

THE CERAMIC MASK

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As the sun began to set over the city, a line of aristocratic women made their way towards the theatre.

Although we were all looking forward to the play that we had been invited to see, we didn't speak a word. Talking in public meant instant expulsion from the group. I was one of the last ladies in the line, grasping a fine ceramic plate in my right hand: the one thing that separated us from the rest of society, high born or otherwise, and a representation of our status. I had worked hard for many years to be accepted into this coterie and the privileges and respect we were given by the other members of society still astounded me. The best seats in the theatre were one of the perks.

As we climbed the steps to the theatre's grand entrance, a couple walked past us, exiting the theatre as we approached it. One by one, the ladies in the line raised their ceramic plates to block the pair from view as they descended the stairs. I took the nonverbal command from the members ahead of me and raised my plate as the commoners passed. My place at the end of the line showed that I had a lot more work to do before I chose who we tolerated and who we didn't. At the moment, I just had to keep up and obey the rules to maintain my status in the group. Climbing the ranks would come later.

Upon entering the theatre, the immense size of the building and its ornate decorations took my breath away. While the other ladies sailed through the door and floated across the room without batting an eyelash, I admired the enormous chandeliers above me which splashed refracted light across the cream walls and the shiny wooden floor which was so polished that I could see my reflection in it. Imposing marble columns disappeared through the ceiling, flanking the chandeliers, and I saw gold wherever I looked. Suddenly, I slammed into another person exiting the building. Reality smashed my amazement. My plate slipped from my grasp... but I never heard it shatter. I turned and saw it, miraculously unharmed, in the outstretched hand of the commoner I had collided with.

"Here," she said, and I took it wordlessly, avoiding eye contact. I gave her the briefest nod of thanks, relieved that the fine ceramic hadn't been shattered on the hard floor. I brushed myself off and turned to see the rest of the group had gathered around us. They had all seen my clumsiness only moments before, no doubt about that, but I was shocked and stunned to find they all had their plates up before their faces, blocking out and shunning not only the

commoner, who would never be accepted into the elite group, but me as well. One of their own. I had seen this happen before. If a member failed to maintain their impeccable reputation and follow the group's rules, they were promptly excluded. However, my plate had not been taken from me to officially remove me from the group and the ceramic was still intact. As they stood there, waiting, it dawned on me that I had been given a second chance. All I had to do was lift my plate to my face, and join the line, turning the exclusion and the blame on the other girl. The nobody. The commoner. The person who caught my plate and returned it to me. The person whose actions gave me the chance to rejoin the group, knowing full well that we didn't tolerate her kind. Knowing that she would never get a thank you. I looked down at my plate and back up at the line of ceramic shutting me out.

Then I let it go.