



EPISODE ONE

The Bloodstream of the Universe

*Phineas Fletcher, Professor Phineas Fletcher, gripped his remarkable pocket-watch, also called an *aperture*, so tightly his fingernail beds turned white. He'd never been this nervous or stressed in hundreds of years. His eyes darted from the aperture to the pool of shadows on the abandoned factory floor. The watch was a tool of necessity, crafted in antiquity and handed down amongst his sect from professor to assistant for centuries. Normally, a professor would receive their aperture when they were no longer an acolyte, but his was more special than other apertures used by the Scholars. Eventually he would hand it down to his assistant, but until then he was its sole master.*

At the moment, however, the pool of shadows was his most urgent objective. It wasn't the shadow itself, but what was inside it. She had been in there far too long.

"You are more nervous than a long-tailed cat in a room full

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of rocking chairs,” Poppy said in her high, girlish voice. “Do you think she’ll make it out?”

“Of course,” he glanced at the nine-year-old girl in a powder blue dress and patent-leather shoes standing nearby. “I wouldn’t have sent her if I thought she wasn’t ready.”

“The Veil is curious,” said Poppy. “There’s no telling how it will receive someone coming through for the first time.”

“It’s not Carmen’s first time with the Veil. She’s been on that side many times before.”

“But not in combat. She’s only been there to explore and become familiar with the nature of the Veil. And we both know the Veil is about as predictable as a cobra.”

“Can you be quiet, please?” He turned a few of the strange buttons on his watch. “I’m not able to really track her. I don’t know where she is. Is she close?”

“I wonder if she will ever come back,” chuckled Poppy.

“Be quiet, or I will never help lift your curse.”

Poppy kicked him swiftly in the shin. “Fuck you. How would you like being trapped in the body of a little girl for 400 years. I’m *not* happy, and you said you would fix it.”

“I’m not a miracle worker, and you earned that curse as I recall. My offer to help you was out of the kindness of my heart.”

“Bullshit. You need me.” Sullenly, she crossed her arms. “And if there was another person I thought could help me, I’d be gone in a flash.”

“It’s not a question of *could*, it’s a question of *would*. No one—but me—is willing to help you.”

“Aren’t you worried she isn’t going to make it back?”

“No, I have faith that she will.”

“Maybe this pretty *señorita* is not who you think she is. You’ve been wrong before.”

“I have been wrong before, I’ll admit it. But the truth was always revealed long before this point. The Veil rejected the others far earlier. Carmen has made it further than any of them.”

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“Well, from my brief observance and unscientific calculations, she has about 2 minutes before the Veil consumes that sweet Latina soul. Tick tock, Doc,” she laughed.

“You love to taunt me, don’t you?”

“It’s all I got, Doc.” Poppy grabbed his sleeve.

“Shut up and look!” She pointed to the pool of shadows.

Two hands emerged from the shadows like a person pulling themselves up after an exhaustive swim. It took all of her strength to haul herself back into her world, sodden with perspiration. All her energy was drained, it was clear. The young woman extended her arms, locked her elbows, and scrambled from the shadow to collapse on the edge.

“Help me!” Fletcher shouted to Poppy as he ran to render assistance.

Together, they pulled the young woman free of the pool like a drowning victim. Fletcher checked her over. She was breathing, but was nearly unconscious.

“Carmen, can you hear me? Are you okay?”

She lifted her heavy head like a drunk, “I’m okay. Am I dead? I feel dead.”

“You’re not dead, not yet,” said Poppy.

“You are not helping matters,” said Fletcher. “Get her to safety, there’s no telling what could be after her.”

“All by myself?” complained Poppy. “I’m a nine-year-old, well in a nine-year-old’s body, how am I supposed to lift that heifer of a girl by myself?”

“Carmen is far from a heifer and you’re a 400-year-old witch. I know what you can do, and what you cannot. So, make with the magic and get her to the tattoo shop.”

“Thanks for pointing that out, and I’m 409, to be exact. In the meantime, what will you be doing?”

“I have to see Miss Venus. I have some suspicions. Carmen Perez may not be our only concern.”

“She’s not Nemesis.” Poppy could read his mind. “Nemesis is not coming back any time soon.”

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He turned to the girl. “You don’t know that,” snapped Fletcher. “There’s going to be much more. I feel it.” He stood and looked at the aperture with its tiny metal cogs and dials. “Please get a message to Mr. Nash and tell him to meet me at the museum this evening.”

“You know he hates to be summoned.”

“He’s my neophyte, he will do as he is told, or he’ll never get this aperture.” Fletcher then stalked from the abandoned factory.

The afternoon was rather pleasant in contrast to the ordeal in the abandoned factory with Carmen Perez. Fletcher looked across the green, city park in the *Campus Martius* district of downtown Detroit. The agreeable late spring weather attracted all sorts of downtown dwellers in the resurrected heart of the city: hipsters, artists, career girls, old executives. Then, at the far end of the park, he saw the familiar ice cream truck.

With big candy-looking marquee movie light bulbs encircling a red and white striped awning, there were no customers at the window of the colorful van. All sorts of sweet treat names were painted on the sides in lurid fluorescent colors that looked more impressive at night. He walked up to the window and tapped lightly on the stainless-steel counter.

“Why Professor Fletcher, as I live and breathe,” Venus stood from a rickety stool, “I have missed you.”

Fletcher smiled, “It’s good to see you again, too.” He leaned against the side of the van, “You look well.”

She laughed, more of an ancient cackle, “You are so full of shit. I love it.”

Miss Venus was so old she defied the term. There was no way to even guess at her proper age for even she stopped keeping track of her birthdays centuries ago. She wore a colorful blue paisley bandana wrapped and knotted around her skull. Her dark skin, withered and wrinkled like an old brown paper bag, contrasted with the bright chunky silver jewelry and beads

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hanging from her coat-wire neck.

“Is the cotton candy fresh?” asked Fletcher.

“Sure is. I spun it not more than ten minutes ago. But I got something better for you, honey.” She pulled a bottle of dark liquor from below the window and put it on the counter along with two shot glasses. “Just got this: *Pappy Van Winkle*. And this is the private stuff, not the 23. This bottle be old.”

Fletcher grinned broadly. “Oh, my sweetheart, I adore you. Where did you get it?”

“Let’s just say someone owed me something.”

“Everyone owes you something.” Fletcher took the bottle in hand and gave the cap a twist, breaking the seal. “Shall I pour?”

“Be my guest. With these shaky hands, I’d likely spill it all over the place.”

Fletcher poured three fingers into each shot glass. He offered one to his ancient companion, and he took the remaining one for himself. They clinked rims and both shot back the bourbon. She laughed at him as he reacted by sucking wind through his bared teeth.

“Smooth,” he grimaced. “That’s surely not the stuff you get at the local liquor store.”

“No, it isn’t,” she smiled. “Now pour us up another while you tell me what you want.”

He obliged. “Do you remember the plane crash about 16 years ago? The one that literally dropped from the sky on take-off, killing everyone except one little boy?” He slid the shot to her.

“Yes, I do.”

“What do you know about that little boy?”

Together they took the shot. “Well, he isn’t little anymore. He’s a strapping young man with a promising future in sports, from what I hear.”

“That’s not what I want to know, Miss Venus, you know that.” He leaned closer. “What is he?”

“He’s *earthborne*. He is not *skyborne* or *starborne* as you may suspect.” Venus reached for a bag of popcorn and began to

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munch as she talked. “He is indestructible, too.”

“What’s his name?”

“Ray Kellan. He is a nice young man with a doting adoptive mama.”

“What do you know about the plane crash itself?”

“Only that a rare bolt of lightning on a sunny morning exploded the fuel tanks on take-off.”

“Hmmm, *skyborne* mischief.”

Miss Venus nodded. “True. They were trying to assassinate the baby, but they didn’t know his nature. They killed his mother, though. She was his only living relative. No one could find out anything about her, or him, and eventually he was adopted out and given a new identity. No information on the father, either.”

Fletcher reached for some popcorn. “Was the adoption your doing?”

“A lot of people owe me favors, but I owe my fair share, too. Some were called in, but I arranged things so the baby could grow up peacefully.”

“Why did they want him dead?” asked Fletcher.

“Good question, and no one really knows that I can reckon. “

“Well someone wanted him dead.” Fletcher paused, thinking. “It’s not like there are *newbornes* everyday of any kind. Births of *newbornes* are rare.”

“Perhaps, the *skyborne* did not want to see a new *earthborne* —it would increase the numbers of one over the other.”

“What if he was *starborne*? What if you’re wrong?”

“He is not, I am sure. I have heard nothing, and *starbornes* have little regard for *earthborne* folk. They consider them beneath everyone. They do not stay on this small blue world for long. They can be uppity.”

“True,” Fletcher poured one more shot. “Would you like another?”

“Yes, of course.” Miss Venus put the popcorn aside, “But Ray Kellan is not the most interesting part of this.”

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“Oh?” Fletcher’s attention sharpened. “Something more?”

“Not something more, but *someone* more. Ray was not the only *newborne* that year. A baby girl named Calliope Garner. *Starborne*.”

“Where is she?” He took his shot.

Miss Venus took hers. “Calliope is transferring to Ray’s high school this week. I made arrangements with Calliope’s parents who are very worried about her temper. And her violent outbursts. I believe, as do her parents, that Ray may be the only one who can temper and contain her. I took the liberty of describing Ray, but not in too much detail.”

“Interesting...” He turned his shot glass over, signaling he was done. “I can’t wait until that storyline plays out, but right now I have to deal with Carmen Perez—and if our dear friend Nemesis has indeed returned to grace us with her presence from inside Carmen.”

“Nemesis,” laughed Miss Venus. “I haven’t heard that name in a long time, but I suppose it is about time for her to show up. No one else will believe you. Ah, but times are different, there are a few who are expecting her, and no doubt they are prepared.”

“The Wire?”

Miss Venus nodded. “Yes. You know them all too well.”

He fiddled with his pocket watch. “That’s the truth. I suppose I need to be getting to the museum. I have other irons in the fire.”

“Do you think you may be playing with fire by getting immature teenagers involved in your schemes?”

“They’re not schemes. And they’re not ordinary teenagers. Well, not in the sense that they are *earthborne*, *skyborne*, or *starborne*.”

“Just don’t get them killed, can you do that?” laughed Miss Venus.

“I will try my best.”

“One last thing,” Venus’ face darkened. “Were you going to tell me about Carmen Perez?”

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Self-consciously, he looked away. “How did you know?”

“Phineas, do you even have to ask that?” Venus touched his hands, “This girl, you think it is Nemesis? Why?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “All the signs say—*maybe*.”

“You don’t sound too sure of yourself. That’s not like you. If it is Nemesis, then you know something bigger than all of us is about to happen. Do you think she is set to return after all this time?”

“Have there been this many *newbornes* before?”

“Not in a very long time.”

“I guess no one knows then.” He winked at her and left the ice cream truck for other obligations.

“Here we go again.” Kendall sighed and looked across at his best friend, Peaches. “The history junkie!”

“Be quiet. Maybe if you were a little more in tune with the world you would have a plan after graduation.”

Kendall and PJ (never call her by her full name) had been friends since 2nd grade when they fought over who got to dress up as the princess during free time. Kendall won and thus began his tortured ride through school as Ken Doll. It didn’t help matters when he came out of the closet in 8th grade, but was surprised when no one was surprised. He may have been oblivious, but everyone else had known for years. Even his best friend PJ, who came out a month later as lesbian, knew. The taunting and teasing was momentary for the school had strict policies against bullying, but no one really cared that they were gay.

“What has got you so interested, then?” He fussed with his bleached blonde hair. “I want to go to the gym, you know, get my fitness on. And I need a new look for this hair.”

“In a minute.” PJ was engrossed in the story. “If you’d stop bleaching it, it will probably look better.”

“I think you are the only person on Earth who still reads a newspaper. Why not just pull it up on your phone?”

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“It’s not the same.” She glared over the page. “Now shut it so I can read the story if you wanna go workout. I’m not going until I’m done.”

“Whatever, Peaches Jean. You could read it on your phone while you did cardio—like normal a human being.”

She snapped the paper down. “I told you to never call me that. I’ll beat you senseless.”

“Promises, promises.” Kendall fiddled with the empty coffee cup in front of him. “God, you are so old.”

She sneered as only PJ Butler could, like a pitbull that could eat another pitbull for breakfast—who’d already eaten another pitbull for breakfast. “In case you want to know...apparently in one of the numerous archeological digs around Cairo, that’s in Egypt—cuz I know you don’t know that—something unusual was discovered. It seems that a pile of more than a thousand skulls was found in a pit beneath an ancient temple around Heliopolis—the city of the sun god Ra. Two experts were discussing it. One said it was evidence of dark rituals that support the legend of *Apep* who killed all the adults in ancient Cairo. The other said it was nothing more than a mass grave of plague victims.”

“Boring.” Kendall stood up. He wasn’t very tall, but he was compact and muscular from years of swimming and gymnastics. “You can get your fill of weird at the museum later. God only knows why someone would want to be an intern there.”

“God only knows why someone would want to work at Hollister. No one shops there anymore.”

“Hot guys, that’s why.”

PJ rolled her eyes. “Don’t be so lewd.”

“That’s your big word of the day, grandma. No more. Come on, let’s go.”

“Why are you in such a rush?” Then her eyes lit up. “*Oh*, because Daniel is at the gym right now.”

“Whatever.”

“He’s my cousin, Kendall. He’s not gay.”

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“Well I wouldn’t complain if he was.”

She put the paper down. “Fine, let’s go. I promised Dr. Fletcher I would be at the museum to help him unpack and catalog some new stuff.”

“Oh, sorry for yawning.”

“You didn’t.”

“I was yawning in my mind.”

PJ smacked him in the back of the head as they left the small coffee shop.