**Chapter Nineteen: Bait**

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

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

Sara and the mysterious old man she called the ferryman didn’t wait for me to regain my bearing before they almost frog marched me out of the alley.

“That amulet might hide the scent of your power but there are plenty of people who know what you look like. We can’t stay out in the open for too long. Luckily, your brother was smart enough to arrange accommodations where we can lie low until your ride arrives in an hour.”

The accommodations he was bragging about was a rundown old motel adjacent to alleyway we had just left. From the looks of it, the ugly building that was a god awful color of pastel and hade a bright red neon signs of women’s silhouettes, it was obviously a place where women of ill repute would ply their trades. The fact that the fat old woman who manned chek-in desk, if a simple table could be described as thus, just tossed a key to us after the ferryman threw some dollar bills at her was testament to the fact that the seedy old motel was a place where anyone could come and go as long as they paid cash. Even I was surprised by her lacsidasical attitude when she saw a man hidden in a cloak leading a man and a woman and asking for a single room as if she saw strange shit like this all the time.

Sara and I followed the ferry man to the third and top most floor of the motel where he stood before a door at the end of the corridor and motioned for us to enter.

“Stay in this room for a few minutes and your brother will meet you in an hour or so.”

I was just about to enter the room but something felt a little off. Something about the whole thing was not right. As I was hesitating at the door, I finally realized what was bothering me.

“Wait a minute, I thought my brother said that he would meet me back at the mansion? He never said anything about meting up before that.”

“It’s a little too late to realize that now.”

Two people in black cloaks and decorative masks appeared before us and I suddenly found myself bound by what looked like fragile pink ribbons but when I tried to struggle free from them, they were as tough as steel bands. Sara immediatelt took out a gun and started to raise it but before she could even point it at te two people in cloaks, a black club hit her from the back and she crumpled powerlessly on the ground. She looked back at the person who had hit her with shock and anger.

“Ferryman? What the fuck are you doing?”

He stooped down and took the gun from her powerless fingers and looked at it with curiousity.

“Interesting little contraptions aren’t they? Guns? Humans never cease to amaze me with their constant need to invent new and ingenious tools just so that they could kill eachother more efficiently.”

He walked away from us and stood behind the two people in cloaks and pulled the hood of his own cloak down, revealing an ugly twisted mask that had sharp teeth and horns, making it look like a demon.

“You are a vulture? That is not possible! No vulture can enter the Sanctuary! You might be the ferryman that has secret ways in and out of it but even you can’t fool Medusa’s eyes. Nothing could do that while in her domain.”

“True. Nobody else can escape her eyes if she was truly looking but what if she didn’t even think to look?” With that, he lifted his mask and revealed a youthful face with a naïve smile which was at complete odds with his wrinkly hands and raspy voice. It wasn’t the first time I saw that friendly smiling face. “Would she ever think to take a close look at her own flesh and blood? Let me reintroduce myself. I am the ferryman but my friends call me Mathew.”

Sara smiled a bitterly and then broke out into weak laughter while coughing intermittently. “So it is Melisa’s little brat. How ironic. She dedicated her whole life trying to protect the forgotten but she was unaware that she was rearing a greedy wolf as her son.”

“You have no right to judge me! You don’t understand how…”

“Oh, save me the sob story. My father and mother were powerful but I was born a weak ass human. Boo-freaking-hoo. You think that you can justify what you are doing? Does that help you sleep at night? Besides, the vultures are using you. Once they have Jonathan, what do you think they will do to you? Do you think these two will share the cake with you?”

“You are almost right. The vultures do think that they are using me but it is me that is using them. They are just idiots that are dancing on the palm of my hand. I mean, what kind of idiots allow a person they don’t fully trust to stand behind them?”

Two loud bangs suddenly rang out and the two people in cloaks had their heads explode into a red gory mess before they slumped down to the ground, dead. Mathew stood there looking at the smoking gun in his hand with a curious look on his face.

“Truly remarkable. All of these idiots look down on humans as powerless sheep but not a lot of them can survive a gunshot to the head, something that the so called weak humans created purely using their ingenuity.”

Sara coughed weakly as she struggled to get up and fell back down. Mathew looked away from the gun and looked towards us with a start as if he had forgotten about us as he was lost in thought.

“No need to hurry. You two still haven’t served your purposes. There is more than ample time to deal with you after we are done.”

He walked towards us with his small black club and hit Sara on the back of her head, knocking her out. He then walked towards me, maintaining that same friendly smile.

“I am sorry John. Can I call you John? Anyways, I apologize for all this John. You seem to be a nice guy but what a shame that you were born what you are. It is nothing personal, I hope you don’t hold this against me.”

The last thought running through my head before he knocked me out was that I was going to be captured by a complete psychopath.

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As of late, my life seemed to have developed a certain pattern and unfortunately, that patter was me waking up after passing out for one reason or another. As for my awakening, I had accrued a lot of experiences lately and I have had plenty of odd encounters lately but I must admit that even I was taken aback when I woke up and found myself staring into a pair of hypnotic blue eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“So this is the mysterious Blackthorn that was rumored to be completely useless? I can’t believe that we were all fooled by that old vixen but then again, she was always a slippery snake that specialized in making people chase their own tails.”

The woman that stood only inches before me wasn’t a stranger, rather, her visage was one that could be recognized by millions around the world. I wanted to rub my eyes so that I could make sure that what I was seeing was real but I found that I couldn’t raise my hands since they had been restrained. I looked back and saw that my hands had been tied up to a metal pipe using the same fragile looking ribbon that had tried me up like a birthday gift earlier. I tried to break free from the ribbons but my struggles were in vain, the ribbons may have looked flimsy but they remained unyielding as metal fiber cables.

“Don’t waste your time struggling, you won’t be able to escape. You and your little friends have already been captured and are now at my mercy. Just stay there obediently and await your fate.”

The blonde bombshell before me smiled pleasantly and even though I knew she was taunting me maliciously, I still found myself dazed as I looked at that iconic smile, the same smile that had conquered the hearts of hundreds if not thousands of men.

“They are at my mercy, not yours. Do not forget our deal. You are not allowed to touch a single hair on his body before you do what we agreed upon. Besides, it is not even certain that I would need your help and in that case, you might not even get to have him at all.”

The woman before me pouted her bee-stung red lips and turned towards the source of the cold voice that had rebuked her, her white dress fluttering up as she twirled gracefully.

“Do you have to be so stingy? You stand there and tell me that you might not need me to take action but you must know you need me deep in your heart or you wouldn’t have called me here in the first place. Face it Mathew, she will never love you without my help. Even when you have gone through all this trouble to set all this up for her, she will never look at you in the same way that you look at her.”

Mathew stood in a dark corner of what was apparently a dark and dank cement basement with his face partially covered in shadows. He didn’t even look at the beautiful woman or answer her but the way his mouth twisted and his face contorted like he had tasted something bitter made it obvious that she had hit a sore spot.

“Wait a minute, this is all because of your unrequited love for some girl? Are you fucking kidding me?”

I turned towards that angry voice and I noticed that not far from where I was tied up, Sara was also tied up to a pipe in a similar fashion.

Mathew snorted and replied, “And what would you know about love? How could you understand what it means to care about someone other than yourself? Not everybody can be a cold selfish bitch like you.”

“Now now, the little assassin over there might seem like a frigid unfeeling woman with no emotions but her heart in not quite the shriveled up husk that she would have you believe. Even now I can feel that she looks upon Jonathan with some favor. She is trying to smother that little seed that has sprung up in her heart for some reason but she is not doing a very good job. What do you think lover boy?”

As she leaned towards me and whispered the question directly into my ear, I gulped involuntarily and a raspy voice that I could barely recognize as my own was produced from my throat which felt as dry as a desert, not because I was feeling thirsty but because of the proximity of the woman before me.

“Marilyn? Marilyn Monroe?”

That’s right, the woman in front of me looked exactly like the pictures I had seen of the actress who had long since died. I was not like one of those people who were obsessed with famous people, I had very little use for TV let alone movies. But even a person as ignorant about such things as me knew who Marilyn Monroe.

“Oh, you recognize me? I’m flattered.”

“But how?”

You would think that I would stop getting surprised by things like this at this point, but I still found myself staring dumbly at her, unable to come to terms with what I was seeing.

As for the apparently still living legend infront of me, she smiled in satisfaction as she observed my reaction. “I know what you are thinking and yes I am Marilyn, the one and only Marilyn Monroe. I have been a lot of people throughout the years but this persona is my all time favorite. There was just something about her that captured the imagination of the people. She was a living goddess and even now, many years after she had died, she still remains in people minds, indelible from human culture.”

Sara snorted rudely, interrupting whatever she was going to say next and interjected, “Stop pretending to make it sound like you are doing something lofty. You are just shamelessly doing everything you can to get every scrap of attention from the humans that you could possibly get. You are no longer the great goddess of love Aphrodite, you have become nothing more than an over glorified succubus who subsists on the lust she invokes in men.”

Marilyn turned towards Sara but instead of getting angry, her smile only grew wider. “Shameless? Yes, I am shameless. I admit that my methods born from desperresion where less than ideal. At first, I really did just use lust to draw some meager scraps of power, but times have changed. Famous actresses are not just merely eye candy anymore. Through the years, they have gone from being idolized to being revered and now they are worshipped like the gods of old. You say I have lost my powers and that I have been reduced to nothing more than a succubus, let me prove to you how wrong you are.”

As she spoke, she had walked slowly from in front of me and arrived at Sara’s side. After she arrived next to Sara, she bent down slightly and started murmuring quiet words that I couldn’t quite hear into her ears. At first, Sara did not react. Her expression remained cold and expressionless except for the small smile on her face which spoke volumes about how much disdain she felt at that moment but after a few minutes, that small smile vanished and her nonchalant behavior was replaced by complete panic as she started to struggle violently and desperately tried to pull away from the woman whispering in her ear as if every word entering her ears were scalding her. Her struggles continued to get more and more intense but the ribbon binding her wrists didn’t even budge and the only thing she had to show for her effort was a ghastly wound caused by the ribbon savagely cutting into her hands. Finally, her struggles got weaker and weaker until she became unnaturally still like a lifeless statue. For a moment, I thought that she might have died because I couldn’t even see her breathing. The whole room became quiet as everyone looked at her. As the tension built up, I felt myself sigh in relief as she finally started breathing again. Her chest rose and fell, her breathing coming out in loud pants. Her face turned bright red and she started sweating as if she had run a marathon, but from all of the strange reactions Sara was having the one that stood out the most was the almost innocuous stream of tears that fell from the eye that wasn’t covered by her eye patch.

I had barely known Sara for a day but I was sure that she rarely cried if she ever cried at all. She always had the same devil may care attitude weather she was just sitting at the bar or getting threatened by an enemy who had complete advantage over her. Her one visible eye hid a steely edge, sharp and unbending, but now, the same woman who looked like she could go through hell with a smile on her face had completely broken down. The steel in her eye was replaced by the burning flames of rage and hatred even as tears rolled down her cheek.

“You are a real bitch, you know that right Aphrodite?”

Marilyn Monroe, who I had figured out by now to be the Greek goddess of love, just smiled at Sara like the cat who ate the canary. “Sara, you are hurting my feelings! This is a gift! Why are you acting like I did something bad to you?”

Sara grit her teeth and glared at Aphrodite who kept looking back at her with that same self satisfied expression on her face.

“Fine, you have proven your point. I was wrong when I said you were an over glorified succubus. You have demonstrated that you have regained your powers, there is no longer any reason to continue with this farce. Undo what you have done. Take it back.”

Aphrodite opened her mouth to speak but she stopped midway as she was interrupted by the sound of loud footsteps echoing around the concrete basement, progressively getting louder as the person responsible grew closer.

“I’m sorry Sara but you are going to have to wait. The guest of honor has arrived and since the star of the show is finally here, the main show can start.”

A silhouette appeared from the only doorway leading into the basement. Before I could clearly see who it was, the person was blocked from my view by Mathew who had suddenly rushed over from the corned he was standing at. The heavy brooding atmosphere that had wreathed him disappeared as he seemed to skip towards the mystery person. He was so enthusiastic that I could almost see an imaginary tail wagging behind him.

“You’re finally here! I was worried that you might not have gotten my message when you didn’t show up on time. Things aren’t as calm as they look, there are many dangers lurking just under the surface. It is good that you are here where I can keep you safe.”

This was Mathew? The same guy who kidnapped us? The same guy capable of ruthlessly killing people with a smile on his face? Where the hell did the evil villain from before go? Mathew had somehow turned into a silly teenager desperately trying to act cool in front of his crush while barely stopping himself from stuttering as he spoke haltingly.

“I was held up because your mom was keeping an eye on me. She had me under lock and key so even with the steps you took to help me escape, I still had to take precautions not to get caught. Besides, I tried to look around for the man that your mom took from me in case I could get an opportunity to get him back but he seemed to have hidden away somewhere. In the end, I had to give up on finding him and came straight here after I got your message. What happened Mathew? Why did you suddenly tell me to come to some condemned building in a trashy neighborhood?”

The person talking walked past Mathew and I finally got a look at who it was. I had already guessed her identity from what she had said so I wasn’t surprised when I saw that it was the girl who had kidnapped me from the wrecked car, I think they said her name was Carla. Mathew stood beside her with an eager smile and pointed at me.

“You didn’t have to worry, I already got him for you. We can exchange him for your father and then escape before anybody figures out what happened. I have already arranged a quiet sub-realm where we can live together in safety.”

I cringed when I saw the stiff smile on the girls face. She had started looking pleased when she saw me tied up and presented to her like a gift but her expression turned wooden when she heard Mathew’s words and the obvious meaning behind them. Mathew also noticed her countenance and realized that things weren’t going the way he wanted.

“What’s wrong? Is something wrong? Just tell me and I can fix it.”

What answered Mathew’s desperate pleas was loud mocking laughter. Sara who had been despondent before was now laughing so hard that tears of laughter were rolling were tears of sorrow had been before. She was laughing so hard that the only thing keeping her up was the ribbon that had her tied up to a pipe a little higher than her waist, not allowing her to fall to the ground.

“This was for her? You did all this to win her affections? You thought that by doing this she would willingly fall into your arms and you two could live happily ever after?”

Mathew’s lovesick eyes turned vicious as he looked at Sara. “Shut up! This is none of your business!”

“Are you sure it isn’t?” Sara looked at Carla with a strange expression and Carla looked away guiltily. “Poor Mathew, you probably did everything you could to make her like you but you didn’t even realize that it was hopeless.”

Mathew looked back and forth between the two in confusion. “What does that mean? Carla, what does she mean?”

I already had a guess as to where this was going but it seemed like Mathew was having trouble piecing it together. Unfortunately for him, Sara was only too happy to relieve him of his blissful ignorance and drive this particular knife into his heart.

“She is gay. I mean she is really gay. Not even bi, just gay. She can’t even stomach the idea of being with a man. You have been barking up the wrong tree buddy.”

“No. That’s impossible. How could you possibly know…”

“Do you really need to ask that?”

“You and her?”

Mathew’s eyes became unfocused and for a minute, he looked like a lost child, unable to figure out what to do next. He looked around, his head turned from side to side, his eyes rolling around in bewilderment but a hand gently fell on his shoulder, waking him up from the bewildered state he was in. Aphrodite in the guise of Marilyn had arrived next to him at some point and turned him to face her.

“There is no need to panic. The reason you invited me here in the first place was in case this kind of situation happened.”

Carla looked suspiciously at Aphrodite, noticing her for the first time. “What is she doing here Matt? Did you bring her? Why is she here”

Carla continued to question Mathew but he wasn’t paying attention to her. He was just staring at the floor and muttering almost inaudibly. “She must be sick. That’s right, she must be sick. Girls should like guys, not other girls. It’s unnatural. I’ll just fix her and everything will be fine. We can be together after I fix her.”

Hearing his deranged ramblings, Carla backed away from him in fear. Mathew looked up at the retreating girl, his face returning to the same cold expression he had when he was dealing with us earlier but his false composure couldn’t completely hide the insanity underneath.

“I’m sorry but this is for your own good.”

With those kind sounding words, he lifted his hands causing streamers of ribbons to manifest and attack Carla but Carla was far enough away from him that she had the time to react. She bent at a strange angle, somehow avoiding most of the ribbons and swiped her fingers which were now adorned with vicious looking claws across the remaining ones, ripping the ribbons apart. The torn ribbons hadn’t even fluttered down to the ground before more ribbons appeared around Mathew and lunged at her, forcing her to retreat backwards while dodging them at a speed that made her turn into nothing but a blur .

<There, I’m done. Took a while but I have made a functional graphical interface that could filter the mass data that nearly melted your brain. So, what did I miss while I was busy?>

Darky chose a hell of a time to come back.

<What the hell man? I was gone for a few hours! How could you get yourself into such deep shit?”

I spoke to him under my breath, “I’m sure you saw my memories, it’s not like I had a choice in the matter.”

<Yes you did! You could have stayed safe in the Sanctuary! You know that everyone and their uncles are looking for you. You are like a juicy piece of steak in front of a pack of starving wolves. You should not trust anyone and definetly not mysterious people that you know nothing about! You dropped your guard because you felt safe with Sara backing you up? What do you know about her that makes you think that she could protect you? For that matter, what makes you think that she wont turn around and sell you to the highest bidder? And regarding your precious brother, didn’t you notice anything suspicious about the way he was acting? You have never been close to each other, he has had his emotions wrung out of him by your mother. Anything he says and does are carefully calculated, why would he suddenly act so concerned about you? From the way he was acting, you would think that the only thing he was concerned about was your safety but knowing him, can you honestly say that he would put anybody’s life over his own personal interest?>

I wanted to argue with him. I wanted to defend the decisions I had made but I couldn’t. The situation I was in was enough proof that I had made very poor decisions, so instead of trying to defend the indefensible, I just changed the subject. “You can chide me later, right now we have more pressing issues to deal with. Instead of criticizing my past actions, do you have any suggestions that could help me now?”

Darky snorted and cursed me as an idiot before answering, <There is only one option really. We can only put our hopes on the prototype of the system I designed to handle your power and hope it holds up without any glitches.>

Carla was slowly being cornered by the ribbons and I knew that after she is caught, my chances of escaping would be drastically reduced. Looking at hoe things were deteriorating rapidly, I decided to act immediately. I tried to remember how I had felt the last time when Merlin forced me to use my power. To my delight, I found that activating my power wasn’t that hard. The moment I made a decision to unleash it, I could feel an infinite dark space somewhere on my being, not my physical beingt but some other part of me that I didn’t have time to analyze at that point and in this unfathomably large space, there was a little star being dwarfed by the pervading darkness but the moment my thoughts reached the small star, it reacted by exploding with dazzling radiance. I felt something warm travel from the base of my spine straight to my brain, gushing up uncontrollably like a geyser. When it reached my brain, everything I was seeing started breaking up into ones and zeros and I felt myself getting overwhelmed but a bright green grid covered the ones and zeros. Most of the ones and zeros melted away like snow in the hot sun while the remaining reassembled making the world around me a strange world where only outlines existed. I looked around but everything had turned into a very poor pencil sketch of itself and when things moved, I couldn’t actually see the movements but just broken up images where the thing was somewhere at some point and instantly moves to another place in the next second without any transition.

<Well, what did you expect? Did you thnk I could make a program that assembles reality itself and it would be perfect?>

“I don’t care about the picture quality. I just want to know how I can use this.”

<Your power is based on the idea that anyone could affect the world around them. Your ability allows you to concentrate all of that capability at one point in time and place. The problem is after using that power, you can’t affect the world in any way for some time. In addition, the things you can do are limited to very small things. You can do almost anything as long as it doesn’t drain all of your energy but any changes to reality is very consumption intensive.>

“In conclusion, I can do something very little but then I would be yunable to do anything for some amount of time.”

<Correct.>

“Can I remove the ribbon restraining my wrist?’

<Barely but that would use up all your energy.>

“Good.” After thinking that, I turned to the outline of Sara and hoping that everybody was too engrossed in the battle to notice me, I tried to get her attention. “Psst, Sara.”

The image of her face that faced forward changed in that strange stop-motion way and faced me. “What?”

“If you can get free, can you handle those three.”

“No, but I wouldn’t have to. Carla wouldn’t fight against me, at least she would wait until the two of them are defeated.”

I didn’t ask anymore questions, I just focused on the sketch of the ribbon on her wrist until it broke down to the now familiar ones and zeros. I concentrated on a very narrow strip of the ribbon and started turning all the ones on that column into zeros. Each time I changed, I felt like I was pushing a large boulder up a steep hill. By the time I was done, the gush of warmth that had flooded my brain was completely used up and the green grid retracted as my vision returned to normal but that didn’t matter because I had succeeded and the ribbon around Sara’s wrist disintegrated.

Sara looked at her free hands in surprise but she didn’t dwell on it for long. She materialized a small dagger made out of flickering red fire the color of sunset and threw it at Mathew’s back. He somehow detected the approaching missile and used one of his ribbons to block it but that created an opportunity for Carla to slip away from the encirclment or writhing ribbons.

Seeing the sudden turn of events, Aphrodite who had been watching relaxedly bolted towards the door without a second thought but before she could escape, Sara materialized another flame dagger and threw it at her feet, nailing it to the ground.

“I’ll deal with you later Aphrodite. For now, be a good little girl and just stay there.”

She then grabbed a flame dagger in both hands and launched herself at Mathew. She seemed to have some sort of understanding with Carla because she also launched her attack at the exact same time. The two coordinated seamlessly, dancing around the ribbons without ever obstructing each other. Carla continued to rip the ribbons apart with her claws while Sara used her flame daggers to burn them. If I hadn’t known that it was a serious fight, the amazing display of the women moving gracefully among the ribbons was some kind of performance. Initially, Mathew had been able to use his numerous ribbons to dominate Carla but that was turned upon its head as Sara was added to the equation and the two systematically destroyed the ribbons faster than he could produce them. He started taking out different golden medallions and launched a variety of attacks like sharp icicles, jagged pieces of metal, bolts of lightning but the two them effortlessly avoided the many projectiles but Carla was caught unaware by one of the ribbons as she dodged and was sent hurtling through the air and landed next to Aphrodite who was still nailed to the ground with her foot blackening as it was slowly getting burned by the flame dagger. Aphrodite knelt down next to the fallen Carla and started whispering into her ears. Aphrodite carefully observed Carla’s reaction and when she saw her eyes glaze over, her eyes flashed with triumph but unfortunately for her, she was celebrating too early. Carla’s eyes flashed yellow-green and turned into slits. She jumped up from where she was lying on the floor, grabbing Aphrodite by her throat and forcibly lifting her up into the air causing half her foot to tear off since it was still nailed to the floor.

Sara looked back at this development and screamed, “No! Don’t!” But it was too late. Carla tore Aphrodite’s throat out in a gruesome explosion of blood and gore. Seeing this happen, Sara became enraged for some reason and her fighting style became more aggressive and less elegant. She violently tore through the many ribbons and appeared before Mathew. With a single smooth motion, one of her daggers was thrust through the soft area just behind his chin and straight up into his brain, killing him instantly. Mathew still had a fearful and unbelieving expression on his face when he crumpled down to the ground.