**Chapter Fifteen: Sanctuary II**

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

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Physically, Percy wasn’t a very big guy. Actually, he was only a few inches taller than me and I can be considered quite short, but it only took me a few minutes of interacting with him to realize that, contrary to his small stature, he had a larger than life personality. I had spent the entire day on edge after all of the things that had happened to me, my nerves were fried and I was reeling from the unrelenting waves of revelations that rocked the very foundations of my being, but even I couldn’t help but to be swept up by his stubbornly positive attitude, mainly because he didn’t give me a chance to refuse. His unorthodox character had a unique charisma that even his rascally attitude became endearing. He was a little crude, excessively direct, tactless and unable to recognize personal boundaries even if you drew it for him with a bright red marker, but he managed to make up for all that with pure enthusiasm. Percy was like a big yellow dog; he is invasive, ignores any attempts to make him behave properly and is aggravating to no end, but at the same time, his honest nature and the pure infectious joy that radiated from him made him endearing despite his obvious flaws.

Case in point, he had barely finished solemnly welcoming me to the place he called “Sanctuary of the Forgotten” when his serious attitude disappeared and it was replaced by a bright smile. He then said, “Think fast!” and casually threw a palm sized object towards me. I didn’t even have a chance to react when the thing hit my chest with a not inconsiderable force, knocking the wind out of me. Percy’s only reaction was to laugh and pat my back with enough power to buckle my knees.

“I knew you were skinny, but I didn’t know you were so frail! You should work out more! I know a few trainers who will only be too happy to whip you up into shape; I’ll introduce some of them to you later, but first, pick up that Clavis. You will need it to get around.”

“Clavis? Are you talking about this?” I held the palm sized object and carefully examined it. All I saw when I examined it was an unassuming, if rather large, stone. It was completely smooth, without any markings or depressions on its shiny olive-green surface. I turned it over several times but I couldn’t find anything remarkable about it. The only thing peculiar about the teardrop shaped stone was that it was unnaturally thin and it was bent in such a way that it was concave on one side and bulged out slightly on the other.

“Stop looking at it so closely, you won’t find anything. Just hold it between your hands and say, ‘I come seeking sanctuary.’.”

“What?”

“Think of it as a contract. I have already welcomed you to the sanctuary but until you formally accept, you will only be a temporary guest without any access to the deeper facilities. Just do what I say so that I can show you all the fun places around here.”

“Contract? That sounds kind of ominous.”

“You’re making it sound more sinister than it is. It’s more of a formality than anything else. Stop being a wimp and just do it.”

<Just do what he says before he starts waving his sword around again. Saying ‘I come seeking sanctuary’ doesn’t sound so bad. If it was something along the lines of ‘I pledge my undying loyalty’ or something that contains the words ‘I give my soul in return for’ , then you should be more worried.>

Darky usually gave great advice, but I didn’t think his assessment of the situation was correct. I didn’t sense any malicious intent from Percy but I didn’t believe that the thing he was asking me to do was as simple as he made it out to be. He was obviously trying to make me do it without thinking about it too much and that made me think that there was something a little off about the whole thing. On the other hand, I wasn’t really in a position to refuse. Percy and his wife sounded like they only had good intentions when they spoke to me and they seemed to imply that I could leave whenever I wanted to, but they were also pretty insistent that I stayed. They claimed that it was for my own good, but something told me that there was more to the situation than they were telling me. At first, Percy’s wife Melisa had almost “accidentally” used her powers to force me to stay and then Percy “playfully” proved that I was safe as long as I stayed. Percy’s tactics might have seemed harmless, but it could also be taken as a veiled threat that my safety was dependent on their good will.

After considering everything, I knew that it was in my best interest not to antagonize these people, so I held the stone between my palms and repeated after Percy, “I come seeking sanctuary.”

I waited cautiously for something to happen, but after a few seconds, it seemed like I had worrying about nothing. I was just about to relax when the stone between my hands flashed brightly, making me close my eyes to protect them from the bright light. When I opened them again, the stone was gone without a trace. No, that wasn’t quite true. The stone had only shrunk and stuck itself to my palm.

“Great! Now that we have got that out of the way, time to start the tour. Extend your hand forward, palm first and say ‘apertus’”

I touched the stone which was now attached to my palm. I put some pressure on it to see if it was removable but it was firmly fixed in place. The thing looked like a single piece of scale from the skin of a snake, and its olive green color was conspicuous against my pale skin, obviously out of place. My latin was a little rusty, but it was something of a hobby when I was studying psychology, so I knew that clavis meant key and apertus meant open, but my suspicions that there was something more to the “Clavis” than simply being a key to the place increased exponentially. The fact that I couldn’t remove the thing from my hand made me uneasy, but I decided to hide my suspicions for now. I didn’t want them to think that I was wary of their motives, so I pretended that nothing was amiss and obeyed Percy’s instructions. I thrust my hand forward and muttered, “Apertus.”

I felt my brain tingle for a second and then the space in front of me seemed to collapse in upon itself like a crumpled piece of paper, leaving behind a shining white rectangle the size of a door. Percy once again stuffed me under his arms and forced me to jump through the bright white light before I could even process what was going on.

Once the white light faded and I regained my sight, I was no longer in the beautiful meadow. Instead, I was in a very familiar room with a red velvet winged chair situated in front of a fireplace where a small fire gave off a pleasant glow. The walls were covered with bookshelves heavy with books of all sizes and colors.

“Umm, why are we in my house? How did we even get here?”

Percy had his perpetual grin plastered on his face as he replied, “This is not your house, not really. The Clavis searched your memory for the place you were most comfortable in, the place you considered your home, and it made a replica for you to stay in. This is now your personal abode, the place you can live in if you don’t choose to move somewhere else, and it also acts as a waypoint where you could access all the other areas of the sanctuary. You should be proud, not everybody gets one of these. Actually, if my wife found out that I gave you an all access Clavis, she would probably skin me alive, but think of this as an apology for all the shit that you had to go through.” After answering my question, he directed my attention to nine paintings on one of the walls that hadn’t been in my original house. “Those are the different regions of the sanctuary. You can access any of them by simply placing your hand on one and repeating the phrase ‘apertus’.” He walked to the painting on the far right which was a vivid depiction of a bright and beautiful meadow and said, “That is where we just came from. That area is called the crystal meadow and it is a solitary area. This means that many people could be present in it at the same time, but they won’t be able to come into contact with each other. It is a place of peace and tranquility made so that people can be alone and rest away from the hustle and bustle of life. Of course, we did meet earlier inside of the crystal meadow but that is a one-time thing that only happens when we welcome a new member.” He passed the painting of the meadow and pointed at the one next to it which depicted a stormy sea, “That area is called the infinite sea. It is a world completely covered in water with few islands appearing here and there. I suggest that you don’t go in there unless you are really good at swimming or you have a good ship. It is mildly interesting. Its inhabitants are mainly communities of sea nymphs, mermaids, sirens and other demi-humans that live around the islands and the surface of the sea. The deeper areas are ruled by deep sea monsters. The only other living beings which go there are those who enjoy sailing ships in the open ocean. I’m not really a big fan of that place so we are not going in there. You can check it out later by yourself if you are interested.”

His smile became slightly cramped as he moved to the next painting which was that of a building shrouded in mist. The swirling and shifting fog revealed the blurry outline of a colossal structure that was made out of stone that looked like red marble with veins of gold running through it. The chiseled triangular roof of the building was held aloft by pure black pillars, making it look like something from a dystopian version of ancient Greece.

“This place has many names but most people call it the hose of sin. It is filled with all of the worldly pleasures that some might not find completely wholesome. To be honest, I’m not really a fan of the house of sin, but many people do enjoy spending their time there, so I might as well introduce you to the proprietor of the place.”

He unenthusiastically made me place my hand on the frame of the painting and say ‘apertus’. This time, there was no shining door. I just felt like I was falling into the painting and I had already arrived in front of the large doors of the red building. The mist seemed to have a strange sweet aroma as it curled around us, making me nervous as Percy led me through the doors that were gaping open like the mouth of a giant beast.

Past the door, we walked through thick mist that shrouded everything that was more than an arm’s length away from us. Thankfully, we didn’t have to walk long before we saw a source of light. As we got closer, the source of light became clearer and clearer until it was revealed to be a large chandelier that lit a circular area that was about ten meters wide and devoid of any mist. Directly beneath the chandelier was a massive bed covered in plump cushions and lounging on the bed, nestled among the plump cushions was an equally plump woman. The slightly overweight woman was dressed in sheer, almost see-through red silk lingerie that served to display more than hide her curvaceous body. She was lazily reclining on the bed while being waited upon by three beautiful women. Her head rested on the nape of a pale statuesque woman with raven black hair wearing a full length dress of the same color which had become slightly crumpled as she bent her knees to sit on the bed and support the plump woman. Her red eyes were cold and emotionless as she massaged the plump woman’s shoulders. The remaining two of the trio of women attending the plump lady were identical twins. They wore tight leather clothes that covered less than the skimpiest of swim suits. Their voluptuous bodies were barely contained in the strips of leather that one would struggle to call cloth and they threatened to burst out at any moment. Every time the two women moved, it seemed to make some part of their bodies quiver obscenely, making my heart quiver slightly at the same time. My eyes couldn’t help but to be glued to their bare backs, my sight slowly descending down their spine towards the bounty that waited below. I was slightly distracted when I noticed the thin red tail that sprouted from the base of their spine. Their devilish tails swayed gently from side to side, the arrows on the tip looking more decorative than dangerous. Closer inspection revealed a pair of small red horns peeking out from their flaming red hairs, but these abnormalities only seemed to add to their charm than detract from it. The provocative nature of the two only increased because of what they were doing; one was holding the foot of the plump woman between her tantalizingly bare thighs, massaging and caressing it with her deft hands and fingers, while the other one sat next to the plump woman, holding a plate of grapes and feeding it to her one grape at a time while the plump woman ate the grape from her fingers, gently sucking them at the same time.

The scene before me would test the will of the most devout monk, and I was no monk. I was hunched over and my face was glowing with heat as my mind raced with indecent thoughts. I desperately looked away and noticed that Percy didn’t seem to be having the same problem as me. He just stood there with a noncommittal expression on his face.

“Hello Kakia. I see that you are doing well.”

The plump woman raised herself slightly and looked over towards us with a welcoming smile. “Percy dearest, how have you been? How have the years been treating you? Why, I haven’t seen you in well over a hundred years. I could almost believe that you were avoiding me.”

“You know that I don’t like coming here Kakia. There is nothing here for me.”

She pouted cutely and stuck her small tongue out at him. “There is always something for everyone here, you are just being a mule headed fool. I get that you love your wife and everything, but Melisa already agreed to let you come here whenever you needed to. Why are you being so prudish?”

“I know you don’t understand. I even know why you can’t understand, but no matter how much we argue, my wife is the only person I want. I am not keeping myself from coming here because I am trying to suppress my urges, it is just that I can’t even feel any such urges for anyone other than my wife.”

“Nonsense! There is no hero out there who doesn’t have a soft spot for women!”

As the two continued to bicker, the three women that had been waiting on the plump woman had stopped what they were doing and were staring intently at me. The woman in the black dress looked at me hungrily, her blood red eyes glowing slightly as she gracefully got off the bed with a single smooth motion. The two demonic women weren’t as graceful as her as they struggled to get up but they still managed to leave the bed as the same time. They saw me staring at the dangerous amount of cleavage that they had shown when they got up and smiled coyly with their cheeks blushing slightly. They walked towards me with swaying hips, licking their ruby red lips as if they were looking at a delicious meal. I stared at the three beautiful women approaching me and my mind went blank, unable to decide what to do.

I was shocked out of my daze when the air around me started to ripple like the surface of a pond being disturbed by rain. It was the same kind of ripple that had appeared when Percy was attacking me with his sword. Percy and the slightly overweight woman stopped arguing and they finally noticed what was going on. The plump woman frowned and said, “Children, where are your manners?”

Her voice was soft and she sounded pleasant but the three women froze and the ripples around me stopped. The three women continued to stare at me while almost simultaneously saying, “We are sorry mistress.”

One of the demonic women added, ”He is… I can’t…”

The plump woman looked at me with a thoughtful expression and said, “I understand child. I feel it too, but there are certain protocols that need to be obeyed. Percy, who is your young friend. I don’t believe I have ever seen him before.”

Percy looked at the women with a raised eyebrow and replied, “This is Jonathan. He is new.”

“Really? Hello Jonathan, welcome to my humble home. Would you like to spend some time here? I am sure that my girls would love to take care of you. You can see how eager they are to be acquainted with you. Girls, introduce yourselves.”

The devilish twins opened their mouths to speak but they were interrupted by the pale statuesque beauty.

“My name is Victoria Bathory, daughter of the blood Countess, Elizabeth Bathory. I am a pure and unsullied princess of the night court. Come with me and I promise you unimaginable pleasure. Be mine and I shall be yours, fulfilling your every desire and serving you day and night for eternity. Share with me your warmth and I promise you my loyalty. Share with me your bed and I promise you my love,” Her red eyes that were cold a moment ago burned with intensity as she reached back with her hand and unfastened her dress. It slowly slid down her shoulders and pooled around her feet, leaving her naked except for black lacey underwear, “Share with me your blood and I promise you my body.”

The devilish women looked at Victoria in shock and one of them started to giggle. “I never thought I would see the thousand year old virgin steal the march and offer herself up so eagerly.”

“Shut up harlot. He is mine!”

The devilish woman just giggled some more. “Calm down Victoria, there is no need to be upset. We can all just share.” She looked towards me and hugged her twin sister, letting her hand trail up her thighs. “And we are very good at sharing, aren’t we sister?”

Percy placed his hand on my shoulder and asked, “Are you alright?”

My voice sounded hoarse as I answered, “I’m fine. I’m just a little confused about what is going on.”

Percy cleared his throat and pretended not to see the fact that my teeth were grinding and my veins were sticking out as I struggled to keep myself from pouncing on the women.

“That woman is Kakia, the goddess of vice. She runs this place and as you probably have guessed, this is a place where you can find gambling, drugs and other less savory things, but mainly, it is a place that peddles sex.”

“Percy, why are being so cold? Don’t listen to him Jonathan. This is a place where people are happy. Things like gambling and drugs might be harmful outside of the sanctuary, but nothing can hurt you here. You can do whatever you want to do without any danger, and all that is left is pleasure.”

Percy cleared his throat again and continued, “The two women over there are succubae. They are after your essence.”

“By essence you mean…”

“Yes. They will take your energy by sleeping with you. They are not harmful since they are only allowed to take a small amount, only enough that you could recover after a small nap. Their offer is simple and straightforward. On the other hand, Victoria is a vampire noble. What she offered is to basically be your servant in exchange for your blood. Again, she can only take enough blood that you can recover quickly. The only problem is that things might get a little complicated with her family.”

Victoria interrupted Percy by saying, “It will not be an issue since I will break all relations with my family if you agree with my proposal.”

Kakia looked at me carefully and spoke, “Can’t you see it Percy? He belongs here.”

Percy frowned. “What is that supposed to mean? You think you can trap him here with your temptations? I haven’t known him long, but I don’t think that his will is that weak. He might come here once in a while to take care of his needs but I doubt he would lose himself to pleasure.”

I was glad that Percy had confidence in me because I didn’t have any confidence in myself. I felt that once I gave in, I would never be able to say no again.

Kakia shook her head at Percy’s assertion. “I think you misunderstand. I don’t want to trap Jonathan. It is quite the opposite. I am saying he belongs here because he is a vice more potent than any other. What is the most addictive thing in the world? Gambling? Drugs? Sex? No, the most addictive thing is power. Look at him Percy. Power is dripping off him like warm honey. Look at what it is doing to the girls. If he was to join the house of sin, every woman in the sanctuary would line up just for an hour with him. The proud fey that turn their noses up at the mere mention of this place, even goddesses who think they are above this world, all of them would kneel and kiss my shoes just to be with him.”

Percy pulled me back from the woman who was almost drooling at this point. “Thank you for your offer. Jonathan will get back to you after thinking about it.”

He hurriedly made me open a portal back to my abode and pushed me through it. Once we were back at my house, or rather the replica of my house, Percy sighed in relief.

“Thank God that that is over and done with. So, what do you think of the house of sin? Do you want to go back there in your free time?”

“I… am not sure. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t tempted, but they are a bit too intense.”

“Yeah. They seemed a little too enthusiastic today.” He waved his hand and restored his smile before pointing at a painting of a forest. “That is our next stop, the primeval woods.”

We arrived at the forest and we were immediately met by a man in a tattered green cloak walking with a wooden staff. Percy introduced him as Cedric the druid. After meeting succubae, a vampire and a goddess, meeting a druid was relatively tame. The visit proceeded like a nature walk, Cedric led us through the trees, pointing out interesting things. As we toured the area, we saw everything from small fairies with butterfly and dragonfly wings to herds of half-man half-horse centaurs running freely through the fields to giants that towered over the trees making the ground quake as they moved, we even saw dragons soaring through the sky. Seeing the many fantasy creatures drove home the fact that I wasn’t in Kansas anymore but it somehow felt like a relief as well. I let go of all my doubts and immersed myself in this new reality.

After a long trek, Percy and I said goodbye to Cedric and returned to my house. The tour of the forest had cleared my head and I was ready to see the rest of the Sanctuary. Percy led me to a painting of tunnels next. The subterranean world was an area for underground creatures. We met hard working dwarves and gnomes, mining ores from the walls of the tunnel. They gladly welcomed us to their large underground cities and showed us their smithing furnaces that actually used magma as a heat source. They even gifted me an intricately made pocket watch with a moving sun and moon.

After that, Percy refused to take me to the next two areas. One of these areas was the one represented by the painting of castles built on mountains being overlooked by the moon. He called it the city of perpetual night and he warned me that I might encounter trouble because of Victoria. He said that they might not be able to hurt me, but that they could make things uncomfortable for me.

The next place he refused to take me was the realm of mist and illusion. The painting representing it looked like something an abstract artist would draw. Percy told me that it was a place for entities without physical form. He warned me that it was the most dangerous area because the spirits knew things. They cannot hurt you physically, but some truths should not be known by man and could drive people crazy.

After showing me the seven different areas, we were left with only two more. Percy rubbed his hands together with anticipation and stood next to a painting with nothing but rows and rows of bookshelves filled with books.

“This is the great library. It has every known work of literature that man has ever produced starting from scribbles on cave walls.”

I went through the usual procedure to get into the painting and we arrived in an endless hall filled with bookshelves. Percy pulled me to the side as I stared at the library in awe. By the time I came to myself, Percy had already pulled me in front of an old man sitting behind a desk. The old man was engrossed reading a book and didn’t even notice our arrival, even when Percy made coughing noises to attract his attention. Finally, Percy run out of patience and started shouting.

“Could you please put down that book and talk to us?! I have brought someone to meet you.”

The old man seemed to come back from a faraway place as he pulled his gaze away from the book.

“Percy? What do you want?”

Percy just shook his head in exasperation and turned towards me. “This is the librarian, Merlin.”

Merlin? The Merlin?

He saw my expression and tutted in annoyance. “I know what you are going to ask. Yes, I am Merlin. No, I am not the Merlin. In fact, there is no such thing as “the Merlin” but as things go, I would qualify as one of the more competent aspects of Merlin. I don’t have a long beard because I shaved it off, it kept getting in the way when I performed experiments. Same thing with the hat and robe, a nice shirt and a pair of trousers are easier to move in without tripping.”

Percy rolled his eyes and said, “Don’t mind his grouchiness. He might seem prickly but he is actually a pretty nice guy. He knows most of the books in here and he will answer any questions you have.”

Merlin looked at me with his electric blue eyes. He tilted his head quizzically and asked, “What are you?”

Percy fidgeted uncomfortably and said, “What do you mean? He is one of the forgotten.”

“Don’t try that on me kid. I was a powerful mage before your parents were born. If you want to fool me, you better have a better explanation than that,” he finished scolding Percy like a child and turned to me, “What do you say kid? Do you know what you are?”

“No. I didn’t even know about all this before a few hours ago.”

Merlin scratched his head then his eyes flashed like he thought of something and he started making gestures with his hands. A small blue light appeared before him and started tracing through the air. By the time it stopped, it had created three concentric circles filled with symbols which were rotating in alternating directions. Merlin looked at me through the circles and started muttering to himself.

“Interesting. Interesting. Three souls in one body? That is rare. The natures of the souls themselves are quite atypical. One is strong yet weak, the other is weak yet strong and the final one is a fragment that does not belong to the past or the present but doesn’t quite belong in the future either.”

I listened to him but I could not make heads or tails of what he was saying. “Can you tell me what I am?”

Merlin looked at me with a complex expression and flicked his finger, making the magic circle disappear. “I am sorry. I can’t tell you. I know this probably sounds annoying, but it is not the right time for you to know. If you knew now, it will only bring you trouble. Fate is cruel Jonathan, but it seems that it is crueler to you than most.”

My heart sunk as I heard his ominous words. “What does that mean?”

He just sighed and closed his eyes. “I have already said more than I should. I can’t answer any more questions about this subject without bringing disaster upon your head. Look, I can’t tell you about your origins but I can answer all your other questions. Right now you are confused and processing everything so come back tomorrow and we can talk.”

Saying that, he picked up his book and buried his nose in it. After that, Percy dragged me to some rare books but my heart wasn’t in it. I left the library with questions buzzing in my head. Finally, I buried them away and focused on the last painting.

Looking at it closely, it was a painting of Washington DC. ”Is that the exit?”

“No, that is the mirror world. It is the replica of the world. It is where most of the people in Sanctuary stay.”

We entered the mirror city. The streets were familiar but what I was seeing was completely alien. Creatures that only belong to stories and myths walked around on the sidewalks alongside normal people. People on strange mounts like giant spiders, carriages of different styles and other strange vehicles shared the street with normal cars.

Percy looked at his watch and started panicking a little. “You should look around and get to know the sights. I have some things to do so I need to go.” And just like that, he vanished and left me alone on the street.

I walked around, thinking about everything that happened. Deep in thought, my feet unconsciously led me to a familiar bar. If I had ever needed a drink, now was it. I entered the bar and it was filled with the same eclectic mixture of strange creatures and normal humans. Many eyes seemed to land on me the moment I passed the door. Their attention made me feel uncomfortable so I looked for a quiet corner to sit at. Thankfully, I found an empty bar stool at the far right of the bar. There was nobody in the area except for a woman in a large leather Jacket so I sat down next to her and ordered beer from the short stocky bartender that I recognized as a dwarf. I started to quietly drink, letting the cold beverage wash away my worries.

“Are you new here?”

I looked towards the woman in the black leather jacket but she was looking down at her drink, her face covered by her dark hair.

“You are new here, aren’t you?”

I also turned towards my drink and answered her with another question. “How did you know?”

“Look around you. Nobody else is willing to come close to me. That should tell you something.”

I looked around and there really was nobody sitting in the area. “Should I be scared?”

“No. You should just be worried about your reputation. If people see you interacting with me, you might have problems making friends later.”

I chuckled without humor and replied, “I think I’m going to be fine. I’m not exactly a very social person.”

She finally turned towards me and I could finally see how she looked. Half her face was still covered by her hair but judging by the part that was visible, she was beautiful. But beside her beauty, the most striking part about her face was that it was covered by small nicks and scratches, marring what would otherwise have been a perfect face. The scars along with her orange eyes which glowed like dying embers, gave her a savage appearance that had its own unique charm.

“I don’t believe that. You are pretty enough and I can see at least three different women checking you out right now.”

“I know the type of women I attract. No thank you.”

“What if I told you that I was one of the three women?”

I became speechless, unable to do anything but splutter helplessly. She just laughed at my reaction and said, “Relax tiger, I was kidding. My name is Sara and you don’t have to worry about me lusting after you. I’m into girls.”

“I’m Jonathan, you can call me John. I didn’t mean any offense by what I said earlier.”

She just shook her head ruefully and put her hair behind her ear, revealing the rest of her face. I was surprised to see that her left eye was covered by an eye-patch. It completed the savage look.

“No offense taken. By the way, you really are new right? Do you have the money to pay for that beer chugging down?”

“I have a few dollars.”

“They don’t accept human currency. Gold and silver only.”

“Shit! Why didn’t Percy tell me?”

“Don’t sweat it. Tonight, it is on me. You’ll get me next time.”

I looked towards her thankfully and raised my bottle up in salute, “Cheers to that.”

She raised her bottle to mine and they clinked together. “Cheers to that.”