**Chapter Sixteen: The Truth about Reality**

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

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I woke up with a massive headache and a bad case of cotton mouth making me feel like my mouth was full of dry sand. They were common symptoms of a hangover, something I hadn’t experienced since I was a degenerate teenager. I rubbed my eyes, struggling to clear the blurriness from my sight. My equally blurry mind kept flashing disjointed memories from the previous day, a mess of images and sounds that I couldn’t piece together. For one sweet moment, I thought that all of the things that had happened the previous day were just parts of a long and elaborate dream but that thought was shattered by an annoyingly sarcastic voice.

<Fat chance Johnny boy. You are already down the rabbit hole and you ain’t never getting out.>

Uhhh. Now I had a new type of headache compounding the pain that I was already feeling because of the hangover.

<I see that you are fine enough that you can whine about it, but last night wasn’t a complete loss for you. At least you got something out of it.>

The smug tone in his voice made me feel a rising sense of dread. I couldn’t remember anything that had happened last night except for drinking a couple of beers. I strained my mind to remember something but I drew a blank. There were fuzzy memories of something, like something important I should remember but it was buried under a bad case of alcohol induced amnesia.

<No need to trouble your pretty little head trying to figure out the adventures you had last night. Just turn around and you will figure it out.>

Turn around? What does that mean? I involuntarily glanced sideways and my eyes grew wide in shock as they fell upon a woman that was sleeping soundly next to me, her black hair messily draped over a pillow and her necked back partially covered by my sheets. It seems like one of my previous bad habits, drinking, had brought out my other bad habit, skirt chasing.

I was wondering who the unfortunate victim of my relapse was when I noticed two large scars running down the woman’s back on both sides of her spine. I compulsively reached out my hand and ran my fingers down the bumpy blemish upon the woman’s otherwise smooth and creamy back, wondering what kind of trauma this woman had gone through to receive wounds like these.

As my fingers subconsciously glided down the woman’s back following the path of her scars, she started to shiver and an annoyed drowsy voice said, “ Stop that, I’m trying to sleep.”

That voice! I knew that voice! But it couldn’t be…

“I said stop it! Why aren’t you listening to me?”

It seemed that my fingers had continued to meander downwards as I was mired in shock and confusion. The lady apparently didn’t appreciate getting her commands being ignored or being awakened without consent because her voice was starting to sound less and less drowsy and more and more annoyed.

“uhh, I didn’t mean to…”

“You are not going to let me sleep, are you?” The woman huffed and turned around to face me.

The beautiful face covered in scars, the eye patch covering her left eye, the strangely beautiful savage face, my suspicions were confirmed. It was the woman from the bar, Sara. Remembering our conversation from last night, I couldn’t help but blurt out, “I thought you said that you were not interested in guys.”

She looked at me with a sly smile and pretended to be confused, “Did I? Are you sure you aren’t misremembering?”

“Yes! I distinctly remember you saying that you were into girls.”

She still kept that cat that ate the canary expression on her face and put her hand on my face, making the sheets slide down dangerously low. “Maybe I was lying to trick you into bed or maybe your face is pretty enough that it didn’t matter. Your face doesn’t exactly exude masculinity, does it?”

I was shocked speechless. I didn’t know how to respond when she was insulting me while she sounded like she was giving me a compliment. But it didn’t matter because she didn’t seem to be interested in my answer anyways. She just laughed at my red face and then she seemed to catch something out of the corner of her eyes and started giggling.

“Looks like you aren’t tired from last night. Up for another round tiger?”

“That is a perfectly natural reaction that happens in the morning! It doesn’t mean…”

Before I could finish the rest of my flustered response, her mouth sealed mine in a rough, almost violent kiss. The bed sheets fell off as she got on top of me and what followed was something equally rough and violent.

About an hour later, I laid on the bed, stunned by what could only be described as a violent storm, a ferocious whirlwind that chewed me up and spit me out without any regard for my consent or opinion. I could feel bruises forming all over my body as I tried to figure out what the hell had happened.

<I will tell you what happened, you were used and abused.>

I looked at the woman who had nearly broken me picking up her clothes from the floor and started putting them on. I stared at her as she put on her jeans, long sleeved shirt and then put on a gun harness over the shirt, complete with two guns and ammunition before covering it up with a baggy leather jacket.

“Why are you carrying two guns and enough ammunition to fight a war?”

She finished arranging her clothes so that the guns weren’t visible and walked towards me before bending down and giving me a light peck on my right cheek.

“Didn’t I tell you? I’m a mercenary.”

Before I could react or even process what she had said, she turned around and walked out of the room. I hurriedly got off the bed and followed after her while struggling to get into my pants but by the time I got to the library with the nine paintings, she was already gone.

< I like her.>

“Shut up.”

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I went back to my room and finished dressing up while I pondered what I was going to do next. My number one priority was to stay safe. In this context, the best way I could enhance my survivability is to remedy my lack of information. I knew almost nothing about the rabbit hole that I had fallen into and it wasn’t a good idea to keep stumbling forward in the dark. I needed answers and I needed them now. Thankfully, I knew where to look.

The Great Library was no less overwhelming and awe inspiring than the first time I saw it. The unending rows of books just waiting to be read made me want to just dive in there and lose myself but I had a another purpose coming here so I had to shake off the almost irresistible itch to pick up one of those books. I reluctantly turned away from the mouth watering buffet of knowledge and walked towards the desk where Merlin was once again engrossed in a book. I stood infront of him for a while, hoping that he was going to notice me on his on but since there was no sign that he was going to do so, I was forced to knock on the desk to get his attention.

Merlin looked up from his book and blinked a few times before he seemed to realize that I was standing infront of him. “Ahh… Jonathan, the anomaly. Have you come to take me up on my offer to give you some answers?”

“If you don’t mind Mr. Merlin, I really am lost and in desperate need for some guidance.” The old geezer had an aura of of someone with vast knowledge. He looked like what I imagine a great sage from ancient times would look like. His actions were those of a forgetful and bumbling old man, but his eyes were too sharp, like they could cut through everything to get to the truth underneath so I unconsciously spoke to him in a very polite and respectful way.

“So, What would you like to know?”

What would I like to know? I had so many questions that it was difficult to know where to start but after some thought, I decided to start with the most basic one. “How is all of this possible? Where did all of these things come from? How does all of this work?”

“Your question is a little vague but I can guess what you are trying to say. It is very bewildering, isn’t it? Seeing things that were only supposed to exist in fantasy, myths, religions and legends? Things that should only be birthed in the imagination of the human mind? There are many theories that try to explain how this came about. For example, most of the entities that are part of the Judeo-Christean system insist that there is an almighty God, a great creator, that created man in his image so that man had a spark of the same power to create things as he was made in the same template as the great creator. They insist that every atypical creation other than themselves, mostly angels and saints, are merely the products of human beings subconsciously using this spark of creation that they inherited from God.”

That made some sense. In fact, it made a lot of sense. According to this theory, everything that I have seen could be explained, but I was congratulating myself on finding the answers to the great mystery, Merlin continued to talk and blew all that away.

“While this explanation might seem air tight and complete, there is one major flaw in it. This explanation could only be true under the assumption that the Judeo-Christian system itself is not influenced by the ‘spark of creation’ that human beings possess. From years of exhaustive research done on this subject, the existence of the spark has been almost been proven without doubt. Reality affects human thoughts and beliefs but human thoughts and beliefs also affect reality. We can assume that the spark of creation is real, but the rest of the explanation falls apart when you realize that human religion has given birth to countless religeons before Christianity, so why would this system be the absolute truth? What if a new system comes along and supplants it like countless others before it who also claimed to be absolute? My own thoughts are that there is no such thing as absolute truth. The past and the future is as much susceptible to change because of human beliefs as the present. We might think that the present itself is proof that the sequence of events that brought us to the present, that is unreasonable. For example, the theory of evolution and pure-creationism are plausible explanations for the existence of man kind. They are mutually exclusive but the outcome for both is the same. What if the majority of the people believing in evolution made it true? Would anybody notice that the past had changed if they believe that it was in that form in the first place? Expanding on this hypothesis, how can we be sure that there is some almighty creator if he was just created by our own beliefs? Can he truly be almighty if he is subject to our belief? Did he create us so that we could create him? Does our existence come about because of him or is his existence dependent on us? Did the chicken come first or the egg?”

The things he was saying would have him branded as a heretic by most religions but I could see a glimmer of something in them. He was saying some earth shattering things that made me think about reality and time in a new way and the more I thought about it, the more I started to see the merits of his way of thinking.

“But if what you say is true, does that mean that things people don’t believe in anymore can’t exist?”

He smiled like a teacher looking at his favorite student, “Ahh…there is the clincher. If people believe that there were people in the past that believed in something, then the creation of the belief by that spark is conserved. There is also the fact that once something is created, it has a certain amount of freedom that might enable it to separate itself from its original purpose, it is not completely bound by the rules it was created by and has its own free will. This contradictions in the spark theory have yet to be explained but it is still the best theory that we have to explain the existence of the extraordinary things around us.”

I stayed silent for some time, digesting the information. I didn’t completely accept it, but I filed it away under the thoughts in my mind labeled ‘plausible’ and moved on to my next question. “Why are people unaware of these things? Why is all this hidden?”

“That is the result of experience. In the past, we mingled freely with normal humans, especially the ancient gods. They thought that direct contact and showing off their powers was a good idea, but as human beings grew to be more capable of doing things without the help of the gods, the gods became less and less awe inspiring and became more obsolete. As people turned away from the gods in favor of progress, the gods lost their divinity and shattered to pieces when they became unable to support their own forms. The new divinities that replaced them decided that pulling away from human society and steeping themselves in mystery would preserve their safety so they unilaterally forced all of us away from society and made a strong veil that kept us hidden. In a way, this method worked. Without seeing the limits of the new divinities, people assumed they were limitlessly powerful. The problem was that this mystification grew so much that people began to believe that direct intervention by a god was impossible and the new divinities lost the power to meddle with the world.”

“What is this place? Is this where the gods hid everyone?”

“No. This is the Sanctuary of the Forgotten. We have already discussed how the ancient gods shattered and old legends became only a shadow of themselves, this is the place where most of them come to stay safe. This is a neutral ground that is welcomes almost everybody. There are various factions with various ideologies so it is inevitable that there would be conflict. For example, one of the most radical factions is a group that calls itself ‘the ascendants’. This group was founded by Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci or as he is commonly known Leonardo da Vinci under the assumption that human beings themselves can become gods. He created a special medallion that can act as a conduit for divinity and using this device these so called ascendants go around hunting for fragments of ancient gods. The problem is that most of these fragments have found hosts that they could reside in. The ascendants simply kill the hosts to extract the fragments earning them their more common name, the vultures. I believe that you have already had an encounter with the vultures.”

“The men in masks who attacked me and Phelps? But why would they attack me? Do I have a fragment of a god in me?”

“You have a fragment of something but I don’t think it is a god. It is something I have never seen before but it in itself is enough to mark you as a target to the vultures but that is not the main reason that you were attacked. You have a vast amount of power sealed inside you. I can’t tell you the source of this power, knowing that would be detrimental to you, but I can tell you that it may be enough to make the vulture that gets you as powerful as a god without any of the restrictions so we cannot allow this to happen.”

“Why can’t you tell me about the sealed power in me?”

“Because the result of that would destabilize you. It would be as stupid as repeatedly bludgeoning a hydrogen bomb with a sledge hammer.”

I realized that he wouldn’t budge on that subject so I moved on to the next one. “Who is Phelps? Is he an angel? How is he related to my mother?”

“Mr. Barnaby Phelps and your mother Dorothy Blackthorn are both a member of a faction calling themselves the Wardens. While this group does have a lot of angels as its members, Mr. Phelps himself is not one of them. To explain the source of his power, I have to explain how the wardens themselves were established. The wardens were created during world war I to stop the devil. The devil , who goes by many names such as Lucifer and Devourer, sought to make himself the ultimate source of all evil by inciting human beings to fight against each other and using the ensuing chaos to find and devour all of the other beings that are said to create evil. The wardens were a collection of influential people that were gathered together by angels to counter this threat. The Wardens controlling the allied powers eventually triumphed over the devil who held sway over the central powers. The devil disappeared to lick his wounds after his defeat but he reemerged and caused the second world war only to be defeated again, but the Wardens knew that it was a matter of time before he struck again. They had lost a considerable amount of their members and resources and unless they found a more permanent solution, he was just going to do the same thing again and again until their strengths would be sapped and he gains victory. Their solution was to trap him under a powerful forbidden enchantment fashioned from enochian and demonic runes. To make this seal, they sacrificed the lives of every person in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, using their souls to make the chains that bound him in place. The wardens then effectively took control of the worlds economy and politics. They manipulate everything from behind the scenes and fabricate conflict only to distract the general populace from noticing that anything is wrong. Mr. Phelps is a high ranking member of the wardens that heads up their media department which controls the information that is disseminated to the people. As a high ranking warden, he is bestowed with some of the power that is periodically extracted from Lucifer. As for your mother, she is also a member of the wardens. In fact, she is currently the only non-angel member of the council that leads them.”

“So they are the good guys?”

“That depends on who you ask. They started out with good intensions but their rigid pursuit of the common good has made them do some awful things in the name of their god. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is one of these things. They also cause conflicts that cause the death of countless people inorder to reap souls to maintain the seal on Lucifer. Recently, they have also deviated from their original purpose of keeping Lucifer imprisoned and started to care more about their control of the world. They have even started sacrificing evil entities to Lucifer to extract more power out of him. Things aren’t black and white. Are their actions justified? Are they evil? Are they good? You will have to decide for yourself.”

“Who are Percy and Melisa?”

“I am sure that you are familiar with their original names, Perseus and Medusa. Medusa was born as a normal human except for her captivating beauty. Her beauty was such that the sun and the moon decided to extract a small part of their essence and bestow them to her eyes in order to display their own splendor. The goddess of beauty and love Aphrodite blessed her with fair skin and beautiful hair. Hebe blessed her with youth and vitality. Most of the goddesses gave her their own gifts but Athena thought that Medusa was nothing more than a beautiful vase, attractive on the outside but empty on the inside. She made herself believe that Medusa was unimportant but it bothered her how all the female goddesses fawned over her and many of the gods had more than a passing interest in her. The innocent Medusa continued to blossom, unaware of the contempt that festered in Athena’s heart. One day, Poseidon came up with a plot to spread around a rumor that Medusa had seduced him. The pure Medusa had always refused the advances of all the gods so he thought to ruin her reputation to force her into his hands. Eventhough her reputation was smeared by the malitious rumor, Medusa refused to give into Posidons plot. Eventually, Poseidon got tired of waiting and took more direct action. When Arthemis noticed Poseidon going after Medusa, she warned her to escape. Medusa had no choice but to flee so she decided to take refuge at Athena’s temple since she was the goddess of justice and had a terrible relationship with Posidon. As she ascended the steps of the temple, believing herself to be safe, Posidon caught up to her and raped her right there on the steps while she screamed for Athena to help her. Athena might have been a goddess of wisdom and justice but she was still a woman. Even without her noticing, her heart had grown jealous of Medusa and when Medusa begged her for help, she ignored her. Worse yet, when she saw the broken and bleeding Medusa, instead of sympathy, she felt rage. She accused her of desecrating her temple and using that as a convenient excuse, she cursed her to be so ugly that no one will look at her again without turning into stone. Some years later, Perseus was sent to hunt her down and kill her. Until this point in the story, there were no major deviations from the myth except for the personality and role that Medusa played in her own tragedy, but things take an even more drastic turn from the myth at this point. Percy approached the cave where Medusa was staying, expecting a big battle with a monster, but as he got closer, he heard the sobbing of heart broken woman. He decided that it was just a trick and entered the cave to slay the beast, but Medusa just stayed in the corned, crying. He raised his gladius to plunge it into her unprotected back but he just couldn’t do it. Something was pushing him to end it. Inside, he knew that it was his purpose, his destiny to do it, but his hand couldn’t move. As he struggled with himself, He heard Medusa ask him what he was waiting for. Surprisingly, she had known he was there all along and could have turned him into stone at any time but she had instead presented him her unprotected back. Athena had cursed her to be a monster, but she was still an innocent little girl whose only sin was to be born too butiful. She implored Perseus to kill her. She begged him to end her suffering. She no longer wanted to live a life where she killed people without wanting to. Hearing her sadness and loneliness, Perseus couldn’tkill her. Instead, he stayed in the cave for hours, just talking to her. For five years, Perceus continued to go to the cave to talk to Medusa and eventually they fell in love. But unable to see eachother, their love only brought them as much greif as happiness. Medusa told Perseus to stop wasting his time on her. She told him to find a good wife and have a true family, but he refused to leave. As she grew desperate and planned to run away, a mysterious entity approached her. A woman who called herself Weaver came to her one night and showed her the strings of fate. She plucked the string that belonged to Medusa and gave it to her. Nobody knows what this action meant or who the Weaver was, but thanks to her, Medusa gained unimaginable power. She could have used this power to crush the gods or rule the world but she was still an innocent young girl at heart. She created a separate space for herself and Percy, a place away from the world where they could be together. She made this place so that those like her, those that face danger and prosecution, could find sanctuary.”

“Why did Carla kidnap me?”

“The Wardens kidnapped her father. They want to get their hands on her to feed it to Lucifer. She wants to exchange you for her Father’s.”

“What can I do to protect myself?”

“Staying here will keep you safe but ultimately, the only way to stay safe is to develop one’s own power. There is a fragment inside of you that has yet to wake up. If you like, I could help you kindle its power.”

“Power? What kind of power?”

“That depends on then fragment. If the fragment was something I was familiar witrh then I might have been able to tell you what your power would be but your fragment is very strange. You can choose whether I should wake it up. I will warn you that there is a chance that it might be harmful.”

I considered his warning but my need for some sort of protection outweighed any caution I was feeling. Plus, the fragment was probably darky and he was more annoying than malicious. “Do it.”

“Well, if you are sure.”

Merlin waved his arm and summoned a bright red vertical eye. He flicked his finger and it shot towards my forehead. The moment it touched me, I felt like my head split open and my body started to heat up. A few seconds of agony later, I felt something snap in me and the pain stopped.

“I should have probably warned you about the pain. Well boy, feel anything new?”

I was going to answer that nothing had happened when everything I was seeing started to disintegrate. Everything slowly broke up into green powder that just kept multiplying until it consumed anything in its way. I looked around in panic but everything had turned into green powder. The green powder got closer and closer until it was right infront of me and I saw that the powder was actually made up of millions upon millions of zeros and ones. As the zeros and ones continued to multiply, they should have simply turned into a solid green screen but I could see every single number even when they were supposed to cover eachother. Every single number seemed to stuff itself forcefully into my mind, refusing to be ignored. Finally, my mind couldn’t handle the overload and I passed out.