

Mask (The Costume Party)

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EXT. GATED COMMUNITY - MCMANSION - EVENING

Ritzy. Secluded. A wealthy recluses' dream. A towering IRON GATE with artistic flourishes hems in the sprawling lawn. The gold sign on the front reads:

"85 Prospero Drive".

CLICK. The automated door swings open. An UBER CAR slips in.

Following the picture-perfect driveway, the sedan rolls to a stop at the curb.

TWO COSTUMED GIRLS spill from the car. One dressed in a "sexy cat" designer unitard. The other with bargain bin angel wings, and a mask.

They wave goodbye to the driver - giggle and skip to the front door.

"Kitty" tabs an app on her phone:

A SECURITY BEAM lances out. Scans Kitty's face. Beeps Green.

Reaching "Angel", the AI buzzes "no entrance" - rejects the glittery mask which obscures her eyes.

Kitty nudges her pal, points at the mask. After a confused moment, Angel gets the drift. Whipping the mask off, she thrusts her face towards the door.

The scan resumes. BEEP. Angel scores "Green" this time.

CLICK. Security bolts slide open. The formidable door does, too. The party girls race inside.

INT. MANSION - ENTRANCE FOYER

Encountering a BUTLER, Kitty sheds her coat - tossing it into his arms. She prods Angel to do the same.

Her costume now fully visible, Kitty strikes a "sexy" pose.

KITTY

Think Duke'll like what he sees?

The Butler eye rolls, gestures to Kitty's phone.

KITTY

Oh. Yeah. Here ya go.

The man servant takes Angel's, too. She hesitates, but lets it go.

ANGEL

You're taking my phone? What if someone calls?

KITTY

Just let it go. Enjoy the silence. After the party, you'll get it back.

ANGEL

I'd better. I couldn't afford loss protection - that cost me five hundred bucks!

(beat)

And what if I want to take pictures?

KITTY

Duke's big on privacy. His events are strictly kiss, don't tell. Or show.

Fitting her mask back on - and jaw dropped - Angel takes in the lobby's opulence. Whoever owns this place isn't just "rich". They're living like a king.

A MIDDLE AGED MAN (DUKE) approaches. Dressed in robes, velvet and a crown that seems studded with REAL gems, he literally resembles royalty.

Seeing the girls, Duke's face lights up. Kitty waves.

KITTY

Dukkkkkke! This way!

Duke sweeps Kitty into his arms. Plants a theatrical kiss on her lips - then lets her loose. Winks at Angel with a smirk.

DUKE

It's good to be the King!

Neither girl gets the reference. Seeing their blank expressions, Duke sags.

DUKE

What? You're not old enough to know Mel Brooks?

Angel's busy gawking at gold trim in the lobby. Duke and Kitty exchange knowing looks.

DUKE

Your friend: does she speak at all?

KITTY

Be nice. She's middle class. Seeing all this stuff at once...

DUKE

Must be quite the shock, I'm sure!

Duke wraps "friendly" arms around their waists.

DUKE

Shock in a good way, I mean. Welcome to modest home!

ANGEL

(chokes)

"Modest"?

DUKE

Dear, everything in this world is relative. Trust me, I know from experience. Bezos' vacation home blows THIS away. Though with what means I have at my disposal...

He winks towards Kitty.

DUKE

I surround myself with the best!

He pulls the two deeper into the mansion, towards a door.

DUKE

Come. The party's waiting. Let's take the tour!

INT. WINDING CORRIDOR

The door swings open, revealing -

A seemingly endless string of ornately decorated rooms. TECHNO MUSIC thuds through the air - the vibe seems surreal.

COSTUMED GUESTS mix and mingle throughout - each room bathed in a DIFFERENT COLORED LIGHT.

ANGEL

Wow. All these costumes -

DUKE

Made by fashion designers I know *personally*. People you have to make an appointment to even invoke their name. No Hot Topic Halloween trash allowed in these hallowed halls!

Duke guides the girls into -

INT. BLUE ROOM

Sapphire. Turquoise. Aqua-Marine. Everything's blue: the walls. Furnishings. The polished floor tile, too.

The girls ooh and ahh. Angel looks around, confused.

ANGEL

Everything's just... one color?

DUKE

Didn't you know monochrome's the fad de jour? My wife Berenice is an interior decorator. The fact she married me proves she's got exquisite taste!

They reach the second room. The color shifts...

INT. PURPLE ROOM

Angel gasps at the abrupt change. And...

Double-takes when she spots the paintings on the walls. Purple in this light, they depict bizarre, insane scenes.

ANGEL

(points)

What's, um - THAT about?

DUKE

You don't get around much. Do you, child? First you betray your ignorance of cinema. Now you don't recognize Hieronymus Bosch's work?

KITTY

(hisses to him)

Duuuuke - remember? Middle class. Give her a break!

DUKE

Ah, forgive me. No-one is born cultured. It's a way of life one must be exposed to first. Dear, Hieronymus Bosch was a Dutch painter. The work he did - as you can see - was striking. And quite odd.

KITTY

This is so... so bizarre!

She reaches out to touch the frame. A SECURITY ALARM BUZZES.

Duke wags a joking finger. Tsk-Tsk.

DUKE

Now, Dear - no touching. At least here. That painting's appraised at one million. Getting fingerprints - even lovely ones like yours - would be a shame.

ANGEL

A million?!?

DUKE

I know. Berenice obtained it cheap.

Pulling them forward, Duke herds the girls to the next room.

INT. GREEN ROOM

The techno beat doesn't change. Just the color does - now shades of Green.

Different bizarre paintings grace these walls. Duke strides past each proudly, points them out.

DUKE

That one's Frazetta. Recognize his style?

(off Angel's look)

Never mind. Here's a Boris. A eighties. But I have a soft spot for him, nonetheless. Wait'll we reach the Geiger. I keep that one in the Violet Room. That's where the color contrast works best!

Movement near the ceiling catches Angel's eye. It's a SECURITY CAMERA, slowly sweeping back and forth.

ANGEL

Uh, I thought you didn't like cameras? How many are in this place?

DUKE

Enough to keep riff-raff out! The math's rudimentary. I let the security boys determine that themselves.

ANGEL

(whispers to Kitty)

"Riff-Raff?"

KITTY

He doesn't mean us, OK? Shhhh!

The next room they enter:

INT. ORANGE ROOM

Angels eases past COSTUMED GUESTS.

Record scratch. Duke double-takes at a MAN dressed as a COWBOY. The HOSPITAL MASK "Cowboy" wears mars the effect.

Duke stalks up to the guest and indignantly RIPS it off.

DUKE

My invitation SPECIFICALLY said - no face diapers allowed!

The man slumps, instantly submissive to Duke's rage.

COWBOY

Duke, I'm... sorry. I thought -

DUKE

You didn't think. Don't litter my home with virtue signaling obscenities like this!

Duke gestures impatiently: on cue, the Butler from before appears at his side. Duke hands him the offending mask - holds it with two fingers, like a dead bug.

DUKE

Take that... somewhere. Far away from me. Burn it, for all I care.

Duke swings back to Cowboy. Waves at the BANDANA around the man's neck.

DUKE

If you must "protect" yourself, put THAT on. I don't ask much. Just stay in theme!

Gathering the girls, Duke storms off. Into the:

INT. VIOLET ROOM

An eerie CHIME stops the girls in their tracks.

ANGEL

What was that?

DUKE

Just some proprietary AI I had installed. It goes off every hour. My incompetent IT team hasn't figured out how to turn it off yet.

Angel watches as the Butler open a recessed violet trash chute, and tosses the mask in.

ANGEL

(to Duke)

You didn't like his mask 'cause it was the wrong color?

DUKE

NO color would have sufficed. Those tacky paper horrors clash with all my decor!

Duke eyeballs Angel's mask.

DUKE

Please don't tell me that's for health reasons, too.

He swings on Kitty, suddenly accusatory.

DUKE

If you brought one of those Covidiot to my home -

ANGEL

(stammers)

Oh no! This isn't for protection. It's part of my costume. That's all!

Duke steps closer, too intimate. Runs a gentle hand down Angel's Masked cheek.

DUKE

When Kitty told me she wanted to bring a "friend" to tonight's festivities, she claimed you'd fit right in. By that, I assumed she meant "beautiful". Don't hide behind that scrap of fabric. Come, show us your face?

Angel squirms at the unwanted attention. Pulls Kitty aside.

ANGEL

(hisses)

Didn't he say he has a wife?

KITTY

(whispers back)

Big deal! Look around you, girl! Duke is richer than anyone can count. Play along, and he'll give you presents. We all have fun. What's the harm?

Duke collects the girls, leads them forward. Into a...

INT. WHITE ROOM

Angel shields her eyes at harsh light. In one corner, a huddled group of CLASSICAL MUSICIANS softly play.

ANGEL

Whoa. You have an orchestra, too?

DUKE

A quartet, just a sideshow. Buying an orchestra for this event would go... too far.

ANGEL

Speaking of "too far"... exactly *how* far do these rooms extend?

DUKE

(chuckles)

As far as any fantasy. How far would YOU prefer, my Dear?

KITTY

Oh Duke, don't be silly. Stop messing with my friend's mind!

DUKE

Fine - no more mystery. There's just one last room. Then we've reached the Hub - where things get fun!

He pats Angel on the shoulder, too familiar.

DUKE

When we arrive, there's an open bar!

He walks past bizarrely contorted WHITE STATUES. Angel runs a hand along one marble arm.

ANGEL

You have statues? I didn't know that was... uh, still a thing.

DUKE

When I throw a party, I do it right.
After all they put us through with -
(looks disgusted)
That so-called "pandemic", can you
blame me if I choose to splurge?

He leads them into the -

INT. BLACK ROOM

Walls, furniture and floor: all painted black. But highlighted with accents of DEEP RED. Angel points it out:

ANGEL

That's - different.

DUKE

Well, Berenice had to add a splash of color somehow. If not, you'd trip over the ottoman and break your goddamned neck!

Awkward silence from the girls. Duke hastily corrects:

DUKE

No YOU, of course. Just some addled, sloppy drunk guest!

They reach the final door...

Through it, a muffled strong TICK.

Duke swings it open, revealing:

INT. BALLROOM

A massive space, with strobing lights and costumed GUESTS.

In one corner a huge BLACK GRANDFATHER CLOCK holds court: the source of the ticking.

ANGEL

What's that for?

DUKE

To keep time. What else?

ANGEL

We have phones for that. Well... usually.

DUKE

But this home is MY palace; seclusion
from a nasty outside world! I only
grant entry to those who appreciate
and deserve life's little luxuries.
For them, I've spared no expense!

A PETITE MIDDLE AGED WOMAN (BERENICE) approaches - the
feathers of her designer costume flutter in her high strung
wake. Duke spots her, waves.

DUKE

Though my lovely wife deserves this
credit. Berenice, my love - have the
performers arrived?

Duke kisses Berenice's cheeks. Pivoting to Kitty, he winks.

DUKE

Speaking of luxuries, I've arrange
some... talent... for our guests.
Just a bit of eye candy to keep them
busy until the midnight hour strikes!

Berenice eyes the girls, faint jealousy sparks. Appraising
Angel, her face sours.

BERENICE

I don't recall seeing YOU on the
guest list.

KITTY

Angel's a long time friend. We knew
each other, back in school.

BERENICE

Hmmmm - what school would that be?
Harvard? Princeton?

ANGEL

(stammers)

Um, no, well... I wanted those. And
my grades were good. But my parents
had to refi the house for tuition. So
I took classes at State first.

Berenice locks eyes with Duke. "What did you drag in?"

BERENICE

She went to State. AND wears a mask?

ANGEL

I swear, it's my costume. That's it!

Angel quickly eyes the other guests. Not a SINGLE ONE wears a mask. Except for minor decorations - wigs, makeup, hair trinkets - everyone's bare faced. And mask free.

ANGEL

I mean, sometimes I still wear one indoors. But if you don't want to, that's... uh.... fine.

(her voice fades)

You know, that whole 'my body, my choice' thing...

BERENICE

(sniffs)

This clearly isn't your usual hangout. But don't worry your little head about diseases, Dear. The guests who come to OUR parties are always quality. Vetted, very clean.

Dismissing the girls with the wave of a manicured hand, Berenice drifts off, mingles in the crowd.

Duke diverts to a TABLE - one stocked with wine glasses and hors oeuvres.

DUKE

Would you girls like a bite? You'll have to keep your energy fueled for when the entertainment arrives!

He picks up a KNIFE to saw a bread roll. Almost drops it when the AI CHIMES.

The eerie sound temporarily stops all conversation. Duke recovers, steps towards the girls -

But freezes as he spots a tall, gaunt FIGURE across the room. Twenty feet away, it wears TWO masks. One is porcelain, covering the man's entire face. A HOSPITAL MASK stretches across the mouth on top.

The rest of the figure's dressed in SCRUBS - a translucent BODY BAG underneath. Both plastic and fabric flecked with blood. Duke's eyes widen with outrage.

DUKE

My invitation clearly said: No gore.
No masks!

The mystery man walks slowly towards Duke and the girls.

The crowd parts like it's Noah, and they're the sea.

The Butler appears, flanks Duke's left. Berenice flutters to her husband's right. This stranger irks her, too.

BERENICE

Who are you?!?

Swinging towards Duke, she chides:

BERENICE

Did you invite him without asking me?
 (points to the girls)
 Like you did with them?

DUKE

No. He's not one of *mine*.

Wheeling on the approaching figure, Duke roars:

DUKE

Perhaps he's one of the entertainers.
 Nothing more than hired help!

Duke turns questioning eyes to the Butler. Who shrugs, shakes his head "no".

Duke storms up to the figure. Clutching the bread knife as a weapon, he appraises the stranger head to toe.

DUKE

You think this is funny?

The figure stops. Stands as still as the statues in the other room. His silence agitates Duke even more.

DUKE

Is this a political statement? Some silly liberal "eat the rich" motif? How'd you get past my security? This is a stand-your-ground state. I'd be fully in my rights to kill you here!

Duke waves the knife. Guests gawk at his bravado: oooo. A nervous Angel backs away.

ANGEL

Y'know - Berenice is right. This isn't my crowd. I'll get my phone... call an Uber, if you don't mind?

Duke can't tear his eyes away from the mask on the figure's face. Raising his voice even more, he sneers.

DUKE

And this - wearing a mask ON a mask?
How pathetic can you people get?!?

Duke RIPS the mask from the figure's face. Exposing the SLIT where the lips of the porcelain mask's lips part. From within, a whispery, slithering voice rasps:

WHISPERY VOICE

One cannot hide from fate behind mere gates. We hold illimitable dominion here.

Slowly, BLOOD OOZES from the hole. It dribbles down the mask's chin, tinting it - and the floor - vivid red.

Angel and Kitty recoil. Other guests do, too. But Berenice and Duke step forward - anger piqued.

BERENICE

A cheap parlor trick.

DUKE

I'll sue you if that costume blood stains ANYTHING. Hell, I'll sue you into oblivion for trespassing and harassment, too! I have elderly guests in attendance. You're scaring *them* to death!

Swiping with the knife, Duke SLASHES one of the straps. The porcelain mask tumbles to the floor.

THERE'S NOTHING BEHIND IT. The figure's headless now. Only air.

Angel gawks. Brave Berenice extends a bony figure to poke the figure's throat.

BERENICE

My granddaughter knows that trick.
Let me guess. You're hiding under
THERE.

Suddenly, Berenice starts to choke.

Doubling over, the older woman crumples to the floor. And spasms. Guests panic, pull away.

Duke kneels at his wife's side as she gasps for air.

DUKE

Honey, did you take your meds today?
All of them? Yes, I know it's hard to
breathe, but tell me now!

ANGEL

Someone - call 911!

Angel checks her purse. Then remembers: her phone's gone.

ANGEL

...oh. Shit.

Duke glares up at the silent figure, enraged.

DUKE

What did you do to my wife?!?

Grabbing the man's scrubs, Duke pulls...

And the rest of the figure's costume falls away. Revealing
there's nothing there, either. Except...

Distorted, half glimpses of SHIMMERING AIR. With something
squirming inside.

Duke stares at his hands - now slick with blood.

Berenice DEATH RATTLES. Falls limp. Blood trickles from
every opening: her nose, ears and mouth.

Pure panic. The crowd runs for the exits. A stampede; made
all the more deadly by strobing lights. Most guests can't
even find the door.

Those that do stumble into the black room. And crash - blind
and lost.

Angel dives under the table, crawls into a fetal ball.

ANGEL

I'm not one of them. It's not my
fault!

Guests around her fall, bleed, spasm. Breathe their last.

Kitty, too - falling inches from Angel, she stares at her
with dead eyes. Angel shivers, close to catatonic shock.

In the middle of the ballroom, Duke - now bleeding too -
crawls to the figure's fallen porcelain mask. He picks it
up, and stares into its blank face.

DUKE

This was supposed to be my paradise.
Please - why am I not safe?

One last spasm, and Duke's heart... stops.

The grandfather clock stops ticking, too.

Lights continue to strobe overhead. From under the table,
Angel stares out at a sea of dead and dying bodies.

Helpless, she starts to scream.

FINAL FADE OUT: