

—MASKS AND SHADOWS

by Cullen Bunn

There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams.

The Mask of the Red Death

-Edgar Allen Poe

“Isn’t this just amazing?” Judith beamed from behind the feathered mask she wore. She gazed across the ballroom and struggled to find the right word to describe how she felt. “It’s simply...*grand*.”

Nick, on the other hand, didn’t care much for parties, even under the best of circumstances, and walking into a gathering of people he didn’t know—or, frankly, care to know—didn’t top his list of fun activities. He would have much preferred a quiet night at home, maybe watching a little TV or catching up on his reading. But quiet nights at home were, in the end, painfully lonely affairs, and it wasn’t often that a girl like Judith called Nick out of the blue and asked him to escort her to a party. He might have been a borderline shut-in, but a fool he was not.

Judith wore a beautiful gown that might have graced a fairytale princess—innocent lace and ruffles. But her mask, with its stitched leather and peacock feathers, gave her an air of mystery and...naughtiness that Nick found more than a little appealing. On the drive over, Judith had made a few lewd remarks and double entendres that seemed out of character for the sweet, shy girl who worked in HR and brought in fresh baked treats every Thursday morning.

“Ooh, Mr. Bandit,” she cooed in a syrupy, baby doll voice when she saw his costume, “I don’t have any money, but I’m sure I have *something* of value you might want.”

And later, she had brushed the long, wispy feathers of her mask against his face and whispered, “Maybe when the party’s over, you can use the feathers to tickle me.”

Maybe what they said was true—on Halloween, you get to be the person you can’t be any other night of the year, and while Nick doubted he would have liked the “new” Judith any other time, he certainly liked her well enough tonight. He’d asked her out a half dozen times in as many months, but she’d always turned him down.

But tonight—

She was gone.

“Judith?”

Nick looked around. She had been standing right next to him not a minute

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before, but now he couldn't spot her amongst the other costumed partiers. He saw scaly monsters, hockey-masked madmen, scantily clad female cops twirling handcuffs from their fingers...but no Judith. Where could she have gone?

"Judith?" he asked again, pitifully, even though she couldn't possibly have heard his quiet voice above the surrounding din.

Pushing his way through a crowd of ghouls and specters, vampires and hobgoblins, Nick felt suddenly awkward, rude, and out of place. "Excuse me," he muttered. He tried not to meet the eyes of any of the odd characters as he peered through the crowd in search of his date.

"You haven't seen Judith Tierney pass this way, have you?" he asked a Sasquatch, but the Sasquatch only shrugged and took a sip of punch.

"Do you know Judith Tierny?" he asked a sexy witch with a shredded black dress sliced all the way up her thigh, but the witch (whom afterwards he thought of as a bitch) only cackled at him.

"I'm looking for a fairy princess," he told a robot made of cardboard and aluminum foil, to which the robot replied, "You and everybody else, pal."

He almost asked a cowboy and cowgirl couple if they knew Judith, but he decided against doing so. Obviously, he didn't know any of these people—at least, he didn't believe he did. He couldn't be sure, not with all of them wearing elaborate costumes and masks. For all he knew, none of them knew Judith, either. He didn't even know who was throwing this shindig, although he had simply assumed it was someone from the office.

But if any of his co-workers could afford to throw such an extravagant event, Nick planned on asking for a raise first thing Monday morning!

At least a couple hundred costumed guests filled the massive room. A chandelier of brass and crystal was suspended overhead, twisting arms supporting candles, the glow of which, when reflected through the crystal ornamentation, sent flittering beams of illumination dancing across the ceiling, walls, and floor. Candelabras stood in each of the six shadowy alcoves lining either side of the chamber, and vague silhouettes crawled across the walls as the other guests moved through the light. Numerous supports and rafters crisscrossed in the shadows of the vaulted ceiling in a puzzle-like configuration, and statues, seemingly chiseled from the very stone of the walls, loomed overhead. Angels? Nick wondered. Or devils? He couldn't be sure if the hulking winged shapes, partially concealed in the darkness, were symbols of hope or despair.

Reaching into his pocket, he fished out the crumpled, handwritten invitation Judith had asked him to hold onto. The parchment felt...old...and the intricate lettering was a dark reddish brown.

*Attend! Attend!
A Masquerade Ball
In Celebration of
All Hallow's Eve.
Reveal Your Identity
To No One
Not the Closest of Friends*