**Chapter Thirteen: Sanctuary**

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

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For the second time in as many hours, I found myself Kidnapped and in a car being driven by a person that I had only met a few minutes before said abduction.

I looked to my left to observe my new captor. What I saw left me with an unsettling feeling of incongruity. She looked like any normal young woman, someone barely beyond her teens; she looked like she should be out with her friends or attending a class in college, not out here holding a frightened middle aged man against his will. In fact, the only characteristics that might make her stand out from her peers were her eccentric choice of clothing and her unusual, short and shaggy auburn hair. Her face wasn’t world shockingly beautiful, but she did have features that made her pretty in the “girl next door” kind of way. She was slim, but not enough that she lacked any meat on her bones. Her body was well proportioned, but nothing particularly noteworthy. All in all, besides her little quirks, she looked like someone I could pass on the street without taking a second glance.

<I didn’t know that you were such a dirty old bastard. You do know that she is half your age, right? Why are complaining about the looks of your kidnapper? Were you hoping that some sort of romance will bud from this situation? Maybe a night of passion that will turn enemies into lovers? Considering the gap between your age and hers, such a thing would be well past cradle robbing and getting dangerously close to pedophilia.>

I decided to ignore Darky, which I had eventually learned was the best way to deal with him. Besides, I knew full well that he was just trying to annoy me. He had access to my thoughts and he knew damn well that I wasn’t really lusting after the young woman sitting next to me, partly because, as Darky mentioned, she was way too young for me and partly because I was too terrified to think of her in that way. I was keenly aware of the fact that the pretty, innocent exterior hid a dangerous predator that was capable of killing a person without so much as batting an eyelid.

“If you don’t stop staring at me, I will scoop out your eyes. I might need you alive but that doesn’t mean I can’t maim you a little.”

I hastily turned away from her and stared forward, frozen rigid in fear. The casual way she had talked about the possibility of scooping out my eyes made me certain that it wasn’t an empty threat. Her lazy sounding voice and the almost leisurely way she was acting might have made her appear relaxed, but that didn’t make me feel any better. I felt like I was a mouse being toyed around with by a cat who couldn’t be bothered to eat the mouse because it wasn’t hungry at that point. I felt an impending sense of crisis because the cat would inevitably become hungry enough that it will eventually eat the mouse, and unfortunately, I was that metaphorical mouse.

<There is something seriously wrong with this chick. She seems to be a little psychotic, temperamental and perpetually on the edge of doing something violent. I wouldn’t antagonize her if I were you.>

I really wanted to heed Darky’s advice. I knew that the smartest thing to do in this situation was to shut up and do nothing, but my curiosity was too much to bear. It was like a scab that I knew I shouldn’t peel, but in the end, it was just so itchy that I couldn’t help myself.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?”

She glanced at me before turning back to the road. “Stop annoying me. I do not have the patience for your nonsense.”

My fear for her didn’t decrease in any way but my frustration that stemmed from the crazy things that were repeatedly happening to me boiled over, and I couldn’t stop the eruption of questions that were bubbling inside me.

“What the hell is going on? Who were all those people and why could they do all those things? Why did that Mr. Phelps or whatever his name is suddenly grow wings? Where are you taking me? What are you? Are you even human? Where those people human?”

”You are one of those people that won’t shut up until they get answers, aren’t you?”

“I’m scared and confused, my whole world is collapsing around me, and I’m constantly questioning my sanity. I need some answers or I’m going to completely break down. Please, I’m begging you, just tell me what is going on.”

The intimidating atmosphere around her gradually subsided until finally, it vanished, taking with it the impending sense of doom that was looming over me. It was almost like she turned into another person, like the dangerous aura around had only been an illusion. She even sounded gentle as she sighed in exasperation before saying, “Dear God, I can’t believe that you have the aura of at least two different types of power on you and you still remain completely ignorant of the supernatural world.”

“Supernatural world? You mean witches, fairies, werewolves and all that stuff?”

She chuckled and replied, “Yes, witches, fairies, and werewolves among other things. As for what I want from you and why I chose you, it wasn’t personal. I had been following Phelps around for weeks hoping that he would lead me to something juicy and he led me to you. I don’t know why he would be dispatched to retrieve an un-awakened being, a job that is usually reserved for some peons, but I knew that something was up. My suspicions were further raised when those vultures decided to abduct you even though they risked antagonizing the Wardens by doing so. It was clear enough that both the Wardens and the Vultures were willing to go to extreme lengths to obtain you and that meant that you are valuable to them. Basically, I am planning to use you as a hostage to get something very important to me.”

I stayed silent after that, digesting the information that I just obtained. At first, my mind automatically wanted to reject the possibility of the supernatural things that should only exist in stories might actually real because it was simply too absurd to even consider, but all the things that I had seen so far could not be explained away by what I knew as “possible”. I was forced to accept the fact that it was highly likely that supernatural entities could be real. Besides that world shaking revelation, I also couldn’t help but get depressed because of the realization that I was a hostage whose only value was to be exchanged for something; I had basically become currency.

<Cheer up man, at least you are valuable currency. You aren’t a dollar or even a twenty. You are definitely worth at least fifty dollars or maybe even a hundred. You should be proud.>

Darky’s flippant comment managed to make me smile a little. It made me recognize that it was pointless to wallow in depression or obsess about the many waves of mystery that kept bombarding me, threatening to drown me. I should just take things one step at a time and hope that things turn out for the best.

I had just made that resolution when the car suddenly swerved from the road and drove straight towards a cliff. I could hardly react before the car started to plummet to the ground. As the strange feeling of weightlessness enveloped my body, I closed my eyes and waited for my inevitable doom. Even as I was contemplating the bizarre sequence of events that had led me to this point, I heard a gentle whisper speak an unintelligible string of words that seemed to wrap around me and make me feel tired and fuzzy, and almost involuntarily, I fell asleep.

My nap didn’t last very long before I was suddenly jolted awake by the disappearance of the weightless sensation I had been experiencing as the car fell. A moment later, I sensed that my feet were planted firmly on the ground and I stumbled because of the abrupt transition, but I eventually managed to restore my balance. By the time I opened my eyes, I was greeted by a scene that made me think that I had truly died and reincarnated into a different world. I looked around in bewilderment and blinked my eyes several times but what I was seeing didn’t change.

I felt the last shred of common sense I had left melt away like cotton candy in the rain as unexpectedly and inexplicably, I found myself in a meadow that stretched as far as my eyes could see, a vast field that was only interrupted by small hills and lakes that dotted the landscape. The picturesque vista was complete with a sky that was clear except for small fluffy clouds that floated merrily across the bright blue expanse and to top it all off, the sun was shining just enough to be pleasant without being too hot. This was strange in itself since I had been in a car plummeting off a cliff that I was sure didn’t even exist in the middle of Washington, never mind the fact that the weather was overcast and miserable at the time, the polar opposite of what I was seeing right now. But even ignoring these anomalies, the meadow in itself was worth more than a gasp or two. For one, the grass that covered the fields and the hills were like small emeralds, not only their color but also the way the sunlight passed through them, making them sparkle like precious jewels. The bushes that grew here and there had the leaves that were like small gems, refracting the light around them and creating their own little light shows. The colorful flowers that grew among the grass bloomed into bouquets of rubies, amethysts, garnets, and sapphires. The whole scene looked so surreal that I subconsciously leaned down and gently ran my fingers through the crystalline grass. Instead of being sharp and unyielding like it appeared, it felt soft and flexible to the touch like common grass. I plucked one of the flowers, a tricolored variety that I have never seen before, and gently touched the delicate petals, accidentally making one fall off and watching it gently float to the ground. I took a sniff of the flower and my nose was filled with a sweet aroma that soothed my over stressed mind like a gentle lullaby. I had to shake my head a little to stop myself from succumbing to the peaceful atmosphere which made me want to just lie down on the grass and sleep my worries away.

The moment of perfect tranquility was broken when three people popped out of thin air and walked towards me at a brisk pace. The most striking of the trio was the person who was in the lead. She was a woman wearing a beautiful white formal gown with enigmatic golden patterns stitched into the fabric in what appeared to be a completely random yet mysterious arrangement. The symbols seemed to be shifting around when I was not looking at them directly but when I focused on one symbol in particular, it stayed stationary without any sign of movement. Her mystique wasn’t limited to the woman’s dress, in fact, her dress was just the tip of the iceberg. Her face was covered by a mask with features that seemed blurry, like my brain couldn’t properly translate what my eyes were seeing. The only thing clear about the mask was that the left half of it was golden, appearing to glow bright yellow in the sunlight, while the right side was silver, making the light around it dimmer and more illusory. The eyes visible through eyeholes of the mask were the reverse of the mask itself; the eye on the left was a silvery white color that brought up vivid images of the full moon floating over a lake when I looked at it, while the one on the right was an bright golden color, like a small sun that burned with flames that could incinerate the very soul. The pure intensity radiating from it made me feel like small needles were sticking into my eyes the longer I stared at it yet I still had trouble looking away from its seemingly eternal majesty. As she floated gracefully towards me with the hems of her dress slightly flaring out revealing dainty feet wearing emerald slippers, I realized that the only plain thing about her was the dull grey iron crown on her head. It was like a discordant tone in an otherwise perfect symphony, but even with the unsightly crown on her head, she still looked like a goddess, something that should be admired from afar but never touched.

Compared to the breathtaking woman, the man to her left wasn’t that unusual, but he wasn’t exactly normal either. He was a muscular man wearing armor that looked like it was a prop from a play about ancient Greece, but I doubted that the shield on his back and the gladius strapped to his belt were just for show. His movements were smooth and his steps were nimble. The simple act of walking became something more when he executed it, like every step he took was gathering potential that could explode at any moment. Despite the martial nature of his movements and attire, he had a refreshing smile on his handsome face. Combined with his ink black hair and the confidence that seemed to ooze from the very core of his being, he was what I imagined one of the demi-god heroes from Greek mythology would look like.

I waxed poetic about the masked woman and the man in armor because their appearances truly warranted it, but the last person, a teenager to the woman’s right, didn’t have the same regal atmosphere that the other two possessed. If the woman was a goddess and the man was a demigod, the kid was a mere mortal whose presence was almost completely overshadowed by the other two. He was just a normal teenager wearing a t-shirt and jeans. The only thing notable about him was the fact that he had the same handsome face as the armored man. If I had to guess, the kid was probably his son. Looking at the two of them with their almost identical masculine and handsome faces, it poked at some of my old psychological wounds about my appearance and I felt a twinge of jealousy in my heart, but it was all swept away with any other emotion I was feeling at the time because the masked woman had reached me and started to speak.

“Greetings Dr. Jonathan Thorne. I realize that this is all very strange to you and you were brought here under duress, but I can assure you that we had nothing to do with the actions of Ms. Carla Belluci and we have no malicious intentions towards you. Ms. Carla will be tried under our laws and punished accordingly for acting against one of our brethren. As for you, even though you did not come here of your own will, I hope that you will choose to remain here for the time being. You are in a precarious situation right now and it is not clear who is your friend or who is your enemy. Until such a time that you are no longer in danger, I sincerely extend to you an invitation to stay in our home. We guarantee your safety and you will find everything you might need in here. I assure you that you will find excitement, peace, happiness or whatever else you might want. Whatever you imagine, whatever you desire, you will probably find it here. Who knows, maybe in time, you will also call this place your home, like so many have done before you.”

I listened to her almost hypnotic voice and I wanted to answer her, but my rational thoughts were rapidly eroded by irrational desires. I became acutely aware of just how close to me she was and how easy it would be to simply reach out and remove her mask. My heart burned with an intense need to see her face. I knew deep down that I would die happily if I had just one glance of the beauty hidden under that mask. I reached out, intending to rip the mask off but I suddenly felt a stinging pain on my chest that made me double over in agony. The strange tattoo on my chest that I had all but forgotten about was shining brightly and the ones and zeros were zipping by so rapidly that I could barely keep up with them. My thoughts that had become muddy because of the influence of the masked woman became crisp and clear.

“Is this what you meant by guaranteeing my safety? Trying to confuse me with mind tricks?”

The glow that was surrounding masked woman vanished and she bent down to help me when I when I staggered and nearly fell down. “I’m sorry. I was angry because of Carla and some of my power accidentally leaked out. I swear that this was not intentional. And I assure you that nobody who comes here can harm you in any way.”

I straightened up and pushed her hand away to put distance between us. I had realized that she might be more dangerous than anybody I have met so far, so I decided to keep away from her before something bad happened. “That seems a little contradictory. If you ask me, what had happened earlier can clearly be categorized as ‘hurt’.”

<Yeah! She totally tried to mind fuck you! Don’t fall for her bullshit about being safe! She is probably trying to lull you into a false sense of security.>

Darky? Why did he suddenly show up? Why was he silent for so long? Did the chatter box suddenly learn shut up?

<Hell no! I have been trying to contact you since the masked lady appeared but you seemed unable to hear me. At first I thought you were just ignoring me because you were too busy ogling her, but I eventually figured out that something was wrong, so I took things into my own hand.>

The pain and the tattoo, that was you?

<Yup, I thought you needed a little kick in the ass before you did something stupid. Oh, and a little thank you would be nice.>

My inner dialogue must have taken too long because the masked woman moved forward and asked, “Are you alright?” but I automatically took a step backwards as she took a step forward, maintaining the distance between us. Seeing my aversion to her, the masked woman’s shoulders seemed to droop and her head bent down like she was dealt a severe blow. It made sense that someone would be sad if they were rejected by someone, but I couldn’t understand her extreme reaction. I was trying to figure out what had happened and what I should do next when I was interrupted by an angry shout.

“My mother is trying to help you and she even apologized, why are you being an ass? If you want to leave, just leave!”

The one who was shouting was the normal looking teenager. He was glaring furiously at me as if he would like nothing more than to beat me to a pulp, but what was important wasn’t his poisonous stare, it was the thing he said. I hated to take advice from an annoying little pup but he did make a good point.

“Alright. I’ll leave.”

The masked woman who was being comforted by the armored man suddenly seemed to snap out of her depression. “No! We can’t just let him walk out of here shining like a beacon. The vultures will get him in less than an hour! We would be sending him to his death if we abandon him right now! We don’t desert one of our own, we don’t betray one of our own, we help our brethren in need and work together for each other’s safety. That has always been our principle and our bottom line. It is the only reason we have survived so far. We can’t just forsake our ideals like this!”

This time it was the man in armor who stepped forward. He stood in front of me with a slightly aggrieved expression. “Look kid, I know that you are tired, confused and scared right now. The incident before probably didn’t help much either. What I’m trying to say is that you have every right to be suspicious, so let’s start over. My name is Percy, this is my wife Melisa and that is our son Mathew. Nice to meet you.”

He extended his hand for a handshake, but I hesitated to take it.

“Kid, you’re thinking about this too much. Did you forget that you were easily kidnapped by Carla? Well Melisa is a thousand times more powerful than her. If she really wanted to do something to you, why would she even bother to go through all this trouble? And as for the whole ‘you are safe here’ misunderstanding, Melisa made the rule that forbids anybody from causing harm in this place. Naturally, the rules she herself made can’t bind her. As for the rest of us…” He pulled out his gladius and thrust it towards my heart before I could react. The tip of the weapon approached my chest at a freighting speed but it was stopped dead cold by some sort of unseen barrier that only became visible because it rippled slightly when it came into contact with the gladius. “See? Nothing will happen to you as long as you are here.”

He kept swinging his sword to emphasize his point. The rippling barrier protected me each time and I wasn’t hurt in any way but that didn’t stop my heart from cramping up in fear every time I saw the sharp edge of the gladius flying towards me.

“Alright! Alright! You have made your point! Please stop swinging that thing around!”

“I’m glad we understand each other. So now that you know how things work around here, let’s dispense with this nonsense and agree to be friends, okay?” He extended his hand again, but this time I didn’t hesitate to shake his hand. It felt more like coercion than friendship but I didn’t seem to have a choice. My discontentment must have been evident because the man in armor, Percy, laughed and flexed his arm. Since our hands were still clasped together, I flew helplessly towards him. He then held me under his arm and rubbed my head with his knuckle, messing up my hair and reminding me of my dark history as a child when I was involuntarily involved in “fun horseplay” with all of my friends who all just happened to be larger than me. The friendly smile on Percy’s face made it clear that this wasn’t something he was doing to embarrass me but just his way of showing friendship and goodwill.

“You are a stubborn one, aren’t you? No matter, I’ll personally show you around and I’ll be damned if you aren’t begging to stay by the end of the day.”

He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me along without so much as asking for my consent. Almost like an afterthought, he looked back at his wife and son with a small frown on his face. “Mathew, stay with your mother and don’t run around without my permission. The main fault for all of this lies with Carla, but don’t think for a moment that I don’t know your involvement in all this. I know how you feel about her and I understand the follies of youth so I’ll let it slide, but consider yourself grounded for two weeks,”

He then turned towards me with a silly grin on his face, “What do you think kid? Was I being too rough on him?”

I felt indignant that he kept calling me kid. “I’m nearly forty years old! I am not a kid!”

His silly grin turned into one full of mischief as he replied, “Trust me kid. You are barely a child compared to some of the inhabitants of this place. You will see what I mean when you meet some of them in a little while. Oh I almost forgot,” he suddenly turned solemn and called out, ”Hey kid.”

I was irritated by his continuous use of the word kid so I barked, “What?”

His mouth twitched a little as he struggled to suppress his smile and keep a straight face to preserve the solemn atmosphere before saying, “Welcome to the Sanctuary of the Forgotten.”