**Chapter Twelve: Behind the Veil**

**Year 1991, Washington DC, United States of America**

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I woke up to the unpleasant sensation of what felt like a hundred hot knives scything through my chest. It felt like all my ribs were shattered and they were poking into my lungs.

<Stop being so overdramatic. You have only fractured two of your ribs. Stop being a baby and get yourself out of here. Things are a little dicey right now and you do not have the luxury to spend what little precious time you have moaning.>

I somehow managed to ignore the pain, no thanks to Darky’s insensitive words, and took stock of my situation. I was hanging upside down in the overturned wreck of the car while being held in place by the seat belt and unfortunately, all of my weight was being held by the strap which was in turn transferring the force directly to my fractured ribs, causing the sensation of blinding pain I was feeling. I tried to release the seat belt’s buckle, but it seemed to have jammed after the crash. I looked around for a solution but the car was empty. Phelps seemed to have left the car at some point, leaving me to fend for myself.

Just as I was about to find something sharp to saw through the seat belt, I was distracted by what I saw through the cracked windshield. Phelps was standing surrounded by three men in black cloaks who had their faces covered with colorful bird-themed Venetian masks with long beak like protrusions.

Phelps looked bedraggled with his tux ripped in several pieces and blood running down from a large gash on the side of his head into his mustache which was quickly turning into a bloody mess, but he still managed to sound cool as a cucumber as he said, “Are you sure you want to do this? There is still time for you to reconsider. All you have to do is to turn around and walk away, and we will pretend like none of this ever happened. The alternative is that you and all of your fellow vultures will be hunted down like dogs. We let you survive in the margins of society because we are not bothered to wipe you out. It will not take much effort to exterminate you.”

One of the men in the masks, the one in the mask covered in orange feathers, cackled like a mad crow, revealing crooked yellow teeth. “Save your empty blustering for someone who cares. You and I both know that the wardens have enough enemies that you can’t risk messing with us, or your enemies will take the chance to rip you apart. Like it or not, I doubt that what happens here will have any far reaching consequences.”

Phelps shook his head and replied, “You do not understand at all. Maybe if we were talking about a normal member of our organization then you might have been right, but I am not some low ranking peon. This will not be easily forgotten. If you do this, you will have to pay a price and that price will be in blood.”

“Pay a price? Do you think we care? Do you think we came here for you? Do you think you can distract us from the man in the car? Our diviners have already told us about him and that is why we are here. A man filled with power, yet powerless to fight back. He is like a fruit ripe for the picking. Our diviners have already told us that he is the one we need, the one that will lead us to our ultimate goal, the one that will elevate us to the level of godhood. His power will be the nourishment we need to fulfill our founder’s goals.”

Phelps didn’t respond. He just took off the tattered remains of his tuxedo jacket and took out a small knife. He quickly sliced his palm and drew strange circular symbols on his cheeks and forehead with his own blood. As quickly as he drew them, the symbols made out of blood vanished and Phelps’s entire body started to shine.

The attitudes of the three men suddenly changed from a relaxed almost blasé attitude to one of alarm. The one with the black mask shouted, “Shit! Why didn’t our diviners tell us that he can invoke the form of an avatar? Hawk, I need you to use your glyphs to contain his aura of compulsion. Sparrow, I need you to distract him from the back while I take him on from the front. Remember, the avatar transformation is temporary so all we need to do is hold him off until he runs out of gas. Don’t try anything fancy.”

“Hey Crow, are you sure you can hold him off in a direct confrontation?”

“Just shut up and do as I say.”

By the time the trio had finished speaking, Phelps had stopped shinning, but the person standing there was no longer recognizable as Phelps. He no longer resembled the portly middle aged man wearing a tux; he had become a tall muscular man with shinning golden hair and clean white linen clothes, but the most remarkable part of his transformation was a pair of giant wings growing out from his back. He would have looked like a stereotypical representation of an angel if it wasn’t for the fact that his wings were ink black and menacing instead of being white and fluffy.

The new Phelps flashed his perfect white teeth at the three men and said, “Did you really think that I was going to let you do anything you wanted and not fight back? Vermin like you think that they can fight against the wardens? Have you forgotten your place? You are nothing more than vultures who prey on the carcass of the stray and forgotten. Your repugnant kind are bottom feeders and today, there will be three less vultures in this world.”

Phelps waved his hand and a flaming sword appeared out of thin air. He grabbed the flaming sword and rushed towards the trio who responded by spreading out from each other. The one in the orange mask took out a golden medallion from the folds of his cloak. He made some hand gestures and bright green symbols started to flow out of the golden medallion and stuck themselves onto Phelps’s black wings. The symbols quickly fractured and disappeared but new ones constantly took their place and Phelps’s wings lost some of its menacing quality.

The man with the red mask also took out a golden medallion and dripped some of his blood on it. A large green snake appeared behind him and rushed towards Phelps. The snake tried to coil around him but with a flick of his wrist, Phelps incinerated the snake with his flaming sword.

The final masked man, the man in the black mask, did not take out a medallion like the other two. At first I thought what he took out was a sword, but on closer inspection, I realized that it was a katana. The gracefully curving blade that looked like it was made out of plain steel and the unadorned wooden handle that had a small hemp rope wrapped around it made it look out of place in a fight were the others were brandishing swords of fire and magic snakes, but the man in the black mask had a certain dignity about him when he stood there gripping his unremarkable katana. His steps were graceful as he walked towards Phelps and he didn’t even flinch as his katana met Phelps’s flaming sword. Surprisingly, the katana didn’t melt. It held firm under the onslaught of white hot flames coming from Phelps’s sword.

For a few seconds, Phelps and the man in the black mask just stood in that position, with their weapons crossed and straining to get advantage over in a contest of strength but it was clear that they were evenly matched. Eventually, the deadlock was broken when Phelps’s right wing thrust towards the man in black and he was forced to duck in order to avoid it. I thought it was a little silly for the man to be so scared of Phelps’s wing until I saw the large gash that was left in the asphalt where the masked man had stood before. That made me realize that Phelps’s wings were every bit as lethal as his flaming sword.

After the masked man dodged Phelps’s attack, the fight between the two escalated quickly. Phelps used his flaming sword and his wings to attack, but his advantage was countered by the masked man’s speed, agility and pure skill. Phelps might have had more fire power but the masked man’s technique was just breathtaking.

<I don’t know much about what is going on, but I really don’t like the guys in cloaks. They were talking about you in the same terms that someone would use to talk about an orange that they were going to juice. You should hope that Phelps wins this fight.>

Darky was right. I didn’t know whether Phelps was a good guy or a bad guy but I was sure that I didn’t want to end up in the hands of the masked men. I stopped staring at the fight outside and picked up a piece of broken glass to cut the seat belt, but the damn thing did more damage to my hand than it did to the strap that was holding me in place. I glanced at the fight outside and decided to ignore the pain and blood and continued to saw at the seat belt while I muttered, “No shit Sherlock. The people who ran us off the road without a care for our safety are bad guys, how long did it take you to figure that out?”

<No need to be so snide, I am on your side here.>

“Well, is there anything you can say that might actually be helpful.”

<Have you noticed how everybody seems to insist that you have powers? What if they are right? Maybe you can use this so called power to escape.>

“Seriously? That is your best suggestion? There are so many things wrong with that plan that I don’t even know where to start. Let us begin with the fact that even if I have some sort of power, I don’t know how to use it. If you have any clues on how to make a flaming sword appear out of thin air, please let me know. Secondly, even if I knew how to use this power everybody seems to think I have, remember Phelps talking about how it was sealed?”

“Who are you talking to?”

I nearly had a heart attack when I heard a soft voice originating from right beside me. I turned around in alarm and found myself face to face with a woman.

She was so close that our noses were almost touching. I could even feel her warm breath on my face. Since I was still hanging upside down from my seatbelt and she was uncomfortably close to my face, I couldn’t really see what she looked like. All I could tell was that she looked very young, had skin that could only be described as dusky and her eyes were a startling shade of vivid green.

“I asked you who you were talking to.”

Her voice had the soft immature tone that one would expect from a young girl, but the thought that she was just some innocent girl trying to help me vanished when her normal human pupils elongated and turned into slits like the eyes of a snake.

“There are no ghosts or other ethereal beings around here, so I repeat, who are you talking to?”

<Don’t tell her about me John. This girl seems suspicious. How did she even get here? How did she sneak up on you without making a sound? Maybe she is one of the freaks outside.>

I decided to once again follow Darky’s advice. Something told me that revealing his existence would be a bad idea.

“No one. I was talking to no one. I have a habit of talking with myself when I am alone.”

The woman didn’t respond immediately. She looked at me suspiciously for a few seconds then got even closer to me until she was almost nestled into my neck and inhaled deeply. She then stepped backwards with a disapproving expression on her face.

“You are lying. Luckily for you, I don’t have the time to dig the truth out of you.”

She extended her hands towards me and her finger nails elongated into sharp claws. At first I thought she had changed her mind and was going to “dig it out of me” after all, but my fears turned out to be baseless as she then used these claws to rip apart the tough nylon seatbelt that had been trapping me. With the seatbelt gone, gravity did its thing and I fell in a heap onto the car’s roof. I had barely reoriented myself when the woman threw handcuffs at me.

“Here is the deal, you are going to put on those handcuffs and do as I say. Disobey and I rip your throat out. Try to run away and I rip your throat out. Try to call for help… well, you get the picture.”

For the first time, I had a proper look at the woman who was threatening me. I guess woman was a bit of a stretch, she barely looked like she was twenty. The girl looked like she could be of Arabian descent which was evident by her slightly dark complexion. The enigmatic young lady wore a strange ensemble consisting of a tank top paired with khaki shorts. The girl was slim and her muscles looked well defined like those of an athlete. Overall she looked like an Arabian Disney Princess that was the star of her high school track and field team; she looked wholly out of place crouching in the wreck of a car, threatening a defenseless man.

I was wondering how I was going to deal with the violent young girl when I felt a stinging pain on my arm. I looked down and I found four parallel lines of blood from my shoulder to my elbow.

“As I have already stated, you will either obey or you will die. This is not a joke. This is your last warning, put on the cuffs and follow me.”

<I think you should do what she says. She might look like a teenager but she is obviously a lot more than meets the eye.>

I really had no choice, so I put on the cuffs as instructed after which she pushed me out of the car and shoved me in the opposite direction of the ongoing fight between Phelps and the men in robes.

I followed her instructions and didn’t make a peep as we walked away but we were still noticed when the man with the orange mask coincidentally looked our way.

“Stop! Stop! Our main target is escaping!”

His shout caused everybody to stop what they were doing; they stopped fighting and we stopped retreating. Everybody turned and faced each other. Phelps focused his gaze on the girl beside me and asked, “What is one of the forgotten doing here? What do you intend to do with Jonathan?”

She stayed silent and looked around at the four men for a few seconds before muttering, “Why can’t things ever go as planned? Why does everything always go to shit?”

The four men were still staring at her when she suddenly darted towards them so quickly that she turned into a blur. To their credit, the men reacted quickly and used their respective gifts to try and stop her. The man in orange threw his strange glowing symbols at her but she just ripped them apart with her claws. Phelps and the man in the black mask attacked her with their weapons but she easily jumped above Phelps’s flaming sword and used the masked man’s katana like a springboard to catapult herself in front of the man in the red mask. With a flash of her hands, the man fell to the ground desperately holding his neck, trying in vain to contain the gushing geyser of blood escaping between his fingers.

Before anybody could react, she was back at my side, licking the blood off her finger nails. “Mr. Phelps, I do not wish to harm Jonathan but if you try to attack me, I will kill him. The reason I took him in the first place is because the wardens seem to put a lot of value in him, so here is the deal: the wardens have something I want and I now possess something that you want. I propose that we meet at a later time to make an exchange. If you want to contact me, you know where I will be. Now, you should finish off those vultures. I have already taken care of one of them, I am sure you can handle the rest.”

She then yawned like she was bored and dragged me away from the fight which had restarted after the death of the man in the red mask. She pushed me into a small Toyota and we drove off.

As we were pulling away, I thought I saw a woman looking towards us in the rear view mirror, a pale woman with golden hair that looked almost ethereal as she shone in the sunlight. Her face looked eerily familiar but I just couldn’t remember where I had seen her before.

I tried to take a closer look but by the time I took a second glance, we had already turned a corner and I lost sight of her.