

MASQUE OF THE QUEEN



A tale of madness and horror by
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2014

She should have made her way to Hollywood five years ago, back when she had enough money to travel farther than Upper to Midtown Manhattan. She would wager that, by now, she could have at least snagged a part in some sitcom or second-rate motion picture — something to make her name known beyond one block off Broadway. Finances were tighter than ever, and though she had no problem lining up auditions, landing a role that paid for something more than a few drinks was tougher now than the day she had spoken her first line on the stage at Fugazi Playhouse, now closed. She sure as hell couldn't afford to move to a new place. By any standard, her cozy apartment in Manhattan Valley was a bargain, though uncomfortably far from the law office where she temped as receptionist, and even farther from the theater district.

Tonight, as usual, the bus was jammed with bodies, but she had managed to grab a seat near the back. To get it, she'd had to physically remove a large shopping bag owned by an older Hispanic woman who had strategically placed it to discourage potential seatmates. On a crowded bus, Kathryn Stefano refused to tolerate such courtesy, and now the woman, her bag tucked under her seat, sat peering out the window radiating hot, silent hatred.

Kathryn had felt so good about the last audition. They seemed to love her, but her phone had been silent for two weeks, and they had promised her an answer within a few days. Bryon Florey, her ersatz agent, had pestered the director enough, perhaps beyond his tolerance level, clearly to no avail. The damned thing would have paid well, too.

She was 28, and her time for grabbing choice roles was rapidly slip-sliding away.

She had never heard of the play before. *The King in Yellow*, a two-act exercise in surrealism, produced by an unfamiliar company — Mythosphere, it was called — though she knew of the director,

one Vernard Broach, who had gained notoriety two decades earlier by helming a production of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* that took a page from the Gospel of Phillip, in which Jesus and Mary Magdalene were engaged in an amorous relationship, portrayed quite graphically on the stage. For *The King in Yellow*, Kathryn had read for the part of Cassilda, the queen of a mythical city called Hastur, somewhere on or off the earth. She had not read the entire play, but it supposedly ended on a tragic note, and she'd always had an affinity for tragedies.

At 109th, she disembarked, ignoring the whispered “*Reina puta*” from her seatmate. She had walked most of the block to her building when she felt her jacket pocket vibrate.

Bryon!

“You got Cassilda,” came his excited voice. “She’s all yours.”

“Well, thank you!”

“Rehearsals start Friday night.”

“Seriously?”

“The schedule’s going to be intense. Hope you’re up for it. Can you get to their office tomorrow afternoon and get the paperwork done?”

“I guess I can take a long lunch.”

“Do it. I have a good feeling about this one.”

“So do I. I think.”

“You impress Broach, things are going to start falling into place. See if they don’t.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“You’d better.”

She signed off just as she reached the front door of her building, an ancient, nine-story monstrosity that took up half the block between Amsterdam and Broadway. Her apartment was on the top floor, a single-bedroom cubbyhole she shared with her roommate, Yumiko, whom she actually saw about twice

a month. She found herself hoping Yumiko would be there now. At first, she thought it was simple excitement that set off an unexpected series of little tremors; but as the elevator took her up to the dim, deathly silent hallway, she realized she it not excitement but apprehension. Not the little butterflies that came before stepping on stage, but the cold anxiety that came when a stranger fell in behind her and rapidly closed the distance.

Unfortunately, when she opened the door and entered darkness, she found the place deserted, except for Koki, Yumiko's cat, who occupied his traditional spot on the windowsill. The gray and white tabby gave her a brief, unconcerned glance and returned to peering out at his vast, unreachable kingdom. For a second, she glimpsed an odd reflection in the glass: a kind of swirl pattern in bright yellow-gold, as if cast by a neon sign. But no such sign existed out there. The weird image lasted only a few seconds and then vanished.

That was strange, she thought, but hardly worth dwelling on. Koki displayed no unusual interest in anything, indoors or out. If the Feline Early Warning System hadn't gone off, all must be right with the world. Such as it was.

#

Damned peculiar: the script the office manager had given her was incomplete. A number of random pages had been excised, including the final scene. Still, from it, she pieced together as much of the story as possible:

The play opened with Queen Cassilda — many thousands, perhaps millions of years old — gazing on the vast Lake of Hali from her palace in the far-off city of Hastur. For eons, Hastur had been at war with its sister city, Alar, and the endless siege had turned Cassilda into an embittered, impotent monarch. She occasionally entertained the idea of passing her rule to one of her two sons, Uoht or Thale, she cared not which. Both princes desired to marry their sister, Camilla, and Cassilda finally decided that whichever son won her daughter's hand would ascend to the throne and take the name "Aldones" — the

name of every king that had ever ruled in Hastur. Then Cassilda would give to Camilla the royal diadem, which had been worn by Hastur's queen since the beginning of time. Camilla, however, dreaded such a transfer, for legend told that the recipient of the diadem might also receive the Yellow Sign — a harbinger of death, or worse — from the mysterious King in Yellow: a nightmarish entity that resided in the fabled, spectral city of Carcosa, which existed somewhere beyond the Lake of Hali.

One day, a stranger wearing a pallid mask appeared in Hastur. To Cassilda's horror, he also bore on his garment the Yellow Sign: an intricate sigil rendered "in no human script." The queen's high priest, Naotalba, declared that the stranger must be none other than the Phantom of Truth, the King in Yellow's most dreaded agent. However, the stranger explained that he was in fact Hastur's truest ally. His pallid mask concealed his identity even from the all-powerful Yellow King, so he could wear the Yellow Sign with impunity. And any kingdom that could bear the Yellow Sign as its standard would be invincible. To make this possible, he suggested Cassilda put on a "masque," wherein the attendees would wear their own pallid masks in the presence of the Yellow Sign. At an hour of the stranger's choosing, the attendees would unmask and find that the Yellow Sign no longer held power over them. Despite suspecting treachery, Cassilda accepted the stranger's offer, for no matter the outcome of such a gamble, the conflict with Alar would at long last end.

Act 2 opened with the masked ball in progress. Cassilda and all members of her court wore pallid masks. At the sound of a gong, all removed their masks — all except the stranger, who then revealed that he wore no mask at all. He had deceived them so that Alar, not Hastur, might emerge victorious from the endless war.

Suddenly, with a cry of "Yhtill!" — a word meaning "stranger" — the King in Yellow appeared. Taller than two men, garbed in flowing, tattered, golden robes, the King struck down the faceless stranger, proclaiming himself a living god who could not abide such mockery. He told Cassilda that

Hastur *would* prevail over Alar, but with a heavy price: from that moment on, every inhabitant of Hastur, including Cassilda, would wear a pallid mask.

Cassilda, regaining her regal manner for the first time in eons, approached the King and boldly refused to accept his terms.

And there the script ended.

There was clearly more to the final scene. Whoever had collated this copy, Kathryn decided, was anything but thorough at his or her job.

Something in the script had seized Kathryn's attention and, for reasons she couldn't fathom, sent her mind reeling, as if gripped by vertigo. She flipped back through the pages until she found the passage.

"The city of Carcosa had four singularities. The first was that it appeared overnight. The second was that it was impossible to distinguish whether the city sat upon the waters of the Lake of Hali or on the invisible shore beyond. The third was that when the moon rose, it rose in *front* of the city's spires rather than behind it. And the fourth was that as soon as one looked upon the city, one knew its name was Carcosa."

Something about that name, *Carcosa*. She felt a strange, tingling excitement, as if she had discovered something indecent or forbidden — the way she had felt when she bought her first vibrator all those years ago. She had taken it home feeling dirty, giddy, almost breathless with anticipation. *How could she possibly feel this way now?*

That night, she dreamed of a soft, reed-thin voice saying, "The truth *is* but a phantom — a ghost that can be used or murdered at whim. Have you found the Yellow Sign?"

#

The first read-through with the full cast in the rehearsal room of the Frontiere Theatre:

Upon her request for a complete copy of the script, the production manager, Earl Blohm — a bearded, long-haired young man who dressed as if he had fallen out of the early 1970s — told her it was all she would get. “You’ll find out the ending when everyone else does,” he said. “It never ends the same way twice.”

“I didn’t think this play had been produced before.”

“Oh, it’s very old. It’s just that no one alive has ever seen it.”

Strange, *strange* man, Kathryn thought. In fact, the whole ensemble struck her as peculiar. Usually, when cast members gathered for the first time, a certain excitement ran through them like a humming electric current, but here, a somber, almost funereal atmosphere pervaded the chamber. Director Vernard Broach, a portly, swarthy man with dyed black, slicked-back hair and a pencil-thin mustache, spoke so softly she could barely make out his instructions.

“The audience is *there*,” he said, pointing to the farthest wall of the long, deeply shadowed rehearsal room. “We do not concern ourselves with them. You are in the city of Hastur on the Lake of Hali.” He gave the group his most theatrical scowl, pointed to the opposite corner of the room, and said, “The King in Yellow lives *there*. We do not look there, we do not speak of there, we do not go there. Now, look at your scripts, look at them. We have Queen Cassilda and her daughter, Camilla. Who is Camilla, where are you?”

“Here.” An attractive young black woman raised her hand and then pointed to herself. “Jayda Rivera.”

“Your name doesn’t matter,” Broach said. “Read, will you?”

Jayda Rivera gave him a questioning look, and Broach replied by stamping one foot.

Jayda glanced at Kathryn and drew a steady breath. “Forgive my bluntness, my queen, but you have been looking for Carcosa. Again.”

“The Hyades have not yet risen, thus Carcosa may not appear. I am simply watching the Lake of Hali swallowing the suns. Again.” Kathryn’s gaze at Jayda was haughty, but her voice carried a wistful note. She felt Broach’s eyes warm with approval.

“If only the lake would swallow our enemy,” Jayda said, her voice gaining assurance as she began to immerse herself in her part. “But, Mother, does it not lie within your power to destroy Alar?”

“It does not, and you know this.” She drew herself up and in a commanding voice said, “Listen well, daughter. Do not mock me, for I still have power in Hastur, and I would as soon you never live to succeed me.”

Jayda’s eyes widened in pure, authentic fear. “I do not mock, my queen. You withhold powerful secrets. I desire only to learn.”

“I should first share them with agents of Alar.”

The ensuing silence felt so deep that Kathryn swallowed hard to make sure she could still hear. From the direction that Broach had indicated lay the purview of the King in Yellow, a movement caught her eye. *Do not look there.*

She looked. Just for a second.

A tiny figure, standing in the shadows, barely visible. *A child.*

A sudden rhythmic clattering drew her attention back to director Broach. The stout man was doing a weird little two-step dance to himself, a blissful grin broadening his already broad face. The sounds of his feet tapping on the floor were soon joined in syncopated rhythm by another set of echoing, *tap-tapping* footsteps.

In the room’s far shadows, the child was dancing as well.

#

Three weeks later: lunch at Brodjian’s Café with Jayda, who, it turned out, worked by day in a nearby office.

“I don’t like those damned masks,” Jayda said, giving her chicken salad wrap a suspicious glance.
“They’re creepy and uncomfortable.”

“Creepier on some than others.”
Jayda smiled and nodded, then looked back at her lunch. “I asked for no walnuts. Screw it, they won’t kill me. You think this play has a chance of taking off?”

Kathryn’s turkey and brie croissant must have sat on the counter overnight. It was not thrilling. She shrugged. “It’s the weirdest thing. I tell you, if I were in the audience, I don’t know I’d sit through it — at least as much of it as we can perform.”

“Please! What *are* we going to do at the end? Stand there like dummies as the curtain falls? And who’s that little girl? One of the cast members’ who can’t find a babysitter?”

“Little girl?” For a second, she drew a blank. “Oh, wait. I thought it was a little boy.”

“Pretty sure it’s a girl.”

“Okay.” Boy or girl, the kid was a mystery. Always lurking in the shadows, never quite revealing his or her face. Six or seven years old at most. She had never heard the child speak, yet he — she was *sure* it was a boy — sometimes mimicked the actions of the players during rehearsal. She didn’t think the kid was Broach’s; he was reputedly as gay as they came and had been an old bachelor since before Moses’ day.

“We still don’t even know who that is playing the King.”

“Nope. Could be anyone, since we never see his face.”

“The orchestra’s on tonight. You ready?”

Kathryn nodded. The play featured a single musical number, “The Song of Cassilda,” in the second scene of Act 1. Till now, she had simply sung it *a cappella* from the sheet music, which, most curiously, Broach had transcribed by hand. This evening, the prior production having finally cleared out, the theater proper would be open for rehearsal, and she would sing with orchestral accompaniment. She

had a fair mezzo-soprano voice, best suited to singing in a chorus, but in college she had held her own as Lady Macbeth in their production of Verdi's *Macbeth*, and more recently as Luisa in a revival of *The Fantasticks*. She had no doubt she could nail the song, yet for some reason she was on edge about it.

Like about so many things in this play.

"What are you doing?"

Jayda was looking at her, one eyebrow raised. Kathryn realized one finger was tracing a pattern on the table and had twisted a portion of the tablecloth into a knotted mass. She'd had no idea she was doing it.

A chilly worm slid down the back of her neck. "I'm done," she said, pushing away her half-eaten croissant. "Not hungry. And I gotta get back to work."

"You really are nervous."

"Something about being poor as dirt, I guess. I need this play to fly, and I'm not sure it's going to."

"If it doesn't, it won't be on your account."

"Well, thanks for that."

They settled their bills and headed out of the café into the afternoon sunshine. Lunchtime pedestrians and traffic choked West 47th Street, the usual barely controlled chaos. For the moment, the aroma of cooking meat from a dozen nearby eateries overwhelmed the exhaust fumes, just barely.

"Till tonight, then," Kathryn said. She gave the younger woman a little wink. "If you see crowds of people running away, it's because I'm practicing my song in the streets."

"Now, that I believe."

"Oh, and Jayda?"

"Hmm?"

"It's a little boy."

Jayda returned an exaggerated sneer. "Yes, Mother."

#

Dark, *dark* theater.

The cavernous space beyond the stage might as well be outer space, Kathryn thought, the only illumination out there the murky red glow from a pair of exit signs over the far doors, like ancient, dying suns floating in the void. The Frontiere, once a posh venue for first-run shows, had decayed as old buildings will decay over the course of a century, and nowadays audiences rarely filled more than half the seats, even for its biggest shows. Still, auditorium's acoustics were phenomenal. The vaulted ceiling rose to dizzying heights, and faux-Greek sculptures framed the huge stage.

The cast had assembled within a warm island of light on the otherwise barren stage, and director Broach huddled in a corner conversing with Joseph Morheim, the orchestra conductor. Down in the pit, the musicians were tuning their instruments, producing a stream of background noise that alternated between soothing and jarring. This felt *almost* like a normal production, Kathryn thought, which in itself seemed bizarre, since little about *The King in Yellow* had so far been "normal." She had no understudy; no one did. At their read-throughs, the director stopped them at various points before the non-existent ending. Hers wasn't the only incomplete script. Broach — or perhaps the anonymous playwright — had excised portions of the play, the director explaining that "Spontaneity, my children, will have its day, and your reactions will be as authentic as the audiences'." Three actors — none, thankfully, in major roles — had dropped out after only a few rehearsals, claiming the play was causing them "psychological distress." While Kathryn and Jayda Rivera had hit it off from the start, the actors who played Cassilda's sons, Uoht and Thale, never associated with the rest of the cast. The former, a handsome, chisel-faced youngster named Les Perrin, always appeared sullen and withdrawn, his every free moment spent with his face stuck to his iPhone. The latter was a chunky, bearded gentleman named Kenton Peach who had starred in several noteworthy shows, including *I'm Not Rappaport* and *The Odd Couple*; ironically, he

was old enough to be Kathryn's father. He seemed polite enough but frequently faded into the shadows as if to perform a soliloquy for no one.

Labeling Broach an 'eccentric' was like saying Jenna Jameson was a little audacious. The director's moods swung between exuberant and depressed, sometimes within minutes of each other. At least he seemed taken with Kathryn's portrayal of the moody Cassilda. "You give her life," he told her, "which is more than she ever knew before."

To date, the "Yellow Sign" had been represented by an "X" rendered in yellow paint. Why, she wondered, did that bother her so? Not to mention the fact the King in Yellow himself was played by some anonymous actor, whose identity only Broach knew.

Kathryn's roommate, Yumiko, after one read-through, refused to practice with her any further. "This play is not happy for me," she had said. "It feels bad."

Two weeks remained before the opening. Broach had promised the sets would be "phenomenal," and the stage crew had their work cut out for them. Until then, there would be rehearsals every night, but they still had no inkling of how the play would actually end.

However, as Kathryn had hoped, the first stage rehearsal felt different. *Good* different. Even without the sets in place, the theater aura bolstered her confidence, and as Cassilda slipped inside her, the two of them breathing together as one, the orchestra sent up swirling, mystical strains from woodwinds and strings, weaving an otherworldly atmosphere that was at once dark and lovely. As Scene 2 of Act 1 — Cassilda's song — loomed nearer, the music became more intense, the brooding bass deeper and more ominous, the ethereal flutes more melodic.

The introduction to the song began. Weird and wistful, the instruments assumed the quality of human voices, humming and warbling in an eerie melody that gave Kathryn a chill.

She needed no cue to begin.

““Along the shore the cloud waves break,

The twin suns sink beneath the lake,

The shadows lengthen

In Carcosa.””

Her voice was not hers. *Alien*, it seemed, more assured and more beautiful than any her vocal cords could produce. She felt herself diminishing. All she could perceive — all that remained of *her* — was her voice.

““Strange is the night where black stars rise,

And strange moons circle through the skies

But stranger still is

Lost Carcosa.””

““Songs that the Hyades shall sing,

Where flap the tatters of the King,

Must die unheard in

Dim Carcosa.””

Her heart swelled, and her feet seemed to leave the floor, her body as light as a dust mote, her emotions overflowing, spilling into all those within her presence.

““Song of my soul, my voice is dead;

Die thou, unsung, as tears unshed

Shall dry and die in

Lost Carcosa.””

The last syllable echoed away into pure, empty silence. She had no breath left in her lungs.

Camilla — no, *Jayda* — stood nearby, her eyes bright jewels, tears glistening on her cheeks.

Kenton Peach lifted an arm and propped himself on Les Perrin’s shoulder, as if to keep from toppling.

Somewhere beyond the island of light, a soft female voice breathed, “Oh, my.”

At the edge of darkness, stage left, Vernard Broach stood with his hands folded together as if in prayer, knees slightly bent, face to the heavens, eyes closed. After a moment, he began to shiver as if clutched by bone-numbing cold. Then he was not shivering but *vibrating*, his entire body quivering in a way no human body could or should move.

Behind Broach, a shadow stirred, and the reed-thin voice Kathryn had heard in her dream sang out: “Aldebaran.”

#

Sometime in the night, she woke to an odd flapping noise, unlike anything she had ever heard in her apartment. She rose and peeked into the darkened living room. Yumiko was not on the pullout sofa bed, and she didn’t see Koki anywhere. The heavy flapping came again, and she now determined it originated outside her window, which overlooked the narrow alley. She drew up the venetian blinds and then staggered backward with the realization that she was not awake but dreaming.

Where the opposite brick wall should have been she saw vast, dizzying space: a midnight blue sky lit by alien stars over an endless body of inky water. High above and to the right, a huge, blood-red star lit the night sky, and she knew *this* was Aldebaran, the sun that blazed above the city of Alar. Around it, a cluster of stars — the Hyades — glittered like the jewels adorning Cassilda’s diadem. And now,

slowly, the rim of the silver moon breached the farthest edge of the Lake of Hali and rose until it resembled a cyclopean eye, its gaze burning through her body straight to her hammering heart.

Then, on the horizon: an impossible array of gleaming, dizzying spires that wavered like ghostly tendrils before taking solid form *behind* the bright, full moon.

Carcosa.

Moments later, it came: the thin, childlike dream voice she had heard before; distant, barely comprehensible.

“Doggy!”

No. The word only sounded like “doggy.” That wasn’t what it had really said.

“Joggy!”

It was still too far away, too difficult to understand. The flapping sound came again, and now, in front of those distant, luminous spires, a silhouette appeared in the sky, its contours vague, imprecise. It was coming toward her, trailing black smoke, as if it were on fire.

“Blocky!”

A little clearer now, the reedy voice sounded excited. The shape in the sky was no clearer to her eye than the voice was to her ear. It seemed ghostly in its way, surrounded by an aura of indeterminate color. Was this what it was like to be color blind? It was neither gray, nor silver, nor white, nor violet. But it *was* color.

“Byakhee!”

Now the thing was rushing toward her, and she could see its eyes, burning with that indefinable, radiant gleam. She backed away from the window, knowing the thing had become aware of *her*.

Then a hand touched the small of her back. She spun around and looked down. Standing before her was the child she had seen at rehearsals. Even now, she couldn’t tell whether it was a boy or a girl. Curly dark hair hung low over big blue eyes, its short, slightly pudgy frame garbed in a pale blue robe, a

tiny replica of Cassilda's jeweled diadem adorning its oversize head. Those eyes were too mature to belong to a child.

The tiny, cherubic mouth spread into an overly huge grin, revealing two rows of polished, very large, very adult teeth.

"Grandmother!" it said.

#

"I want out of this," she said, and from the long silence, she didn't know whether Bryon had even been listening to her. "I can't do this play."

The low voice that finally replied was disbelieving. "You signed a contract."

"Screw the contract."

"You do *not* back out on Vernard Broach. Are you fucking serious?"

"There's something wrong with him. He's not *right*."

"What's he done? Tried to rape you or something?"

"No, of course not. But I can't eat anymore. I can't sleep — not without these nightmares. I see things that can't be real. Bryon, no play is worth my health." Then she whispered, "Or my mind."

"You break this contract, you'll be temping and waiting tables till that drama mask tattoo on your ass is sagging to your knees. Are you that damned stupid?"

"This is not negotiable. Call. Him."

"You're not my client anymore. I'm done with you. You tell Broach yourself."

Bryon Florey hung up on her.

Her eyes were swollen from crying, and her throat felt as if she had swallowed razor blades. She'd had to call in sick at the temp agency, and they were hardly any happier with her than Bryon was. For that brief moment, when she had sung Cassilda's song on stage, there seemed a chance that everything

might yet turn out as she had hoped. But then came the aftermath, so repulsive, so full of unendurable *dread*.

She had barely put her phone down on the nightstand when it began to vibrate. It was not a number she recognized. “Hello?”

Director Vernard Broach’s voice. “I know you wish to leave the play.”

“How did you—?”

“If you stay, I promise something wonderful will happen. Kathryn, you are our shining star.”

“Mr. Broach, this is taking too much out of me. I feel awful, physically and mentally. I just can’t do this.”

“I will double your pay. No. Triple it. Kathryn, you *are* Cassilda. Trust me when I say that, after the first performance, things will be very different.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I’ve treated you well, have I not?”

She had to concede that, personally, Broach had shown her only respect. What if she *were* to face her fears and finish out this play? All kinds of new doors would open to her. And this bullshit would be behind her.

“When you wake up in the morning, the money will be in your account. And you will have a new agent. A real agent.”

“Mr. Broach, I—”

“Kathryn. Please?”

“All right. All right. I’ll sleep on it and call you in the morning. I promise.”

There was a long silence. “I trust you, my good friend Kathryn. Now I ask you to trust me. Tomorrow morning, call me and say you will stay. I will honor my word to you.”

“I’ll call.”

"Until then, Kathryn."

#

Opening night:

Upon her arrival, her first reaction had been to the brilliant sets. Everything looked as it had during the final dress rehearsal, but nothing *felt* like it. The balconies of the palace rose almost to the ceiling, and — more disturbing to her — the backdrop of the Lake of Hali uncannily resembled her vision from that night. The lavish interior sets were modular and could be moved by stagehands to their designated marks almost instantaneously. She had seen all these during their construction, but now she felt as if she were viewing for the first time a realm that actually existed.

Vernard Broach had been true to his word. By any standard she could measure, she was now a wealthy woman, about to sign a contract with a brand new, very reputable agent.

The *King in Yellow* opened with an overture: a haunting, wistful composition built on the melody of "Song of Cassilda," but that ended on a series of harsh, dissonant notes that set her teeth on edge. As she took her place on the palace balcony, she felt a moment of vertigo, and just for an instant, an image of that black, smoking silhouette with burning eyes flashed in her mind's eye.

There was a rumble as the curtains separated and spread wide, and then the spotlights were on her. Beyond those lights, only a gaping abyss, blacker than the sky over the city of Alar. Behind her, Jayda spoke her lines, and the play commenced. Uoht and Thale argued over which of them would take their sister's hand in marriage. Cassilda turned thoughtful as she decided that one of the brothers would succeed her and that Camilla would inherit the royal diadem.

Something seemed wrong. The space beyond the stage was too silent, too still. She felt as if she were trapped within a sealed sphere of light, barely able to breathe. But it was when she was supposed to describe to Camilla the four singularities of Carcosa that she received her first shock.

It wasn't Jayda who knelt before her to listen. It was the child.

"Grandmother!" it said. "Tell me of Carcosa."

Deaf and blind, existing somewhere apart from herself, her body continued to play her part, speaking the lines she was meant to speak. When awareness returned to her, the music told her it was almost time to begin her song. For a moment, the spotlights were turned away from her, and she chanced a look out at the darkened chamber.

It was empty. No living soul occupied a single seat.

She stepped in front of Brad Silva, who played the priest, Naotalba. Her disbelieving eyes swept the empty space. "There's no one there. There's no one out there!"

She felt something tugging at her long, crimson skirt, and she looked down to see the child's huge blue eyes peering up at her.

"There is an audience, Grandmother. But sensible souls in Hastur hide their faces."

Inside, she began to scream. She tried to leave the stage. She pleaded, cajoled, threatened Cassilda, but the character refused her, and Kathryn played on.

The masked figure — the Phantom of Truth, played by a young man named Zack Cheuvront — appeared before her, and for the first time, she saw it. Not a crude, painted "X" but a blazing, yellow-gold sigil, simultaneously adorning the character's robe while floating in some dimension in front of it. She could not have found words to describe the Yellow Sign, for it was rendered by no human hand.

The masked stranger was full head taller than Zack Cheuvront.

Kathryn sang "The Song of Cassilda." And the empty, soulless auditorium erupted with thunderous applause.

This was all in her mind.

She agreed to the stranger's proposal, and the curtain came down on Act 1. She fell to her knees, sobbing, barely aware of tiny hands pulling the pallid mask down over her head.

#

The child took the stage and spoke to the emptiness.

“Your chance to escape has passed. Bound to us, at last.

No harm can come to you in fantasy, and this is not reality.

No sensibilities offended, no immorality decried.

But 'tis now too late, for your sin is complete.

You have crossed the threshold and the door is barred.

Lament what you will, but here you abide;

Sit and listen, for you are ours forever,

And until the end of time, we are also yours.””

#

The gong sounded.

Zack Cheauvront — it *had* to be Zack — as the Phantom of Truth stood before her, pointing to her face. She was supposed to remove her mask, but as long as she wore it, she couldn't be seen. She did *not* want to be seen.

But she tore the mask from her face and regarded the horrid Yellow Sign on the stranger's robe.

She heard Camilla say, “You, sir, should unmask.”

“Indeed?”

That was not Zack's voice.

“It is time. We have laid aside our disguises. All but you.”

“But I wear no mask.”

“No mask!” Camilla's eyes turned to Cassilda's, bright and bulging with horror.

““Yhtill! Yhtill! Yhtill!””

The King in Yellow appeared before her and, with a glance, struck down the masked stranger. The monstrous figure floated above the stage: a giant garbed in tattered, brilliant yellow robes, its face covered by a golden mask that revealed only its eyes — eyes so black they glowed. One hand rose to point at her, and the King’s voice boomed across space: “Have you found the Yellow Sign?”

It was not the costume from their rehearsals.

It was not the same man.

It was not a man at all.

The King pronounced Hastur’s fate. Declared its victory over Alar. Condemned every man, woman, and child in the city to wear a pallid mask for the rest of eternity.

Cassilda felt another soul inside her, one struggling to escape, protesting these events that never began and never ended. At last, it was time for her to rule in Hastur, to no longer revel in the ennui of perpetual siege. She stepped forward and gazed into those blazing sockets in the golden mask. “No,” she said, her voice firm and strong. “This will not do.”

That was where the script ended.

Kathryn stood under the hot stage lights, glaring at the thing floating before her. It seemed diminished somehow, as if wilted by her refusal. She heard rustling and other little sounds in the darkness, and her attention shifted to the great, empty hall beyond the orchestra pit.

The theater was filled to capacity. Not a seat remained empty. As she stared, the applause began, at first sparse, then rising to a consuming thunder. People rose to their feet and began to shout. When she looked back toward the King, he was gone. Only the unmasked people of Hastur — these actors — surrounded her, radiating approval.

Her children — Jayda Rivera, Les Perrin, and Kenton Peach — came to her, smiling, and the two men took her arms, evidently to escort her offstage. But no; at the far end, on a dais, there was a throne.

The original throne of Hastur, first occupied by King Aldones, before the beginning of time. *Not one of Broach's sets.* They led her to the throne and knelt as she ascended the dais and took her rightful place.

The child appeared and stood before her, its big blue eyes gazing at her, inquisitive, appraising. The eyes turned cold and black, mimicking those of the King in Yellow. Kathryn heard a series of metallic *snaps*, and a second later realized that manacles had closed around her wrists and ankles, binding her in the throne.

“What is this?”

She heard a clatter behind her and smelled something thick and pungent. From the shadows offstage, actors were carrying bundles of wood and piling them on the dais beneath and around the throne.

My god, they were going to burn her.

“No,” she whispered to the child. “What are you doing? Why?”

The small creature laid one finger beside its nose and said, “Grandmother. Did you think to be human still?”

Jayda appeared, carrying a lit torch, her eyes reflecting the flames until they burned pure gold. From the painted stage backdrop, Kathryn detected movement, and — as in her dream — saw a smoking silhouette with glowing eyes drifting through an endless, star-filled sky.

“When all is done, Byakhee will feed,” Jayda said.

The child pointed to a blood red star above the Lake of Hali. “Adebaran.”

She could see Carcosa behind the rising moon, and as Jayda dropped the torch and flames began to rise around her, catching her skirt and enveloping her sleeves, she saw the distant spires glowing gold.

Before her screams became the only existing sound, she heard the child addressing the audience.

“This ends the story of *The King in Yellow*, a tragedy told in fire and verse.”

The child danced its way off stage, while Kathryn and Carcosa burned together.

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She woke to a pair of blurry figures leaning over her and discovered she could not move. Something covered her face, something with slits for her eyes that barely permitted her to see out.

“Stay still. We just want to help you,” a young male voice said.

Paramedics.

“We need to try to get that off her face.”

“What is it?”

“Looks like some kind of mask.”

“No!” she cried, her voice muffled. “Don’t take it off.”

“What did she do?” another voice asked.

“She burned herself.”

“Oh, my god.”

“It’s bonded to her skin,” the second voice said. “We can’t remove it here.”

“Look at that pattern on her chest. Why is it *yellow*? ”

“Who knows? Let’s get her in the ambulance.”

Kathryn closed her eyes. She felt no pain, felt *nothing*. As long as she wore the mask, she would never have to face the King again.

“How bad is it?” the first voice said.

“Bad. No one will ever recognize her.”

Ever.

And so, at last, Kathryn and Cassilda were free.

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You can find this tale and a dozen more of Stephen Mark Rainey's tales of eldritch horror in his collection, *Fugue Devil: Resurgence*, available in paperback, ebook, and hardback from **Black Raven Books**.

[Order *Fugue Devil Resurgence* from Amazon.com here.](#)

About the Author

The writer is *not* the infamous Stephen King antihero Mort Rainey, but the far more nefarious author of the novels *Dark Shadows: Dreams of the Dark* (with Elizabeth Massie), *Balak*, *The Lebo Coven*, *The Nightmare Frontier*, *Blue Devil Island*, *The Monarchs*, *Young Blood* (with Mat & Myron Smith), several novels in Elizabeth Massie's *Ameri-Scares* series for young readers; five previous short story collections; and 200-some published works of short fiction.

Those with long memories may recall that Mark, as he is known to most, edited *Deathrealm* magazine from 1987 to 1997. In its decade-long history, *Deathrealm* won a bunch of nice awards and featured hundreds of short stories, poems, and essays by authors ranging from the most established professionals to young, aspiring first-timers, many of whom proceeded to carve out names for themselves in the horror/dark fantasy field.

After *Deathrealm*'s passing, Mark edited an anthology for Delirium Books—titled *Deathrealms*, believe it or not—which featured a selection of short stories from the magazine. He has edited a couple of other anthologies as well: *The Song of Cthulhu* (Chaosium, 2001), which features 20 stories of Lovecraftian horror, and *Evermore* (with James Robert Smith, Arkham House, 2006), which is a volume of short stories about Edgar Allan Poe, many featuring him as a character.

Mark lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, with his wife, Kimberly, and a passel of housecats. He is an avid geocacher and, whenever he can get away with it, poses as a musician, actor, and graphic artist.

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