Report of Captain James Auburn on a strange mask discovered by residents of the now destroyed Maple Village.

REPORT BEGINS:

We found this diary, half-mangled by the flames, though we were able to get the most legible bits out of it. What follows is a transcript of it.

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS:

Day 1
Mother said I should have a journal. She said it was for improving my writing, but I'm pretty sure it's to keep me inside more often. Even my father wanted me to too. Won't work on me!

Day 6
I haven't been writing, but I thought that this might be important. I was exploring the woods today, with everyone else. Even Jude was there, though I'm not sure why. No one really likes her, honestly. She's so quiet and weird, and she can't even use magic.

But, as we went along our way, we found a little hole. We were confused, so I tried getting in for a closer look, and without any warning, the whole thing collapsed, and I fell into some kind of cave. I wasn't hurt, so everyone came down with me. That's where we found the Mask.

It wasn't a very good mask, nor was it even okay. It was crudely carved of some dark wood, with swirls and patterns carved into its bark skin. It was dry, like kindling, and we could sense, that we were not welcome here.

I know that sounds strange, but I could feel it. We all could. The air was hot, almost too hot to breathe, and we could feel the heat was radiating from the Mask. It was overpowering, like putting on seven layers on a hot summer day. I did that once, for the whole day. I forget why though.

Anyways, the thing was, Jude seemed perfectly fine. She almost seemed… drawn, to the badly carved Mask, as if it were the most beautiful sculpture that she'd ever lay her eyes on. She slowly walked up to it, put it on and, I don't know, it was almost like it fused with her, or something. But it was only for a second, and it soon dissipated.

That was when we headed back to the village. She was wearing it the whole time home.

Day 8
Jude's been acting strange. Well, stranger than usual. She keeps whispering to a few of the kids, and they all nod with her, for some reason. And every time I talk to them about it, they just shrug me off. As if I was the weird one!

Honestly, this Journal is really helping. I guess Mother was right.

Day 12
I think I might be scared now. Jude's been taking some of the kids she talks to into the woods, and they all come back... changed. It's hard to explain. It's like someone scooped them out and made them into puppets filled with nought but cotton. They look the same, talk the same, they sound the same, but they don't feel right. When I touch their skin, it's hot. Too hot.

One of my friends tried to steal the mask from her, Arite. I'm not sure what he was thinking, but Jude pushed him to the ground, hard. I'm pretty sure he was trying to cry, the big baby.

Day 18
I've decided to eavesdrop on Jude tonight when she goes out. She's been talking to Mikey a lot, so I'm pretty sure they're going to be heading out. I've been hiding you, Journal. I have to make sure you're still safe. And if they find you, well, I don't think I want to imagine it.

Arite scalded his hand earlier. He was trying to help his mother cook, and his hand slipped right into the pot of boiling water. I'm not sure if it's the same hand that he used to grab the mask but, either way, he's not using it for a while.

Day 19
I'm not sure exactly what she was saying. She took Mikey out as I had hoped, but I don't think I understood anything.

She kept talking about flame and scorched earth, of desolation and burnt offerings, to… something? I couldn't quite make it out. In the end, she pulled out a small matchbox and lit the grass right underneath Mikey's feet.

I don't know why the fire was so big, so hot. Even where I was, I could still feel the emanating heat of the flames. It was horrifying. It had just appeared out of nowhere, the grass catching fire supernaturally fast, consuming the clearing.

In the end, Mikey, or, whatever was now in Mikey's skin, stepped out, and I almost screamed. His skin was blackened and burned, cracked and flaking. He wasn't making any sounds, and I couldn't even tell if he was in pain. He almost seemed, entranced, and I could almost see what could have been called a smile in between burned teeth and an ash-choked mouth.

And as I watched, horrified, willing the contents of my stomach to not spill, Jude stood next to him and grabbed a piece of skin, and I watched as it sloughed off, in one, quick motion, like someone pulling a tablecloth leaving the cutlery unmoved. His new skin was pink and patchy, but somehow, beyond all reasonable explanation, he's alive. I'm not sure what to do now, now that there's an imposter among us. I know he's not human, not anymore. I think my best course of acti-

Day 20

I wasn't able to finish the last entry, my Mother had called for me. She seems paler nowadays. All the adults do. I think it's some sort of sickness, but it's only affecting them, for now. I am sure of the cause. I think Jude is onto me. The number of children she has not taken into the woods grows smaller by the day. It is only a matter of time before I am the next. I must find out some way to bring her down, if not to save myself then for everyone else in the village.

Tomorrow I'll send a message to the Magic Council. Messengers don't come by very often, but I know for a fact the next one is scheduled tomorrow. Hopefully, they will be able to solve this.

Day 19

He didn't come. I don't know why. I checked, and I double-checked, and I waited until it was midnight, partly out of hope that he would come, and partly out of fear that Jude would come for me. I left the letter by the road, but I know they will not come. All hope is lost. Mother is growing sicker by the minute. This will be my final entry, at least until she is cured.

Day 28
Mother is dead. I'm not sure where Father is. He never played a very large role in my life anyways. But, he's gone now. He didn't come back this night. I can only imagine why.

I buried her in the backyard. I'm not sure what to do now. Jude's merry band has increased to the point where it outnumbers everyone else. I've been avoiding them. All the adults are sick, so they have free reign now. I'm scared.

Day 35
There was a burning today. For a while, I didn't think Jude was doing anything, but she ordered a mandatory burning at the village centre. I'm not sure who it was, by the time I was there, the fire had already mangled her face to non-recognition, the skin crisping and sloughing off in mounds of black and cracked flesh. Or at least that's what I'd like to say.

Jude didn't let Arite die quite yet though. I can still hear his screams.

Unknown Date
I am not sure what the date is. I don't think it matters. I've been thinking of trying to stop this, but I haven't gotten any answers. I've been wondering about the mask. On how to get it off of her. No one tried in the beginning. After what happened to Arite, I don't believe simply grabbing it is a good idea. I don't know how much of Jude is still left inside, but I hope whatever it is can still be killed.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Apparently, that kid's message reached us, and we were able to make it. Not in time, however. As you'll later learn, eventually, someone, *finally*, called for the Magic Council. I'm still not sure why these villages take so long. Sure, there's a *bit* of property damage, but it's all paid for in good faith.

When we did arrive, the damage was immense. Burning buildings and screaming start raving children billowing smoke were a common sight. The "Jude" or whatever was inhabiting her body at the time, proved to be a challenge for us, but eventually, me and the other captains dispatched were able to take her out. Thankfully, we did it before she could escape to any other village.

Curiously, when we did find her, she was in a pile of corpses, circled around her in the very same cave mentioned here. We're not exactly sure what she was doing but, safe to say nothing good. Hopefully, that mask stays dormant.

Speaking of Mask, we've decided to place it in high-security artifact containment. It seems to be dormant for now seeing as we disrupted its weird ritual thing. We're still not sure how old exactly the Mask is. Whatever things she spoke of are long dead. Hopefully.

Anyways, we didn't find the kid. Or his body. I think he might be alive, but I'm not sure. Hopefully, he's at peace, either way.

END OF REPORT