisper between the trees.

As a result, no one had ever entered the palace at the far edge of the forest. The top of it was visible, a great stone spire reaching above the treetops. This was where the Officials lived. The Officials ruled Erde, and they were grand-looking men, dressed in velvet robes with cloaks wrapped around their shoulders and white gloves pulled up to their cuffs. They always wore masks in shades of black and red so that no one knew their faces.

The Officials usually spent their time in the palace, but every so often they would come to visit Erde, which they had divided in half. There was the Land of Sun, whose inhabitants had hair the color of the sun and eyes the blue of the sky, and there was the Land of Stars, populated by those with night-shaded hair and skin kissed with the bronze of starlight.

It had not always been that way. Years ago, those of sun and star descent mingled freely, but the Officials had decided that they must be apart. They said that those of Star were tainted with the shadows of the night, darkness lurking within their souls, and they had to be contained for the sake of the kingdom. And because they were the rulers of Erde, no one dared question them.
Arie of the Sun hated when the Officials came. They took things— for the palace, they said, as they removed a watch or necklace from its encasing. Always, they would leave with a bulging bag of words. Arie disliked giving up his words, since they were his, but the Officials only laughed and told him they could use the words much better than he ever could.

The Officials liked him, he knew. He had perfect sun-colored hair and eyes, and he was apprenticed to a powerful wizard. Plenty of times they had hinted that he would be very useful when he became of age. But Arie had only dreamed of stars.

Before Erde had been divided, he’d lived in a village where Sun and Star made up equal the population. There was another boy, Isaak, who’d been his best friend. They still kept in contact despite their separation, their letters smuggled across the border by an anonymous rebel. However, several months had passed since Isaak’s last letter, and Arie was becoming increasingly frantic.

He’d blindly asked around the village, but they didn’t know, and besides, they didn’t have the words to answer. They used the words the Officials had given them instead: that Isaak was filthy and dark, that what business did Arie have with him, scum of the stars. They turned Arie away from their doorsteps with dire warnings of what the Officials could do.

But Arie was undeterred. One night, he snuck off to the wizard’s storeroom and brushed invisibility across his features, casting a spell to be unnoticed. Then he took some food out of the pantry and set off toward the border between lands. It was heavily guarded, so much that even with his magic, Arie had difficulty getting through. Eventually, he emerged on the other side, body bruised and bleeding.

He couldn’t believe what he saw.
The Land of Stars had been devastated. Entire houses were ravaged, the broken windows revealing that the only inhabitants were ghosts. No laughter rang through the town square, and the wind whistled through empty fields. Despite the warm summer air, Arie felt as if he’d been doused in ice.

Arie searched. After ten hours, he found a woman cowering in an abandoned fabric shop. He asked where everyone had gone. The woman couldn’t answer, for her words had been stripped, but she pointed a shaking finger at the palace. He thanked her, cast a concealment charm on her in repayment, and headed for the forest.

The first day of the journey was easy. Sunlight filtered through the treetops, and Arie picked several of the wild fruits and stored them in his sack, knowing he would need them for later. And indeed: as the journey wore on, the trees seemed to press closer around him, the roots winding around his feet and slowing him down.

The darkness began to swim with night and fog. Spirits and beasts lurked in the shadows, urging him to go back. Arie became sick, blood dripping out of his numerous wounds. He was certain he was going insane. The only thing that kept him going was the thought of Isaak and his Star brethren; he remembered the sight of their village and felt a fire inside him that allowed him to plunge on.

Finally, Arie emerged out of the forest, coughing blood into his hands. He stood at the wrought iron gate that guarded the palace. He pressed a hand to the gate and muttered an incantation; the lock clicked, and he staggered inside. He only had strength left for a weak charm that would soften his movements, so he cast that upon himself and heaved his legs through a palace window.
Fortunately, there were no Officials around. Arie crept down the hallway and found himself inside a vast room. The room was covered with luxurious drapes and carpets, and yet, the walls were marred by scratches and there were mysterious stains on the floor. At the opposite side of the room were three doors.

Arie opened the first one. Piles of goods were stacked inside, spilling across the floors. Arie picked a handful up at random. A ruby necklace. A silver fork. A picture of a family with stars on their skin. He gently replaced these things and went on to the next room, afraid of what he would find.

The sight nearly caused him to vomit. Here were the people from the Land of Stars, dressed in rags with emaciated bodies and haunted looks. They were locked in huge metal cages fitted with steel padlocks. At the sight of Arie, some began to scream for help. Others looked at him with dull eyes and didn’t speak. Some didn’t stir at all.

Before Arie could move, the Officials came running. They saw Arie and pointed their weapons at him. Arie cast a small shield charm that prevented the attacks from being fatal, but they bruised his skin and broke his bones. There were too many for Arie to fight; in desperation, he threw himself at the third door, which opened with a hiss.

Words flew out, unable to be restrained by locks or leashes. They soared on wings made of letters, hurtling toward the Officials and tearing at their masks, their gloves, their elegantly tailored suits, so that Arie could see what was underneath. Their faces were permanently seared into his mind. Decaying, blackened flesh; skin stretched too tight over human bones; monsters masquerading as people.
When the words had stripped the Officials of their disguise, they flew to Arie, sinking under his skin, replacing the emptiness that he’d tasted for months. But even with the words, he was too weak to fight, so he fled the palace to return to the village. The forest seemed to welcome him this time, aiding his escape.

Back at the village, newly armed with his words, he told the people what he had seen, what the Officials had taken. Many refused to listen, but those that did braved the journey through the forest and came back with words of their own. As time went on, more and more people went, until nearly everyone had their words and belongings back. The palace was destroyed, the Officials exiled, the captives freed.

It sounded perfect. And yet.

Those of Star were not the same. Not all returned, and the ones that did were bound by invisible cages. Isaak, who Arie had started his journey for, was dead. Arie’s grief was a knife wound in his heart; it left a mark in the shape of a star. Isaak.

Arie smiled sadly, touching his hand to his throat, where his voice was, where the words were. They burned brighter than ever, a magic all on their own. Never would he give them up again. They were his: to fight with, to love with, to protect with. He understood their power now, why they were there.

To take action.

To speak out.