

Masked Desire

by

By Christel Bodenbender

The only face that Sibling W remembered was that of her grandmother, as she turned paler with age. One time her grandmother leaned closer and explained the color was fading due to the lack of sunlight underground. Grandmother whispered so faintly that Sibling W could hardly hear the words.

Although Sibling W wanted to hear more about the star that once provided the necessary warmth to seed life on this planet, her grandmother became silent and turned away. The preachers only mentioned the sun when they lost themselves in lavish descriptions of the fires of hell that awaited anyone who would climb up to the surface of the planet. Going outside was as taboo as looking at a face, which included one's own.

Sibling W sometimes stole glances at her own face as it was reflected on the shiny surface of the bathroom on level seven. Her face appeared much smoother than that of her grandmother. Yet there were the same bright, blue eyes.

It all was so strangely organic. So different from the crude facial expressions that the electronic facemasks projected.

She quickly put the mask back on when she heard footsteps outside the door. She adjusted the hood of the cowl to make sure it hugged the facemask tightly. It was considered a crime to show anything personal to other people, which meant that everyone wore the same gray cowls and the same black facemasks with crude, digital representations of eyes, nose, and mouth.

The eyes and mouth of the person who entered the bathroom were rendered as straight white lines as the person rushed into one of the bathroom stalls.

The only people who looked different from the majority of the population were the preachers, wearing brown cowls instead of the usual gray.

Sibling W left the bathroom and went through the dimly lit corridor back to the elevator. She had to be back in time for the second part of the ritual with Sibling H. Being late might lead to an arrest. Of course the preachers would do the same if they found out that Sibling H had convinced her to divert from the sacred steps of the ritual. They had instructed her to report any transgression. But she hadn't. Yet.

As soon as the elevator button jumped back into its neutral position, the elevator doors opened. She was lucky. Sometimes one had to wait a while before an elevator arrived at this level.

The elevator was large enough to carry ten people, but only one other person was inside. The mask displayed a stylized smile. She smiled as well and the sensors on the inside of her mask detected the change in facial expression. Immediately, the screen on the outside of the mask showed the same stylized smile.

"Level thirty-two," she said, and her mask modulated the speech sounds with the generic voice that

everyone spoke with.

She remembered that her grandmother had mentioned that people also used to communicate with something called “gestures”, but they drilled those out of the people very early on.

“Only if we think the same can we act responsibly,” blared the automatic voice in the elevator. That constant acoustic noise had become part of their culture.

Although her fists clenched automatically inside the cowl pockets when she heard the automatic voice, she had learned to not show any signs of her emotions, and her facemasks just kept smiling.

She was startled when the elevator doors rumbled open and another person entered the elevator.

“Remember, we are all one people; we are all siblings.” The voice went on with the same slogans that she had heard a million times over.

When the elevator finally arrived at her level, she rushed out.

Down here, the hallway lights were a bit brighter because a higher current was rushing through the electric wires. The increased charge was needed to provide enough power for the hydroponic tanks in beta section, which housed the plants that produced most of their oxygen.

Whenever she could, she would go to the tanks. The fresh green of the plants brightened her days. It was one of the few colors the preachers weren’t able to guilt out of their lives. And they still needed a few humans to carry out some tasks that the automata could not.

She passed a preacher on her way and barely noticed his nod aimed towards her; but it was there — a subtle, yet clear reminder of what was expected from her in exchange for allowing her to work in the tanks. She had to report Sibling H after today’s meeting.

Her heart was beating faster as she reached the door to the room. The scanner embedded above the door ignored her facemask and cowl and created a biometric map of her body down to the molecular level. For a moment — just a moment — she was recognized as an individual and granted access.

Sibling H was already in the barren room.

“I greet you, Sibling W,” he said. The facemask showed a smile.

She returned the greeting and sat down across from him on the only other cushion. Their arms rested on their laps. As usual, they were careful not to show their hands and hid them inside the long sleeves of the cowls.

She tried to make out the sound of his breath. It had been fascinating to hear him breathe the last time they met. The whole meeting had been ... arousing, much more so than the preachers would have wanted. Well, the two siblings had somewhat bent the rules of engagement. The experience had been too profound to simply end it after only one meeting by reporting him to the preachers. She needed to find out more first.

“I take you as my wife,” he said.

“And I take you as my husband,” she said, uttering the words of the ritual.

The ritual was why the preachers wanted them to meet; artificial fertilization had not been as successful

as everyone had hoped.

“I guess one of us has to go first,” Sibling H said eventually. He lifted his left arm. As his hand emerged from inside the sleeve, she could see that he was holding a small device.

Then she realized that he did not wear a glove.

Fascinated, she stared at his hand. It was as dark as the skin that covered his face, which he had shown her last time.

He guided her attention to the device.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Through this wireless device, I can access the sensory input from the inside of your mask,” he explained. “It means that with this I can see your face.”

He turned the device so she could see the small display. It was her face, clearer and more detailed than the walls of the bathroom on level seven could ever reflect.

“Hand-held devices are forbidden,” she objected automatically.

“So was what we did last time.” He pulled the hood back a bit to take off his mask.

“We shouldn’t take off our masks anymore. What if someone comes in?”

“I am logged into the camera at the door and will get a warning when someone else seeks to enter. Also, I gave the room a sensor sweep before you came in. We are safe.”

Now she understood why the preachers recruited her to spy on him. With his electronic gadgets, their usual surveillance tricks weren’t working.

She paused for a moment before she took off her mask as well.

His smile was contagious. There was something magical about seeing a real face. His skin looked so soft; she wanted to run her fingers over it like last time.

When she inched closer to touch him, he backed away slightly. “Today I want to show you something else,” he revealed. “Something that everyone should be able to see.”

He took another device from underneath his cowl. She began to wonder what else he was hiding underneath the wide garment.

“It’s a UI-modem,” he explained, but the term meant nothing to her. The device looked like the seeing-glasses of her grandmother, except that both ovals were black like the surface of the facemasks. “Put it on and you will see.”

Although the glasses rested comfortably on her nose, she was disappointed that they were as black on the inside as they were on the outside.

“There is a button on the left earpiece. Press it.”

She closed her eyes and pressed the button, anticipating a bright burst that might blind her.

There was no burst. Instead soft light penetrated her closed eyelids. Carefully, she opened them.

Images and text flooded her visual nerve with colors she had never seen before. Although she only saw the images through her eyes, they appeared to be projected right into her mind.

One prominent picture showed a three-dimensional representation of an uncovered person. Not that the woman was naked. She just wasn't wearing a cowl or a facemask. She was quite beautiful. Sibling W could feel arousal welling up again and fought it down; this was not the right moment. The woman was holding something in her hands — a sign with just one simple word: Freedom.

"This is a page with news from one of the final days before the preachers turned off what used to be called the 'Internet,'" explained Sibling H.

"The Internet." Her grandmother had sometimes talked about it. "Wasn't it some kind of primitive collective consciousness? From the time before we all became truly one with the help of the preachers?"

"The Internet was a collection of data stored in so many places that the preachers could not destroy them all. Some of the old folks were able to store pieces of information inside every chip they could find — like, for instance, the processor that controls the scanner of this door. All the technology the preachers use is networked. We are simply tapping into that network and hiding our information inside. And now we are about to put it all back online." He paused for a moment. "This UI is for you. That is, if you want to keep it."

"I can keep it?"

"Of course. Also, this is one of the new devices with integrated facial recognition. There is a button on the other earpiece. Press it."

She did, but nothing happened until he put on his facemask and although it covered his face, she was able to see right through it. His smile warmed her heart.

"We need you to do something for us," he continued.

"We?"

But Sibling H ignored the question. "We know the preachers have asked you to report on me." He took a deep breath. "We want you to meet them, look in their eyes and be completely honest."

She frowned. "You want me to betray you?"

"I didn't say that. I just want you to be honest. Which is one of their commandments, isn't it?"

"I still don't understand."

The device she was wearing displayed his wink as he adjusted his hood and got up. "You will," he stated before he turned and left the room. She followed him outside but lost sight of him as her eyes followed the other people in the hallway. Everyone's face had the same basic features, yet small difference betrayed their individual histories. She saw scratches and discolorations, high cheekbones and thick eyebrows, so unlike the stylized images on the facemasks. It took all her willpower to force a neutral smile on her own facemask.

She almost failed to recognize the preacher who passed her on his way to the tanks. He would be waiting

inside for her report. Although she only saw his face in passing, it seemed a lot like that of her grandmother — older and feminine. She had never thought that a preacher could be a woman like her or her grandmother.

The doors to the hydroponic tanks opened for Sibling W and she slipped inside, where she was greeted by the familiar green of the plants. Even the air smelled better in these rooms than outside.

She walked around a few of the large glass containers that provided the perfect breeding ground for bushes until she came to one of the over-sized computer terminals that governed the climate inside this facility. The blinking lights told her that everything worked within normal parameters. The preacher stood next to the terminal, waiting for her.

Sibling W studied the face of the other woman. She noticed the swollen tear sacs, the brittle lips and gritted teeth.

“Let the guilt flow through you,” said the woman with a modulated, firm voice that hid the weak articulatory movement under the mask.

“And through you,” replied Sibling W automatically.

“We have sinned against the planet,” the woman continued the common sermon with a blank stare in her eyes, as if she was reciting from a sheet of paper that hung in front of her in the air. “We had chosen blind faith in our ability to fix things later. Until we finally took responsibility and accepted the guilt. Never again can humanity be allowed to choose ignorance and convenience.”

The woman looked tired, the bags under her eyes heavy and saggy, which stood in stark contrast to the harshness of her words — phrases that couldn’t undo the atrocities that had been committed and only created new pain.

“Maybe it is also sin to embrace guilt for all eternity,” Sibling W blurted out.

Her hand rushed to the stylized mouth on her facemask, covering it in an attempt to take back the words she had just said.

Yet she could see a spark in the eyes of the preacher, spreading as color to the rest of her face as if she had just found a reason to live again.

“We need to heal,” added Sibling W.

The preacher frowned. “Is that what Sibling H told you?”

“No,” she answered truthfully. The similarity between the face of the preacher and that of her grandmother helped Sibling W to put aside her inhibitions. “I have watched plants heal from injury and stretch their tips to the light again. Maybe we should do the same.”

“The guilt is too large,” replied the preacher.

“Don’t you have grandchildren?”

Sibling W could see the other woman swallow. “I think so,” she eventually replied.

“Then give them the freedom to choose.”

The woman in the brown cowl was silent for a moment, tears running down her cheeks as Sibling W had only seen from her own grandmother when they had to put on the facemasks again after their secret meetings.

“Go,” whispered the woman behind the mask. “Just go.”

Sibling W ran off but not without noticing the automatic voice blaring through the hallway, “Only if we think the same can we act responsibly.”

Christel Bodenbender is a writer currently living in London, Ontario. She has been creating stories since childhood, taking part in short story competitions. After a Master's in Linguistics she rekindled her passion for writing. Since then she has penned a selection of short stories and worked on a science fiction book series. Apart from spinning tales, Christel works in IT and web design.