

Mask

By C. Jade Wyton

Young Becky Bloom got in a fight with a much smaller and weaker classmate, and now her parents have had to come home from their business trip early. This sparks frustrations throughout the whole family— In Becky, who doesn't understand why she can't just be herself and express herself her own way— In Isa and Becky's father, who just want the best for the young girl.... And in Becky's mother, who fears for her daughter's safety in a religious community that presses for conformity.

Contains some descriptions of ableism and domestic abuse

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Becky sat in the backseat of Isa's car; banished from her place of pride beside the drow as they drove home in a deafening silence.

Isa was furious. And Becky couldn't understand why.

Wendy had been *asking* for a fight!

Becky had told Wendy! She'd told her to be quiet!

To leave her alone.

To stop following her around.

But Wendy hadn't listened.

Wendy had kept talking and talking and talking! And nothing Becky did would stop her from standing too close and talking too much.

So Becky had kicked Wendy.

She hadn't meant to kick her so hard.

But she'd just been too angry!

Because Wendy wouldn't stop talking!

Wendy's voice had been scraping and scraping in Becky's ears, deeper and deeper into her brain!

She'd just wanted her to go away!

So she'd kicked the tiny kobold! Kicked her halfway across the school's oval, into a group of boys who'd gasped and jumped and run to the teacher.

Becky scowled.

Why wasn't Becky allowed to want to be left alone?

When her mum or dad wanted to be left alone, *she* had to listen to *them*!

So why didn't Wendy have to listen to her?

It wasn't fair.

Nobody ever treated her fair!

They treated her like she was dumb.

And they called her slow.

Just because she didn't like to talk.

*Use your words, Rebecca.*

She didn't want to!

Words were like sandpaper in her throat.

Rubbing and scratching and coming out all wrong and clumsy and painful.  
She hated when she was told to use her words.  
They made her mouth feel heavy.  
And her skin tingle wrong.  
And it made her mad— Because when she *did* use her words, like all the adults would tell her to, they would just tell her to be quiet again!

*Not so loud, Rebecca!*

They would tell her to stop!

*Stop.*

*Stop being so quiet.*

*Stop being so loud.*

*Stop flapping your arms!*

What was wrong with her flapping her arms?!

What was wrong about feeling so happy she had to move, and flap, and flail?

What was wrong with being so full? So full of emotions that only jumping and shaking and dancing could help her to get rid of the tingling feeling that tickled her all over?

‘Rebecca,’ Isa started, getting the girl’s attention. It was clear the drow was furious— Though she didn’t raise her voice as she continued. ‘I’m very disappointed in you.’

A sigh, and Becky smacked her arms to her sides in acknowledgement.

‘Do you understand that what you did was wrong?’

Again, Becky hit her arms loudly to her sides. And again, she sighed— This time looking away and out the window at the houses that passed them by.

*Blue painted wood.*

*Plain wood.*

*Green painted metal.*

*Blue painted wood.*

*Black painted metal.*

She noted the colour and material of each house’s fence; using the weight of the knowledge to stop her head from spinning.

*White painted wood.*

*Blue painted wood.*

*Plain wood—*

‘Rebecca, are you listening to me?’ Isa asked.

Becky looked to Isa and, after a moment of hesitation, she shook her head.

‘Oh, Becky,’ Isa sighed. ‘Hm....’

*Had that been the wrong answer?*

It had been the truth.

Had Isa wanted her to lie?

Becky kicked her feet forward, hitting the empty seat in front of her, and let out a grumble. ‘*Mmmhmm—maa-yy head hurts!*’ she complained. ‘Head hurts! My! Head hurts!’

Another heavy sigh from Isa as she checked the lane beside her, then merged. ‘We’ll be home soon. I’ll get you some Panadol.’

‘Mm,’ Becky grunted back, smacking her sides again. ‘I’m... mad!’

‘Me too,’ said Isa. ‘I’m mad, too.’

‘Ugh!’ Becky pouted, knowing that the woman was mad at *her*. ‘At me. Me you. At you. I’m mad at you.’

Becky let out a frustrated growl when the words didn’t come out right. *No. That was the wrong way around!*

‘Hmp,’ Isa echoed Becky with a short grunt and nod. ‘Okay, then. We’re both mad at each other.’

Isa’s calm, simple reply made Becky feel a little better; at least she was trying to listen, even if she didn’t understand.

‘Both,’ Becky echoed.

‘Both of us.’

‘Mhm!’

‘That’s right. I’m mad at you. And you’re mad at me.’

‘No. Not at you,’ Becky corrected, crossing her arms and looking away again.

‘Then at who?’

‘Wendy.’

‘Why?’

‘Loud mouth! Doesn’t leave!’ Becky covered her ears, trying to show Isa how she’d felt. ‘Doesn’t leave me alone! Wanna be alone! Too loud!’

‘Did you tell her that?’

‘Yes.’

‘And she didn’t listen?’

‘No.’

‘Well. That was wrong of her,’ said Isa. ‘But that doesn’t mean you can hurt her.’

‘Why not?’ Becky huffed. ‘Made her stop!’

‘It did. But now we’re here,’ said Isa. ‘In trouble. Do you like being in trouble?’

‘No,’ Becky admitted, slumping in her seat.

‘No,’ Isa echoed, simply. ‘I didn’t think so.’

‘Mm,’ Becky shifted uncomfortably.

She was in trouble.

A whole lot of trouble.

And when she was in lots of trouble....

‘Don’t tell Mum,’ Becky demanded. ‘*Don’t*. She’ll be too mad at me.’

‘Too late,’ Isa responded— Causing Becky to let out an unhappy snarl. ‘The school called her before they called me— Don’t you take that tone with me, young lady! Do you want to be in even more trouble?!’

Becky shrunk back in her seat when Isa snapped at her.

Then, the drow pulled into their driveway and shook her head. ‘Your parents are getting the first flight home. They should be here by tomorrow afternoon.’

‘No!’ Becky let out a distraught wail, and yanked open the car door to bolt to the house. ‘No! *Noooooo!*’

‘Yes,’ Isa said, simply.

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It had been twenty minutes of fighting, according to the clock. Becky could hear her parents and Isa arguing about her downstairs, and it had made her skin

crawl.

She'd tried to ignore them, at first, but as the shouting went on she grew curious, and quietly made her way to the top of the stairs to eavesdrop.

'It was just *one* fight, Barb—' Ken began, before being cut off.

'She broke Wendy's arm!' Barbra snapped back. 'She could have *killed* that girl! The Shedskins want to *press charges*!'

'We'll figure this out, she's still young, she'll learn. There's no need to put so much pressure on her—'

'She should know better by now!' Barbra snapped, and Becky saw her shadow turn to Isa's. 'I wouldn't have to put pressure on her if *you* would do your job!'

'Excuse me—'

'If you just looked after Rebecca properly and did what we paid you to do—'

'I have done *everything* for Rebecca—'

'You *broke* my daughter!' Barbra snapped, making Becky's breath catch in her throat.

Broke?

Her mother thought she was... *broken*?

'This is all *your* fault!' Barbra snapped, making to step towards Isa— Though Ken held her back. 'If Becky didn't like you so much I'd have fired you *years* ago! Don't you forget, Isa! Rebecca is *my* daughter! *Not! Yours!* And I won't stand by and let you neglect her! Either you do your job, or you get the *hell* out of *my* house!'

Becky thought she was going to be sick.

Her hands went cold and sweaty as her chest tensed up and her breath caught in her throat.

Isa!

Not Isa!

Her mother couldn't get rid of Isa!

'Hey! Non! Arrêter! Enough. Assez,' Ken's voice cut in again, and his shadow melted into Barbra's. 'Ce n'est la faute de personne. Oui? There's not need for that! It's nobody's fault. It's just... *happened*....'

Barbra let out a loud snort, her shadow throwing off Ken's and pacing furiously before she sighed and looked back to Isa. 'I'm... sorry.'

It was a reluctant apology; but it still surprised Becky. Her mother rarely apologised.

But still— It didn't slow Becky's quick-beating heart as she swallowed back a cry into a whimper.

Her mother wanted to get rid of Isa. Because... because she wasn't behaving properly!

Becky sniffed back her tears.

That wasn't fair!

Isa's shadow nodded; her voice quivering as she very obviously held back her tears. 'I promise, I've done everything I can for Becky. I would *never* neglect her. *Never.*'

'Yes,' Barbra muttered, slowly— Like she didn't believe Isa's promise. 'Yes.... It was uncalled for. I'm sorry I.... I'm just scared. With everything going on with the Frankensteins and the church I just.... They'll target anyone who's different.'

‘No— Barbra, our situation’s not the same,’ Ken tried to comfort his wife.

‘You don’t know that, Ken!’ Barbra cried. ‘Today, it’s the Frankensteins— Tomorrow it could be *anyone*! It could be *us*! What do we do, if they decide that Becky— That she’s— I don’t know! *Possessed?! If they hear about her outbursts and decide she needs some sort of— Of fucking exorcism?!*’

Becky didn’t know that word....

‘Ça ne sera pas—’

‘She *snarls*, Ken,’ Barbra interrupted, her voice firm and flat. ‘Like an animal. That’s not normal.’

‘No, but—’

‘And the flailing!’ Barbra let out a loud cry, and put a hand to her face. ‘And the jumbled speech— They’re going to try and claim there’s a demon inside her, speaking in tongues!’

‘They won’t—’

‘They will!’ Barbra cried. ‘They will!’

Ken paused, and Becky shivered as she heard her mother begin to sob.

‘Barbra—’

‘No! No!’ Barbra pulled away, then, and made for the stairs—

And Becky bolted for her room; leaping into bed and throwing on her headphones so she could pretend she hadn’t heard the fighting.

She listened to her mother’s heavy footsteps stop halfway down the hall— And then swallowed as Barbra continued, slowly, with lighter steps.

Becky tensed as she heard her mother come to her bedroom door and pause. The woman let out a heavy sigh before giving a brief knock and immediately entering.

‘Becky?’ she asked softly, stepping to her daughter’s side. When Becky looked up, Barbra crouched down and took the girl’s hands. ‘Becky. Listen to me. There is something very important I have to talk to you about, okay?’

Becky gave a slow nod.

‘What you did yesterday was a *very* bad thing,’ she said. ‘And it has made a lot of problems. Problems that are going to be very hard for us to fix. So I need you to listen to me, very, *very* hard.’

Becky nodded.

‘I need you to do exactly as I tell you from now on,’ Barbra said, firmly. ‘You need to stop behaving like yourself, and start trying to act like everyone else. Do you understand? It’s important. You *need* to behave. Or someone else is going to get hurt. And if someone else gets hurt, we might not be able to fix it again— So no more growling. No more hissing. Or snarling. Or biting. You have to act like a *proper* girl. Like... like girls in movies behave! You know your movies? You have to try and be like those girls. A normal, plain, regular girl. Who likes pink. And flowers. And puppies— And who doesn’t snarl or bite or throw things or refuse to talk. Do you understand? Rebecca? Do you understand what I’m telling you?’

Becky nodded, tugging at the hem of her shirt— And she flinched when her mother took her hands to stop her fidgeting.

‘Say: “Yes, Mum. I understand,”’ Barbra instructed. ‘Out loud. With your words.’

‘Yes, Mum,’ Becky squeaked. ‘*I understand.*’

A relieved sigh escaped Barbra, and she kissed Becky's head before pulling her into a firm hug.

Becky tried not to wiggle, even though it was too close and too tight.

She had to listen to her mother.

She had to do as she was told— Or Isa might have to go.

Pink. Flowers. Puppies.

No snarling. No biting. No throwing.

It wasn't her.

But she had to do it. She had to pretend to be a normal girl.

A normal girl.

She would pretend, as hard as she could.

She'd pretend to be a normal girl, just like Mimi pretended to be a shoe.

She'd put a normal-girl mask on... and she'd never take it off.

She would wear it, day and night.

She would wear the mask so tight she would *become* the mask.

And then it wouldn't be a mask anymore.

And she would be normal.

She would be normal.

And then... her mother would stop being mad.

And Isa would be allowed to stay.

—END—

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