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## Starry Mask

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# Starry Mask

Linea Cutter

Blaire sprinted to the locker room. “That was a close call!” she thought frantically as she burst through the door. She had barely enough time to raise her hand to ask for a bathroom pass before disaster would have come upon her. Her drama teacher had been slightly put out by Blaire’s sudden interruption of his lecture, but nevertheless, he understood the sudden call of nature, a characteristic of his young high school students that was especially prevalent on days when he was spouting forth an especially sleep-inducing monologue. Blaire ran into one of the showers and forced the curtain shut. She looked down at her chest—the distinctive bright glow had begun to flicker. “I need to stop forgetting to change the batteries on this thing!” she thought. “One day, it might be the death of me.”

The gold chain that held the flickering orb suspended around her neck was so thin that it easily escaped detection with the naked eye. Blaire had to pull her glasses from her pocket and put them on before she could take the necklace off. She ravaged through her backpack, scouring it for extra batteries. She breathed a sigh of relief as she found two small batteries lodged in one of the pencil pockets of her bag. She carefully placed the batteries inside the orb and it began to glow brightly again. She put the necklace back on and sat down in the shower, taking a minute to relax after the stressful episode. Her mind wandered to the time her mother had first explained Blaire’s disability to her. It was a painful memory, yet one that had helped her better to understand herself. She closed her eyes, and a picture of her five-year-old self swam in front of her eyes. She had been getting ready to jump off the roof of their old, two-story house. The strong arms of her mother wrapped around her body and lifted her off of the roof’s edge in one swift movement. “Blaire!” her mother shouted with tears streaming down her face. “How could you?” Five-year-old Blaire stared at her mother blankly. “I don’t want to live anymore,” she had said in a weak, squeaky voice, “the world is dark and I am too small.” Her mother placed her on her lap, and they sat together in the middle of the roof. “Blaire, you need to fight this. You need to fight it with everything you are. You are a strong girl, and I know you can do it.”

Her mother had then explained to Blaire that on Yendar,

everyone was born with a bright star in his or her chest. It would always glow, giving the people of Yendar positive energy that fueled their individual lives. But Blaire was different. Instead of being born with a star in her chest, Blaire had been born with a black hole, which filled her entire being and darkened her thoughts. To disguise this black hole, her mother had given her a special necklace to wear—a battery-powered, glowing orb. “This necklace will be a useless disguise if you do not adopt an attitude to match it,” her mother had warned.

Blaire had struggled to follow her mother’s advice. She felt like an outcast at first, and struggled to make friends when she first entered school, wrestling against the awkwardness and sadness that she knew her peers could not comprehend. When she entered high school, she had completely changed, at least on the outside. She was now one of the most popular girls in school, actively involved on the school’s tennis team, and a prominent member within the student government. Only Blaire knew the truth—her bright smile was a mask that melted away as soon as she entered her bedroom and removed the necklace from her chest. She felt so alone in her struggle. But so far, her act had succeeded, and her character was a hit in the play that had become her life.

She left the locker room, and hurried back to her drama class. She entered the room just as the bell rang, adjourning school for the day. She waved goodbye to her friends and started walking to her house, a block and a half away from the school. As she walked, the stress of the day suddenly dropped upon her like a heavy weight. She broke down as tears flowed freely down her face. She stopped by an oak tree, and set her backpack on the ground, rummaging through it for her sunglasses. “Blaire?” She jumped at the sound of a voice right in front of her. She looked up. In her hurry to find her sunglasses, she had failed to notice that Dimitri, a boy from her drama class, had been relaxing in the shade of the tall oak. “What’s wrong?” he asked in earnest, studying her face. She couldn’t recover this time. She usually could, but the close brush with disaster had been the last straw that had brought her to her knees. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Suddenly, she found herself pulled into a tight embrace. Her tears soaked into his shirt as he held her close to him—her cheek against the soft beating of his heart. She finally pulled away from him and looked away, embarrassed by her own lack of control. He

walked her home without saying a word, but he held her hand the entire time.

The next day, he found her at lunch with her friends, and asked if he could meet her after school. Fear gripped her heart, but she nodded her consent. She met him by the same oak tree where he had startled her the day before. She sat down next to him as a cool breeze rustled through the leaves of the mighty oak.

“Blaire,” he said as he looked at her, his big blue eyes were grave. “You can’t wear a broken mask your whole life.” Her eyes grew wide, and she moved away from him.

“How would you know anything about that?” she stut-tered.

“Blaire, the world is full of different actors, all of them wear different masks. The key to surviving is to become the best actor that you can be—to the point that you believe your own act.”

“How can I make my mask that perfect?” she asked, “I have a black hole for a heart.” She had never confessed this to anyone, and she braced herself for the repercussions and rejection she knew would come. Instead, she again felt his steady heartbeat against her cheek.

“Just because there is a black hole in your chest doesn’t mean that you can’t create your own light to fill it with,” he whispered, as he held her tightly and kissed her forehead.

Every day after that, Blaire would sit with Dimitri under the oak tree after school. Through him, she found strength to battle the darkness inside of her. A month into their friendship, she found that she no longer cried as much when she was alone. Although she knew she had a long way to go, she now knew progress was possible. Her new smile—a real, genuine smile—was all the evidence she needed.

Summer came, and Dimitri left for a drama camp that he had been accepted to in the north. Blaire wished that she had applied to the drama camp, but she knew that Dimitri would enjoy himself. She wanted him to enjoy himself because she was so thankful that he had given her hope.

When she said goodbye to him the day before he left, Blaire had no idea that she would never see him again. A month after he left, she received a phone call from Dimitri’s sister. He had killed himself.

Blaire’s world stopped.



Blaire didn't leave her room for a week. Her mother had to coax her into eating any form of food. She felt smothered by grief and loss.

She had just emerged from her room on the following Tuesday, when a letter arrived for her. It was addressed in Dimitri's familiar handwriting. He had sent it to her before he died. She braced herself, tears blurring her eyes as she opened the envelope, and read his enclosed letter.

"Blaire, I have failed. This play has become too much for me, and I can no longer act my part. It has become too demanding. We aren't supposed to discuss this. They've told us not to because they want us to act out our parts as best as we can. Our parents hope that by concealing the knowledge from us when we are young, we will work harder to 'be like everyone else' and overcome the black holes inside of us. Everyone is born with a black hole in their chest, Blaire. We all don the same necklace to hide our own darkness. I thought I knew the secret to overcome it, but I was naïve. I was wrong—becoming the best actor is not the key. Everyone is trying to overcome the same disability, and we all put on masks. We really should be trying to eradicate the problem, not disguise it."

That was all he wrote. Blaire closed her eyes and wept, as the full gravity of what he wrote hit her.

The next day she sat under the oak tree. She longed for Dimitri, so much so that her whole body ached. She closed her eyes and imagined that the soft breeze that drifted through the mighty oak was the gentle whisper of his voice. He had given her so much hope, and yet ultimately, he himself had succumbed to the darkness. He had become such a good actor that when he finally realized he was just a character himself, he had given into despair.

"That's the answer," Blaire thought quietly. "The only way that a character can survive in this play is if he fully embraces who he is. A great actor never loses sight of who he really is, despite his many imperfections. It gives him joy to play his part, because he can step away from his own troubles for a while—but he cannot forget his true identity. An actor must also work on his true character, instead of only working on the character that he has fashioned for himself."

"Just because there is a black hole in your chest doesn't mean that you can't create your own light to fill it with." His words echoed in her mind as she closed her eyes and imagined again the sound of his beating heart against her tear-soaked cheek.