While the Mask still Held True
by Avamaria Marra

If one were to travel by rocket in each of the four cardinal directions simultaneously, but without leaving the confines of one's living room in the process, one might just come across the kingdom of Paradoxia, a wondrous and jaw-dropping beauty to all foreigners, near and far alike.

Now, this particular Kingdom prided itself on every area of personal conduct, order and life which they always generously made known to all the surrounding kingdoms, sure of the supposed thankfulness offered for being included in their kingdom's paradoxical excellence. Their inhabitants, known as Paradoxians, though the elitist members of the society were known as the Machiavellians, who instead utilized their own elite language as opposed to the common language which the Paradoxians spoke, Flatterish by name, were the exuberant pride of blushing Paradoxia, turning the surrounding kingdoms green with envy. This very much delighted Paradoxia, as their green currency took the form of envy.

The chief career which employed the Paradoxians in their august kingdom was that of an influential and sympathetic demeanor, through which they provided great service to the wide world and their close neighbors alike by taking upon themselves the role of doctor, counselor and instructor. The humble Paradoxians fulfilled their noble duty by considerately tantalizing their submissive clients with their lovely luxurious lives, which were exchanged for a plethora of green envy and pitiful, delusional beliefs regarding lifestyle and self-"improvement" that their clients eagerly swallowed whole.

The Kingdom of Paradoxia, like many other kingdoms of the time, was ruled by a seemingly wise and beloved King, King Duplicitous. King Duplicitous was not by any means of the reserved type and he generally exhibited an active and transparent social life. Duplicitous, the very founder of Paradoxia's magnificent establishment, portrayed every aspect that a model Paradoxian should embody. He was so very generous with his humble advice, never refrained from displaying his luxuries to all the wandering eyes he could capture (which was quite a few indeed) and was always willing to impose the solid truth to others regarding proper lifestyle and behavior, all of which only ever always highlighted the truth of identity which was supposedly the core of his philosophy.

Why, this same wise and benevolent King had established a law in Paradoxia requiring that all subjects who were born into his kingdom must then, on the very date of their birth, choose from any of his wondrous hand-picked selection of "personality-templates" which he has carefully and lovingly curated for his citizens. And if any such rascally child was overwhelmed or unwillingly to choose

from the marvelous options set before him, the very next day a public vote was set out as to what template the child shall be confined in.

King Duplicitous was lovingly referred to by his citizens by many titles, including the Supreme Counsellor, the Most Excellent Entertainer, and the Incredible Influencer of Identity. All the citizens strove to be like him, or rather, to be him. And in this manner, Paradoxia seemingly thrived.

However, unbeknownst to the multitude of admiring foreigners and Paradoxians, during a particular council meeting with the elite Machiavellians, King Duplicitous had fallen gravely ill with such an illness that was formerly decreed by the poor King himself to be outlawed from his kingdom. This illness took on the form of paralyzed fear, stiffening all his limbs and joints from the bottom upward until his entire being would be eternally frozen over. The King, however, knew this day would come, and sensing the illness start to take effect in the tips of his toes to the heel of his foot, the King quickly excused himself from the meeting and shut himself up in his room before any of the elites could determine the problem.

The King's room however, contained a secret stairwell which no other member of the castle knew of which led down into a small enclosed room, above it an inscription read, *Speculum Veritatis*.

Inside, this peculiar room was encased with mirrors on every side. This hidden place was not unknown to the King and he detested it with a passion. In the center lay a small ornate wooden box guarded by a large and magnificent peacock with diamond feathers and jeweled eyes. Engraved on the small chest were the words, "Mirrors reflect the surface alone." As soon as the distressed King stumbled into the room, as his left leg was now entirely frozen, the peacock, *The Spectacle* by name, gracefully craned her neck to meet the King and in a shrill high voice of a thousand overlapping whispers, she said, "Greetings Magnificent King. Ah, the frost has already reached above the knee I see. What are you seeking for this time Duplicituous, healing, or the usual dose of validation?"

"The Box...," Duplicitous was now rasping breathlessly, as the frost had now reached his chest, "I need the box, the contents, quickly..." The never-ending mirrors only amplified the King's terror.

The Spectacle let out a beautifully horrid laugh,"Ah yes, the contents. It's always about the contents with you Machiavellians."

With that, the dazzling bird opened the box with a quick flip of her beak, and the King caught a glimpse of his terrified, sweaty face reflected in The Spectacle's mirrored coat as he peaked inside to find a blank, featureless porcelain mask. This was the original "template" from which all the other personality-templates were formulated from.

“Come on, put it on,” The Spectacle had now leaned her beak close to the King’s ear, “You know very well that this is the only cure to your incurable illness.”

Helpless and weakened, the King, though reluctant to obey the dazzling guardian, hastily lifted the mask up to his face using all the strength he had left. When lifted to his face, the mask stuck on instantly and immediately the rotting frost melted away and the King was free to move again. The King then turned to one of the marvelous mirrors but instead found them to be dirty and unclear, the ill-proportioned mask obstructing his vision even further. Worried and shocked by the transformation, Duplicituous hastily tried to remove the mask, but instead, to his horror, it stuck on fast and was unable to be removed. Seeing the pathetic King’s helplessness, The Spectacle let out another lovely blood-curdling laugh.

Frantic and deeply distressed, the King spun on his heels and demanded to know the truth behind this trick.

The Spectacle only cooly and slowly replied, “Did you not receive the end which you so desperately strove to attain? Why, you have indeed received the purest form of the object you so deified.”

The King, realizing that his supposedly irrefutable title, status and power now laid bare of any such former influence, as he had given up all he had, including his very identity, for the security that he had spent his whole life blindingly and endlessly grappling for, with a heavy heart and downcast spirit the grand King became the outcast of that paradoxical Kingdom he had spent his whole life building.

And the Paradoxians?

How could they possibly escape from the same fate while remaining in the splendidly superficial Kingdom of Paradoxia, which was built on nothing except the inexorable commands of The Spectacle, that vacuous and unyielding dictator of beautifully confined subjects.