



THE ORPHAN'S TALE

MASK

I had a rough childhood. When I was ten, my parents gave me away. Well, more like they swapped me for another kid at the orphanage. Damn the orphanage for having swap offers! Why do they even have those? I remember what I told my father on that day very distinctly. I said, "Dad, don't you love me?" and he said, "Of course I do, son. But I don't love you enough to *not* swap you out for a daughter." That didn't cheer me up so then he came up to me, knelt down and said, "Hey, you're special. This always cheers you up; what do humans have that nothing else on the planet does?" He paused for a bit, then continued: "Human babies."

"I hate this joke, dad."

"This is why you don't have parents anymore."

Then he walked away and drove off. Not even a second glance my way. As I sobbed myself to sleep that night, I knew that the reason for my abandonment wasn't my lack of humour but because my toes weren't symmetrical to their counterparts. How could anybody love an abomination like me?

Riddle me this, what does the poorest man in the land and the richest man in the land have in common? The answer is "toes". They both have toes. Unless the rich guy is super-rich and also eccentric and paid some radical scientists to forcefully evolve him beyond the need for toes. Or if the poor guy had to sell off his toes to settle the mortgage on his cardboard box, er, house.

Of course, then neither of them would have toes and my point/analogy/anecdote would still hold.

Also Goddess loves both of these men equally, that's another similarity. Just one she chooses to shower with gifts while the other she just chooses to speak to in his head while he's inebriated and make him seem like a loon. Goddess works in mysterious ways. On a familiar topic, let's skip ahead to the next stage of my life, adolescence, where I too was receiving mixed signals from a girl.

My teenage years weren't easy. I'm thinking of a particular rainy night. I was apprenticing at a watchmaker's at the time and was sent out to run some errands. I tripped on the wet sleet and the miniscule gears and screws I was carrying got swept down the drain. My first instinct was to reach down the opening but I realized that would be futile. So I just sat there for a while, looking at the grate until a set of eyes blinked back at me from the shadows.

The trio of lidless eyes belonged to this *girl* named Anna-Brog. She invited me beneath to her cosy place down under. Not like that! I mean I *literally* went down to the secret city of Craplantis. It still sounds like an innu-endo/metaphor doesn't it? When we were in her home I got to take a good look at her. She had gills that looked like gashes and didn't shave the scales on her legs. One of her eyes was lazy and they weren't even arranged symmetrically. She was absolutely disgusting... and perfect for some-

one like me with similarly malformed toes.

After what I only recently concluded to be flirtation (she was aggressively croaking at me while I was stiff with fright so it really couldn't have been anything else), I'd like to say I got to learn how the biology of her people worked, but I'm still confused (there was no doodle!) So... my first *romantic* encounter was with a krul. That's slang for mutant sewer people (who, to be blunt, aren't really people anymore, not as far as the law is concerned anyway). The next few moments defined my life and are nothing I care to share with anyone except my therapist. So let's flash forward to today.

Now I'm 24 and making ends meet. I don't live in the *worst* area of the city; maybe the fourth worst... or fifth worst if you count the disputed territories (don't even ask). Whenever I walk, there is a distinct clicking noise. I can't open my shoes or socks by myself and have taken in my own orphan to deal with these tasks for me. I feed it of course, I'm not inhuman. But the primary reason I keep it around is to handle my dressing needs. So if it ever lost its arms to, say, a freak stapler accident, then I would have to return it for a new one. Thank Goddess the orphanage still has those swap offers.

Life is terrible and if I have learned one thing it's this - never, and I mean NEVER, say yes when a fish mutant asks you if you'd like her to perform the Bloated Gearshift on you. This would never have happened to my orphanage bunkmate, Even-toes Joe.