Seeds of Doubt

Book 1: Strange Nirvana

**PROLOGUE: The Plague Called Man**

Novelists have always been fascinated with the notion of mankind actually being a form of parasitic disease which has infected planet earth, and as a result, it is a scenario that frequently appears in various books and movies. In fact, it is such a common theme in so many of these stories that it borders on being an overused cliché. In these novels, it is usually some villain or other who proclaims that human beings were nothing more than dirty cockroaches infesting an otherwise balanced ecosystem, their mere presence being tantamount to a desecration of the natural order. Said villain would then cackle maniacally and declare that the only way to restore the natural balance would be to exterminate all of mankind. This stereotypical bad-guy would follow up his insane rant with an overly elaborate plan to kill everyone after which his evil schemes would inevitably be foiled by the heroic protagonist of the story.

Unfortunately, reality is often times stranger and much crueler than fiction could ever be. The ‘deranged’ ramblings of the many fictitious villains in the books and movies turned out to have more truth in them than we would have liked to believe.

The year was 2030. The world was ushering in a new decade in the same old fashion: with ever escalating war between nations based on everything from ideological and religious differences to economic tensions fueled by greed. To make matters worse, small skirmishes started breaking out over contested territory in the South China Sea. Neither China nor America and her allies were willing to back down. As more and more American armadas steamed towards China, people were justifiably terrified that 2030 would be the year that the first thermo-nuclear war would break out. The looming disaster continued to escalate until it became akin to a Sword of Damocles whose sharp edge was hanging precariously over the fragile neck of humanity itself, ready to plunge downward and obliterate everything at the first sign of action from any of the parties involved in this perilous nuclear standoff. Everyone had their eyes set on what they believed might be the beginning of a nuclear apocalypse, but they never expected that they were looking in the wrong direction. The sword they anticipated never came, but the one they were ignoring and had always ignored, a sword made entirely from man’s own hubris, mercilessly stabbed them from the back.

Man, in the ultimate act of arrogance and ignorance, had always plundered everything around him to his heart’s content with nary a thought to the consequences. The few people who were worried enough about the planet’s future to utter words like ‘the environment’ and ‘conservation’ were labeled worthless, tree-hugging hippies and treated with scorn and ridicule. In the pursuit of prosperity and wealth, man’s conscience was abandoned to atrophy, so much so that it degenerated to a point where it became something vestigial, something that still existed but whose function was long forgotten. Even when he saw the world dying around him, mankind chose to close his eyes to its suffering. He poisoned the air and the water. He destroyed the forests and the seas. Even the mountains couldn’t escape devastation as they were mercilessly mined in search of precious materials to further man’s idea of progress. Everything was sacrificed on an altar of greed. Man happily obliterated everything which had actual value in exchange for worthless pieces of paper that he had come to worship as his god: money. He gleefully rolled around in it like a pig cavorts in its own filth. Unable to handle the enormous strain that man put on it, the earth edged ever closer to the brink of destruction and only a little push was all that was needed to send it tumbling over into oblivion.

That final push came in the form of the ozone layer, or rather the sudden lack thereof. Scientists had always asserted that the ozone layer would keep getting thinner and thinner with the passage of time and that there was no immediate need for concern. The scientists that everyone thought to be very clever all seemed to agree on this one point, so everybody took their words at face-value and believed them. The problem was that scientists, however smart they may be, were not infallible. Instead of gradually depleting like it was predicted, the ozone layer popped like a soap bubble, leaving the earth devoid of a critical part of the system that allowed it to sustain life. With nothing to stand in their way, the harmful cosmic radiations from the sun and elsewhere from space bombarded the now defenseless earth. In the year 2030, a year that would forever be known as the year of the great cataclysm, more than two thirds of the people in Europe, Australia, South Africa, North America and certain parts of Asia were instantly wiped out by solar storms. More died from the adverse effects caused by the radiation left behind by these storms. As if that wasn’t bad enough, the particles from the solar storms supercharged the earth’s ionosphere causing lightning storms that were only marginally less destructive than their progenitors.

The once bountiful earth that provided humanity with a home and sustenance turned into a veritable hell. The majority of all plants and animals perished under the furious onslaught of the sun’s golden flames. Multicolored lightning raining down from the sky scorched the ground so badly that it turned into molten slag. On the rare nights that the lightning storms abated, the sky would be covered by eerie colorful lights. The Aurora Borealis and Aurora Australis which were once localized events that only happened near the North and South Pole became a global phenomenon thanks to the supercharged ionosphere. The hauntingly beautiful surreal lights in the sky painted a stark contrast as they hung over the infernal burning landscape below. It was as if the heavens themselves were gloating at the hell beneath, finding joy in man’s suffering.

But even in these dire times, man still managed to show his true colors. The American military dug deep into their substantial arsenal and produced something out of a science fiction writer’s nightmare. They took this abominable creation of death and dropped it in the middle of Africa. It was the first time that the world beheld the horrifying effects of the Neural Impulse Disruption Bomb or the NIDB for short. This insidious weapon had very little visible physical effects unlike its nuclear counterpart. Instead of a large explosion, this bomb caused a specialized electromagnetic wave that specifically targeted the human nervous system. On January 28, 2031, this bomb was detonated smack dab in the middle of central Africa and most of the countries in the continent fell victim to the NIDB. The little children playing their innocent games, men and women going about their daily lives, unsuspecting people who were unaware that their very existence had become an inconvenience to those who wielded powers beyond their ken, the shadow of doom suddenly fell upon these unfortunate souls. There was no bright flash of light or loud noise when the NIDB detonated. There was no fanfare that announced the beginning of the largest mass atrocity in human history. Without a single warning, nearly a billion people suddenly started to convulse violently as their neurons started to fire off uncontrollably. Their nervous systems short-circuited causing catastrophic failures all around their bodies including to vital organs like their hearts and brains. In a single stroke, more than half a billion people simultaneously lost their lives and the rest were left in comas from which they would never awaken.

And what was the reason behind such a cruel action? What could motivate the most powerful nation on earth to act so savagely against some of the weakest? Naturally, it was because of greed. It was because most of North America had been destroyed by the storms from the Great Cataclysm and the Americans had decided that the relatively safe area created by a stubborn wisp of ozone hovering over Africa was rightfully theirs. “Manifest destiny” they called it, and since the locals where getting in the way of their “destiny”, they had to be removed.

In this manner, morality was once again discarded in the face of overwhelming greed. Although people were quite fond of talking about man’s superiority over animals in terms of having standards and decency, when it came down to it, it was shown exactly how vicious mankind could be. Man was indeed different from other animals for he is much too malicious in comparison. Ironically, man is too inhuman to be categorized as an animal.

Which brings us back to the thoughts raised by the fictitious villains; the actions of human beings might disqualify them from the category of animals, but their behavior is typical of parasites. Broadly speaking, the modus operandi of the deadliest disease causing germs in the world follow two basic paths: the way of the virus and the way of the bacteria. The way of the virus involves the germ first infecting a cell before hijacking all of its resources in order to make more of itself, inevitably causing the host cell to die. On the other hand, germs that emulate the way of the bacteria reproduce uncontrollably while producing toxins that cause irreparable harm for any living thing around, even killing the germ itself in extreme situations. Human beings don’t follow either of these two paths. Instead, they have somehow managed to create a hybrid path which is uniquely their own. They strip the resources of their environment until the ecosystem around them collapses which makes them similar to a virus while simultaneously reproducing so rapidly while they poison everything around them not unlike bacteria.

From an objective point of view, it could be argued that man was a disease and that the planet earth was the unfortunate victim to this sickness. By the mid-twenty first century, man had assimilated and mastered all of the most harmful traits of the most dangerous pathogens; all except one. Now that its host was dying, man started working on developing the final trait of any dangerous disease: contagion.

Once it became clear that the earth had become a dead planet unsuitable for habitation, man began developing space travel at a frightening rate.

There were new planets to find, new resources to plunder, new worlds to consume.

There were new planets to infect.

**Chapter One: The Seeds Are Born**

**Year: 2054**

**Location: New Abyssinia, East Africa**

**POV: Jonathan Joseph “JJ” Gates**

*I hurt myself today*

*To see if I still feel*

*I focus on the pain*

*The only thing that's real …*

Music has always been something of a sanctuary for me, almost like a physical place where I could escape to when the rigors of daily life became too strenuous for me to handle. Since this particular day promised to be more strenuous than most, I found myself once again taking refuge in my safe haven set amidst the enchanting melodies and captivating lyrics. I stood alone in the dimly lit room, listening to the melancholic voice of Johnny Cash crooning about the pain that had haunted him throughout his entire life, a pain that I was all too familiar with. As I slowly lost myself in the intense emotion of the song, I realized why I loved to listen to music so much. It was because music allowed me to feel things more deeply, more vividly, and more profoundly while simultaneously separating me from the mundane world. Music had the unique ability to change the way I thought and felt in such a way that I was drawn into a different realm, a realm created by the musician.

This particular realm was the creation of legendary singer and song writer Johnny Cash. It was during his twilight years that he recorded this song, a song originally written by Trent Reznor and performed by his group, a rock band that went by the name of 'Nine Inch Nails'. Johnny Cash’s version of the song ‘Hurt’ was released on the same year that he passed away. It was almost as if he took everything that he had been through along with everything that he had remaining inside of him and channeled all of it into this one final masterpiece. Every time I listened to his old, tired, yet at the same time uniquely compelling voice, I can feel the deep sadness that permeated his soul; it resonated profoundly with the sadness within my own soul. It felt like he was reaching out through the mist of time to connect with me.

*…The needle tears a hole*

*The old familiar sting*

*Try to kill it all away*

*But I remember everything…*

I picked up a small silver case off of the coffee table and opened it to reveal the contents inside: a syringe and four small innocuous looking vials filled with a slightly viscous, clear liquid. In this day and age, it was rare to find such implements. Things like syringes were mostly found in museums, displayed as antiques that showcased how “barbaric” and “uncivilized” medicine used to be but a few years ago. Nowadays, most drugs work simply by applying them to the skin, but unfortunately for me, the run-of-the-mill topical medication that is typically used to treat most diseases just didn’t have enough strength to work on my illness.

I was born with a very rare congenital disease called Schwartz-Ritchie Disorder. Due to a random mutation to my brain-derived neurotrophic factor(BDNF) gene, my frontal lobe is more active than a normal human’s. This may sound harmless, maybe even beneficial, but it is actually a cruel and unforgiving form of torment. People that are afflicted with this disease cannot get any rest from their own unsettled thoughts. Their minds are always working furiously, the cogs in their heads spinning ceaselessly day and night. Even as they sleep, their rampaging thoughts refuse to let them have any peace and as a result, they are unable to properly enter the all-important REM sleep cycle. Most people who have Schwartz-Ritchie disorder lose their sanity or commit suicide because of insomnia or other problems stemming from mental fatigue. It was practically a miracle that I had managed to desperately claw my way till the age of thirty under such exquisite torment but I refused to let the disease win, I refused to take the easy way out and kill myself. As for the state of my sanity… the jury was still out on that one.

After confirming that everything in the case was in order, I tied a rubber band securely around my arm and, with practiced ease, inserted the syringe into one of the many veins that were clearly visible through my pale, almost translucent skin. The automatic depressor made a familiar hissing noise as it injected the syringe's payload into me. I felt a slightly tingly numbing sensation spread from my arm to the rest of my body until it finally reached my brain, but that was where the effects of the drug seemed to vanish. To be honest, I had been expecting this. Over the past fifteen years, I had been gradually building up resistance to various drugs. Consequently, I had to slowly increase the strength of the sedatives I was taking in a bid to medicate myself. Unfortunately, I had reached a point where even the strongest sedative available, the poetically named "Lethe's tears", no longer had any effect on me.

*…..What have I become*

*My sweetest friend*

*Everyone I know goes away*

*In the end…..*

Was it a coincidence? Was it just happenstance that the day I finished working on the Chronos project was the same day that I became almost completely immune to the effects of the last drug on earth that could help me? Without the drugs to ease the symptoms of my illness, I would be at the mercy of my disease, doomed to a slow, inexorable descent into madness. To make matters worse, because I was using illegal narcotics to 'medicate' myself, my physical condition had been deteriorating at an alarming rate. Was it a coincidence that my final avenue for retreat vanished on this particular day, or was there something else directing everything behind the scenes? Maybe something grand and unfathomable was at work?

Purpose. Meaning. Fate. Destiny.

Words that have so much importance attached to them. People spend their entire lives trying to fathom these unfathomable concepts in an attempt to explain the reason for their very existence, but I constantly found myself trying to run away from these words, constantly trying to escape from these inescapable specters that have always haunted me.

My antipathy for such things started on the day that I lost my family during the great solar storm that destroyed most of North America. On that fateful day, when I was just six years old and I saw my parents and my sister get reduced to ashes right before my eyes, something dark was born in the depths of my young mind. To make matters worse, that was the same year that the symptoms from my mental illness started to appear. Fueled by my disease, the darkness that was born in my mind manifested into mental ghosts and monsters whose savage teeth made of my despair and sharp claws fashioned from my impotent rage nearly shredded my sanity into pieces.

Eventually, I managed to extricate myself from these vicious demons by numbing myself using drugs and focusing all of my efforts into my work, but now that I couldn’t hide behind the drugs anymore, my own personal Pandora’s box burst open. The specters that I had managed to ward off for more than twenty years came back to collect their due and their poisonous whispers started to invade my mind.

Why? Why did something so terrible happen? Why did my family have to die in such a senseless way? Why was the world falling apart? Why did thousands of innocent people die every day in these so called “aberrant natural disasters”?

Of course, once I started going down that slippery slope, my over-active mind kicked in and I couldn’t stop myself from slipping further into even more murky waters.

Why were we even created in the first place? What is the purpose of the human race? In the years before the Great Cataclysm, most people used to believe that they were created by an all-knowing, all-powerful deity or deities, but why would such a benevolent being create such an imperfect world? Whether it is Allah, Jehovah, Ra, Zeus or any of the many other gods that people worship, if everything was created by a god, doesn’t that mean that this god was responsible for all the good and all the evil in the world? Were we created, as most religious fanatics claimed, to struggle against evil in some twisted version of a trial to test whether we pass and are deemed worthy of entering paradise or we fail and our souls are forever consigned to the depths of purgatory? Why would an all-knowing god even need to test the flawed things he created in the first place?

Faced with such difficult questions, I was tempted to abandon any hopes I had in religion, but if I turned my back on the divine, then what should I turn to? Obviously, the only other option to religion was Atheism, where the only faith was to the scriptures of logic from the bible of science. The fact of the matter was that new-age Atheism had become something of a religion in itself, complete with everything a religion might need. The ‘bible of science’ which started out as a figure of speech was made into a physical book, an actual bible. It quickly gained a massive following of zealous fanatics who used people’s mistrust towards religion to spread their own ideologies. In the end, they were massively successful, even convincing the United Earth government to ban all religions on the basis that they made people “irrational and violent”. Under the leadership of their prophet, a self-proclaimed philosopher named Clyde Hudson, they crusaded against any and all religious institutions and burned countless churches, mosques and temples to the ground. They went around preaching the words of Mr. Hudson to anybody who would listen. It wasn’t uncommon to find these people in populous areas, raving about the truth of the infinite chaos. This theory of infinite chaos that they so enthusiastically shouted about in transportation hubs and eateries across the world was the crown jewel of ‘the bible of science’. It was also the reason that Mr. Hudson who was the man responsible for making it popular became the de facto pope of the organization that insisted it wasn’t a church.

A school of thought that had been gaining prominence in recent years, the theory of infinite chaos was born in the ashes and despair left in the wake of the massive catastrophes that ravaged our planet. After people repeatedly experienced one massive tragedy after another at the hands of a wrathful Mother Nature, they discarded the idea that a benevolent god was watching over them. Most people started to believe that we were simply spawned from the infinite chaos. They started to believe the philosophers who suggested that what we saw as the patterns, logics, and laws that govern this universe were but a small part of a large infinite tapestry woven from all forms of matter and energy.

It is difficult to directly visualize it, but it becomes somewhat easier to do so using Mr. Hudson’s favorite thought experiment. Imagine a canvas that is infinitely large and stretches out forever. Now imagine that this canvas has been painted in every color imaginable without any rhyme or reason. Hypothetically, on this infinite canvas, there is a hundred percent chance that we would find the Mona Lisa, the Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, pictures of Marilyn Monroe, and every other image we can think of. Now apply the same principle to reality. If there was an infinite chaotic region with everything in it, there would be a hundred percent chance that there would be an area of this chaos that is identical to our own universe. What does this mean? This means that our existence isn't special, fated or even meaningful. All that we were, are, and will be can then be summed up in one word: incidental.

People who believe in this philosophy don’t care much about things like fate. Their purpose in life is to just live their mortal lives until they die. They don’t believe in an afterlife or a greater meaning to life.

And where do I stand in all this? My parents used to believe in God. Some of my earliest memories were those of going to church every Sunday morning to hear stories of miracles and angels, but that was before everything started to fall apart. That was before I had to watch powerlessly as my entire family was taken away from me while I prayed for a miracle, while I begged God to send his angels down from heaven so that they would use their white feathered wings to shield my family from the merciless flames of the solar storm. The angels never came. That day was the day that I realized that the angels would never come. That was the day that I realized that if there was a god, he didn’t give a damn. The man in the sky didn’t care about mere mortals on earth, but I did.

In the end, despite the complex theological debate that raged in my head, my thoughts on this matter were actually very simple. Fuck fate. Fuck destiny. Fuck whatever deity that decided that we would suffer like this. I refused to just rollover and take whatever is thrown at us. I refused to accept the crappy cards that were dealt to us. Since the hand that we were dealt was so rotten, I will just reshuffle the whole damn deck.

I sighed and looked out the window as my turbulent thoughts continued to churn. I knew that my resolution to go against the most basic principles that govern the universe was a one way trip. Whether I succeeded or not, whether I managed to change the flow of the earth’s history or not, my own story will come to an end. In fact, by the end of my mission, my story wouldn’t even have existed at all. I would be erased from reality in the most complete and comprehensive way imaginable. In a few minutes I would activate the Chronos program and exchange my life for a small chance to save my family and the rest of humanity. My demise might just possibly sow the seeds for mankind's final chance for salvation. I thought that I would feel fear at the prospect of complete annihilation, but all I felt as I stood there staring up at the breathtakingly eerie fluorescent lights of the Aurora that covered the velvety black sky like a magnificent blue and green silken scarf, all I felt at that moment was regret and loneliness. Staring out into the night, I felt like I was drowning in a sea of melancholic thoughts.

But that was neither here nor there. Instead of losing myself in contemplation, I needed to focus on what I planned to do. There was no margin for error or second chances for what I was about to attempt, so I did everything I could in order to unravel the complex knot in my heart and clear my head. I even closed my eyes and tried to meditate in the hope that it might free my soul from the jumbled web of emotions that it was trapped in. For a second, I thought that I had succeeded, but that was when the one who had woven the web around my soul in the first place suddenly appeared from the doorway behind me, and all of my efforts to calm myself became null and void.

"Honey? Why are you up at this ungodly hour? Come back to bed, the sheets get really cold without you."

I didn't turn when I heard her voice. My resolution had already started to crumble the moment I heard that familiar soothing voice; I did not think it would survive if I actually turned around, so I stubbornly stared forward, afraid to look back.

Instead of directly confronting what could possibly be the scariest opponent I would ever have to overcome, I desperately scrambled for a random topic to talk about in order to distract her and prolong the inevitable.

"Look at this so called window. Isn't it interesting? It is not actually a real window but a computer screen programmed to display the images of the outside world in real-time. Right now, I am just looking at an image from a camera, but it feels like I'm looking directly at this magnificent vista of the sky outside. I know that I am not actually looking at a real window, but on some level, l let myself be fooled into feeling like I am looking out a window. Does that make me a moron?"

"What are you babbling about? You know that real windows haven't been used since the ozone layer broke up into small pieces way back in twenty thirty. What is this really about?"

And just like that, my attempt to make inane conversation and stave off what was coming fell flat. A smile involuntarily crept upon my face, but it wasn't a joyful or happy expression. No, it was a ghastly expression filled with pain and self-ridicule.

“You don't have to pretend anymore. You don't need to act like you care for me or love me. You have already donned this mask for far too long Natalia; it is about time you took it off.”

“What are you saying Joseph?”

The warmth in her voice had vanished. She was still struggling to stay in character, but the alarm in her voice had already given her away.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. The anguish that I usually kept bottled up deep inside me burst forth like a river through a collapsing dam. Years of buried resentment compelled me to turn around and face her.

Immediately, I knew that I had made a mistake. I had assumed that because I was confronting her about her betrayal, my anger would have dulled my feelings for her, but I had severely underestimated the irrational and overwhelming emotions that I held for her. The moment she entered my sight, all of the erudite philosophical thoughts I was having, all of the bitter feelings I was experiencing, even the most basic awareness I had of my surroundings simply floated away like so much smoke. The seemingly unstoppable tide of anguish that had erupted after years of accumulated misery just disappeared after a mere glance at her.

There was absolutely no need to try to use mere words to describe her beauty. Any attempt to do so would only fail miserably. Next to her, even the majestic Aurora Afrikanis that I was looking at earlier was nothing but celestial fart that was not even worth a second glance. Even though it had already been three years since I had first met her, my reaction to her didn't seem to have abated in any way. If anything, like the flavor of fine wine, it had only grown richer with the passage of time.

In my defense, Natalia was one of the very few people in the world to have ever received embryonic genetic restructuring; she was carefully designed to look the way she does. She was the product of a seamless blend of cutting-edge science and transcendent art.

They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder but I couldn't see how anyone could look at Natalia and not think she was beautiful. Her shoulder length golden hair, pale blue eyes and exquisitely carved features made her look like a virtuous angel, but the devilish body that was on full display under a partially unbuttoned shirt that barely came up to her thighs ruined that virtuous effect somewhat. In the end, she was neither angel nor devil; she was more akin to an irresistible siren that lured sailors to their death. She was my Achilles heel, my kryptonite. She was the only woman that had ever penetrated the wall that surrounded my heart since my family died.

Natalia was my wife. She was the only thing that made me hesitate to do what I needed to do, the only variable that might ruin an otherwise perfect plan.

I just stood there, gazing at the vision of loveliness that never failed to take my breath away, but I eventually recovered the use of my body and that ugly self-mocking smile crept back onto my face.

“It’s okay. I have always known that you were an agent for the Human Race Preservation Agency. I have always known that I was nothing but a mission to you, but I still married you and let myself fall in love with you. Like this window, you are just pretending to be something you are not, but I still allowed myself to be fooled, to enjoy the fantasy. Does that make me a moron?”

“You have to listen to me Joseph. It is not what you think. It is true that I work for the HRPA, but that doesn’t mean that doesn’t mean that the feelings that I feel for you are not real.” Her beautiful face was scrunched up in alarm and her voice actually sounded anxious when she was talking. I could almost believe that she was telling the truth. Hell, I almost wanted to hug her and tell her everything was okay, but I couldn’t do that even if I wanted to.

“I want to believe you Natalia, but it is really hard for me to do so when you have a gun pointed at my nose.”

I couldn’t fathom how she hid a gun on her person while the only article of clothing she had on was one of my slightly baggy shirts that she insisted on wearing as a pajama every night. I didn’t have a lot of time to ponder over this mystery before Natalia started waving the gun around dismissively as if it didn’t matter. ”What, you mean this? This is nothing, just a little precaution in case you overreact. Instead of worrying about this, you should consider these,” she held up two strips of golden paper so I could clearly see the word ‘ARK’ printed on them in bright red, “You see these? Two first class tickets aboard the Ark. We could leave this damned planet behind, just you and me. I’ll quit the HRPA and we can live the rest of our lives in peace, maybe have some children, build a family together. This is our happily ever after. Just say yes Joseph. All you have to do is agree.”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to abandon my plan and follow her into the wonderful dream she was describing, but my conscience wouldn’t allow it.

“It is funny that they are calling it the Ark. Most people probably wouldn’t get the biblical reference since religion has been banned for a few years now. The full name should be ‘Noah’s Ark’, right? The giant ship that delivered Noah and his family from the great flood; it is fitting that this spaceship has the same name. Funny thing is, according to bible lore, there was only one Ark and anyone who wasn’t on it drowned during the forty days and forty nights of rain. I know the HRPA is spouting nonsense about saving all of humanity, but anybody who pays attention to these things will know that there aren’t enough resources to make another ship. In addition to that, you and I both know that the launch of such a massive ship will damage our already fragile planet. The earth will not survive once the Ark launches. All that would be left in the Ark’s wake will be meteorites, debris, and frozen dead bodies floating out in space.”

“How do you…? Never mind. Look, this planet is already doomed anyways. We can’t save everyone so we chose to save who we can.”

“So you will sacrifice nearly a billion people to save a few hundred.”

Natalia was frowning hard as she tried to explain to me why mass extermination of the human race was a good thing. ”We don’t have a choice Joseph. It is either this or everybody dies.”

I smiled at Natalia and this time it wasn’t the ugly thing from before, but instead, it was a smile filled with pride and accomplishment. “That is not necessarily true. I have a way to solve everything.”

That surprised her. Although there was some skepticism evident in her expression, she still asked, “How Joseph? How can you save everyone?”

I made a gesture with my left hand and a podium slowly rose up from the ground. On top of it was a silver metal seat with something that looked like a spaghetti strainer with wires coming out of it welded on top of the backrest. “This is the answer. I know it looks a little rough since I didn’t have time to make it look pretty, but this baby is a fully functional time machine.”

“A time machine? That is foolish Joseph. We have already explored this option and it leads nowhere. Anyone that attempts to change the past creates a paradox and is erased by the forces that govern the universe. If you try to do it, you will just disappear.”

I gestured again and two arks of electricity appeared like two swimming dragons, trapping Natalia in their midst as they circled around her. I calmly walked to the metal chair and sat down. I carefully put the metal object that looked like a spaghetti strainer over my head. “I believe I can avoid that problem. I am not actually trying to send myself back in time per say. Sending oneself back in time is a profoundly stupid thing to do and I am well aware of this fact. Instead of sending myself back, I will be sending back pieces my consciousness in the form of tachyon particles in the hope that they might find appropriate hosts. As for the paradox problem, that wouldn't really matter because these little pieces of my consciousness will be unstable. By the time the feedback from the universe arrives, they would have already dissipated into non-existence, leaving only a trace of my consciousness behind. This means that when the universe tries to restore equilibrium, I'll have already been completely erased from reality, so there will be no paradox. Causality will have been preserved.”

Natalia was still pointing her gun at me, but I could tell that it was more of a reflex action than anything else. Her face was filled with alarm as she looked on in horror. "Joseph, please listen to me. What you are doing now will jeopardize what little we have left. It could destroy everything! Stop this madness! If you have ever loved me, please don't do this!"

I looked at her, unfazed. Now that the final moment had arrived, I felt a strange calm settle upon me. "Are you going to shoot me Natalia?"

Tears ran down her cheeks as she threw the gun away. "Joseph, why are you doing this? This is suicide! Our future is already secure; it is waiting for us aboard the Ark. Why do you insist on throwing all of that away? Why are you risking so much for people you don’t even know? Why are you throwing everything away for strangers who have done nothing for you?"

I started to flick the switches that would start the Chronos program and the seat underneath me started to hum softly. "I know this is suicide Natalia. I know that even if I succeed in changing this timeline, my existence will become too improbable and I will be gone forever, but it will be worth it. As to why I am risking 'what little we have left' as you so aptly put it, you are willing to kill billions of people to save a scant few, why are you surprised that I am willing to risk a scant few to save billions?"

That was when Natalia did something that scared the crap out of me. She ignored the dangerous looking force field around her and took a step forward right into the barrier. One of the two electric dragons collided with her chest, but instead of electrocuting her, it passed right through her and came out of her back, leaving her completely unharmed. For a second, she just stood there, frozen in shock.

"It wasn't real?"

I couldn't help but laugh when I saw the look of wonder and disbelief on her face. "It was just a hologram. Funny thing is, even now, I can't bear to see you get hurt. Well, I guess this is goodbye. You don't have to worry Natalia. I have taken steps to make sure that you are safe from any alterations in this timeline. I hope you will have a better life in the new future Natalia. I hope you will find someone that you will love as much as I loved you."

Before Natalia could react, I pressed the final button and the Chronos program activated. The last thing I saw before my mind was swallowed by unimaginable pain was Natalia frantically running towards me. She had almost reached me when a wave of blue light suddenly threw her back so violently that she hit the opposite wall and slid down motionlessly onto the floor.

At that moment, time started to elongate like an elastic band being stretched to its limit. It felt like only a second had passed while at the same time, that same second felt like it lasted for eternity. Eventually, my mind started to break apart and my thoughts became blurry. Finally, the only thing that remained clearly in my mind was the voice of Johnny Cash singing the last words to his song.

*…..If I could start again*

*A million miles away*

*I would keep myself*

*I would find a way*

**Chapter Two: High Stakes**

**Year: 2054**

**Location: Top secret military base, Undisclosed location**

**POV: Beatrice “Queen Bee” Queen**

Immediately after opening the dusty old bottle, the acrid smell that had been accumulating for several years rushed right into my nostrils and nearly made me gag. The fumes were so overwhelming that I felt tears in my eyes as I carefully poured the amber liquid into a crystal decanter.

"What foul concoction is the Queen Bee brewing for us this evening? Are you planning to murder all of us a week before the launch? Seems a bit heartless if you ask me."

I didn't even have to look up to recognize the person talking with that lazy frivolous tone.

"Heartless? I suppose nobody would be more of an expert on that particular subject matter than the man who was nicknamed ‘the butcher’, and for your information, this isn't some foul concoction. This is one of my most prized possessions, one of the last surviving bottles of Gold Label whisky ever made. I would have never wasted such a precious drink on a bunch of philistines who couldn't appreciate it, but unfortunately, the custom officials wouldn't let me take it aboard the Ark. They said something about vintage whisky not being a necessity for the preservation of life. Damn buggers don’t know what they are talking about."

I finished setting up four glass tumblers on the elaborately carved, antique Mahogany table and sat down on my favorite red velvet recliner which was placed at the head of the table. Once I was nice and comfortable, I looked up to face the owner of the frivolous voice.

General Arnold Grimes was a man of many contradictions. His florid state was at complete odds with his role as the leader of the armed forces of the United Earth government. His messy silver hair, which made him look like he just passed through a hurricane, clashed terribly with his immaculate navy blue uniform with the five golden stars arranged neatly on each of his shoulders. The sloppy smile and the many wrinkles on his face would have made him look like a friendly grandpa but the cruel glint in the depths of his frosty gray eyes would cause a shiver down most people's spines. All in all, he looked like a wolf in sheep's clothing, if said wolf hadn't done a very good job disguising itself.

I couldn't help but sigh when I saw his nearly bipolar state. "Would it kill you if you combed your hair? You look like a cartoon character that has been electrocuted."

His smile just grew broader and he completely ignored my comment as he plopped himself down on the chair to my right, a rocking chair that looked comfortable if it hadn't been for the painful looking straight back. It wasn't surprising that his favorite chair was as bipolar as he was. "Hey Queen Bee, did you say that they wouldn't let you have that bottle of whisky aboard the Ark? Why didn't you just tell them that it was rocket fuel? You wouldn't even have to lie, I'm sure that it has enough alcohol in it to be a decent substitute for rocket fuel."

The immature bastard didn't even wait to finish his own joke before he started guffawing like a lunatic. Unfortunately for him, laughing so hard made him completely unaware of the dark shadow that was creeping up on him, so when the dark figure lightly placed his hand upon his shoulder, Grimes was so surprised that he fell out of his chair and started to curse angrily, "God damn you Shadow! I thought I told you to stop sneaking up on me! You nearly gave me a heart attack you dodgy bastard," after he noticed that cursing at Shadow had no noticeable effect, he turned his ire towards me instead, "Why didn't you tell me that Shadow was coming Queen Bee? You know that he likes messing with me."

"First of all, would you please stop calling me that awful nickname? Not only is it juvenile but it is also offensive. Secondly, I'm glad that you decided to stop skulking in the corner Shadow. I don't know why you always insist on hiding yourself in a room for at least ten minutes before you show yourself, we are all allies here."

Shadow was the only known alias we had for the person that had scared the living daylight out of Grimes, who was incidentally still lying on the floor and quietly mumbling insults while breathing heavily. There was precious little we knew about Shadow. We didn't even know his real gender, so we just refer to him as male due to habit. Shadow was always covered in an impenetrable cloak of shadows even when he was standing under bright lights, so we had no idea what he looked like. His height, body shape, and even his voice constantly changed from day to day. This person just showed up one day with the ring engraved with the signet of our organization, the Ouroboros symbol, and has been our information specialist ever since.

"Did you notice that I was here Beatrice? I am undetectable to all known forms of surveillance, how did you find me?"

The surprise in his voice made me smile. It was nice to know that I could rattle the great Shadow himself. "There is your problem Shadow. You assumed that I was using *known* forms of surveillance."

"Oh, so the Queen Bee has a way to thwart my little tricks. I'm sorry, I forgot that you hate being called that, don't you? I wonder why? It is actually a very accurate description of you, a woman who used her own genetic material to manufacture a new breed of super soldiers and agents. You are just like a queen bee with its hive of workers and drones."

Although his androgynous voice sounded as emotionless as ever, Shadow's words obviously had a hostile edge to them. It seems like I injured his professional pride a little when I managed to find him while he was still trying to remain hidden, but that didn't give him the right to disrespect me.

"Choose your next words very carefully. If you insist on making me your enemy, I shall oblige you, but I doubt you will enjoy that experience, however brief the experience itself might be. If my actions have antagonized you somehow then I apologize, but if you continue to talk in such a disrespectful way, I shall count you as one of my adversaries. Before you make your decision, I would like you to remember something. You might be an unfathomable wraith to everybody else, but the only reason that your identity remains a secret is because you are a useful ally. If you choose to break all decorum with me, then I shall use all my resources to hunt you down and the great mystery of your identity will not remain a mystery for much longer. Friend or foe, the choice is yours."

Grimes had settled back down on his chair by the time I finished speaking and he had his trademark insolent smile plastered on his face. "Dude, you really should apologize. I might tease Beatrice now and then but you crossed the line. I know that she might look like a harmless little lady but I honestly believe that she is the scariest person alive today. They might call me names like ‘the butcher’ but she scares the shit out of me. I gained notoriety when I set off that NIDB in central Africa and eradicated the natives in order to pave the way for resettlement. I was personally responsible for the deaths of hundreds of millions of people: men, women and children whose only crime was the fact that they were living on land that we wanted," Grimes still had a silly smile on his face but his eyes looked haunted as he continued to speak, "They called me a monster behind my back while hailing me as a hero to my face, they called me a pragmatic patriot who was willing to make the difficult choices for his country. The funny part is that I didn't act because of patriotism or bravery. The reason I acted was because I owed Beatrice a favor and she asked me to clear out central Africa. What I did wasn't a difficult act of sacrificing my morals for my country, it was a simple act of self-preservation. What I'm trying to say is that I know things about Beatrice that would give you nightmares; in fact, the things I know give me nightmares every night when I close my eyes. I chose to kill millions instead of antagonizing her. Let me give you some advice, if you walk out of here as her enemy, you will live just long enough to see everything you love destroyed and everything that is even remotely connected to you crumble before your very eyes. Compared to the sheep out there, we might be gods, but Beatrice is a demon. Did I say demon? No, she is the devil. If you are smart, you will apologize and take a seat."

I winked playfully at Grimes and grinned happily. "You say the sweetest things Arnold."

For a few seconds, Shadow just stood there doing nothing, but he eventually just sat down on his designated seat which was directly opposite mine. Shadow's seat wasn't a conventional chair, but rather it was just a slightly raised platform with a mat on it and Shadow sat down on it by crossing his legs like some sort of yogi.

Shadow had barely settled down when my final guest arrived: tech genius extraordinaire Frank Stone. He was a burly bald middle-aged man of African American descent wearing a simple white T-shirt with ripped sleeves and tattered old jeans, both of which were stained by grease and other such liquids. He would have looked like any normal mechanic if it wasn't for his shiny silver cybernetic right arm. He immediately sat on the chair to my left and wiped his dirty hands on his jeans. "Sorry I'm late, I got held up with some last minute preparations on the Ark. What did I miss?"

"Nothing much, just Shadow pissing off Beatrice and nearly getting on her shit list."

Frank's beady little eyes nearly popped out of their sockets in reaction to Grimes’s flippant remark. "What did you say? I think I must have misheard you. Did you just say that Shadow pissed little Betsy off? Have you told him that pissing off Betsy is a profoundly stupid idea, something that is ranked just above performing brain surgery on yourself with a chainsaw and diving naked into a black hole?"

"Yup, I gave him the fire and brimstone speech and he seems to have calmed down a bit."

I cleared my throat before the two could really get into their little comedy shtick. "That's enough of the Frankie and Grimes comedy show. Now that we are all here, let's get down to serious business. Considering the fact that this is our last poker night before the launch next week, I propose we make it a little special."

Frankie raised one of his dark bushy eyebrows in suspicion. "What do you have in mind?"

"High stakes."

"Playing with millions of credits on the line isn't high enough?"

"Come on Frankie, you know that money means very little to us by now. Let us make things interesting by betting things that we truly value, things that we cherish."

Frankie and Grimes exchanged uneasy looks. They looked like they were going to bolt out of the room with their tails tucked between their legs.

"Relax, I'm not trying to extort things from you. Any bets would have to be deemed to have equal value by at least two of the parties involved and if you think the bets are unfair at any point, you can simply pull out. Does anybody have any objections? No? Alright, let's begin."

I poured some whisky for everybody and took out a pack of unopened cards. After everybody made sure that the pack had nothing untoward done to it, I shuffled the cards thoroughly and dealt the first round.

I didn't even turn over my cards as I looked around at the three men picking up their cards and closely scrutinizing them. "Since everybody is unfamiliar with the new gambling system, I shall start the ball rolling by placing the first bet. I bet two of my Valkyries. If you want to stay in this round, you have to bet something of equal value."

All of the three guys were looking at their cards when they suddenly froze. Frankie was the first one to recover but he was still stuttering when he said, "Wait..? V..V..Valkyries..? You mean..?"

I threw two unremarkable looking computer chips onto the table top. "Each Valkyrie that we produce is designed to be super strong, agile, and have inhuman reflexes. They are smarter than average humans and have been implanted with the knowledge to instinctively handle every weapon on earth in conjunction with proficiency in every known discipline of combat on the planet. They look and act like any normal human female, so they are ideal for any covert operations or assassinations. Each Valkyrie is implanted with a unique control chip when they are born to ensure complete obedience. These two chips are the keys to those control systems. They will allow you to have complete control over the two Valkyries that I just bet."

The corners of Frankie's mouth started twitching and I could have sworn I saw drool coming out of Grimes's mouth. For a second, they just stared ravenously at the two computer chips on the table then Grimes suddenly started laughing like a deranged hyena. "So this is what you meant by high stakes? Alright then, I bet two regiments of infantry drones. It should be just enough to match the value of two of your Valkyries."

I nodded my head to show that I had accepted that his bet was valid and things started happening quickly after that. Frankie bet two fighter class shuttles, Shadow bet a very interesting camouflage device, I added another Valkyrie and things continued that way for a couple of rounds.

Four hands later, I had won one hand and lost three. As the game progressed, things were starting to escalate really quickly.

Frankie: "I bet an imperial class cruiser."

Me: "I bet two of my specialized Valkyries, the Hawks. Remember those pilots that smoked two of your carriers using nothing more than a dingy with two cannons in the simulation battle last week? Those were Hawks."

Grimes: "I bet a Latvide crystal twice the size of the one we are using to power the Ark."

Shadow: "I bet this ancient relic."

Frankie: "Are you fucking kidding me? Do we look like we are history fanatics who give a damn about such things?"

Shadow: "Use a specialized matter spectrograph to scan it."

Frankie was still scoffing until he used a small device to scan the relic, but after he looked at the results on the small screen, his expression changed completely from ridicule to shock. "Holy shit! That thing is completely out of phase with the rest of the universe! It’s almost like it doesn't even exist! How the fuck did you get something like this?"

Shadow: "Is it valuable enough to use as a bet?"

Frankie: "It is. Betsy, it's your turn. Do you have anything with similar value? Maybe you can bet one of your Oracles?"

Me: "I will not bet an Oracle. The cost of making and training one in terms of both resources and time is astronomical."

Grimes: "So, are you out Bee?"

Me: "I will not bet an Oracle, but I am willing to bet the method used to make an Oracle of the fifth rank."

Things were getting more and more interesting when my communicator started making a shrill noise. Frankie frowned and looked at me reproachfully. "I thought you said that we should all turn off our communicators?"

"Don't look at me like that, I did turn off my communicator. Someone must be trying to get through to me using the emergency channels. I'm afraid that I must take this call."

I picked up the annoying little device and accepted the incoming call. "This better be the end of the world."

A surprisingly calm female voice answered, "Ma'am, one of our end-of-days protocols have indeed been triggered. There is a large temporal flux originating from sector 6A. The waves of disturbance seem to be originating from the home of one of our shadow assets, but the more worrying matter is that the disturbances seem to be escalating exponentially."

Very few things in life make me feel fear. At that moment, I discovered one of those very few things. "How advanced is the temporal decay? What is the projected time for complete collapse?"

"If nothing changes, complete temporal collapse will occur in less than four days."

Less than four days? We had less than four days before the entire universe collapsed? What the fuck happened? "Wait, did you say sector 6A? That is near the southern border of the New Abyssinian settlement, right? The only shadow asset we have in that area is that programmer. Is he the one responsible for all this?"

"The shadow asset's name is Jonathan Joseph Gates. He was a gifted programmer that we were very interested in, but unfortunately, psychological tests showed that he was too unstable to bring into our organization. Since his work was deemed to be too important to just ignore, a caretaker was assigned to him and he unwittingly became one of our shadow assets."

"Who was assigned as his caretaker?"

"The codes he produced were essential in a lot of our projects including the Ark project so he was given top priority. As such, we appointed our most competent Valkyrie as his caretaker, Valkyrie alpha-1."

"Athena? You assigned him with Athena? What is her status?"

For the first time, the calm female voice hesitated before answering, "Athena's condition is abnormal, but she doesn’t appear to be in any immediate danger. Jonathan Gates on the other hand has suffered brain death. The source of the temporal disturbance seems to be a machine at his home that I cannot fully understand. Ma'am, I am Oracle alpha-1, special designation Pythia, and even I can't make heads or tails of the situation here. My recommendation is that you come to the scene to investigate this matter personally before making any decisions."

I put down the communicator and looked at the three people in front of me trying to pretend like they didn't hear anything. "Don't even try to feign ignorance. I'm assuming that you all heard every word of my conversation. Gentlemen, I'm afraid we are going to have to cut this game short. Stone, I need your expertise to analyzing the mysterious machine, so you are coming with me. In fact, maybe it is better if you all came with me."

They all quickly agreed and a few minutes later, all four of us were in a shuttle heading to New Abyssinia.

\* \* \*

A forty minute flight later, we landed on the private shuttle-pad of Gates's estate. It was clear from his house that Jonathan had done well for himself as a programmer. His home was a large luxurious mansion built into the summit of the Entoto Mountains, but that didn't come as a surprise. According to the reports I read on the genius programmer, Jonathan Joseph Gates or “JJ” as he is known to his friends, owned the patents to several programs that would allow him to make millions without lifting a single finger. In fact, he probably would have been one of the wealthiest people on earth if he didn't donate the lion's share of his income to charities around the world.

After the shuttle landed and the metal dome that acted as the house's anti-radiation shield closed above our heads, Grimes was the first person out of the shuttle and he found himself face to face with a frail looking little girl whose milky white eyes lacked irises and pupils.

"Umm....what is happening? What is a child doing here?"

His surprise and bewilderment was understandable. People usually had similar reactions when they first met Pythia.

"Everybody, I would like to introduce to you our top Oracle, Pythia. She is the very first Oracle that I have ever produced and as you can see, my attempts to maximize her thinking capabilities using genetic manipulation had unintended consequences. Her growth is permanently stunted at this stage and she is completely blind. We have fixed these problems when we produced subsequent Oracles, mainly thanks to the efforts of Pythia herself, but even with her handicap, Pythia is still the single most valuable member of my organization."

Pythia smiled and looked down at her feet shyly. If I didn’t know any better, I might have believed that she was just an innocent little girl. "Thank you for the compliment ma'am. Now, if you would follow me, the machine that is causing the temporal anomaly is down this hallway. That is also where we will find Athena and the shadow asset."

She led us down the corridor at a brisk pace. She had no problem navigating the hallway that was filled with various curios, knick knacks and other obstructions without tripping or running into things which obviously surprised Frankie so I answered his unasked question, "She really is completely blind, but she has devised a way to transcend her condition. Do you see that backpack she is carrying? It has various sensors scanning the area around her at all times and it sends this data to her in the form of small vibrations on her back. She uses these small vibrations and the raw processing ability of her mind to create a real-time, three-dimensional rendering of her surroundings. She may be "blind", but she is able to see more than any of us can."

I had just finished explaining Pythia's unique way of "seeing" when we finally arrived at our destination and the scene playing out before my eyes left me shocked to the point of disbelief.

I thought that it was strange that Pythia was being cagey about the state of Athena when she was reporting the situation, but now that I was seeing it for myself, I finally understood the difficulty that she was facing. A temporal disturbance that threatened to destroy the universe was hard enough to believe, but what was happening right before my eyes was completely beyond comprehension.

Athena, arguably the greatest Valkyrie ever created, was crying.

**Chapter Three: New Hope**

**Year: 2054**

**Location: New Abyssinia, East Africa**

**POV: Natalia Gates/ Valkyrie alpha 1/ Athena**

"I have always known that you were an agent for the Human Race Preservation Agency......"

"I was nothing but a mission to you, but I still married you and let myself fall in love with you....."

"You are just pretending to be something you are not, but I allowed myself to be fooled, to enjoy a fantasy. Does that make me a moron?"

"It was just a hologram. Funny thing is, even now, I can't bear to see you get hurt...."

"I hope you will find someone that you will love as much as I loved you......"

Jonathan’s final words buzzed around in my head like a swarm of angry bees. Each syllable out of his mouth felt like a needle that was cruelly stabbing directly into my heart. Wave after wave of pain unlike anything I have ever experienced before washed over me, unrelenting and unforgiving as it drowned me in sorrow.

I am not very familiar with nightmares. Dreams are merely constructs of the human mind, something made from half-remembered memories and half-forgotten thoughts, but I am not human. I looked like a human being, I talked like a human being, and I acted like a human being, but I am nothing but a highly advanced biological machine. I was created as an organic tool made for the sole purpose of serving my creator, at least that was what I was taught since I was ‘born’ in the lab.

These were the simple facts of my life: I am not human. I was designed to be emotionless and completely obedient to my creator. I never have dreams or nightmares. I thought that all of these things were inviolable, immutable truths.

But if these so called ‘facts’ were really immutable, then why was I feeling fear? Why did I stop caring about my mission and even my creator? Why did I suddenly find myself stuck in this nightmare?

A few minutes ago, I thought that I had everything under my control and the world made sense. I had believed that I had Joseph dancing in the palm of my hands. I thought that I was successfully deceiving him, but that illusion was ripped apart before my eyes and all I could do was watch in dismay as I found out that the only person I was deceiving was myself.

I sat on the floor where I had landed after I was blasted backwards by the strange blue pulse. I just sat there with my back against the wall, staring at the person who I had discovered to be the most important person to me, too bad that it had taken me too long to figure that out. I looked into his emerald green eyes, but I couldn’t find a trace of the man that I loved. His eyes were still open but there was nothing left in them.

I continued to sit on the floor, paralyzed by fear. The logical part of me was telling me that it was already too late, that Joseph was already gone, but for some irrational reason, I was scared that I would somehow validate what had happened if I reacted. I was afraid that by getting up and taking a closer look at Joseph, I would be acknowledging what had happened and that would somehow make it more real.

As I sat there wrestling with my emotions and trying to convince myself to move, I felt something warm and wet running down my cheek. At first I thought it was blood. Had I injured myself when I hit the wall? I subconsciously touched my cheek with my hand and brought it in front of my face. For a second, I was completely confused. Why wasn’t my blood red? Why did it suddenly turn colorless? But then it finally clicked; the thing on my face wasn’t blood, it was tears.

The realization that I was crying was the final straw that broke the camel’s back. The idea that I could even react in such a way made me break out into hysterical laughter. Oh how the mighty have fallen! I was once hailed the most lethal weapon in the agency, the infamous White Oleander. Even amongst my own kind, I was respected as the best. I was even given the name of the goddess Athena beside my designation as Valkyrie-1, but now I was crying like a child? It was fucking hilarious. Peals of shrill, insane sounding laughter rang out from my throat and even to my own ears it sounded unpleasant, but I couldn’t stop. Eventually the laughter turned into a chocking noise which finally turned into sobbing.

That was how Pythia found me: sitting in the corner, in the fetal position, my body shaking uncontrollably as I wept.

“Athena? Athena? Please respond.”

Pythia was a first generation creation, just like me. For all intents and purposes, we were practically sisters. Unfortunately, she was born with some physical defects. She has learned how to function despite her disabilities, but there were some times when her methods failed her, like now. Pythia used an ingenious method of echolocation to “see” even though she was blind, but this method had a flaw when it came to detecting liquids so she had no clue that I was crying. Combining the fact that she couldn’t see my tears with the fact that her mind was inherently logic oriented, it probably never even occurred to her that I might be in my present situation.

“Natalia.”

I could see that my one-word response had confused her. She tilted her head in puzzlement like a confused puppy and asked, “What does that mean?”

“My name is Natalia. I am no longer Athena.”

She paused for a second, but it only took her that second to figure out the meaning to my words. “You are free?”

“I’m free. I am no longer a Valkyrie.”

“But how? When? All of the systems installed inside of you are functioning properly, how can you be free?”

That made me laugh. You don’t see this kind of bewilderment in an oracle very often, let alone the smartest of all the oracles.

“It was Jonathan. We underestimated him. We thought he was just a gifted programmer, but we were sorely mistaken. He probably set me free during our honeymoon. There was a large solar storm that day and all of the signals were down. He probably deactivated my control module and replaced its signal with a dummy signal. The funny part is that none of us noticed, not even me. I was free and I was feeling things I shouldn’t have. I was feeling real emotions for the first time in my life, but I chocked it all up to ‘good acting’. I was no longer a marionette to our mother. He had cut my strings and set me free, but I still continued to act as if I was her damn puppet. Why didn’t he tell me? If only he just…” I couldn’t continue talking; the rest of my words stuck in my throat as deep regret made me start crying again.

Pythia frowned for a moment then chose to ignore me; I guess she decided I wasn’t worth the trouble anymore. She approached Jonathan and the machine he was sitting on before she started taking out several instruments from her backpack and began pointing them at the machine then at Jonathan himself. The readings she was getting must have been bad because her frown only grew deeper as time passed.

After she finished her inspection, she had a whispered conversation on her communicator before leaving the room with a very gloomy expression on her face. An hour later, she returned with four people in tow.

All four were people that I was quite familiar with, especially the second person that came through the door. Her name was Beatrice Queen, and for a lack of better words, she was my mother, my creator, but above all, she used to be my master. As for the rest, all three of them were people wreathed in dangerous and threatening auras: the mechanic Frank Stone, the general Arnold Grimes, and the information specialist only known as Shadow.

When I realized who they were, my training automatically kicked in and I subconsciously got into a battle stance. Even though I was distraught, the instincts that had been implanted into me at birth and drilled into me through years of training were automatically triggered when I felt threatened. I crouched down low while my mind quickly analyzed the situation. Once I located the sources of danger, my eyes darted around trying to find something I could use as a weapon. My sight immediately landed on the gun that I had dropped earlier. After gauging the distance and deciding that it was my best option, I performed a smooth roll and got up with the gun already pointed at them.

The surprised expression that mother had when she first came into the room quickly morphed into one of pure fury as she started to shout with spittle flying everywhere, “What is the meaning of this? Are you actually pointing a gun at me? You know that I can fry your brain before you can even pull the trigger, right? I don’t care if you are Valkyrie-1 or Valkyrie-99, I will not hesitate to destroy you.”

A threat that would have made me quiver in the past now meant less than nothing to me. I smiled provocatively at her and replied, “Go ahead.”

The bitch actually took me at my word and pressed a button on her right wrist, a button that all Valkyries knew and feared, the button known as the kill switch. She even had a truly unpleasant smirk on her face as she waited for me to die, but after a few seconds, her smug expression turned into one of confusion and then fear. She started to repeatedly press the button on her wrist in panic, but she eventually gave up when she realized that the button had no effect.

“It doesn’t matter if I can’t kill you now. There are multiple contingencies that will not allow you to hurt me, so it is only a matter of time before we hunt you down and kill you.”

My provocative smile only grew wider as I replied, “Really? How much do you want to bet on that? An arm? Maybe a leg?” I could almost see the thought being born in her head as it finally occurred to her that I might just possibly be completely free of her so called “contingencies”, but it was too late by then. I pulled the trigger of the gun after I pointed it squarely at her shoulder joint, and her right arm was nearly blown clean off her shoulder. The blood from the fairly catastrophic gun-shot wound splattered all over General Arnold Grimes, soiling his neat blue uniform. He looked down at his formerly pristine uniform with unconcealed horror. “Shit! I just had these dry cleaned!”

Frank Stone was so exasperated that he slapped himself in the head with his non-cybernetic hand. “She is a Valkyrie, one of the deadliest agents in the world, and not only has she just shot Beatrice, but she is now pointing a gun at us. I think there are problems that outweigh your dry-cleaning issues.”

The two sounded like they were just having a normal conversation, but I knew better than to underestimate them. They were trying to distract me from noticing that “Shadow” had already vanished from my sight. They were also trying to hide the fact that General Grimes had taken out a gun from a holster behind his back under the guise of freaking out about his uniform and Stone’s metal arm was almost imperceptibly shifting around, transforming into a weapon.

Shadow’s attack came first, a knife being thrust from directly behind me, but I had already studied how he fights so I was ready for him. I grabbed the knife’s handle with his hand still on it and performed a classic over the shoulder judo throw on him, disarming him in the process. By the time I was done, both Grimes and Stone were pointing their weapons directly at my face. I was going to shoot at Stone while simultaneously throwing the knife I took from Shadow at Grimes when my body suddenly stopped obeying me. At first I thought that one of the “contingencies” in my body had activated, but then I noticed that both Grimes and Stone were frozen too.

“That is enough. We do not have the luxury to waste time like this.”

It was Pythia. She was pointing a small device towards us while she spoke with slight irritation tingeing her voice. She then faced me and her blank white eyes seemed to fall on me. “I know that you probably hate mother right now, but you have to listen to me. Believe it or not, we all want the same thing. Natalia, you want to save Jonathan. I can see that you think that it is impossible, but I can assure you that it is not. Mother, you want to stop this instance of the universe from disappearing into non-existence. What the two of you haven’t figured out yet is that you two need each other to achieve your goals.”

When I heard what she said, I felt like a bomb exploded in my head. Jonathan wasn’t gone? I could save him?

Pythia continued to talk, and I focused all my attention on her, unwilling to miss a single word.

“Natalia, you need technology from our organization and even some from Mr. Stone’s personal stock to go after the pieces of Jonathan’s consciousness that have been scattered through the past. If you bring back all the pieces, I will be able to put those pieces back into Jonathan’s body, and he will be able to live again. Mother, you need Natalia because she was irradiated with a wave of tachyons that are the same frequency as the fragments of Jonathan that were sent back in time. She is the only person who is able to locate and go after those fragments. She is the only one able to stop the pieces of him from destroying this instance of the universe. Without her, we can’t find where or when the pieces are.”

Mother was on the floor, still dumbly staring at her mutilated arm, but Pythia’s words finally seemed to reach her. Her face was looking pale from blood loss and she was obviously in pain, but she still managed to say, ”Fine. You can be with your little boyfriend after you get him back.”

I was understandably suspicious that she was suddenly so magnanimous when I had just shot her. It seemed that Pythia had similar ideas. “I’m sure that Natalia won’t believe that without any guarantees, so here is the guarantee: if the safety of Jonathan or Natalia is compromised in any way by Beatrice, be it directly or indirectly, I have arranged for a cache of documents detailing all the actions of the organization known as “Ourboros” to be released to the public. The only person who can stop this release is Natalia. In five days, if this universe is still here, that means that Natalia has succeeded. If she is satisfied that she and her husband are unharmed, she will stop the release of the files. She will continue to do so until The Ark has launched and this stops being an issue. As an Oracle, I am incapable of purposely lying, so this should be a good enough guarantee.”

She was right. It was a great guarantee. There was only one question in my head: why was Pythia going through all this trouble to help me?

**Chapter Four: Dealing with Emotions**

**Year: 2054**

**Location: New Abyssinia, East Africa**

**POV: Natalia Gates/ Valkyrie 1/ Athena**

Pythia took advantage of the fact that we were all immobilized and quickly took control of the situation. She disarmed all of us then proceeded to tell us exactly what was going to happen and what we were going to do, and since Stone, Grimes, and I were all frozen like statues, all we could do was to stand there and obediently listen to her.

“The paralysis should wear off in a few seconds, but that doesn’t mean that I am not able to immobilize you again. If any of you exhibit any suspicious behavior or make any sudden moves, I will not hesitate to paralyze you again, and this time I will make sure that the paralysis is permanent, understood?”

As I listened to her threaten us with the same carefree tone one would use when talking about the weather, I started to get some feeling back into my body. Unfortunately, that feeling was pain. I went from standing rigid like a statue to lying on the floor, writhing in agony.

“As the paralysis wears off, there will be some residual pain. This is perfectly normal and is the result of your nervous system resuming its normal function.”

For some reason, Pythia’s blasé attitude annoyed me to no end. I knew that she didn’t do anything wrong. Judging from how she acted so far, it can even be said that she was helping me a lot, but some part of me found her emotionless white eyes looking down on me utterly irksome, not to mention the fact that she was coldly analyzing my pain with her emotionless voice. Some part of me wanted to do nothing more than to strangle her delicate little neck just to get some reaction out of her.

I closely examined these strange and unreasonable emotions, but I couldn’t find a way to explain them. They were clearly irrational and illogical, but they were just as real as the reasonable and well-thought-out ideas in my mind. Before today, I would have simply ignored them or even denied their existence, but I couldn’t turn a blind eye to them anymore. I could no longer deny that they were affecting me, affecting the way I think, coloring the way I saw things, and influencing the way I acted.

Is this what it meant to be human? Is being human synonymous with being perpetually under the influence of emotions? Since I realized that I was no longer an emotionless robot under my mother’s control, I had been bombarded by various emotions; I felt unimaginable agony when I thought that I had lost Jonathan, I had felt incredible rage when I laid eyes upon the woman who was responsible for my cursed existence, I felt a tremendous surge of hope when I found out that I had the chance to save Jonathan, and now I was feeling annoyance for almost no reason at all.

It was strange. Jonathan ripped my heart apart when he unilaterally decided to destroy himself to save humanity. By all rights, I should have hated him, but I didn’t. Instead of despising him for the pain he caused me, I loved him more than I could possibly describe. On the other hand, my mother created me. I owed my very existence to her, but all I felt for her was loathing and animosity. Pythia was the closest thing I had to a sister and she seemed to be trying very hard to help me, but all I felt when I saw her expressionless face was revulsion.

That was when I realized why I was reacting so negatively towards Pythia. Grimes, Stone, and even mother had faces that were filled with different expressions. Each of their faces were either warped into a mask of pain, contorted into a grimace of anger, or covered in a scowl of resentment. Their faces were a stark contrast to Pythia’s visage which was nothing but a blank slate. Her bland, expressionless, almost vacant appearance looked like nothing more than a façade made from skin, a disguise that hid an emotionless robot. Her face reminded me of the face that I had to look at in the mirror every morning, a face that I had come to loathe, and above all, a face I had come to fear.

It was another odd contradiction. I have been utterly miserable starting from the time I gained my freedom and the ability to feel emotions, but at the same time, I was completely terrified of going back to becoming the emotionless zombie I used to be. I felt great pain because of the loss of Jonathan, but at the same time, I was afraid that I would lose that sense of pain and loss. I was afraid to lose my connection with him. Not only was he precious to me, but the feelings I had for him were precious to me too. The famous poet laureate Alfred Tennyson once said that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. I had always found that particular quote confusing, but I think I finally understood what he was trying to say.

My moment of enlightenment and realization was rudely interrupted by the loud bellow of an enraged animal, or at least that was what it sounded like to me. It was actually the bellow of an enraged General. Apparently, Arnold Grimes’s paralysis had also worn off, and he was now enjoying the wonderful after-effects.

“Son of a bitch! Why the hell did you do that? Frankie and I had this little lass dead to rights! We had everything under control! There was no reason to blast us all with that strange crap! And what the hell is that thing anyways? Why do I feel like my entire body is one giant sore muscle cramping up?”

Pythia smiled a strange smile that wasn’t really a smile and replied noncommittally, “I am surprised you didn’t recognize this particular technology. You used a larger version of this little device to wipe out almost all of the indigenous Africans from this land and all the nearby countries. Have you forgotten your great act of patriotic heroism so easily General Grimes?”

He immediately stopped complaining after he realized what she was talking about. He even stopped groaning and writhing in pain. He just shriveled up into a small ball with his knees against his chest, and I could have sworn I saw his eyes glimmering with unshed tears.

Frank Stone, who was using his barely functioning human arm to hold a screwdriver to fiddle around with his mechanical arm which was twitching strangely, stopped what he was doing and looked at Pythia in anger and condemnation. “That was cruel. You know that he has a trauma regarding that. Truth be told, you have been acting strangely from the beginning. You probably knew that your little friend over there was dangerous, but you failed to warn us. You also had that nifty little gadget that could have stopped her at any time, but you just stood there and watched as Beatrice got shot. In fact, the only time that you did act was when your little friend was in danger. I’m starting to wonder whose side you are on, Pythia.”

Mother finished applying an auto-bandage on her grizzly wound, temporarily stemming the flow of blood, and also leveled an accusatory stare at Pythia. “I was starting to get curious about that myself.”

Pythia seemed unconcerned by the vaguely threatening looks and calmly replied, “Of course I am on mother’s side. The reason I didn’t tell you that Valkyrie-1 had gone rogue is that you would have reacted drastically. You would have brought half of the Valkyries in Valhalla, if not all of them, in order to subdue Valkyrie-1. Mother is not exactly known for her subtlety. The only times she doesn’t use the scorched earth policy is when she uses the scorched and salted earth policy. If she had attempted to use her usual schemes in this situation, things would have become irredeemably ruined and our universe would surely be doomed. I apologize for my inaction which led to you being shot, but mother, if a gunshot wound is all you will have to suffer, it is a small price to pay when weighing it against the fate of the universe.”

Mother didn’t seem very pleased that Pythia had let her get shot on purpose. “What are you talking about? Have you gone mad?”

“I am perfectly sane. It is just that you have not fully understood the situation here. Jonathan Gates has sent fragments of his consciousness hurtling back in time in the form of tachyon seeds. These “seeds” were designed to inhabit a host and after implanting themselves, they will immediately start influence the way the host thinks. By sacrificing himself, Jonathan Gates has created a viable way to change the past. Has it worked? The answer isn’t a simple, straightforward yes or no. The temporal decay that has started in this area would suggest that it has succeeded, but it also demonstrates that it is not impossible to stop him before it is too late. According to my calculations, the “tachyon seeds” that Jonathan has created will degrade and disappear in four days. Coincidentally, or perhaps as a result of this, four days is also the projected time for the complete temporal collapse of this reality. The only solution that I can think of to save this reality is to stop the “seeds” that have been sown by Jonathan Gates. The only problem is that we have no idea where or when these seeds are located. As I have said earlier, Valkyrie-1, or rather Natalia as she prefers to be called now, is the only one capable of doing this. Not only do we need her to be alive, but we also need her to be motivated in order to accomplish this task. The only way I could see that happening is by assuring that she would have Jonathan back if she succeeds. She seems to have developed a strange attachment to him and the promise of getting him back appears to be the only incentive that would get her to be fully dedicated to this mission. My actions were aimed at guarding her safety and gaining her goodwill. It might seem that I was acting against you, but I assure you that I am trying to do my best to help you.”

Her explanation removed a lot of doubts from my mind. I had been suspicious because of the bizarrely favorable way she was acting towards me, but now I knew why she was so determined to “help” me. To be honest, it was easier to trust her now that I understood her real motives, but knowing Pythia, she was probably aiming for this outcome starting from the very beginning. Oracles are pretty deft at manipulating people and situations as they see fit, and Pythia was indisputably the best oracle that has ever been created. Her skills in manipulation make other oracles look like immature children. Her abilities to pull strings from behind the scenes were reminiscent of renowned maestro composers of the olden days who were able to control entire orchestras with but a flick of their wrists.

Pythia was one of the most conniving and dishonest people I know despite the fact that she is unable to tell an outright lie. She overcame this handicap by using facts like a weapon. She would tell you just enough pieces of information so that you would reach the conclusion she wants you to reach. Over the years, I have learned to always remain cautious when dealing with her. It was possible that this little performance might just be a trick specifically intended to lower my guard.

This meant that I was still suspicious of her, but when I carefully remembered what she had said and the exact words she had used, I was slightly reassured. She had explicitly said that she would guarantee Jonathan’s safety while I was gone and even made sure that I had a way to escape with him when I returned. In the end, I had no choice but to trust her if I was to have any chance of saving Jonathan.

All I could do was grit my teeth, cross my fingers, and go along with whatever plans she had for me.

**Chapter Five: The Hunt Begins**

**Year: 2054**

**Location: New Abyssinia, East Africa**

**POV: Natalia Gates/ Valkyrie 1/ Athena**

None of us were very happy with the arrangement, but we finally decided to establish a temporary truce based on our shared objectives. As Pythia had pointed out, my main goal was to rescue Jonathan and by doing so, I would also be serving their interests which lay somewhere in the area of self-preservation.

Once we decided to table our hostilities for a later time, our next course of action was to figure out how to send me back in time as soon as possible. According to Pythia’s predictions, we had a little less than four days before this universe suffers a complete temporal collapse, and more importantly, four days was also the amount of time Jonathan had before he disappears into nonexistence. With what little time we had left counting down so rapidly, we were understandably a little flustered. Thankfully, we had somebody who was as steady as a mountain minding the tiller of our little sinking ship, so we didn’t completely lose our heads and start running around like headless chickens.

Pythia once again took control of the situation and promptly herded all of us into her personal transport without even explaining where she was taking us. She simply stuffed all of us into the rear passenger compartment of the shuttle and took the steering wheel at the front. Grimes tried to make some inappropriate joke about letting a blind little girl drive, but a single imperious look from Pythia made him freeze like a small animal under the gaze of a predator and quelled any further comments from him. The rest of the journey was spent in awkward silence. We weren’t trying to kill each other anymore, but we weren’t exactly best friends either, so we didn’t really have much to chat about.

Mercifully, the ride was short and it came to an abrupt end when the shuttle shuddered as it landed. The viewing panels had been turned off, so none of us actually knew where we were, but all of us were in a rush to get free of the cramped space of the shuttle so we hurriedly made our escape, ignoring the possibility that there might have been dangers awaiting outside.

Once I untangled myself from mother and her cohorts, I looked around and found myself in a completely unfamiliar warehouse. If I had to use one word to describe it, I would probably pick massive. The place was large enough to fit a decently sized neighborhood inside of it, complete with school and park. From the looks of it, the place used to be an abandoned hangar before someone repurposed it for something else, something slightly more industrial. It was filled with a whole plethora of machinery assembled into what looked like a complex chain of assembly lines. Looking around at the gigantic industrial complex, I noticed that there wasn’t a single living human being in the entire building, but that didn’t mean that the place was empty. Quite the opposite really, the place was bustling with activity.

Robots. The entire place was jam packed with robots. There were big ones that were nearly two stories high, small ones that could barely reach my knees, but the overwhelming majority of them where strangely humanoid looking androids. All of these different robots where milling about like ants and working on different machines. It was a bizarre scene; machines working on machines. It was also very dramatic. There were bright lights flashing everywhere and occasionally one or two dazzling sparks can be seen as metals crashed together. The metal gears made a low rumbling grinding noise, different things banged into each other with thunderous results, metals let out earsplitting squeals under heavy pressure. All in all, the place was very loud and hectic.

For a few seconds, I was a gob smacked by the outlandishness and enormity of what I was seeing, and it took me a while to fully process everything. Judging by their reactions, Mother and Grimes were also having trouble trying to take in everything they were seeing. The only person who acted differently was Frank Stone. He was also surprised but for a completely different set of reasons.

“Wait a minute, this is my workshop. What are we doing in my workshop? How did we even get here? How did you know about its location? How did you get past my security system?”

His eyes were twitching dangerously and he looked like he was going to blow his top as he furiously questioned Pythia. She, on the other hand, was perfectly composed as she answered, “We do not have time for that right now. All that you need to know is that I need to use your cold fusion reactor. It is the only thing with enough power to run and sustain our first generation temporal flux generator.”

She had barely finished speaking when two shuttles landed behind us. One was a rather large and bulky looking cargo carrier while the other one was a small and slick personal transport. The two vehicles might have been polar opposites of each other, but the two women who jumped out of each shuttle were eerily similar; two beautiful women who looked about twenty with the same green eyes and chin length blonde hair. I was very familiar with those features, so I didn’t need to see their identical pink and white jump suits to know that they were Oracles.

The two of them politely greeted mother before they bowed deeply towards Pythia and knelt before her like obeisant servants. Technically they should have been more respectful to mother, but the Oracles were all like that; they obeyed mother, but they were almost fanatical when it came to their devotion to Pythia. It was almost like they worshipped her as their goddess. Having finished their peculiar ritual, the Oracle that had gotten out of the small shuttle presented a silver case with a black symbol of infinity painted on top of it to Pythia like a sacred offering while the one from the large shuttle offered up a key fob in the same grandiose manner.

Pythia first took the silver case and opened it. Inside lay a small gray metal ball that was about as big as my closed fist. Pythia picked it up and turned towards me. ”We do not have a lot of time, so I am going to try to keep all of my explanations as brief as possible. This little device here is from our immortality project. One of the things that we Oracles were tasked with researching was to find out if there is a way to live beyond a normal human’s lifespan. One of the methods we devised to get over the limitations of an aging mortal body is to simply move the mind to a younger body. Unfortunately, when we tried inserting a foreign consciousness into a brain that it did not belong to, even if that brain belonged to a clone, the brain rejected it and the subject died. Even though our experiments failed, we did manage to develop a device capable of storing a human consciousness in a static state. This little metal ball contains a special material inside of it that is able to mimic the neural activity of the human brain. I am going to reprogram this device to only extract particles with vibrations the same frequency as tachyons so that you can safely extract the pieces of Jonathan’s consciousness, wherever they might be. The operation of the device is simple; just place these two metal pads on the temples of the subject and the machine will do the rest. The only important prerequisite is that the subject must be fully conscious at the time.”

She handed the silver case with the metal ball to me which I received gingerly. “So you have never successfully implanted a consciousness into a brain?”

“We have never successfully implanted a foreign consciousness into a brain it didn’t belong to, but you have to remember that we are just returning Mr. Gates’s consciousness back into his own brain so rejection will not be an issue.”

She took the key fob from the second Valkyrie and led us all to the large shuttle. With a press of a button, she opened the back door of the shuttle to reveal a mag-lev forklift carrying a large blue plastic crate. She got into the forklift and made us all follow her as she drove it into the depth of the strange robotic city.

In the heart of the large complex, we stopped before a colossal door that looked like it could stop even gods, let alone normal human weaponry. Pythia turned towards Frank Stone who just sighed in defeat and did something to the door which made it open.

Beyond the intimidating door was a large egg shaped device with lots of wires coming out of it. The strange silvery blue egg was emitting an eerie glow that surrounded it like a halo. Frank went up to a console in front of the egg and started to type furiously before turning towards us with a large grin on his face. “You should all be very proud that you are here standing before what might just possibly be the greatest invention in the history of mankind. This is my proudest creation, the cold-fusion reactor.”

I don’t know what he was expecting, maybe he was expecting shock and awe, or maybe he was expecting applause. If he was expecting something like that, then he was sorely disappointed. Pythia ignored him and drove the forklift up to the giant egg. She lowered the plastic crate that the forklift was carrying onto the ground and started to unpack it with the help of the two other Oracles. Together, they quickly assembled a silver capsule and connected it to one of the cables coming out of the cold-fusion reactor.

Pythia then turned to me. “This capsule is one of the very few working prototypes made by our time-travel division before the project was shut down. As you know, the concept of time travel was abandoned since we believed that it was a fruitless endeavor, but before it was abandoned, one of the things we discovered about the nature of time is that time could be treated like a field. Everything that exists at this moment is vibrating at the exact same frequency, but because everything is vibrating simultaneously, it is almost impossible to detect. We have conclusively proved that this vibration is what keeps us “stuck” in the space-time field. This capsule stops whatever is inside of it from vibrating. Imagine that the vibration that we are talking about acts as an anchor that keeps us in the here and now. If the vibration of an object stops, that object will literally fall through a crack of space and time, but you are different Natalia. When we stop the vibration that corresponds with the frequency of “here and now”, there is another frequency that will keep you from simply vanishing. When you were hit by that pulse of tachyons, you automatically started to resonate with them, so when we put you in that capsule, you will be drawn towards wherever and whenever the pieces of Jonathan’s consciousness are. We do not have a lot of time so I will need to perform a few calibrations on your body to prepare it for the journey. This is going to be a very delicate procedure so I will ask that we not be disturbed in the meantime.”

After she finished speaking, she grabbed my hand and took me to an empty side room. She closed the door behind us and started to lightly rub some gel on my wrists, the back of my knees, elbows, and neck. While she was doing that, something unimaginable happened; her perpetually emotionless visage displayed an actual human emotion. Her mouth twitched and spread out into a sad little smile.

“I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry for what happened.”

At first I couldn’t comprehend what was going on, but then it finally dawned on me. “You are also free? You found a way to break free of mother’s control?”

“That is not quite right. The control modules have never worked on me in the first place.”

I was so astonished by her revelation that all I came out of my mouth was a single word. “Why?”

Even though it was just a single word, it was chocked full of meaning. If she was free, why did she stay with mother? Why didn’t she escape? Why did she continue to help her? Why did she continue to further mother’s agendas? Why did she let her make more of the Valkyries and Oracles who were cursed existences born into slavery?

“Mother wasn’t always like she is now. Once upon a time, she was actually quite similar to your Jonathan. She was also quite brilliant but instead of electronics and programming, she was a genius in the field of genetic engineering and biotechnology. When the great cataclysm happened, she also lost the ones she loved. Her husband died in the solar storms, but what really devastated her was what happened to her daughter. Mother was lucky enough to escape the disasters. What she didn’t know was that she was pregnant at the time. When she later found out, she was over the moon with happiness. She had lost her husband, but now she felt like she was getting a piece of him back. Unfortunately, even though she had escaped the solar storms, she had been exposed to a fair amount of radiation. When her daughter was born, she was deformed, unhealthy and weak. Mother did everything she could to save her daughter, but she died before she reached her first birthday. That was when mother decided to bring back her daughter using her research into genetic engineering. If it was just a matter of cloning her daughter, that would have been easy but she wanted to cure her. She wanted her to be healthy, strong and have as many advantages as possible. She wanted her daughter to be as blessed with as many gifts as the problems she was cursed with in the past. The first results of her work were the two of us. You turned out perfect; a beautiful baby girl, but I turned out like this, a freak. For a few years, she was happy. She truly loved you while she tolerated my existence, but slowly she started to realize that you and I weren’t really the daughter she had lost. She started to slip back into depression. That was when a powerful group that called themselves “Ouroborus” noticed her research and its potential. They poisoned her mind with their rhetoric and pushed her down a dark path. You weren’t old enough to remember all this, but my mind had developed very early. I was just a child at that point, but I had matured enough to realize that I was nothing but a failed experiment while you were perfect and received all the love and affection. I grew jealous and bitter, but I had one ability that you didn’t. I was able to learn quickly, understand many things, and create wondrous inventions. Out of a misguided sense of resentment, I used my gifts to do something unforgivable; I created the control modules. I thought that if I helped mother with whatever she wanted, she would start caring for me. At that time, she was obsessed with finding a way to control people, so I made the control modules for her. What I didn’t know was that mother’s mind had already been twisted by the words of Ouroborus, so she didn’t even hesitate to plant the modules inside you and me. She then proceeded to create a whole army of Valkyries and Oracles using us as templates. Eventually, she became the woman you know today. As for me, I acted like the modules worked on me. I watched as my mother enslaved my sister with the collar that I had created, and all I did was bury my head in the sand. I am sorry Natalia. I am sorry for what I did.”

At that moment, Pythia was no longer the legendary, awe inspiring Oracle, she was just a confused little girl saying sorry to her sister. I wanted to be mad at her, but I just couldn’t. Besides, I had no time to think about this right now.

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because this might be the last time that we ever get to see each other. The chances that you will succeed are abysmally low. If you don’t collect all the pieces of Jonathan before your time is up, you fail. If you do something that alters the flow of history too much, you fail. I’m not even sure that you should be doing this. Jonathan has gone back in time to try and fix all of the crappy stuff that has happened. I’m not sure we should stop him. He could prevent the world from becoming the disaster that it is today.”

When I realized that Pythia was finished applying the medication, I got out of the side room with Pythia following right behind. I went directly to the capsule, and as everyone looked on, I jumped inside.

“I don’t care about the world. The world could burn in hell for all I care. All I am concerned about is Jonathan.”

Pythia just smiled wryly and lowered the lid of the capsule.

**Chapter Six: The Storm Brews**

**Year: 63 MA (Mystery Adventus)**

**Location: Silver Moon Tower**

**POV: Acolyte Adam Tilton**

I looked at the images reflected in the scrying pool with utter disbelief. I rubbed my eyes repeatedly and pinched myself several times but the images reflected from the depth of the pool remained unchanged. I quickly came back to my senses and did what I should have done in the beginning; I recorded everything in a memory crystal and ran to report the incident to my master.

My master had his signature condescending sneer plastered on his hawkish wrinkled face as he received my crystal with the very tip of his thumb and index finger as if it was a plague carrying rat. “What have you come to report this time; did you see some petty thief? A purse snatcher perhaps? Is someone stealing coins from the temple’s fountain again?”

I can’t say that I wasn’t pleased when I saw his smug smile get wiped clean off his face when he saw what was in the crystal. ”What is this? Where is this? What kind of strange sorcery are these people using?”

I looked at him with feigned surprise and replied, “You don’t know? But you are the great and powerful Arch-mage Zelpir of Silvermoon tower, how could you not know?”

I was lucky that he was too engrossed in the recording to notice that I was being sarcastic. The egotistical idiot actually thought I was being serious and replied, “The mysteries of the world are many. Even I do not have the knowledge of everything in the infinite cosmos. Although I might appear to be all knowing to a lowly acolyte like you, I am always striving to learn about the small amount of things that I actually do not know about. For example, the people in these recordings have the same pale complexion as the Andalasians from the continent of Kirk and most people would have mistaken them as such, but with my keen observational skills, I have deduced that they are not Andalasians.”

I listened to him speak with my jaws open in astonishment. How can someone be so stupid and egotistical at the same time? I once again cursed my bad luck which had caused my assignment to this moron. There were so many decent mages out there but I had ended up with a narcissistic monkey who thought that acolytes where nothing more than state sponsored slaves.

I took a deep breath to try and calm myself then swallowed down my scorn for the idiot so that I could pretend to speak respectfully while hiding my complete disdain for the bumbling buffoon. “Revered Master Zelpir, shouldn’t we report this to the Council of Mysteries?”

Zelpir blinked owlishly a few times because he had had the crystal too close to his eyes making him look even more incompetent than usual. “Ah… yes. Of course. Ahem… the Council of Mysteries. I was just about to do that.”

It was really tragic that I had to remind the “great” and “wise” arch-mage something as basic as the rudimentary operational procedures of the department that he was in charge of.

To his credit, he didn’t tarry much after that. He grabbed me and the memory crystal and performed a translocation spell which directly transported us to the inner sanctum of the Council of Mysteries where he handed the crystal to the secretary who was waiting there.

It only took about a minute after the secretary left before we were ordered to come inside by a rather flustered looking acolyte. He led us through a long twisting corridor until we reached an ornate golden door that was decorated with the insignia of the Council of Mysteries: a pair of eyes with the right one having an image of the sun glowing a bright orange instead of a pupil and the left one having an image of the moon glowing a soft silvery blue color. The acolyte opened the door and motioned us to go inside. Apparently he wasn’t allowed to go into the fancy looking room.

Once we went through the door, we found ourselves in a large hexagonal room. Each of the six walls were painted a different color; brown for earth, red for fire, blue for water, light green for wind, golden for metal, and white for spirit. A raised bench stood in front of each wall. The bench representing earth looked like it was made out of granite, sandstone, turquoise, diamond, and other gems and rocks. It was also covered in beautiful flowers and colorful plants that were bursting with vitality. The bench that represented fire was made entirely out of flames which swayed and flickered hungrily, casting strange and ominous shadows across the walls and scorching everything around it. The chair that corresponded to water was a whirlpool filled with the willfulness and tempest of the sea. Inside the water, I could see schools of bright colorful fish swimming around, but in the darker depths, I felt something cold and dangerous stirring restlessly. The bench next to that was the one representing air and it was just a fluffy cloud hanging in the air. It looked completely harmless if it wasn’t for the occasional flash of lightning that lit up the inside of the fluffy cloud. The bench for metal was a throne made from swords, sabers, spears, shields and all other types of weapons and armor. The bench that represented spirit was the strangest one from the six. The best way to describe it would be ephemeral; sometimes it was there, sometimes it wasn’t. At times it looked like it was made out of pure holy light, at other times it looked like it was made up of tormented spirits with ghastly faces and semi-transparent skeletons radiating death.

I was twisting my neck this way and that, trying to see everything when all the benches were suddenly filled with twelve people, two per bench. Each bench had a man and a woman sitting next to each other. The seat for earth had a man that looked like a massive mountain sitting next to a woman covered in leaves instead of clothes, the one for fire had a man that looked like a living inferno next to a woman covered in shadows, the one for water had a man holding a trident and a woman covered in ice, the seat for air had a man with fluffy wings and a woman covered in lightning, the one for metal had a giant man made entirely from shields and a woman covered in weapons, and finally the seat for spirit had a pious looking man who appeared to be a priest standing next to a woman in a black cowl whose left hand was just a skeleton without any flesh.

The pious looking man from spirit was the first one to speak. He rubbed his eyes tiredly and said, ”Why did you drag us out of bed at this hour? What could be so important that it couldn’t wait until morning?”

The man with the fluffy wings flicked his hand and an image was suddenly projected in midair. It was an image that I was very familiar with since it was the image that I recorded into the memory crystal from the scrying pool.

It was the image of a breathtakingly beautiful woman crying in the corner of a room before she was interrupted by four people after which there was some sort of confrontation. The scrying continued to follow the woman as she seemed to resolve her differences with the others and they went to a strange and wondrous place filled with metal men using a completely unfamiliar flying metal contraption.

As the image continued to play out, I was taken aback at how little surprise there was on the faces of the twelve people watching. The living flame that represented fire even yawned loudly. “Why are you showing this to us? It is a mildly interesting world, but it is nothing to convene an emergency meeting about.”

The man with the fluffy wings had a somber expression on his face as he ruffled his feathers and replied, “This image wasn’t taken by our Realm Eye. It was taken by a novice acolyte doing a random scry using the most rudimentary scrying pool.”

For the first time, I saw shock and alarm on all of their faces. All traces of tiredness vanished as the room was suddenly gripped by an almost palpable tension. A sonorous voice from beneath the dark cowl of the woman from spirit loudly rang out, “That is impossible. It requires at least three of us working in tandem and the help of the Realm Eye to look beyond the veil. A mere acolyte cannot accomplish such a task, let alone a novice acolyte using rubbish equipment.”

The man with fluffy wings pointed at me and said, “There is the acolyte in question. Go ahead and interrogate him.”

Before I could react, the woman pointed her hand made of bones at me and I suddenly found myself reliving the moments when I had seen the strange images in the scrying pool. A few seconds later, I was lying on the hard marble floor, covered in cold sweat.

The woman in the dark cowl turned away from me and said, “I have scoured his soul. He did indeed discover that world while he was scrying randomly. It seems like there is some sort of crack on the veil between this world and that one.”

The man with the wings shook his head negatively. “It is much worse than that. I did some research before we convened. It seems that someone in that world somehow figured out how to use some kind of temporal inversion spell, but it was done very carelessly. The spell worked by creating a tunnel through the veil, but the tunnel weakened the veil and cracks started appearing on it. Now the veil is slowly degrading. It won’t be long before traversable channels will open between this realm and that one. That is not all. If my hypothesis is correct, the veil that surrounds that other world is severely damaged. It is highly likely that our world will not be the only one that will end up being connected to it.”

At first there was only silence following this declaration but then all twelve members of the council started to speak at once.

“… a legendary realm gate?”

“… a confluence of worlds.”

“… fates and destinies are tangled up.”

Their complicated words meant very little to me as I lay on the floor, recuperating from whatever the woman from the spirit faction did to me. All I knew was that something unimaginable had happened and that something amazing was about to happen in the near future.

**Chapter Seven: The Storm Brews Part II**

**Year: 151 AE (Age of Enlightenment)**

**Location: Somewhere in the far reaches of space**

**POV: Science-officer Gordon Styles**

I was having a wonderful dream involving my high school crush Mindy, her best friend Kate, not a lot of clothing, and a whole lot of whipped cream when I was woken up by an annoying beeping sound that was coming from my computer.

This wasn’t the first time that I had fallen asleep at my workstation. My work wasn’t exactly the most exciting job in the world. Sure, being a science officer in a great armada that was travelling across the universe may sound interesting, but it was the kind of job where you would have to spend hour after hour staring at a screen and looking at page after page of numbers and graphs. Although we were given the name “science officer”, we did very little actual science. Most of our work consisted of analyzing data and writing reports for the higher ups. It was an incredibly boring job so it was not surprising that I had fallen asleep while doing it.

I wanted to do nothing more than to shut the computer up so that I could go back to my dream but the multiple exclamation marks that were flashing on the screen where telling me that there was no more chance of me finishing that dream, so I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, picked up my spectacles from the desk where they had fallen, and tried to focus on the flashing screen. Once the blurry screen came back into focus, what I saw made me question whether I had really woken up from my dream.

I knew for a fact that I was on a ship that was several light-years away from my home planet, yet my computer was telling me that it was picking up images that were almost identical to earth-prime on the short wave antenna. To make matters worse, the data on my computer screen seemed to be indicating that these images were being transmitted from a drone that I was sure I had lost when I maneuvered it too close to a black hole during an experiment.

I carefully analyzed the data being transmitted and discovered small inconsistencies that showed that the planet I was looking at wasn’t actually earth-prime or any of the other home planets that we had colonized, but it shared too many similarities with earth-prime for it to be a coincidence; the same seven continents, the same moon, the same oceans, the same islands. The differences were also pretty obvious; the barely existent ozone layer, the giant storms blanketing the planet, the strangely lit ionosphere. The place looked like a post-apocalyptic version of earth-prime.

At first I thought that something had happened to earth-prime while the armada was away, but the information just didn’t add up. There were a couple of space stations and artificial satellites orbiting around the planet, but they weren’t nearly as numerous as they should have been. They were also three or four generations more primitive than the models that we currently use. I attempted to establish contact with these outdated looking machines, but they didn’t respond when I hailed them using our established emergency channels. What this told me was that they were not part of our federation.

They were aliens.

There were special protocols in place to quickly report if any signs of extra-terrestrial life were discovered. I was feeling a little surreal as I became the first person in history to trigger those protocols.

I had barely finished typing the report when it was immediately flagged by my supervisor. He came running to my workstation, and after seeing what was on the screen, he dragged me out of my chair and led me through a maze of corridors without saying so much as a single word to me.

We went to a part of the ship that I have never been to before and he rudely shoved me through a pair of thick looking blast doors. Inside, I came face to face with a group of people that I had only ever seen on TV and computer screens; the Council of Twelve.

First from the left was Rook, the head of mining and resource extraction. He was a large, muscular, bald man who looked like he could crush rocks with his bare hand. Next to him was Dr. Synthia Green, the head of agriculture, horticulture and botanical terraforming. She was a pretty, willowy, blonde woman with a kind smile on her face. She always looked so gentle and soft, I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who had a massive crush on her. Next to her was Engineer Clark Ignatious. He was the head of the teams that were responsible for the running and maintenance of all the reactors and engines of all the ships in the armada. Physically, he was a well-built man with pale skin and flaming red hair. To his right stood a woman who was simply known by the moniker “thousand eyes” or “eyes” for short. She was in charge of a network of spies and informants that spanned the entire armada. She was a short woman who wore a skin tight, black, leather body suit that accentuated her obscenely voluptuous body. Although her body was on display for anybody to drool over, her face was covered by a featureless, black, full-face mask. Right next to her stood Cedric Raymond, head of sanitation and water resources. He was a pudgy little man with greasy black hair who had a strange fondness for colorful Hawaiian shirts. He looked especially comical and out of place because he was standing next to Dr. Rita Glass, a six foot tall statuesque beauty with silver hair, cold grey eyes and pale skin which combined to make her look like a statue made of ice. I guess it was fitting that the woman that was nicknamed “the ice queen” would be the head of the department of cryogenics.

Next to her was a man who seemed to be the center of attention and someone who was used to things being that way, Admiral Aeolius Sinclair the third. Not only was he the captain of our flag ship, he was also the leader of our entire operation. He was a fit, attractive, middle aged man. The silver streak that ran through his jet black hair made him look distinguished instead of old. To his right was a tiny woman who was nearly vibrating with excess energy. She was Veronica Thorgood, head of the department of alternative energy. Many people compared her with a chipmunk which had drunk Red-bull and refer to her by the nick name “Sparky”. Trying to stay as far away from the over enthusiastic little woman as possible were our heads of security; Commander Luke Copperfield who was the head of defense and Commander Amelia Shearer who was in charge of the Sword Wings, a battalion of military ships that escorted the armada. As you would expect, they were a pair of no-nonsense soldiers in crisp green uniforms. The penultimate person from the right was the boss of my boss, Professor Samuel Priest. He was a scrawny little man with a head of completely silver hair. He was the only one of the twelve people there who was ignoring us. Instead of staring at us curiously like the others were doing, he was typing furiously on a computer. The final person on the Council of Twelve was Dr. Lara Blackstone. She wore many hats including but not limited to head of the coroner’s office, head of the bio-warfare department, and head of bio-engineering. She was a quiet, reserved woman who hardly said anything to anyone, but she had the scariest reputation from the whole bunch. Her work in bio warfare and the amount of time she spends with dead bodies has earned her the name “lady of death”.

I finished taking in all these legendary figures and as I was observing them, they were doing the same thing to me. Finally, the silence was broken by Admiral Sinclair who chuckled and said, “I’ve been in this service for well over two decades now and I have heard almost every emergency protocol in the books, but I think I speak for everybody here when I say, what the hell is emergency protocol K-12?”

Professor Priest didn’t even look up from what he was doing as he replied in a monotonous voice, “Protocol K-12 is the set of guidelines which were set in place in case of extra-terrestrial contact of an unknown nature. It is not to be confused with K-13 which is triggered in case of hostile alien encounters or K-11 which is only triggered in case of a peaceful or benign encounter. K-12 means that we are not sure what the intentions of the other party are so we act cautiously but not aggressively.”

The pudgy little head of sanitation, Cedric Raymond, started laughing when he heard that. “Aliens? That’s a good one Professor! And here I thought you didn’t have a sense of humor.”

He continued to laugh until Commander Copperfield smacked his balding little head. Copperfield then took out a handkerchief to wipe the grease that Cedric’s hair had left on his hand. “He is not kidding you idiot. This is potentially a very dangerous situation and we do not have time for your silly antics so please shut up. Professor, what do you have for us?”

The Professor continued to type away as he answered, “The young science officer standing in front of you discovered something quite interesting about two hours ago. He discovered an inhabited alien planet with one of the drones that he was piloting.” A holographic image of the strange planet that looked like earth was suddenly displayed at the center of the room. The people who didn’t know what it was, which was everybody apart from me, the professor, and my boss, just stared at it quizzically.

Finally, Admiral Sinclair cleared his throat and said, “I think you have made some sort of mistake Professor. That is not some alien planet. That is Earth.”

The Professor just shook his head. ”That is not Earth, or at least not our Earth. This is a live stream from the drone in question. Ignoring the fact that we are light years away from Earth and that it is impossible to communicate across such distances, there are some glaring inconsistencies which indicate that this is not our Earth.”

One by one, he listed out the various differences that I had noted earlier and a few that I hadn’t, but he didn’t stop there.

“The images that you are seeing are being transmitted from a drone that we had thought we had lost since it was sucked into a black hole. The implications of that are staggering. A lot of theories exist about the interaction of black holes and the space-time continuum, so I took a closer look at this ‘alien planet’ using some secret equipment that we have hidden in all our drones and discovered that the ‘aliens’ on this planet were actually human. You might be thinking that this proves that this is Earth but on the contrary, it proves that it isn’t because I scoured this planet and found fifteen people that couldn’t be on our Earth right now.”

Fifteen faces replaced the image of the planet at the center of the room. I was shocked because one of the faces was identical to my own. There were some minor differences here and there but it was obviously my face.

For the first time, the professor looked up from his computer and he had a look of unbridled excitement on his face.

“These fifteen people are on the surface of that planet right at this very moment but we know that they can’t be on Earth because they are aboard our ship at this very moment. In fact, one of them is right before your very eyes.”

**Chapter Eight: The Storm Brews Part III**

**Year: 151 AE (Age of Enlightenment)**

**Location: Somewhere in the far reaches of space**

**POV: Science-officer Gordon Styles**

I was confused. The Professor had laid out evidence that we were looking at some sort of parallel universe, but that didn’t appear to be the entire story. I wasn’t the best quantum physicist out there, but I did know one or two things about temporal entanglement principles and phase uncertainty theory. I did know that the possibility was very real that a parallel universe existed; hell, it was all but certain. The problem is that the existence of parallel universes is predicated one essential criteria, that they should remain separate and isolated, hence the ‘parallel’ in ‘parallel universe’. If two of these universes were ever to come in contact with each other, then they would be subject to Pauli’s exclusion principle, i.e. two objects cannot occupy the exact same space at the exact same time. That would mean that either one or both the universes will end up getting annihilated.

While I was having my little internal panic attack, the professor continued to look at his fellow members of the council as they gawked at the images he was showing them. Finally, Admiral Sinclair turned to the professor and asked him, “What are we looking at here? What does this all mean?”

The perpetually overexcited head of the Department of Alternative Energy spoke before the professor could have a chance to answer him. “OH MY GOD! It’s a parallel universe! It is a parallel universe right? We are looking at an actual parallel universe! This is so exciting!” Her voice was bubbling with excitement as she looked towards the professor with large imploring eyes, as if she was begging him to agree with her.

The professor just smiled an inscrutable little smile and replied, “The answer is yes and no. If you define a parallel universe as a universe that mimics yet is separate from our own, then no, it isn’t a parallel universe. I have hacked into a couple of their networks and I have discovered that we share a common history, identical in every way, or at least it was identical until things started deviating more and more a couple of decades ago. This has led me to believe that that universe is simply an instance of our own or vice versa.”

The pudgy little Cedric held his head in both his hands and groaned in pain. “You are starting to hurt my head Professor. Can you please translate what you just said to those of us who don’t have Doctorates covering their walls like wallpaper?”

Dr. Rita Glass also chimed in, “I loathe to agree with the slimy little toad, but he is right. Your explanation is very confusing. Can you please clarify what you just said?”

“Are you familiar with the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrodinger or his thought experiment, the famous Schrodinger’s cat?”

Cedric scratched his head and replied, “Schrodinger’s cat? Isn’t that the guy who did unfortunate things to his cat to see how it would die?”

The professor chuckled and answered, ”That isn’t quite right. Schrodinger’s thought experiment proposed that if we put a cat in a metal container with some hydrocyanic acid, a rather potent poison, that would be released in the event that even a single atom of a certain radioactive substance which is also in the container decays, we cannot conclusively say whether the cat is dead or alive. Until we open the box, the cat is considered to be both dead and alive according to quantum law. This thought experiment is meant to show how uncertainty affects our universe, especially at a subatomic level. Something very similar but much grander has happened to cause the dual-universe effect that we are seeing now. Something has caused so much uncertainty that two instances of the same universe are existing at the same time. The source of the uncertainty could be on our side or theirs, but further investigation has shown the source of the uncertainty is on their side. The exact location is the Entoto Mountains in Ethiopia. From my scan of the planet surface, I have discovered this location to be the epicenter of a temporal instability, a time scar if you will, that is slowly beginning to consume their universe. I believe that this is a point of divergence; someone actually managed to go back in time and that caused a divergence in the time stream. Multiple universes were born from this one singular act and ours is just one of many. The problem is that my scan has picked up a second anomalous location. This one is a point of convergence; it is resonating with the first point and is attempting to heal the temporal scar.”

Admiral Sinclair had a frown of concentration on his face as he asked, “What happens if they succeed?”

The professor beamed at him like he was looking at his favorite pupil. “The current state we are in is unstable. Remember the cat? Eventually the box will be opened and the cat will either be alive or dead. The same is true here. If they succeed, we cease to exist. It is either them or us.”

Commander Shearer suddenly stood up, attracting everybody’s attention. ”Professor, can my Sword Wings travel to this other universe?”

“In a few hours, the channel created through the black hole will stabilize enough for your smallest ships to pass through.”

As soon as she heard that, Commander Shearer immediately started to leave the room.

The kindly Dr. Green looked awfully distressed as she ran up to Commander Shearer and grabbed her arm to stop her from leaving. “Wait! What are you going to do?”

Commander Shearer violently ripped her arms away from Dr. Green causing Dr. Green to fall on the floor. She looked coldly down at her and snorted in disdain. “You heard the Professor. It is either them or us. You ask what I’m going to do? Well, I am going to make sure that it is us that survive, and if that means that I will have to personally go there and eradicate them, then so be it.”

Dr. Green started crying and I could almost feel my heart break as crystal tears ran down her cheeks. “How can you do that? Can’t you see that they are human beings just like us? Do we have the right to snuff out their lives? There has to be another way to solve this!”

Admiral Sinclair walked over to her and helped her up. “I’m sorry Cynthia but she is right. There are no other options. We need to do what is necessary to fight for the survival of our people. A lot is hanging on this and we don’t have the luxury of being soft hearted.”

He turned to the two soldiers in the room and formally saluted them, “As of now, I am declaring a state of emergency. Commander Shearer and Commander Copperfield, I am placing the two of you in charge of the armada until this situation is resolved.”

He then turned to the rest of us and declared, “I need everybody here to prepare as best they can. As of this moment, we are at war.”

Elsewhere, in a place without light, without sound, without substance, fragments of thoughts floated around filled with envy and greed. They looked into the material world, hungry to delve into a world full of so many wonders, hungry to devour all and make it theirs, but all they could do was watch and wait. Their existence continued unchanged for eons until one day, a crack appeared in the material plane. Although the crack disappeared almost instantaneously, the always vigilant fragments did not miss their chance. In that one moment, more than a hundred fragments escaped their prison and entered the material world.

The Atelli had finally found their way into the material world. They could finally satisfy their hunger.

**Chapter Nine: Talk Show**

**Year: 1991**

**Location: Washington DC, United States of America**

**POV: Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

“Dr. Thorn. Dr. Thorn, can you hear me? Dr. Thorn, we are about to go on air. Please wake up.” The reporter lightly shook my arm which abruptly woke me up from the rather strange dream I was having. The few pieces of the odd nightmare that I could remember contained a world bathed in the fires of hell itself, a sky covered in the hauntingly beautiful lights of heaven, and the face of a woman I was sure I had never seen before, but whose otherworldly beauty seemed to linger in my memory before growing vague and vanishing like smoke.

All in all, it was the kind of dream one would have as a result of imbuing oneself with psychedelic drugs or ingesting something disagreeable, and since I don’t remember dropping any acid, it was more likely that the culprit was some food I had consumed. That thought had barely popped into my head when, right on cue, my stomach started to feel a bit queasy. I gently patted my growling stomach and attempted to dissuade it from continuing its ongoing battle with the piece of chicken that I had been unwise enough to buy from a suspicious street vendor. Thankfully, my stomach acquiesced to my soothing ministrations and stopped its titanic battle with the foul fowl.

I looked up from my now calm stomach and made eye contact with the reporter who was looking at me with a worried expression. “Are you alright Dr. Thorn? Do you need anything? Maybe a glass of water?”

I waved my hand dismissively and smiled to reassure the fretful man who was hovering over me like a fussy mother-hen tending her chicks. “I’m fine. I just nodded off a little.”

A deep rumbling chuckle erupted from beside me, startling both me and the reporter. It was then followed by an even deeper voice. “I know what you mean; I’m also having trouble staying awake. They have had us cooped up in here for over an hour, and the heat is killing me.” The man with the thunder-like laughter mimed wiping his brow and started fanning himself with a magazine.

The reporter immediately stood up like he had received an electric shock to his butt and started to apologize profusely. “I’m so sorry General. There were some difficulties with the filming equipment, but we are doing our best to get it fixed as quickly as possible.”

I knew that finding mirth at the misfortune of others is in poor taste, but I couldn’t stop myself from chortling when I saw the poor guy jump around like a circus monkey performing for an audience. I found his lack of spine somewhat contemptible, but I could understand his panic. The man sitting next to me was retired General Rex Thurman, or as he was known back in the army, “T-Rex”, and that nickname should tell you everything you would need to know about his temperament. This aging septuagenarian might have left the army, but he maintained his ferocious reputation as a vicious rabid dog in his current role as a top military advisor to President Reagan. It was understandable that the reporter was soiling his pants in terror, afraid that the General would do or say something that would end his career, and judging by the cold merciless glint in the General’s eyes, he had every right to be worried.

Luckily for the hapless reporter, he was saved by one of his colleagues who entered the room at that exact moment to tell us that everything was ready and that we could start with the show. The reporter, who was obviously relieved by the timely reprieve, led us into the studio where the show was going to be filmed. We were then ushered into the set for the show which was a simple room with three walls and the proverbial fourth wall left open for the cameras.

I took my designated seat on the mustard yellow leather couch alongside the General and the reporter took his place behind his desk. He faced us with a nervous expression and pretended to shuffle his notes as he desperately avoided making eye contact with the General.

“Before we start, there is something very important I should warn you about. This interview was scheduled in such a hurry because one of our other shows had to cancel due to unforeseen circumstances and we needed something to fill the empty spot. Since it was a last minute cancelation, we were forced to film this show almost live. Most of our live shows actually have an hour delay so that we can do some last minute editing, but due to the delay caused by the technical difficulties we just had, we are going to be broadcasting this interview live, truly live. What I am trying to say is that you should be careful what you say because you cannot take it back once it has been broadcast.” The reporter kept glancing at the General, and I could guess who the warning was really meant for. The General has been known to say some pretty inflammatory things in the past and I could just imagine what would happen if he went on one of his signature rants live on TV.

For his part, the General looked completely unconcerned as he splendidly ignored the not so subtle hints being thrown his way. He seemed supremely uninterested by the warning that was being given by the reporter.

The awkward silence that ensued was eventually broken by the cameraman giving us the cue that we were about to begin. The reporter proved that he was a professional as his nervous expression evaporated to be replaced by a confident smile that was the very epitome of calm and poise. “Ladies and gentlemen, viewers across the nation, I am sorry to say that the regularly scheduled program has been canceled. We apologize for the inconvenience, but we have something that we hope you will enjoy just as much as the canceled program, if not more. For the past two decades, the world has been gripped in the midst of an ideological, philosophical, and sometimes even military struggle between the west which advocates the principles of freedom, democracy, and free economy and the east which stands for authoritarianism and socialism. Joining me today are two experts that will help shed some light on this situation and help us gain an in-depth understanding of the cold war. On the right end of the couch is retired General and military advisor to the president, Rex Thurman. He has graciously agreed to come here in order to tell us more about the military aspects of this cold war. To his left is Dr. Jonathan Thorne, an expert in the fields of economics and psychology. He has a dual doctorate on these two subjects and as such, I can’t think of anybody better qualified to talk about the socio-economic side of the cold war. First of all, I would like to welcome the two of you esteemed gentlemen to the show. I would also like to thank you for accepting our invitation and for taking time out of what I am sure is your very busy schedules in order to be with us here today.”

I tried to mimic the reporter’s friendly smile as I looked into the camera. “Thank you for having me. I have always been a big fan of your show. I am honored that I was invited.”

The General also smiled, although his so called “smile” made him look like a bear snarling in annoyance. “I am glad to be here so that I can share my experience with your audience. I hope I can impress upon them exactly how wicked and evil those soviet scums really are.”

I could see the reporter flinch as all his hopes of a semi-civilized conversation went out the window. It was common knowledge that western media peddled propaganda that heavily demonized all soviet nations and painted America and its allies as virtuous, saintly, sometimes even messianic, but there was a thin line between demonizing the soviets and outright attacking them on public TV by calling them scum. The situation had become even more complicated because of the current leader of the USSR, the relatively moderate Mikhail Gorbachev, who was actively pursuing peace with the US. Following this sudden policy shift from the USSR, western media has been trying to remain civil in their narrative when speaking about the east, even when they attacked soviet values and philosophies. Now the reporter found himself in an awkward situation. He could either agree with the General and risk antagonizing the USSR which might create some sort of diplomatic incident, or he could disagree with the General and risk antagonizing the rabid dog in front of him. His eyes swiveled around in panic as if he was trying to find a way to escape and his breathing started to turn a little ragged. Finally, the best solution he could come up with was to pretend like nothing had happened. He ended up ignoring the General’s comment, and instead, cleared his throat and abruptly turned towards me. “Dr. Thorne, a lot of people have speculated that the reason for the tensions between the two super powers, America and the USSR, is due to differences in ideology and one of the main differences between the two nations lies in the economic systems that they follow. America follows a free market system while the USSR follows a much more restricted socialist system. Can you please explain to us what these two systems really mean? What is socialism? What is capitalism and free market economy? What are their strengths and flaws?”

I was a little surprised when he suddenly turned the conversation towards me, but I was willing to cooperate with his rather transparent effort to dodge his impending doom. “Before I begin to explain the definition of these two terms, I would like to point out that they are not simply economic systems. Socialism and Capitalism go beyond the realm of economics and affect almost every aspect of our daily lives. They have become deeply ingrained into our society and have become a part of our collective psyche.”

“What do you mean by that? Can you elaborate?”

“What I am trying to say is that these two systems have become a part of our respective national identities. Capitalism has become as much of an integral part of being an American as socialism has become for being a Soviet. When we talk about the clash between socialism and capitalism, we must simultaneously consider these two nations who are concurrently trying to shape the world in their image. Even if we ignore these rather obvious implications, when you asked me to talk about capitalism and socialism, you are asking me to describe two concepts that are incredibly complex and have multiple connotations attached to them. I will try to do my best to answer your question, but I doubt there is anybody on earth who can give you an unbiased, complete, and completely accurate answer.”

Before I could continue my explanation, I was interrupted by the General who enthusiastically shouted, “I wholly agree with what the good doctor is saying. I don’t know much about these so called economic systems and what-nots, but I do know about these god damn commies. They are evil sons of bitches who kill innocent people just because they wouldn’t do what they say. They are crazy tyrants hell bent on destroying anything that doesn’t resemble themselves, ideologically speaking. Nothing good can come out of following these commie doctrines, so this so called “socialism” must be just as foul as the minds and mouths from which it originates. Evil begets evil.”

The reporter had a violent physical reaction as the General spoke. His body recoiled every time a word left the General’s mouth. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, but he appeared to be unable to make a single sound. His face slowly started to turn an ugly shade of purple, and in the end, he ended up looking like he was having some sort of seizure. Finally, I decided to intervene before the reporter’s head exploded from the pressure he was under.

“That is not what I meant. In fact, the General has just demonstrated one of the main problems that arise when discussing capitalism and socialism. There is a deep stigma attached to the philosophy of socialism simply because it originates from and is championed by people that we perceive as our enemies. Nowadays, people are thinking in terms of us versus them, so it becomes difficult to analyze these topics without bias, and that is what I was trying to convey with my earlier remarks. Now, let me try to systematically dissect the two concepts of socialism and capitalism, fist as economic systems then as all-encompassing philosophies. I will try to accomplish this while being as objective as possible without falling into the pitfalls of any stereotypes, and I hope you will listen with the same mentality. Since it is the one that is closer to home, let us start off with capitalism. What is capitalism? I will not give you the party line that most economists and teachers will give you when asked that question. Instead, I will try to describe what makes it different from other economic systems. All economic systems are dependent on money and capital to some extent, but as its name implies, capitalism is almost completely reliant on capital. Everything is almost exclusively decided by the flow of money. What does this mean? Most economists will tell you that this means that there is more freedom because there are no external restrictions being imposed by the government or other sources. They will tell you that it is a fair system because it allows people who work harder to earn more money. Those are the main selling points of capitalism: freedom and fairness, but is capitalism truly the free and fair system that it is presented to be? The so called “freedom” of capitalism becomes nothing more than a joke when you realize that most of our country’s wealth rests in the hands of very few people; the ‘super-rich’ have monopolized a majority of our nation’s wealth. What does this mean in a system where money translates directly to power? It means that these few elite people have an inordinate amount of power and influence. They are able to manipulate the system in such a way that they can gain even more money and correspondingly, more power. It turns into a vicious cycle that allows these rich and influential people to have a stranglehold over our society. As for the so called “fairness” of capitalism, that all depends on how you define the word fair. Is it fair that there are poor people living in poverty and starvation in the same country where the rich spend millions on their cars, yachts, horse races, golf tournaments and other such frivolous and pointless activities? Is it fair that the richest people are getting richer while the amount they contribute to our society isn’t proportionally high? Is it fair that the majority of the people in a democracy work incredibly hard only to have the majority of the wealth being generated by their hard work fly directly into the pockets of very few people?”

By the time I was finished, I was a little breathless because of the intensity and emotion I had spoken with. The General who was sitting next to me was also breathing heavily, but for a completely different set of reasons; he was literally fuming with rage. I could have sworn I saw smoke blowing out of his nostrils and billowing out of his ears. He looked like an angry bull that was about to charge, and he was directing his bloodshot eyes and metaphorical horns directly towards me. “Think very carefully about what you say next, Doctor. You are starting to sound dangerously close to a commie.” He spit out the word ‘Doctor’ like a curse word and his last statement had the unmistakably sharp edge of a threat.

The reporter, whose complexion had recovered from the unhealthy purple color that it was just a few minutes ago, started to turn pale as he heard what I was saying, but he quickly decided that this was a good opportunity for him to denounce me and score some points with the General at the same time. “Doctor Thorne, are you saying that the current economic system, the one which is being used by the most successful and richest country on earth, is somehow deficient? Are you suggesting that socialism would be a better alternative for our nation? On another note, do you perhaps have any connections or affiliations with the communist party?”

I wasn’t surprised the two had suddenly teamed up to attack me. General Thurman was a well-known soviet hating nationalist and the reporter was part of a media that had become little more than a mouthpiece of the government whose aim was to spread propaganda. No, what really surprised me wasn’t what they were saying but what was coming out of my own mouth. I had initially planned to say a few bad things about capitalism to appear fair before heaping praises on it as the obviously superior economic system. In fact, I had been given a general outline on what I should say by the producer of the show, and I had agreed to follow that guideline before I had appeared on the show, but something had gone awry as I continued to speak. It was as if a shadow had appeared in my mind. Something that was dark and alien leapt out from behind a door that I didn’t even know existed inside of me and started to infect my heart with unimaginable anger and hate. As I spoke, there had been an invisible struggle inside of me, a struggle for dominance. I was slowly losing control to the shadow, and my words continued to get more and more poisonous. What General Thurman and the reporter didn’t know was that the transformation wasn’t complete. The darkness was still spreading. The poison filling my heart was only increasing. Their attack destroyed what little control I had left, and the poison came rushing out of my mouth like water escaping after a broken dam.

“I did not major in politics and it has been a while since I have taken freshman civics, so can you help me refresh my memory? What kind of government suppresses a certain idea that it thinks might be dangerous to its hold on power, all the while ignoring any possible benefits it might have to the general populace? What kind of government immediately accuses anyone that disagrees with them of being part of a terrorist organization and somehow manages to silence them, one way or another? I’m sorry General Thurman, I forgot that you weren’t very knowledgeable about such things. With the way you speak and act, I’m surprised that you know which end of a gun to point at an enemy, let alone have enough intelligence to speak about political systems. Since you are obviously a lost cause, let me turn to our esteemed reporter. Maybe you can answer my questions. What kind of government assures it people that they have a free and unbiased media when, in fact, all the outlets are saying the exact same thing? Is that just a coincidence? What kind of government has an ‘independent’ media that trumpets the government’s propaganda without question? Does this sound like a democratic system? Why does it sound more like some sort of autocratic system?”

As I spoke, I could see the General continue to get redder and the reporter continued to get paler. I was going to continue venting the sudden rage that had invaded my heart when I noticed a man come running into the room. He quickly approached the cameraman and quickly signaled for him to stop recording. I looked straight into this man’s eyes and said,” And here come our overlords. They are going to shut us down because we have expressed views that they can’t allow you to hear. I believe that this is what they call censorship, a word that is tantamount to blasphemy in a truly democratic country with a truly free press, but it is a staple diet of dictatorships around the world. Go on then, shut it down, and know that by doing so, you will be proving my point. I dare you to cut me off and create a live media incident. See if that makes it better.” I continued to look into his eyes as I spoke, and I could almost see the gears turning inside his head. In the end, he realized there was no easy way out of this situation. He was riding on a tiger’s back; all he could do was see it through to the end. He reluctantly broke eye contact with me and looked down at the floor, a clear sign of defeat. I smiled as he backed away from the cameraman with a hunched back and slumped shoulders. If he was a dog, he would have had his tail tucked between his legs. I could feel my smile broaden as that image filled my head, but my good mood was short-lived as it was shattered by the reporter who stuttered, “Dr. Thorne, we are a respectable media outlet. We would never allow censorship. Please don’t overreact or make unfounded accusations that might tarnish our image.”

My attention was automatically drawn to the poor fool. His hands, which were holding his notes, were shaking like a leaf, and I could see beads of sweat on his forehead. I was impressed that he could scrape up enough courage to actually speak when he was noticeably close to having a nervous breakdown. The miserable bastard was pretending to look intently at his notes, desperately trying to avoid my gaze. He might have been looking at his notes like they held all the secrets of the universe, but he still reacted violently when he felt my gaze on him. He visibly shrunk into his seat. It looked like he was trying to burrow inside of it, like he thought that he could escape through the chair if he tried hard enough.

I didn’t find the situation particularly amusing, nor did it stir up any sympathy inside my heart. If anything, his cowardice only made me angrier, and that was obvious from my response which came out laced with rage and sarcasm. “Really? Are you really going to sit there and accuse me of tarnishing your station’s image when it hasn’t even been two minutes since you levied baseless malicious accusations against me claiming that I was connected to a group publicly recognized as an enemy of the state? Are you honestly going to pretend that this show was not a hair breadth away from being taken off air before your producer realized that the consequences would be worse if he had done so? Have you truly sunk to the level where you have become immoral and shameless enough to lie to my face, to your viewers’ faces?”

The poor bastard was completely cowed by my outburst and couldn’t respond to any of my accusations. He just shrunk further into himself like a turtle retreating into its shell. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t have a shell so he just ended up looking sad and pathetic. Seeing him in such a miserable state somewhat sated the thirst for retaliation that his earlier comments had kindled inside me. The darkness that had invaded my heart paused for a moment, the waves of rage that were rocking my heart calmed down for a second, and I used that opportunity to regain a sliver of control. It wasn’t much, but I tried to use that tiny sliver to steer the conversation away from the minefield of politics and back in to the slightly less scary and more familiar waters of economics.

“Although what you said was distasteful and despicable on many levels, you did make one good point. I did overreact to your previous provocation and in my anger, got a little carried away for a second. I am not here to talk about how our precious democracy resembles a dictatorship with two ‘opposing’ parties pantomiming a theatrical struggle while keeping the status quo. I am not here to talk about how two parties have marginalized and suppressed any politician that refuses to join them, or how they have obviously rigged the electoral process so that they have a stranglehold on power. No, I will not talk about the obvious flaws in our political system because today I am here to talk about economic systems.”

I was going to continue when I was interrupted by General Thurman who decided that now was a good time to snap out of the angry trance he had been in. The old man wasn’t looking very good. He was so mad that he was beyond the point where such pedestrian sayings such as “red like an overripe tomato” were enough to describe the state he was in. He was so agitated that he was actually radiating the color red. To make matters worse, the old man was riddled with thick bulging veins that were throbbing dangerously. Until this moment, he had been quietly fuming next to me, radiating and pulsating like Satan’s version of Christmas lights. He was a ticking time bomb, and at that moment, his timer reached zero.

“You ungrateful little son of a bitch! How dare you disrespect me? I was overseas fighting to protect your rights and interests when you were still a baby crapping in your diapers. This is why I hate so called intellectuals like you. You just sit there and blabber about things you have only read in books when you don’t know a single thing about the real world. You smugly insult our democracy while ignoring all the sacrifices that the brave men and women of our army have to pay in order for you to even be here. Not only that but you also belittle the heritage that was handed down to us. What you are doing is tantamount to spitting on the graves of our forefathers. You know what? Sometimes I envy the soviets and the fact that they have the ability to throw annoying noisy insects like you into prison. I think a little bit of jail time would help you appreciate all the rights and freedoms that you currently enjoy.”

I don’t know what he was expecting after his impassioned speech, but I doubt it was what I did next which was to get up off the couch to give him the most patronizing slow clap I could manage. “Bravo General. Bravo. That was a performance worthy of numerous accolades and awards. I bet you win a lot of arguments using that army veteran shtick. Unfortunately for you, I have a bit of a curious streak so when I found out that I was appearing on this show beside the great General Thurman, I just had to find out everything I could about you. I must admit that it was a bit difficult to unearth anything about your military history. Nobody seems to know a damn thing about you. If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought that you sprung up from the ground about thirty five years ago. In the end, it was an old family friend that dug up your deeply buried past. The things I found in your file were quite fascinating. I think everybody will be interested to know that the great General Thurman has seen exactly the same amount of combat as I have, that is to say none at all. He is an over glorified pencil pusher who has ridden a desk to the position he has today. He was carefully assigned to a series of cushy desk jobs courtesy of his father who was also a General. For those of you at home who have lost count, that is one count of censorship uncovered at a major news network and one count of nepotism uncovered at the very heart of the United States government in the space of five minutes. Personally, I think that the most hilarious part of all this mess is that the infamous fire-breathing “T-Rex” has never fought anything tougher than a paper-clip. His most ghastly war injuries are paper cuts and getting pricked by the pins on his medals when he puts them on every morning. This man is a fraud that pretends to be a great war-hero when all he has ever done in his life is to bluster and send the real brave men and women of our army to their deaths with his insane wars. Tell me General, from the two of us, who is the real traitor to the nation? Who deserves to be put into prison?”

The General didn’t even try to deny what I was saying. He just deflated like a leaky balloon. All his fierceness seemed to vanish into thin air as the blood drained from his face and he ended up looking eerily similar to the reporter. I decided to ignore the sickly looking duo and continued with my lecture.

“Now that the honored reporter with the obvious leash around his neck and the venerated General of paperclips are going to behave themselves, let me return to the point I was trying to make before I was interrupted by this nonsense. I believe that I have already finished talking about the basic principles of capitalism, so I think it is about time for me to say a few things about socialism. The thing that never fails to amaze me is the fact that people as practical as the Russians came up with a system as naïve as socialism. Sure, it sounds like a wonderful system, at least theoretically. Let us all work hard for the common interest of society and benefit equally without any feeling of bitterness or spite. While we are at it, why don’t we all just hold hands, sing ‘kum ba yah’, and live happily ever after in the paradise we have created? The problem is that this is not some fairytale. This is real life filled with real people who are infinitely more complex and troublesome than fairytale characters. The Soviets thought that they could curtail all of these unnecessary complexities by enforcing the rules with an iron fist. The problem is that an iron fist isn’t very conducive to a harmonious society. Furthermore, the people wielding the iron fist become susceptible to corruption themselves. It becomes a classic case of ‘who watches the watchmen?’.” At this point, I took a bit of a breather and checked to see if the General and the reporter were showing any signs of acting up. Seeing that they weren’t, I continued with my lecture. “To really understand what capitalism and socialism truly are, we must depart from the world of economics and delve into their psychological aspects. Most of you are probably wondering why the true meaning of economic systems is found in the field of psychology. The answer to that lies in the fact that the true objective of an economic system is not managing money, it is managing people. Although it is not immediately apparent, the purpose of an economic system is to balance the personal interests of an individual inside of a society with the amount that that individual would have to sacrifice for the good of that society. Socialism and capitalism are two classic examples of this. Socialism ignores the individual’s self-interest in order to maximize the amount he or she contributes to society. It is based on the idea that the individual will get enough fulfillment from the growth and enrichment he gets as part of society, regardless of how much that person has contributed. Capitalism is the exact opposite; it almost completely disregards the interest of the society in favor of the individual’s personal interest. The entire system is based on the idea that the whole community will be enriched if enough members of that community prosper. This is all probably meaningless mumbo jumbo to most of you so let me simplify it a little. It all boils down to one thing: greed. Capitalism seeks to harness the greed that people have for money and advancement and use that greed to do constructive things. Although this might seem harmless and clever in the short term, in the long run, it will fan the flames of greed inside of people’s hearts. As time goes on, this greed will fester and people will become obsessed with the singular purpose of chasing money. Society will slowly rot away before our eyes and eventually fall apart. If you look closely, you can see the signs of rot appearing right now. We can see it in our culture, poisoning the minds of our children. We can see it in our politics, filling it with corruption. We can see it in our media, filling it with lies. We can see it in our daily lives, pitting brother against brother and spreading this harmful ‘dog eat dog’ mentality. By saying this, I’m not implying that socialism is better than capitalism. Socialism seeks to extinguish the flames of greed in our hearts, but we are normal human beings, not saints. We might not like it, but greed is a basic part of our psyche, a basic part of who we are. We can’t just simply crack open our skulls and surgically remove it from our brains. It is impossible to make human beings something that they are not, so this system was doomed to fail from the start. At this point, you have probably figured out that I am not a proponent of either capitalism or socialism. If I am not a supporter of socialism or capitalism, then what do I support? Despite what most people would want you to believe, the choice of economic systems has never been a binary one. You can take elements that you like from capitalism and supplement them with the more palatable parts of socialism to make a hybrid system that doesn’t have all of the gaping flaws from the two, and the best part of this approach is that every country could follow a system that is tailor made for it instead of one that is being forced upon it. This nonsensical confrontation between the east and the west can finally end, and we can focus our attention on something more constructive.”

I finished my little speech and turned to the reporter so that he could take over, but the poor sap still looked like he was too shell shocked to continue the show. Since I didn’t really have a choice, I decided to end the show myself.

“I have finished what I have to say for today and our dear reporter appears to have nothing more to add, so I will take his place in saying thank you for watching this show. This is Dr. Jonathan bidding you adieu live from the set of ‘Meet the Press’. I hope you have had as much fun watching this show as I have had making it. Have a good night.”

And that was how the show came to an end, with me smiling at the camera and two corpse-like figures sitting petrified behind me.

**Chapter Ten: Self Reflection**

**Year: 1991**

**Location: Washington DC, United States of America**

**POV: Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

The moment the show came to an end, the darkness that had taken over me retreated to the back of my mind, taking with it the unexplainable and irrational hate that had taken root in my heart. One moment, I was basking in the aftermath of the chaos I had caused, delighting in the defeat of my foes; the next moment, my sanity had returned, and the tingling feeling of excitement running through my entire being was replaced by the dawning horror of what I had done.

What was wrong with me? Why had I flipped out like that? My earlier conduct was poles apart from how I normally acted. I am usually a soft spoken guy with a mellow attitude and very little aggression. Nothing in my history would explain why I suddenly turned into a maniac hell-bent on denouncing the government, the media, and two of the greatest super-powers in the world. And what in God’s name was that mysterious darkness that I had felt taking control of me? Was I going insane? Was it some form of Dissociative Identity Disorder?

I continued to flounder under the ceaseless bombardment of questions that I just couldn’t find suitable or at least plausible answers to. The situation was just too bizarre and unexpected. I was blindsided by the entire incident and didn’t know what I should do next, so I just stood there, paralyzed by confusion and indecision. I ended up frozen in the exact same triumphant pose that I had when the show had ended, completely motionless like a statue.

Unlike me, the other people in the filming studio didn’t have any similar problems of indecision; almost simultaneously, the majority of them started moving towards me. Some of them were walking, some were almost running, but all of them had one thing in common; they all had grim expressions on their faces.

The earlier fearlessness that had been inspired by the intense emotions evoked by the darkness that had encroached on my sanity completely vanished along with the darkness’s influence, so when I witnessed the people in the room coalescing into what could only be described as an angry mob, it scared the living daylight out of me. Luckily, the fear caused by such a terrifying sight finally jolted me free from the debilitating paralysis of indecision that had frozen me in place, and I quickly made the only sane decision I could make in this situation; I decided to run away as fast as my legs could carry me.

Thankfully, the door to the green room that they had kept us inside of while we were waiting for the show to begin was relatively close by, so I was able to escape into the door before anybody could get to me. I ran through the green room without stopping and dashed into the toilet that was found just beyond the door on the other side. I scampered into the clean white room before locking the door from the inside so that nobody could get in.

I had barely closed and locked the door when I heard loud banging coming from the other side of it. The incessant knocking was accompanied by a chorus of voices speaking all at once which blended together into a deafening cacophony of noise.

“Dr. Thorn, please open the door. We have many things that we need to discuss.”

“Mr. Thorn, you are not doing yourself any favors by locking yourself in there.”

“Dr. Thorn, I am from the company’s litigation office. I need to talk to you regarding possible infringement of the company’s rights. This is a serious matter that could result in major lawsuits that could end with you having to pay hefty fines or even serving jail time.”

“Open the damn door!”

“This is ridiculous Dr. Thorn. You can’t hide in there forever. Come out and face us like a man. Even though you look like a pansy, it doesn’t mean that you have to act like one.”

There were an assortment of voices trying to be heard: some were politely trying to coax me to open the door, some were loudly barking at me in pure rage and some were trying to intimidate me in one way or another, but the most vocal of them all was a familiar bellow that nearly shook the door off its frame, a bellow that I had heard only minutes before.

“You lily livered son of a bitch! You think that you can just humiliate me like that and run away? Your life is over! You hear me? Over! Did you honestly believe that there would be no consequences when you completely destroyed my reputation? Let me tell you something, I have friends in high places! I will make sure that you are destitute, penniless and living out of a box in the streets by the end of the week!”

Listening to the unhinged ravings of the enraged General was actually something of a relief for me. I felt perfectly justified when I thought about what I had done to him. I could explain exactly why I revealed how disgusting the scummy asshole was. What I couldn’t do was explain the rest of my rather spectacular outburst to the other members of the angry mob that had gathered outside before they decided to burn me at the stake. How was I going to get myself out of this jam? What was I going to tell the horde of angry people outside who were starting to sound worryingly similar to a pack of wild animals? Ah, sorry about throwing mud at your collective faces and maybe even irreparably damaging the reputation of your whole network, but I was being possessed by something when I did that. It was nothing personal. Can’t we just settle this with a few bottles of beer and forget it ever happened? For some reason, I doubt that a simple apology would appease them.

Compared to the impending sense of doom I felt when I thought about the mob outside, possibly sharpening their pitchforks and lighting their torches in preparation for my burning, I felt absolutely no fear or guilt when it came to the phony General. The bastard deserved every single insult that I threw at him, and he was naïve if he thought that he could intimidate me now that the show was over. Didn’t he understand what kind of deep shit he was in? Did he not understand that he no longer had enough clout to threaten a fly, let alone me? If he truly was that stupid, I would be more than happy to educate him.

“General Thurman, I want to make one thing very clear. I did not run away from you. I didn’t fear you before the show and I certainly do not fear you now. I don’t know if it is because you have started believing your own lies, but you seemed to have forgotten that you are not really a ferocious tiger. You holler about consequences, but what you have failed to realize is that your threats have become as hollow as your fake reputation. As for your so called ‘friends in high places’, I am completely certain that a man as vile as you has no friends. You have sycophants that you coerced or intimidated into following you and people who keep you around because they think you are useful to them. Now that the counterfeit reputation that you have so meticulously cultivated has come crashing down around your ears, the people that had meekly followed you because of your power will either abandon you or maybe even turn on you. You have terrorized a lot of people with your tyrannical ways, and I am sure there are a whole host of people that would only be too happy to take advantage of this situation to kick you while you are down. As for the second group of people that you think are your friends, they will have realized that associating with you is no longer beneficial to them. I wager that there wouldn’t be a single one among them that will answer a telephone call from you. General, you might not have realized it yet, but you are no longer a bright shining star in government. You have become a liability, nothing more than a pile of hot steaming pile of dog shit that nobody wants to get close to. What I am trying to say is: do you want to destroy my life? Bring it on, but I won’t be holding my breath while I wait.”

As I spoke, I realized that the darkness that had previously infected my thoughts might have been gone, but it still had some influence on me. In fact, there were still some lingering traces of aggression left behind from when it had possessed me. The scariest part was that it was blending almost seamlessly with my own anger so that I could barely differentiate between what I normally would have felt and what was being caused by the alien influence. I felt terrified that my personality, the very core of who I was as a person, was being eroded by the malignant entity that was roosting in my mind. I was terrified of losing myself to it, of eventually becoming less and less like me and more like it, but another part of me, a part that I wasn’t particularly proud of, was not sure if that was a bad thing. Since I was a little boy, there were certain labels that had plagued me wherever I went: weak, cowardly, gutless, sissy. I couldn’t escape these labels when I was at home, at school, at work. They even followed me when I went out for a stroll or to a restaurant to get a bite to eat. I couldn’t even run away from them in my own head because deep down inside, I thought that if everyone believed I was a craven sissy, maybe they were right. As a result, I was always self-conscious when it came to this matter, but all of that self-doubt and discomfort that I had become accustomed to seem to melt away when I was being possessed by the darkness. Instead of self-doubt, I felt confident in my own skin. As for what everybody else thought, I had honestly not given a shit. It was an extremely liberating experience for someone like me, a person who was sensitive to what people said about him. That was why a part of me, the part that always cringed whenever it felt other people’s gazes, wished for the darkness to come back to deal with the angry mob outside. Unfortunately, the darkness obstinately stayed in the far corner of my mind and refused to help me. In the end, all I could do was to scramble for a way out of the mess I found myself in, but the only idea I could come up with was a ridiculous ploy to stall them.

“Umm… can I please have a moment of privacy? I am trying to use the lavatory and I would appreciate it if I didn’t have a crowd breathing down my neck while I use the toilet.”

One of the more angry voices outside shouted, “What are you doing in there?”

“Do I need to draw you a fucking picture? What do you think I am doing? Just give me fifteen minutes, and I will come out when I am done.”

To be perfectly honest, I didn't really expect that the old "I am using the porcelain throne" excuse would hold enough water to get them off my back, but surprisingly enough, the crowd seemed to accept my bullshit explanation, which could at best be described as somewhat implausible, and they dispersed very quickly. I could tell that there were still people standing outside the door, but there were only one or two of them instead of the veritable throng of noisy bastards that were there only moments ago. Their departure was so sudden that I was starting to wonder if the thought of me defecating was really that terrifying when I heard a calm voice say, "Take your time in there Dr. Thorn. There is no need for you to hurry, so you can calmly take care of whatever business you have in there and no one will disturb you. We will discuss everything that has transpired and how to properly handle the inevitable fallout when you are ready."

Ahh... So it wasn't my rather flimsy excuse that drove off the mob? Who did that calm voice belong to? What kind of person had enough power to instantly force an unruly mob of people to disband and why was he helping me?

Just like the earlier bunch of questions I was asking myself, this new bunch of questions also lacked convenient answers I could attach to them. I could of course just open the door to find out the mysterious polite man's identity, but something told me that I might not enjoy the experience. Even though the man had been very polite and sounded very reassuring, the amount of apprehension that was weighing down my stomach like a lump of lead had only increased from when I was being besieged by the angry mob. My alarm had gotten to the point that I could feel my own heart beating heavily against my chest and my breathing had gotten fast and shallow. I could feel myself getting more and more panicked, but I just couldn't understand why I was having such a dramatic reaction to a few nonthreatening words from this man. As time passed, my strange reaction only got worse until it got to the point where I was starting to show early symptoms of a panic attack. In the end, I decided that I was being silly. I was a certified psychologist for God's sake! How can I let myself crumble under a completely irrational fear? Sure, I didn't know the man, and it might be true that he might want to harm me in some way, but the possibility that he might harm me wasn't a reason for me to have a meltdown just because I heard his voice. I gritted my teeth, balled my hands into fists and shook off the weird reaction that my body was having. After regaining some of my composure, I walked away from the door and calmly walked to the sink so that I could splash some water on my face. Maybe the cold water could help me clear my head and sharpen my judgment.

I turned on the little tap, cupped the cold water that gushed forth in both my hands and vigorously washed my face with it. I could feel the cold water work its magic as some of the confusion and alarm started to fade away. When I was done, I looked up from the sink and came face to face with my own reflection in the mirror above the sink.

I couldn't help but grimace a little when I saw my visage being reflected by the mirror. My flinch wasn’t because I found my reflection to be unappealing. I didn’t have any scars or deformities. Actually, my face wasn't ugly by any means. If anything, my features could be considered pretty handsome, emphasis on the pretty. The curly golden brown hair, the large baby blue eyes, the thick eyelashes and small red lips made me look entirely too feminine. To make matters worse, even my facial structure was feminine; my cheekbones were dainty and my almost nonexistent jawline looked like it was carved with the gentleness of soft fluttering butterfly wings; it was entirely too delicate.

All in all, I had the kind of face that confuses men and induces jealousy in women. Hell, if I saw a woman who looked like me walking down the street, I wouldn't even hesitate to ask her out. The problem is that I am not a woman. I am just a man that has a lot of features that most people associate with the standards for feminine beauty. That means that many men who see me experience some form of attraction or arousal, but then they are immediately disgusted and angry by their subconscious reaction. Unfortunately for me, most men don't want to confront themselves or be honest about what had happened so they automatically place all the blame on me and I end up being detested for something I didn't do. I tried everything to make myself look more butch, but nothing seemed to work. I even tried working out so that I became more muscular, but nothing could change my face and the animosity from almost all the men I met continued unabated.

As for the women part of the equation, I haven't had much luck with them either. There is the jealousy that I mentioned earlier, but that goes away pretty quickly. Instead, it is usually replaced by the intense desire to possess me, and when I say 'posses' I don't mean it in the way that two people who are attracted to each other would like to 'possess' one another. No, I mean it in the way that a person possesses a nice car or a good house or a pretty purse. They want to own me so that they could parade me around to their friends and show off exactly how pretty I was. Were all women like that? No, but all of the women that have ever approached me only did so because they wanted to feed their own egos by having the shiniest boy toy of their group. As a psychologist, I found it interesting that women could exhibit the exact same traits that they find so abhorrent in men. As a person, I found these women to be very detestable. Did this mean I became a celibate monk? Hell no! Through the years, I have had more than my fair share of lovers, but the amount of serious relationships I have ever had could be counted on one hand. I got through my early years by telling myself that I was happy and that any man would kill to be in my position. A long list of casual lovers with no commitment? Who wouldn't want that? But as I grew older, I realized exactly how lonely such a life could be, for however much I was able to satisfy my more base needs, I couldn't fill the hole in my heart left by knowing that I didn't have a partner to share my life with.

Apart from my troubles with the two genders, my less than masculine features have also had a detrimental effect on all the other aspects of my life and my interaction with society. Through years of television and magazines, people have been programmed to recognize certain features as dependable and professional. The fact that I had none of these features combined with my face's apparent inability to age has had a less than desirable impact on my professional life. In fact, 'less than desirable' is a gross understatement. My professional life has been fraught with difficulties that originated solely from how I look. From my colleagues refusing to recognize my work simply because of my face to people ignoring me because they wouldn't believe I truly was an expert in my field, I had to put up with a lot of shit in my career. Hell, I had to take another professor with me whenever I had to teach a class I have never taught before simply to convince the students that even though I might look the same age as them, I am a 36 year old man and their teacher, not one of their classmates.

Besides inviting hate from men, making me unable to find a wife, and forever dooming me to a life where I am labeled a weak 'pretty boy' unworthy of respect, my looks have also had other serious impacts on my life, this time revolving around the relationship I had with my family and my life at home. My golden locks, blue eyes and delicate features were a constant reminder that I didn't belong in my family. I am the oldest in a family of four. That breaks down to two younger sisters, Olivia and Rose, and one younger brother, Thomas. All of them have straight black hair, strong jawlines and a certain heroic air about them that just screamed dominance. They are the kind of people that naturally exude an aura of aristocracy that intimidates other people. In short, they all looked and behaved similar to my mother, the no nonsense matriarch of my family. Next to my mom and my other siblings, my baby blues and angelic good-looks stuck out like a sore thumb.

It was no secret that I had a different father from the rest of my siblings. In fact, all but the last two of us have different fathers. What made my situation exceptional was that no one was willing to talk about my father. My mother, Dorothy Blackthorn, was a powerful business woman in a world that is mostly dominated by men, but that had made her somewhat jaded when it came to human relationships so it was not really surprising that her first marriage ended in divorce. Her marriage with wealthy oil tycoon Henry Letterman ended spectacularly with him leaving behind his daughter Olivia and taking virtually nothing when he left. Truth be told, most people were more surprised when her second marriage didn't implode in the same way. They find it shocking that it has lasted this long and continues to endure to this day. This marriage, which was to a little known French accountant named Jean Dupoint, has bore a daughter and a son, my younger brother and sister, Rose and Thomas.

As for me, the oldest brother, my past was much murkier than theirs. I was just a little six year old boy when I first got wind of the fact that I was a bastard born out of wedlock. On that fateful day, I had escaped from my nanny and was playing around near the kitchen when I overheard one of the maids talk about it to one of the other maids. I didn't understand exactly what the words 'bastard' or 'wedlock' meant but I could understand from their tones that it wasn't a good thing. Like any kid would do in this situation, I ran to my mother to ask her what the two words meant.

My mother might have been cold and unfeeling when she dealt with other people, but she had always been very caring and warm whenever she was with me. In fact, that day was the very first time that I had ever seen the scary side of my mother that she had always carefully hidden from me. It was as if the caring and warm personality was just an illusory mask, and in that instant, it dissolved right before my eyes.

Appearance wise, she didn’t really change. She didn’t frown in anger, she didn’t flush in rage, and she didn’t even gnash her teeth. She looked exactly the same as she always did when she played silly little children games with me or when she read me a bedtime story so that I could sleep.

No, the way she transformed wasn’t very obvious to the eye, yet at the same time, the way that the atmosphere around her had shifted was so dramatic that it was discernable even to my six year old self. She calmly smiled at me but everything about that smile was wrong. What was supposed to be a friendly gesture turned into something frighteningly predatory. She asked me where I had heard such words and I answered honestly that I had heard it from the maids. At that moment, I was so scared that I didn’t even consider lying to her. When she heard my answer, she smiled again and nonchalantly left the room. When she returned, the scary monster that had possessed my mother had disappeared. She was still smiling, but it was the warm familiar smile that I was used to seeing on her face, instead of the draconian abomination that I had witnessed earlier. She even sat me down on her lap and explained to me how the two words I had heard were very bad words that were used by stupid and mean people. She told me that I didn’t have the same daddy as my little sister and that my father was not a very good man. She told me that that some people would try to use these facts to insult me but that I should also remember that none of these insults were true. She finished by telling me that I didn’t need a father because I had a mother that loved me more than anything else in the world and that talking about my father made mommy very sad. She made me promise to never talk about him again, and that was the last time I heard anything about my father.

That might seem a little harsh, but to be frank, I didn’t care about the identity of my father since I had everything I could ever want as a child. Was I curious? Sure, I was curious, but I was also quite content to be pampered by my mother. I never wanted to see that scary part of her again.

Long story short, I grew up to be a spoiled little brat that got whatever he wanted. I had absolutely no responsibilities except to do the bare minimum to achieve passing marks in my studies. The part that made me feel really special was that my mother didn’t show that kind of affection to any of my other siblings. She was incredibly strict with them and made them work unbelievably hard at everything while coddling me and making sure that I was happy. I’m ashamed to say that the fact that my mother treated me better than my brother and sisters made me feel a sense of superiority.

But as the years went by and I grew older and wiser, I realized that my mother’s tough attitude towards my siblings wasn’t a sign of disregard but a sign of esteem. She was grooming them to take over the vast financial empire that she had built over the years.

Where did that leave me? Even though I was the oldest son, it was clear that she had very little expectations from me. I realized that she just wanted me to live a life of luxury without having any effect on the company she had built.

The realization that my mother, the person that I loved the most, thought so little of me nearly crushed me to pieces. I was so depressed that I spent almost half a year just drinking and partying as hard as I could, but no matter how much I drank and no matter how many parties I went to, I couldn’t forget that I was nothing but a piece of worthless garbage with no potential. In my mother’s eyes, I had no value. These thoughts continued to torment me until I finally decided that it wasn’t okay to just live my life flitting from party to party and smelling like whisky. I decided to prove that I was useful, that I was not less capable than my siblings.

That year, I quit drinking and cleaned up my act. I stopped going to parties and started focusing on my studies for the first time in my life. My hard work eventually paid off and I graduated with full honors from Washington University. I even managed to graduate with two different majors at the same time, psychology and economics. I chose those two fields because I believed that they were the two fields that would allow me to be most useful to my mother.

The day after I graduated, I immediately returned to my home where I expected to be welcomed with open arms, but my expectations were dashed by what awaited me. My mother was completely apathetic when I told her about my accomplishments.

At first I was confused by her reaction. Didn’t she understand? I had worked so hard that I had ignored every other aspect of my life excluding food and sleep. I had dedicated myself to proving myself to her. I had worked so hard that it even impressed the university enough to grant me an academic scholarship. They nearly begged me to enter their masters program, all on their own dime. Why was she ignoring what I was saying? Why was she talking about a new estate she had bought me in the Hamptons? Why was she telling me that it was the best time to take a vacation in the Swiss Alps?

Eventually, I realized that what I achieved meant absolutely nothing to her. She didn’t see me as someone worthy of helping her. She just wasn’t able to see me as something more than a helpless spoiled little boy and it didn’t matter how much I try. In her mind, I was forever going to remain as the useless one in the family. They didn’t need me to help them. They didn’t want me to help them.

It took me a few minutes, but my mother’s complete indifference to my announcement and what it meant finally sunk in. At first I just couldn’t believe it. I tried to explain why I did what I did but she continued to talk about other nonsense, not showing even a smidgeon of interest. Finally, I just snapped and started shouting at her. On the day that I was supposed to have my triumphant return to my home, I had a huge row with my mother and I left with all my expectations dashed into pieces.

With my ultimate life goals turning into a meaningless joke, I didn’t have any purpose left in my life anymore, so I just continued to do what I was doing: studying economics and psychology at the university. Habit is a truly frightful thing. Even with my loss of motivation, I just continued with my daily life because I had nothing better to do. I continued in that vein until I received my PhDs in both these subjects and that meant that I had reached the end of that particular road.

At first, I considered learning other things but I was sick and tired of just aimlessly devouring information from textbooks, so I left the university and wandered aimlessly through the country, looking for something to occupy myself. During my travels, I inevitably found myself devoid of ready money so now and then, I went to the bank to refill my wallet and it was during these visits that I noticed something odd was going on. My visits would always start normally with an almost robotic teller treating me apathetically but it would always end with the same teller suddenly becoming enthusiastic and helpful. Sometimes the branch manager of the bank would even make a personal appearance to make sure that I was being treated well. At first I assumed that they had somehow figured out that I was one of the scions of the Blackthorn family and were trying to get into my good graces, but my suspicions were raised when my treatment didn’t change even after I legally changed my last name from Blackthorn to just Thorn.

It was during one of these bank visits that I found out that the reason for the special treatment I was receiving wasn’t because of who I was but because of how much money I had in my account. For an Economist, I was ridiculously careless with money so I never really checked how much money I had in my account. I was perfectly content to just let the bank handle everything since I thought that all I had in my account was my meager earnings from teaching part time at the university. I had no idea that my mother had snuck in fifty million dollars into my account when I wasn’t looking. When I found out about this little fact, what little pride I had left took a further hit. Most people might have seen the money as something good but I just saw it as just another sign of my mother’s contempt. It was like fifty million little posters from my mother that indicted how incompetent I am and how little faith she had in me. The unsolicited charity money made me fly into a rage and I immediately tried to return it, but the confused bank teller kept telling me that it was impossible. Eventually, the ruckus that I was causing attracted the bank manager’s attention. He made a few phone calls and confirmed the bank teller’s assertions that the money couldn’t be returned, but he did find out that the large deposit that was made into my account came with a message. The printed out message that he handed me read: “My sweet little angel, I know that this is probably unwelcome after how our last conversation ended. I think that there has been a grave misunderstanding about my motives when I acted to stop you from entering the family business. The truth is that I never wanted to keep you away from the business; I wanted to keep the business away from you. Since you were just a child, it was clear to me that you had a pure soul filled with generosity and love. Even as you grew into a willful teenager that was drunk half the time, you still managed to have enough kindness in your heart to secretly give away half of your allowance to charity. At your core, you are a compassionate person, and the last thing I wanted to do was to snuff out that pure light in your soul by exposing you to the ugly and treacherous world that big companies like ours operate in. Your brother and sisters were born with a certain ruthlessness and cunning that you lack, so they manage to thrive in this world, but I would rather you stay my unblemished little angel than become a successful businessman.

P.S. I hope that you take this money in the spirit that it is meant, as a small gift from you mother to make sure that your life is comfortable.”

The message from my mother didn’t fix everything, but it did help me calm down. I still felt that my mother was just trying to mollify me with a thinly veiled excuse but I was sick and tired of thinking that I was inept or insufficient in some way. I took the money as compensation for the distress I was put through for half my life and went back to the University to teach full time.

My walk down the winding road that was memory lane finally ended and I found myself back in the present, still staring at my reflection. It was a little absurd that just looking at my reflection brought up all of these memories and complex emotions. I chuckled a bit and mumbled to myself, “You are one funny guy John. For a psychologist, you sure do have a lot of psychological issues.”

My laughter rang out in the empty toilet sounding a little unhinged. Maybe I really was going crazy. There was the entire ‘getting possessed and going off on live TV’ debacle from before and now I was talking to my own reflection.

<Could be worse. Your reflection could start talking back. That is when you know that you have really lost it.>

The sarcastic answer to my unspoken thoughts coming from what I thought was an empty room startled me so much that I slipped on the wet ceramic floor and fell back on my ass. While I was still sprawled on the ground, I looked around in search of the source of the voice, but I could find neither hair nor hide of anybody in the toilet. I turned my head in every direction, trying to find the person that had spoken, but my efforts turned out to be in vain.

<Hey princess, over here. Not there, over here. Look forward and up.>

I unconsciously followed the instructions of the teasing voice, and my eyes fell on the mirror. The angle was oblique, and the sink was blocking most of it because I was on the ground but I could see something moving in the mirror. I looked behind me to check what was being reflected, but there was nothing to see. I turned back to the mirror and I could still see something moving.

<There we go. Hello Johnny boy, nice to meet you. Umm, can you get up from the floor? This angle isn’t very suitable for a conversation, plus you never know what is on the floor of a toilet.>

To my horror, it dawned on me that the voice was coming from inside the mirror. After that realization, I scuttled backwards in fear to try and get away from the mirror as fast as possible. I didn't even try to get up from the floor, I just scuttled backwards like a startled insect until my back was pressed up against the closed door of the bathroom stall behind me, and since I was no longer right underneath the mirror, I could finally see what was being reflected on it.

It was my own reflection, but it was not mimicking my movements like a normal reflection should. No, it was looking down at me with a mocking smile as if it was amused by my distress.

So this is what insanity felt like? First was that whole darkness possession thing, then there was the irrational fear caused by the calm stranger’s voice and now I was having hallucinations. That last one was the final nail in the coffin; I could no longer deny that I had lost my sanity.

<You are not insane. I am not just a hallucination that was created as a result of psychosis. Granted, you are not exactly well balanced and your mind is more messed up than most, but you are not crazy.>

My own reflection was telling me that I wasn't crazy. I guess it made sense that when a person like me who has a lot of issues with his or her image cracks under pressure, his or her subconscious would create a construct based on that person's image. Plus there was the fact that the construct I had created was answering questions my unasked questions which conclusively proved that the autonomous reflection in the mirror was not real. It was just in my head.

<Not every woman you meet is conniving bitch, not every guy you meet is a homophobic hate projecting bastard, and not every person you meet looks down on you. I have seen some of your memories and some of the problems that you have interacting with other people stems from your own preconceptions about how people perceive you, but everybody has this problem to one extent or another, it is just a bit extreme in your case. This doesn't mean you are nuts. As for the second part of your conjuncture, yes I am in your head, but that does not mean I am not real. What was that famous quote? ”There are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamt by your philosophy.” I am not simply a part of you. My memories are woefully incomplete, but what I do know is that I wasn’t always like this. I have memories of being a complete person instead of this shadow that you see now.>

For a fraction of a second, his expression became sad and confused but it instantly reverted back to that teasing smile, making me doubt if I had really seen the lost look in his eyes in the first place.

<What I am trying to say is that I am a fragment of something, but not your imagination or subconscious. I did not originate from you, but I wasn’t complete enough to function on my own so I did take pieces of you to complete myself. In conclusion, I am not you, but I am not not-you either.>

My day was already crazy after the earlier debacle but now it seems like the insanity was just beginning and things were starting to get stranger and more complex with every hour that passes. At this juncture, I could only proceed by making a choice on whether my reflection was telling the truth or not. I could either believe his story and proceed with the assumption that something unbelievable had happened yet I still retained my sanity, or I could do the rational thing and admit that I needed professional medical help.

While the second choice might appear to be the more obvious choice but it was also the less appealing one. Crazy or not, I did not want to admit myself into a psychiatric hospital. With that in mind, I made the decision to go along with my reflection’s words, at least for now.

“Alright, let us say that I believe you. If you are something that is partly made out of my own psyche, what is the rest of you made of? Who are you? What are you? ”

<Johnny boy, you are going to hurt my feelings! We only met a couple of minutes ago and you have already forgotten about me?>

I wracked my head trying to figure out what he meant. Something foreign that got into my mind recently? In the end, there was only one thing that could fit that description. It was actually quite obvious when I thought about it, but the way things were going, it wasn’t that surprising that it took me this long to make the connection. The apparition that was masquerading as my own reflection was the same mysterious darkness that had possessed me earlier.

<Bingo. Give the man a prize.>

I remembered all the hate and resentment that I had felt radiating from the darkness, and I felt fear. What kind of malicious spirit had infected me? Was it some kind of demon?

As I spoke, the familiar image of myself being reflected in the mirror started to change. The pale skin turned ink black. A pair red eyes appeared above the two normal blue ones and antler like horns started to grow out of the forehead of my reflection.

<No. That doesn’t feel right. I am angry and bitter, but I am not evil.> When the voice finished mumbling, the terrifying image of the demon reverted back to my own likeness.

What the hell was that? Was I really possessed by a demon?

<Relax cupcake. I did tell you that I was just a fragment of something and that I was using pieces of you to complete myself. I am nothing more than a dissociated consciousness and the question of my identity remains ambiguous. That is why I currently look like this; much of my identity is taken from you, so I look like you. When you brought up the idea that I might be a demon, that idea affected how I saw myself and as such, the image that I have of myself also changed accordingly. Once I discarded that idea, I returned to being your twin brother.>

“Doesn’t that mean that one day you could decide that you are a psychotic murderer and I would be stuck with a psychotic murderer in my head?”

<That is a fair point, but I guess that is just a risk you have to live with. You are stuck with me so I suggest that you don’t think too hard about such depressing possibilities, your life is dismal enough as it is. Just pretend I am not here until we figure things out. If you need to contact me, just think and I will know. Nobody else can hear me so try not to react overtly when I say things to you or people will start thinking you are crazy. Now, unless you are planning on living here forever, I think it is about time that you get out of this damn toilet.>

**Chapter Eleven: More Insanity**

**Year: 1991**

**Location: Washington DC, United States of America**

**POV: Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

<Unless you are planning on living here forever, I think it is about time that you get out of this damn toilet.>

The man in the mirror might have been imaginary, but he did make a good point. I couldn't keep myself barricaded inside of this toilet for much longer without wearing out what little patience or goodwill that the man outside still had remaining. He said I could take however much time I needed, but I don't think he expected me to take quite this long, so it was about time that I left the toilet under my own steam before I get hauled out by security.

I straightened my clothes, patted my pants and jacket to remove any dust I might have picked up when I fell on the floor, and took a deep breath to pull myself together for what felt like the hundredth time in less than ten minutes. I tried to convince myself that everything was going to be fine and checked the mirror to see if my blatant lie had any effect. My feeble attempt proved to be futile because instead of disappearing, my reflection winked at me and made 'shooing' gestures with his hand. I sighed in resignation and left the sink, the mirror, and that damned reflection behind.

<I'm still here you know, and I'm not sure I like your attitude towards me.>

Was this how the rest of my life going to proceed? With a smug annoying bastard prattling around in my head? I didn’t know how long I could take it before I would go insane, if I wasn’t insane already, which according to recent events seemed unlikely.

<Fine. Fine. I'll be quiet. You won't hear a peep out of me. I'll be as quiet as a door mouse. Hmm....is a door mouse really quiet? I guess they do make those squeaky little noises. Silent as a grave, maybe? But that sounds much too ominous.>

I ground my teeth in irritation with my hand on the toilet's door handle. I was going to go out, but I couldn't face whoever was outside with an obnoxious voice talking incessantly in my head. It would be kind of difficult to have a conversation with somebody when I was constantly being distracted by the ramblings of an imaginary person. Didn't he just promise to shut up? Why was he still shooting his mouth off like a machine gun?

<Aren't you just using me as a convenient excuse to delay confronting the difficult situation waiting for you when you go out there? I promised to be quiet and you keep telling yourself that I am the reason that you are not getting out of this toilet, I guess that makes us both liars. Now, stop bitching and put on your big boy pants. It's time to see what is waiting for us beyond that door.>

I am not a man that likes to curse but I found myself struggling to think about the smug little shit in my head without resorting to offensive words. The most annoying part of the whole experience was that he was in my head and as such, he knew all of my thoughts inside and out, so he knew more about my own thought processes than I did. He knew all about the things that I try to ignore, all of the little lies I tell myself, so his assertion about my cowardliness being the true motive behind my hesitation to go out was correct. In my heart, I knew that I was scared of the consequences awaiting me when I left this restroom. In the end, I resolutely turned the doorknob and opened the door, not because I had a sudden burst of courage, but because I refused to let the little shit inside my head have the satisfaction of being right.

There were a lot of things I was expecting to see when I opened the door: an angry crowd, security guards, or even maybe some scary men wearing black suits waving badges around and proclaiming that they needed to “take me in for some questioning”. What I didn’t expect was a single harmless looking portly man in a tuxedo and top hat to be waiting for me without an ounce of impatience or hostility on his ruddy face. The portly man’s well groomed handlebar mustache twitched as he looked up at me and started to smile like he saw his favorite grandson.

<Oh my god, it is the monopoly man! The only thing that is missing is the monocle!>

The annoying voice in my head was right, the man in front of me did look an awful lot like the monopoly man. He even dressed like the monopoly man. I was so surprised by the uncanny resemblance that it took me a few seconds to register the fact that the man had extended his hand out for a handshake. When I finally did notice, his hand had already hung there for an uncomfortable amount of time and things had gotten awkward. In an attempt to dispel the awkwardness, I responded to the overdue handshake with a little too much enthusiasm and things got even more uncomfortable.

The portly man pretended to not notice my little blunder and continued to smile. “You are Dorothy’s kid, right? My name is Barnaby, Barnaby Phelps. I’m a friend of your mother’s.”

My mother’s friend? What did that mean? What exactly was he doing here?

“Nice to meet you Mr. Phelps. I am Dr. Jonathan Thorn. I would like very much to know what your purpose is in coming here.”

“You are a cheeky one, aren’t you? You just pissed off half the world with that little speech you made on live TV and you have made enemies you can’t even imagine. After that stunt you pulled, you still have the gall to ask me what I am doing here? I am here to save your ass, kid. Your mother sent me here to protect you and bring you back to her manor where you can stay safe till this whole thing blows over. Until then, I am your babysitter.”

I looked him over from top to bottom and I couldn’t imagine how the pudgy little man could protect me from anything. “Look Mr. Phelps, I appreciate your concern, but I doubt I will get assassinated on the street just because of the things I said. I don’t think that the US government is that petty.”

“I don’t have the time or patience to explain to you just how much you have fucked up or how dangerous the situation is for you right now. Just do what I say and I will take you to your mother, she will explain everything to you. Just shut up and follow me.”

When he said “follow me”, a black tattoo of what looked like a leaf or a feather suddenly appeared right between his eyebrows and started to glow with an unsettling purple radiance. As I was bathed in the eerie purple light coming from the tattoo, I suddenly had the irrational urge to relax and follow Mr. Phelps, but that urge disappeared as quickly as it came, leaving me shaken and fearful. What the hell was that? Did I start hallucinating again? Was I really going insane?

<I have got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that you are not hallucinating. This is not originating from your mind, so I can conclusively tell you that it is not a delusion. The bad news is that you are not hallucinating. This is happening in real life and the friendly monopoly guy just tried to mind fuck you with a magic tattoo.>

For the millionth time I asked myself what in god’s name was going on. First it was the darkness that took control of me during the talk show, and then it was a talking reflection in a mirror followed by a voice in my head, now I was almost hypnotized by a magic tattoo? No. Just no. I have had enough of this shit. I needed to get away from this insanity.

Phelps must have seen the panicked expression on my face and guessed that I was going to bolt like a startled deer because he shouted “Stop!” at the top of his lungs. This time the tattoo between his eyebrows turned into an image of a bird’s wing which then started to shine a hundred times more brightly that the feather did, nearly blinding me with its dazzling purple glow. My body froze up, instinctually following Phelps’s instruction, but just like before, the unreasonable urge that I had to follow his instruction quickly faded and I regained control over my body. Unfortunately, Phelps had used the time I was hesitating to pull out a pistol and point it at me, dashing any hope I had to escape.

“Don’t move kid. I don’t want to shoot you in the foot to stop you from running but I will do it if I don’t have a choice.”

I considered taking the risk and running away even with the gun pointed at me, but my sense of self-preservation wouldn’t allow it. I just couldn’t dreg up enough courage to do it.

“What do you want with me? Why do you want me to go with you so badly that you are even willing to pull out a gun to force my cooperation?”

Phelps looked a little unsure on how to proceed but eventually he just sighed tiredly. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I was told that you were one of the rabble. They told me that you were completely sealed up and that you couldn’t access an ounce of power. Someone royally fucked up and now I have to deal with this shit,” he then looked right into my eyes and asked, “How long has it been since you could wield your power? How much do you know? Have you told anybody about your gifts?”

Power? Gifts? What did that mean? Part of the rabble? Sealed? He was saying words whose meaning I knew but I couldn’t understand what he was trying to say. My confusion must have been obvious because Phelps’s expression changed from slight alarm to curiosity.

“You haven’t been unsealed, have you? You aren’t awake? But how can you resist my compulsion if you can’t connect with…” He didn’t finish that sentence. He seemed to have a sudden revelation as he spoke and his expression quickly changed from curiosity to alarm. Before I could say or do anything, the portly little man grabbed my shirt with one hand and pulled. The small buttons holding my shirt together popped off and the shirt tore open revealing my bare chest. It wasn’t much of a sight to be honest. I try to work out as regularly as possible, but I have always had problems trying to add muscle mass to my body. I wasn’t sickly or fat, but I was no body builder either. No, my chest was completely unremarkable, or it would have been if it wasn’t for a strange tattoo of glowing green ones and zeros which had mysteriously appeared right over where my heart would be. The thing reminded me of the tattoos that kept appearing on Phelps’s forehead. I looked up at Phelps to see if he would explain what was going on but before I could speak, he started to howl like a madman.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! How the fuck did this happen? Which idiot dared to do this right under our noses? Which asshole is insane enough to actually try this? How is this even possible? Why did this asshole not get devoured? This makes no sense! What should I do now? What the fuck should I do!?”

The man looked like he was ready to breakdown into tears, but he slowly started to calm down as he muttered, “She will take care of it. She has to. I don’t need to make a decision, I just have to get him to her and let her figure it out.”

With the return of his sanity, he regained his former confidence. Without saying another word, he pushed me down the hallway with the barrel of the gun pointed at my back. We passed countless people on our way to the elevator and out of the building but nobody seemed to notice the gun that Phelps was brandishing openly or my bedraggled state with my shirt ripped open. Even when I tried to make eye contact with them, they seemed to see right through me.

With what felt like the entire world ignoring us, Phelps led me to the parking lot of the building and pushed into a sleek black convertible, a Jaguar two-seater.

<The man might be a complete dick, but he does have good taste.>

With the way things were going, the beauty of the car I was being kidnapped in was the last thing on my mind. I was too busy trying to make sense of the things I had seen, the things I had heard, and their connection with what was happening inside of me. This all started with the darkness, so maybe Darky could enlighten me on what was going on.

<Darky? Is that what you are calling me now? I guess it is significantly better than little bastard. As for your conjecture that all of this has something to do with me, you might have a point. As we have already discussed, I am nothing more than a very incomplete piece of something and I am not sure what that something is. Is all of this related to me? Maybe, but if it is, I don’t have the required memories to answer your questions. Beyond my involvement, there is one thing you seem to be forgetting, or should I say deliberately ignoring. All of this might have something to do with me, but it definitely has something to do with your mother. Phelps has already said that he is a friend of your mother’s and I don’t think he was lying. There was also the things he said about you being sealed and not being unable to access your power. That seems to imply that you have gained some sort of power at some point and you were then sealed on purpose. You and I met only recently and we have already established that I am a foreign entity. If my guess is correct, the power you obtained and is still sealed inside of you probably predates our meeting today by quite a while. In fact, something tells me that this dates all the way back to your birth and it involves your mother, your absentee father, and maybe even your entire family.>

As Phelps started the car with one hand on the steering wheel and the other pointing the gun at me, I couldn’t help but agree with Darky. This whole thing seemed to reek of a large conspiracy and my mother seemed to be at the center of it.

Any other thoughts I was having were forcefully erased when the car suddenly lurched forward with a ridiculous amount of acceleration as Phelps floored the gas pedal. He drove like a crazy bat out of hell until we left the underground parking lot and continued to floor the pedal as he zigzagged through traffic.

<Someone is in a hurry. It looks like Phelps wants to get rid of you as quickly as possible.>

I could understand that in Phelps’s mind I was like a hot potato that he needed to get rid of, but the way he was driving was more likely to get us in a car accident than get us where we were going, and just like I predicted, when was trying to navigate through a particularly tight space between a van and a truck, he scraped the van pretty badly. I thought that Phelps would stop like a normal motorist after a car accident but I had underestimated how insane he was, he didn’t even glance backwards or slow down as he continued to drive.

I looked back through the rear view mirror only to notice that the van was following us. The angry driver was probably trying to flag us down so that we could compensate him for the damage on his car, but he didn’t stand a chance of catching up with us, or at least that was what I thought until I saw a traffic jam ahead of us.

As we were forced to slow down and then stop, the van pulled up behind us and rammed us so hard that we crashed into the car ahead of us. The van then backed up and rammed us again. Phelps looked back at the van and started to curse.

“Buckle up kid, this is not just some random angry driver. I am afraid we have run into some of that ‘deep shit’ that I told you about earlier. I’m going to need your help if you don’t feel like letting them turn us into a human and metal sandwich. Here is the deal, I’ll open up the traffic, your job will be to steer us through the space that I create, understand?”

Before I could answer, he forced my hand on the steering wheel and closed his eyes. As the van backed up for a third ram, Phelps opened his eyes and they had completely turned black, from his sclera to his irises there was nothing but darkness. A bright purple beam shot up from the center of his forehead which transformed into an image of giant black wings in the sky. Black feathers started to fall from the giant wings in the sky and at least one feather fell on each car that was ahead of us. The feathers passed through the metal roofs of the cars like they didn’t exist after which the drivers in these cars all suddenly and simultaneously decided to pull over to the side, opening a narrow space between them. I was gawking at this unbelievable spectacle when Phelps suddenly floored the gas pedal and I was forced to pay attention to the road so that I could navigate through the narrow space between the cars. The space between the cars was barely wide enough for the small convertible, so it sure as hell couldn’t fit the considerably wider van. I glanced at the rear view mirror to check if the van had given up, but I was terrified to find that the maniac in the van was bulldozing through the narrow space without a thought for the cars he was hitting or the damage he was causing to his own van.

When I pulled my eyes from the rear view mirror and focused back on the road ahead, I saw that we were nearly through the traffic jam and the cause of the jam became apparent. The road was barricaded by a roadblock made from two vans similar to the one chasing us and two strange people completely covered by black cloaks stood fearlessly in front of the vans even though we were barreling towards them at a ridiculously high speed.

Phelps grabbed the steering wheel back from me and yanked it violently to the right, trying to drive around the roadblock but something red streaked out from one of the strange cloaked people and hit the front wheel of the car. There was a loud sound of a tire popping and that was the last thing I remember before the world started spinning and everything went black.

**Chapter Twelve: An Impossible Battle**

**Year: 1991**

**Location: Washington DC, United States of America**

**POV: Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

I woke up to the unpleasant sensation of what felt like a hundred hot knives scything through my chest. It felt like all of my ribs were shattered and they were poking into my lungs.

<Stop being so overdramatic. You have only fractured two of your ribs. Stop being a baby and get yourself out of here. Things are a little dicey right now and you do not have the luxury to spend what little precious time you have moaning and complaining.>

I somehow managed to ignore the pain, no thanks to Darky’s insensitive words, and took stock of my situation. I was hanging upside down in the overturned wreck of the car while being held in place by the seat belt and unfortunately, all of my weight was being held by the strap which was in turn transferring the force directly to my fractured ribs, causing the sensation of blinding pain I was feeling. I tried to release the seat belt’s buckle, but it seemed to have jammed after the crash. I looked around for a solution but the car was empty. Phelps seemed to have left the car at some point, leaving me to fend for myself.

Just as I was about to find something sharp to saw through the seat belt, I was distracted by what I saw through the cracked windshield. Phelps was standing facing three men in black cloaks who had their appearance covered with colorful bird-themed Venetian masks with long beak like protrusions.

Phelps looked bedraggled with his tux ripped in several pieces and blood running down from a large gash on the side of his head into his mustache which was quickly turning into a bloody mess, but he still managed to sound cool as a cucumber as he said, “Are you sure you want to do this? There is still time for you to reconsider. All you have to do is to turn around and walk away, and we will pretend like none of this ever happened. The alternative is that you and all of your fellow vultures will be hunted down like dogs. We let you survive in the margins of society because we are not bothered to wipe you out. It will not take much effort to exterminate you.”

One of the men in the masks, the one in the mask covered in orange feathers, cackled like a mad crow, revealing crooked yellow teeth. “Save your empty threats for someone who cares. You and I both know that the wardens have enough enemies and that you can’t risk messing with us or your enemies would take the chance to rip you apart. Like it or not, I doubt that what happens here will have any far reaching consequences.”

Phelps shook his head and replied, “You do not understand at all. Maybe if we were talking about a normal member of our organization then you might have been right, but I am not some low ranking peon. This will not be easily forgotten. If you do this, you will have to pay a price and that price will be in blood.”

“Pay a price? Do you think we care? Do you think we came here for you? Do you think you can distract us from the man in the car? Our diviners have already told us about him. A man filled with power, yet powerless to fight back. He is like a fruit ripe for the picking. Our diviners have already told us that he was the one in Leonardo’s prophesy, the one we have been searching for all these years. Once we have him and rip the power from his soul, we will finally achieve our founder’s ultimate goal. We will make ourselves gods.”

Phelps didn’t respond. He just took off the tattered remains of his tuxedo jacket and took out a small knife. He quickly sliced his palm and drew strange circular symbols on his cheeks and forehead with his own blood. As quickly as he drew them, the symbols made out of blood vanished and Phelps’s entire body started to shine.

The attitudes of the three men suddenly changed from a relaxed almost blasé arrogance to one of alarm. The one with the black mask shouted, “Shit! The diviners never said anything about him being able to invoke the form of an avatar! Hawk, I need you to use your glyphs to contain his aura of compulsion. Sparrow, I need you to harass him from the back while I take him on from the front. Remember, the avatar transformation is temporary so all we need to do is hold him off until he runs out of gas. Don’t try anything fancy.”

“Hey Crow, are you sure you can hold him off in a direct confrontation?”

“Just shut up and do as I say.”

By the time the trio had finished speaking, Phelps had stopped shinning, but the person standing there was no longer recognizable as Phelps. He no longer resembled the portly middle aged man wearing a tux; he had become a tall muscular man with shinning golden hair and clean white linen tunic, but the most remarkable part of his transformation was a pair of giant wings growing out from his back. He would have looked like a stereotypical representation of an angel if it wasn’t for the fact that his wings were ink black and menacing instead of being white and fluffy.

The new Phelps flashed his perfect white teeth at the three men and looked down at them from his suddenly elevated height of about two meters. “Did you really think that I was going to let you do anything you wanted and not fight back? Vermin like you think that they can fight against the Wardens? Have you forgotten your place? You are nothing more than vultures who prey on the carcass of the stray and forgotten. Your repugnant kind are bottom feeders and today, there will be three less parasites in this world.”

With a wave of his hand, Phelps made a flaming sword appear out of thin air. He grabbed the flaming sword and rushed towards the trio who responded by spreading out from each other. The one in the orange mask strafed to the left before he took out a golden medallion from somewhere underneath the folds of his cloak. He made some hand gestures and bright green symbols started to flow out of the golden medallion and stuck themselves onto Phelps’s black wings. For a moment, Phelps’s wings flashed a bright purple color making the symbols quickly fracture and disappear, but new ones constantly took their place and Phelps’s wings lost some of its menacing quality.

The man with the red mask also took out a golden medallion and dripped some of his blood on it. A large green snake appeared behind him and rushed towards Phelps. The snake tried to coil around him but with a flick of his wrist, Phelps incinerated the snake with his flaming sword.

The final masked man, the man in the black mask, did not take out a medallion like the other two. At first I thought what he took out was a sword, but on closer inspection, I realized that it was a Japanese katana. The gracefully curving blade that looked like it was made out of plain steel and the unadorned wooden handle that had a small hemp rope wrapped around it made it look out of place in a fight were the others were brandishing swords of fire and magic snakes, but the man in the black mask had a certain dignity about him when he stood there gripping his unremarkable katana. His steps were graceful as he walked towards Phelps and he didn’t even flinch as his katana met Phelps’s flaming sword. Surprisingly, the katana didn’t melt. It held firm under the onslaught of white hot flames coming from Phelps’s sword.

For a few seconds, Phelps and the man in the black mask just stood in a deadlock, their weapons crossed and each straining to get advantage over the other in a contest of strength, but it was clear that they were evenly matched. Eventually, the deadlock was broken when Phelps’s right wing thrust towards the man in black and he was forced to duck in order to avoid it. I thought it was illogical for the man to be so scared of Phelps’s fluffy looking wings until I saw the large gash that was left in the asphalt where the masked man had stood before. That made me realize that Phelps’s wings were every bit as lethal as his flaming sword.

After the masked man dodged Phelps’s attack, the fight between the two escalated quickly. Phelps used his flaming sword and his wings to attack, but his advantage was countered by the masked man’s speed, agility and pure skill. Phelps might have had more fire power but the masked man’s technique was just breathtaking.

<I don’t know much about what is going on, but I really don’t like the guys in cloaks. They were talking about you in the same terms that someone would use to talk about a tasty piece of fruit that they were going to juice. You should hope that Phelps wins this fight.>

Darky was right. I wasn’t sure if Phelps was a good guy or a bad guy but I was sure that I didn’t want to end up in the hands of the masked men. I stopped staring at the fight outside and picked up a piece of broken glass to cut the seat belt, but the damn thing did more damage to my hand than it did to the strap that was holding me in place. I glanced at the fight outside and decided to ignore the pain and blood and continued to saw at the seat belt while I muttered, “No shit Sherlock. The people who ran us off the road without a care for our safety are bad guys? How long did it take you to figure that out?”

<No need to be so snide, I am on your side here.>

“Well, is there anything you can say that might actually be helpful.”

<Have you noticed how everybody seems to insist that you have powers? What if they are right? Maybe you can use this so called power to escape.>

“Seriously? That is your best suggestion? There are so many things wrong with that plan that I don’t even know where to start. Let us begin with the fact that even if I have some sort of power, I don’t know how to use it. If you have any clues on how to make a flaming sword appear out of thin air, please let me know. Secondly, even if I knew how to use this power everybody seems to think I have, remember Phelps talking about how it was sealed?”

“Who are you talking to?”

I nearly had a heart attack when I heard a soft voice coming from right beside me. I turned around in alarm and found myself face to face with a woman who was so close that our noses were almost touching. I could even feel her warm breath on my face. Since I was still hanging upside down from my seatbelt and she was uncomfortably close to my face, I couldn’t really see what she looked like. All I could tell was that she looked very young, had skin that I would describe as dusky and her eyes were a startling shade of vivid green.

“I asked you who you were talking to.”

Her voice had the tender immature tone that one would expect from a young girl, but the thought that she was just some innocent girl trying to help me vanished when her normal human pupils elongated and turned into slits like the eyes of a snake.

“There are no ghosts or other ethereal beings around here, so I repeat, who are you talking to?”

<Don’t tell her about me John. This girl is incredibly suspicious. How did she even get here? How did she sneak up on you without making a sound? Maybe she is a friend of the masked people outside.>

I decided to once again follow Darky’s advice. Something told me that revealing his existence would be a bad idea.

“No one. I was talking to no one. I have a habit of talking with myself when I am alone.”

The woman didn’t respond immediately. She looked at me suspiciously for a few seconds then got even closer to me until she was almost nestled into my neck and inhaled deeply. She then stepped backwards with a disapproving expression on her face.

“You are lying. Luckily for you, I don’t have the time to dig the truth out of you.”

She extended her hands towards me and her finger nails elongated into sharp claws. At first I thought she had changed her mind and was going to “dig it out of me” after all, but my fears turned out to be baseless as she proceeded to use these claws to rip apart the tough nylon seatbelt that had been trapping me. With the seatbelt gone, gravity did its thing and I fell in a heap onto the car’s roof. I had barely reoriented myself when the woman threw handcuffs at me.

“Here is the deal, you are going to put on those handcuffs and do as I say. Disobey and I rip your throat out. Try to run away and I rip your throat out. Try to call for help… well, you get the picture.”

For the first time, I had a proper look at the woman who was threatening me. I guess woman was a bit of a stretch, she barely looked like she was eighteen. The girl looked like she could be of Arabian descent which was evident by her slightly dark complexion. The enigmatic young lady wore a strange ensemble consisting of a tank top paired with khaki shorts. She was slim and her muscles looked well defined like those of an athlete. Overall she looked like an Arabian Disney Princess that was the star of her high school track and field team; she looked wholly out of place crouching in the wreck of a car, threatening a defenseless man.

I was wondering how I was going to deal with the violent young lady when I felt a stinging pain on my arm. I looked down and I found four parallel lines of blood from my shoulder to my elbow.

“As I have already stated, you will either obey or you will die. This is not a joke. This is your last warning, put on the cuffs and follow me.”

<I think you should do what she says. She might look like a teenager but she is obviously a lot more than meets the eye.>

I really had no choice, so I put on the cuffs as instructed after which she pushed me out of the car and shoved me in the opposite direction of the ongoing fight between Phelps and the men in robes.

I followed her instructions and didn’t make a peep as we walked away but we were still noticed when the man with the orange mask coincidentally looked our way.

“Stop! Stop! Our main target is escaping!”

His shout caused everybody to stop what they were doing; they stopped fighting and we stopped retreating. Everybody turned and faced each other. Phelps leveled his piercing stare on the girl beside me and a smoldering golden flame appeared in them. “What is one of the forgotten doing here? What do you intend to do with my ward?”

She stayed silent and looked around at the four men for a few seconds before muttering, “Why can’t things ever go as planned? Why does everything always go to shit?”

The four men were still staring at her when she suddenly darted towards them so quickly that she turned into a blur. To their credit, the men reacted quickly and used their respective powers to try and stop her. The man in orange threw his strange glowing symbols at her but she just ripped them apart with her claws. Phelps and the man in the black mask attacked her with their weapons but she easily jumped above Phelps’s flaming sword and used the masked man’s katana like a springboard to catapult herself in front of the man in the red mask. With a flash of her hands, the man fell to the ground desperately holding his neck, trying in vain to contain the gushing geyser of blood escaping between his fingers.

Before anybody could react, she was back at my side in a flash, licking the blood off her claws. “Mr. Phelps, I do not wish to harm Jonathan, but if you try to attack me, I will kill him. The reason I took him in the first place is because the Wardens seem to put a lot of value in him, so here is the deal: you have something I want and I now possess something that you want. I propose that we meet at a later time to make an exchange. If you want to contact me, you know where I will be. Now, you should finish off those vultures. I have already taken care of one of them, I am sure you can handle the rest.”

She then yawned like she was bored and dragged me away from the fight which had restarted after the death of the man in the red mask. She pushed me into a small banged-up car and we drove off.

As we were pulling away, I thought I saw a woman looking towards us in the rear view mirror, a pale woman who looked almost ethereal as her golden hair shone in the sunlight. Her face looked awfully familiar but I just couldn’t remember where I had seen her before.

I tried to take a closer look but by the time I took a second glance, we had already rounded a corner and I lost sight of her.

**Chapter Thirteen: Sanctuary**

**Year: 1991**

**Location: Washington DC, United States of America**

**POV: Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

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 having fun 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 unusually 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 pervert. 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 with fear. The casual way she had talked about the possibility of mutilating me 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 people? 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 unreasonable things that kept 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? Were 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 exchange for 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 the inevitable crash to the bottom. 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 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 from being seated and falling to standing and stationary, 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 had 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 started walking 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 a completely random yet mysterious arrangement. The symbols seemed to be shifting around when I looked at them from the corner of my eyes but when I focused on one symbol in particular, it stayed stationary without any sign of movement making me doubt what I saw earlier. The woman’s mystique wasn’t limited to her perplexing 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 frozen lake, while the one on the right was a 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. The unadorned and simple circlet 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 celestial 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 the ones I saw in a play about Troy, but I doubted that the shield on his back and the gladius strapped to his belt were harmless props. His movements were smooth and his steps were nimble supporting my assumption that he was a true warrior that can use his weapons not a fake posing with pretend swords. 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 come 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.

“Dr. Jonathan Thorn, let me start by offering my most sincere greeting. You probably find all of this very strange and I realize that you were brought here under duress which might make you suspicious of our intentions, but I can assure you that we were not complicit with your abduction. That was the unilateral actions Ms. Carla Belluci and I can promise you that Ms. Carla will be tried under our laws and punished accordingly for the crime of acting against one of our brethren without just cause. Besides the unfortunate event that was caused by the desperation of a young girl, you must have realized by now that you are in a rather tricky situation. For your own safety, I strongly suggest that you choose to remain here for the time being. You are in great danger Dr. Thorn and there are many powerful people trying to get their hands on you. Until such a time that you have enough knowledge and ability to protect yourself, I sincerely extend to you an invitation to stay here in our home. We can fully guarantee your safety and you will find everything you might need for a satisfying life. Be it excitement and happiness or peace and tranquility, we have entire worlds dedicated to fulfilling any desire you might have. Whatever you want, whatever you wish, 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 which had become muddy because of the 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 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, pushed her hand away and backed away from her to put distance between us. I had realized that she was probably more dangerous than anybody I had met thus 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 to shut up?

<Hell no! I have been trying to contact you since the masked lady appeared but you were 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 normal looking teenager yelled at me while glaring furiously 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, but 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. Seeing my discontent expression, 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.”

**Chapter Fourteen: The Cat**

**Carla Bellucci**

My earliest memories were that of hell. The days filled with misery and pain, the place where the bright dreams of children where ruthlessly smothered and their hearts wilted like flowers in the flames of despair, it was all deeply burned into my mind.

St. Mary’s orphanage was probably founded by good people with good intentions, but by the time I got there, all of the “good” had long since disappeared, and it had devolved into a pit of demons in wimples who tortured children under the guise of discipline. The so called nuns that ran the place where sanctimonious fiends who took every chance they had to spout passages of the bible in our faces to prove that God was on their side while committing heinous actions, things like beating a hungry two year old girl until she was black and blue just because she had asked for some bread or caning a three year old until her hands were bloody just because she accidentally broke a plate. They would even have a compassionate smile on their faces after their vile deeds, claiming to be instruments that moved by the will of God to guide us away from evil and towards redemption. They would constantly tell us that bad girls don’t get adopted, that they would never go to heaven, that their souls would rot in the depths of purgatory.

Was I a bad girl? Was that why I didn’t have a mommy and daddy? Was that why I was in this hell? Dark thoughts swirled in my young mind, casting shadows on my heart and draining all the hope I had left in me. My desire to escape was gradually replaced by a quiet resignation to bear the damnation that I had been born into. My prayers for a miracle stopped as my heart turned into a frozen wasteland devoid of any warmth.

I was six years old when I finally found out the truth about why I was consigned to a cursed life. Most of the other girls were in the orphanage because their parents where dead or destitute, but my parents were not dead, they weren’t too poor or in some situation that wouldn’t allow them to take care of me. No, the only reason I was cast away like trash was because of the woman who gave birth to me, a person who I refuse to call my mother.

The unfortunate chain of events that culminated into me ending up in St Mary started with my father, who was a soldier in the navy, getting deployed overseas a month before my birth. Because of his ill-timed deployment, he was absent when the despicable piece of shit that gave birth to me decided that she didn’t want to be a mother and dumped me at a random orphanage in order to run away with my father’s degenerate brother, a deadbeat drug addict who was freeloading off of my father at the time. When my father found out about what had happened, he tried to leave the navy to hurry back, but he was unable to get permission from his unreasonable commanding officer. He ignored his orders and tried to leave anyways, but he was caught and court-martialed for insubordination as well as desertion, landing him in jail for five years. He tried to convince his relatives to find me and take me in but nobody was willing to answer his desperate pleas. By the time he was free and he made it to the orphanage, he found a sad little girl with empty eyes and a broken spirit, a gloomy six year old unable to understand why a strange man was hugging her and apologizing while tears ran down his face.

I had thought that I would be over the moon with happiness if I left the orphanage but when I searched my feelings for joy, all I found was numbness, like I had forgotten how to properly experience emotions. Even when my father took me home and did everything he could to give me everything I might ever need or want, I still couldn’t get myself to be happy. I smiled and went through the motions so that my father knew I appreciated his efforts but we both knew that it was superficial.

Don’t get me wrong, this didn’t mean that I did not love my father. On the contrary, watching his unflagging effort just to watch me exhibit a positive emotion, it was enough to evoke affection even from my shriveled up heart. The process was slow but eventually, he became the only person I could trust. As for my relationship with the rest of the world, it was a nonissue. I couldn’t make friends in school, something about me scared all the kids away. How could I be friends with naïve little children who had no idea about the true nature of the world when I have already witnessed the ugliness that is hidden below the surface? Even the teachers avoided looking into my eyes, like they were scared of what they would find there if they looked too long.

I wasn’t the only one who was disillusioned with the world. My father had also lost all the faith he had in his family, his friends, and human nature in general. He worked hard to earn money, but besides that, he didn’t have any social life. I was the only one he loved, and he was the only one capable of dragging out emotions that I thought I had lost forever. It was us against the world, and we were both just fine with that.

Nine years later, nothing had changed. I was still an anti-social recluse and my dad was still a single father who didn’t like unnecessary interactions with people. He still showered me with presents and I still treasured each one of them, even when they were unpractical and girly things, stuff I found so repulsive that it could almost be described as an allergy. One day, he came home with one of those girly presents that I was supposed to hate so much, a little cat with a bow wrapped around its neck. At first, I was skeptical about the whole thing. Could this even be considered a gift? Isn’t taking care of an animal more of a chore than a present? I hesitantly extended my hand to receive the cat but it flinched away from my touch and started to shiver in fear. I looked into its scared little eyes and I immediately knew that it used to be a stray. I was familiar with that scared and confused look in its eyes unique to those that had been thrown away, it was the same look that the girls who were new to St Mary had on their faces. At that point, something clicked and all of hesitation disappeared. I carefully picked up the poor little thing and gently rubbed its head until it stopped shivering. I decided to make sure that that look never appeared in its eyes again.

It started off innocently enough, an hour here and an hour there playing with the cat, but as the days passed by, that time kept growing and growing until I spent virtually all of my free time with it. Eventually, I started skipping school just to spend more time with the cat. I even started collecting other stray cats off of the streets. I was like a drug addict who couldn’t kick his habit; my entire life was consumed by my obsession. It got so bad that I didn’t leave the house for weeks at a time, only going out to stock up on cat food and sardines. My father tried to reason with me but I barely paid attention to him. In the end, he was forced to bring a psychiatrist to help me. The so called Doctor turned out to be completely useless; he couldn’t even diagnose my problem properly, let alone treat me. He just mumbled some unintelligible medical mumbo jumbo before he recommended that the cats be forcibly taken away. My father hesitated to obey the psychiatrist who was obviously a quack, but he couldn’t bear to see me in such a mess. Left without any other choices, he tried to take the cats away.

One day, he went into my room which reeked of the acrid smell of cat urine and other repulsive odors and approached one of the sleeping cats with a resolute expression. He reached out to grab it when it suddenly woke up and started to bristle and spit angrily. When I heard the cat in distress, I snapped. Everything turned blurry and when I came to, I was choking my father. I held him against the wall and I had somehow lifted him off the ground. He dangler in the air, desperately struggling to pry my fingers open but having little luck since my left hand was tightly clamped around his neck. I had my other hand out, poised to strike down at any moment. When I looked up at my raised hand, I found that my fingernails had turned into claws.

It was like I was dowsed with freezing cold water; the haze that had clouded my thoughts melted away and I could think clearly for the first time in months. The realization of what I had almost done hit me like a punch to the gut. I quickly let go of my father like my hands were scalded and he slid down to the floor and fell down in a helpless heap, coughing and gasping for breath. Full of dread, I slowly shifted my line of sight downwards until it landed on my hands only to see claws slowly retract into my fingers and turn into normal fingernails.

I stumbled backwards in shock, trying to run away from my own hands, but it was futile; they followed me no matter how much I tried to retreat from them. Finally, I raised my eyes from my hands and looked at my father who was sitting against the wall. Our eyes locked and I could clearly see the horror and fear when he looked at me. The dread I could sense from him made my heart feel painful. He was the only person who I loved and I couldn’t bear to see the way he was looking at me. I tried to explain what happened. I tried to say something to make things better, but I couldn’t find words to undo what I had done. What could I say? How could I explain something even I didn’t understand? What if this happened again and what if next time I couldn’t stop myself? I couldn’t allow my father’s life to be at risk by staying close to him. I realized that the best thing that I could do to keep him safe was to put as much distance between us as possible. After making that decision, I immediately ran out from the room and left the house without waiting for my father to react.

The next time I calmed down enough to think again, I found that my feet had unconsciously carried me into a dark ally. All the fear, pain, terror and confusion that was bottled inside of me broke loose and I just crouched down on the spot and I broke down sobbing.

I was still crying when I heard the loud chirping of a cricket so clearly that I thought it was on my shoulder. I looked around for the annoying insect that wouldn’t let me grieve in peace, but I couldn’t find anything. To make things worse, the irritating chirp of the cricket was joined by the sound of water dripping from the roof gutters which was then followed by squeaks of rats stowed away in the various corners of the alley. The sounds that I could hear slowly started to increase until the once quiet alley turned into a cacophony of noise. One moment, my ears were ringing from the racket, the next moment, all of the sounds that threatened to overwhelm me vanished as suddenly as they had come and all that was left was the crisp sound of footsteps coming from behind me. Even though I knew that the footsteps weren’t really that loud, the tap tap from the heels colliding with the floor sounded like booming thunder to my ears. I turned around to see who was behind me and I was surprised when I saw that the previously dark alley had turned as bright as a well lit room; I could see everything clearly, including the person who was approaching me.

The person was clearly female. She was wearing a robe that was tight enough to accentuate curves that made it clear that there was no doubt of that fact. Half of her face was covered by a white butterfly mask decorated with delicate blue patterns, but the mask did not cover her lips which were curved up in a mocking smile.

“What do we have here? A newly born forgotten who hasn’t fully adjusted to her fragment? You must be very scared and confused. It’s okay, I will take away all your pain and make everything okay.”

She took out a golden medallion from underneath her robe and pointed it at me. The medallion flashed blue for a second and a blue spear made entirely of ice materialized out of thin air. The spear just hung there in midair before it hurtled straight towards me.

I saw the point of the spear get bigger as it come directly at my face but before it could impale me, it seemed to slow down until it almost came to a stop. Some unknown instinct started rising up in me and I jumped onto the dumpster next to me to avoid the icy spear. A second spear was created and came at me but I dodged this one by jumping to the opposite wall. I continued to jump from wall to wall, avoiding all the ice spears that kept being thrown at me until I was nearly on top of the woman in the mask. With a final jump, I threw myself towards her and reached my hand out to her neck.

My jump took me past her and I landed behind her in a crouch. I turned around just in time to see the woman fall down to her knees while clutching her neck, desperately trying to stem the flow of the blood that was gushing out from it. She made a gurgling sound and fell down to the ground, with a confused look in her eyes which then turned glossy in death.

I looked away from the woman who had breathed her last and stared at my hands. I saw claws covered in blood growing out from the tips of my fingers making it abundantly clear as to who was responsible for the dead body behind me lying in a pool of blood. I didn’t know which scared me more, the fact that I had killed a person or the fact that I felt absolutely nothing about it. Who was that woman? How was she able to make those ice spears? How was I able to do the things I could do? Was I even human anymore? I just stood there lost in thought when I was snapped out of my trance by footsteps coming towards the alley. I knew that it would be stupid to stay there and be found with a dead body and that I should leave as quickly as possible. I hesitated for a moment but I still went back to rip the golden medallion from the dead woman’s neck before I ran away as fast as I could.

For weeks after that incident, I slept on park benches and in homeless shelters, barely scraping up enough money from menial jobs paying less than minimum wage. I had no choice since I didn’t want to reveal my real identity since every time I did so, people like that woman would come searching for me. If I wanted to evade their pursuit, I had to constantly move around which meant that I couldn’t get any long term jobs. The only people who were willing to hire me were greedy sharks that took advantage of individuals who didn’t have valid identification.

A few months later, I was mopping the floor at a convenience store when I was approached by a young man with a kind smile on his face. The “warm” smile on his face didn’t do much to decrease my caution which kept mounting the closer he got. If anything, it made me raise my guard even more. I had been through a lot in the past couple of months and I had learned from various encounters with friendly looking people that all sorts of wicked and dark thoughts might lurk beneath a pleasant and amiable veneer.

I surreptitiously observed him while I pretended to focus on moping the floor, getting ready to react at the first moment I notice any suspicious movements. “What do you want?”

He pretended not to hear the aggressiveness in my question and completely ignored my stand-offish attitude as he continued to smile. “There is no need to be alarmed. I just want to talk.”

“Why would you want to talk with me, a person that you have never met before? Better yet, why should I talk to you?”

“Oh, how rude of me. My name is Mathew. I am just a person who was wandering about when I spotted you. After seeing your current situation, I guessed that you didn’t choose your current occupation or lifestyle. Don’t get me wrong, I am not looking down on you, I just feel like you are wasting your potential.”

“Let me guess, you are here to offer me a job.”

“A job? Not quite. What I am offering you is some answers.”

“Answers? What answers?”

“Let me ask you some questions. Have you found yourself behaving in strange ways or feeling unexplainable emotions? Have you experienced blackouts where you don’t remember what happened for a certain period of time? Have you gained abilities that are beyond what is possible for a human being?”

I narrowed my eyes as I finally looked straight at him. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Relax, I’m not here to expose you or to take you to a lab to dissect you or something like that. You are different, but that doesn’t mean you have to hide from society and live your life in the margins. There are people like you all over the world and they form groups that help keep them safe. I come here representing one of those groups. But before I get to the nitty-gritty details, let us go to somewhere a little more private. This is not the kind of conversation we should be having out in the open.”

I hesitated to take his offer but his proposal was just too tempting to ignore. The caution that had been etched into my bones after weeks living in the streets struggled with a burning desire to get a chance at living a life that was more than simply surviving day to day. In the end, I was just too tired of the life I was living. I decided to take a leap of faith, even if there was a chance that it would lead to something bad happening to me.

After making my decision, I picked up the mop I was using and threw it at the shopkeeper’s face. I smiled at the surprised and angry look on his ugly face and said, “I quit.” I then turned towards the boy without caring about the shopkeeper’s curses and threats. “We should go out the back door. There are some things I need to take care of before I leave.”

Once we were in the small loading area behind the store, I secretly made my claws extend from my fingers before turning a full one eighty and using the momentum to shred the boy’s shirt into pieces. Understandably, he stumbled backwards in shock.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

I disregarded his anger and calmly retracted my claws. “I might have decided to believe you for now but I’m not stupid. What I just did serves two purposes. The first one is to give you a warning. If you do anything, and I mean anything, that makes me think that you want to hurt me, I will not stop with simply ripping your shirt apart.”

“And the second? You said that you had two reasons for doing this.”

“I was checking if you had one of these.” I rummaged into my pocket and threw out three golden medallions.

He looked at the medallions with astonishment. “Vultures? You took out three Vultures?”

“No.”

He sighed in relief and asked, “Then how did you get your hands on these without killing their owners?”

“Huh, so the owners of these medallions are called Vultures? By the way, I think you misunderstood what I meant when I said no. I wasn’t denying that I killed them, I was just saying that the number I killed is far more than just three. I sold most of the medallions to pawn shops for money.”

He gulped loudly and stuttered, “Far more than three…? Sold them at a pawn shop…?”

“Hey, are you alright? You seem a little pale.”

It took him a while but he managed to pull himself together enough to lead me to a nearby sushi restaurant and explain the facts of the supernatural world over a sumptuous feast of nigiri and unagi.

And just like that, I was inducted into the messy world of myths and legends, a world of magical creatures and horrifying monsters, a world of demons and gods.

**Chapter Fifteen: Sanctuary II**

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

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

Physically, Percy wasn’t a very big guy. 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 what I believed to be true or false, 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, so much so 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 of that with pure enthusiasm. Percy was like a big yellow dog; he was invasive, ignored any attempts to make him behave properly and he was 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 melted away and got 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. The result of my examination 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 begins with 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 completely accurate. 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 down to the size of a finger nail 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 I could peel it off 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 underneath his arms and forced me to jump through the bright white light before I could even take the time to be surprised.

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, well, not exactly. 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 there 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 familiar meadow. “That is where we just came from. That area is called the crystal meadow and it is a solitary area. That means 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 people 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 house 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 either, 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 door that was 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 shocking blood-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 skin than the skimpiest of swim suits. Their voluptuous bodies were barely contained in the tiny 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 parts 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 quite 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 took me a while to realize that 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 at the trio who had just left her side. “Children, where are your manners?”

Her voice was soft and she sounded pleasant but the three women froze and the ripples around me that indicated that I was under attack 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 followed. 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 have probably guessed by now, 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 or consequences, 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 eternal partner 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 to 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 as if he was erasing the memories of that whole experience with the gesture 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 giant golden eagle that swooped down from the sky and transformed into an unkempt man covered in a tattered green cloak and holding a wooden staff. Percy introduced him as Cedric the druid. After meeting succubae, a vampire and a goddess, meeting a druid felt relatively tame. The visit to the forest 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 farewell 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, colossal structures 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 giving me a stern warning to stay away from both. 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 my experience if I was to go would not be pleasant.

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 insane.

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 a reproduction of 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?

The old man 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 surface world. It is where most of the people in the Sanctuary stay.”

We entered the bizarre world that mirrored the city that I had lived most of my life in. 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 landing on me like they had physical weight making me feel incredibly 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 one visible orange eye 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 you have been 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.”

**Chapter Sixteen: The Truth about Reality**

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

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

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 the common symptoms of having one too many drinks, 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 naked 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 completely fell off as she got on top of me. What followed was something rough and violent. There was no place for love or care, just pure intensity.

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.”

\* \* \*

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 mouthwatering buffet of knowledge and walked towards the desk where Merlin was once again engrossed in a book. I stood in front 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 in front 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 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 a little too early. Merlin continued to talk and blew all my certainty 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 have the ability to 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 religions 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 are as susceptible to change because of human beliefs as the present. We might think that the present itself is proof of the fact that the sequence of events that brought us to the present happened in a certain way, but that is not necessarily true. 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?”

“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 this theory, it had too many holes in it, but I filed it away inside the drawer 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. They became infinitely powerful but at the same time they became impotent to use that power.”

“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. Although this in itself is enough to mark you as a target to the vultures, it 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 manages to get you enough power to become a god without any of the restrictions that the current divinities are subjected to. We cannot allow one of those maniacs to become an unstoppable existence free to run roughshod in the world.”

“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 members 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 , a being whose most dominant aspect comes from the fallen angel Lucifer, 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. Following their second victory, the Wardens knew that it was only 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 to the problem was to trap him under a powerful enchantment created from enochian and demonic runes, an unholy creation fashioned from the language of the angels and the forbidden tongue of demons. 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 world’s 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. He 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 instigate conflicts that cause the death of countless people in order 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.”

The subject of my mother and the shadowy organization she worked for was giving me a headache so I decided to switch subjects. “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 exceptional beauty. Her most noteworthy features were her eyes, a mesmerizing pair of jewels. In fact, they were so remarkable that they somehow stole a fragment of the radiance from the sun and the moon and trapped them in their depths. A human mortal child actually managed to steal some of the magnificence from two celestial bodies. Apollo and Selene, the god and goddess of the sun and moon respectively, nearly lost their minds with shame and anger. Seeing this, the mischievous goddess of beauty and love Aphrodite was tickled pink and blessed Medusa with fair skin and hair like a black waterfall. The other goddesses also joined in the fun and gave her their own blessings like Hebe who blessed her with youth and vitality. There was only one exception. Athena, the goddess of wisdom and warfare, despised her. She 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 how many of the male 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. Even though her reputation was smeared by the malicious rumor, Medusa refused to give into Poseidon’s plot. Eventually, Poseidon got tired of waiting and took more direct action. When Arthemis noticed that Poseidon was going to abduct Medusa by force, she warned her to escape. Medusa had no choice but to flee and hide. She chose to take refuge in Athena’s temple since she was the goddess of justice and had a terrible relationship with Poseidon. As she ascended the steps of the temple, believing herself to be safe, Poseidon 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 corner, 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 being born too beautiful. 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’t bring himself to kill her. Instead, he stayed in the cave for hours, just talking to her. For five years, Perseus continued to go to the cave to talk to Medusa and at some point they fell in love. But unable to see each other, their love only brought them as much grief 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 that 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.”

That was one mystery solved, now onto the next person I was curious about. “Who is this Carla person and why did she kidnap me?”

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

I was starting to get the general idea of what was happening so I decided to move on to the most important question. “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 the fragment. If the fragment was something I was familiar with 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 in front 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 wall that covered everything but I was somehow able to see every single number even when they were supposed to cover each other. 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.

**Chapter Seventeen: The Biannual Harmony Ball**

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

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

<That was interesting.>

What the hell was that?

<I have some clues. If I am not wrong, it was machine language, binary code.>

Binary code? Of what?

<Everything. It was a binary interpretation of everything around you. Every object down to the most minute details including chemical composition and its relative position to you as a vector described in three dimensional space, every force acting on these objects including gravity and air pressure, hell it even had information on forces I didn’t even know existed. The more I dig into this stuff, the more I find.>

That is all good and dandy but why is everything black?

<You passed out. Your pretty little noggin couldn’t handle the sudden influx of information. Truthfully, I’m surprised that it didn’t just burst like an over-ripe melon. I have had almost an hour to analyze this stuff and I have barely grazed the surface, you had it shoved into your unprepared mind in a few seconds.>

Jesus, this is what I get? Other people get flaming swords and killer claws while my great party trick is to passout because of useless numbers?

<I wouldn’t quite call it useless. I will try to tidy it up a little and translate this stuff to something a little more understandable. I might be able to make a useful graphical interface that would turn this stuff into something a little more refined, something that won’t overload your brain in a few seconds. Judging by the volume of the information, it might take me a few days to complete everything but I should come up with a crude prototype in a little more than a day.>

And how would that help me?

<It would give you an edge if you want to analyze things. Having an almost perfect awareness of everything around you is never a bad thing, but you are right, this doesn’t really compare to a flaming sword. But before you become too depressed, I think that there is a chance that there is a way to manipulate the machine code and subsequently manipulate the thing that the code represents. Thanks to the data I have gathered, I can feel a part of you that is able to manipulate reality.>

You mean the spark that Merlin was talking about? But if that is all there is to it, why don’t I just use it as is?

<Think of it this way; a normal stream of water couldn’t do anything to a concreate wall unless there is a whole lot of water acting over a long period of time to gradually erode it. That means that the power of multiple people utilizing their sparks might make a difference, but a single person can’t make any descernable change. But consider that someone could use their spark in a very specific and targeted way, consider that someone could figure out how to change the most minute things to achieve their goals, it would be like the small stream was suddenly concentrated on a single point, turning it into a high pressure jet that would slice through concrete like butter.>

Wouldn’t that mean I will become all powerful?

<Hell no. Everything from interpreting the mess of ones and zeros into usable data to using precise targeting to affect even the smallest things would take an emmence amount of energy. >

So is it useful or useless?

<We will figure that out when I have the prototype up and running. I will be completely busy until I finish this up so I wont be here to hold your hand anymore. Good luck and don’t get yourself killed.>

“….are you insane? Don’t you know how this could have ended?”

“Don’t try to lecture me boy. I knew exactly what I was doing. His mind is a little banged up but the seal is untouched.”

“But why take the risk? Awakening the fragment in his soul might have made an already volatile situation even worse!”

“Don’t pretend to be worried about him. I can see through all that concerned bullshit. You just want to hobble him so that he has no choice but to stay. You are afraid that if he becomes capable enough to protect himself, you will no longer have an excuse to keep him here.”

“Don’t make it sound like we are imprisoning him.”

“Isn’t that what you are doing?”

“We are trying to keep him safe from those that seek to steal his power. If we handle this wrong, it might turn into a disaster. Keeping him here is the only way to insure that this doesn’t spiral out of control.”

My inner dialogue with darky was interrupted by two angry voices that seemed to be screaming at each other and it seemed like they had been going at it for some time. After a few moments of listening to the bickering, I realized that I was on my back, lying on a cold hard surface. Slowly, all of my senses returned to me one by one. I realized that the reason that it was dark was simply because my eyes were closed so I opened them.

“Jonathan, are you awake? How do you feel?”

The first thing I saw was the uncharacteristically serious face of Percy looking down at me as he squatted next to me. “I feel stiff and sore but otherwise I’m okay.”

“The stiffness is understandable. You have been lying on the floor for an hour now.”

“Did you consider maybe picking me up from the floor and taking me to a less uncomfortable place, maybe a bed or at least a couch?”

“No can do. We couldn’t risk moving you until you finished your awakening. As for why you weren’t taken to a safe location before your fragment was stimulated, you can thank Merlin for that.”

Merlin humphed and glared at Percy. “You know damn well why I did this without prior preparation or consulting you. The best way to protect Jonathan is to give him the tools to protect himself. You cannot keep him forever. He will leave this place one way or another and he needs to be prepared for when that happens.”

Percy sighed tiredly and decided not to give a response to Merlin’s. Instead, he turned to me and asked, “So, what did you get? What are your powers?”

I didn’t know whether I should honestly answer his question. From what I have heard so far, I wasn’t sure if my safety was truly his number one priority. He seemed to think that I am a potential threat and trying to explain to him the powers that I barely understood might cause him to be even more frightened. If he translates what he hears wrongly and decides that I had too much power, I didn’t know what he would do. “ I am not sure. There was some green flashes but nothing more.”

Percy looked at me thoughtfully and his serious expression slowly got replaced by a smile. “That is probably for the best. It is not necessary to complicate your life any further.” He patted my back and helped me up from the floor. “All of this has probably bummed you out. Tell you what, let me take you somewhere interesting so that we can forget this ever happened. “

He dragged me out of the Great Library and into the Mirror World. He then took me to a fancy Italian tailor in an upscale district to get a tuxedo. I tried to tell him that I didn’t want to go anywhere nevermind a place where I needed to wear a tux, but he ignored my pleas and continued to drag me around without a care in the world. Finally, he made me put on a raven black tux and made me open the portal back to my house. Once we returned, I noticed that there was a tenth painting that wasn’t there before hanging next to the other nine. It was a painting of a large ballroom full of people in fancy dresses and formal clothes. In the background, there was a string quartet engrossed in their performance while people where dancing the Waltz to their tune.

“Come on, lets go before the food gets cold and they run out of wine. I swear the wine runs out quicker every year. It is almost as if everyone in there is an alcoholic. It doesn’t even matter that we stock more whine, they still manage to decimate it in no time.”

“I keep telling you that I don’t like this sort of thing. Just leave me here so I can get some rest.”

“You can rest later. That is the Biannual Harmony Ball, it’s a place here you can mingle and make new friends, maybe you can settle in with the new crowd and get comfortable with your new life.”

He forced me to open the portal to the ball. I tried to push him through the portal and close it behind him but he grabbed my arm and pulled me through before I could close the portal.

Once through the portal, we landed on some steps that led down to the crowded ball room. Giving into the inevitable, I grit my teeth and walked down the stairs with the same forced smile that I put on when I had to attend a benefit party to gather money for the university.

When Percy and I finally got to the bottom of the stairs, the normal hubhub that is natural for a big gathering gradually died down and settled into an eerie silence. All of the people in the room turned around and started staring in our direction. At first, I thought they were looking at Percy but it didn’t take me long to realize that that their piercing stairs where aimed at me.

As I stood there, trying to do something about the awkward situation, someone struggled through the gawking croud and stood infront of us, not staring at me but glaring at Percy.

“What the hell are you doing? Have you lost all semblance of sense in you? We are supposed to be protecting him, why did you bring him here? To parade him infront of everyone because he doesn’t have enough people gunning for him? Why don’t you just cover him in blood and through him into a tank full of sharks?”

Percy backed away in fear as his wife berated him while poking his chest menacingly. Her face might have been covered by her mask, but there was no doubt what kind of expression she would have had if it was visible.

“Umm…They would have found out about him anyways, right? I didn’t think it was a problem if…?”

“That’s right, you didn’t think! If you had taken a moment to think about it, this wouldn’t have happened!”

She gestured towards the crowd who where staring at me with varying levels of curiosity, interest, greed and outright hunger, making me want to back away and run back up the stairs.

Melisa stopped shouting at Percy when she noticed my panicked expression.

“This is not over. We will continue this conversation later.” She then turned to the crowd and snapped her finger, producing a flash of bright light that seemed to wake everybody up from their stupor.

“If I may have your attention, I would like to introduce you to Dr. Jonathan Thorn. I can see that all of you are quite eager to meet Jonathan but I would like to ask you to tamp down on your enthusiasm. Jonathan is a personal guest of mine so he is under my protection. If any one of you tries to deceive him into anything or try to play any underhanded tricks, I will obliterate your physical form and and banish your soul to the realm of mist and illusions to writhe in madness for all eternity, so please try to behave.”

She talked in a pleasant and polite way but her cold blooded threat got through loud and clear. The crouds previous expressions all changed to fear and apprehension. I could almost hear loud gulps as the people looked at eachother. They even moved to form a pathway between them as Mellisa led me around the room, pointing out people for me.

“The people over there, the ones in black and red clothes and blood red eyes are the vampires. They are mainly didvided into two camps. Dracula surrounds himself with his brides and Batheroy has her own coven. They hate eachother’s guts and both of them will probably try to rope you in to get to your blood. I would suggest that you do not accept any of the offers that are made by the vampires. They will try to tempt you with beautiful women and their version of nobility but all they are after is to extract some of your power through your blood.”

“Those guys in the white lab coats who didn’t even bother to dress up for this occasion are here representing a group that calls itself the Vanguard of Knowledge or Vanguard for short. They work to develop advanced technology using things like magic and material that could only be found here. They have been quite successful and they are one of the more powerful groups operating right now. They probably would want to invite you to their lab to study you but I wouldn’t recommend it. They always take things too far in their pursuit of knowledge, even at the expense of safety and morality.”

“That large group of beautiful women there are all witches. The one in the center is their most recent leader, Morgana. She is a vicious woman who would do anything for power. She is one of the people that you should be careful of.”

“Most of the rest of the people here are people that posses a fragment of one god or another in their body. They are all trying to piece themselves back together, but it is a slow process. Ofcourse they could accelerate this process if they had enough power to take back their divinity, so they might approach you. They are another group you should be careful of.”

She continued to tell me about all the other groups in the room and I noticed that she kept telling me to be wary of each and every one of them. Everything she was saying just sounded like one huge warning and by the end of it I was left jittery and slightly afraid. Thankfully, I was distracted when I noticed a familiar person standing against the wall, not talking with anybody and seemingly uninterested in the whole ball.

When Melisa noticed that my attention had wandered somewhere else, she turned towards the direction I was looking. “That woman goes by the name Sara. She doesn’t belong to any group and she has no affiliations. She is basically a gun for hire and she has made a lot of enemies. If you have noticed, most of the people are avoiding her. That is because she is willing to use any and all methods including guns. People who use guns are labeled as weak in our community. Using a gun is a great taboo, it is seen as an admission that your power is not strong enough. Sara doesn’t really care about people’s opinions and no matter what people say, she is anything but weak. People might pretend to despise her but they acknowledge her ability enough to hire her when they are unable to handle things themselves.”

She had already told me that she was a mercenary so I wasn’t surprised by what Melisa said about her. I looked at the petite woman in a black mini-dress, looking deceptively weak and fragile and I couldn’t help but smile as she dug into a plate of shrimps without caring for manners or the weird looks that the people around her were giving her.

“Excuse me, I’m going to go there and say hi to Sara.”

Melisa raised her eyebrows in surprise. “You know her?”

“We met yesterday.”

She frowned slightly and bit her lips before shrugging and saying, “Alright. Just be careful.”

I hurried towards Sara, ignoring numerous people approaching me and stood next to her. She didn’t even look at me but instead shoved her plate of shrimps towards me. I took one and took a bite to slowly savour the rich taste of a sause that I had never tasted before.

“What are you doing here Sara? I wouldn’t have pegged you as the type that goes to posh events like this.”

“You are not exactly a stuck up socialite either. Besides, I didn’t come here for fun, I came here for business. You would be surprised how many jobs I get because I come to events like this.”

“So, parties are the best time to hire a mercenary? What exactly do you do anyways?”

“Anything that comes my way, mostly assasinations and exterminations. I do a few retrivals and thefts here and there but that doesn’t crop up too often.”

“You kill people?”

“Hey, a girls gotta eat. You’re not going to go all scared and horrified on me, are you?”

“Can’t say I’m not bothered about the killing people for money thing but I won’t freak out before I know the specifics.”

“Good, because I haven’t had enough fun with you yet. Besides, you can relax, it is not like I go around massacering nuns and children. I don’t accept a job unless someone really deserved it. Like for example, I popped a vulture last week, a real rabid dog. He had already racked up fifteen kills under his belt before I put him down with a bullet through his skull.”

She gleefuly continued to tell me about the goary details of her recent contract killings when she was interrupted by a loud bang made by the door at the top of the stairs being slammed open. Four people walked in wearing crisp, buttoned up, high collared uniforms. The woman leading them was a person I hadn’t seen in almost ten years, but blood runs thicker than water so I didn’t have any trouble recognizing my sister Olivia. Walking meekly behind her like he always did was my brother Thomas. Flanking the two on their left and right were what I could only describe as angels. There was no other way of putting it after I saw their fluffy white wings, golden hair and golden eyes.

“Greetings to lady Medussa. We apologize for our sudden and unannounced visit.”

Melisa was sitting at a table with her husband and son at the far end of the room but her voice was clearly audible when she replied, “There is no need to apologize. This is a neutral ground so anybody is free to come as long as they do not have any bad intentions.”

She seemed to be welcoming them with her polite response but there was something about the way she said ‘bad intentions’ that sounded like a warning. If she had sensed this warning, Olivia seemed to ignore it as she continued to speak. “My mother would like to thank you for saving her son. We are indeted to you for keeping Jonathan safe from those who would harm him, but it is no longer necessary to burden you with the task of looking after him. We would like to take him back home.”

“A burden? Jonathan isn’t a burden. We like having him around. As for your request to take him away, I don’t think now is the best time to do that.”

“But we insist. He is a member of our family and taking care of him is our responsibility.”

Melisa got up from her seat and she started to glow and her voice stopped being civil. “Enough of this nonsense. Jonathan isn’t going anywhere.”

Olivia didn’t back down as she also became stern. “What is that supposed to mean? This is a private family matter, you have no right to interfere.”

“Do you take me for a fool? Do you honestly think that I don’t know what is going on? Do you think I am stupid enough to just hand him over to you?”

“We know there is a problem but we can fix it.”

“Fix it? You are the ones responsible for this in the first place! Do you think I am going to trust the same people who were reckless enough to let this happen? Get out! Get out before I lose my patience! You are no longer welcome here!”

Olivia didn’t budge a single step. “Are you sure you want to do this? Do you want to make the Wardens your enemy?”

“Did you just threaten me?” The halo of light surrounding her started to get brighter as she started walking towards my sister. “Did you just come into my territory and threaten me infront of my family?” She continued to walk towards them with her hands behind her back, looking like she was going for a casual stroll but the two angels, my brother and sister froze in place and started to levitate a few inches off the ground. “You seem to be under the impression that your little club is more powerful than me, let me correct that false assumption. Whatever your may have heard about me from the egotistical idiots in your organization who like to trumpet their own superiority, I do not stay here because I am hiding or afraid. I do not stay here because there is someone who could threaten my safety. I stay here because my benefactor told me that my presence in the world would bring chaos to the strings of fate. If I wanted to destroy your organization, it would be as easy as flipping my hand. I could crush you like a bug and there would be nothing you could do about it.”

Melisa made Olivia float towards her until they were face to face, my sister’s terrified eyes looking into her shining golden and silver orbs. I didn’t know what was going to happen next but I had to do something before my sister got hurt, so I hurriedly walked forward and inserted myself between them. “Please let go of her. I’m sure this is all a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding? Jonathan, there are a lot of things that you don’t know so I understand your naivety, but this is not a misunderstanding. These self-rightous people are playing a dangerous game with the fate of the world hanging in the balance and they need to be stopped. They want to force their own ideals of good and bad, right and wrong on everybody and they are willing to sacrifice anything to do it. Can’t you see? They are the ones responsible for every major war since world war two! They pull the strings behind every government, company, rebel force, media outlet and any other powerful organization and they use this power to rear people like cattle, pushing them where they want them to go and slaughtering them when necessary. They are your family and I understand that you care for them but they are the type of people who wouldn’t even hesitate to ignore familial bonds if they think that it is in line with their twisted version of morality. I am sorry but I cannot in good conscience let you return with them. As for the four of you, you will be confined in the mirror world until you answer all my questions and I will decide what to do with you afterwards.”

And with a wave of Melisa’s hand, my two siblings and their angel escorts vanished into thin air.

**Chapter Eighteen: Decisions Decisions**

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

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

After the dramatic exchange, nobody seemed to want to stick around the agitated Melisa and portals started opening all around the ballroom as people decided to leave. A few minutes later, the room was empty except for Percy, Melisa, Sara and me.

“Where did you send my brother and sister?”

“Why does it matter? No good can come out of meeting them.”

Before I could respond, Sara cut in. “However bad things may be, they are still his family. I think that he should at least be allowed to speak to them.”

“Well then, it is a good thing that what you think doesn’t matter. This is none of your business mercenary. There is no money to be made, no profit to be gained. If you think that you can benefit from this situation, you are sorely mistaken.”

“Is that all I am to you? A selfish, money grubbing killer who only moves for profit? Is it so hard to believe that I want to help the only person around here that doesn’t treat me like dirty garbage?”

Melisa sighed and seemed to calm down a little. “I’m sorry Sara. I’m just so upset because of those idiots that I starting spouting nonsense. I know you are not a bad person and I know that you are not nearly as nasty as your reputation.”

“Fine, apology accepted. Besides, its not like it isn’t something I haven’t heard a hundred times before. Now lets get back to the main subject. I don’t think there is any harm in letting Jonathan speak with his brother and sister. Its not like they can carry him off under your nose. They can’t even leave without your permission let alone escape with Jonathan in tow.”

“Fine. I’ve put them in a hotel in mirror world. I’ll send you there.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll go with Jonathan to make sure that they don’t do anything to him. You know my history with them so you should know that you can trust me.”

Melisa looked like she was reassured by Sara’s words and with a wave of her hands, we were transported to a place that was obviously a hotel lobby.

An attendant in red uniform greeted us from behind his desk the moment we arrived. “Welcome to the Serene Palace hotel, how may I help you?”

“Hi, I am looking for a Thomas and Olivia Blackthorn, can you help me?”

“Oh, are you talking about the party of four that just arrived? Let me call their room to check, who should I say is looking for them?”

“Tell them it is Jonathan.”

It didn’t take long before my brother Thomas came running through the door leading deeper into the hotel. “John?”

“Hey Tom.”

“John! I didn’t get a chance to talk to you before we were booted out back there. You got yourself in quite a mess, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, it has been one hell of a ride. “

“Are you okay? Are you handling things well?”

“I might have handled it better if you guys had told me about these things from the beginning.”

“Don’t be like that. The only reason that Mom didn’t tell you was to protect you.”

“Protect me? Is that why she got me sealed?”

“The seal was necessary to suppress…, wait, you can’t know about the seal, at least the specifics or it would have unraveled.”

“Hmm, so that is why nobody is willing to talk to me about it.”

“Damn it John! Do you have any idea what you almost made me do!?”

“I think that we have already established that I do not know. Maybe you can tell me.”

“This is not a joke John. You need to take this seriously. Things are particularly bad right now and there are many people after you, that is why Mom wants you back at the mansion. That is the safest place for you.”

“I was under the impression that this was a place that could keep me safe from anybody coming after me.”

“It is true that nobody can hurt you while you are here, but that only applies to people other than Medusa and Perseus. What happens when they decide that you are too big of a threat? They may seem pleasant on the outside but you have seen that they aren’t the passifists that they pretend to be. The moment that they decide that you are too dangerous to let live, they will kill you and don’t pretend that there is no chance of that. You must have already noticed something from the weird way they treat you. You must have noticed that they fear you. These people aren’t your allies John, this is not some happy fantasy land where you can live happily ever after.”

“That’s funny Tom, Melisa told me something similar. She told me that you have other motives other than familial love to approach me. She told me not to trust you because the organization that you work for are not very good people.”

“Ofcourse she would say that, she would say anything to drive a wedge between us.”

“So your organization doesn’t kill innocent people?”

“It is easy to point fingers and criticize but things aren’t so simple. What we do might seem bad but we only do it to prevent something worse.”

“So you really are responsible for countless wars and atrocities? Jesus Tommy, are you the ones responsible for the way things are around the world right now? Are you really responsible for the current status quo where people all over the world die from perfectly preventable diseases and drought because people are slowly being taught not to care?”

“We have to make the hard choices because nobody else can. History has taught us that a perfect world cannot exist. Two world wars, the whole sale slaughter of the red Indians and the inhuman spread of slavery have already taught us that we cannot stop evil in the world, we can only manage it and make sure that it doesn’t get out of control. Does that mean that people will suffer? Does it mean that we have to abandon some people in favor of the bigger picture? The answer is yes. We are willing to cover our hands in blood, we are willing to damn our own souls to the depths of hell so that the good in humanity could be preserved.”

“Is that the same reason that you used when you wiped out Hiroshima and Nagasaki?Melisa told me that you were willing to sacrifice anything to achieve your goals, even your family. You are a zealot Tommy, how can I trust you with my safety? How can I know that you won’t turn around and sacrifice me for your cause because you think it is necessary?”

“Will you trust your own family or some strangers you have only known for a day? Even if you don’t trust me, you must trust Mom. If she had wanted to do anything to you, it would have been as simple as snapping her fingers but instead, she went to great lengths to protect you. She didn’t even stop to consider our cause when she hid you from anyone and everone who was a threat to you. If things hadn’t gone wrong, you would have lived a normal danger free life without being caught up in all this shit. Mom loves you John, and she has always acted to keep you safe. If there is a single person that you can trust right now, it is mom.”

After all these years, I was still pissed at my mother but I still loved her and I was fairly certain that she loved me. ”Fine, I might not trust your organization but I do trust mom, but that doesn’t matter. I am stuck here and I cannot escape.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I have made arrangements for you to leave this place but all of them will be for naught if you don’t leave right now. After what happened today, it is just a matter of time before Medusa puts restrictions on you and if that happens, your chances for escape become zero. We only have one chance and that is right now.”

He then turned to Sara and started talking to her. “You are the infamous Assasin Ember, right? I would like to hire you to escort my brother to safety. I have hired the ferryman to help him escape and everything should be alright but I would feel a lot better if I knew there was someone there to protect him. As for payment, name your price, whatever you ask, we will pay it.”

Thomas extended his hand for a hand shake but Sara just looked at it like it was something disgusting. “I will go with John but I am not doing it for you. You can keep your filthy money, I would rather die than receive your blood money.”

Thomas didn’t seem to mind her attitude one bit and instead of getting angry, he just smiled. “Whatever, as long as you take the commission, I don’t care about our past history or what you think about us. Just take John to the alley two blocks down and the ferryman will be waiting for you there. After you are out, take him straight to the mansion. I’m sure you remember where it is.”

We left the hotel in a rush by the urging of my brother and Sara led me to a nearby motel to change her clothes and get her guns before she took me to the aforementioned alleyway. We walked into the narrow space until we reached the brick wall at the other end but there was no sign of anybody waiting for us. I thought that we had arrived early and we would have to wait for the person called “the ferry man” but that was when the brick wall started to waver like a mirage and collapsed into grey mist, revealing a cloacked man standing atop a gondola similar to those that could be found on the waterways of Venice floating on gray mist that now covered the ground upto my knees. The man wore a black cloak with a large hood so his face was covered but I could see that his hand was old and withered when they became visible as he threw something towards me. I caught the object and when I looked at it, it was a small wooden bead strung-up on leather tongs.

“Courtesy of your brother. Put it on, it will hide the stench of your power and keep the flies away when we reach the outside. Now get on the boat, our window will close in half an hour and if we can’t make it, you will have to wait another month to get a second chance.”

Sara and I didn’t tarry any longer and boarded the mysterious man’s boat which soundlessly drifted off until there was nothing around us but white smoke.

“What is this place?”

“It is one of the forbidden zones of Sanctuary, the realm of mist and illusions. This place is really weird, they say that it is a place between worlds that doesn’t really exist, others say that it is a prison where Medusa keeps the most dangerous entities locked up so that they don’t escape. Whatever the case maybe, the ferryman has found a way out of the sanctuary through this place. Becareful though, the spirits and ghosts that inhabit this place are malicious. If you pay too much attention to them, their whispers will drive you insane.”

“…your mother never loved you…”

“… you are a useless waste of space. Even now you are still nothing more than a pawn that is being thrown around…”

“…your mother was afraid of you. You try to hide from it, but you have already seen the fear in her eyes…”

“…your family is evil. They are ruthless butchers pretending to be benovelent gardeners pruning the bushes…”

“…everyone you know will betray you. Nobody sees you as a person anymore…”

“…you were never a hero. You were just a confused drug addict who couldn’t handle what the world threw at him…”

“…you were sealed for a reason. You are a monster, why else would you be sealed…”

“…what has happened will always happen, what will happen has already happened. Nothing changes. You have come on a fools errand…”

“…your foolishness knows no bounds. You are a lamb being led to the slaughter, refusing to stay safe, choosing to be led by your nose instead…”

“…she comes. Against knowledge or reason, she comes. Against fate and time, she comes. Guided only by the light of her love, she comes…”

Soft whispers started to snaked their way into my ears. They started out quiet but the more I listened to them, the more they got louder until they built up into a defeaning creshendo. Like the most insidious poison, they spread through me, ignoring all my attempts to stop them. The seemingly gentle voices spoke unimaginably painful words that grated harshly against my soul, slowly wearing me down. Some of the things they said were painfully familiar thoughts plucked right from my mind, tormenting me with my own weaknesses and insecurities, the rest were things that I didn’t even understand but where somehow equally painful, like they were poking at scars that I didn’t even know I had.

I was desperately trying to shut out the voices that were drowning me when I felt the sensation of a hand slapping me on the back of my head, pulling me back from the abyss that I had nearly fallen into.

“Don’t pay attention to them. If you ignore them, they can’t hurt you.”

I tried to follow Sara’s advice, but it was harder than it sounded. She had to slap me several times to save me from the voices before we reached the end of our journey.

When the smoke cleared, the boat stopped in the same alley that we had come from.

“Was there some kind of mistake?”

“No. We aren’t in the mirror world anymore. We are in the real DC. We have left the sanctuary and are back to the surface world.”

**Chapter Nineteen: Bait**

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

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

Sara and the mysterious old man called the ferryman didn’t wait for me to regain my bearings 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 another 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 was being confined to the mirror world? He never said anything about meeting up.”

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

Two people in black cloaks and decorative masks appeared before us and before I had a chance to react, I suddenly found myself tied up by what looked like decorative pink ribbons. I tried to struggle free from them, but despite how fragile they looked, the ribbons turned out to be as tough as steel bands. Sara immediatelt took out a gun but before she could even point it at the 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 own 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 just 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 idiot allows 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 that same 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 yet. 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.

\* \* \*

As of late, my life seemed to be following a certain trend and unfortunately, that trend was me waking up after passing out for one reason or another. As for my awakening, I had accrued a lot of experiences 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 and revealing two long legs as she twirled gracefully.

“Do you have to be so stingy? Besides, you stand there and tell me that you might not need me to take action but you must already 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 of 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 desperately 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 violent but the ribbon binding her wrists didn’t even budge. 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 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 corner 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 replaced the tears of sorrow from 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 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 was caught, my chances of escaping would be drastically reduced. Looking at how 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 being but some other part of me that I didn’t have time to analyze at this point, and in this unfathomably large space, there was a little star being dwarfed by the pervading darkness surrounding it 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 green ones and zeros and I felt myself getting overwhelmed by the flow of pure data but then a bright green grid was superimposed over the ones and zeros, pausing the sudden influx of information. 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 themselves 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 change you make to reality will consume a butt-load of energy.>

“In conclusion, I can do something very little but then I would be unable 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 was facing forward changed in that strange stop-motion way until she 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 one of the digits, it felt like I was pushing a very large boulder up a very 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 to me because I had succeeded. A neat cut appeared on the ribbon binding Sara and it slowly fell away.

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 the whole thing with great enjoyment, 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.”

Sara 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, I would have thought that the amazing display of the two 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 from around his neck 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. Unfortunately, Carla was caught unaware by one of the ribbons as she dodged and was sent hurtling through the air to land squarely 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 sensed an opportunity so she immediately 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 that triumph turned out to be premature; 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 be torn 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, straight up through the roof of his mouth and into his brain, killing him instantly. Mathew still had a fearful and unbelieving expression on his face when he crumpled down to the ground like a marionette who had had his strings cut.

**Chapter Twenty: The Fall of Gods**

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

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

The room became eerily quiet as Sara glared at Carla and Carla looked back at her in confusion. The prolonged silence was broken when Sara spoke in a voice as cold and desolate as the most frigid winter.

“Why didn’t you stop when I told you to? Why did you kill her after I told you not to?”

“She was an enemy so I killed her, what’s wrong with that?”

“If I wanted to kill her, do you think I couldn’t have done that at the beginning? Didn’t that small cat brain of yours ever consider that I could have sent a dagger through her heart as easily as sending it through her foot?”

“How would I know what you were thinking? Besides, why would I even care?”

“I needed her! Because of your idiotic actions, I got screwed over!”

Carla looked at Sara with curiosity and asked, “Why did you need her so badly?”

Sara’s eyes flickered for a moment before turning away from Carla. “That is none of your business.”

As her eyes wandered around, they landed on me.

“Hey Jonathan, you really saved our collective asses this time. How did you get rid of those fucking ribbons? I didn’t catch what you did to them. They just seemed to fall off.”

She used a flame dagger to incinerate the ribbon binding me and waited for an answer but I didn’t answer her, or rather, I couldn’t answer her. After I had used my power to free Sara, my body had frozen in place, unable to move a single inch. My lungs stopped inflating and deflating to pump air in and out of my body, my heart stopped beating, the rhythmic thump thump of contracting muscles falling silent. If I was in a hospital, I would have already been pronounced dead and on my way to a morgue, but despite the fact that all the bodily functions necessary for my survival had ceased, I remained alive and conscious. Sara looked closely at my current state and noticed that something strange was going on. She waved her hands in front of my eyes and when she didn’t get any reaction, she felt for a pulse. Finding nothing, she grew observably distraught.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! How did this happen? How the fuck did this happen?”

Carla sounded fed up as she said, “What’s wrong now?”

“He is not breathing! His heart has also stopped!”

“Well then what are you waiting for? Try to administer CPR!”

“I’m trying but I can’t move him no matter how much I try. How am I supposed to administer CPR if I can’t get him to lie down?”

“What do you mean he won’t move?”

“He is stuck in place like an insect stuck in amber.”

“Then there is a chance that he is just in a suspended state of animation. There are a lot of things that could cause that but most of them are temporary and nonlethal. The only thing we can do is to wait and hope for the best.”

Sara turned to look sharply at Carla. “What do you mean ‘we’? There is no ‘we’. This has nothing to do with you.”

“You are dreaming if you think I’m going to just leave without him.”

“Well, you are dreaming if you think that you can just take him.”

Carla made a frustrated noise and pointed at Sara. “This man is the only way I will be getting my father back. He is just another paycheck to you but I need him.”

“Frustrating, isn’t it? When you need something but the other person deprives you of it? What was it that you said earlier? Ah, that’s right, why should care?”

Carla’s claws which had been retracted after the end of the previous fight shot out like switchblades. Sara grabbed two flame daggers, one in each hand, after making them materialize midair. The two of them looked like they would start ripping into eachother at any moment.

<Cat fight! Cat fight!>

What kind of nut job was I sharing my mind with? Could his insanity rub off on me?

<Stop being over dramatic, I’m not insane.>

That is what an insane person would say.

<I can’t argue with that. Alright, I will stop expressing my excitement at what is sure to be an amazing battle between two beautiful women and instead I will take upon myself the onerous task of explaining why you can’t move right now. Basically, you have used up most of your ability to affect the things around you. If you moved, you would have used your will to change reality so that is a big no no for now. This was well within my calculations but what I didn’t expect was that the world around you can’t affect you when you are in this state, I guess that is a freebie that comes with your superpower.>

I stood there helplessly watching the two women about to break into an all-out fight. They kept slinging insults and provocative words at each other until both of them started emitting bloodlust that managed to chill my blood even though it was frozen in place at that moment. As the tension built and things were about to come to a head, I started to regain some mobility in the tip of my fingers. The small innocuous movement should have gone completely unnoticed but Sara somehow caught it from the corner of her eyes. If the cumulating tension and impending conflict was like a runaway train with unstoppable momentum, what happened next was like that train hitting a metal wall and coming to a complete stop. The way that Sara suddenly disregarded everything and came to my side, leaving Carla confused and deflated was kind of funny. They were obviously on the verge of tearing each other apart but after Sara abruptly turned her back on her, Carla seemed to grow a little sad and lonely.

“It seems that he is thawing out. Jonathan, can you hear me?”

She looked worried as she checked me for any signs of life but contrary to her concerned attitude, her actions weren’t very gentle as she poked my finger with her flaming dagger, cutting and searing it at the same time. The pain I felt would have made me scream if I still had the use of my voice, but all I could do was to just stand there in excruciating agony with the sound of my newly liberated heart pounding away into my ear.

“Hmm…It seems like you still can’t speak. Well, at least your vitals have returned, that’s a relief. I would have hated to return you back to your family as a statue, partly because that might ruin my stellar reputation as a mercenary but mainly because your mom would flay me alive.”

Sara’s lighthearted joke was somewhat undermined by the very real fear that made her voice tremble when she talked about my mother. She started out jovial and playful but her comment about getting flayed alive sounded serious, as if she truly would have been skinned in the event that something would have happened to me.

<John, I don’t think she was joking. From the way people talk about your mother, it sounds like she is the boogey man around here. I don’t know about you but if she is able to terrify these people who are scary in their own right, there must be a good reason. I mean, they make her sound like she could make the boogey man crap in his pants.>

I couldn’t completely discount Darky’s opinion but I didn’t have the time to think about it because Sara had forgotten to take her dagger away from my finger and it continued to get incinerated causing searing pain to shoot up from the rapidly blackening finger straight to my head like there was a direct line connecting the two. At that point, my voice came back just in time for me to scream and wail as complaint to the way I was being treated. My high pitched screech finally made Sara realize that she had yet to remove her flaming dagger and she hurriedly withdrew it with a sheepish smile.

“Oops. Sorry about that.”

“Oops? Oops? That is all you have to say for yourself after nearly burning my finger off?”

“Don’t exaggerate, it was one sixth of a finger at most. Besides, it is not like you use the tip anyways.”

I held my hand gingerly and blew gently on the finger whose tip now resembled a piece of charcoal but it did very little to stop the pain. My attempt at relief having been unsuccessful, I settled for angrily glaring at Sara in accusation as a form of mental relief. She just shook her head dismissively nudged me playfully, setting off another wave of pain from my hand.

“Stop milking it so much, it’s just an itsy bitsy injury. You’re not even bleeding because it has been cauterized. Look on the bright side, we are alive and free. That is worth more than some lousy finger, isn’t it? By the way, how did you set me free from those annoying ribbons? Those things have the ability to restrict any magic or divine ability. How were you able to do whatever you did?”

I tried to explain my new found powers to the best of my ability and Sara was suitably impressed.

“Doesn’t this mean that you are omnipotent? From you explanation, you can change the nature of anything. Doesn’t that make you all powerful?”

“Hell no! Didn’t you see what happened when I changed something as small as that ribbon?”

Sara sighed disappointedly then shrugged. “That’s fine, it is still a useful thing to have when we are in a jam. You did well back then and I’m sure your ability will come in handy if we get in trouble. Now, it is best if we leave as quickly as possible. We don’t know how many people might know about this place.”

She pulled my hand, thankfully it was the uninjured one, and led me to the only exit of the basement but our way was blocked by a fuming Carla.

“Where do you think you are going?”

And with that comment, the tense situation from before was restored but before the two women could lunge at each other, I squeezed myself between them and kept them apart.

“Wait a minute. There is no need to fight, right? I mean, your objectives aren’t mutually exclusive, are they? Carla, you want to take me back so that you can free your father. Sara, you have been commissioned by my brother to do the same thing. Why don’t you just work together to take me back?”

Sara raised her hands up in exasperation and said, “Fine, we will team up or whatever. We will work it out later. Right now, I want to leave this place. Something about the whole situation is making me uneasy.”

Carla grudgingly agreed and all three of us headed to the exit. On our way, we had to step over the bloody corpse of Aphrodite which made Sara frown and nearly made me throw up in disgust.

<Have you noticed that you have become fine with thinking about a goddess without any shock or awe? I mean, this is a true blue Greek goddess and you just stepped over her dead body! You even found out that Marilyn Monroe was just a front for this goddess. Jesus John, look at her face! Look at what is happening to her face!>

I had not really looked at the face on the corpse because I found all the blood repulsive but I saw what Darky meant when I took a second look. The face on the corpse was constantly shifting and changing forms. Some of the faces that appeared were faces that I recognized like the faces of famous actresses. The rest were unfamiliar to me but all of them had one thing in common, they were beautiful.

“That is the fragment leaving the body. The dead body is unable to sustain the piece of Aphrodite that had been inhabiting it, so the fragment is being expelled. Aphrodite has probably used this body for a long time so this process is taking a little longer but there is nothing to be afraid of.”

Sara reassured me after seeing me glance at the body with the thousand flashing faces. I dragged my gaze from the corpse and smiled at her only to see her turn away from me without making eye contact. Infact, now that I thought about it, she had been avoiding making eye contact since she burned my finger. Even when she had pulled my hand earlier, she had pulled back immediately afterwards.

<Maybe she has a crush on you.>

I thought about that but I immediately discounted that idea. Sara wasn’t exactly the shy type, if she really had developed any fondness for me, she wouldn’t act like a smitten high-schooler. No, there was something else going on. I considered asking her but something told me that was a bad idea, so I just did a mental shrug and decided to ignore her peculiar behavior.

While I was having these thoughts, we left the basement and went up a rickety set of stairs leading to a derelict house that obviously hadn’t been habituated in quite some time. There, Sara found her many weapons and her leather jacket stashed in a corner and she happily rearmed herself. After she was satisfied that all of her guns, knives and other strange looking gadgets were properly stowed away, we left the house through half boarded, rotten wooden door hanging on one hinge. After all that had happened, I was glad to put the house and the memories of my time there behind so I was in a rather good mood when I saw the outside world through the door, but as walked through the doorway, the world in front of my eyes rippled like a mirage and changed into a completely different setting.

Sara grabbed my arm and pulled me back in a hurry but the old rotting door we had passed through was gone and instead it was replaced by an ancient looking marble archway with cracks running throughout the structure.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I knew something was wrong! I just knew it!”

“Sara, where are we?” Sudden shifts in locations weren’t anything new to me at this point but judging from the way that Sara was reacting, I didn’t think that this particular instance was a good thing. The place itself didn’t seem very threatening. A brightly lit mountaintop wasn’t very menacing. The giant marble structures that dotted the landscape were in ruins and the fact that the ancient crumbling buildings had overgrown weeds and vines creeping upon them like they were slowly being consumed by the vegetation was obvious proof that no one had lived in them for a long time. From what little was left of these ancient structures, I could see glimmers of what was once a grand city filled with splendor. The remains of statues made entirely of what looked like gold and jewels told of extravagant opulence that one would be hard pressed to see today, but however decadent it might have been in the past, what was once a magnificent metropolis had become an abandoned ghost town forgotten by history, the only inhabitants being some birds flying high in the sky above our heads.

“What is this place?”

When I repeated my question, Sara finally decided to stop throwing a fit and answered my question. “This crumbling piece of shit is what is left of Olympus.”

“Olympus? As in the home of the gods, that Olympus?”

“What home of the gods? It is just the place where a group of delusional idiots gathered to stroke each other’s egos. Now that those morons with delusions of grandeur are gone, it seems to have become a roost for stray birds and I say that the new inhabitants are far better than the original ones. I wonder who brought us here? I’m sure the birds didn’t bring us here to keep them company so who would want to bring us here? ”

Carla who was kneeling on the ground and examining something looked up with a frown on her face. “It’s Janus. I can smell the residue left after he opened a portal here.” She looked up at the sky and her frown only got deeper. “Those aren’t birds.”

The so called “birds” in the sky rapidly descended, growing larger as they did proving that they were much bigger and farther away than I initially thought. By the time they landed around us, they were no longer tiny white specks but fully grown women clad in shining silver and gold armor and white feathered wings growing out of their backs. Each and every one of them looked identical with the same heroic looking faces, blonde hair and blue eyes, and cheekbones that completed a classic Scandinavian appearance.

“Are those angels?”

Sara snorted in derision and spit on the ground. “They wish. These pigeons are angels the same way a firecracker is a weapon of mass destruction. These wannabes are just Valkyries.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong but aren’t Valkyries part of Norse mythology? What are they doing here if this is Olympus?”

“I was just wondering about that myself. Janus is one of the Olympians so him bringing us here just barely makes sense but the Olympians would never work together with Asgardians. The two despise each other.”

“That is true. Given a choice, we would never work alongside each other, but that decision is no longer in our hands.”

An ominous voice rang out from all around us, making it difficult to discern the location of the speaker. The words it spoke in a distorted timbre were laced with obvious rage and they were made even more menacing by the way it sounded like the words were being spoken by two different voices speaking in tandem while slightly out of sync with each other creating an unnerving reverberation effect.

“Zeus? Is that you? You’ve always had a flare for the dramatic but this voice trick is new. Where did you learn it?”

I was nervous because of the encirclment of the winged women armed with what looked like very sharp swords and my mounting anxiety only increased because of the unfriendly voice but Sara was unconcernedly picking at her fingers when she answered the ominous voice.

“Trick? Do you think this is a trick? Look at us! Look at what we have become! Does this look like a trick?”

The source of that eerie voice finally revealed itself and after seeing the things appearance, I couldn’t help but to recoil in horror. The thing that appeared could be called a man in a very loose definition of the word. His body wasn’t that abnormal. His posture was a little crooked and his body structure was a little off, his right leg was slightly longer than his left, his left hand was more muscular than his right, even his torso wasn’t put together evenly making him a little deformed but nothing that couldn’t be passed off as just abnormal. The real problem was with his face. It looked like a child took two different faces made out of play dough and mashed them together haphazardly. It was truly disgusting.

“Look at what has become of us. Our looks were once the envy of countless men and the object of obsession of any woman who lays their eyes upon us. Look at us now!”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, I think that this is a big improvement from how you looked previously. At least now you look as twisted on the outside as how twisted you are on the inside. And why do you keep referring to yourself in the plural sense?”

“You have the nerve to make fun of us? You were the one who captured us like a wild animal and sold us to the Seekers. You were the one responsible for those maniacs experimenting on us like guinea pigs. Do you understand what they did to us?”

“Hey, I was just the delivery guy.”

“You delivered us to hell. They took our souls and mashed them together in one of their twisted rituals. We were once two paragons of our own courts, gods among gods. We once held the titles of the father of man and the all seeing ones. We were once known as Zeus and Odin but now we are neither. We are just an abomination. We…”

I would never find out what he would have said next because he was cut shiort by a loud bang. The loud noise coming from right besides my ear made me jump in fright. I turned around and saw that Sara had taken out a gun at some point. Said gun was pointing forward and had smoke rising from its barrel. I followed the direction it was pointing towards but the winged warrior in that direction was gone and all I saw was a couple of white feathers floating down forlornly.

“Jesus Christ. Can’t you control yourself? At least warn me before you do that. You nearly gave me a heatattack.”

“Oh come on. I wasn’t going to listen to his sob story. I hate sob stories.”

“I noticed.”

“Besides, this was all going to end in a fight anyways. Might as well get it over with.”

“You do realize that we are surrounded right? There is also Mr Ugly over there and two of his best friends who have just appeared. Why do you look so laid back?”

“Because we have you.”

“What? What do you think I can do?”

“Don’t sell yourself short. He might whine about me and how I did him wrong but the main reason they are here is for you. That means that they will hold back not to kill you.”

“Wait, I’m a human shield?”

“Precisely.”

Zeus or Odin or whatever the weird amalgam of the two gods called himself gestured to a thin beanpole like man who was only a blur as he moved and Mr beanpole lanched himself at us. Sara unceremoniously pushed Carla towards the flickering silhoute coming at us and commanded, “Hermes is yours. Take him down as quickly as possible, I don’t have enough ammo to kill all the Valkyries.”

Carla and the blurry silhote clashed against eachother and both of them vanished as their struggle quickly turned faster than the human eye could follow. That seemed to act as a signal because all of the winged warriors launched their attacks at that point. The simultaneous omnidirectional attack didn’t make Sara flustered. She was cool as a cucumber when she shoved at the Valkaries coming from the front and vaulted over my head by bracing her right hand on my shoulder, her left hand held a gun that had lines running down the barrel glowing bloody red and it rained down a hail of flaming bullets straight down at the hesitating warriors who were desperately trying to reign back their attacks. By the time she landed, she landed on a pile of dead bodies. She stood atop the dead bodies, looking at the Valkyries like a queen surveying her subjects. She was obviously not very pleased by what she saw because she spat out in disgust.

“You are just a bunch of pigeons. What makes you think you are even worthy of attacking me?”

Her words riled up the Valkyries and they charged at her with bloodshot eyes but as they got close, she grabbed my arm and draped me over her like a shield, once again forcing the Valkyries to pull back their strikes although some weren’t quite fast enough and I got a couple of scrathes as a souvenier for the experience. Sara, who was now crouching low beneath me once again unloaded a flurry of bullets but these time her aim was kneecaps instead of heads. The legs of several Valkyries were swept out from beneat5h them, making them fall face first on the ground. Sara didn’t miss this opportunity and capitalized on their miserable states to brutally stomp on their heads with her boots which had brutal flame spikes sticking from their soles.

As Sara was massacring the Valkyries, I was being thrown around like a rag doll while screaming and cursing indignantly but nobody paid attention to me as the battles only grew more heated and bloody. Sara obviously dominated the fight by using the unconventional and highly objectionable tactic of using me as a human shield but all that changed when a couple of black chains sprung up from the ground and wrapped around my hands, holding me in place. The second man who had stood behind Mr Creepy, a large stocky black man who was nearly as dark as the pitch black chains he held had made his move. He had somehow used his chains to bind me in place. At first, I thought the purpose of the chains was to restrict my movements and stop the tactic that Sara was using but I quickly found that I was being naïve. Mr. Ugly shouted, “Do it Hephaestus.”

The black chains grew red hot and I smelled the scent of my own flesh burning as they dug into my arms. I felt the chains penetrate not only my skin but also somehow enter that strange metaphysical place that I had entered when I used my ability. I felt the chains slither like snakes as they wandered through that large dark space. For a moment, I thought that the chains were heading towards the only visible object in the large space, the shining star, but the chains that were wandering around aimlessly straightened out well before they reached the small solitary star. They darted forward like a snake striking its prey and the tips of the chains seemed to vanish. That is when I noticed something strange. I had assumed that the metaphysical place where my powers rested was a vast empty space with that one small shining speck but I suddenly realized that what I thought was empty space had somehow turned into a sea of viscous liquid and the once innocuous sea that I hadn’t even been able to precieve was now fluctuating violently, the small ripples being created by the chains started turning into giant waves as they crashed around. The chains that were red hot in the beginning started turning black as that acted as a conduit for the strange black liquid. The effects of the liquid spread up ythe chains in my physical space and then became visible in the physical world as it spread up the chains that had dug deeply into my arm.

“Sara, something is happening and I don’t think it is good!”

Sara hesitated for a second while she continued to weave around me and shoot down Valkyries. She bit her lips like she was having an argument with herself but then she seemed to make a decision and her face hardened in determination. She used her free hand to raise her eye patch and for the first time, I saw what lay hidden beneath it. Instead of an eye, only a red crystal was visible and once it was no longer hidden away by the eye patch, it burst into flames. A narrow beam of light shot out from the flaming crystal eye and wherever Sara turned towards, anything that came in contact with that ray of death was incinerated. In the space of a breath, the Valkyries closest to us had turned into noting more than ash after which Sara replaced her eye patch looking incredibly pale and tired.

“We don’t have much time. I’m almost out of ammo and I’m at the end of my leash. Carla is too busy to help us. They are using those chains to suck out the power inside you. I need you to trust me John. I need you to use your ability, Don’t hold back or be conservative, just use your ability at full blast.”

I heard her voice and it was like a guiding light as I suffered through increadible torment that was akin to having my insides getting yanked out. I desperately held on to that familiar voice and struggled to follow its instructions. Eventually, the small star that still shone ami8dst the writhing sea of darkness started to pulse along with my heart beat and a warm current of energy shot up through my spine and into my brain. My vision shifted to the strange pencil sketch stop motion animation version of the world. I was wondering what the best way to employ my power was when I was destracted by what was happening in that metaphysical space at the depth of my being. The shining star that was providing me was wave after wave of warm current came into contact with the chain draining the dark liquid and faltered. The star and the chain revolved around each other in a standoff with neither one willing to give ground. In the end, ther black chains struck the star from two opposite directions and plunged into it. For a second, it seemed like they were going to suck up the light from the star but the star wasn’t willing to concede just yet. It fluttered weakly putting up a struggle and although the black chains still managed to suck up some of the light, it was only enough to light up one side of the chain. The two chains now resembled a black and white snake twining tightly with each other. The besieged star was unable to sustain itself and started to dim down. I thought that the star along with any hope I had was about to get extinguished but when I was just about to givfe up, the star compressed itself and then exploded in a blinding flash of light. The two chains which looked like they were celebrating their victory were caught unaware by what they thought was a vanquished foe. The star managed to win back some of the light they had extracted and along with the light, it also got some of the darkness. The once bright and warm star suddenly turned a chilling purple color that burned with a cold ghostly flame. The newly transformed star latched onto the chains that were struggling to escape and started using them to siphon off the dark liquid from its surrounding.

This struggle felt like it took forever when I was in that metaphysical space but when my attention returned to reality, practically no time had passed at all. The warm waves of power that were travelling up my spine were now replaced by an almost arctic river that was infinitely bigger than the tiny stream it was before. The power entering my head was intoxicating. I finally knew what it felt like to be a god, an omnipotent existence with everything at his fingertips. I felt a smile spread on my face and with a simple shake of my hands the chains holding me to the ground shattered, only leaving the length of chain wrapped around my arms which were now glowing with the same purple fire as the star in my soul.

I flexed my hands and at the same time I flexed my powers to see what they could do. The first thing I was going to do was to refill Sara’s ammo but midway I changed my mind. Why go through all that trouble if they were only going to run out anyways? With some mental concentration, I permenantly distorted the laws of the universe so that the number of bullets just looped and when it reaches zero, it would go straight to a full cartridge. Pleased with my work and the ridiculous amount of power I was able to weild, I turned my attention to the next order of business. Now that I had a hang of my new abilities, I waved my hands and the pesky Valkyries around us vaporized into their constituent molecules. I guess all the king’s horses and all the king’s men wouldn’t be able to put them back together again.

For my next trick, I made the superfast Carla and the god who I think was named Hermes slow down to a crawl. I could see the bewilderment on their faces as I snapped my fingers and snapped Hermes’s legs into pieces. I took pleasure in the sweet sweet agony dying his screams but it didn’t matter how much he hollered, the god of speed couldn’t outrun this pain.

I cracked my knuckles and prepared for the big finale. I had saved the best for last because I wanted to enjoy making the maggots who thought they could take my power from me realize how stupid they were. The poor fools couldn’t understand that I was the one who did the taking, not the other way around, and now they were going to pay the price for their idiocy.

I started out by making them both kneel before me as was appropriate. I looked at the black chains that now laid limp around the large black man and smiled.

“Those are very interesting chains. I never thought there was anything that could handle the immense load of my power but I have been pleasantly surprised. Would you like to experience these marvels for yourself?”

With a simple gesture, the chains wrapped around him from head to toe making him look like a metal mummy. I released the spatial restraint I had put upon him just so I could see his futile struggles as the chains feasted on his flesh, his power, and finally his very soul, leaving nothing behind. I picked up the chains containing the soul of the deceased god and clenched my fist, shattering them into powder.

Done savoring the horror of the soul that just realized that it had been permenantly erased, I turned to the twisted wreck that called himself a king of gods and I was pleased to see the terror in his mismatched eyes.

“Are you scared Mr. ‘god’? Do you finally realize how stupid you are?”

He shook in fear, his eyes silently pleading for mercy.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you.”

I laughed inwardly at the relief that showed on his face. I waved my hands around and collected the twisted remains of the two gods inhabiting his body. I tampered with them a little and returned them to him.

“There, you are truly immortal now. You couldn’t die even if you wanted to. Unfortunately, sustaining your immortality will use up all of your energy and you can’t use your powers to ease the pain that torments you because of your twisted soul. I guess you have to take the good with the bad.”

I released him and he fell to the ground and started writhing in pain. He clawed at his own face and neck, ripping away flesh and skin but no matter what he did, he couldn’t die.

I stood there admiring my masterpiece and enjoying the show when the entire mountain top we were on shattered like glass and above me appeared a woman in a golden and silver mask covering her face and an iron crown on her head.

“How dare you kill my son?! I will kill you! I will kill you all!”

**Chapter Twenty-One: A Mother’s Rage**

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

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

“How dare you kill my son? I will kill you! I will kill you all!”

The nearly incoherent shout rang through the air like a summer thunderstorm and I went from feeling like an invincible god reigning over the world to feeling like an insignificant ant under somebody else’s boot. Under the bright beam of light coming from her shining gold and silver gaze, all of my supposed might melted away to be replaced by fear. I could feel that primal part of myself that kept me alive flicker like a dying flame, unable to hold up under the suppression of her will. She didn’t wield any blades or brandish flames. She simply manifested her hate into a weapon and reality itself seemed to howl in agony as all the space around me started to twist and shatter before reforming again. The cycle continued to repeat seemingly without end but after each excruciatingly painful round, I felt myself fading away.

I was dying. For all the power that I felt coursing through my veins like molten lava, for all the potential I had discovered hidden inside me just begging to be unleashed, I still couldn’t do a damn thing to stop her from killing me.

The change came too suddenly, one moment I was on cloud nine enjoying the high of absolute power, the next moment I was being crushed like a bug. It happened so quickly that I didn’t even have the time to process my sudden impending doom. Before I could come to grips with the new depressing state of affairs, the situation changed once again. A giant whirlpool of water appeared in the sky above us, momentarily distracting the terrifying woman and giving us a temporary reprieve. A gigantic blue man as large as a ten story building fell out from the center of the massive inverted waterspout suspended in midair and landed in front of me, Sara and Carla, shielding us from Medusa’s wrathful glare. He stood silently in front of her and didn’t so much as flinch even as her iron crown disappeared, setting free waves upon waves of green hair which then turned into hundreds of slithering snakes. She angrily flung giant fireballs which were so hot that they singed my hair even though I was meters away from them, she called down blizzards that had shards of ice that looked like they could rip everything apart, the snakes on her head screamed out unnaturally and the air itself started turning into stone, but amidst all the chaos, the giant blue man continued to stand there and took everything she threw at him without taking a single step back. He was like a giant blue mountain, stable and unmoving.

When she saw that her attacks weren’t working, Medusa screamed hysterically and threw herself at the giant blue man and beat her tiny fists on his vast chest.

“Why are you doing this Atlantian? This has nothing to do with you! You have no reason to stop me. They took my son from me! Do you understand? They took my son from me!”

She continued to scream and sob uncontrollably as she beat her fists against him, but there was no real power left in her feeble blows.

“That is enough Medusa. Stop this right now.”

A third being suddenly appeared out of thin air, the slowly materializing figure took the shape of a woman. I struggled to see what the new arrival looked like but the memory of her was like a slippery fish. I could see her clear as day, but when I tried to remember what she looked like, all I could remember was that she was female.

“You know that this is not their fault. Greed and envy had already consumed Mathew’s heart. His end was inevitable.”

“No! I could have saved him! You are the Weaver. You knew what was going to happen. Why didn’t you tell me? If I had just talked to him…”

“No. Every time I interfere with fate, there is always a price to pay. I have already moved beyond the confine of this plane so that price must be exacted from someone else.”

“You mean…?”

“Yes. This was fated to happen the moment I helped you and Perseus. This was the price you had to pay, the pain that you had to bear as penance for going against providence. In fact, if things hadn’t ended up the way they are now, you would have been forced to kill your son with your own hands.”

I looked at the three beings before me, two talking to each other and one remaining stoically silent and standing still. I felt the power rolling off of them and I finally realized what true gods were like. I had become powerful enough to play around with the so called “Greek gods” but Medusa could have crushed meeffortlessly without raising a single finger. Furthermore, the giant blue man was able to stop Medusa cold without even fighting back. Although I had no evidence, I felt like the woman who appeared last was leagues above even the giant blue man. I felt stifled when I realized how powerless I was in the face of such overwhelming might. I felt uncomfortable with the thought that I wasn’t the most powerful one. It just didn’t sit well with me that there were beings that surpassed me. As if responding to my unsettled thoughts, the black liquid inside my soul started to seethe and churn violently, pouring itself into the purple star. I felt my power swell as the star’s size expanded and it became a darker shade of purple.

Power coursed through my veins like molten metal and the unpleasant feeling of getting dominated by an unreachable power vanished. I felt like if I was able to absorb all of the dark liquid into the star, I would be able to swat down the three super-beings before me like flies. Unfortunately, my fantasies of making them grovel beneath my feet were interrupted when the blurry lady appeared before me and gently placed her right hand on my head. All of my accumulated power evaporated, leaving nothing behind. The large purple star deflated like a balloon, expelling all of the dark liquid it had consumed and returned to its original warm yellow color. With the cold purple power being cut off from going into my brain, I finally realized how uncharacteristically I had been behaving. After I remembered all the terrible things I had done and all of the gruesome acts I had committed, I bent over and started retching.

The blurry woman gently patted my back and spoke reassuringly, “You shouldn’t take all this to heart, that wasn’t really you. The power in you is potent, but it is tainted. The more of it you use, the more it will influence your actions. It is better if you don’t use it unless you need to and if you think it is necessary, use it sparingly while keeping an eye on your state of mind. Remember, whoever the enemy you are fighting might be, they are nothing compared to the thing sealed inside of you.”

The dark ocean in my core was calm again but it no longer stayed silent. Before I knew of its existence it was completely inert but now it refused to be ignored. It whispered dark thoughts into my head. The whispers did not speak in something as mundane as human words. No, they spoke in unintelligible tongues that still somehow managed to express exquisite songs, songs that told of the unimaginably addictive taste of power, the allure of domination, and above all, the agony of being unable to have absolute supremacy over all of creation.

“Is this what I am? I can feel an insatiable hunger growing inside me. I didn’t feel it before, but I can’t suppress it now. I want to consume everything. I crave to devour the world itself! What is happening to me?”

“I’m very sorry Jonathan. The burden that you are asked to carry is immense, but I know that you are strong enough to bear it without breaking. Your will is strong enough to resist the whispers of the evil that lurks in you. Your soul might harbor something inherently malevolent, but you are more than a match for it. When the time comes, I have faith that you will make the right choice.”

The blurry woman put her hand on my shoulder for one last pat and faded away into nothingness, leaving behind a few quiet words that I barely caught.

“I’m sorry Jonathan. I’m sorry Joseph. I’m sorry for what I did to you and what I must put you through in the future.”

Joseph? Who is Joseph?

<I think that was my name.>

Darky? Did you figure out who you are?

<I’m not sure. It is all very blurry.>

“Pick up your friends and go. I don’t want to see your faces ever again. You are no longer welcome in my sanctuary.”

Medusa pointed behind me and I noticed for the first time that Carla and Sara were lying on the ground with blood coming out of their mouths, eyes, noses and ears. Medusa’s initial attack seemed to have hit them harder than it had hit me. I helped Sara up and supported her after she nearly collapsed trying to walk on her own. After a little hesitation, I did the same for Carla and I supported both of them as we left through a gash in space that appeared to receive us. The last thing I saw before leaving was the silent blue giant vanishing into a whirlpool of water after he saw us off with a glance from his entirely blue eyes and Medusa’s eyes flashing maliciously after he was gone.

**Chapter Twenty-Two: The Warden Part 1**

**Dorothy Blackthorn**

They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I don’t know about hell, but I know that my own path was paved with glittering tiles of righteousness and thoughts of the greater good. I have always believed that I made the right choices and decisions throughout my tumultuous life, but it still somehow led to a dark and twisted place. In my weaker moments, I constantly wonder what I could have done to change what happened, constantly fantasizing about what could have been.

Of course such thoughts were unbecoming of someone who is one of the leaders of the Order of Wardens, but I guess it was to be expected since, unlike most members of the Order who were powerful Archangels, my origin wasn’t very grand or noble. You see, I was born a normal human. My father was a simple Englishman who had to flee from his country in fear for his life because of mounting gambling debts and increasingly insistent loan sharks. My mother was a foolish little Polish girl who fell for the mysterious stranger from a foreign land who suddenly appeared at her little town and occasionally worked as a hired hand at her father’s farm; it wasn’t long before she was pregnant and my grandfather forced the two of them to get married. Surprisingly, my father matured considerably after getting married and settled down after he and my mother took over the farm. He always half-jokingly called himself a “gentleman farmer”, but he was hard working and the farm did well because of his effort. This meant that I was born into a relatively prosperous and happy family. I had no brothers or sisters, but I had loving parents and that insured that I would grow up content.

Alas, my life of familial bliss wasn’t fated to last very long. The flames of war that started raging all over Europe made sure of that. With the assassination Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria acting as the fuse, the volatile situation in continental Europe exploded like a barrel of gunpowder, sucking in all the countries in the area and culminating in the first World War in history. Even though Poland wasn’t even an independent nation at the time, it was positioned smack dab in the middle of the warzone. Fortunately, my home town was in a secluded and hard to reach area, so it had somehow managed to escape unnoticed by the encroaching armies. Unfortunately, even though we managed to escape the marauding armies, we landed in the crosshairs of something much worse.

Because of the chaos and anarchy caused by war, there was no organized police force left to keep the peace. Law and order broke down to a point where places that were not under some form of military rule became fertile breeding grounds for certain groups that couldn’t operate during normal times, groups that could only thrive during chaos. One of those groups was a cult of Satan worshipping mad-men who roved the countryside performing their unholy sacrificial rituals to please their evil god. With no one to stop them, these psychopaths continued their rampage until one day, they chose our unprotected little town as their next target. Overnight, they took our peaceful town and made it into their own nightmarish playground. Except for the few who managed to escape when they first attacked, the rest of us were rounded up like cattle and imprisoned in the warehouses where we had originally stored our grain. Every night they would pick a couple of people to take out from the warehouse; these people were never heard from again. Deep inside we knew that we would never see them again and everyone was terrified that they would be the ones to be chosen next.

One fateful night, instead of picking a few people, the Satanists forced everyone that was left out of the warehouse including me and my parents. They made us all gather in the town square where they started to pick out young girls to separate them from the main group. Their parents and loved ones tried to resist the Satanists, but they eventually relented under the threats and violent beatings. Finally, it was my turn and the Satanists tried to take me, but my parents held onto me and wouldn’t let go no matter how much they were beaten or threatened. The merciless Satanists repeatedly struck them with the butt of their guns, using them as clubs to violently beat them until they became a bloody and broken mess on the floor. I couldn’t bear to see what was happening and tried to escape their grasp, but even with their broken hands, they still managed to hold on to my legs. Eventually, the commotion that we were causing attracted the attention of the man who appeared to be the leader of the Satanists. He was a shriveled old man with wispy white hair who looked like he could be a hundred years old. He was dressed in a traditional black priest’s cassock. He sat on an ornate golden chair while being flanked by ten heavily armed men who respectfully stood behind him. He had been lounging lazily when he noticed what was going on. With a gesture from his hand and a few muttered German words, the goons who were assaulting my parents retreated and the armed escorts behind him raised carried his golden chair towards us with him still sitting on it with a relaxed smile on his wrinkled face. He looked down at us from his high vantage point and spoke to us with broken and barely understandable Polish.

“Your parents are brave. This I admire. It is bad that we must have you. You should rejoice. You are chosen as bride. Soon you shall fulfill a great purpose,” he then turned to the people rounding up the girls and continued to speak in Polish, even though he was obviously not accustomed to it, as if he was trying to be considerate to us, “Friedrich, Hermann, no need to take the other girls. This is the one we need. Put the other girls back. Bring this girl to the center. Bring her parents too. Tell the slaves that it is time for them to play their parts.”

His goons dragged me and my barely conscious parents to the center of the square where the Satanists were keeping the rest of the town at least 10 steps away from us. Two women came out from the darkness somewhere beyond the lights of the burning torches that the cultists were holding. They stripped me of all my clothes right there in front of everyone and started washing my body. It took me a while to recognize them but I finally realized the two of them where the baker’s wife and a nun from our church. They were almost unrecognizable with their mouths sewn shut and their eyes glassy and empty like that of a fish. They ignored my desperate pleas as they took off my dirty clothes which had gotten filthy after days of captivity and methodically washed my entire body until I was completely clean. When they were finished, they disappeared back into the darkness as quietly as they appeared. The old man scrutinized my naked form without a single ounce of lust, unlike his followers whose eyes all glimmered with hunger. He nodded his head in approval and spoke some more German words. When he was done, all of the cultists started howling madly and took out sharp edged weapons like machetes and large butcher knives. They moved into the crowd of town’s people like wolves into a flock of sheep and started slaughtering them until the whole square was bathed in red. Blood started to form little streams on the cobble stone ground before flowing into freshly dug troughs I hadn’t noticed before. The blood filled the troughs and formed a giant pentagram that spanned the entire area of the town square. Six of the old man’s escorts came forward and grabbed me and my parents, two for each of us. They held me stationary while they forced my parents onto their knees. The old man who looked like he couldn’t crawl let alone walk jumped up from his seat with one smooth motion. He took out a small switch-blade from his voluminous sleeved and brandished it expertly, slitting the throats of both my parents before my eyes. The men on either side of me had grabbed my arms to stop me from moving, but it was completely unnecessary because I couldn’t have moved if I wanted to. I was in shock, my body had gone numb and my mind was blank. I stared in disbelief as the two people who were my everything made horrible gurgling noises as they bled out in front of me. The man responsible for their deaths dipped his finger into their throats and started drawing symbols on my body with the blood of my own parents. When my entire body was covered with the strange symbols, the pentagram of blood surrounding the area caught fire. In the periphery of my mind, I was thinking how blood shouldn’t have been flammable, but most of my mind was swallowed by static, refusing to process what was happening.

I was snapped out of my trance when a pipe fell on the head the old man who had retreated a few steps back. His skull caved in with a sickening crunch before it burst outwards, showering me with more blood and some brain matter. The metal pipe continued to move and one by one the Satanists started to die in the same way, each swing crushing a skull and reaping a life. The Satanists responded with gunfire, but the pipe continued to claim lives unabated. I looked at the chaos around me and it took me a while to notice that the two goons holding my arms had already fallen to the ground, dead. I knelt down to the ground and tried to shake my parents awake.

“Wake up! Wake up! Please wake up! The bad people are gone, you don’t need to stay on the ground anymore! Get up! Why aren’t you getting up?”

“It’s too late. They’re gone.”

Before I could react to the voice, a hand grabbed my waist and I found myself being hoisted up onto somebody’s shoulder. I tried to struggle free to get back to my parents but the man just grunted and held me more securely.

“Stop struggling. I took care of a few of them and they are panicking, but they will soon realize that there is only one of me and there are hundreds of them. I don’t want to be here when that happens.”

I didn’t listen to him and continued to desperately struggle for freedom.

“Fine. If that is how you are going to be, you aren’t giving me any other choice.”

That was the last thing I heard before I felt a dull pain in the back of my neck and passed out.

Hell of a way to meet the future love of my life.

**Chapter Twenty-Three: The Warden Part 2**

**Dorothy Blackthorn**

The smell of something burning tickled my nose and woke me up from the awful nightmare I was having. I couldn’t remember it clearly, but the image of my parent’s dead bodies remained fresh in my mind. The burning smell that woke me up was probably one of father’s calamitous attempts to make breakfast. I pulled the blanket covering me off of myself and rolled over to get out of bed, but even after two consecutive rolls, I couldn’t reach the edge of the bed. I finally opened my eyes and I noticed that the “blanket” I had pulled off was actually a large black jacket and the “bed” I was sleeping on was just grass.

“So you finally decided to wake up huh? You have been out like a light for nearly a day now and I didn’t even hit you that hard. Must have been the stress, sudden shock can do strange things to the human body.”

I scrambled backwards in a panic, holding the jacket to my chest by reflex as I realized that I was naked.

“Relax, I am not going to eat you.”

My slightly blurry eyes popped wide open as I stared at the strange man who sat next to an open fire. He was completely covered in ragged black clothes, so I couldn’t really see what he looked like; even his face was covered with black rags. He didn’t even glance in my direction when he spoke. Instead, he just stared at a pot of something while stirring it with a broken tree branch, but he must not have been doing it very well because it was emitting dark smoke. It was the origin of the smell that had woken me up.

“Who are you? Where are we?”

“Hmm, seems you don’t remember what happened. No wonder you are so calm.”

A foreboding feeling gripped my heart as a certain possibility entered my head.

“What are you talking about?”

He threw the twig he was using to stir the pot and threw it in the fire with a defeated sigh.

“Your town is gone, so are all of the town’s people, so are your parents.”

“Gone? What do you mean gone?”

“I mean gone as in dead.”

I once again remembered the nightmare I was having and piece by piece, it started to slowly come back to me.

“No! You are lying! Take me back to my parents! They are probably worried sick about me by now!”

The man continued to look into the camp fire and pointed at me with his right hand.

“Look down at yourself. That is all that is left of your parents. The rest was burnt away when the cultists burned your town.”

I looked down upon myself and I was horrified to find that I was naked under the jacket, but that wasn’t the worst part; the worst part was that my naked body was covered in symbols made of dry and flecking blood.

“Oh God! It was real? It was all real?!”

“No use calling the name of God. He must have better things to do because he sure isn’t going to answer to our pleas. Trust me, I have already tried.”

“I need to go back! I need to get my parents!”

He snorted in derision and just threw another twig into the flames.

“I already told you, there is nothing left in your town but ashes. Besides, that place is swarming with cultists. You would be dead before you got within a hundred meters of that place. There is no chance of you succeeding, you would just be wasting the effort I made to save you.”

His words reminded me of the miraculous floating pipe that smashed the heads of the cultists.

“Wait, that was you? That’s great! You were able to kill those cultists like it was nothing! With your help, we could just go in there and save my parents.”

“Are you an idiot? Didn’t you hear me when I said they were dead?”

“Maybe they survived when…”

“Their throats were slit in front of you. They bled out right there and then. They did not survive.”

I glared at him angrily with tears running down my cheeks. ”Fine! If you are not going, just show me the direction to my town and I will go there myself.”

He continued to silently look into the fire for a long time before turning towards me for the first time. His face was covered by the black rags and the part that was visible between his black hair and the rags was painted black, even his eyes were black. “Do you think that going back will make you some kind of hero? That throwing yourself into danger will accomplish anything? Do you think that you are the only one who has love for their kin? I saw your parents die. God knows how they survived for so long, but they still had a breath of life left in them, so I saw their final moments when I carried you away. Do you know what kind of expression they were wearing when they passed away? They were smiling. They saw you escaping and they were happy that you were safe. It was obvious that you are more important to them than life itself. How do you think they would feel if you throw your life away? If you truly want to honor their memory, then live on. Dying is easy, learning to survive is much harder. I understand that you aren’t in any state to make rational decisions, so think about what I said and cool off a little before you do anything rash. There is a stream a few steps that way, wash yourself off before we talk about anything else.”

His words hit me like a slap, they made my mind a mess and all I could do was to get up woodenly and walk in the direction he was pointing, all the while grasping the jacket wrapped around me to my chest like it was the only thing keeping me safe. Just like he had said, I found the little stream and jumped into the cold water. I frantically scrubbed my body to get the bloody markings off of me, but at some point I realized that they were actually the only things I had left of my parents and that thought made me feel an indescribable sorrow. All of pain and grief that I couldn’t feel because of shock finally burst forth like a flood and I started shaking and sobbing quietly. I was still crying when the man wearing all black came running at me. I was still naked and the man was a stranger, so I immediately became terrified at the idea of what he might do to me.

“No! Don’t come any closer!”

He ignored me and stretched out his hand, but instead of grabbing me like I thought he would, he pushed me to the side and rushed past me, just in time to meet the gigantic bear paw that would have landed on my head if he hadn’t intervened. The paw knocked him back into the water and when he resurfaced, he had a bloody slash stretching from the side of his face to the bottom of his ribs. The black rag covering his face had fallen off and the water had washed away most of the black paint on his face, so I had my first clear look at the man who had rescued me. Despite the immediate and mortal crisis I was facing, I couldn’t help but marvel at his handsome, almost femininely beautiful face. Even with the giant bloody gash on his face, he still somehow managed to look like a piece of art. I’m sure if a painter drew a painting like him, that painter would never paint again because he would know that he could never surpass such perfection. I wasn’t exaggerating, he was that beautiful, and this fragile looking man wiped the blood the blood off his face with his sleeve, took out a pipe which was tied to his belt, and charged at the hulking bear that was standing on its hind legs and looming over us. It was ludicrous, a man attacking a grown bear with a pipe, but what was even more ludicrous was when he ducked past the bear’s wild swings and used the pipe to hit its knee which bent the wrong way, making it fall to the side. He then climbed over the fallen beast and smashed its head repeatedly until it was nothing but a messy pulp and the bear stopped moving. After he was finished, he seemed to lose all energy and collapsed right there on top of the bear.

Seeing him suddenly fall down, I panicked and pulled him out of the stream and back to the place with the camp fire. I laid him down next to the fire and started to use the shredded remains of his shirt to make bandages and clean his wounds like I used to do back in the farm when the animals were hurt. Sometime in the middle of the process, he coughed weakly and opened his eyes a crack before muttering, “How the hell do you not notice a giant brown bear attacking you?”

“I was a little preoccupied. Don’t try to talk anymore. You have lost a lot of blood and you barely have enough energy to stay awake let alone talk. You need to eat something before you pass out again.”

He pointed at the pot he was stirring earlier which was still somehow releasing plumes of noxious smoke. The effort from moving his hand to point made him grimace and his face turned frighteningly pale.

“Don’t move! Just stay still! As for whatever is in that pot, you are already hurt, I won’t make things worse by feeding you that. Do you have any ingredients that I could use to cook?”

“There is a dead boar over to the side next to that fallen tree, but it hasn’t been gutted or cleaned.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Even though he was sick, he still managed to look up at me cynically. “Are you sure you can do it?”

I ignored his remark which dripped with skepticism and asked, “Do you have a knife?”

“It is in my satchel, next to the boar.”

I went over and found the dead boar. I also found the knife he was talking about in the satchel among other knickknacks; it was short enough that it was more of a dagger than a knife. Thankfully, the boar was not fully grown so it was enough for my purpose. With a practiced hand, I made a few careful incisions and stripped it of its hide.

My father didn’t have any sons, so I was the only one that could go with him when he went out to hunt with his favorite prized bow. My father had been a peaceful man, but he was able to nail an arrow through a red stag’s eyes from fifteen steps away. I grew up idolizing him, so it wasn’t surprising that I was a little tom-boyish. I loved going with him into the woods and learned everything I could from him. It was only natural that I knew how to handle a small boar’s carcass. It didn’t take long before I had strips of meat from the flank.

I dumped the unholy catastrophe that was brewing inside the pot and washed it thoroughly in the clean water from the stream. I looked at the dead bear and thought of bringing it over to the camp, but I discarded that silly thought immediately. I was not nearly strong enough to move that behemoth.

With the boar’s meat, some common edible herbs I found in the area and salt from the satchel, I made a half-way decent broth. As I carefully fed it to the injured man, I realized that I didn’t even know his name.

“What is your name? Mine is Dorothy.”

He stared at me incuriously and replied, “Lucas. I’m Lucas.”

“Why are you staring at me?”

He finished swallowing another mouthful of broth and his mouth tilted into a crooked smile. “Oh nothing, it is just that this is the first time I saw a naked girl butcher a boar.”

That was when I finally realized that in my panic, I had forgotten to get the oversized jacket from the shore of the stream where I had left it. I had somehow failed to notice all this time and now I sat next to Lucas without a stitch of clothing and covered in boar guts.

**Chapter Twenty-Four: The Warden Part 3**

**Dorothy Blackthorn**

For nearly half a year, we continued to travel through the woods, often while being chased by one group or another. Lucas continuously protected me from anything and everything that he thought might hurt me while I took care of him. He was very brave, sometimes stupidly so, and he was surprisingly good at fighting, often winning against seemingly unbeatable opponents, but he was completely useless at anything else. It was true that I would not have survived long without him, but he would have also struggled to live on his own. Over time we grew to depend on each other which eventually grew into something else, something more.

It was strange. I had just gone through the most traumatizing times in my life following which I spent most of my days fleeing from pursuers and in fear for my life but I found warmth and happiness in the arms of my unfathomably handsome guardian angel. Lucas was my sun and my moon, he meant everything to me.

One cold Polish night, the two of us stood beneath an ancient tree and with the grass as our honored guests and the stars as our only witnesses, we exchanged vows that wrote ourselves. There was no priest to make it official, but that night, we became man and night.

Two weeks after we got married, we could no longer outrun all of our pursuers and one of them caught up to us. It was early in the morning when a single man dressed in a strange military uniform that I had never seen before barred our path. The all white pants and white jacket with golden buttons were pristine, which did not make sense since he was in the middle of the forest. His imposing tall figure was paired along with a sharp angular face and fiery red hair with streaks of gold running through it. His cold blue eyes also had the same golden streaks radiating out from the center. The man was completely unarmed and stood casually in the middle of the dirt road, but for the first time in my life, I saw apprehension flash through Lucas’s eyes. He pulled me back so that I stood behind him and stared straight at the alien looking man.

“Must we do this? I am not hurting anyone; must we act out this same old broken routine?”

The man looked at him sternly and replied, “Do you honestly believe the nonsense that you are spouting? Do you really think you can just go on your merry way without causing any harm? Who are you trying to fool, me or yourself?”

“All I know is that I am tired. I am fed up with this meaningless struggle. I just want to have peace. You have won, I give up. You and your army can do whatever you want and I will not resist, just leave me out of it.”

The uniformed man straightened out non-existent wrinkles from his cuffs and started walking towards us. Lucas panicked and raised his hands to signal him to stop.

“Wait! The girl is innocent. Let her leave first before anything else.”

The uniformed man looked at me for the first time and raised his eyebrows in surprise. “A mortal girl? This is why you are hiding away in this remote corner of the world after setting off the war? This is why you left your armies defenseless in the middle of your campaign? You! Girl! Do you know who this man is?”

I could not understand what was happening and I knew that Lucas had some past history with this mysterious man but his stuck-up holier than thou attitude rubbed me the wrong way so I answered him with vim and vigor. “He is Lucas, my husband.”

He stood stock still for a second and repeatedly looked back and forth from me to Lucas and back again, then he burst out into loud hysterical laughter. “Husband! HA! HA! HA! Did you just say husband?”

Lucas frowned frostily and put his hands on my shoulder to pull me back behind him again. “What is so funny? She is my wife!”

The man wiped tears of mirth off his cheek as he got his laughter under control with some difficulty. “Oh, I see it now. I didn’t notice it before because I didn’t know to look, but it is obvious now. You fell in love with the girl. You of all people fell into that trap. You are telling me to leave you alone so that you could live happily ever after with this girl? That is foolish. This is not allowed. It is against the scriptures that we were taught to obey.”

Now, it was Lucas’s turn to smirk. “I am already a Fallen, it is not like I can fall again.”

“Oh really? Then what about your new wife? Does she know who you really are? What you are? What you have done?”

“Shut up!”

“I’m guessing that is a no.” The man in white had an almost sing-song tone as he gloated.

“What is going on Lucas? Who is this man?” I could no longer suppress my mounting apprehension and sought some reassurance from Lucas but the only thing that answered me was silence.

“Oh, how rude of me; I mean, we are practically family and you don’t even know who I am. We should remedy this immediately, I’m your brother-in-law after all.”

Brother-in-law? This man was Lucas’s brother?

“I have many names and titles: the righteous flame, protector of order, sword of God, but the one you would probably be most familiar with is Archangel Michael.”

As he spoke, four pairs of massive wings sprouted from behind him like a giant peacock’s tail. Each pair had its own unique color; the bottom-most one was white and fluffy like the wings of a white dove magnified a hundred times, the ones above those were golden like they were made from delicate gold leafs, on top of those was a pair of metallic wings with sharp edges like a collection of swords and finally, in the most prominent position at the top were an eye catching duo of flaming monstrosities that were so bright that it hurt my eyes to look at them.

“It has been a long time since a human has seen my true form.” He flexed his shoulders and made his wings flutter like he was stretching out a sore muscle. As he moved closer, the white uniform he wore was slowly covered with gleaming golden armor, a flaming red spear appeared in his left hand and a glowing golden sword appeared in his right, completing his transformation into a heavenly warrior. “Well brother, it is time that we settled this.”

Archangel Michael? My first thought was that the man was insane, but reality disabused me of that notion. I gawked in disbelief but a part of my mind was whirring, performing the calculations.

He was the Archangel Michael? He was also the brother of Lucas? Who were the ones that the great Archangel would call brothers? Which one of these would he have such a deep enmity with? There was only one answer that fit.

Lucas turned towards me with a sad smile and pulled away from me. With a subtle motion, four pairs of wings burst out from his back. Unlike Michaels, his weren’t bright. They were just as large but their colors were much darker. The bottom most pair were pitch black like the wings of a crow, above those were a scary red and scaly bat wings, followed by an iridescent green pair spectral wings that flashed in and out of existence. The last pair were a relatively inconspicuous deep purple, but despite their apparent unremarkable appearance, my eyes were irresistibly drawn to them and it took me a while to extricate my gaze from them.

“Do you fear me? Do you hate me?” Lucas looked at his own wings and touched them gingerly. “This is what I really am. I am Lucifer. I am the great evil from your bible. Lucas was a lie. Everything that we shared was a lie. This is the truth.”

I closed the distance that he had put between us and slapped him, hard. “Never say that again! I don’t know who you used to be, but don’t you dare say that I don’t know who you are now. You are my Lucas. Whatever else you might have been in the past, you are and will always be my husband.”

Lucas rubbed his red cheek and smiled that familiar rogue smile. “You are really ok with this?”

“Of course not! There is a whole lot of questions you are going to have to answer and I retain the right to mete out some punishment for hiding so much from me, but I am not going to leave. I can’t leave you. “

Michael snorted at our little show of affection. “You bought into his bullshit too, huh? But I understand, he does have that effect on people. I know from experience that you can’t help but to love him and trust him, but I also know from experience that he will break your heart eventually.”

“You have no right to say that! You know that what I did in the past was as painful for me as it was for you!”

Lucas’s angry retort made Michael furious. His flaming wings flared up into a giant conflagration in response to his rage. “I have no right? I have every right! We were brothers! We fought side by side for millennia! You were the only one I trusted with my back and I would have sacrificed my life to protect yours! In the end, you betrayed me to make a grab at power. You threw away our brotherhood, and for what? To make yourself God?”

“That is not fair. You make it sound like I was greedy for power. The throne means nothing to me, just a means to an end. All I wanted to do was help the humans. Can’t you see it? The wars? The famines? The diseases? If I had succeeded, I could have stopped it all. I could have made earth into a paradise free of evil.”

“What you are proposing is against the Lord’s will. There is a reason for all the pain and suffering in this world and it is not our place to question the almighty’s plans. God gave the humans free will, what you want to do would take it away.”

“As long as they are happy and content, why would they need free will?”

“That is not for me to know. I am not God. I know my limitations. You on the other hand have always had the bad habit of overreaching yourself. It doesn’t matter how you try to justify yourself, in the end, you are the lowest of scum, a betrayer.”

“Why can’t you see what I am trying to do? Why are you so mad at me when all I have ever done was to try and make the mortals’ lives better?”

“Because I am your brother! They might be my God-given duty but you were the closest family I had! Whatever your reasons were, you stabbed me in the back!”

Lucas stood aghast and pointed uncertainly at his brother. “All this time, it was never about the word of God? It was personal?”

Michael lifted his weapons and advanced. “The moment you betrayed me, you stopped being my brother. Now I will avenge my brother by destroying the twisted monster pretending to be him.”

Lucas, or rather Lucifer, and Michael clashed in an explosion of bright red and dark purple like fireworks. The fight was short; it was finished before I realized what was happening and the result was also immediately apparent.

Neither one of them won. Both of them lay on the ground bleeding heavily and barely breathing. I rushed over to Lucas but it was obvious that he didn’t have long left to live.

“Don’t worry Dorothy. I am not mortal. I will come back in a couple of years.” He then raised his head with some difficulty and looked at Michael. “Are you satisfied now? We are both going to die, but have you thought about who would return first? The mortals think about me more than they think about you. My name might be notorious but it is equally prominent. I will resurrect years before you. Without you, who will be powerful enough to stop me?”

Michael coughed up some blood and somehow managed to get back on his feet using his sword as a crutch. “So this was your plan all along? To get me out of the way?” He staggered over to us and finally collapsed in front of us. “You think it would be that easy? You think I would let you win?” As he spoke, his giant wings which had dimmed down considerably started glowing brightly again before they started to break down into small motes of light. Before I could react, these small motes of light drifted over to me and started to enter my body, making me feel like my blood has turned into hot scalding magma. I screamed in pain and convulsed on the ground but the motes of light continued to stream into me without end.

“What are you doing? Why are you bequeathing your angelic authority to Dorothy?”

“Because somebody needs to stop you. It can’t be me so it is going to be her.”

“You are insane. She is my wife! She loves me! She would never fight me. You are destroying yourself for no reason at all.”

“Really? Do you think that she will not fight you once she finds out what you are planning to do with the baby in her stomach? Do you think she will not fight to protect her child when she discovers that you want to use him as a vessel? That you want to possess him and destroy his soul?”

I was in tremendous pain but I was still shocked by the sudden revelation. I was pregnant? I was going to have a child? Through gritted teeth, I looked at Lucas with questioning eyes and asked, “What does he mean? You want to kill our child?”

Lucas looked alarmed and a little ashamed as he looked away. “It is a necessary sacrifice. My plans can bring happiness and prosperity to all of humanity, what is one life compared to that?”

The last of Michaels wings disintegrated and he looked pale as a sheet of paper but he still managed to laugh. “Do you see that? That is his true nature!”

The motes of light finally stopped flowing into my body but instead, they combined to form a golden halo above my head before disappearing into my forehead. Michael vanished with a flash of light, leaving behind the echo of his laughter.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Lucas reached out his hand as if he wanted help getting up but I recoiled from him.

“Dorothy?”

I put my hand on my stomach and I somehow felt the life growing inside of me. This was my child! This was my son!

“Dorothy!”

Everything suddenly changed at that moment. Everything shifted in my world.

“I’m sorry Lucas. I can’t let you kill our child.”

Tears fell down uncontrollably from my eyes but my hand was steady as I summoned a flaming spear, the same flaming spear that was in Michael’s hand earlier, and thrust it through my husband’s heart. I knew he was already dying, but it was my way of drawing a line between us. It was a way to show him where I stood. He stared at me, his eyes wide with surprise and asked,” Why? What about your promise to never leave me?”

I cradled his head on my lap, just like I had done on that first night that we had met, and wept bitterly. “Because I am no longer just your wife. I am also a mother.”