

Chapter Nine

With four women down, Tabitha was over halfway through the challenge, and while so far it had felt like some of them had been trickier than others, the entire ordeal had also somehow been less difficult than she'd expected it be when she'd started. That could only mean that there were much more herculean things to come.

One of the lessons Tabitha had learned the hardest growing up was that when things felt like they were on Easy Street, Rough Road was just around the damn corner, and it would always be upon her before she even had a moment to consider it. She'd learned that if there was a quiet spell anywhere along the way, that was when you took the opportunity to study, to plan, to research, to do any preparatory work that might prove useful in a pinch.

When Tabitha had asked Veronica for the rules of the competition, the demoness had provided them to her, but not in any modern or easily usable format, because why would they be in something convenient like a PDF or a Google Doc? They had been given to her on a giant vellum scroll that had to be read in sections, and Tabitha had begun doing her best to decipher, decode, decrypt and decomplicate all of the verbose and antiquated language, which was written centuries ago. Thankfully, this particular version of the scroll had been translated into English, even if the writers had a tendency to use fifty words when five would do.

She hadn't expected the angels and demons to have made the competition easy to comprehend, but she certainly also hadn't expected that they would have so many layers of complications that it made modern contracts look like memos. The language of the celestial beings, it seemed, was filled with ambiguities, and anything that would leave wiggle room was expressly being stricken out during event after event. It seemed like each time the game ran, one side or the other had certain stipulations they wanted added to future versions of the game. The addendums and clauses section of the document was twice as long as the original document itself, something Tabby couldn't decide if she was pleased or bothered by, as it meant there was more and more things for her to have to keep track of, but it also meant that the remaining loopholes tended to leap out to her eyes more easily.

"I told you," Veronica said, sliding down into the chair next to her as Tabitha continued to scrawl her notes on her fifth yellow legal pad of paper. "It's a lot to take in. All the various changes and minutiae we've had to add over the years."

"Do I even want to know what to this section here about tortious interference via non-mammalian methods refers to?"

Veronica giggled a little bit, shaking her head. "Probably not. It's a long, weird, complicated story and the pay off isn't all that great, but it did involve me getting to see an angel yelling about how our side had always been using reptiles in interesting and dangerous ways, and that if we didn't stop, they were going to exterminate the lot of them. 'It's always the thrice-damned reptiles!' became a punchline in Hell for a long while."

Tabitha joined in the laugh. "The angels seem like they're all pretty uptight."

Veronica shrugged slightly. "I get that they're 'the enemy' and all that but they aren't that bad when you get right down to it. A little snobby, maybe, but some of them have been known to relax and let their hair down now and again. They just need to be reminded that even though they're God's preferred species, they aren't flawless, and just as capable of error as any other being. But they're just trying to do what they feel like is their job, and we're just doing what we feel like is ours. So, I try not to get too annoyed with them, even if many of them desperately need a stick removed from their ass."

"That's awfully enlightened of you, Roni."

“At the end of the day, boss, when you get right down to it, we’re not very different on a molecular level,” she told her. “In fact, genetically, we’re almost identical, despite the generations of separation we’ve had to evolve away from one another. Almost all the differences between angels and demons are ornamental or decorative. Shy of an actual blood test, there’s no real guaranteed way to tell us and them apart.”

“Lemme get this straight,” Charlie said, wandering over to them dressed in camisole top and boyshort panties. “She’s *actually* a demon? Like, that wasn’t some game we were playing but like, genuine actual demon?”

“That she is,” Tabitha confirmed.

“And, you’re, like, the for real daughter of the Devil or whateva?”

“That’s what she tells me.” Tabitha waved her hand over the giant amount of vellum before her. “And what all of this confirms, basically. I can’t imagine they’d give me all this shit if there wasn’t a great reason to do so. It’s an ass ton of paperwork to do for a ridiculous prank.”

“Does being the Devil’s daughter come with any perks?”

“I might die in a few weeks if I’m not careful,” Tabby joked.

“That doesn’t strike me as much of a perk, per se,” Charlie pouted.

“Well, if I *don’t* die, I think I gain dominion over a very large swath of Hell, to do with as I see fit, for whatever *that’s* worth.”

“What would you *do* with a chunk of Hell to call your very own, Mistress?” Kelly asked as she came over to join the conversation. It seemed like now that Tabitha had stopped focusing on the paperwork, it was open season for all her women to come and pepper her with questions, not that she minded.

It was good to see them starting to get along with each other and spending a bit of time with one another. Tabitha had been bringing them under her wing, but she hadn’t been sure she’d been giving enough thought as to getting them to mix. But the three of them had seemed to fold naturally together without much direct intervention from her, falling into the roles of the performer older sister, the athlete middle sister and the artistic little sister, although it was good that they *weren’t* sisters, because Tabby had seen them each making out with one another on a couple of occasions. Kelly had made it a point to give both Charlie and Emily the most intense kisses she could upon their arrival at the house.

“Haven’t given it all that much thought yet,” Tabitha replied. “I want to remain living first and foremost, and it seems like a plot of land in Hell comes along with that living. I’m going to figure out how not to die in this competition, and I can worry about what to do with my portion of Hell when they give me the title for the land in question.”

“You could open up a Hell soccer league,” Kelly suggested. “I can be the star player, or the coach, or both! We can all play soccer all the time!”

“That’d certainly be my own personal Hell,” Charlie said. “Having to do physical activity for the rest of eternity.”

“Mine too,” Emily agreed, “although it might be funny if you tried to open an orchestra in Hell, Charlie, and made me and Kelly play instruments in it.”

“Hey!” Kelly laughed, pointing a finger at the former pro gamer girl in objection. “Shows what you know! I took two years of trumpet back in high school!”

“And were you any good at it?” Charlie countered.

“Fucking *terrible*, which is why I stayed focused on sports,” she giggled frantically as Emily sat down on top of Kelly’s lap. “The last thing you want to hear is me trying to play that fucking thing ever again. I think I missed more notes than I hit.”

“You can’t possibly be *that* bad, Kelly.”

“I’m not kidding when I tell you that you would pay me *not* to play around you.”

That set all the girls laughing. “You know I could Taskrabbit someone to bring me a trumpet here right now to settle that argument, don’t you?”

“Don’t you fucking *dare*, you little bitch!” Kelly cackled as she shoved Emily from her lap, hopped to her feet and started to chase Charlie around the apartment, like a pair of deranged lunatics, making everyone else grin unreservedly.

“I’m gonna get a trumpet! I’m gonna get a trumpet!” It was a menacing little sing-song melody that floated through the air as she fled from the soccer star, tossing pillows into her way to try and slow her progress.

“Emily, can I talk with you a minute away from the others?” Tabitha said quietly.

“Sure, boss; what’s up, buttercup?” the blue haired woman said as the two of them moved away from Kelly, Charlie, and Veronica, who seemed to be getting incredibly involved in their game of stop the phone call, sprinting after one another like a trio of pets with the zoomies, Charlie and Veronica tossing the phone back and forth over Kelly’s head.

“You mentioned when we first met that you had been given advice that I was not to be trusted,” Tabitha said quietly. “Who gave you that advice?”

“Oh!” Emily said in surprise. “It was one of the other team owners, S@vvyB3@r. Er, Danil Pashtin, the owner of Vitas Illuminus team out of the Ukraine. He said he’d heard that AOA was looking to make a play to acquire an e-sports team or two, and that they’d dispatched a pit viper with no morals, sorry boss, to try and put the moves on whoever they thought they could convince was weakest. So that’s why my guard was up when you and I first met. AOA’s whole reputation around the esports community hasn’t been so great for the last few months, I guess.”

“This Pashtin, he still in town?”

Emily nodded. “They weren’t due to head back to their basecamp for a few days after Planetary Showdown finished, so I imagine he’s likely still over at the hotel. They don’t like to travel the day after the tournament is done, especially after they had a Top 4 finish.”

“Sorry about the Queens of Ragetown not finishing first,” Tabitha said, putting her hand on Emily’s shoulder, but the blue haired e-athlete only grinned.

“I’m not! Sure, we would’ve loved to have taken first place, but finishing second is still *way* better than we were predicted to do. I’m thrilled we did well enough to clinch the number two slot. It’s the biggest single prize pool we’ve ever taken down. It also puts us in a fantastic position to start the next season, and we’ve got loads of people talking about how good we looked, so it’s way more press than I think we expected to do. My gals will head home, take some time to relax and enjoy the money from the win, and then in a few weeks they’ll get back to scrimming and strategizing, getting ready for the next season. We’ll get ’em next season.”

“If I went over to talk to this Pashtin, do you think he’d take a meeting with me?” Tabitha asked, cautiously.

“Oh, I can call their manager and have them let him know you’re coming, and it should be fine. Danil’s an old friend and he’s generally a nice guy, that’s why I believed him when he told me AOA was sketchy, because why would he lie to me?”

“Don’t call him. I don’t want him knowing in advance I’m coming over; I just want to be sure he’s going to be around.”

“They finished fourth, so he’s definitely not going out and partying, boss. The team is, but I know Danil, and he’ll already be in his hotel room, prepping for next season. He’ll be

there.”

Tabitha nodded, then leaned in to kiss Emily before pulling back. “Go, have fun getting to know your new partners. I don’t want you to feel like the odd one out, so the better you know the others, the more at home you’ll feel.”

“Kay!” The former streamer skipped away from Tabitha and over to join in the wild game of chase that had continued the entire time they’d been talking as Veronica tapped out and headed back over towards the Mistress.

“Emily says we’re going out?”

Tabitha rolled her eyes a little bit. “I’m perfectly capable of going out on my own, Roni.”

“Of course you are, Mistress, but I know that we would all feel better if I could go with you, just to offer you protection in case there are other problems that spring up along the way.”

“You think I should be worried?”

The demoness smiled with as much delicacy as she could manage. “I think we should be careful, which isn’t the same thing.”

“Alright,” Tabitha said. “Let’s get changed. You and I are indeed going out.”

New York City had never been the most hospitable of places, but ever since Veronica had pulled the last remnants of the veil from her eyes, Tabitha had found it difficult to let her gaze wander around the streets, for all the new things she’d see any time she looked.

All the stray visions she’d seen occasionally growing up were things she saw daily now, grotesqueries living day-to-day lives, strange supernatural creatures of all kinds trying to be as ordinary as possible from behind the protection of their illusions of normality. Minotaurs in business suits, goblins working construction, lamia manning subway stations. Everywhere she looked, there were inhuman creatures going about mundane lives, sometimes offering her a polite smile or wave, as if they recognized her ability to perceive them as they were, giving thanks for not being ousted or stared at.

“How long has New York City looked like this, Veronica?” Tabitha asked as they stepped foot off the subway and started heading back up towards the surface.

“Oh, for as long as it’s been New York City, Mistress,” Veronica chuckled. “This is a city where the magical denizens have always wanted to coexist with their more mundane compatriots, and so they just needed a little bit of cover to allow them to do so. And so, the great veil was built, a spell that draped all of New York City, concealing all but the most extravagant of magic uses from the unsuspecting eyes of the public at large. Many of the larger metropolitan areas have the veil extended over them. New York wasn’t the first – that would be Rome. But NYC, SF, LA, Tokyo, London, Paris, Berlin, Shanghai, Hong Kong... any place I think over a million humans are gathered, the veil has been pulled over to cover and protect.”

“Who built it, this veil?”

“Some say Morgana La Fey. Some say Merlin. Some say Queen Titania and King Oberon of the Feyfolk. I’ve even heard tell that the Council of Dragons might have created it, mostly so that they wouldn’t have to worry about knights bothering them all the time.”

“I don’t think we’ve had knights in the boroughs for a long while now, Roni.”

“You can probably thank the dragons for that. They’ve been responsible for a lot of the significant advances we’ve had over the centuries that have pushed humanity along the line towards civilization, for better or worse.”

“Or worse?”

Veronica smiled bitterly. “I know humans like to think themselves are particularly clever, but many of the weapons that have been invented have originally sprung forth from the minds of

dragons. They like to introduce them to humans and let the humans convince themselves they've invented them on their own. Of course, humans usually run with them in ways the dragons hadn't even begun to consider, which can sometimes backfire."

"Did the dragons invent the subway system?"

Veronica laughed, rolling her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous, Mistress."

"Oh good."

"Dragons aren't big on long tunnels. The dwarves invented the subway."

Tabitha shook her head with a soft smirk. "Of *course* they did. Why didn't I think of that?"

When they arrived at the hotel, the two of them headed straight to the elevator, taking it up to the eighteenth floor. As soon as the elevator reached the floor in question, Tabitha immediately began to grow nervous, as there were several police in the hallway, including two who were standing just outside of the elevator, gesturing for them to step out.

"Let's see your room key, ladies," the cop said with a sigh. "Anybody who doesn't have a room on the floor needs to head down to the lobby and call their party down to meet them."

"What's going on, officer?" Veronica asked curiously.

"We had an incident of some kind and so we're keeping people off the floor for the time being."

"No, I asked, officer, what's going on?" Veronica's eyes flashed red for just a moment before she asked her question a second time. This time, the cop provided a very different answer.

"One of the guests, a mister Danil Pashtin, was murdered a few hours ago. Someone strangled him using a keyboard cable." The two cops looked at each other, then looked back at Veronica and Tabitha, seeming to have forgotten what they just said. "Anyway, if you're not staying on the floor, we're going to have to ask you to return to the lobby."

"Of course, officers," Veronica said as the two stepped back into the elevator. "We'll be on our way." She pressed the button for the lobby and then exhaled once the doors had closed. "If that's a coincidence, I'm secretly a satyr."

"Yeah, there's no way that's random chance at work," Tabitha sighed. "But are the angels capable of actually killing people to cover their tracks? I thought their side was supposed to be above that kind of thing."

"The angels will do whatever they think is necessary for 'the greater good.' It's a creepy phrase you hear them parroting all the time, but they're completely committed to it. Intimidation, harassment... murder's not a commonly applied tactic, but it's not outside of the realm of possibility."

"Murder by angel? Not exactly kosher is it?"

"Well, we don't have any proof that it was an angel behind this, boss," Veronica said. "You're on a lot of people's shit lists."

"Who else?"

"The other dukes of Hell? Some of the gods looking to up their profile?"

Tabitha scowled. "What use would old gods have for a plot in Hell?"

"Not just a plot," Veronica said. "All the best, most important and most mystical portions of Hell are under Lucifer's domain. Since she... abdicated, the lands haven't had anyone overseeing them beyond a couple of caretakers your mother left behind to keep tabs on them, and they haven't done much of anything with them other than basic maintenance. When someone finally lays claim to them, there's going to be quite an amount of banked power there to be tapped, having just sat there and accumulated for centuries."

“How long ago did my mother take her leave from the throne?”

“About seven centuries ago,” Veronica said.

“Why?”

The demoness gave the tiniest of shrugs as the elevator doors dinged and opened, letting them back into the lobby. “She doesn’t have to explain herself to me or anyone, Mistress. Whatever her reasons for it, she didn’t disclose them to the demons at large, only that the vacancy would be reclaimed by one of her daughters at some point in the future.”

“I noticed that verbiage in the compacts,” Tabitha said as they strolled back out and into the ground floor of the hotel. “Lucifer doesn’t want sons?”

“She’s chosen not to produce any,” Veronica said with amusement. “If you’re going to be nigh omnipotent, why do anything you don’t want to do? She says boys are headstrong, impetuous, and generally not clever enough to be worth her position in Hell, and so she’s never chosen to see one through to term.”

“Do you know who my real father was?”

Veronica clicked her tongue. “Does it matter? He’s long since gone, and he only knew of your existence for the briefest of moments.”

Tabitha’s scowl deepened a little more as they walked out of the hotel. With Pashtin dead, there was no point in trying to follow up on the lead about who had provided him with the false information. That end had been neatly tied up and nobody could interrogate a corpse. So she’d decided to delve into *this* subject a little more, and had come to find that there weren’t many pathways towards making inroads on it either. “What does *that* mean?”

“His time with your mother, it was…” Veronica frowned a little bit. “You might remember at the beginning of all this how I told you in some ways, you were saving these women from doomed paths, yes?”

“You implied that, yes, but as in all things, you were pretty fucking vague on the concept.”

“The man who you would call your father… he died, not long after your conception.”

“How ‘not long after’ exactly?”

“A day, maybe two,” Veronica said quietly as they walked out onto the busy New York City Street. “If a person isn’t at least somewhat supernatural, getting sexual with a divine being is most often fatal. The Nephilim we’re talking about here, they aren’t the same level of toxicity as your mother is, but people they were sexual with, they’re going to get sick for a while, have some health problems. Stuff they’ll get over eventually, because thankfully, they weren’t together for long enough. Doctors won’t know what it was, but they’ll say it must’ve been flu or an infection of some kind that they just got better on their own from. But if your girls had gotten proper serious with anyone? If they’d been in long term relationships lasting more than a month or two? Their partners would’ve withered and died in front of them within a matter of months, and no one would know why. Mysterious unexplained illness, it would’ve been written off as. I doubt any of them would’ve been durable enough to celebrate a one-year anniversary with any of your girls.”

Tabitha let out a quiet whistle. “That’s applicable to me too, isn’t it?”

“Much more than it is the rest of the girls,” Veronica confirmed. “You’re toxic to humans, and if you were spending long periods of time with any of them, eventually they’d turn to illness, respiratory failure, dementia and, ultimately, death. So it’s worth being aware of that kind of pain you’re capable of involuntarily bringing to humans, should you decide to get too close to any of them.”

“Bit of a bummer, all said and done, but I guess humans wouldn’t really understand what I see every day anyway.”

“Plus, you have to admit, bringing somebody by Hell on a first date isn’t exactly what I would call a party-dropper,” Veronica joked.

“How’d my mother make it work?”

“She doesn’t need any external things to impress people,” Roni replied. “Your mother... she’s a force of nature. She was one of God’s archangels before The Fall. The favorite, in fact, God’s personal chosen. Still, being told constantly about ‘The Plan’ with being given a copy of said plan began to drive your mother nuts, and that’s why she ended up leading the rebellion, taking many angels with her out of the Heavens to go and establish Hell. That’s why she was the one who got the primest cuts of the land.”

“I assume God was angry?”

Roni chuckled a little bit, shaking her head in disagreement. “I wasn’t there for it – we’re talking thousands of centuries before my birth – but I heard that God merely smiled at the rebellion, said that not only was it was expected, but that it was part of The Plan, and let them go without any fight or discussion. I think that only pissed your mom off even more, but hey, deities aren’t easy for anyone to deal with.”

“How the hell are so many creation stories in conflict, then? I mean, how are there so many different *gods* to begin with?”

Roni stopped walking, looking up at the sky as it started to sprinkle gentle rain down onto them, a strange expression crossing her face. “I always go back to something Morgana La Fey once told me. ‘Anything is true, if enough people believe it.’ That’s the fundamental lesson, the *only* lesson that matters, if you get right down to it. Each of the creation stories you’ve ever heard are true, to somebody, but just because that person believes in that particular creation story doesn’t mean that the other creation stories aren’t *also* true to someone else.”

“You met Morgana La Fey?”

“I came across her, Merlin and the Storyteller arguing once in a tavern, about a thousand years ago, not long after my birth. They were arguing philosophy, semantics, and magic.”

“Was there a particular reason?”

Roni nodded, as the rain’s pace started to quicken a little bit, and she started walking again, setting pace for them both. “They were attempting to discern exactly what the Storyteller *was*, because he wasn’t a magician, a sorcerer, or a god. As it turns out, he was the newest addition to The Elite, something that perplexed both Merlin and Morgana.”

“The Elite? Weren’t they those people that were considered the best of their field? A sort of skill-based immortality?”

Roni nodded. “That’s the lot. But Merlin argued that it didn’t make any sense for The Storyteller to be one of them, because nobody had ever *heard* of him. He didn’t look all that impressive, overweight, short-sighted, a bit scruffy looking. But there was no question that he was, in fact, one of The Elite. He bore the same telltale aura shades as the rest of them. It had been centuries since a new member of The Elite had been born, so Merlin argued that The Storyteller had found some way to cheat the system, which amused The Storyteller to no end.”

“I mean, I hate to be in agreement with some crotchety old mage, but isn’t Merlin right in this?” Tabitha said, trying to keep beneath the awnings as much as possible as they skirted along the sidewalk as the rain truly began to pelt down hard upon them. “How can he be the world’s greatest storyteller if nobody’s ever heard of him?”

The demoness grinned. “I sort of thought that too, but Morgana pointed out it was

because of that that The Storyteller had cemented his place among The Elite. He introduced stories into the world without anyone *knowing* they were from him. He didn't need to be famous; his *stories* did. The Storyteller knew that moveable type had been invented just a little while ago in southeastern Asia, and that meant that many stories that had been circulated in the oral tradition were starting to codify, solidify. Sure, people had begun writing them down earlier, but more often than not, folk tales were still the currency with which travelers bought hospitality from strangers, and he had invented so many of those folk tales that it had calcified his place in the world."

"I imagine he got replaced by Shakespeare eventually."

"See, you'd think that, but The Storyteller had already breathed so much life into so many stories that he was impossible to separate from the whole cloth narrative that was part of everyone's daily lives, and while Shakespeare may indeed be the greatest known writer the world has ever seen, the stories that are part of the lifeblood of the human race? Those still carry the fingerprints of The Storyteller, and he's still up to his tricks even today. Yesterday's folk tales are today's internet whispers. He's found new ways to put his stamp on the world, by introducing things into the world without attribution, letting the ideas burrow within the skulls and minds of people around the globe. It's been a couple of decades and change since I've seen him, but he was particularly proud of his newest creation back then... he called it 'a meme.' They were microstories, designed to get into the mind and never let go. A visual equivalent of the musical earworm, he described them as. And he certainly was right about that, because about a month later, it seemed like everyone was talking about this 'All Your Base' animation that was making its way across the Internet. But even many of Shakespeare's great plays have The Storyteller's DNA in them, the core conceits and concepts taken from narratives The Storyteller had introduced long before Shakespeare reworked them for his own liking. So, to bring it back to where I started, as Morgana told me, anyone can define reality for as many people as they like, as long as other people choose to go along with it."

"That's... terrifying," Tabitha said, as the rain finally grew intense enough that they ducked inside of a café to take shelter from the weather. "A bunch of people just decide 'here's what we believe in' and suddenly that's true for them?"

"There are certain levels of impact on reality, obviously, but your mother liked to say—"

"There are many Hells out there, but this one is yours," a caramel smooth voice said from across the café. "Hello Veronica. I'm guessing this is Tabitha? Do bring her over here so I can get a look at her. Allow us to sit and enjoy an espresso."

Tabitha felt the words coming to her lips before she intended them to, words she'd been dying to speak all her life but had never truly had a chance to say before now.

"Hello mother."