

Faces Behind the Masks

Thomas J. Brodeur

A Starsmacked Book

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Regina Silsby's Secret War

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To all who aspire to heroism—It is often found in unlikely faces.

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To the Rescue

Travis Warnofski trudged the hospital corridor. A backpack sagged down his spine, thumping his butt with every step. His unlaced hikers screeched as they peeled from the sticky tiles.

He wrinkled his nose against the stink of bleach, alcohol wipes and floor wax. Why did all hospitals smell the same? Long ago he had learned to hate that smell.

A security camera squatted above the hallway's double doors. He tucked his chin to his chest and pulled his gray hoodie farther down his face.

Through the doors he shuffled. A smile creased his lips. *Here's the world-famous stealth warrior Travi Wa, deep within the dungeon fortress of the Dark Khan...*

He passed a cart piled with ransacked dinner trays. Orderlies in blue scrubs crammed more trays into the tower. A man in orange coveralls wheeled a floor buffer along the hall.

Trav plodded past the workers. *The Dark Khan's legions prepare their engines of war...*

Open doorways lined the corridor. Trav grabbed a squirt bottle of hand sanitizer from an entry and tucked it under his hoodie. *Traces of the famed warrior's presence fill the fortress, spreading fear.*

His pace slowed. A puzzled look creased his brow. Would a stealth warrior be famous?

He shrugged and resumed his march. *Throughout the realm, hushed voices recount the silent champion's exploits...*

Two nurses at the patient care desk ignored him. Trav snatched a calculator from the countertop and stuffed it under his hoodie. *Travi Wa takes from his enemies what he needs.*

He turned a corner and peeked into the first room. A decrepit crone with tubes up her nose lay gurgling in her bed.

Trav shuddered and backed away. *Though fearless in battle, Travi Wa recoils at the Dark Khan's cruel tortures.*

Across the hall, an old man in a wheelchair scowled at the baseball game on his corner TV. He snarled at Trav.

"That's dinner?" he said, stabbing a finger at the tray beside his bed. "Send me something I can eat."

Trav retreated along the hall. *The plight of the Dark Khan's many prisoners must not distract Travi Wa.*

From one entry he palmed a box of latex gloves, from another he grabbed a LED penlight with a long gooseneck. *Deeper into the dungeon the determined hero delves. Where have they imprisoned the Empress?*

He glanced into the next room and...

Shèng lì! The culmination of his quest!

She was slumped in a wheelchair by her bed. Dark hair streaked with silver tumbled around a haggard but still pretty face. The collar of her terrycloth robe was raised against the room's chill. Shallow breaths buzzed in her nostrils.

Trav scanned the corridor for security cameras. *Clear.* He slipped into the chamber.

An empty pill cup lay on the floor beneath the woman's open hand. Beside her chair stood a steel pole bulging with fluid-filled bags. Drip tubes coiled around her arms.

Trav's mouth tightened. *What foul potions had the Dark Khan's Inquisitors forced into the empress' veins? What horrors assailed her drugged mind?*

He eyed the corner TV. A man with polyester hair and a painted tan waved both hands over a weather map. "Our Tetrapolis forecast calls for scattered thunderstorms tonight..."

On the floor by the bed lay a plastic tote bag with bold print: *Midland Medical...health care with heart.*

Bunched into the bag were jeans, a *Universal Studios* t-shirt, sandals and a *Gucci* purse.

Shivers tickled Trav's spine. *The royal vesture! Cast aside like a scullery maid's apron.*

The wall clock ticked 8:49 PM. Trav watched its double dots blink between the numbers. *Mere minutes separated the empress from freedom or death.*

He hung the tote bag on the wheelchair's frame. One by one he removed the drip bags from the steel tree and draped them on the chair's handles.

From the closet he grabbed a stack of hand towels, a box of cotton balls, a canister of fat popsicle sticks that doctors used to flatten tongues, a plastic breathing mask, two rolled Ace bandages and some rubber-soled socks. He balled everything into a blanket and wadded it beneath the wheelchair's seat.

The woman moaned.

Trav felt his innards stiffen. *She must not wake. In her drugged state, the empress might mistake her friends for enemies, and her enemies for friends.*

Her lips smacked and her nose wriggled. She resettled into her stupor. The buzz in her nostrils resumed.

Trav let go the breath he had been holding. *Too well the Inquisitors plied their fiendish arts.*

From his backpack he grabbed the sea-green ER scrubs he had snagged earlier. *To move unseen among his enemy, Travi Wa shall become his enemy.*

Except that his borrowed scrubs must have belonged to a basketball player. The tunic's half-sleeves hung past his elbows, and the long pants swallowed his hikers.

But who would look that closely? He pulled out the stethoscope he had found and looped it around his neck.

To his sleeve he clipped a stolen ID tag. So what if the badge belonged to a girl? Her hair was as short as his, and almost the same color. If she lost a little weight, that might help too.

After a final inspection of his getup, he pushed open the bathroom door and peered at the mirror above the sink. Gazing back at him was a middle-schooler of less-than-average height hoping to pass for a heart surgeon.

Trav's shoulders slumped. Even at a Halloween party he'd be mocked.

He turned his back to the image and tugged his lip. *Though his plan required it, Travi Wa was loathe to adopt the guise of a Khan warrior...*

Hurriedly he shed the scrubs and pulled on his hoodie. *Better to don the robe of the holy ones. They, too, moved unseen.*

From a pocket he fished out his smart phone. Its screen flashed a red alarm message: *Data Usage Alert.*

He groaned. Always when he was in a rush.

His darting thumb found one of the many executables he had concocted. The phone's *Available Data* climbed to 999GB. *Payment Due* dropped to zero.

Trav grinned. *Since his earliest days, Travi Wa had schooled himself in the mystic disciplines.*

A stroke of his thumb set the phone to video capture. He eased the phone past the room entry and studied the hallway in his screen. *No sentries guarded the corridor...an oversight the Dark Khan's legionnaires would regret.*

Slowly, silently Trav rolled the woman past the patient care station. Both nurses were lost in their computer monitors. *Ever observing, never observed, these are the holy ones.*

He passed the food tray tower and turned the corner.

"Hey," said one nurse to the other, "have you seen my calculator?"

His pace quickened. Drip bags sloshed beneath the wheelchair's handles. The chair's front tires wobbled as they spun.

A woman's voice called through a distant corridor. "Anybody seen my ID?"

Trav raced past the visitors' lounge. Plastic prescription bottles clattered in his backpack.

Opposite the lounge were two pairs of elevator doors. A bell dinged when he punched the *down* button.

Footsteps padded toward him. "Maybe you left it in the break room."

The left elevator slid open. Trav swung the wheelchair into the lift and pressed *G*.

His heart raced as the doors shut. He watched the lighted numbers count down above the doorframe: 5...4...3...

With each passing floor, a loud beep rebounded through the lift. The woman in the wheelchair tensed at every bleat. Trav fought an urge to cup his hands to her ears. *She must not awaken.*

A final *blat* filled the elevator. The doors parted. Trav scooted the chair across the ground floor lobby.

Sofas and armchairs formed deserted sitting areas. Somewhere a vacuum cleaner whined.

To one side of a vacant information desk was a darkened gift shop. The café opposite spread a wash of white light into the expanse. Behind the deli counter, a woman in a striped apron nibbled a salad while reading a paperback.

Trav guided the wheelchair past the gift shop's gloom. Teddy bears, bunny rabbits, puppies and piggies gazed from the window shelves with pleading eyes. *Save me, Travi Wa.*

Swiftly he approached a glass wall blackened by night. Beyond the barrier beckoned a glittering downtown boulevard.

Automatic doors parted at the wheelchair's approach. The chair's hard rubber tires rattled across an aluminum threshold.

Trav grabbed a lone umbrella from a stand by the door and tucked it ninja-style between his shoulder blades. *Travi Wa sheaths his sword and passes unheeded through the citadel gates.*

Summer heat and a rumble of city traffic rolled over him. A flush of victory filled his chest.

So what next? His plan didn't take him beyond the hospital entry. Now, here he stood, under the awning of a circular drive that arced from the entry in both directions.

A shuttle bus lumbered toward him, headlights glaring. It growled to a halt beside the walkway.

Trav's pulse quickened. *The Dark Khan's imperial barge. What better transport?*

Double doors yawned open at the bus's rear. A handicap ramp descended to the pavement.

From the lift stepped a fat driver.

"Back in five," he said, waddling past the wheelchair and through the hospital entry.

Thunder rippled across the night sky. Trav scanned the blackness beyond the skyscraper peaks.

Behind him, the bus driver swaggered into the café and waved a greeting at the deli girl. Her gaze never left her book.

Trav pushed the wheelchair onto the handicap ramp. He goosed the lift's control box. The ramp ascended to the bus's passenger deck.

Another rumble rattled the heavens. He pressed harder on the toggle. *Travi Wa fumes at the slowness of the barge's equipment.*

Finally the ramp reached the floor deck and retracted into the bus. The doors swung shut.

Only the engine's purr disturbed the cabin's silence. Pinpricks of light marked a passageway between the bus's four rows of bench seats.

Trav wrestled the wheelchair behind the last bench. *He wastes no time securing the empress below decks.*

Steel latches sprouted from the floor. He had seen similar ones on the commuter buses that took him to school every day.

A few moments of fiddling released the clamps. He ratcheted them over the chair's wheels and pinned them to the floor. Seatbelts hanging from a bulkhead strapped across the woman's lap. These he clipped into the floor as well. *The empress was ready to embark.*

Unless she woke up and started mouthing off.

Trav burrowed under the wheelchair for his wadded blanket. Hospital clutter spilled from the woolen folds. He found the breathing mask, yanked off its elephant trunk of an air tube, and crammed the mouth cavity with cotton balls.

Carefully he fit the molded plastic to the woman's face. She murmured and wagged her head, but did not open her eyes.

Trav retreated into the shadows. He watched her drift back into her daze. Satisfaction curled his lip. *Travi Wa possesses the delicate touch of the butterfly.*

He wandered up the aisle to the bus's nose.

Green dials glowed in the dashboard. A trail of tiny lights descended a narrow step to a side door.

Through the door's windows he studied the hospital lobby. The deli girl placed a steaming Styrofoam cup in front of the shuttle driver. He reached past the cup to tickle her cheek. She batted away his hand and went back to her book.

Trav snorted. *The sentry knew nothing of the ways of women.*

A commotion at the elevators caught Trav's eye. Nurses tumbled into the lobby and scattered in all directions. One leaned into the café. The driver's head snapped toward the bus.

Trav gulped. He scanned the dashboard dials and the gearshift sprouting from the console. How hard could it be? Hadn't he mastered his Daytona 400 Extreme Raceway in less than a week? He dropped into the driver's seat.

From the back of the bus came a drunken groan. The woman in the wheelchair lifted her head. She swept a bewildered gaze over the shuttle's innards. Her eyes met Trav's and widened to saucers.

Outside, a voice bellowed. "You, hold up there."

The driver lurched alongside the bus, pounding his fist on its metal skin. Three nurses scampered after him.

Trav wriggled to the edge of the driver's seat. He grabbed the gear shift, slung it into *drive* and stomped the accelerator.

