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Amos Daragon

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written by

Bryan Perro

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Amos Daragon

Book One

The Mask Wearer

Bryan Perro

English Edition by
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BRYAN PERRO

Bryan Perro was born in Shawinigan, Quebec, in 1968. He has trained as a drama teacher and actor, as well as obtaining a masters degree in Education. His best-selling series, *Amos Daragon*, has been translated into 19 languages (including English) and book one, *The Mask Wearer*, has sold over one million copies in Quebec alone. Perro has been awarded a variety of prizes for his fiction, including the 2006 Quebec Youth Prize for Fiction and Fantasy.

AMOS DARAGON
THE MASK WEARER

PROLOGUE

Tales about masks of power can be found in most of the ancient legends. These masks were highly prized. They bore the sacred magic of the elements and were only given to humans of great courage and spirit. There were four masks: the mask of earth, the mask of air, the mask of fire, and the mask of water. There were also sixteen stones of power, that gave the masks their potent magic. In the eternal struggle between good and evil, day and night, and the gods of the good and evil worlds, it was the task of a chosen few to re-establish the balance between these forces. Amos Daragon, son of Urban and Frilla Daragon, was one of the chosen. On the day of his birth the supreme goddess of the world, the Lady in White, wrote his fate in golden letters in the great history of eternal heroes. Then she waited patiently for the day he would begin to fulfil his destiny.

CHAPTER ONE

The Bay of Caves

The Kingdom of Omain was magnificent. It consisted of a small city lined with tidy streets over which a dark stone castle towered. High mountains, eternally capped with snow, surrounded the city. A long, wide river cascaded down through the snow-capped mountains and flowed right into the centre of the city which nestled in the valley.

There was a small fishing port in Omain, filled with brightly coloured little boats. When night fell, the people were lulled to sleep by the sound of the ocean waves. Every morning, dozens of fishermen made their way down to the river. Raising the triangular sails on their vessels, they ventured out to sea to try their luck with their lines and nets.

Along the dirt streets of Omain people travelled on foot and by donkey. The city's inhabitants were poor, with the exception of Lord Edonf. He lived in the castle

and ruled over this corner of paradise with an iron fist, forcing every family to pay him huge taxes. Every month when the moon was full, the lord's personal guard entered the city to collect the money. Anyone unable to pay on demand was immediately strung up in an iron cage in the marketplace for all to see. A prisoner could remain there for days or weeks on end without food or water, and no shelter from the cold, the heat, or vicious insects. The people knew that being condemned to the cage was tantamount to a death sentence, so they were always scrupulous when it came to paying their taxes to the lord.

Lord Edonf was as fat as a whale. He had bulging eyes, a cavernous mouth and pimply, greasy skin, all of which made him look like one of the enormous sea toads that invaded the port of Omain every year in the spring. Besides being frighteningly ugly, it was rumoured that he had a brain the size of a tadpole. Sitting by the fire, the elders told the children stories about his ridiculous antics. These tales, spun over time and embroidered by skilful storytellers, delighted both young and old.

Everyone in Omain knew, for example, the story of Yak the Troubadour. Arriving in the town with his troupe of travelling acrobats, Yak had passed himself off as a famous doctor. He persuaded Lord Edonf that swallowing sugar-coated sheep droppings would cure his failing memory. This went on for nearly a month

before Lord Edonf recovered his senses. But he never forgot the so-called doctor – or the taste of sheep manure. And after that, Omain's storytellers always told the children that if they didn't obey their parents, they would get a taste of Yak's medicine. This ensured that the children of Omain had remarkably good memories.

It was in this kingdom that Amos Daragon was born. His father and mother were skilled craftspeople who had spent many long years travelling from country to country in their quest to find the ideal place to settle. When they came across the splendid kingdom of Omain, they thought it was the perfect place to live out the rest of their lives.

They were good people. However, they made the unfortunate mistake of building their little thatched cottage on the edge of a forest not far from the city. What they didn't know was that they had built their home on Lord Edonf's private land, and without his permission. When Edonf heard what they had done he sent his men to arrest them, take them to the cage, and burn down their home. Urban Daragon pleaded with Edonf's men, offering to work for the lord in exchange for their lives, and to pay off the cost of the trees they had cut down to build their little cottage. Lord Edonf accepted the offer, but now twelve years had passed

since that terrible day, and Amos' father was still paying for his mistake with the sweat of his brow.

After spending so many years serving Lord Edonf, Urban was a pitiful sight. He was visibly wasting away. Lord Edonf treated him like a slave and was always ordering him to work harder. Over the past few years he had taken to beating Urban with his staff to make him work even faster. The lord of Omain took great pleasure in these beatings, and Urban, as the prisoner of his debt, had no choice but to put up with his tyranny. Every day Amos' father came home with his head hanging low and his limbs black and blue. Since he had neither money to flee the kingdom, nor the strength to stand up to Lord Edonf and cast off his shackles, Urban left home every morning in tears and came back every evening broken and bloodied.

The Daragon family was the poorest in the village, and their cottage the smallest. The walls were just made of tree trunks with the rough edges taken off and stacked together. To keep in the heat from the fireplace, Urban had stopped up any gaps with moss and hay. The straw roof was watertight, and the big stone chimney, huge in proportion to the cottage, seemed to be the only part of the building that was truly solid. A flower garden that hardly got any sun because of the large trees surrounding it and a small outbuilding that vaguely resembled a barn made up the rest of the family

homestead. The cottage was sparsely furnished with a wooden table, three chairs, and bunk beds. The chimney covered almost the entire east wall, and a kettle always hung on its hook over the fire. For the Daragon family, life in their tiny cottage was a constant struggle against the elements, and against hunger and poverty.

Since he was very young, Amos had had no choice but to get by as best he could. As a result, he had developed many talents. He hunted pheasant and hares in the forest, fished in the river with his homemade rod, and collected shellfish along the seashore. It was largely thanks to him that the family managed to survive, even though on some days there wasn't much food on the table.

Over time, Amos had developed a foolproof way of catching wild birds. He would tie a slipknot in the end of a rope and hang it over the tip of a long Y-shaped pole. When he spotted a partridge or some other game bird, all he had to do was keep his distance and then, at the right moment, quickly and silently slip the snare over the bird's neck and yank the rope. Thanks to this technique, many a partridge found its way onto the family dinner table.

Amos had learned to listen to nature, to blend in with the bracken and walk in the forest without making a sound. He was at home with the trees and knew all the best places to find wild berries. By the time he was

twelve he could track all the forest animals. Sometimes, during the cold season, he was even able to unearth truffles, those delicious underground mushrooms that grew at the foot of oak trees. The forest held no secrets for him.

But Amos was deeply unhappy. Every day he stood by as his father suffered and his mother sank deeper and deeper into despair. His parents, constantly penniless, argued a lot. Immersed in the misery of their daily lives, they no longer held any hope of escape. When they were young, Urban and Frilla had always dreamed of travelling. They had wanted more than anything to live their lives happy and free. But their eyes, which had once sparkled so brightly, were now dull with sadness and fatigue. Amos dreamed every night of rescuing his parents from their torment and giving them a better life. Also, since Urban and Frilla were too poor to send him to school, the boy dreamed of finding a teacher who would help him to understand the world, answer his questions and advise him what books to read. Every night Amos Daragon sighed as he fell asleep, hoping that the next day would bring him a new life.

One fine summer morning Amos went to the seashore to gather mussels and catch crabs. He followed his usual route but without much success. His meagre findings, carried in one of his two wooden buckets, were certainly not enough to feed three people. 'Well,' he said to himself. 'It looks like there's nothing much left along this section of shore. But it's still early and the sun is shining, so let's see what I can find further on.'

He first considered heading north towards an area he did not know very well, but then he remembered the Bay of Caves. This was quite a distance from where he was, and away to the south. Having been there a few times already, Amos knew he would not be able to spend much time scavenging, but if he walked quickly, he could get home before evening, as he had promised his father.

The Bay of Caves was an extraordinary place. Over time, the waves had eroded the rock and the tides had carved out grottoes, basins and magnificent sculptures. Amos had discovered it quite by accident, and each time he went there he went home with large quantities of crabs and mussels. He didn't go there very often, though, because it was such a long way to walk, and returning home with a bucket in each hand filled to overflowing was never easy.

After walking for two hours, Amos finally reached the Bay of Caves. Weary from his journey, he sat down

on the pebble beach and looked at the amazing landscape. The tide was low and the enormous sculptures carved by the ocean stood over the bay like petrified giants. Everywhere along the cliff, Amos could see deep holes dug by thousands of years of tides, waves and storms. The sun, already high in the sky, beat down on him, but the breeze from the sea cooled his tanned skin.

'Come on,' he said to himself. 'Time to get to work!'

Amos quickly filled his two buckets with crabs. There were dozens more on the beach, taken by surprise by the ebbing tide and now struggling to return to the safety of the sea. As the young fisherman was walking past a cave entrance which was wider and higher than the others, he noticed a big, black raven lying dead on the beach. Amos looked up at the sky and saw twenty or so more ravens flying in circles above the cliff.

'Those birds are circling,' he thought, 'waiting for something to die so they can feed on the carcass. It could be a big fish, or maybe there's a beached whale nearby. This poor raven was unlucky. It must have flown into the rocks and broken its neck.'

Looking around for a dying animal, Amos noticed three more ravens a little closer to the entrance of the cave. These were very much alive. They were staring into the cave as if they were trying to make out something deep inside the stone walls. As Amos went closer to see what they were doing, he heard a loud cry

from deep inside the cave. At once, the three birds fell dead, the life knocked out of them by the terrible sound.

Amos himself was blown over by the force of the blast. He collapsed as though he had received a violent blow. Instinctively, he covered his ears with his hands and lay curled on the ground, his heart pounding. His legs refused to budge. Never before had he heard such a sound. It seemed to him both human and animal, and it must have come from an extremely powerful source. Then an enchanting voice, soft and melodious, snapped Amos out of his daze. It was as though a lyre had suddenly started playing from deep inside the cave.

'Don't be afraid, young man. I am not an enemy.'

Amos lifted his head and struggled to his feet.

'I'm in the cave. Come quickly. I'm waiting for you. I won't hurt you. I only shouted to chase away the birds.'

Slowly, Amos walked into the cave. The voice continued to sound and its words chimed in his ears like a symphony of little bells.

'Don't be afraid. I don't trust those birds because they're nosy and crude. They're always spying, and they love eating fish far too much for my liking. When you see me, you will understand why I say this. Rest assured that I mean you no harm. Come quickly now, for I haven't much time left.'

In the darkness, Amos moved deeper and deeper into the cave, groping his way towards the voice. Suddenly, the ground and the rough stone walls were bathed in a

soft blue light, making the small puddles of water gleam and the wet walls shimmer in different shades of blue. It was magnificent. The light filled the inside of the cave, giving Amos the feeling that he was walking through glowing liquid. The voice continued:

'Isn't it beautiful? It is the light of my people. By sheer force of will, my people can produce light from salt water. Turn around. I'm right over here.'

When Amos looked closely at the creature, it took all his courage to keep from running away. Before his eyes, a real mermaid lay in a puddle of water. Her long hair was the pale colour of a sunset as it dipped behind the ocean. Strong and beautiful, she wore on her breast a shield of shells that resembled a soldier's armour. Between the armour and her skin, Amos thought he saw a shirt woven from seaweed. Her nails were long and pointed, and her body ended in a magnificent fish-tail, thick and heavy. Close to her lay a weapon, an ivory trident, carved from a narwhal horn and decorated with light red coral. The mermaid smiled as she spoke:

'I see the fear in your eyes, but please don't be alarmed. I know that creatures like myself have a bad reputation among humans. Your legends tell of mermaids bewitching sailors and luring them to the bottom of the sea. You must believe me when I tell you this is not true! It is the merrows who do this. Although our bodies are similar, merrows are repulsively ugly.

Like mermaids, the merrows use their voices to enchant men. But then they devour their victims, loot cargoes and raise storms that sink ships, which they then make into their homes at the bottom of the ocean.'

As the mermaid spoke, Amos noticed large gashes in her armour.

'Are you hurt?' he asked. 'I'm sure I can help you. Let me go into the forest. I know where to find plants that will heal you.'

The mermaid smiled warmly.

'You are kind, young man, but I know I will die very soon. I was badly injured in a battle with the merrows, and my wounds are deep. Where I come from, deep under the ocean waves, the war against evil creatures has been raging for many, many days. Now, take this white stone and, as soon as you can, go and find Queen Gwenfadrilla in Tarkasis Forest. Tell the queen that her friend Crivannia, Princess of the Waters, is dead, and her kingdom has fallen into enemy hands. Also, tell her that I have chosen you to be a mask wearer. She will understand and act accordingly. Swear to me, on your life, that you will carry out this mission.'

Without even thinking, Amos swore on his life.

'Go quickly now. Run and cover your ears. When a Princess of the Waters dies, she leaves this world with a terrible sound. Go! Run! May the power of the elements be with you every step of the way! Take this ivory

trident – it will be useful to you.'

Amos ran from the cave. Just in time, he covered his ears with both hands. A gruesome, sorrowful song, heavy with suffering and melancholy, echoed through the bay, making the ground tremble. Rocks began to fall all around him, then, with a terrifying crash, the cave in which the mermaid lay collapsed. When it was all over, a deafening silence reigned.

As he climbed back up the cliff with the ivory trident tucked under his arm and a bucket full of crabs in each hand, Amos turned to gaze at the place one last time. Somehow he knew that he would never see the Bay of Caves again. Then, as he watched, he realised he was looking at hundreds of mermaids, their heads bobbing out of the water, watching over the princess' tomb from a distance. It was only after he had walked several miles towards home, that Amos heard a dirge carried by the wind. A choir of mermaids, paying their final homage to Princess Crivannia.