

ABENHAUR

By Kevin B. Chatham

*Blurb: A twisted phantasmagoria about a mythical and mysterious maker of magical masks*

Abenhaur made masks. Among the general public they were known and respected for their elegance, beauty, and grace. But, among a more select clientele, who whispered in darkened corridors behind unidentified doors, they were known for their mystical qualities. Hushed, cloaked voices in damp rooms traded secrets of the unique masks with powers woven into them. Masks that could cover you in shadows in broad daylight. Masks that could plunder your hidden potential. Even masks that could bend time and space to reveal lands past and worlds future.

It was through an acquaintance of a friend of a distant relative that I suddenly found myself in the workshop of the fabled Abenhaur. The night had already taken several unexpected turns. But nothing had led me to think that it would end with me here, with this bizarre man in front of me.

The workshop was dingy and dank and smelled of wood, damp paper-mache, and unplaceable body fluids. And Abenhaur's demeanor did little to put me at ease. He scuttled about mumbling, half in conversation with my companion and half to some party or parties that were not there. It almost seemed as if he were playing through encounters that he had in the past or would have in the future.

But as disorienting as it was listening to the mask maker ramble, one thing became clear. Abenhaur had created something that terrified even this unsettling man before me. I watched intently as he stumbled between calm and genial conversation with my friend and nervous, almost panicked, urgency with some company not present. And as he continued to switch into this fearful mode, I began to detect that he kept looking nervously at a wooden box stashed ineffectually beneath a stack of books.

Quickly, I found myself countering his mood swings with my own, focusing on him with intensity when he mumbled and then nervously sneaking glances around his workshop whenever he calmed to address my friend. And always anxiously being drawn back to that carelessly hidden box with an itching curiosity to know what was inside

I will state right now that, though I have been a man of whims, I have always held within the lines of a socially acceptable immorality or at least barely skirted the grey edges of legality. But the burning in the back of my mind, perhaps fueled by the bizarre behavior of our curious host could not be calmed. So, as my companion began the rather lengthy process of closing the evening, I took advantage of Abenhaur's distraction. And, with barely a thought or a hesitation, I quickly slid the mysterious box under my coat.

A hasty and awkward handshake and I was out into the fading night. I rushed into the nearest café. Even at this late hour the café still had a considerable crowd, though through the smoke and stench of spilled beer, it was really only the cacophony of blurred revelry that hinted at the number of people stumbling around, and maybe over, the tables. The sketchy reputation of the neighborhood that housed Abenhaur's workshop meant that this café had drawn a wide range of clientele, ranging from the disenchanting youth looking for some new stimulation to the jaded world-weary sophisticates

bravely questing for some experience that could sink beneath the layer of crust that had formed on their souls. And then, of course, there were the local residents who had evolved particular skills in order to feed on all of them.

I discretely rushed to a secluded table in the corner. And, with twitching palms, I opened the box. Inside was a mask unlike any of the ones that Abenhaur had shown off to us earlier that night. While all of his work was highly and intricately decorated, the mask in front of me was bare and black. My first instinct was to assume that it was simply not finished. But, there was something about it that just seemed complete. Pure. As if any further decoration would merely become a gaudy artifice hiding the mask's simple elegance. Even an additional curve or carved line would somehow seem a lie.

With excitement and fear, I put the surprisingly heavy mask to my face.

There was what I can only describe as a flash of light inside my eyes. For a moment, I feared that I had been blinded. But my vision quickly adjusted and I was able to see the other people in the room. And then I was able to see more than just the people, for each one I looked at was laid open before me.

I could now see into the darkest spots of their minds. I looked into all the unspoken horrors, the whirlwinds of silent regret screaming behind dull eyes. I read lists of wishes and flashes of fantasies.

I saw the pain and the pleasures that they hid from themselves.

The panic of disconnection.

The fear of the forgotten.

Beneath their confidence, their comfort, their mundane, drab routines, I saw their fears, their rages, the choruses of despair that hummed in the back of all their dull thoughts.

I looked at one man at the bar and realized that his father beat him as a child and that he still carried the fear and humiliation with him and that charged every single decision he made. That elderly man with the cravat in the corner had paid prostitutes to burn cigarettes into his feet. That overly bejeweled woman over there dreamt about poisoning her husband and even kept a drawer full of extra cleaning fluids. And that well-dressed, handsome man flirting with that attractive woman in the alcove really wished that she looked more like his mother.

And there was comfort in peering into the hearts of all those who seemed better than me, more in control, more at ease. To see that underneath there was a howling cacophony of unrest, dissatisfaction, anger and terror

And as I floated in the whirling horrors, a sense of power washed over me as I realized that I could see their most vulnerable thoughts. With that knowledge, it would only take the slightest manipulation to turn any of them into my greatest ally or to crush them beyond redemption. This secret insight would hand the world over to me.

And as I stood up, preparing to approach a lovely young woman with slight suicidal tendencies who never got the appreciation she needed from her father, I suddenly caught my own reflection in the mirrored wall. And I saw myself standing there with the mask on. I saw myself. Oh dear god, I saw...