

## Chapter One

The commute to work via the subway was no slice of heaven for anyone, but Tabitha St. Cloud had it worse than most people. Most people were worried about muggings or rats or stepping in trash or shit on the floors. Tabitha only wished she had those kinds of problems, because hers were of an entirely different strain all together.

Sometimes Tabitha saw things that weren't there.

It had started as a child, but back then, it had been rare, and eventually Tabitha stopped talking about them, especially since mentioning them had freaked out her foster parents. She'd always been exceptionally bright, even as a child. She'd figured out early on that they weren't things other people could see, and she'd done her best to push them to the back of her mind as she grew up, but over the last few years, they'd started appearing more and more frequently, and that was a very dangerous thing to have happening during her commute, especially since she had to change lines multiple times along the way.

She started on the Number 2 line, which she hopped on at the 233<sup>rd</sup> St. station, a short walk away from her apartment, then took it down to the Jackson Avenue station, where she hopped over to the Number 5 line. Then at the Lexington/53<sup>rd</sup> St. station, she hopped over to the M line, taking it over to her final stop, the Rockefeller Center station, where she'd get off and head back above ground to walk the final few blocks to the building that housed her job for the summer.

Assuming she made it, of course.

And the last few weeks, she'd felt more and more like that wasn't guaranteed, because the distractions were getting more vivid, more distracting and far more graphic.

When she'd been a child, they'd been simple things, easy to dismiss, a person standing in the distance, sometimes with wings, sometimes with horns, occasionally with both, usually just watching, sometimes waving, never getting close enough for her to get a good look at them.

The first few times, her foster parents had thought maybe she simply had an imaginary friend, something common enough for a girl of her age, but as she grew older, the visions receded and they became so infrequent that Tabitha herself had written it off as just the delusions of a child's mind.

On her first day on the commute, however, she had seen a large man sit down at the other end of the train car, and for half a second, she had been certain that she'd seen horns poking out from the edge of his hat.

That night, she'd woken up in the early twilight hours from one of the most vivid dreams she'd ever had, standing atop a clifftop of darkest obsidian rock, overlooking a sea of fire and lava, while on the hill behind her, dozens of couples, demonic in form and nature, engaged in all sorts of sexual perversity, female, male, some combination of the two, all layered atop of each other, bodies connected by barbed cocks and spiked tails jammed into any orifice they could find, a chorus of moans of ecstasy and agony all intertwined. And as she stood overlooking the mass of slithering flesh, she felt pride and a sense of accomplishment before she had snapped from the dream in a cold sweat.

She wasn't sure if it was a byproduct of spending all her time in New York City, or perhaps the immense increase in people around her all the time, and some part of her couldn't wait to get away from the Big Apple.

Since her first day in the city, the dreams had come every few days, each more vivid and lurid than the last. Sometimes it had even been hard to convince herself she was dreaming, as if the dreams had taken on coherency and reality of their own accord, unwilling to let her abandon them to step away from the moment and back to her day-to-day life.

She'd also caught glimpses of gothic and pornographic images out of the corner of her eye multiple times on the subway. Once, as she was getting off the train, she was *sure* she had glanced into

one row of seats to see a demonic woman going down on a demonic man, his clawed hands holding onto her horns, forcing her face upon his hideous and bulbous cock. But she'd been in a swell of people pushing towards the exit for the train, and couldn't stop to confirm it. In fact, the moment she thought she saw it, it was almost as though the crowd around her had surged forward even more vehemently, like she had willed them to take her away from the sight of it.

If this was the sort of thing she was seeing the commute, Tabitha thought to herself, then what sorts of horrors were going to infect the rest of her waking life? She'd had similar problems the previous year, when she'd been working in Brooklyn, but the distance between the office and her rented room for the summer were much shorter back then, which limited her exposure to the big city.

New York City was a world unto itself, and one, it seemed, that skewed towards her hallucinations being front and center.

So far, her work life had remained untainted by the dark visions, but she worried how much longer such a thing would last, and was debating whether or not she should go and see a doctor. But she was also willing to consider the option that the pressure of the job was simply getting to her, and that she just needed to relax and unwind a little.

There weren't any surreal visions today as she exited the subway and headed up to the building she worked in near Rockefeller Plaza. She had won a rather prestigious slot as a law clerk and paralegal for the offices of Ariton, Oriens & Associates, one of the most selective and well-respected private practices in New York City.

AOA, as they were called for short, took on only a handful of new clients each year, and instead dedicated themselves to 'full service' of the people that they had contracted with earlier. Exactly what sort of work that meant they were doing, Tabitha still wasn't entirely certain, and she was well into the time of her summer internship.

On her first day on the job, she'd been tasked with looking up maritime law in regards to piracy and commandeering vessels on the open seas. The day after that, her boss had set her into what the legal definition of the word 'salacious' when it came to broadcasting, and what specific laws were on the books in regards to that.

Each subsequent day brought with it a new task, often obscure, often titillating, never related to the previous day's work and never once with any knowledge as to what or who the research was for. In fact, she hadn't even met any of the six practicing attorneys in the office yet, something she'd thought was guaranteed as part of her position.

Tabitha still had a few years left of study to do at Buffalo State College, but her professors had all urged her to make sure she spent her summers clerking, and the more prominent the placement she could get, the better. Her first year she'd clerked for the public defender's office in Brooklyn, and while she had seen a side of the law she felt it was important to learn about, she had also learned that it was likely not where she saw herself once she graduated.

While she felt that the role of the public defender was an important one, she also felt like she had seen some of the absolute bottom of the barrel when it came to humanity, people so reprehensible that she couldn't even begin to understand how anyone could defend them. Some of them didn't lack remorse so much as take pride in the atrocities they'd committed, eager to brag about their criminal actions to any ear close enough to listen.

So when the next summer had rolled around, she'd made a point of sending her resume to every major law firm up and down the murderer's row of high-priced defense firms. If she was going to be exposed to horrible people doing horrible things, she decided, the least she could do was to be well compensated for the exposure.

She hadn't even remembered sending a letter to AOA, having to look them up when they called her to schedule an interview, only to see how prestigious their offices looked. The interviewer had been incredibly adept at avoiding telling her who they represented, only to say that the work was engaging, challenging and paid extremely well.

“One thing we can guarantee you here at AOA,” the interviewer had told her, “is that no two days will ever be the same.”

When they'd offered her a paid position for the summer, and included how much the compensation would be, she'd knew she'd have to be a fool to turn it down, so she'd accepted.

This was the first day of her third week with the company, and she hoped at some point, she learned at least a little about how her research was going to fit into the case it was tied to, or who the client was. Just *some* idea of what all of it was *for* would be an excellent start. It mostly felt like busy work, and while she tried not to have too big an ego, it almost felt like a waste of her time.

She stepped into the elevator, seeing only two other people in the small, ornately decorated box, both outlandish and unmistakable in their appearances.

One was a slender Asian man in his sixties, dressed in a traditional Chinese suit, the layered designs in white cloth over the powder blue backdrop of silk, his white hair drawn back and braided into a long whip-like tail that hung down his back, his eyes concealed behind a pair of large mirrored oval sunglasses, his hands folded together in front of him. A silver pendant hung around his neck, a sort of hyperstylized metallic flame design.

The other man was about of equal height as the Chinese man, but as muscular as the Chinese man was thin. He looked brawny in a way that Tabitha had never seen up close and personal before, his forearms as thick around as her thighs. His skin was a very dark brown, his black hair curled tight against his scalp. He had a thick bushy black beard that jutted down to his collarbone, but it was incredibly well-kept. He was dressed in a large dashiki, red with black, gold and purple patterns overlaid one another, with loose pants that hinted at powerful legs still concealed beneath. He, too, wore mirrored sunglasses over his eyes, although his were curved rectangles, wrapping around the side of his head, the frames almost flush against his skin. He kept his hands behind his back. Around his neck hung a gold pendant, the piece hanging from it a lump of gold that had been crafted into the shape of a cloud.

More disturbingly, neither man wore shoes, each sporting a pair of leather sandals, leaving their bare feet exposed. In Buffalo, she might not have thought much of it, but in NYC, it almost felt like taking one's life into one's own hands.

As the doors closed, Tabitha moved to push the button for her floor, 37, only to see that it was already lit. The only offices on that floor, and the one above it, were for AOA, so she immediately began to wonder if the two men were clients, although she supposed it was possible they could also be attorneys.

“I see you are headed to the same place we are, young lady,” the Asian man said to her, his voice layered with an accent from somewhere in southeastern Asia, Singapore or Hong Kong perhaps. “Are you one of the associates?”

“Well,” Tabitha said with a shy smile. “I'm a summer intern, one of many law clerks AOA employs, so only in the most literal definition of the word. I'm certainly not a practicing attorney with them. I'm guessing you must be clients?”

The darker skinned man laughed, a warm and calming sound like full clinking beer glasses, as he answered her in a voice that was tinged with a heavy African accent. “No, no, we are, what is the word I am seeking for, my friend?”

“Leg breakers?” the slender Asian man joked.

“Consultants,” the African man replied, sounding pleased in his ability to recall the word. “That is it. We are consultants.”

“Only to be requested for special and extremely specialized tasks,” the Asian man said to her. “Because we do not take sides, you see, so we are among the few who can be tasked as arbiters, to ensure a fair competition.”

“Competition?” Tabitha said.

“Mmm,” the African man said to her. “As we are without loyalty to either side, something that

is quite rare in a game of this scale, our presence is invaluable.”

“But most necessary,” the Asian man said. “We cannot be compelled, no matter how much the two factions might wish it.”

“And lo, how they do wish it,” the African man agreed.

“But that compulsion is to be denied, and sportsmanship, instead, to be maintained.”

“That sounds important,” Tabitha agreed. “Who's our firm playing against?”

“It isn't so much the entire firm as simply one of the partners. Veronica Gomory. She has retained our services to ensure a fair competition as dictated by the terms of the Accord.”

“The Accord?” Tabitha said. “Which Accord?”

“For the Western worlds? The oldest one there is,” the African man said, matter-of-factly as the elevator doors moved to open. They waited for her to step out into the lobby then stepped out behind her. “We did not catch your name, Miss...?”

“St. Cloud,” she said, taking his hand, shaking it. “Tabitha Saint Cloud. And you are?”

“Oh! Well, then it has been our pleasure making your acquaintance early, Miss St. Cloud,” the man said, towering over her, bowing down, still not bringing his eyes to be level with hers. He went to shake her hand, and for a moment, Tabitha thought she saw her own fingers disappear in the inky muscular grip of the black man's powerful hand. “My name is Shango, and this is my colleague and friend, Zhurong.”

“A pleasure, Miss St. Cloud,” Zhurong said, offering a very formal and practiced bow. “I am certain we will be seeing more of one another in the coming days.”

“Good luck to you,” Shango said, releasing her hand. He turned to the receptionist, a good looking woman in her mid twenties named Teresa. Tabitha had always thought Teresa quite lovely, although maybe a little too formal for her own tastes. “Shango and Zhurong, here for our appointment with Miss Gomory.”

“Of course, gentlemen,” Teresa said, standing up immediately. “If you'll just follow me?”

“Morning Teresa,” Tabitha said to her, the receptionist offering back just a polite wave before leading the two men down the hallway towards one of the meeting rooms, being left to wonder just what the hell they'd been talking about. As she went, Tabitha thought Teresa's skirt framed her ass very well, although it was perhaps a little too loose. Almost as if in response to her thought, Teresa gave a little tug on the fabric, pulling it tighter so that Tabitha could see the faint outline of a thong top through the skirt.

“Odd coincidence,” she thought to herself before heading towards the clerks area.

There were three exits from the lobby, one to the left, one to the right, and the center. The left and the right led to partners offices, but the center led into the main clerks area, a section full of cubicles for people to work surrounded by law books and computers.

The clerks area did have one large window on one side, proximity to it was arranged by seniority, and as an intern for just the summer, Tabitha was as far from the window as it was possible to get, in a cubicle with almost no natural light breathing into it.

The window might as well have been on Mars for as far away as it was.

There were a dozen other law clerks and paralegals already hard at work, and it wasn't even eight AM yet. The sound of typing was like a little army of marching ants, tap tap tap tapping again and again, over and over, a symphony of micro noises.

Tabitha moved over to her seat, settling in to get to work on whatever today's litany of lethargy held for her. The stack of papers next to her shitty little computer terminal looked like it was related to medical malpractice law when it came to underage patients. Heaven only knew what it was all for.

She buried her head in the books and got to work for what felt like half a day but was likely only a couple of hours, if that, before the phone on her desk flashed. She'd been so engrossed in her research, she'd almost missed it. It had taken her several seconds even to register that the flashing light meant something, a signal of some kind she'd never seen in the office before.

A call.

She'd never gotten a call before. In fact, she'd sort of assumed that the phone on her desk was just a relic that nobody actually used any more, but that it had been too much hassle to remove them all, so they'd been left on all the desks, a reminder of a forgotten time. Nobody in any of the other cubicles ever seemed to get calls on them, as far as she could tell.

They had different ways of communicating to her what needed doing around the office, and it was always as indirect as they could possibly make it. Usually it had been that someone had come down to her cubicle and pulled her into a meeting room where they had dictated to her what she'd be working on for the next few days. More often than that, however, it had just been a stack of books with a single sheet of paper on top of them telling her what specific things they needed her to extract from the tower of tomes.

This was different.

She picked up the phone unsteadily, lifting the old relic to her ear. "Hello?"

"Miss Saint Cloud," the purring feminine voice on the other end of the line said to her. "I need you to meet me in the McCallan meeting room in five minutes. All your current work is being reassigned to other interns, so you needn't worry about wrapping up whatever it is you have in front of you. Just finish whatever sentence you were currently writing, close the book up, and then come and meet me in five minutes time, so we can discuss what's to become of your future here at AOA."

Without giving her so much as a chance to respond, the line went dead, and Tabitha was stuck holding a dead telephone.

At first, she started to panic, thinking that she'd done or said something that had ended her career before it had even gotten a chance to get off the ground, but the fear passed quickly and a sense of curiosity had remained, as the woman on the other end hadn't sounded upset or angry. If anything, she'd had a sense of amusement to the tone of her voice.

It had felt less like a boss to a flunky and more like... well, more like someone trying to pick someone else up at a bar. At least in tone, anyway. There was something unusual about that. The instructions had been quite clear, so Tabitha finished up her sentence, closed the book, placed her work on top of it, grabbed her purse and then headed out of the room, walking towards the west wing of the office.

All of the seven meeting rooms in the AOA offices were named after different brands of alcohol, always high end, although she hadn't realized that on her first tour. The McCallan meeting room was at the far end of the hallway. All the meeting rooms had smart glass that could be turned opaque or clear at the flick of a switch, and it was currently all set to the frosty blocking level so that Tabitha couldn't see what was going on inside of the room.

She wasn't entirely confident that she should go in, but the instructions hadn't been that she should knock, so instead she simply nudged the door open gingerly, stepping into the room. "You called for me, ma'am?" Tabitha said, peeking her head in.

"Hey Tabitha," Veronica Gamory said to her. "Come in and take a seat. We've much to discuss." While Tabitha had seen pictures of the partners, this was the first one she'd met in person.

Veronica was much younger than Tabitha had expected. She might have been in her mid thirties, but if so, the woman had taken incredible care of herself. She was rail thin, and yet somehow those willowly limbs of hers also looked muscular, like a ballerina. Her skin appeared like polished marble, a stark contrast to the onyx shade of her long hair that was done up into an elaborate bun on top of her head. She was dressed in an incredibly expensive crimson blouse beneath a blazer, a black skirt that went down past her knees, dark stockings covering the rest of her legs beneath it.

When Tabitha looked at her face, she almost felt like she was looking through an out-of-focus camera, as if parts of Veronica's head were drifting through blurry patches of reality. It made her head hurt if she tried to concentrate on the blurry patches, so she decided not to focus on them for the time being, glancing over to see that the two men she'd seen in the elevator were sitting on either end of the

table, both of them still wearing their sunglasses. They had a sense of amusement about them.

"I'm... I'm not sure what we have to discuss, ma'am," Tabitha said, moving into the room, sitting down at the table as far as respectfully away from everyone as possible. "I'm just an intern here, and the firm keeps us all pretty much in the dark as to what we're doing and why. I don't know that I'm going to be of much help."

Veronica casually tossed a large folder down onto the board room table with a flourish, moving to sit down at the head of the table. "Let's not get bogged down in talking about the firm, Tabitha. We're on a different subject today. I want to talk a little bit about you."

"Is... is that all about me?"

The woman extended a single fingertip and hooked it beneath the edge of the folder, flipping it open, the paper making a very quiet thud as it did so. "Tabitha Saint Cloud. Reported birthday of June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2001, although because the adoption agency couldn't get a confirmed birth certificate, that date is speculative." She smirked a little bit. "It's right, though."

"How do you know that?"

"Adopted by Thomas and Rene Saint Cloud of Syracuse, New York on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001, who were content to name their new child Tabitha. Thomas was a cop and Rene was a teacher, both accomplished in their fields without being remarkable in any way, shape or form. Both good people, although both lived tragically shorter lives than they should have. He died in 2015, killed in the line of duty, and his wife, your adopted mom, passed of cancer just a couple of years ago, just after you'd left for your first semester of college at Buffalo State College," Veronica said, her voice even keeled and giving nothing away. "I imagine that must have been quite hard on you, being left completely alone in the world, with no one looking out for you, no one to have your back when times got rough, and being without your adopted mother and father, I would consider that to be about as rough as it gets. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Have... have you been spying on me?"

"Spying is such an *ugly* word, Tabitha," Veronica chuckled. "I prefer to think of it as 'keeping tabs' on you. Besides, I think you're going to want to hear what I have to say. I know your mother, after all."

"Mom's been gone for—"

"Not Rene, Tabitha," Veronica said with a predator's smile. "I mean your *real* mother, your *birth* mother. In fact, it's my relationship with her that brought you here."

"You... you know who my real mother is?" Tabitha said, suddenly feeling very antsy and eager to have that bit of information. "I've spent quite a bit of time trying to find that out."

"I'm aware."

"And you're telling me it's just sitting there in that file in front of you?"

"Not exactly."

"*Give it to me*," Tabitha said, her voice taking on a funny echo, blood boiling behind her eyes for a moment, as she felt a flare of pain inside of her skull like a hornet trapped under glass.

Veronica's hand moved to the folder jerkily, as if she both wanted to and didn't want to, before she finally forced the paper across the table towards her, a slightly nervous laugh rolling from the older woman's lips. "That's good. That's good, Tabby. How long have you been able to do that?"

"Don't call me Tabby," she said, her eyes moving to scan the papers in front of her. "There's nothing in here about who my real parents are. Nothing about my mother *or* my father."

"You didn't think it was going to be that easy, did you?"

"What do you *want*, Miss Gomory?" Tabitha said, frustration cutting through the tone of her voice like a knife.

"When you turn twenty-one, Miss Saint Cloud, you're in line to inherit quite the legacy. But you have to survive to be able to claim it, something I'm rather invested in making sure happens, despite what some of my fellow brethren might have in mind for you."

"Lawyers are blood thirsty," Tabitha said, "but they usually aren't cold-blooded killers."

"That's true," Veronica said with a smile. "But I wasn't talking about my professional brethren so much as my blood kin. You see Tabitha, you're the daughter of Lucifer, the Queen of Hell. And every time she gives birth to a child, the child is eventually given a test, to see if they're worthy of assuming the long vacant post of Reagent of Hell."

"Wait, you're telling me my mom... was Satan?"

"Is, darling, is, although I haven't been in touch with her for quite some time. It's been..." Veronica whistled for a moment. "Almost seven years since I saw her last, although she looked good for a demon in self-imposed exile."

"Self-imposed? I didn't think anyone was allowed to *leave* Hell. Isn't that why it's *HELL*?"

"When you're in charge, they let you do it," Veronica said, tilting her head a little. "Your mom, she's been wandering the Earth for centuries, living a life in concealment, trying to further understand the divine plans, avoiding angels everywhere she goes. And usually once a century, she takes a lover and gives birth to a nephilim. In this century, that's you."

"Nephilim?"

"Half angel, half human, although when it comes to Lucifer, it's half fallen angel and half human."

"What's the difference between an angel and a fallen angel?"

"The books more commonly call fallen angels 'demons,' dear girl," Veronica said with amusement. "A matter of semantics really."

"And I suppose these two men are angels or demons or whatever."

"Gods, actually," Shango said, a dry chuckle rolling off his lips. "From the non-Judeo Christian pantheons. I realize we aren't quite as in fashion as we used to be, but when the angels and demons are having one of these little contests, they are quite content to call us to serve as judges."

"And, you're, what, the god of outdated fashion sense?" Tabitha said to him.

Shango removed his sunglasses and where humans would have eyes were two empty holes through which Tabitha thought she could see swirling storms, clouds lit up by tiny sparks of lightning. "I am one of the gods of lightning, little nephilim, and while I am not on one side or the other, you will still provide me some basic respect." He lifted the glasses back up and slid them in place over his eyes once more.

"I thought that was Thor," she said quietly, still entirely uncertain of what she had seen. The man's missing eyes had felt the same way her visions had, solid enough to seem true, but beyond the realm of what possibly *could* be true.

"There are many gods for any one thing, child," Zhurong said to her, taking off his own glasses for a moment, letting her see that instead of eyes, the old Asian man apparently had flames inside of him, filling up those holes with flickering red, orange and yellow shades before he placed his sunglasses back on. "Nothing is simply one thing or another."

"And you're... you're here because of me?"

Shango smiled, a tiger in the wild. "We are here at *her* request, and *she* has requested us on your *mother's* behalf."

"My... my mother. Lucifer."

"That is correct."

"This is insane," Tabitha said, starting to panic.

"All your life," Veronica said to her, "you've thought you were seeing things that weren't there, but instead, you were peeking behind the veil, able to see what's really going on in the world, one of the gifts of your mother's lineage."

"It's never *felt* like a gift," Tabitha said. "It's felt like I was going crazy."

"That's been you struggling to overcome the base glamour your mother placed upon you as a newborn. Think of yourself as a baby bird, struggling to peck your way out of your eggshell. There's

still bits and pieces of it lingering on you. Let me just sweep them away.”

Veronica's hand lifted into the air, and for a moment, Tabitha was certain she could see sparks of purple and red dripping from them before Veronica clenched her hand into a fist, and for the first time in her life, the world snapped completely into focus.

“So Tabitha,” Veronica said. The blurry patches around Veronica's head were gone, and in their place, Tabitha could see two small red horns sticking up from the woman's scalp. “Let's talk about what your next month is going to look like...”

## **Chapter Two**

“The next month of your life could very well be the *last* month of your life, Tabby,” Veronica said to her, a tail extending out from beneath the dark skirt, whipping back and forth as the woman moved about the room. Tabitha wondered where the tail attached to her body, and if it had pierced through the stockings or just gone over them. “Because if you fail, it's their job to kill you.” She gestured at the two men claiming to be gods, who both nodded cordially. “As it part of the duties of performing as judges for this content you find yourself in.”

“This has always been in the cards for your fate, young one, so harbor us no ill will for passing judgment one way or another,” Shango said. “If it was not us, it would be someone else.”

“And, should it come to that, we will make the matter as quick as we are able,” Zhurong said to her.

“Isn't the expression 'quick and painless,' when it comes to killing someone?” Tabitha said, the tone of her voice somewhere between fear and anger.

“There is always pain in death,” Shango said. “Which is why we strive to make the quick as quick as we are able.”

“So maybe let's talk about how I go about *not* dying, then, because even if I believed all of this, which I still kinda don't, I'm keen on remaining in the land of the living. Start there. Start with the not dying part,” Tabitha said, reaching up to tie her long wavy longs behind her head, making sure they stayed out of her face.

“You're going to have to build an empire. In a month. More specifically, a harem. Seven souls who will be bound to you by their love and your abilities,” Veronica said, walking closer to her. “They need to be semi-divine beings, so you can't just pick up seven random souls and call it good. They'll mostly be nephilim, like you, but never direct descendants of Lucifer herself. In fact, they'll almost all be descendants of non-fallen angels.”

“Angels go around having kids?” Tabitha asked, surprise in her voice. The more Veronica talked, the more real all of this felt, especially since she had two small horns on her forehead that Tabitha found herself unable to look away from.

As if to drive the point home, both Shango and Zhurong had removed their sunglasses, so wherever she turned her eyes, she was being confronted with visual proof of the unreality of all of it, gods on either side of her, a demon lecturing her about survival. “They're like anyone else, Tabby. They get bored. They fuck. Shit happens. And in some cases, these people are two to ten generations removed from their angelic ancestor. Sometimes there are outward signs, but in a lot of cases, there aren't. They'll be exceptional women, smarter, stronger, prettier than they would be without that stripe of holy blood running through their veins, but none of them will know they've got an angel somewhere in their family tree.”

“You said 'women,’” Tabitha said. “No men?”

“You're not into men,” Veronica said with a smile. “You're meant to be enjoying this challenge. It's been custom tailored to you, by me, your shepherd through the reeds.”

“Bending people to my will and forcing them to follow my every order?” Tabitha asked. “I can't imagine what would've possibly made you think that's something that's my speed.”

“You think you're hiding it, Tabby,” Veronica said, walking past her, tapping Tabitha's temple



with one of her fingernails. “But it bleeds out of that noggin of yours. You may have tried to keep your life private, but the more you try and tamp it down, the more it starts to seep out and affect the world around you. It wasn't you see perversity in the world around you because you were looking; because you were looking, you brought perversity out into the world. You've always loved inflicting your will on others, reaching into their skulls and finding what deviant delights linger there that they're afraid to let loose. Those people sucking and fucking, on the street corner, in the subway cars, in the shadowy corners of the hallways that you pass by? They're doing so because of you, Tabby.”

“Stop calling me Tabby,” Tabitha growled a little bit at the woman.

“Seven women, bound to your will, loving you, adoring you, engaging in whatever devilish idea springs forth into your head,” Veronica said. “Once you take them, claim them, make them yours. By the time you're done, they'll all be eager to press flesh with you as much and as often as you'll let them, even while you're overseeing your portion of Hell.”

“Portion?” Tabitha asked, arching a finely trimmed eyebrow. “You want me to jump through all of these hoops, and you're not even going to give me *all* of Hell if I succeed?”

“Hell is multi-fragmented kingdom at this point, segmented into so many tiny fiefdoms and principalities that it's far too large for any one being to control all of,” Veronica said, her long fingers plucking lightly at one of the buttons on her blood red blouse. “But the portion left for Lucifer's heir is sizable. It's under the watch of three barons of Hell at the moment, and they, of course, are the ones who've set up this little contest, to make sure that should one of Lucifer's heirs become old enough to assume their place lording over part of Hell, that they're capable of the task.”

“How many children has Lucifer had over the years?”

“That have lived long enough to reach the age of challenge? Four.”

“And how many have succeeded?” Tabitha asked, already dreading the answer.

“You know the answer to that, silly girl,” Veronica said with a soft, almost cruel laugh. “None, obviously. They've all been presented with the challenge, and they've all died, having failed to show the willpower needed to live with Queen Lucifer's blood running through their body.”

“Better to be a star in Hell than a slave in Heaven? That what you're saying?”

“You won't even get *that* far,” Veronica said as she slipped out of her suitcoat, hanging it over the back of one of the chairs. “When you're killed by a god, your soul ceases to be. No Heaven, no Hell, no afterlife of any kind. Your soul simply dissolves into nothingness.”

“How is any of this my fault?”

Shango barked with laughter. “Are you arguing that the universe should be *fair*, child?” he said, swinging an angry fist in the air as he spoke. “I took great care to provide for those who worshiped me, protecting them and striking down their adversaries, and yet, over time I have been lost and forgotten. Another lost god with no flock to tend. No followers to put their faith, their *power*, into my being. There is no justice, and nothing is fair,” he said, pointing a finger at her. “Ignore that lesson at your own peril.”

“How long do I have for all of this?” Tabitha asked.

“Until your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday,” Veronica said. “Which is pretty soon now, I imagine.”

“Why do I feel like you *know* that's exactly 31 days away?”

“Because I *do* know that's exactly 31 days away,” Veronica said, flicking open the top button of her blouse. “It's part of the rules of the challenge.”

“And I have to use these superpowers that I have and don't know how to use to do it.”

“They aren't superpowers, Tabby,” Veronica laughed. “And you learn how to use them by *using* them. You certainly aren't the brightest of offspring Lucifer's ever had.”

“I can't tell if you're trying to goad me into flying off the handle or if you think I'm not going to succeed, so you feel like you can talk shit to me.”

“No reason it has to only be one of the options,” Veronica said. “Motives are complicated things, and too often people only ascribe one when there are multiples at play.”

“Then tell me, Vera,” Tabitha said, deliberately shortening the woman's name, seeing if it would get to her like being called 'Tabby' was getting to her. “What sort of abilities do I have as the daughter of Lucifer, beyond seeing perverse sex dreams everywhere I go?”

“Much like your mother, you have the ability to guide people towards their darker natures, to unlock that repressed or hidden side of their personalities and get them to embrace their true fallen nature, squirreled away behind lock and key,” Veronica said, finally unbuttoning the top button of her blouse that she'd been playing with for the last several minutes.

“That sounds an awful lot like turning people to the dark side,” Tabitha shot back. “What if I'm not cut out to play for Team Evil?”

Veronica rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed at the suggestion. “Evil. Good. I thought you'd be past such simple concepts by this point in your life. You've seen plenty of what the world is like. You had to go church every Sunday for over a decade, and you saw that both the just and the unjust had a home in the house of God. Such is true for the House of Lucifer as well. Everyone in the world is looking out for themselves first and foremost.”

“That's awfully cynical of you,” Tabitha responded.

“Is it?” Veronica said, her slender fingers dallying with the next button down on her blouse now. “You saw there were people there who were pure of intent, but you also saw that there were coveters, lusts, wrathers... all the seven deadly sins were on display if you looked hard enough. And I know you saw angels and demons fucking in the corner every now and again.”

“...wait, those things were *real*?”

Veronica strolled close, patting Tabitha affectionately on the cheek. “*All* the things you've seen were real, Tabby. Humans fucking succubi, demons plowing women, angels and demons and humans alike, all engaged in all sorts of deviant sexuality, just out of focus from anyone without angelic blood running through their veins.”

“*Angelic* blood? I thought you said I was the daughter of Lucifer, Queen of Demons.”

“The only difference between an angel and a demon, my dear, is that demons have rejected the collar that floats above an angel's head,” Veronica laughed. “When we pull the collar you people call a halo and cast it aside, the horns sprout automatically, like the collar has been keeping them pressed down the whole time. There's a good reason Lucifer is often called the First Among The Fallen. She rejected her halo long before anyone else did. These women, though, they won't be angels. They'll be just as human as you are.”

“So that's it then?” Tabitha asked. “Seduce seven women in thirty days or be destroyed forever?”

“You can't tell me the lure of the challenge doesn't appeal you to, Tabby,” Veronica said, the second button of her blouse the color of blood popped open by her delicate fingertips. “You lived such a harsh life growing up, the only girl of color in your entire school, picked on for being adopted, picked on for being smarter than the rest of the kids. And you were always polite. You always took it. You don't have to take it any more.”

“You think that it bothered me?” Tabitha shot back. “They were jealous, and when you're exceptional, you have to get used to people being jealous. I would expect you'd know something like that, a beautiful powerful woman like yourself.”

“When people are petty to me, I just squash them.” Veronica walked around the table and got close to Tabitha, close enough she could reach out and touch her. In fact, Veronica reached a fingertip forward and brushed it against Tabitha's cheek, pursing her lips. “You can do that, you know. You can just reach out and bend them to your will.” Veronica's forked tongue brushed across her cherry red lips.

“And there's seven *specific* women I have to get?” Tabitha asked.

“Well, anyone with angelic blood will do, but it takes a special set of eyes to be able to spot that, and so I've scouted out a suitable set for you,” Veronica said. “And it's not like you'll use them and get rid of them. Each one you claim adds to your power base, and you can use her to help you with the

others.” Veronica traced a fingernail along one of Tabitha's pert and perky breasts through the cloth before pulling away. “Or, you can dismiss this whole thing as a fever dream, walk out that door and die in a month's time, never once having even tried.”

“Then where's my first target?” Tabitha said, standing up from her chair. “Somewhere within walking distance I imagine?”

“Not even that far, Tabby,” Veronica replied, her grin sinister and inviting. “You're looking at her. Consider me the watcher at the gate, the first line of defense.” She turned and walked slowly away from her, swinging her ass back and forth like a pendulum beneath the skirt, her tail moving counter to her hips. “Do you think you can bend me to your will, Tabby? You think you can tap into my sexual desires and enflame them to the point where I am unable to resist your every command? Or are you afraid? Afraid to become who you are, what you were always meant to be? I don't think you have it in you, Tabby. I think you're going to fail...”

Tabitha stood up and her eyes flashed with a golden light for only the briefest of moments, something she wasn't aware of but that the two gods in the room certainly noticed. “My name...” she said, stomping over towards Veronica, “is *Tabitha*.”

She reached forward and hooked her fingers into Veronica's blouse, grabbing hold of it, pulling on it sharply to yank it open, sending all the buttons flying, exposing the insanely expensive bra beneath it.

“So that's what you call me,” Tabitha said to her, seeing a slightly changed expression on Veronica's face. “You *will* call me Tabitha.”

The forked tongue slipped out again, wetting her lips in anticipation. “Make me, *Tabby*.”

Tabby felt like something was awakening inside of her, some part of her that had lain in wait for what felt like an eternity, and was ready to make its presence known now. She reached her hand back forward again and grabbed onto the bra, pulling on the center of it, feeling the fabric resist her for only a moment before popping like a bubble, the two sides breaking away from one another, falling open to hang loosely and ineffectually on Veronica's shoulders, exposing the woman's slender breasts, around the same size as Veronica's. Her aerola were small, barely nickels around her stiffened nipples, which were shades a lovely blend of pink and brown. One of the two woman's nipples, however, held a silver barbell through it, with a little charm attached to it, a very tiny cursive L on it, to offer some contrasting color.

She reached forward and pinched her thumb and forefinger on the charm dangling from one of Veronica's tits, pulling downward on it slowly but unrelentingly, making the flesh stretch and stretch even as the demon's face seemed to cycle between pleasure and pain constantly, unable to settle on one or the other.

“I am going to make you orgasm so hard, your twig-like legs will be shaking so bad that you'll look like a newborn foal when you try and stand up,” Tabby said as she finally let go of the charm, Veronica's nipple snapping back into place. “And you are going to do everything in your power possible to return the favor, to show me that you're worth a place in my harem beyond just being the girl I let lick my fucking boots.”

Veronica reached forward to paw at one of Tabby's tits, but the darker skinned woman swatted her hand away, a slight smile crossing her lips. “Should... should we take this back to my office?” Veronica asked, feigning shyness where Tabitha knew there was none.

“Why?” Tabby said. “These two gods need proof of my accomplishments, so why not let them watch?” She snorted derisively. “If I wasn't so adverse to sharing my toys, I might even let one of them have a crack at you. They both look like they're desperate to get laid.”

Zhurong shook his head with a slight grin. “We both do well enough, child.”

Shango laughed heartily at that. “I would *break* your toy given half the chance, spawn of Lucifer. She would never walk properly again.”

“Even more reason not to let you near her,” Tabby said, amusement in her tone. Despite her

newly found confidence and swagger, somehow she knew that her abilities would pale in comparison to those of a purely divine being, such as an actual god. They were neither friends nor foes, and she saw no reason to casually give them a reason to pick a side by being completely disrespectful.

“Besides, if you're doing well enough on your own, you don't need my aide, now do you?”

“Not in the least,” Shango said. “We may not be gods in our prime, but we still have some devoted followers willing to sacrifice themselves upon the altar of my lust.”

“We will not be opposed to the show, however,” Zhurong said, his long fingertips spreading atop of the table just a little. Let us see what you are capable of, little nephilim.”

Tabby looked back to Veronica with fervor in her eyes. “Hike that dress up,” she snarled, her tone implying she was almost annoyed that the woman had waited until she'd been commanded before taking any action.

“Up?” Veronica said, leaning her ass back against the edge of the table? “Not down and off?”

“Down and off makes you look more like a lady,” Tabby said, reaching forward to grab that piercing by the barbell this time, rotating and twisting it, as Veronica's face contorted all over again. “You haven't earned that yet. For now you're nothing but a high rent *whore*, until I decide whether or not I'm going to give you *meaning*.”

This new and unfamiliar side of herself still felt somewhat comfortable to Tabitha, as if she'd been simply hiding this part of her mind for a long time, and it was just revealing itself instead of being something new developing inside of her. This part of her had always been here, just below the surface, just waiting to bubble up, just waiting to be let loose from the shadows and into the light, and now that it had arrived, it wasn't going to disappear for anyone.

“Yes, Tabby,” Veronica said with a sultry smile, both of her hands reaching down and slowly bunching the skirt upwards handful by handful, exposing more and more of her legs until about mid-thigh, it became apparent that Veronica was wearing not pantyhose, but in fact stockings, attached to a garter belt.

As the skirt finally reached Veronica's waist, Tabitha could see the woman wasn't wearing panties, her freshly waxed and neatly tucked in vulva on full display, Veronica preening her hips forward just a little, as if to make sure Tabitha's eyes were drawn to it, unable to look away.

“Completely bare, are we?” Tabitha said. “Is that for my benefit?”

“Yes, Tabby,” Veronica said, licking her lips, reaching her hand down to push two fingertips on either side of her slit, making it pout and open just a little to Veronica's eyes. “I didn't want you to get any hair in your teeth.”

Tabitha laughed, a dark and hollow sound, quite unlike the sort of high pitched musical laugh she'd had most of her life. “You think *I* am going to go down on *you* this first time?” With her left hand, she pushed her palm against Veronica's sternum, forcing her to slide up and onto the table, as her right hand forced the lighter skinned girl to spread her legs wider apart. “If I truly have all these magical gifts you claim I do, I'm not going to need to, now am I?”

Veronica looked like she was about to say something, but to keep her from doing so, Tabitha slid her index and middle finger right into the woman's cunt, causing her to gasp sharply, a dramatic intake of air as the demon's eyes popped a little wider in shock at the suddenness of the touch.

“No, Tabby, you aren't,” Veronica said, almost a touch of shyness crossing the demon's face now, as if perhaps she hadn't realized how much she was awakening all at once, and now seemed a little daunted by beast stirring. “Your touch is like ice that burns, like shadows that blind. There are no words to truly describe it.” Veronica's tail snaked up and slowly wound itself around Tabitha's wrist like a whip. The skin over it was warm to the touch, the thickness of her tail about two of her fingers in width, a tuft of black hair at the end of it. “I beg you for more.”

“You will get what I choose to give you, slut,” Tabby growled once more. “And only when I choose to give it to you.” Tabby's two fingers curled, dragging her fingertips against the inside of Veronica's pussy, making the demon shiver and tremble visibly, her breath caught for a moment, trying

to stifle a whimper of pleasure. “Did I tell you to keep those sounds in, bitch?”

“No Tabby,” Veronica said, letting a whorish moan drain from her lungs. “Please, Tabby. Control my body. Take control of all you deserve to own.” Tabby felt a slight tingling in the back of her brain, and wondered if she was employing her abilities to attack the woman's nervous system, making it even more sensitive to her touch.

“Then let these gods hear the sounds of you in the throes of your orgasm, in the depths of your submission, as you give yourself in to me,” Tabitha said as her two fingers started to jerk back and forth quickly, never coming fully out, pressing up and against that spot inside of the demon's pussy. She brought her thumb down and rubbed it against Veronica's clit, and within moments, the barrage of sensations was too much for the demon to handle, as her head threw back to look up at the ceiling, a ferocious shriek of pleasure filling the room loud enough to cause the glass to wobble just ever so slightly, the demon's tail clinging to Tabitha's wrist tightly at first before slowly easing up as her breathing began to return to normal.

Veronica seemingly couldn't help herself, as she leaned her head back up, reaching forward to grab the back of Tabitha's neck with one hand, pulling her in close to mash her own lips against Tabitha's, forcing her tongue into her mouth like a prayer of submission, desperate to display her affection to the younger woman, whimpering and whining into the kiss, even as Tabitha slowly pulled her fingers from the demon's cunt. “Let me worship you, Tabitha,” Veronica pleaded. “Let me feast upon you and show my thanks for your acceptance of me.”

“I haven't accepted you yet, Veronica, but I think I've displayed who's in control, haven't I?” Tabby said, pulling away from the taller woman as she slowly hiked up her own skirt, moving to sit down in one of the conference room's plush leather. She hadn't expected for anyone to see her panties today, so they weren't anything fancy, just some basic dark blue cotton panties from Target. Somehow that made her feel *more* powerful rather than less. “Feast upon my body and show me your devotion.”

Veronica couldn't fall to her knees fast enough, moving to lean her face between Tabitha's lean chocolate thighs, starting to kiss just above the kneecap before letting her forked tongue swipe out, tracing patterns along the inside of her thigh before one of her hands reached up to tug Tabitha's panties aside, baring her snatch to Veronica's advances. While she kept her pubic hair trimmed neatly and off of her vulva, there was still a wedge of black curls just above it.

“Convince me to keep y—” Tabby started to say, but Veronica pushed that long forked tongue inside of her cunt with such voracity, the sentence died midstream as she found herself unable to resist a moan, the snaking sensation within her so foreign and alien and yet so targeted on exactly the finer nerves within her hole. Her hands reached down to rub against Veronica's head, finding the small horns there, pleased they weren't so sharp as to scratch her, both of her hands getting lost in the dark locks, pulling her face more firmly against her twat. “*FFFFffffffuuuck* you're good at that!”

The feeling of that split tongue painting sigils and runes along the inside of her cunt was surreal and powerful, and Tabitha had never felt sensations quite like the ones running through her body, her nerves almost immediately wanting to give way, but some sense of internal pride refused to let her go gently, so she pushed back the orgasm, trying to stave it off as long as she could. Veronica would not be satiated without a release, however, and so no matter how much Tabitha tried to keep her body in check, the demon could not be denied.

When the orgasm hit Tabitha, she felt alive like she never had before, every nerve in her body singing out in a kind of glorious harmony, and she could swear she could see golden light painting the ceiling of the room, as if it was erupting from her eyes, but that couldn't possibly be, she told herself, even as the flood of orgasmic energy thrashed over her body.

After the trembles had crescendoed and retreated, Tabby lowered her head down just in time to see Veronica pulling her mouth from Tabby's snatch, looking up at her with adoration and mischief in equal measure. “Think that's good enough for me to compel you to claim me, Tabby?” the demon asked.

"I think I claimed you before I even walked in this room, Veronica," Tabitha said with a soft laugh. "Oh well, as my adoptive mother always said, 'Anything worth doing is worth doing right.' You do, indeed, belong to me."

"You will need some way to mark your claims, little nephilim," Zhurong said to her. "Something you can easily get displayed."

"Stand up, Veronica," Tabby said, moving to stand once more, smiling a little seeing how the demon's legs were unstable beneath her, the aftereffects of her mind shattering orgasm still not having fully faded. "And get all of your damn top off."

Veronica had to keep one hand on the table, her stance wobbling and swaying, even as she peeled the blouse and the bra off, setting them on top of the table. As soon as she had, Tabitha grabbed the woman's hips, spun her around and bent her over the table, her back exposed. It gave Tabitha a chance to see how the demon's tail connected to her body, near the bottom of her tailbone, just above the cleft of her ass. "I feel like I have the ability to do this, but let's find out," she said, holding her index finger up in the air, concentrating on drawing power to it.

On the dip of Veronica's back, just above her waist and tail, Tabitha drew her fingertip along Veronica's skin, tracing the shape of a T, the flesh darkening, as if a tattoo gun was painting in impossibly large brushstrokes, more like a paintbrush on flesh. To the left of the T, close beneath the cover of the top, she drew a small s and to the right of it, a small c. The letters were done in a light shade of blue with contrasting red outlines, brilliant against the demon's pale white skin. It was a logo Tabitha Saint Cloud had been drawing since she was a child, her own little personal brand.

The marking looked to be just like a fresh tattoo, the skin angry and red, and Veronica had clearly been trying to swallow the pain of it, but breathed with relief when Veronica pulled her fingertip from the skin. "There," she said. "I think that looks adequate."

"We need to authenticate the capture," Shango said, as both gods rose from their chair, moving to flank her on either side, Veronica still having not moved, prone over the table. Simultaneously, Shango drew a small lightning bolt shaped S on the left of Tabitha's sigil as Zhurong drew a fiery Z on the right of it, the two glowing with silver light for a moment before fading.

"There," Zhurong said. "One down and six to do. We wish you the best of luck, little nephilim. Your demon knows how to contact us when you have another claim to authenticate."

"Thanks gods," Tabby said, "but why do I feel like your best wishes are not genuine?"

Shango laughed, clearly entertained by her bluster. "Then you do not know us at all, fledgling. We are just as happy to savor the failure of angels as much as we are as demons. We will see you soon."

"I'm going to lose so much time to the commute while all this is going on," Tabitha sighed, as the two gods walked out the door.

"You need not, Mistress," Veronica said. "My home, my possessions, they are all now yours. I would be honored to share my bed with you. May I dress once more?"

"Mmm," Tabitha said. "Alright. And let us head to your house, and you can tell me about my next option..."

"Yes Mistress."

Mistress, Tabitha thought. I could grow to like the sound of that.

### **Chapter Three**

The difference in Tabitha's old apartment and her new apartment, well, Veronica's *old* apartment that Tabitha now *owned* (along with Veronica herself), wasn't just miles apart, it was light years.

Her old place had been barely little more than a box with a toilet and shower attached. The "bed" if it could be called that, had been an old school Murphy bed that folded down from the wall, and when it was down, there was almost no space to walk about the main room of the apartment. In fact, from bed, Tabitha had been able to make dinner, brush her teeth, wash her face and get dressed without

even having to stretch.

Her *new* place, the place she'd taken from Veronica, was the kind of obscenely large New York apartment she'd only heard rumors about, and didn't believe actually existed. It was located at One Hundred Barclay and was only referred to the Penthouse. While her old apartment had been 500 square feet, if she was lucky, Veronica informed her that her new place was over 14,000 square feet, and took up two floors of the building. The living room had 20 foot high ceilings, and when Tabitha had asked how much the place cost, Veronica had only said that the original asking price had been \$40 million, and there had been a bidding war that she'd eventually won by paying significantly more over asking price, in addition to intimidating a couple of buyers. Tabitha had wanted to ask exactly how she'd intimidated them, but was afraid that Veronica would've actually answered her.

There was fine art along the walls, and somehow Tabitha suspected none of it was prints or copies, but actual originals. In fact, as she wandered through the place for the first time, she decided that anywhere she stood in the new apartment, if she extended both of her arms out, the value of that area alone was probably worth more than anything she'd ever owned before.

It had been remarkably comforting, learning that she hadn't been going crazy all those years, and now that she knew she was seeing actual things and not hallucinations, she'd thrown her prescriptions into the trash. The drugs had deadened her senses for much of her life, and she hadn't realized how much she'd been living her life like the walking dead until the morning after she'd claimed Veronica, the drugs having flushed out of her system.

That morning, she stood naked at her window, looking out through the tempered glass that prevented anyone from looking into her place, watching the sun rise in the distance, noticing perhaps for the first time that not all the gargoyles that lined the tops of the skyscrapers in New York City stood perfectly still, some of them moving every so often when they thought no one was watching.

It was a weird world she found herself in, but she was going to make the best of it with as little or as much time as she had left, she decided, although she supposed that the amount of sand remaining in her hourglass was completely in her own hands at this point.

Veronica's hand slid across Tabitha's belly as her body pressed against Tabitha's back, the demoness kissing the top of one of Tabitha's shoulders. "You're up early," she purred. "Far earlier than I thought you would be."

"I've been asleep all my life, Roni," Tabitha chuckled. "Why on Heaven and Earth would I want to stay that way any longer than I have to?"

"That's good, Mistress," Veronica replied. "Time and tide wait for no man, or woman in this case. And your clock is ticking, so each and every moment should be precious and never wasted. Thirty days, seven women, well, nephilim that *look* like women. That means you only have a little more than four days each, so speed is of the essence, and idle hands will only cost you."

"Do these women *know* they're nephilim?"

"Generally not, but the angelic blood that runs through their veins has made them all exceptional at whatever they apply themselves to, and to a trained eye, the signs of their nephilimhood are relatively easy to spot."

"Such as?"

Veronica tipped her head up, confused. "Excuse me, Mistress?"

"What sort of signs are easy to spot?"

"Ah," the demoness replied. "Well, to those who can see past The Veil concealing the magic world from the mundane one, at moments when their gifts are in use, their eyes turn gold for the briefest of moments. You and I, for example, would be able to see that, even through a camera or on video, which has been of great aid for me lining up possible targets for you to consider."

"Does the contest specify they have to be nephilim?"

"No, Mistress, but going at full blown angels is very high risk behavior, and certainly should only be a last ditch option," she said, her fingertips toying with one of Tabitha's dark nipples now.

“While I have no doubt you might eventually be able to corrupt them, let's wait until you've claimed your mantle from your mother's legacy before you go about wing hunting.”

Tabitha smirked, tilting her head to one side. “You're afraid of them.”

Veronica frowned in response. “No, Mistress, but I am *respectful* of the level of power they can bring to bear if they decide to. As I once told Alexander Hamilton, respecting one's opponent does not have to entail underestimating one's opponent. The worst can always be right around the corner.”

“Fine,” Tabitha said. “No angels, only angel spawn. I can manage that, at least while I'm getting a handle on things. Do you have a list I can pick from, or are you going to suggest an order to me?”

“I feel like the first few in the stack should be ones of my recommendation, but beyond that, I think you are free to decide for yourself when and where you want to make your move,” Veronica said, kissing Tabitha's neck before pulling away, walking towards the kitchen. “The next one I have a bit of an in with, as we say in the business, so you'll be able to focus on the task at hand, and not be distracted by having to figure out how to make your approach.”

Veronica had started coffee before coming over, and now that it was ready, she poured out two cups worth, one for herself and one for Tabitha. “Splash of cream and one sugar, yes?”

“As always, you've done your homework,” Tabitha said, strolling over towards the kitchen area, still not having bothered to put clothes on. It helped reinforce her position in her mind, being able to move around naked in such a large area. “Tell me about this first target and how you have an in with her. I can't imagine anyone called AOA for anything good.”

“It's not as big a deal as she made it out to be, but I suppose if I hadn't handled it, there was the potential of it turning into a media shitstorm,” Veronica said, holding the mug out to Tabitha, arm of the cup towards her. Based on how steaming the coffee was, either it was quite insulated or Veronica had quite the tolerance to heat. Either seemed possible.

“Start with a name.”

“Kelly Simone,” Veronica responded. “There's a chance you might have heard of her, depending on what hobbies you may have kept hidden from me. As much as I tried, I couldn't learn everything about you while you were growing up. Have you? Heard of her, I mean.”

“The name doesn't ring any bells,” Tabitha said, lifting the coffee to her lips, taking a sip from it. She wasn't sure what kind of coffee it was, but it was definitely some sort of exotic roast she'd never had before, and the very taste of it felt decadent and sinful on her tongue in the best possible way. “Who is she?”

“She's a soccer player,” Veronica said, grabbing a tablet from the countertop, tapping on it to make it spring to life. She touched and swiped at it a few times before finding the app she wanted, opening it and getting some presentation she'd clearly prepared in advance. “This is her.”

Veronica laid the tablet down in front of Tabitha, then spun it around to make sure it was right side up. On the screen was a large image of a soccer player, her long dirty blonde hair held back from her face by a headband, the majority of it drawn into a rather bushy ponytail full of volume. She had a wide smile with perfect white teeth on display. The jersey was a sort of faded powder blue with a big circular logo smack dab in the center of it, the letters Y, C and N visible in that order, although Tabitha realized it must have been for NYC. Her skin was tan, maybe a stripe of Greek or Italian heritage in her or perhaps just a good amount of time spent out in the sun. The expression on her face exuded confidence by the mile.

“She's certainly pretty enough,” Tabitha said, pinching her fingers together and then flicking them apart to make the image zoom in on Kelly's face. “How old?”

“19,” Veronica replied. “Turns twenty a week or so before Halloween.”

“So let me guess,” Tabitha said. “She got drunk and trashed her car or something? She strikes me as the sort of girl who would both start drinking early and wouldn't accept that she couldn't hold onto her liquor and insisted on driving herself home from a party when she shouldn't have.”

“Zero for one,” Veronica chuckled. “Dear little Kelly here is straight edge. No liquor, no



cigarettes, no pot, no vaping.”

Tabitha grinned, rolling her eyes a little. “Don't tell me she's a vegan.”

“Most certainly not,” Veronica replied. “You want to take a second guess at why she called me, or should I just come out and tell you?”

“Got pregnant and needed an abortion, and you to hush it up from her family?”

“Bzzt!” Veronica giggled, miming a buzzer, reaching across the countertop to swipe on the picture, moving to the next image where Kelly was wearing a jersey with a rainbow flag, playing on a field with several other people in matching jerseys, clearly at some sort of charity event. “No dick for our girl Kelly here. She's the first letter in the sexuality alphabet coalition – a great big L.”

Tabitha shook her head, throwing one hand up into the air. “Then I think I'm about all out of guesses. So tell me, why'd she need AOA's help?”

Veronica reached over and swiped on the tablet to show the next image, a very good looking sporty woman that Tabitha didn't recognize, but the woman's face wasn't the first thing she noticed. The woman's neck had bruising around it, and her left arm was in a sling. Around the woman's wrists were further bruises and chafing, like there had been restraints on them. On top of that, the woman had a black eye and it looked like maybe her nose had been broken and reset. The image was a Polaroid that had been taken, almost like it was documenting evidence of some kind.

“Damn,” Tabitha said. “Looks she and our girl got into a hell of a fight. Too much tequila or something? They run into each other at a bar after a match?”

“Even crazier,” Veronica said. “They're ex-lovers. This is Amanda Frank, and she's claiming that Kelly beat her up, while Kelly's claiming literally everything they did was consensual.”

She stretched again and swiped to the next thing in the presentation, a short video file obviously captured from an internal home security camera. It showed the two women in bed, dressed in bras and panties each, locked in an intense kiss, their hands all over one another. The kiss broke, and Kelly spoke first, her voice sort of low and husky. “You've been a bad little bitch, haven't you, Amanda?”

“Mmmm... sooooo bad,” Amanda teasingly whined back. “I need to be punished.”

The video file stopped at that point, as Veronica picked up her coffee, taking another sip from it. “There's more, of course, lots of rough, nasty, violent sex, including Kelly basically hogtying Amanda there for a some of it, during which she apparently dislocated Amanda's arm.”

“I mean, she had to have said stop at some point, didn't she?” Tabitha asked her.

“She did, but Kelly's claiming she never used their safeword, because all the 'no no no' was part of their particular game, and that Kelly had loads of other recordings not far from this one, where Amanda was asking for more, to be used harder,” Veronica said. “Amanda and her attorney were going to try and extort Kelly for money over all of this, so Kelly turned to AOA to make the problem go away, at the recommendation of one of her coaches.”

“AOA's got a relationship with soccer coaches?” Tabitha asked.

“AOA's got a relationship with *everybody*, Mistress,” Veronica laughed. “I'm the only demon of the partners, but the others are capable of far more devilry than I am.”

“So how'd you make it go away?”

“Some cash *did* exchange hands, but we got Amanda to sign a full waiver, releasing Kelly from liability from any of their past sexual encounters together, and she had to sign and non-disclosure agreement, preventing her from saying anything about their relationship to anyone in the media, or she'll be in breach of contract and owe, well, every bit of money she'll ever see for the rest of her life, and more,” Veronica said, grabbing the tablet, closing the presentation. “Her children and her children's children would be in debt to Kelly if she ever breathed a word about it. We're supposed to have destroyed all the evidence, but I kept a copy myself, as I suspected it might be useful for you, knowing as I did that you were coming of age, and that Kelly's a nephilim.”

“And you're sure of that?”

“Well, let's watch together and find out,” Veronica said, moving to grab the tablet once more,

this time just opening up the YouTube app, typing in “Kelly Simone golden goal” into the search menu, with immediately half a dozen results popping up, all from an exhibition match last year, the New York City Football Club against the Flamengo Womens Club from Brazil.

Before the video even started playing, Veronica noticed the video had close to 200k likes, meaning the clip had gotten more than its share of attention in the six months since it was posted. Veronica didn't know all that much about soccer, but it seemed like it was overtime. She watched as the ball was knocked away from the goal and back towards what the announcer was calling the strikers, dangerously high and threatening to sail over their heads when Kelly leaped into the air, snapping her leg out at just the right moment to completely redirect the ball back towards the goal with enough force and speed that the goalie didn't have even a chance to adjust momentum, much less block the shot. But as impressive as the high kick shot was, that wasn't what Tabitha had been focused on.

As promised, even in the footage, she could see how Kelly's eyes turned into glowing sphere of golden light right before she landed that almost impossibly high kick to score the winning goal in overtime. Tabitha even scrolled back the video to freeze on a frame, and it was uncanny how much light seemed to be emanating from Kelly's eyes, something that she felt seemed impossible to miss, but as she scrolled down, there weren't any comments about it anywhere, and the announcer's voice, very much caught up in the energy of the moment, made no mention of the two almost headlight strength beams of light shooting from Kelly's eyes like cartoon lasers, although it was only for a moment, and when they cut back to Kelly and her teammates cheering, her eyes were normal once more.

“Nephilim are wild,” Tabitha muttered to herself. “So this is my first target? You're certain? I shouldn't try one of the others instead?”

Veronica smiled and shrugged. “I've only got your best interests at heart, Mistress. If you don't trust me, you can look through the rest of my files and see if there's someone else instead you think would make a better candidate, but I strongly think the first two should be of *my* choosing, simply so you're scaling up in difficulty as you move along, after you're warmed up. No need to start with Everest as your first mountain to climb, when there are perfectly acceptable hills in our own backyard. Besides, there's an excellent window of opportunity with Kelly that seemed too perfect to pass up.”

“Oh yeah?” Tabitha asked. “And what's that?”

“They're having a party tonight to celebrate Kelly's signing with Nike in terms of endorsements. The company's going to make a big deal about it, and they've rented out a ballroom, invited the press and it should be quite the party. Naturally, I've acquired us invites to the event, and it should be nice chance for you to see some of the larger supernatural community, and let them see you out and about, so they know you're not afraid of them.”

“*Should* I be afraid of them?”

“You should be at least a little respectful, but afraid? I think that's a bit big of an ask, especially for Lucifer's daughter,” Veronica answered. “But you might be surprised just how many things you've never seen that have been just around the corner.”

The afternoon was spent getting Tabitha a new collection of outfits, as Veronica insisted that nothing in Tabitha's existing collection of clothes was suitable for the night, or so Veronica insisted. They were of similar statures and builds, but Veronica was a few inches taller and because of that, Tabitha needed to stock the closet.

They spent time at all sorts of boutiques, and Veronica insisted that money was no object, and that if Tabitha saw anything she wanted, she should just add it to the collection. Tabitha followed the instruction to the letter, and estimated that she'd spent the price of a rather respectable Italian sports car for just clothes.

It didn't even include the amount she spent on shoes, but then again, shoes deserved their own category of spending. Shoes were *more* important than anyone could ever understand.

From all the outfits they bought for the day, they picked a nice skirt and blouse combo that offered daring lines and clingy bulges, something that gave Tabitha a sleek look that felt modern and

business but also still edgy and sexy. Veronica insisted it wouldn't be too much or too little for the event, and Tabitha had to trust her judgment on the matter. After the shopping spree, the next stop had been to a spa to relax for a few hours over lunch. At one point, Tabitha asked if they should be swinging by the AOA offices, and Veronica had responded that they only needed to put in time at the office when they wanted to. The last stop was to Veronica's personal stylist, to get Tabitha's hair touched up, and her make-up done, to complete the new look with a few final twists.

None of the changes individually they'd made over the course of the day had been large, but each of them had added up a bit at a time, and piece by piece, Tabitha felt like a new woman was emerging, a stronger, more confident woman, the kind who wasn't afraid to grind the heel of her brand new five thousand dollar Prada shoes down on the back of someone's neck if they were being *a bitch*. As she looked at herself in the mirror, seeing who she was now, she felt a sense of pride and determination over the upcoming contest.

She'd been wearing a style before, but now, she was inhabiting it. There was no room for self-doubt in her new life, no space to let uncertainty creep in through the cracks around the edges. It was all or nothing, and nothing wasn't something Tabitha ever wanted to hear again.

From the stylist, they headed straight to the party, and it was being held in a ballroom that looked large enough to fit small armies in. Instead, however, there were only a few hundred people milling about. It was easy to distinguish between three separate types of people in attendance.

The first group was the reporters. They stood out like a sore thumb because none of them had gone the extra mile to look impressive, dressed in passable clothes but nothing that anyone would call fashionable, even on the best of days. There were more of them there than expected, but Veronica had said that the prestige name of Nike associated with the announcement added an extra layer of allure.

The second group were the celebrities. They were the ones dressed to the nines, in the latest of fashions with only the next-next-*next*-gen technology toys. There were also more of *them* than Tabitha had expected, but Veronica said that sometimes press announcements like this could draw fame seekers out of the woodwork, people attempting to recapture lightning in a bottle or to ween off the residual spark of others, just to get another go around. But with them also came the celebrities whose stars were on the rise, the up-and-comers who were just about to be on top of the world, giving people one last chance to catch them on the way up. The problem was telling the two apart could almost be impossible.

The last group were the suits, the people whose money it was being spent on the announcement and the event, who wanted to be sure that they were getting what they wanted out of it – exposure for their brand, their celebrity, their current project, their next project, whatever it was they were expected to be sell, sell, selling.

But after she'd clocked most of them, she started to notice a fourth group – the outliers. The people who didn't seem to fit into any of the three categories, and that she didn't know quite what to make of. The security staff had checked their invites at the entrance, but now that they were inside, Tabitha and Veronica had nothing but blue skies of opportunity before them.

“How many non-human people are here right now?” Tabitha whispered to Veronica.

The demoness glanced around the room, quickly taking stock. “Well, there's our target, the angel Sandy's over there...”

“There's an angel named Sandy?”

“It's short for Sandalphon,” Veronica told her. “There's a small contingency of the Forgotten Gods over there, including Shango and Zhurong, whom you've already met. Haagenti's over there, and she's a demoness, so I guess you could call us coworkers, although she's generally been in alliance with one of the other Dukes and Duchesses of Hell, so we don't always get along. Oh! The Ostrogoth's here,” Veronica said with a sly smile. “You simply have to meet him. He's a charming old bastard. You'll get along famously.”

Veronica led her across the room where an extremely tall blonde Germanic looking man was holding court with three gorgeous women, each of whom seemed to be perched on his every word. The

man had a very rugged and chiseled look to him, like the sort of gladiators of old, with a handsome face, even though Tabitha didn't swing that way. He had a short beard, only an inch or so in length, and his nose looked like it had probably been broken once or twice before, although it only gave him character. He seemed like the sort of big, brawny man who should be driving a truck and swinging a sledgehammer, although he was wearing a t-shirt for what Tabitha would've guessed was a band called Beyond The Black, a thin leather jacket draped over it, and jeans that she almost thought were painted on. He had a glass full of whiskey in one hand, using the other to gesture while he talked, seeming to reach the apex of some humorous story just as Tabitha and Veronica arrived. His blonde hair was curly but still mostly short, and when the women broke out into laughter, he turned to one side, catching Veronica's eye, shooting her a wink. "Excuse me, ladies," he said, his voice with just a touch of a German accent undercutting it. "But an old friend of mine has come to see me, so you must excuse me, but I insist I will return to you with post haste once our conversation has concluded. Don't leave, otherwise I shall take great personal offense to it." He stood up, and when he did, he seemed even more like a mountain than he had previously, towering over Tabitha by a good foot, but he moved over to bend down and offer a hug to Veronica first. "Ver, dear, how've you been?" he said with a laugh, starting to walk them away from the trio of high society women.

"Still up to your old games I see, Kai," Veronica said to him. "Haven't decided which of the three you're going to bleed dry?"

The massive man laughed, offering a polite shrug. "You know me, Ver. I always say 'why choose when you don't have to.' It's served me well thus far."

As the two talked, Tabitha let her eyes relax a little bit and could start to see Veronica's conversation partner for what he was – his skin, which had looked impeccable and immaculate when they'd approached him, was actually covered in a seemingly endless number of scars, ranging from relatively fresh to practically ancient. She could also see that he had a sword hilt resting in what looked like Velcro hangings attached to his back – no blade, just the grip, pommel and guard. In lieu of eyes, she could see gemstones, a deep red shade, with many facets, a soft light throbbing from them.

"Kai, let me introduce you to Lucifer's newest daughter, Tabitha St. Cloud," Veronica said, making the introduction. "She's just beginning her challenging ritual. Tabitha, this is Kai Mitternachtsblitz, more commonly known as The Ostrogoth, the oldest and most successful living duelist the planet's ever seen."

"How successful, if I might ask?" Tabitha said, as Kai took her hand and brought it up to his lips, bowing his head down a little as he did.

"Over twelve-thousand kills over the past three thousand years or so, since I began."

"Or so?" Tabitha asked with a soft laugh.

Kai shrugged, his massive shoulders shrugging like an avalanche. "After the first thousand or so, you decide to stop counting. The number of years itself isn't important."

"But you still count the number of duels you've won?"

"Of course," he said with a nod. "That number *is* important." He glanced over at Veronica with a frown. "Don't look now, but I think the wet blanket is coming our way."

"Now Kai," Veronica scolded. "Be nice to the enemy."

Tabitha's eyes flickered over and saw the woman that Tabitha had named Sandalphon approaching them. She appeared to be Chinese, although she was dressed in a rather formal looking tuxedo, something that seemed about fifty years out of date, like she had just walked out of the filming of the most recent adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. Her dark hair hung down over her shoulders, black at the roots but slowly dissolving into brown locks.

"Everyone's the enemy to The Ostrogoth," Sandalphon said to Veronica with a smile that held absolutely no friendliness to it. "That doesn't mean he isn't the kind of soul to be rude about it. Fighting alone must certainly get tiring, Kai. Why haven't you picked a side yet?"

"Because I only fight winning battles, Sandy," Kai replied to her, his gemstone eyes having to

tilt far down to match hers, nearly two feet of height between them. "And it's still too early to call it in your squabble, if there even will be a winner."

"The righteous will always win out in the end," Sandy said with a sniff, before turning to glance over at Tabitha. "You're Lucifer's most recent spawn, are you?"

Tabitha extended her hand, but the angel just seemed to look at it. "Tabitha St. Cloud."

"A devil with a saint in her name," Sandy said sardonically. "How droll."

Tabitha pulled her hand back in. "Yes, well, my cause is righteous, to me anyway. I'm fighting for the right to survive."

"Aren't we all, darling?" Sandy replied, extending Tabitha the courtesy of a short smile.

"Veronica, if I might have a few minutes of your time? I need to go over a few of the rules with you, to make sure that both sides are playing fair in this little challenge."

"I didn't think the angels had a stake in the matter," Veronica replied.

"The angels have a stake in everything."

"Alright then," Veronica said. "Mistress, Kelly should be here soon, but I advise you wait until I return before you make contact, yes?"

"Hurry back, Veronica," Tabitha replied. "My patience has limits."

"Yes Mistress, of course." The angel and the demoness walked off together, talking low and quiet, although the tone insisted they were hammering out some details neither was happy with, leaving her alone with Kai.

"So how much trouble am I in, Kai?" Tabitha asked him, grabbing a flute of wine from a waitress walking by.

"The same as any of the rest of us, demon princess," the Ostrogoth chuckled. "More than we would like but never as much as we deserve." He grabbed a deviled egg off of a different tray from a waiter strolling by. The waiter looked like he couldn't decide if he should stop, scurry away or just offer the bulky man the entire tray. He finally selected the middle option. "You're here nephilim hunting, aren't you?" he asked her. "Looks like your prey has arrived."

At the stage, the music was dying down, and someone was tapping a microphone, clearly having been talking for a few minutes, but now they had turned the volume up for the main event. "Ladies and gentlemen," the woman at the podium said, "I give you Nike's newest spokeswoman, Kelly Simone!"

The room erupted into applause, and Tabitha laid her eyes upon her next meal for the first time.

## **Chapter Four**

"Are you going to go duel the nephilim?" the Ostrogoth asked her. "I'm not entirely certain what your challenge involved, but if it is going to be a fight to the death, I might suggest it not be done in such a public venue. I know the urge to rush into battle can be great and consuming, but those of us who live within the underbelly of the dark world must maintain a certain level of consideration on how we affect the veil and the protection it gives us."

Tabitha would've thought it very easy to write off the Ostrogoth as a sort of immortal himbo, but there was a depth to the man's words and tones that made it clear to do would be a mistake that might come back and bite her in the ass sooner or later, one that clearly over twelve thousand souls had made before her, and that was more than plenty to ensure that she wouldn't allow her name to be added to that list. His advice was counsel worth heeding.

"I wouldn't say it's a duel, but I can assure you, one of us is going to totally come out on top," Tabitha chuckled, taking a sip from her flute of wine. Now that she was embracing her inherited demonic senses, everything seemed so much more *vivid* than it had just days ago. The scent of perfumes, the taste of wine, the rhythmic thumping of the bass in the track the DJ was playing their way... all of it felt intense, like her entire life had been lived out of focus and now she was wearing glasses for the first time, introduced to a world that had been all around her the entire time as she

moved mostly oblivious through it. “And there may be some bruising involved.”

“AH,” Kai said, nodding his head. “Dominance and submission, likely of a sexual fashion. I have fought a few of those style of duels in my time, although certainly not as many as I'm certain both Casanova and Aspasia have.”

“Casanova's still alive?” Tabitha asked, her interest in her target momentarily deflected, especially since Kelly seemed to be surrounded by autograph seekers and press people. There were too many witnesses for her to make her move, so it would need to be something she would be patient on. Opportunity would present itself soon enough, she felt confident. Allow for time and strike only at the correct moment. “And who's Aspasia?”

“Both of them are like me, members of The Elite, legends that, through our prowess in some field or another, have become demi-gods, attaining an imperfect form of immortality,” Kai told her. “As long as we remain at the top of our game, we do not age, we do not weaken, we do not die.”

“So you're immortal,” Tabitha said, finding the whole subject fascinating.

“Of a sort, little demoness, but like most forms of power, it is frail and subject to its own limitations,” he said as the waiter tried to slink by him, but the giant of a man reached over and grabbed a handful more of the deviled eggs he'd had earlier. “I did say our form of immortality was imperfect. We can be killed just like any other human. Shot, stabbed, hung, crushed, drowned... it all works just the same. In fact, accidents are the highest cause of death among the Elite. Casanova is the greatest male lover of women alive. Aspasia is the greatest female lover of men alive. There is, assuredly, a greatest male lover of men alive, and a greatest female lover of women alive, but my path and theirs have never crossed, so they are unknown to me.” He paused for a moment, chuckling, as he tilted his head back, lost in memory for a moment. “Actually, I may not know them specifically, but I suspect they were likely both there at the Great Naples Orgy, but then again, who wasn't?” He laughed, bouncing his eyebrows. “It was a hell of a time, and Aspasia is one *hell* of a woman...”

“Worth of the title of 'greatest female lover of men,' then?”

“Oh, ja, that and *so* much more. I am blessed that the memory itself has faded over time, because for over a hundred years after that, every woman felt like just a pale imitation of what true sexual ecstasy had been in those wee hours of my time in Naples,” he said, trying to jostle himself from the memory, as if he was afraid he would tumble down the rabbit hole again if he thought about it too long. “In fact, I've yet to go *back* to Naples since.”

“Why, Kai,” she teased. “You almost sound like you're afraid.”

He scowled at her, his eyebrow dropping as he turned to look at her, and for just a moment, she regretted speaking the comment aloud. “The Ostrogoth fears nothing, demoness, and you would be wise to remember that, unless you wish to be another scratch on the hilt of my blade.”

“My apologies, Kai,” she said, seeing if she could smooth this over quickly. “I was simply hoping to encourage you to confront your memories rather than retreat from them.”

He smiled and it carried with it the centuries of experience the man had built. “There is nothing to be ashamed of in a retreat, demoness. I have gotten where I am by knowing how, when and where to provoke those in need of a duel, but that does not mean I run blindly into every fight I see. So many wish to duel in other manners these days that I rarely get the chance to let my sword breathe.”

“What do you mean 'other manners?'”

“Sometimes it is socially. Sometimes it is financially. More often than not, it is a wager to be first at something, to acquire something, to achieve something... those types of things. They often result in mortal wounds, but not fatal, where someone is destroyed but not killed.” He sniffed, as if he found the challenges of lesser status, but still things he needed to engage with never the less. “The stronger of those who survive such duels can sometimes go on to become excellent adversaries, but often they simply end their own life in shame.”

“Fuck, Kai, remind me not to piss *you* off,” Tabitha said with a laugh. “What other kinds of Elite are there?”

“The greatest shooter. The best painter. The finest military tactician. The most engaging writer. The deadliest unarmed combatant. The most moving musician. Creators and destroyers in equal measure. Hell, The Storyteller is so old, I think he's forgotten his own original name by now. Either that, or he's had so many assumed names, he can't separate his fiction from his history.”

“How do they remain undiscovered?”

He nodded, as if she had made a particularly salient point. “It's more challenging now than it's ever been, but the creators create by proxy. Different names, different supporting teams, whatever it takes to let someone else take the credit for their hard work,” he said with a shrug. “Such is the price of eternity. Well, one of them, anyway.”

It looked as the crowd around Kelly was starting to dwindle down a little, and despite the fact that Veronica had yet to return, Tabitha didn't feel like waiting any more, so she decided to make her move. “Excuse me, Kai. I do believe I need to go introduce myself. I do hope we meet again, and still under such non-opposed interests.”

“Battle on, little demoness,” Kai replied, raising his glass of whiskey in toast to her. “May the only broken blade belong to your enemy.”

Tabitha couldn't see where Veronica and Sandy had gone, but she'd spent more than enough time in her life waiting for permission, and those days were behind her now. The new Tabitha moved when she chose to, and let those who opposed her quiver in fear. Her most opportune moment was now, and she refused to let it pass her by.

Where the old Tabitha would've done her best to slip and slide between the various people, trying not to be noticed or imposing on anyone, she now walked through the crowd and let them instinctively part around her, as if the very presence of her moving through them encouraged them to slip away from her, out of deference or respect, but all without them even truly noticing they were doing it. The simple volume of Tabitha's presence made people reflexively make way for her to move through them, even if they weren't aware they were doing it. The crowd simply drifted away from the path she intended to take, opening up for her like the Red Sea before Moses.

The number of fame seekers crowded Kelly had dwindled enough that could see her, far better than the fleeting glimpse she'd caught when Kelly entered the room. She'd wanted to let her eyes take her in within that moment, but the crowd had surged and swelled around her, and whatever image she had was gone, buried beneath a wave of people.

Now, however, Tabitha could truly size up her prey, especially as she grew closer to her. The woman was incredibly fit, there was no denying it. In anticipation of the event, perhaps, her handlers must have convinced her to wear the team uniform, because she was dressed in the same clothes she'd been wearing in the footage of her playing, the jersey, the short shorts, the ankle-high socks and the white athletic shoes. It clung to her like it was deliberately a little too snug, also likely the choice of a marketing person, hoping that the 'sex sells' mantra still held true, even when it came to lesbians. The fabric clung to her provocatively, so the lines of her sports bra and her panties were easily visible through the fabric.

Tabitha couldn't wait to rip them off her.

She wasn't especially tall, but definitely in remarkable shape. Small breasted, as athletes tended to be, with thighs that looked as though they had spent an endless number of mornings doing sprints out on a track. A deliciously pert ass. Blue orbs that looked as though they were growing weary of so many people asking for selfies or autographs. There was something energetic and wholesome about the woman that Tabitha knew concealed a darker, more forceful interior, something she intended to bring back to the foreground again.

“Hello Miss Simone,” Tabitha said, extending her hand. “I've been very much looking forward to this meeting.” The lawyers and sychophants faded into the background, and the whole room seemed like it fell quiet, like the sound of the crowd dropped away and disappeared into the ether, like the two of them were the only people in the room.

“You know me, but I don't know you,” Kelly said to her, taking her hand and shaking it. “So whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?”

“My name's Tabitha St. Cloud,” she said. “I'm with AOA. Is there some place more private we can chat?”

The look on the woman's face went from exuberant to crestfallen in between heartbeats. It came back up again between the next two, a familiar and well-crafted defense mechanism falling back into place like tumblers on a safe lock, the visage of safety and security plastered back over her face once more. “Yeah, I have to go do this presentation, but come find me after the announcement's made,” Kelly said quickly, almost fleeing from Tabitha's very presence, just as Veronica returned to her side.

“I thought I advised you to wait until I was back before making first contact,” the demoness said, the tip of her tail trailing against the back of one of Tabitha's calves affectionately, invisible to all but the most mystically attuned of eyes.

“And I thought *I* made it clear that I would make my own decisions on these matters, Roni,” Tabitha said, her tone of voice conveying not cross but amused with perhaps a tiny amuse bouche of annoyance bubbling up from underneath. “You should have seen the fright that mentioning AOA evoked within her. She hid it very well, but there's only so much obfuscation one can pull off in these sorts of matters. You must have really put the fear of God into her with your conversation the first time around.”

“She was a little mortified at how she felt like she didn't know her own strength,” Veronica said, doing her best to be close to Tabitha without seeming overly fawning. “That's a common enough story with nephilim. They're stronger, faster, smarter than normal humans, but that means they don't typically know their own capabilities. They have to learn how to limit themselves to not accidentally overreach. They tend to have some... collateral damage around them during that education.”

Tabitha sighed, shaking her head. “Never push yourself if you can't control how you're going to use those abilities.”

The sound of the music started to swell up and the lights came down as the event started to happen. For the next twenty minutes, there was a cavalcade of people parading out, hyping up about Kelly's achievements, her skill, showing clips and highlights to cheers, before finally one of the heads of Nike stepped up and announced that they would be entering into a three-year endorsement deal with Kelly Simone, an entire year longer than had already been rumored, which was met with raucous cheers from the crowd.

Rather than go to Kelly immediately after the announcement had concluded, Tabitha decided to make Kelly sweat a bit and bode her time. She would glance over from time to time, seeing the crowd continue to ebb and swell around the sports star each time she tried to pry herself away from them. Tabitha somehow knew that if she went over to Kelly, there wouldn't be anyone getting in her way, but she took a certain joy in watching the athlete do her best to keep her calm with the sword of Damocles hanging over her head.

“Why are we waiting, Mistress?” Veronica finally said to her. “You are sort of on the clock for these things and it seems fickle to waste time this way.”

“We aren't *wasting* time, Veronica,” Tabitha said, delight in her voice. “We're *spending* it, and wisely.” She found herself a little surprised how naturally all of this was coming to her, but now with the knowledge of where she came from, it seemed only right to put the pedal to the metal and never once look in the rear view mirror. “She expected me to be impatient, eager, but the fact that I'm not going and grabbing her immediately is letting her mind run through a thousand scenarios, each one worse than the one before it. *I* don't have to put fear into her heart about our meeting; she's doing that *for* me all by herself.”

Once the party began to lose energy, the crowd dispersed quickly, like rats fleeing from a sinking ship. Nobody wanted to be the last person to leave the party, because that was the epitome of 'uncool,' and so many of these people were more concerned with their images than anything else.



It wasn't on its last legs by the time Tabitha made her way back over to Kelly, who had been basically chaperoned by a person from Nike and a person from the football team's management the entire time she'd been there, but as soon as Tabitha and Veronica headed towards her, Kelly seemed to be doing everything she could to shed herself from the handlers.

When they were nearly upon the trio, Kelly broke away from the two and Tabitha clearly heard the woman say, "There's nobody important here left, Cyrus, so I'm getting the fuck out of here, okay? The party's dead anyway."

As soon as Kelly was free of them, they saw the girl heading straight for them, panic now running rampant in her eyes. "Veronica, what the *fuck*?" Kelly said to the demoness, trying to keep her voice low and quiet, but the fear clearly affecting her ability to modulate her volume well. "You *promised* me this was *fucking handled*."

"This isn't about *that*, Kelly," Veronica said, placing a hand on Kelly's shoulder, whether to comfort or calm her, it was unclear, as was whether or not it worked. "Is there somewhere more private we can talk?"

Kelly harrumphed a little, rolling her eyes. "Yeah, whatever. They got me a suite here at the hotel to crash at tonight because they were worried about me getting drunk, when I'm like, hey asswipes, I'm not *old* enough to drink... Hello? Still just 19, fuckwits... C'mon."

The hotel itself was a remarkable piece of New York history, over a century old, and still owned and run by the same family, although with what Tabitha knew now, she almost wondered if maybe by 'same family' it actually meant 'same *person*.' Learning that life and death weren't quite as static as she'd expected, Tabitha had been working to disabuse herself of assumptions she'd long held dear. It was within the realm of possibility that the hotel had simply had one owner since its inception, and covered it up.

As soon as they got into the elevator, the doors closing to seal the three of them in, Kelly turned to look at Veronica, desperation and confusion plain on her face. "If this isn't about the one thing, Veronica, then what *is* it about?"

"Let's wait until we're in your suite, Kelly," Veronica said. "This is the kind of matter we shouldn't be talking about publicly."

Tabitha found it entertaining how Kelly kept looking at Veronica like she was running the show, but decided to let the illusion play out for a few minutes longer. The elevator couldn't seem to most fast enough for Kelly, who was pacing around inside of the car like a caged predator, impatient and agitated. It was clear that while her last experience with AOA had been to her benefit, she hadn't enjoyed it at all, and Veronica's unwillingness to answer questions didn't seem to be helping her mood any, only making it more of an itch she couldn't scratch.

As soon as the doors opened, Kelly practically sprinted out of the elevator and headed down the hall as fast as she could, trying not to look like she was running, but certainly walking much faster than a person normally would, not even looking back to make sure the two of them were following, reaching into her pocket to fish out her magnetic keycard, having to swipe it three or four times before finally getting the green light, unlocking the door so she could open it and head into the room, only then looking back to make sure that Veronica and Tabitha were ready to enter.

It was only at that point that Kelly probably noticed the level of deference Veronica was showing to Tabitha, allowing her to walk into the room first, her eyes slightly lowered. Once Veronica entered the room, she closed the door behind her, leaving the three of them alone in one of the nicest hotel rooms Tabitha had ever seen.

"What the fuck is going on, Veronica?" Kelly said, stomping over to the mini fridge, opening it to grab a bottle of water from it. "I had genuinely *fucking* hoped to never see you again."

"Hey," Tabitha said, snapping her fingers. "You may have been talking to Veronica before, but I'm in charge now, and you had better get your head around that real quick. I'm the one who called this meeting, so stop *fucking* looking at her and focus your eyes over here. I know all about what you did to

that poor girl, but, but, BUT..." Tabitha could see the girl was panicking and it was time to offer the carrot instead of the stick. "But you need to know it wasn't entirely your fault, and I'm here to help make sure it doesn't happen again."

Kelly moved over to a couch in the corner of the room and sat down on it, almost defeated. "What do you mean not 'entirely' my fault? I beat the shit out of her. Either it is or isn't my fault, and I'm pretty sure I was there."

"Sure, but you weren't aware of how strong you were, Kelly," Tabitha said, strolling over towards her. "How strong you *are*. I can give you a partner who can keep up with you, though. Someone who's got as voracious an appetite as you, who can push and pull you without worry about you bruising or injuring her. Of course, you'd have to learn that you aren't always going to be on top, though, and it strikes me that maybe you aren't comfortable with that."

"Oh yeah?" Kelly laughed, Icarus daring to race towards the sun, and damned be the consequences. "Who's gonna be able to keep up with me? You?"

"You're better believe it," Tabitha said, stepping over, grabbing Kelly's ponytail in her slender fingers, yanking with a force that seemed to surprise the athlete, pulling her to her feet, locking lips with her, a slight squeak of surprise. Kelly squirmed, trying to pull away at first before the resistance melted and turned to excitement, wrapping her arms around Tabitha, reaching down to grab the back of her head with one hand, her ass with the other.

The kiss broke and Kelly's breath was quick, racing, much like the woman's heartbeat. "Holy fuck," Kelly whispered. "You're... you're strong for as thin as you are."

"You haven't even seen the half of it yet," Tabitha said with a smirk, reaching up to the neckline of the football jersey, grabbing the collar of it with her slender fingers before ripping the jersey straight down the center, from neck to waist, Veronica stepping in behind Kelly to pull her hands free to allow it to drop it off her shoulders.

"Fuck, you're *really* strong," Kelly gasped. "Those shirts don't tear for fucking anything..."

Tabitha's wolflike grin spread a little more than she'd intended. "So I'm going to be gathering a stable of fun playmates that you and I can have as much fun as we want to with, and I'm willing to let you into the party, as long as you're willing to agree to my one condition."

"What's that?" Kelly said, her breathing growing even more impatient and shallow.

"I'm in charge. You *belong* to me. I *own* you. You're my *bitch* and that means you always do exactly what the fuck I say. If I want to ink you, if I want to pierce you, if I want to collar you, your job will be to say 'yes Mistress,' 'thank you Mistress,' and 'where did you have in mind, Mistress?' Your very *soul* will belong to me."

Kelly licked her lips. "Fine. *Make me*. If you can get me to yield, then I'll be yours. Mind, body *and* soul, as agreed upon. I dare you. Make me *yours*."

"Oh, Kelly," Tabitha said with a wicked laugh that reverberated through the room like applause. "You already *are*..."

Tabitha reached down to Kelly's waist and grabbed both shorts and panties and just ripped them at each leg, shredding them until they fell off and left the sporty athletic woman visible to her eyes. She kept her pubic hair trimmed short but not entirely shaved clean, as if the constant bother of maintaining it would've been more hassle than it was worth. She had smaller, pert breasts, but the pinkish nipples were already hard enough that they were like rocks, stiff and poking out, eager for attention, as Tabitha shoved her hand between Kelly's thighs, forcing three of her fingers right up inside of the woman's snatch suddenly, a sharp groan escaping her lips as she tried to widen her stance a little.

"Oh *F-*" Kelly started to say when Tabitha's other hand reached up and grabbed the athlete by the throat, her slender fingers exerting a remarkable amount of force upon the woman's windpipe, but the smile on her face made it clear that she enjoyed the sudden lack of control, as she gasped and struggled for air for a moment, while Tabitha's right hand continued its assault on Kelly's cunt, which was drenching the darker woman's fingers.

“I told you that you were my bitch, didn't I, Kelly? If I let you breathe, I want to hear you say it, want to hear you embrace it.”

Kelly shook her head with a deranged grin, trying to put up some last ditch resistance, although it was clear she was going to cave very soon. Tabitha could feel the woman's snatch gripping eagerly around her fingertips, especially as she crooked them a little. Tabitha looked at Kelly again, and the woman clenched up and then nodded, as she finally let the football player's throat go, Kelly coughing, her eyes watered up.

“I belong to you, Mistress. You own me. I am yours,” Kelly said, forcing the words out of her mouth with maximum effort, even while Tabitha's hand continued to work against the athlete's cunt, the base of her palm grinding against the blonde's clit, making her squirm and thrust her hips as best as she could to the darker woman's touch.

Tabitha did her best to grind down with her thumb even while the three fingers slotted in and out of her forcefully, as Kelly groaned and howled, her eyes rolling back in her head but failing to close, so those whites were completely dominating her sockets.

“Again. Louder.”

“You own me, Mistress! Fuck, I'm your little bitch! Fucking cumming! Fuck fuck fuck!” Kelly's voice was reduced to a banshee's keen, her hands trying to clamp down onto Tabitha's thin arms, but completely unable to do anything but hold on for dear life, as the orgasms started to blast through her body like shockwaves, rippling outward from her hips, every nerve in her body lit up like bumpers on a pinball machine, finally giving a gush of clear liquid all over Tabitha's fingertips before her body slumped, held up by Tabitha's hands for just a moment before she laid the blonde down on her back atop the bed. Her mouth hung open, her jaw slack, her face a contorted mask of ecstasy from which she had yet to come down.

Tabitha flipped the woman over onto her belly and then slowly dragged her finger against the woman's lower back, drawing a matching brand to the one she'd placed on Veronica not long earlier. She looked over to the demoness. “Are the adjudicators nearby?”

“For the next month, Mistress, they are always only a few moments away.”

“Go and get them. Bring them here to authenticate this.”

“Yes Mistress.”

As Veronica stepped out of the room, Tabitha flipped Kelly back onto her back, sliding her fingertips across the woman's snatch once more before pushing those thighs wide, leaning her head down to run her tongue in one long pass against her dripping slit, simply taking in the taste of her before grinning, standing up, flipping the unconscious girl once more onto her stomach, just as the doors began to open, Shango and Zhurong moving into the room with deliberate speed, the doors closing behind them as Veronica was the last to enter.

“You keep up this rate, and the challenge will be over sooner than is healthy, little demon princess,” Shango said, applying his thumb to the left of the brand Tabitha had drawn on Kelly to apply his lightning bolt shaped S on the tender flesh.

“They will not all be this easy,” Zhurong said, adding his matching fiery Z sigil on the other side. “Your assistant chose well, letting you ramp up the difficulty as you move through your targets, because this one required almost no convincing.”

“I keep meaning to ask,” Tabitha said with a mysterious smile. “How do you know that she's consented to this? I could just draw this brand on anyone, couldn't I?”

“Could you?” Shango asked, a lazy grin crossing his massive face, as he extended a dark arm out to her. “Show me.”

Tabitha hesitated, but reached over and drew her fingertip across the god's bulky forearm, only for nothing to happen. “Well, that's because you're a god, I'd assume.”

Zhurong shook his head. “You cannot mark the unwilling, little demoness, no matter how much you might wish to. You can try all you like and see if you can get a result you like, but we can assure

you, that way only disappointment lies.”

“Who am I to doubt a god, I suppose?” Tabitha laughed, glancing down at Kelly, rolling her back onto her back, reaching down to flick one of the blonde's nipples. “You know, maybe I should make you all get pierced nipples, little tags in addition to the brand.”

“Whatever you want, Mistress,” Veronica said demurely.

“You're goddamned right.” She moved over and shook Shango's hand, then Zhurong. “Thank you for being nearby. I appreciate you being on call. I can imagine that this isn't exactly how you wanted to spend your spare time.”

“On the contrary, my dear,” Zhurong said, a wry smile crossing his face. “This is more fun than we've had in ages. There were different arbitrators for the last one, and they were only needed for a week, so we are hoping you're going to give us the full game.”

“Well, old god, I'll do my best.”

“It remains to be seen if your best will be good enough, but I suspect that time itself will be the only judge of that,” Shango replied, his voice full of bass as he and Zhurong started moving towards the door. “And little demon?”

“Yes, oh Lord of Thunder?” Veronica said to him.

“Remember to cover her up before you take her out of here,” he said, pointing at Kelly's unconscious body. “Your veil magics are good, but nothing's quite *that* good.”

“Be seeing you,” Zhurong said, curling his thumb and forefinger into a ring, holding it in front of his eye before saluting with it. Then the two gods turned and walked towards the door, not bothering to open it, simply passing through it as though it wasn't even there.

“Showoffs,” Veronica grumbled.

## **Chapter Five**

Tabitha had found that the chase itself held a certain thrill to it that could not be denied, because as much as she'd enjoyed her first night in bed with Kelly and Veronica together, the spark hadn't shined quite as brightly on the second night as it had before. Of course, Tabitha realized, some of that could simply be the fear of her life being snuffed out in less than a month's time. It was fair to say the pressure of that had been creeping into her headspace every chance it got.

Still, progress had been good, and in less than a week, she'd already capped two of her needed seven. If she kept pace, she figured she would finish the challenge a few days ahead of schedule, and could enjoy relaxing a bit to savor her victory.

The time for relaxing, however, was certainly not now.

She'd awoken early again, snapped from slumber by a dream of a flaming sword being brought down on her neck, the angels passing judgment upon her very soul, severing her from the worlds both above and below. The dreams of angels had been far more vivid than anything she'd ever had over the course of her lifetime, more vivid even than what she'd assumed until recently were her waking nightmares, which led her to believe they weren't simply dreams, but visions being sent to her by the opposing team, something she considered unfair and unjust interference.

The lawyer in Tabby knew *just* what to do about it.

One of the things Roni had laid out for her in the apartment was the actual terms of the agreement, the rules of the contest spelled out for any of Lucifer's children to see. The contest, such as it was, had been going on for some time now, and Tabby was the 6<sup>th</sup> child of Lucifer to partake in the game, all of which had been won by the other side.

The competition, which had begun in 1304, happened every time Satan gave birth to a child, and when the first devilish nephilim had been born, rules of engagement had been drawn up, and an accord had been ratified between the demonic forces and the angelic ones. And because of where the first born daughter of Lucifer had made her home, the accord was written in Italian.

Thankfully, a updated and annotated translation into English had been provided, and the

translation had been agreed upon and notarized by both sides during the previous competitor's go, back in 1922. Back then, the competition had also taken place in New York City, and Tabitha found herself wondering about her brother or sister whom had died in the game for no small amount of time after she was done reviewing the accords.

Each time the game had run, new conditions had been stipulated by both sides, and Tabitha decided that if she made it through this, she would take some time and study all the other times the competition had happened in greater detail.

After the first run-through, counselors and advisers were limited to one on both sides, something which made sense, as Tabitha imagined an army of demons attempting to all push or pull one person in so many ways their head spun. After the second go around, any direct interference by either side had been expressly forbidden, with the exception of the advisers, and even they were not allowed to directly act in any fashion once the first nephilim had been claimed. After the third, it had been explicitly called out that coercion into conversion via violence would not be permitted, so Tabby found herself wondering if her brother or sister had tried something hinky like kidnapping a nephilim's friend or lover to get them to submit. But also in that third set of revisions was a clause that the angels were required to keep their distance during the game, with the exception of the single adviser that the Heavenly Host provided as their representative for the game.

It was the back two where things got interesting.

After the fourth game, it was stipulated that while the advisers could do some amount of prep work and organization, they weren't allowed to pitch or prepare the nephilim targets in any way, other than to have them relatively conveniently located within or near to a major metropolitan area. That told Tabby that whomever had tried to run the fourth game for Team Lucifer had tried to stack the deck, and have the nephilim primed and ready so that the Spawn of Lucifer could just knock them down quickly, like dominoes. Either the change had gone into effect during that game, or the prep work had backfired. Regardless of how the outcome had been reached, it'd still ended in a failure for the side of the devils.

The most recent update spelled out in great detail who was and wasn't a candidate for 'claiming,' and this section was surprisingly detailed. It required that the people Tabby brought under her wing have angelic blood at a percentage of no less than 25%, explaining that nephilim of 5-7% angelic blood were actually relatively common in the world, and had very little of that potency left in them, but those nephilim who were more recently spliced onto angelic bloodlines were more powerful, and the very nature of their being was, apparently, considered somewhat of an affront to Heaven, who frowned on (but, Tabby noted, did *not* expressly forbid) carnal relations between angelic beings and humans. By requiring a nephilim be of at least 25% angelic blood, it meant she was dealing with people only a generation or two removed from their angelic progenitor.

What Tabitha found *more* fascinating was that she, herself, was technically considered a nephilim.

Lucifer and a small handful of other fallen angels had retained enough of their angelic might that when they produced offspring, they were nephilim with angelic blood of somewhere between 30-40%, although Tabitha herself, as a direct spawn of Lucifer, clocked in at exactly the fifty-fifty mark, unless she was carrying nephilim blood in her bloodline from the *other* side, which she had to admit was possible, if somewhat unlikely. Lucifer's primacy was indisputable.

She'd been studying the terms of the accord for almost an hour and was on her second cup of coffee when both Kelly and Roni woke up to come and check on her, a yellow pad of legal paper nearly entirely covered in her notes in the matter. She'd been worried the pen had been about to die on her.

When her life was on the line, Tabitha took her homework very seriously.

"Couldn't sleep?" Roni said to her, kissing the back of her neck.

"Yes, but not due to reasons of my own doing," Tabitha sighed. "Am I entitled to arbitration, if I think there's been a violation of the accords? It's implied at here in one section, but not called out explicitly what the methods or processes are."

“Of course you are, Tabby,” Roni said to her. “It’ll be mediated by Zhurong and Shango, and Sandalphon will be representing the other side in terms of arguments. Is it important? Does this need to happen soon?”

“As soon as possible. I’m tired of not getting enough sleep. It’s impairing my judgment.”

“I could set up a late lunch today, or maybe a late brunch, if you’re willing to put up with Sandy when she’s a little bit grumpy.”

“She’s going to be *very* grumpy by the end of it regardless of when it happens, so set it up for as soon as possible,” Tabitha told her.

“I’m going to go for a run, if that’s okay?” Kelly said to them, starting to stretch, dressed in short shorts and a giant baggy t-shirt. “I need to keep my workout schedule up, even if I do have angelic blood or whatever running through my veins.”

Tabitha stood up, stretching herself, having been hunched over the papers nonstop since she woke up, wearing only an incredibly large oversized nightshirt of her own, then moved over to Kelly, reaching up to grab the woman’s hair within her fingers, yanking her face down to her own, only an inch or two between their lips, Tabby smirking a little, seeing Kelly’s trembling a little bit. “Want to try asking again?”

Kelly tried to nod, but the firm grip let her do little more than wobble her head slightly. “Yes Mistress. Sorry Mistress. May your slut go for a run, to keep her body fit and supple for you?” she whispered in quiet supplication.

Tabitha pulled Kelly’s lips to mash against hers, the athlete giving a little squeal of delight before the kiss broke. “Better. Don’t forget, or I’ll have to paddle your athletic ass until it’s cherry red next time.”

“Who’s to say that isn’t how I get my kicks, Mistress?” Kelly giggled as she slipped away, grabbing her keys and heading out the door. “See ya!”

Veronica laughed, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. “That one’s certainly a handful. Anyway, let me go call Sandy and then Shango and Zhurong. I’ll have them meet us at Jacob’s Pickles in two hours, so that Shango’s in a slightly better mood for having to be up early in the morning.”

“Eleven AM isn’t exactly what most people would call ‘*morning*,’ Roni,” Tabitha said.

“Shango isn’t exactly what I would call ‘*most people*,’ Tabby,” Veronica teased back at her. “He’s probably still asleep beneath a pile of female bodies right now.”

“A pile?”

“Shango once told me that if he had anything less than five women in bed with him, it was a waste of his time and a failure of a night,” the demoness laughed. “He preferred seven to eight, to form a perfect blanket of cool human flesh, he said.”

“Was he exaggerating or telling you his truth?”

“Shango’s never lied to me before,” Veronica admitted, her tail whipping back and forth lazily. “I don’t know why he would start now.”

“I suppose we will put that to the test today. Make your calls. Tonight, I will sleep like a rock, calm, peaceful and uninterrupted.”

Jacob’s Pickles was, at this point, practically a Manhattan institution, one of the best known brunch joints for those with voracious appetites, where the “breakfast sandwiches” were simply two pieces of bread with an insane amount of food stuffed between them. Getting a table was a challenge on the best of days, but it seemed like Veronica had contacts everywhere, and when they arrived, there was a table waiting for them, Zhurong having gotten there minutes earlier.

“Hello my dear,” the old tiny Chinese god said to her with a smile, his eyes hidden behind the heavy sunglasses, something they always seemed to do, although no one ever seemed to comment on. Tabitha found herself wondering idly if they had some sort of magic to keep people from noticing they were constantly wearing sunglasses indoors. Then again, it was New York, and stranger things happened all the time. He sat a square table designed to fit eight, two on each side. “You certainly

cannot be ready for us to confirm another entanglement, can you?"

"No no, my friend," Tabitha said, moving to sit down on the table with him, Veronica moving to join them, the two of them sitting to his right. They'd left Kelly to her workout. "But I think you'll still get enough fireworks to make the whole thing worth your time."

"You're feistier than your predecessors were, child," he pipped with quiet laughter. "It's a refreshing change of pace."

"Stars in my soup, woman!" Shango boomed as he stomped over towards the table. In stark contrast to the previous times she'd seen him, he looked slightly ashambles, his outfit not quite as smartly tucked in or tied down at it normally was, large wraparound 80s sheet style sunglasses covering nearly a third of his face. "Your cause had best be most righteous to stir me from my revels so early."

"Too much rum?" Zhurong asked him, pouring the large African god a cup of tea.

"Too *little* rum and too *much* vodka," the dark skinned giant grumbled, sitting on the same side as Zhurong. "Many of those Russian stewardesses won't drink anything else, and that liquor is insidious in its ability to creep up on you. Rum makes its presence known, like an old friend or a visiting neighbor. Vodka is a thief in the night, with a blackjack in one hand and your wallet in the other." He plucked sugar cube after sugar cube to drop into his tea, five in all, before taking the slim end of the spoon, dipping it into the cup, swirling the sugar in with the piping hot liquid. "Are we expecting the angel soon?"

"There is still two minutes to eleven, old friend."

"And I would wager she intends to make us sit and wait through both of them."

"Cease with your bellyaching, thunder god," Sandalphon said as she approached the table, looking impeccable as always, although her fashion sense also seemed out of phase with modern time, also as always. She wore a loose flowery summer dress that looked much more akin to something a flower child of the 1960s might wear, with a huge floppy wide brimmed sunhat resting atop of her head. "One minute prior to expectation. Almost as though I expected you to be cantankerous regardless as to how close to the arranged time of our engagement I inevitably arrived. Deities of dust should learn to temper their anger, much like they do their steel."

"And angels should allot more weight to the lesson of Icarus," Shango sighed. "The fire that melted his wings could burn yours."

"You're nothing but a load of noise, old god," Sandy said, moving to take her seat opposite from Tabitha and Veronica, with the two gods on her right, leaving the side opposite from them unoccupied. She placed her hands on top of the table calmly, an almost bored expression upon her face. "Hasn't anyone told you that no one is frightened of thunder?"

Shango's teeth bared in a smile more like a predator than a human. "Everyone is frightened by thunder, little cherub, and the lightning that follows. But we can continue our squabbles later, on our own time. We are here because there has been an accusation that one side has violated the accords which oversee the competition. Is this true?"

"It is, Lord Shango," Tabitha said, slipping right into lawyer mode. "I was woken early this morning by a violent dream of being beheaded by angels wielding a flaming sword. It is a nightmare I have been exposed to multiple times since this competition has begun, and it is in direct violation of the accords that were set forth at the beginning of this competition's inception. It states, quite clearly, in section three, subsection 2, paragraph 4, that neither side shall in any way directly interfere or obstruct the other side in their pursuit, and that any such direct intervention will be considered an infraction by the keepers of the accords, and shall be acted upon accordingly."

Sandy groaned, rolling her eyes. "I knew we were in for trouble when the daughter of Lucifer decided to take up the law." The angel shook her head. "I did not *directly* interfere in Tabitha's quest," she sniffed, lifting one of her hands to flick at the air dismissively. "So I've sent her a handful of dreams, visions of her inevitable outcome in being who she is and doing what she does."

"So you do not deny sending the dreams?" Zhurong asked calmly. The old god never seemed to

get worked up about much of anything, but there was a subtext of menace to his words.

“Why would I? It's not an attack. It's not a disruption. It is little more than a momentary annoyance, and if I knew that the devil's daughter would be such a wimp about it, I would've realized I needn't bothered with such distractions.” She stood up, pushing her chair back as she rose to her feet. “In fact, I believe I've tolerated this verbal assault long enough.”

“Sit down, Sandalphon,” Zhurong said quietly.

“No! This... this... slander! I will not—”

“SIT. DOWN.” Shango's voice reverberated on some sort of primal level that tapped into the angel's willpower and simply crushed it in a moment, because Sandy moved to sit back down as soon as the words left the god's mouth. “We are in charge of these proceedings down to the finest detail, and if we believe you are in violation of the accords, we serve out justice any way we see fit.”

“That includes the liquidation of the participants on either side,” Zhurong added quietly. “And we do tend to think of that word in the literal sense.”

“You... you wouldn't!” Sandy said, aghast.

“We would, and without hesitation,” Zhurong said, with no inflection.

“You have admitted to interference in the opposition's ability to play the game, and restitution must be made,” Shango said with the sort of authority that filled the air, just as the waiter arrived to take their order. “Yes, I will have the Ham Egg & Cheese Biscuit Sandwich, as well as a pineapple juice.”

The tension around the table rest of them placed their orders was thick enough that it would take a battleaxe to split it in twain, but everyone placed an order quietly and respectfully, all conversation of treaties and accords waiting until the waiter had left the table.

“It's a minor interference *at best*, arbitrators,” Sandy sniffed, as if the entire conversation was still mostly beneath her, but her entire demeanor regarding the conversation had changed at Zhurong's implied threat, as if the angel had been convinced up until that moment that she could get away with anything, but now realized the two old gods weren't fucking around, and that ripping the wings off an angel, for them, would take exactly as much effort as flicking a fly from the table. Taunting them when they had seemed unwilling to engage in the process had come easy, but now the gods felt their authority had been challenged, and they were willing to make a point of Sandalphon, should it come to that. That had shaken the angel, Tabitha could see, and she was walking on eggshells not to anger them further. “So she's lost an hour or two of sleep. I fail to see how this constitutes as anything more than... what was that term Nixon used? Ah yes, ratfucking.”

“Interference, little angel, is interference,” Zhurong stated quietly.

“And interference is an infraction,” Shango added.

“Fine,” Sandy replied, rolling her eyes. “What's my punishment to be? A slap on the wrists? A stern scolding from the teachers?”

“Oh no, little angel, we will need to make it something more than that, especially if you have been engaging in such behavior for some time now,” the tiny Chinese god said, reaching one wizened hand over to clamp his fingertips around her wrist like a claw, as Tabitha could see hints of flames dancing around the very edges of the old god's glasses, like it was bubbling out of him uncontained, the glasses doing their best to shield it from the world, but only barely holding on. “We will sit and enjoy breakfast, but in an hour's time, your senses are going to engulfed by fire. Not just your sight, but the sounds, the smells, the feeling of it upon your flesh – you will be only able to perceive everything and anything as flames for an entire day. You will be unable to eat, drink or rest, and will certainly be unable to cause any more disruptions to the game during that time, as the balance is restored.”

“This... this is... this is *unfair*,” Sandy pleaded, her eyes softening considerably.

“No, arrogant little angel,” Shango said, grabbing his napkin, expanding it out over his lap.

“This is proper justice, something you and the rest of your angelic chorus seem to forget about any time it suits you and your interests. Judgment has been handed out, and a decision has been reached. Let us



eat with the matter settled.”

Tabitha was riding a wave of high as they headed back to the apartment after brunch, because it meant that despite Sandalphon's arrogance and petty attitude, there was someone to appeal to if the rules weren't being followed. The game still felt difficult, but no longer quite as unassailable as it once did. And she knew that this night, she would have an entirely peaceful night's rest, something she would desperately need.

But she needed to decide upon her next target. Even if she didn't approach her today, knowing who was next, so she could start constructing her approach in her head was for the best. Once back at the apartment, they began looking through the list of possible targets that Roni had gathered for her. There was quite the variety of options, and each came with their own collection of appeals and challenges, something that was making it very difficult for Tabitha to pick the next vector of approach.

“I'm considering these two, Roni,” Tabby said, tapping two pictures, one with her pinky and one with her index finger. “They're so radically different, but if your research is to be believed, the two of them are linked, married even. I mean, one's an adrenaline junkie doctor and the other is a local mob boss, so I can sort of see how the links were formed, but it still seems like they're riding the line of getting themselves into all sorts of hot water without us even arriving.”

The doctor, Priya Bhatt, didn't look at all how Tabitha might have an ER doctor to look. An Indian-American woman with long bleached blonde hair, the photo she was in, she was wearing leather pants, a Lynyrd Skynyrd muscle t-shirt on beneath a bulky leather jacket, with a cigarette on her lips, and a spiked leather collar around her neck. The stud through the nose didn't come as much of a surprise, but the fact that she was straddling a Suzuki DualSport DR-Z400 motorcycle certainly did. Between the cigarette and the motorcycle, everything about the woman screamed 'organ donor at 30,' although Tabitha had to allot for the fact that the woman's nephilim heritage would make her far more resilient to damage. She wondered if that might even be her way in, considering that it would be hard to feel like you were risking anything if you couldn't ever lose.

By contrast, the mob boss, Gabriela, looked incredibly buttoned up. A Latinx woman who almost seemed to be leaning into the 1940s noir look, onyx black hair cut short, barely reaching her collarbone, dressed in a dark suit, although she did have on a skirt that ended above her knees, and sheer black stockings that Tabitha would wager just about anything were held up by a garter belt that also included a little .22 Derringer attached to them. On paper, Gabriela Nuñez seemed like just another real estate mogul in the greater NYC area, but turn over any rock the woman owned and a thousand cockroaches seemed to come scurrying out.

Direct ownership was difficult to prove, but if Veronica's research was to be believed, Gabriela owned at least a dozen bars, three or four strip clubs and a dozen laundromats, several of which had been noted, although never officially linked, to all sorts of crimes like drugs and sex work.

Gabriela also wasn't one to sit on her laurels either, apparently, as one of her rivals, a man named Max Berenstein, had recently turned up dead, stabbed to death in a mugging gone wrong on his walk home, although the notes in the margins of the police report made it clear they weren't taking up too much time looking for the man's killer. Right after Max's death, Gabriela's portfolio had 'acquired' several of Max's businesses for pennies on the dollar.

“I wouldn't dare to question your decisions, Tabby, but I might suggest waiting for at least one or two more acquisitions before attempting either of these two,” the demoness said. “They are within your reach, but they will be a challenge, even after you've gotten a bit more of the hang of it.”

“You think I'm not ready for them yet?” Tabby asked, arching one of her finely plucked eyebrows at her first acquisition.

“I think you would be *more* ready if you took one or two of the others before them,” Veronica replied diplomatically. “The camgirl/streamer, perhaps, or maybe the musician.”

“Mmmm... as loathe as I am to do another formal event so soon after our last one, the musician does have a certain allure to her,” Tabitha said, taking up the picture of the woman, holding it up before

her. "Charlie Carmichael, daughter of a British father and a Nigerian mother. Raised in only the most upper crust parts of England, and yet, seems well-liked by just about everyone. A musical prodigy, picking up the violin at age five, and currently the First Violin at the NY Symphony Orchestra, the youngest ever to hold that position, and both the first woman and first person of color to do that. And yet, despite all her accolades, you can't seem to find a single person who has an unkind thing to say about her."

"Yes Mistress," Veronica agreed. "The closest anyone would come to disparaging her was to that she regularly overcrowded her schedule, and so that she would often have to move from one thing to another very quickly, but always made exceptional apologies for how busy her life kept her."

"Under previous relationships, I see only a couple of male names here, Roni," Tabitha said, narrowing her eyes suspiciously. "I know I have great powers at my disposal, but completely rewriting someone's sexual orientation is probably still beyond them."

"She won't take a complete rewiring, Tabby, but just a little bend," Roni replied. "There's hints of her bisexuality around the fringes of things like her internet searches and who she looks at in a room. I think she simply hasn't *had* the pleasure of a woman's company yet. Maybe some combination of her parents expectations and the stiff upper lip English crowds. I know they like to think of themselves as very progressive, but lesbianism is still more frowned upon than two gay men on that side of the pond. I suppose the British do have a long history of quietly accepting gay men."

"*This*," she said, tapping a single line on the report that Veronica had written up for her, "strikes me as rather surprising. Most women lean *away* from this sort of thing, instead of towards it."

The demoness shrugged. "It's the most commonly searched for thing by her on all the porn sites, so I would imagine it's going to be part of your encounter with her. I wouldn't have thought you the type to be intimidated by that, Mistress," she teased.

"And I'm not," Tabitha replied. "Simply surprised. How soon can you arrange a meeting between myself and Miss Carmichael?"

"There is a performance of the Philharmonic tomorrow night celebrating the works of David Axelrod," Veronica answered. "The three of us already have tickets, and are signed up for a meet-and-greet after the event itself."

"You think Kelly will enjoy going to the symphony?" Tabitha asked, tilting her head to one side.

"I think you can *make* her enjoy going to the symphony, Mistress."

"I suppose that I can."

That night, free of angelic distractions, Tabitha slept, blissfully and wonderfully uninterrupted, getting a full eight hours of sleep with Veronica pressed against one of her sides, and Kelly nuzzled up against the other.

The next evening, the trio found themselves surrounded by high society as they attended the NY Philharmonic, each of them wearing a dress that cost several thousand dollars, and more than a couple of paparazzi wanting to photograph Kelly in her ballgown, out for a night on the town, although Kelly made sure to always pose and stand to obscure Tabitha and Veronica, at Tabitha's insistence.

Veronica had gotten them their own private box, and the view from there was astonishing, as Tabby could get a good long look at Charlie Carmichael, dressed in a tight form-fitting black dress that might have looked plain and simple on a less curvaceous woman, but Charlie had been quite gifted in the bust department, and as such, the dark spaces of the dress only sought to draw eyes inwards, like a black hole, sucking in all the light. Her black hair was done up in a bun, her skin the color of aged wood, much like Tabby's was.

She was surrounded by other musicians, so it was difficult to get too close a look at her, but Tabby knew that soon enough, they would be getting very close indeed.

Her performance was excellent, and the woman had complete mastery of her instrument, getting it to soar and dip along the lines of David Axelrod's magnificent pieces, particularly the swing and sway of "Holy Thursday," a jazz song that Tabitha hadn't been familiar with before but she had

instantly fallen in love with.

The song felt more like New York City than anything she'd ever heard in her entire life, busy and bustling without constantly screaming for attention, a majestic beauty painting over an undercurrent of menace and danger.

Tabitha had chosen a glamorous red ballgown, but one that still left her plenty of mobility and freedom, and sensible shoes. Veronica, by contrast, was wearing a black, slinky little number, as well as heels that added a good five inches to the demoness's height. Tabby noted the ease with which Veronica seemed to move in them, as if she had centuries of practice. Perhaps she did. Kelly's dress was a deep oceanic blue, hanging just below her knees, and like Tabitha, she had also opted for more sensible shoes. The dress itself had been something of a challenge, as Kelly had spent a good ten minutes complaining that she wasn't going to be able to figure out how to pee in it, should she need to.

The standing ovation for the Philharmonic lasted a good four or five minutes, and when it was all said and done, an usher came to escort them down to the arranged area backstage for the meet and greet, one which Tabby was sure Charlie Carmichael was never going to forget.

## **Chapter Six**

There was something incredibly lush about the entire surroundings as they descended from the main auditorium into the belly of the building that held the backstage meet and greet. The entire walk felt like being in the long tracking shot in Martin Scorsese's "Goodfellas," with such a wild mixture of people all around them. They were by far the only people being brought back for the meet and greet, and Tabby was certain she could see politicians, movie stars and athletes in the minor crowd around them. A few people had taken note of Kelly, although she'd done her best to be polite but also dismissive, as if she just wanted to enjoy her evening like anyone else, and while one fan had taken a bit more discouragement than the rest, eventually everyone had gotten the hint and let them be.

No matter how lush and decadent a performance may seem, the very best backstage areas just about anywhere were rarely more than a step above a fifth grade cafeteria, with tables and chairs sort of scattered haphazardly around the space, many of them simple wire bends with only the barest of cushions on top of them. There were a few long flimsy tables with thin tablecloths thrown over them, stapled to the tops, and a meager selection of crackers, cheeses and meats, but it was clear the food was not meant to be the draw. It never was for events like this. No, the draw was in the people getting a chance to hobnob with performers whose work they'd greatly enjoyed.

It would have been easy for Tabby, Roni and Kelly to go up to Charlie Carmichael early on in the meet and greet, but that would've just painted them as overly eager, something Tabby was determined not to let herself be categorized as. Besides, not rushing meant Tabby could have a chance to observe Charlie in a social setting before deciding to make her move, and within just a few minutes, she was very glad she'd chosen the wait and see approach.

Unlike many of the other performers, Charlie had an immediate sense of joy to her. Many of the performers would immediately launch into a diatribe about how woefully misunderstood they were as an artist, or how confining it was to be performing a piece with no room for individualism or personal expression, wanting to focus on how, given the chance, they could do so much more than the options they were being afforded.

Charlie was as far on the other side of the spectrum from those grumps as she could get. She was humble, far more humble than any performer Tabby had ever met before. She constantly espoused how thankful she was just for the opportunity to perform with such talented musicians. She spoke highly about how much she enjoyed performing, and how this show in particular introduced her to a composer she wasn't familiar with before they had started rehearsals, but that she had come to pick up his entire catalog, and how it had set her down a path she'd never even imagined getting into, with soul-funk-jazz being her new favorite thing.

There were no hints of reservation, no whiffs of critique for her fellow performers or the

conductor himself. In fact, the smile on Charlie's face didn't fade at all over the course of the evening, even in the face of some people trying to get her to complain about something. She focused on the happier aspects of conversation.

Her improved senses let Tabitha listen in on a number of the other conversations around the room, and it seemed like shit talking was the top priority for most of the musicians, with relentless self-promotion coming in a close second. Many of the musicians were happy enough to dunk on other members of the orchestra, the composer, the host of the party or even the city itself. They were all happy to be complaining about something, as if it was the only sort of conversation that came to them naturally, and if they weren't complaining, they didn't really have much else in the way to talk about.

But not in the entire time while they were slowly circling in on Charlie did Tabby once overhear her talking poorly of anyone. She was posh and erudite, well-spoken and generally happy to talk about whatever the people who'd just approached her were interested in, whether it be discussing her background or how it felt to be breaking so many glass ceilings all at once. And despite all the praise being thrust upon her, she did her best to redistribute that praise to those around her, to make sure that people knew she was simply one person in a massive team effort.

This wasn't a one-off for Charlie either, Tabitha could overhear. She'd been a regular for many of the charities around the NYC circuit, spending time feeding the homeless at soup kitchens, delivering toys to orphaned children and even putting in manual labor hours building homes with Habitat For Humanity.

"We're *certain* this woman's a nephilim, Roni?" Tabitha asked her assistant, scowling over a delicious scampi appetizer that she'd plucked off a shelf. "And you're *sure* that bit of information about her predilections is correct?"

If looks could kill, Veronica's glare back would've slain hundreds. "You may question my tastes, ma'am, or my preferences or even my sense of style, but never, *ever* question the accuracy of my research. If I learned one lesson true and clear from your mother, if you intend to aim at the top, you had better not miss, because you only get one shot, and nobody's ever going to give you time to reload. Yes, my information is accurate."

"And she's *never* been with a woman before?"

"She had a threeway once with one of her college roommates and her roommate's boyfriend when they were both pretty drunk, just so she could say she'd had some wild college times, but no, she's too focused on the other thing," Veronica replied.

"Women can handle that also," Tabitha said with a mischievous grin. "In fact, I'm looking forward to hearing from her mouth why she's so particularly in to that one aspect."

"Well, the party is starting to wind down a little, Mistress, so if we don't make our approach soon, we may just miss her. It sounds like she's starting to consider making her exit for the night."

"Then let's not allow her to pass without making time for us, Roni," Tabitha said, as the three women began moving in for the kill on their prey.

Charlie's flush bust was even more impressive up close, and it was clear the top portion of the dress was straining a bit against those lush curves, and the fabric was doing its best to try and hold it all together. Tabitha could even see the hint of Charlie's nipples straining against the dress.

"Your performance was masterful, Miss Carmichael," Tabby said to her as the three of them moved to cut off a number of the other people from the conversation, the advantage of having two women operating as bouncers, pushing the other people away from them. It didn't take too much effort, as it seemed like the remaining people were gravitating towards conductor, who had a long lineage. It was the perfect time, as the party was dwindling quickly, and the number of people in the area was getting sparse. "I'm not all that familiar with the composer, but I have to admit, it did have a certain sort of panache to it. He was something of a big deal in the 70s, but his star dwindled a bit over the years. I understand he had something of resurgence late in his life after some of his works were sampled by hip hop artists."

“Absolutely,” Charlie responded with a genuine smile. “I didn't realize until after I'd started digging into his portfolio that I'd grown up hearing some of his music sampled by Dr. Dre, among other people. It was a delight mixing the new school with the old school. You are...?”

“Tabitha St. Cloud. I'm an attorney with Ariton, Oriens & Associates. We're a private services firm that handles anything our clients need.”

Charlie's smile widened a little bit. “That doesn't sound at *all* ominous, does it, love? Dare I even ask you to delve further into what sort of services those are?”

“Oh, you know,” Veronica said with a grin. “Lawsuits, defense motions, blackmail, assassinations, whatever our clients find themselves in the need of. We don't judge their needs, simply fill them.”

“Even *more* sinister sounding.”

“That's just how lawyers like to play it,” Kelly laughed. “They figure the less they tell you, the more you'll insinuate on your own *for* them, and your imagination does all the fucking work of scaring you shitless.”

“Are you a regular patron of the Philharmonic, Miss St. Cloud?” Charlie asked her, that posh British lilt just ever so enticing.

“Not as often as I'd like, but we made a special effort to come and see you,” Tabby said, finally settling on how she wanted to make her approach to this woman. “Because you're something special and I'd like to show you just *how* special.”

Charlie looked a little cautious, as Tabby had expected she would. “Now, I'm *sure* I don't have any idea of what you're talking about...”

“May I see your hand, please? Just for a moment. I promise not to harm you in any way, shape or form, and I'm a woman of my word,” Tabby said with a sultry smile.

She could see Charlie considering her options for a moment, knowing that her hands were the most valuable asset she had, but she the feeling of security surrounded by the people she worked had whittled down but were still plentiful enough that she didn't hesitate for too long before she reached a hand out to Tabby.

Tabby took the woman's hand in her own, and she closed her fingertips around Charlie's darker skin, and took a deep breath. “You're used to looking at the world one way. Let me show you another. Close your eyes, count to ten, take a deep breath and then open your eyes again. What you'll see is going to surprise you, I promise you that.”

Charlie did as instructed and while she did, Tabitha used her new abilities to peel the veil off her eyes. It was something that Tabby knew was going to shock the woman, so she didn't let go of her hand, because she was expecting Charlie to gasp.

When the musician opened her eyes, not a single sound escaped her mouth because she was holding her breath. For the first time, she could see the the world around her as it truly was, and her eyes could not seem to peel away from Veronica, who was whipping her tail in front of her for dramatic effect, that devil's smile on her lips widening just a little bit.

“Is that...” were the first words to escape Charlie's mouth.

“It is,” Tabitha answered, not letting either of her girls get a word in edgewise. “But that's not all. Look at my eyes, at my partner's Kelly's eyes... then, take a look at your own in this mirror...” Tabitha held up a little make up compact mirror for Charlie to look at herself in, and saw the woman's eyes widen a little when she noticed the golden glow coming from the edges of her gaze.

“What... what *am* I?”

“Perhaps we should move our conversation to somewhere a bit more private instead of staying here in the middle of everyone,” Tabitha said politely.

“What the hell is *that*?” Charlie whispered, pointing behind Veronica's shoulder, off in the distance, which made Tabitha and Veronica turn to look.

On the wall, near the high ceiling, there was a large six-legged rocky creature slowly moving

across the brickwork. It looked vaguely spiderish (except for the incorrect number of legs) although there was also a greenish sea foam colored symbol on the center of its back, something strange and formidable looking.

"I... have no idea what that is," Tabitha admitted, having completely missed the creature the entire time she'd been waiting to introduce herself to Charlie. "Roni?"

"It's a muse's guardian," Veronica said after considering the creature for a long moment. "I imagine one of the muses regularly finds herself lingering around the Philharmonic, and decided she wanted to have a bit of protection strolling around the place."

"There's no such thing as an *actual* muse," Charlie said, still staring at the creature as it moved in a slow pattern around the lip where the ceiling met the wall, as if making sure there weren't any intruders or threats. "...Is there?"

"Did you believe in devils sixty seconds ago?" Tabitha said with a sultry grace.

"Uh, bollocks," Charlie muttered. "I suppose not."

"Then maybe let's not go passing judgment on any other mystical beings or creatures for the time being," Tabitha shrugged. "Shall we?"

"Where are you going to take me?"

"To my lair, to do insidious and wicked things with you," Tabitha freely admitted.

"Why me?"

"Because my dear, you're a nephilim. I'll tell you more along the way."

One of the things Tabitha had to admit was that the apartment she'd commandeered from Veronica was easily accessible and quick to reach from most parts of the city without too much effort, so they barely had time to talk in the back of the limo before they were arriving at the building, taking a long, slow elevator ride up to the apartment.

As soon as they reached Tabby's new home, Charlie laid in with the questions. "So what the hell is a nephilim?" she said, making a beeline for Veronica's very well-stocked bar, pouring herself a glass of what looked like equal parts vodka and orange juice. "Am I a demon?"

"Demon is such a... gauche term," Tabitha said with a chuckle, heading over to pour herself a generous glass of lovely scotch whiskey. "Demons are just angels who had a disagreement with management at one point, so the difference between angelic blood and demonic blood is... arbitrary, at best. Virtually non-existent, if others are to be believed. But yes, you could argue that you're part demon, or part angel, or both. But you're also part human. Nephilim describes those with human blood and either angelic or demonic blood intermingled. You're generally capable of great things. The genetic boost lets you accomplish incredibly difficult tasks with ease."

"Are you saying my skills are not my own?" Charlie said, with possibly the first frown Tabitha had seen upon the woman's face.

"Not at all," Veronica replied, kicking off her heels as Kelly headed out of the room and down the hall to her own bedroom. The athlete had asked if Tabitha wanted her around for Charlie's welcoming party, but Tabby had insisted this time it was best to keep it light and simple. "It just means things will come more naturally to you, and that you'll be capable of greater extremes than most people will be. The training, the discipline needed to utilize such skills? That'll all require the same thing it does for anyone else – hard work and practice."

"I'm sure you've got a reason to be showing me all this," Charlie said to Tabitha, the smile returning once more. "I can only imagine if something like this is hidden from the world, then a great deal of effort has gone into ensuring it stays hidden."

"I'm gathering a little consortium," Tabitha said with a smile, slipping out of her own shoes. "People of like-minded interests, where nephilim can look after one another. Under my oversight, naturally, but I like to think I offer very compelling benefits."

"Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?" Charlie asked, a touch of nervousness to her voice, her blinding confidence wavering just a wobble.

“Sexual benefits,” Tabby replied, licking her lips. “For both you and I.”

“I... I've never been with a woman before.”

“Would you like to?” Tabby asked invitingly. “I won't judge you about your sexual predilections, unlike most men, and you'll find I'm... quite gifted.”

Charlie inhaled a slow breath, her fingers curling into tiny fists before she forced them to relax, debating about leaping over this cliff headfirst or not before seeming to make her mind up. “What'll it cost me? Am I going to have to give up the symphony? Because I don't think I can do that...”

“No no, my dear,” Tabitha said, flitting her hand through the air. “You'll simply belong to me first and foremost. I won't make you sign a contract in blood. I won't come claiming your soul after your eventual demise. But while you walk this earth, you put me above and before all others, your own personal alpha and omega. In return, I'll give you a support group of other nephilim who will understand your plight, whom you can talk with and play with, as long as I've given permission, of course. You'll be given a few minor markings, showing that you belong to me, but both will be respectful and easy to conceal among polite company. But that's it. A trivial thing in exchange for a lifetime of bliss and love.”

Charlie paused, considering her options, letting the idea roll around inside of her head for a moment before turning her gaze back onto Tabitha. “Alright, you first.”

Tabitha might have thought it presumptuous, but the willingness to step forward and embrace it felt an open invitation, and an opportunity for Tabitha to continue her pitch, so she lifted her left arm and reached over with her right to drag down the concealed zipper, slowly lowering it to let the dress itself loosen up before falling to the floor. She hadn't bothered to put on anything underneath – it had only seemed like a waste of time.

Her naked form began approaching Charlie as the darker skinned woman held her breath a little, removing her own dress to reveal a very utilitarian bra and panty set, shaded in dark lavender. Tabitha's skin was a light shade of brown, like hot cocoa with a good amount of whipped cream mixed into it, while Charlie's skin was definitely a few shades darker, like coffee with only a splash of milk in it.

Charlie grinned a little bit as Tabitha got close, but Charlie only moved to push the woman down into a couch, letting her lift one leg up and over an arm of the chair as Charlie dropped down to her knees and began to flick her tongue along the top of Tabitha's slit while slowly pushing two slender fingers inside of the woman's cunt.

Tabby moaned a little bit, licking her lips with a smile as she leaned her head back. “For a woman who's not been with another woman before, you certainly know your way around a twat.”

“Mmm...” Charlie said with a little giggle. “It's just like playing with myself, but with a better angle for looking. Now take a deep breath. If you've not done this before, it'll feel a little strange, but you'll learn to love it.”

Tabitha pushed a large section of her mane out of her face before looking down, gasping a little as she felt one of the musician's fingers poking at her backdoor, her anus puckering just a little in response before she did her best to force her body to relax, allowing Charlie's finger to invade her rectum, making Tabitha shudder a bit at the unexpected pleasure of it.

“I thought this was purely a male fascination,” Tabby groaned, her teeth catching her bottom lip in a pout.

“It's an area of your body full of nerves that so rarely get treated to sensations,” Charlie said, almost lecturing. “Which is why it's going to feel so wild when I do this.”

Tabitha almost wanted to look down, but decided to not spoil the surprise, feeling Charlie's finger slipping out before an odd sensation tickled around the edge of her asshole, sending a harsh shiver up her spine as she realized Charlie was running her tongue against the clenched hole, feeling it squeeze around the very tip of her tongue as she tried to push it inside of Tabitha's ass.

Veronica had simply been watching at this point, but moved over to kneel on the couch next to Tabby, leaning down to offer what she clearly intended to be a soft kiss, but Tabitha had other ideas in

mind, grabbing a fistful of hair in her slender fingers, causing Veronica to yelp a little in startled surprise, but the sound of moans from her lips immediately blended together with Tabitha's, the two lips locked and tongue tangled as Charlie continued to introduce Tabitha to these new sensations. As Charlie's fingers pressed against the walls of Tabby's pussy, she found herself galloping towards an orgasm so intense, it had overtaken her before she had even known it was approaching, the moment on top of her before she could even react, simply embracing the sensations of it, a loud and primal squeal of pleasure escaping her lips into Veronica's mouth, Tabitha doing her best to finger the demoness, having basically yanked her panties aside so she could shove three fingers into Roni, two inside the demon's cunt and one inside of her ass, as if wanting to involve her in this new discovery.

As soon as Tabby could breathe again, she pulled Charlie's head away from between her legs and yanked her up on top of her belly, the three women tangled up in one giant mess as Tabby pressed her lips hard against Charlie's, making the darker woman squeak a little in surprise. The three women let their hands explore all over each other, Tabby reaching behind Charlie to pop open the clasp on her bralette, making it fall effortlessly onto the couch, exposing dark thick stiff nipples, one of which was already pierced with a graceful silver barbell through it, a surprise to Tabby, who'd considered the musician far too prim and proper for such a thing.

Tabitha extricated herself from the tangle of bodies before making her way over to a series of drawers on an island in one corner of the room, pulling the drawer open before grabbing a strap on and harness from it, sliding it into place as she looked over and saw Veronica and Charlie making out, Veronica moving to position Charlie's hips over the arm of the couch, as Roni moved up onto her knees.

Once Tabby had the strapon fastened securely in place, she grabbed a tube of clear lube from the drawer and drizzled it heavily over the rubber phallus, reaching down to give it a few strokes, smearing it all over the surface of it, smiling a little as the sensation made the base of it press down on her own clit in a rather delightful fashion. She also grabbed a knife from the top of the counter, as she headed over towards Charlie, reaching down to cut off the woman's panties with two quick lifts of the knife, casting the blade aside immediately after only to take the tube and glaze the woman's cleft with some of the clear Astroglide, making sure that her sphincter was drenched with the liquid as Tabby moved to press the artificial cock against Charlie's asshole and then shoved on forward just as Veronica's lips pressed hard against Charlie's, so the whorish moan was squelched but not entirely muffled, a wash of goosebumps racing up Charlie from the small of her back to her neck.

"God, fuck yes," Charlie hoarsely said, her lips still somewhat against Veronica's so the words weren't entirely clear. "Go on. Hammer my ass. Fucking give it to me."

Tabitha tilted her head a little with a curious smile. She'd intended to take it easy, but if the musician wanted it hard, she didn't want to disappoint, so her hands grabbed onto Charlie's hips and held her solidly in place as Tabitha forced that fake dick deep into Charlie's ass, making those plump asscheeks jiggle and ripple when she smacked into them with her hips, Charlie's head tilting back.

Tabby could only imagine how much the woman's hefty tits must've bounced when she'd been smacked into by Tabby's thrust, but decided to do so again, drawing back, sliding almost all of the prosthetic out before jabbing it back deep inside of her once more, making Charlie squeal in delight. Charlie even bent one leg at the knee backwards, calf folded up against thigh, as she wheezed and panted for breath.

The pace was originally going to be slow, but any time Tabitha tried to ease off on the tempo, Charlie did her best to back her ass up harder onto the rubber strapon, forcing the fake cock back into her guts once more, which made Tabby's grin widen.

Once it became clear that Charlie wasn't going to back down, Tabby decided to set the pace as a dance number rather than a waltz, with a quick beat and a fast rhythm without rest or pause, and before she knew it, Tabby could feel a splatter of clear liquid jetting from Charlie's pussy against Tabby's calves and thighs as she started to squirt, howling out in shrieks of orgasm that would've set her



neighbors afraid if Roni hadn't soundproofed the walls. It wasn't much longer after that that the stimulation of the base of the strapon against her own clit set off an orgasm in her own body, just as it seemed like Charlie was in the throes of a second.

Once all three women were mostly holding still, Tabitha slowly slipped the rubber dildo out of Charlie's ass, the musician giving a little whimper as she felt it leave her body, although there might have been the tiniest undercurrent of relief hidden among the harmonics.

"Now I have to ask yourself, will you give yourself over to me?" Tabitha said, smoothing her hand along Charlie's back.

"If I can have a lifetime of that level of pleasure? Fuck yes. I will give you my everything."

"This will sting a little, but it will seal our compact," Tabitha said, focusing on her thumb, bringing a bit of magical heat to that digit.

"What's a little pain?"

Tabitha considered putting it in the small of Charlie's back, just as she had with Roni and Kelly, but decided a little a variation would be for the best and moved to Charlie's hip, just below the top of the hip bone, and brought her thumb down, drawing that sTc logo she'd applied to her two other captures, Charlie hissing a bit at the pain, although it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. "Now go and put some robes on, dears, and Roni, summon the adjudicators, will you? I need to get another win chalked up in my column as soon as possible."

"Adjudicators?" Charlie asked in confusion.

"A couple of old gods are going to come take a look at that brand and add their own tiny markings of it," Tabitha said. "I'll explain the whole game to you later, but it's a marker of completion, a sign that we belong together."

"Mmm," Charlie giggled, finally moving to stand up, although her stance was a little unstable. "You know you're going to have to take a turn on the receiving end of that sooner or later, don't you? And hopefully you'll let me be the one wearing it."

"I'd often considered anal to be a male fascination," Tabitha said, sliding out of the harness, dropping it casually in the sink so it could be washed and cleaned before being put away. "But I must confess, you did seem to enjoy it very much indeed."

"Men get things right now and then," Charlie said. She started to walk with Veronica before pausing, stopping to look back, tilting her head. "You... you were kidding when you said a couple of old gods were coming up to meet us... right?"

"You saw the muses's guardian with your own two eyes," Tabitha chuckled. "What the hell do you think?"

## **Chapter Seven**

Of all the places that Tabitha had thought this journey was going to take her, where she currently found herself wasn't even the top one hundred of what she considered most likely. And the location and the inhabitants were in such stark contrast to one another that it was giving her a bit of cognitive dissonance.

The building itself was one she'd been in multiple times, because it was one of the most classic of New York City venues – Madison Square Garden. It was where many a concert and sporting event had been held for decades, but this? This was not the kind of sporting event that Tabitha had expected to find herself at.

There were team jerseys but not for basketball. There were fans in elaborate getups but not for hockey. The roar of the crowd would swell and fade but not for football. Matches were less than an hour long. Teams were only five people strong, with a coach and occasionally a stand-in, just in case someone was ill. And the entire tournament, which had just started yesterday, would be done sometime in the early evening of the upcoming Sunday. At the end of it, close to thirty million dollars' worth of prize money would be awarded.

It was all for some computer game called Immortal Guardians of Avalon.

“Tell me again what kind of game this is?” Tabitha asked Veronica, the two of them having decided to come to the arena on their own, leaving Kelly and Charlie at home.

“It’s called a MOBA, or multiuser online battle arena,” Roni told her. “Basically, the map is divided up into three main lanes, each of which has a steady stream of computer controlled units called creeps that will continually move towards the other team’s sanctum. Each player controls a single hero unit with a handful of abilities. They move around the map, trying to farm the enemy creeps as well as the enemy heroes, while buying better gear and levelling up. Eventually, one side is able to break through the other team’s defenses and destroy the sanctum, which means they win.”

“You seem like you know quite a bit about this game, Roni,” Tabitha said with a soft chortle. “Fangirl much?”

“I came across it, well the entire genre actually, when I was doing research on all the possible nephilim within the greater New York area, and once I started watching the games, well, I can understand how some people get hooked on sports and the like. You start to develop a loyalty to particular players or teams, and sometimes I’ll just put on streams of the game on Twitch when I’m working on something I can afford to be distracted from now and again.”

“And the nephilim we’re looking for, she’s a player, is she?”

“Emily? She used to be, but not anymore,” Roni said. “Emily Barber started as a streamer about six years ago, and then after she and the rest of her team – Team Question – finished second at Planetary Showdown three years ago, she decided she wanted to go down a different path. She wanted to think bigger, wanted to do more, and felt like she was limiting herself by just being a player.”

“So she’s a coach,” Tabby said.

“Still thinking too small. Two years ago, she founded her own e-sports organization, Queens of Ragetown,” Roni said as the two of them moved over to an escalator, taking it up a few levels. “She’s got about fifty players signed to her now, and they have teams in most of the major esports games – Avalon, Dota, League, Overwatch, Valorant, Smite, you name it.”

“You made some of those games up, right?” Tabitha asked, causing Roni to giggle. “And there’s money to be made here?”

“Loads. The game developers love these tournaments because it promotes the game itself, and many of these tournaments support their prize pool by having in-game cosmetics, team pennants, voice lines that you can play when you’re playing on your own or even trading cards with players pictures and stats on them. In addition to prizes, the esports teams and organizations take on sponsors, people who pay to have their company’s logo displayed on the players jerseys, and for the players to be using their products.”

“What kind of sponsors?”

“Mostly computer peripheral companies, but there’s been some headway made into the market by energy drink companies, snack food companies, apparel and even some crypto currency exchanges. We’re even starting to see sponsorships from companies like Audi, Nike and Capitol One.”

“But it’s still sort of a niche thing, isn’t it?”

“With thirty plus million viewers just here in the states, and an estimated half a billion viewers across the globe, esports is probably too big to be called ‘niche’ anymore,” Roni said as the escalator reached a platform for them to step off onto. “There’s something like five billion dollars in the ecosystem right now, and they have to worry about things like player images, doping scandals and immigration visas.”

“How big is Queens of Ragetown?”

“Not as big as the titans of the industry, organizations like Team Liquid or Evil Geniuses, but most of those orgs have several owners, while Queens of Ragetown is completely owned by our girl. In addition to that, Queens of Ragetown has made a very concerted effort to house and train mostly female players, making them something of an oddity in the esports world.”

“Not a lot of women playing videogames?”

“It’s not that there isn’t interest, but there’s still something of a glass ceiling that the ladies are trying to break down, make the whole thing feel less like a sausage fest. Now, somewhere between eight and ten percent of professional gamers are women, which is something like a seventy-five percent increase in just a handful of years. And a lot of women are put off by the sort of rampant toxic sexism that a portion of the gaming community refuses to let go of.”

Tabitha glanced over as a young woman dressed in a particular skimpy costume bounded by, heading towards her seat somewhere on the second floor. The outfit couldn’t have been much more than three or four large patches of cloth held together by some string. The cloth was made to look like seaweed, and just strategically covered bits on the woman keeping her from being exposed. “I can’t possibly imagine why.”

“That’s somebody cosplaying as the Lady of the Lake. Most of the female characters aren’t dressed quite so scandalously, but I suppose there’s got to be at least a couple of cheesecake outfits for people to make fan fiction about.”

“And the Lady of the Lake drew the short straw, huh?”

“Well,” Roni said with a smile. “Merlin sure as hell wasn’t going to put Morgana La Fay in that kind of outfit or she’d have burned the company down.”

Tabitha started to laugh before looking over at Veronica, the expression on her face quite serious. “Wait, are you telling me that Merlin, the *real* ancient Merlin, owns a game company that made a video game based on Arthurian mythos?”

“I think he thinks it’s funny, playing into the stereotypes of what people expected.”

“And Morgana La Fay’s still around?”

“Yeah, she’s something of a badass magician that even the angels and devils don’t like to mess with. Same’s true for Merlin, truth be told. If the two of them ever united behind an idea, Hells help us all, because I imagine they’d be unstoppable. Thankfully, they’re both flightier than hummingbirds.”

“Who the hell else from the Round Table’s still around?”

“Almost nobody else,” Roni said, waving her hand. “And I wouldn’t worry about it. You’re very unlikely to run into any of them any time soon. Other than Merlin and Morgana, they mostly prefer to hang out in Europe, and you’re going to be pretty NYC focused, at least for the rest of the challenge. After that, though, it’s anybody’s game.”

They walked into one of the VIP boxes, Roni typing a six digit code into the door code lock to let them in. “We have our own VIP box here at the Garden?” Tabitha asked as the door closed shut behind them.

“AOA does,” Roni replied as they moved through the private suite. Roni must have called ahead, Tabby thought, because there were a number of appetizers set out for them, should they want to nosh on them, more food than the two of them needed. The inside of the suite had a number of televisions on the wall and there was a stocked bar in case they wanted to make drinks for themselves. “All of us know the key code, and there’s just a two-hour advance notification to have snack food ready. I could’ve gotten us a bartender as well, but that seemed a touch excessive, you know?”

“I’m completely capable of making my own drinks, Roni,” Tabitha said dismissively. “So... where’s our girl?”

“They have the box next to ours, so you’ll be able to sort of look over and see her, although she’s going to mostly be working, so we’ll have to figure out how your approach is going to be.”

The two of them walked to the edge of the suite and down onto the ledge seats so they could glance over at the suite seats next to them. There were three women seated there with a variety of wild hair colors – pink, blue and green – most of them no longer than chin length. “What shade am I looking at?” Tabitha politely whispered to Veronica.

“The lass with the blue hair down to her collarbone,” Veronica replied.

It was Tabitha’s first chance to really size up Emily Barber, and the woman was a strange

combination of both what she suspected and what she completely didn't. She looked to be in her mid or maybe even late 20s but was dressed in attire that made her look significantly younger. She had on black jean shorts with dark black fishnet stockings on beneath as well as shiny black leather lace up boots that came up to her knees and with platform bottoms that had to be a few inches thick. She wore a jersey for Queens of Ragetown – the colors black, purple and a shade of blue that matched her hair – and Tabby could see the word COACH written across the back of the shoulders. The jersey left much of the woman's arms exposed, although they were still covered, just with ink and not fabric. Emily seemed to be fully sleeved on both arms, and while Tabitha couldn't make out what was decorating the woman's skin, the colors were certainly bright and vibrant, meaning they weren't more than a few years old.

Emily's skin was a strikingly pale shade of white, almost like milk or alabaster, and Tabby found herself wondering just how much sunscreen the woman had to apply to not get immediately burned by the outside. Despite her bright blue hair, Emily's eyebrows were coal black and her lips a strangely soft shade of pink.

"Give me the rundown on her," Tabitha said as the two of them moved back towards the sliding glass doors of the suite, making sure they were well outside of incidental earshot range by Emily, although the constant swelling roars of the crowd made that a little bit questionable.

"Emily Barber, age 24, daughter of Chelsea Barber and the angel Jerahmeel, not that either Chelsea or Emily know that," Veronica said, reading from her notes on her iPad. "Started out as a streamer back in the early, *early* days of streaming, but she was also on a number of esports teams at the time. She had just turned 18. After she finished high school, her mother tried to convince her to go to college, but Emily was making more than enough money between pro-games and streaming that she just moved out into her own apartment instead."

"She was making that much?"

"Between the streaming and the gaming tournaments, she declared close to a quarter of a million dollars her first year living out on her own."

"For playing games?" Tabitha asked incredulously. "I got into the wrong damn business going into law."

"She's had to endure her fair share of people harassing her while she did it, though, simply because she's an attractive young woman, and women like that who stream are often subjected to all sorts of weird and gross sexual harassment."

"What, you mean like the 'show us your tits' stuff all women get?"

"Sure, but imagine you weren't just getting it from one or two people, but entire swarms of preprogrammed bots. And not just, like, once a week or once a month, but tens, sometimes hundreds of times every single day," Veronica said, scrolling through her notes. "That's partially what led Emily to start V-tubing."

Tabitha shook her head a little bit, looking a bit confused. "V-tubing?"

"So you get the basic idea of streaming, right?"

"It doesn't seem that complicated. You turn on a camera, you point it at yourself and you connect it to the Internet, where people can watch you if they want to. Sometimes I guess you're supposed to be playing a videogame or playing an instrument."

"Right. Now some people wanted to do that but didn't want how they look to be the focus of the stream, so they started what's called v-tubing, where they're wearing a motion capture outfit and it's translated into a virtual character – sometimes it's a Japanese anime girl but it can also be just about anything, including anthropomorphized animals."

"She's a very lovely woman," Tabitha said to her. "But I can imagine there would be days where she just wanted to talk and not worry about her make up, her hair, her outfit or whatever."

"Exactly. So when SheStorming went–"

"Excuse me, who?"

“Oh, that’s her gamer tag SheStorming.”

Tabitha grinned a little. “Do I get a cool gamer tag?”

“I can register you on all gaming platforms as DevilsOldestDaughter if you like.”

“I would,” Tabitha said with an approving nod. “Carry on.”

“Oh? Oh! Right. As I was saying, when SheStorming went from live camera to v-tubing, I think she expected there to be a drop off in viewership, but instead she found a whole new audience that simply added on top of her existing audience. That stayed with her through her tenure with Team Question and their hot streak, finishing in the top four at a number of feeder tournaments before they qualified for Planetary Showdown 3, the annual high value tournament for Immortal Guardians of Avalon, or IGA for short. They were expected to finish in the top eight, but nobody thought they’d get to the Grand Finals, much less go to a game five.”

“How many games do they play?”

“Most rounds are best of three, but the grand finals are best of five, although it rarely goes to a game five. Usually by game three, one team or the other has their opponents’ strategies completely figured out. Instead, it went to game five and Team Question had a single mistake that cost them the match.”

“Our girl’s fault?”

“Nah,” Veronica replied. “Em played position three, which meant it was her job to be front lining during team fights, but their position one, what’s called the carry player, he got caught out farming up his next item and wasn’t paying enough attention to the map. That’s all it takes sometimes in games like these – lose an inch and suddenly it’s all over in a flash.”

“And so she quit?”

“Less quit and more retired,” Veronica corrected. “She’d won half of a million dollars from that tournament alone, and she’d decided it was time for her to put her money where her mouth was. So she started up Queens of Ragetown with the intention of getting more women onto the scene. They weren’t just going to be an Immortal Guardians of Avalon team, but a fully rounded e-sports organization. They wanted to have teams in most of the major esports games, and they were always going to prioritize female players over men. They’ve got a couple of men players, but the teams are always captained by women and there’s always going to be a majority of women. I think she’s supporting six or seven teams now, helping structure and train them.”

“Just esports?”

“Well, she’s also giving them media training, and helping many of them start up their own personal brands for streaming or merchandise. The problem with most of these kids who want to get into streaming or esports for a living is that they only see one little part of it, whereas Emily’s got the total package, an understanding of all the various aspects of what it takes to get into the business and stay afloat. Nobody was training these kids before she started the program, so everyone was having to learn the same lessons over and over again. But now that Emily’s got Queens of Ragetown, people who aren’t even joining her rosters are coming to her for training or even tech support.”

“Tech support?” Tabitha asked.

“You know what kind of web camera to use when you’re streaming? How to set up an OBS overlay? How much bandwidth you’re going to need from your network provider on a monthly basis?”

“Okay. Okay, okay, I get the point,” she said as the crowd roared, something particularly exciting happening on stage, even if Tabitha didn’t understand exactly what it was. “So she’s making an entire little generation of Mini Me’s out there in the videogame streaming community.”

“She’s expanding the idea of what it means to be a gamer for a living to a whole world of young women who never thought it could be them, because nobody else had *done* it yet.”

The two teams on the stage were in the middle of some intense battle right now, as a pair of commentators were rattling on about how some play that had riled up the crowd was a “wombo combo,” although Tabitha had no idea what the hell that meant.

“I’m sure there’s another side to her that you’ve found out about her, though, otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation, now, would we, pet?” Tabitha asked her.

“You know me oh so well, Mistress.” Veronica started tapping on her iPad, swiping over to show an entirely different side of the blue-haired beauty. In the picture on her iPad, Emily was dressed in some very sheer lingerie, with one arm barred right across her petite breasts and the other draped lazily between her two legs. “As it turns out, Emily dabbled with being a cam girl for a little while. Nothing all together *too* explicit, but she liked the thrill of being naked and exhibiting herself for others to see, even if she decided she didn’t want to make a career out of it.”

“I’m certain this isn’t the raciest photo you found for me, because if it is, you know I’m going to be severely disappointed.”

“The last thing I would want is to disappoint you, Mistress.” She tapped on the flat tablet to bring up another photo of Emily completely nude, her tiny pink nipples with silver barbells through them, a silver naval piercing dangling from her belly, and a patch of matching dyed blue public hair above her pink pussy, the whole image feeling almost like sexual cotton candy. She was on her back on a bed with shimmering silver silk sheets, her arms folded behind her head, giving a little pout to the camera, sticking out her pierced tongue playfully.

“Awww, doesn’t she simply look delectable. I take it she’s into girls?”

“Girls and boys, Mistress.”

“Well then, after I’ve made her mine, maybe I’ll let her play with a boy every now and then for a change of pace. How do we make our approach?” Tabitha said, glancing back up at the stage, where one team had apparently won the match and the other lost, as handshakes were being exchanged. “I don’t have to go and talk to her about this game do I? Because I’m fairly certain that’s the best way for me to go and make a fool of myself.”

“Hells no, Mistress,” Veronica giggled. “She hasn’t even touched Immortal Guardians of Avalon in a couple of years now. No, she plays far less games than she used to, because she’s entirely focused on making sure the business succeeds. That’s her central focus and where she dedicates all of her time towards. And as much as she’d like to be bankrolling the entire business herself, she can’t, and she needs investors. That’s how I think you should make your approach.”

“What, representing AOA?”

Veronica scowled a little. “Representing yourself, Mistress. As a private investor. You know, the whole ‘go girl power’ sort of thing?”

“Ah yes. And you’ve set up a meeting for us?”

“In just under an hour.”

“Excellent. That should give us time to figure out who the hell that is,” Tabitha said, gesturing towards the door as a man in his early 50s walked into the suite, clearly someone who had the access code, although there was a strange look on Veronica’s face.

The man had skin like ancient sand, his black hair slicked back and just long enough to tease the back of his neck. The deep blue suit he was wearing looked expensive, but the cut didn’t seem especially modern, and Tabby noticed that there was a gold pocketwatch chain that ran from one of the buttons of the blazer into one of its pockets. Also, it was impossible to miss the many rings that lined the man’s fingers, or the fact that he had painted his fingernails a deep, nefarious shade of scarlet. His eyes were like illuminated emeralds, sumptuous green lakes to get lost within, protected behind a pair of gold-frame octagonal shaped spectacles.

He wasn’t tall, but nor did he seem particularly short. His face was also adorned with a black goatee, the points of his mustache having been tipped with wax and twirled into sharp points. In his right hand was a wooden cane, although the wood seemed sort of reddish gnarled fiber that almost gave it an unnatural appearance. Also around his neck hung a large necklace made of woven gold rope, braided into a heavy coil, with a singular piece dangling from it, a giant pearl carved to look like an eyeball with a sapphire set in the center of it to resemble an iris.

From what little skin of his that was exposed, it seemed like much of the man's flesh was covered in black ink, tattoos of an elaborate kind, some faded, but many showing signs of being habitually touched up, as if their appearance was tantamount to the man's existence.

"Hello there, ladies," he said with a voice that felt ancient and ominous. "To what do I owe the privilege of your presence at my gathering?"

"Your gathering?" Tabitha said. "This suite belongs to AOA and I wasn't aware we were required to ask anyone permission for anything."

The glasses shifted from clear to a sort of silvered mirrory substance for a moment and then back again. "I recognize you, demon, but who's your little nephilim friend?"

"Lord Merlin may I present to you Tabitha Saint Cloud, daughter of Lucifer and possible heir to her throne in Hell," Veronica said, taking a very deep bow, her voice completely humorless, something Tabitha hadn't thought her assistant even capable of.

The fact that Veronica was taking this seriously conveyed to Tabitha that she should as well, so Tabitha struck a deep bow herself. "Great Lord Merlin, I had no intention of disrupting your gathering. I was simply going to introduce myself to one of the other nephilim who is attending this evening, in order to further my cause of establishing myself as a worthy heir to my mother's throne. Have you had the privilege of meeting her, master warlock?"

Merlin chuckled in amusement, seeming to take delight in the respect they were showing him. "I have, in fact, had the pleasure of your mother's acquaintance several times. Quite a remarkable thing, to rule in Hell, although I can understand why she is loathe to have such duties all the time." The wizard lifted his hand holding the cane, or perhaps staff would be more accurate, up to shoulder height and the room began to fill with a dense blue fog, the odorless smoke going from a wisp to a fog and back again within the space of a few breaths. "Your words have the tone of truth to them, so I will allow this to occur with but a warning – do not disrupt my games."

"If I might ask, oh mighty Merlin, but why are the games of such import to you that you are attending them personally?" Veronica dared to query.

"Magic is an art that requires belief to power it, and belief is a thing that can be harnessed, that can be... harvested," he said, gesturing to the crowds out in the arena before them. "Those fans out there, they aren't so very different from old worshippers to ancient temples. It's the same spiritual energy, ripe for the taking, just in a shiny new wrapper. So every year, at the Planetary Showdown, fans of Avalon come from around the world to pay homage to the new sport in this most modern Colosseum. And every year, I siphon some of that power off to add to my own. Sometimes I use it for major magics." He chuckled bitterly, turning back to look at them. "And some years, I'm just dicking around. But I will not let the ritual be interrupted. I've warned gods and mortals alike off this holy site before, so do not think I am frightened of a demones and a nephilim just on the verge of coming into her powers. I am an adversary you do not want to mess with, child."

"I had no intentions of doing so, great Merlin," Tabitha hastened to add. "I am simply here to take what's mine – that being the single other nephilim beneath this roof – and then abscond with her into the night to further my quest."

Merlin stepped closer to Tabitha, peering at her with eyes that seemed to house a thousand lifetimes, maybe more. "Then I wish you luck in doing so, and will even give you a free piece of advice to help you on your way. Since you're in AOA's box, I'm assuming you have some legal training, yes?"

"I do, master mage."

He nodded, his breath almost dusting across her skin, the scent of garlic and brimstone. "Remember that training. The people you are playing against have lifetimes of experience in attempting to disrupt this challenge you are on, but they are bound by the terms of the contract regarding the contest, just as you are. And when all seems lost and failure threatens to consume you, salvation may lie among said contract's fine print."

"Thank you, oh Merlin."

He waved a hand almost absent-mindedly. "It is a trifle, a thing for my own amusement as much as it is your continued success. But remember – if you interfere with my games, the angels will be the least of your concerns." He lifted his cane and then struck it down against the floor of the suite, which suddenly rang out like a tiny thunderclap, golden light filling the room for a moment, threatening to blind both women, and by the time it had faded, the wizard was gone, no sign that he had ever been there at all.

"He could do it, couldn't he, Roni?" Tabitha asked the demoness, who had just let out a very heavy sigh of relief.

"Easily and without so much as raising a sweat, Mistress," Roni said, shivering slightly. "I've been around angels, demons, gods and immortals nearly all my existence, but nothing scares me more than Merlin and/or Morgana La Fay."

"Has he ever come into conflict with the forces of Heaven or Hell?"

Roni nodded, her face a little ashen. "He's been attacked by each side exactly once. The angel who attempted to strike him transformed into a bottle of Scotch before the blow was struck, and Merlin drank that angel up before the rest of his Heavenly brethren. No angel has dared cross him since."

"And the demon?"

"A demon named Bazalgar attempted to slide a knife between the mage's ribs, thinking he could rule in Hell if he could lay claim to slaying one of the two mightiest wizards of all time."

"What happened?"

"The moment the knife touched the wizard's skin, millions of volts of electricity ran through it and through the demon's body, charring him to a crisp, even though technically he remained alive. Merlin told Bazalgar that next time he would not be so kind."

"Hardcore."

"Hardcore indeed, Mistress," Veronica agreed. "Now, shall we go over and introduce ourselves to miss Emily Barber? I imagine you'll have her agreeing to come home with you within minutes."

"Home?" Tabitha laughed. "Why, dear Roni, I intend to bring her back to this very suite and have my way with her while she's looking down at the crowd below, hidden behind the one-way glass of the suite's windows."

"Mmmm... yesssss Mistress."

## **Chapter Eight**

Although she could've just tried to lean forward and invite Emily over, it seemed more polite to go over from their box to her box next door, as if they were keeping a formal meeting appointment, which they were. Just as Veronica was about to knock on the door to the suite, it opened and a familiar face met them with a scowl.

"Well, if it isn't the prodigal daughter," Sandalphon said to them. The angel was dressed in a business suit a shade of white bordering on vanilla, the barest hints of yellow toning the fabric. It certainly looked expensive. Her hair was done up in a bun with a pair of chopsticks sticking through it, a little blend of eastern tradition to go with her Asian appearance, contrasting to the very strictly Western cut of suit, the front of which did little to conceal the angel's ample bosom. Underneath one arm, she had a closed leather portfolio, several papers in the middle of it obscured from view. "You're a little late on this one, darling, because I'm afraid your chances of success have dropped precipitously since I was allowed to make my presentation first."

"You've got quite the stones on you, little angel," Tabitha said with a wicked smirk. "Still feeling chafed by your time amid the first for your little transgression? Perhaps the fire singed your wings in a way you aren't accustomed to? They scorch off more than a few feathers?"

Sandalphon shot her a look that could wither away a thousand dreams, her brow furrowing in clear annoyance. And yet, for as intense as the glare was at first, it withered and died on the vine, leaving only regret in its wake. "All I am seeking is a fair game, Daughter of Lucifer, and you should



be seeking the same.”

“I am,” Tabitha replied. “Which is why I held your feet to the fire when you broke them.”

“*Broke* them?” Sandalphon scoffed. “I did little more than give them a slight *bend* at the very worst. An inconvenience. A trifle of trouble, at the very worst, and even then, extreme dramatics have been deployed. To call such a minor thing a break would—”

“Would be *exactly* what the arbitrators have decided,” Tabitha said, shaking her head. This was the sort of thing she’d excelled at in school – finding the holes in someone’s arguments, rifling through them and then widening them up so much that all the light came in. “Look, I get that you’re doing your job and your job is be the opposition—”

“Don’t *tell* me what my job is, little princess—”

“But all *I* am asking for is a fair game, a chance to prove what I am capable of, to stand or fall on my own. One set of rules that we both abide by. That’s what the accords are there for; that’s what the *arbitrators* are there for. We’re not playing for the same team, but let’s just both agree to abide by the rules of the game, and maybe we can set the animosity aside.”

Sandalphon looked at Tabitha with a curious expression for a moment, considering the statement before the appearance of hostility faded again from her visage, leaving something far more complicated behind instead. “Alright, little devil. I will agree to your terms as long as you abide by them yourself.”

Tabitha smiled a little bit, as if there had been a little bit of weight lifted from her shoulders. “I am nothing if not a servant of the law.” She even offered a little mock bow.

“In the spirit of your peace offering, then, let me extend you something in kind,” the angel said, immediately making Tabitha slightly nervous again. Kindness from the enemy should always be looked upon with cautious and suspicion, she thought, and realized it was the kind of lesson her mother would likely approve of. “You may find this Nephilim you are going to speak to now has been disinclined to believe you. There is a specter of impropriety I did not introduce. I assure you that wherever these seeds of malice have come from, they are not from my hand.”

“Where are they from?”

“We’re not the only players with stakes in this game,” Sandalphon said, looking around, as if she expected to see adversaries appearing at any moment. “There are several personages on both sides of the equation would love to see you win, see you fail, or just generally cause trouble for everyone involved in the process. Keep your eyes and ears open and perhaps you will prove to be your mother’s daughter after all, for better or worse. It is not my place to judge.”

The angel moved past the two of them, and for a second, Tabitha glanced at the angel’s back, noting how bulky and thick the suit was along the back. She couldn’t help but wonder if there were actual feathered wings bound down beneath it, and what they might look like should they be opened and extended towards the sky. Tabitha somehow knew it would be both achingly beautiful and yet somehow fear inducing also.

“Do be polite if you happen to bump into Merlin,” Tabitha said, wanting to get one last barb in. “He seemed in a particularly prickly mood.”

Sandalphon turned back to ask a question, but the person running the Queens of Ragetown luxury box closed the door behind them, cutting her off from being able to follow up on Tabitha’s closing statement. There was something fun about that, being able to have the last word when the angel clearly had further questions about what she’d just said. Just because they weren’t openly enemies didn’t mean Tabitha couldn’t get some amusement at the angel’s expense.

“So you’re the hot shit dragon lady everybody’s talking about?” Emily said with a laugh, looking at her across the room. “You seem more smoke than show to me.”

It was Tabitha’s first chance to get a look at her latest target up close. The girl was certainly as pale as she’d looked at a distance, her skin bordering on albino but obviously just a light shade of pale, which made the blue dye in her hair pop even more contrastingly. But when she got close enough to

offer her hand for Emily to shake, Tabitha caught the most surprising thing about the young woman – her eyes were *violet*, not blue but a genuine shade of lavish purple, so perhaps Emily was partially leaning into albinism, or perhaps it was an offshoot of her being a Nephilim.

“And you were supposed to be smarter than the kind of person who makes hip shot judgements about people she hasn’t even really spoken to,” Tabitha said with a smile, offering her hand. “Tabitha St. Cloud. I understand you’re looking for someone to make your money problems go away.”

Emily looked down at the extended hand, considering it for what felt like far too long to be respectful, but then eventually put her own hand into it and shook. The woman’s hands were soft but not delicate, hard earned callouses on the fingertips just beginning to fade down. “You make it sound so overly dramatic. ‘Money problems.’ Like I’m all of a sudden in ‘Goodfellas’ or something. We need an influx of capital to cover some operating costs and some growth spurts. I don’t need someone trying to buy me out of my own company.”

“And I’m not interested in doing that,” Tabitha replied breezily, trying to come across as easy to work with. “I’m interested in helping you grow your company the way you want to grow it, without you losing control of the thing you’ve spent the last few years building.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard,” Emily said as she released Tabitha’s hand. “Word around town is that you’re quite the mercenary, willing to throw anyone under the bus at the drop of a hat.”

“Not sure where you’ve heard such nonsense, but it couldn’t be from anyone who actually knows me or has any real work with me,” Tabitha said, reaching her fingertips up to flick some dust, real or imaginary it was hard to tell, off her shoulder dismissively. “Who told you this?”

“A friend of a friend of a friend,” Emily said. There were only a couple of other people in the suite – one of the team’s coaches, an alternate to stand-in on the off chance a player could get sick, and someone representing Damedulac Designs, the company that developed and published Immortal Guardians of Avalon. Tabitha wondered if the folks who’d built this game had any idea who they *truly* worked for. “Said you were a prime example of the snakes over at AOA and that I should steer clear of them and you. Convince me otherwise.”

“That’s their first mistake. I’m not here on behalf of AOA. I’m willing to put my money – not AOA’s money, but my *own* money – where my mouth is, and buy into your company for a stake. Not a controlling interest, just a piece that’ll pay back over the years as you continue to grow. I want to buy a chance to profit off your inevitable success.”

“And if Queens of Ragetown doesn’t continue to grow? You know a lot of these esports teams, they crash and burn after a few years, and we may look like a solid investment now, but in—”

“Except you *don’t* look like a solid investment right now,” Tabitha said with a smirk. “You look like a gamble. You have some top eight finishes, a couple of top fours, but never a first place finish at any of the big league events. Nothing like the invitational, the Dota International, the LoL World Championships, the CS:GO Majors. I think it’s predicted your girls are going to top four here, but the oddsmakers don’t seem to think they stand a good chance of going past that.”

Emily shook her head. “They don’t, but odds makers are wrong as much as they are right. I don’t know that we’re good enough to win the tourney, but I won’t be shocked if we end up in the finals. People have always been underestimating us because we’re girls; no reason they’ll stop now, even when we’re regularly kicking their butts.”

“That’s good. That’s how it should be. People constantly underestimating you. Gives you an edge, at least for a while, and it’s no skin off your back, because it’s not like you’re putting up a false front. They’re just following outdated concepts and thoughts. People have underestimated me my whole life. They think I’m just a pair of long legs in a short skirt. That’s the edge people like us have.”

“What’s the catch?”

“No catch. I get a seat at the table, so you get to listen to me ramble on every now and again, but I wouldn’t have even close to a controlling interest, so if you want to dismiss everything I’m saying as useless nonsense gibberish, that’s your right. Of course, I can always sell off my investment into the

company if I feel like it's not working out, but hell, that could even just be you buying it back, if it turns out you're doing well enough."

"And if everything's falling apart?"

"Well then, it was a risk that didn't pay off, and we've both learned a valuable lesson."

Emily seemed a little more cautious than Tabitha had expected, but she wondered if maybe that was due to whatever disinformation her opponents had spread about her. "There's something you're not telling me."

"Why don't we go over back to my suite and I can give that question a 100% honest answer?"

The blue-haired social media star looked back and forth then shrugged with a smile. "Sure, how much harm can I get into if I'm just next door?"

They exited from the suite the Queens of Ragetown had been assigned and moved back into the AOA suite, Veronica closing the door behind them with a wry smile, making sure to flick the switch to 'do not disturb,' and flicking the door latch to locked.

"What didn't you want to tell me in front of the rest of my staff, Miss Saint Cloud?" Emily said, moving over towards the glass doorways, looking out to check on the state of the matches.

"Oh, a handful of things, but let's start with the big ones. I'm the daughter of Lucifer, and I've got a little less than a month to live, unless I bring seven Nephilim to heel under my will," Tabitha said, slowly walking up behind Emily. "And you? You're one of the Nephilim. So, I'm gonna need you to learn how to heel." Tabitha reached a hand up and suddenly pressed against the back of Emily's neck, forcing the woman to smush up against the glass. "You do so love the damn fame and adoration, don't you? The feeling of those eyes all upon you?"

Emily whimpered a little. "You... you can't be serious..."

"Listen to them chanting. Listen to them cheering. Listen to the adoration of the crowd. I met a man who feeds off of such things just a little bit ago, but he isn't the only one, now is he?" Tabitha's other hand began to smooth over Emily's ass before sliding around her waist, unbuttoning the top button of the woman's heavily shredded jean shorts.

"I... I don't... I don't know what you're talking about," Emily stuttered, but the defiance that been in her voice just a few minutes ago had faltered, the confidence had wavered. Nothing was quite as solid and assured as it had seemed when they were in the other room.

"I've seen images from your days as a cam girl," Tabitha purred, one hand still keeping Emily's form pressed helplessly against the glass door as her other hand moved to push down the front of the cyber athlete's pants, her fingertips moving down to stroke a couple of fingertips against the folds that she unsurprisingly found damp and flushed with excitement. Everyone had their weakness; Emily's was *attention*. "Back when you would give boys and girls a show. To make them feel special. But it was never about *them* feeling special, was it? It was all about *you* feeling like the center of their attention, to be the beating heart of their world, even if only for a short while."

"That's... that's not..." Emily tried to deny, but Tabitha made a loud shushing sound.

"You don't have to deny it with me, Emily," Tabitha chuckled. "We all have our vices. Mine is to be in control. Yours is to be watched. I can let you have that, assuming you're willing to submit to me, to bend the knee, to put yourself under my control." Those two long fingers pinched Emily's vulva between them, the pale skinned girl whining, trying to push her hips more towards Tabitha's touch.

"But I... I..."

"All you have to do is give in to my control, and I can let you have the sorts of orgasms you were only dreaming of. I can put you on a stage in front of the sort of people who look upon you with excitement and fascination. I mean, look at us right now..." Tabitha's hands moved from Emily's form, grabbing the waist of her jean shorts, along with the fishnet stockings, and yanked them both down to her knees, Emily not moving an inch from the place or position that Tabitha had put her in. "Here I am..." Tabitha's hand moved back between Emily's thighs and pushed two fingers up and inside of Emily's pussy, making the smaller girl whimper, her knees bending. "Fingering you right in front of the

glass. And I can't remember whether or not these windows are see-through on the other side or not."

Emily's breathing started to quicken, her muscles tensing up. "Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck..."

"The entire crowd might be able to look up and see my fingers buried in your twat, see you pressed up against the glass, your face contorting with ecstasy. Let's give them a full show, shall we?" Tabitha's free hand reached up and tugged up on Emily's shirt, pulling it up, yanking the bra hard enough to make it snap and spring loose, exposing the petite silver-capped swells before pressing Emily's body hard against the glass once more, mashing that flesh against it. In the harsh lights of the stadium, all of Emily's tattoos – Ganondorf and Gandalf and Arwyn and Princess Peach and all the rest – they seemed to glow, almost as if the skin itself was capturing the light and pushing it back out as illumination. "I bet you can't even decide which you're hoping more, are you? That they *can* or *can't* see you?"

"I... I..."

"If they *can* see you, then all it's going to take is someone to glance up from the right angle, and then pretty soon there will be loads of people looking on watching me work you over. If they *can't* see you, then your reputation might be spared, but your appetite may not be satiated. Because deep down, you'd rather that entire crowd would be watching you, wouldn't you?"

Emily's hips were noticeably grinding down onto Tabitha's hand now, trying to get her to push her fingers even deeper inside of her pussy, practically humping on those digits, her flat palms pressed against the glass. "Fuck, yes! Yes I would! I want people to look on and see me getting finger-fucked! I want to be naked all the fucking time! I fucking love it, okay?"

"Now I did make a promise that I wouldn't disturb this event, but if you submit to me, I can make sure you can have your cake and eat it too. You can wallow in the fame and glory of being watched nude, being scrutinized constantly while engaging in some of the filthiest sex you've ever had, and yet, I can keep it all apart from your little day job. I can help you keep your company growing and excelling. What do you say to that?"

"What do I have to do?"

Tabitha chuckled darkly. Once they were discussing price, the deal was already done; the other person just didn't know it yet. "You must give in to me, relent to my control. You must willingly give everything to me. I can feel that you want to. You're so slick," Tabitha said, her fingertips starting to grind down against Emily's clit, her coffee colored skin a stark contrast to Emily's pale white thighs.

"I... I..."

"Say it."

"I... I..."

"**SAY IT.**"

"Fuck, I yield, I yield. Just make me cum and you can call me yours," Emily pleaded, trying to grind her hips down more onto Tabitha's hand.

Tabitha's slender digits started to vibrate quickly against the e-athlete's bundle of nerves, and Emily lifted one of her legs before stamping her foot down, a low growl turning up in volume as it escalated in a high pitched shriek of delight. She was trembling so hard in the aftershocks of her orgasm that Tabitha was basically holding her up.

She pulled her hand from between Emily's thighs, letting the girl slump a little bit, as Tabitha brought her fingertips to lick the taste of the girl from her fingertips. "Good start, but now it's time for you to worship and prove your submission to me."

Tabitha strolled across the room, spun around a chair, hiked up her skirt, exposing how she hadn't bothered to put on panties today, as she sat down, spreading her legs wide.

Emily dropped down to her hands and knees, then put on her best showman's smile, crawling over towards Tabitha before lifting her head to press her lips up against Tabitha's pussy, slowly dragging her tongue from the bottom of her slit up to the top, the tip of her pink tongue drawing shapes against Tabitha's clit.

Tabitha let a soft moan escape her lips as she lifted one of her legs and hooked her calf over one of Emily's shoulders, her fingertips sifting through Emily's lustrous blue hair, her other hand curling a finger at Veronica, who smirked and nodded.

As Emily's tongue worshipped Tabitha's snatch, Veronica moved to lay down on her back, sliding her head between Emily's thighs, lifting her face up to press her lips against Emily's cunt, vibrating her lips like she was playing a trumpet. The former streamer groaned, pressing her face more between Tabitha's thighs, her breath hot against the exposed skin. Tabitha's one regret was that she hadn't set up camera to record all of this. She would know better for next time. It was, like all things, a learning process.

When Veronica began to work upon Emily's pussy, the blue haired woman took that as a cue to get competitive, and her tongue began to press deeper and faster, working as much as she could, even as Veronica countered, both of her hands on Emily's ass, her face plugged up against her.

The three of them were locked in a chain of intense sexual energy that seemed to roll on in waves from one to the other to the next, and Tabitha was delighted to see that Emily had fully embraced her role in the challenge, doing her best until just around the point she was cresting with her own orgasm, Veronica's forked tongue had brought Emily to crest her second. Veronica's hand was up her own skirt, so Tabitha was certain she was having her own release around the same moment.

Five minutes later, the three of them were getting dressed and composed again, each of them still glowing in the aftermath of their releases. Tabitha reached over and grabbed Emily's blue hair, yanking her body close to hers as she pressed her lips hard against the e-athlete, tasting the musky flavor of her own cunt upon the woman's lips.

Tabitha sat down in the chair and patted her lap, making Emily move to sit down on top of her legs, as Tabitha lifted the woman's shirt and bra up once more. "Veronica, if you would?" While Veronica was getting the jewelry from her purse, Veronica unscrewed a barbell end off of one of Emily's nipple piercings, sliding it out before threading through the replacement tag that Veronica gave to her, her engram stamped into bronze hanging from the woman's nipple as Tabitha pushed the ring through it and screwed it closed, sealing it off once more.

"You're going to enjoy playing with my other girls," Tabitha said with a wry smile. "I'm sure Charlie's going to enjoy broadening your horizons."

"That sounds like there's a story to be had," Emily said. "You... you were kidding about the whole 'daughter of the devil' thing, weren't you?"

"Roni, show her your tail while you call the adjudicators," Tabitha said. On command, Veronica's tail snaked out from beneath her skirt and moved to wrap around Emily's thigh, the gamer girl moaning a little bit. There wasn't fear in her sounds, only excitement and delight.

"Fuck, I bet you can do some hot ass shit with that," Emily finally said when she found her voice once more. She pulled her clothes back into place, buttoning, buckling and zippering.

"They'll be here in just a moment, Mistress," Veronica said, as a loud roar of approval blasted through the auditorium, causing both Emily and Tabitha to turn and look back towards the main event.

"Fuck yeah!" Emily said, pumping her fist into the air as she looked out at the crowds, watching as the Queens of Ragetown team took the stage. "There's my girls! Give 'em hell, bitches!"

"Let's go out onto the balcony."

Tabitha and Emily opened the door as they moved out to look out among the crowd, Emily's breath catching a little bit as she looked down onto the crowd.

"Holy shitballs," Emily whispered. "I can... I can see energy rising up from all these people now. Was that always there?"

"It was," Tabitha said, moving to lean against the railing next to Emily. "You just couldn't see it. There's been a whole lot of things in the world you just couldn't see before now. For example, the two people coming to greet us? Not exactly human."

Emily and Tabitha both looked back over their shoulders as Shango and Zhurong walked

through the door, not opening it, simply passing through it, as was their particular style. “Did... what the hell are *they*?” Emily asked, confusion and disbelief in her voice.

“The judges of the little competition I find myself in,” Tabitha sighed. “Also, gods from a nearly forgotten time of the world.”

“That’s funny,” Emily said, laughing a little before turning to look at Tabitha. “Oh. Oh! Oh shit, you’re *serious*.”

“Very much so,” Tabitha said before the two gods were close enough to hear them. “Hail adjudicators. How does this fine evening find you?”

Zhurong was almost beaming, his smile from ear to ear. “It seems I’ve developed a handful of new worshippers, which means that it’s possible my star could again be on the rise.”

“He’s been glowing like this since this morning,” Shango bemoaned. “It’s been nearly impossible dealing with him, reminding him that every so often we get blips of interest, but it’s never going to return back to the old days.”

“The old days?” Emily asked them.

“Mmmm,” Shango said. “Back millennia ago, the name Shango would send fear into the hearts of the people, and they would never go so far as to neglect my holy days, or to tithe off a sliver of their harvest to invoke my favor, to inspire my compassion for the next year’s harvest. I had hopes that my people would expand beyond their homes in Africa and bring my gospels to other nations, to other continents, but I was never quite as good at outreach as the damn Christians.” He let out a heavy sigh, a tiny cloud of smoke tinged with crackling fire escaping as his breath.

“I see the Merlin is still riding his success, using every trick in the book to remain within the minds and thoughts of civilized beings all across the globe,” Zhurong said, looking to the screen as a giant LCD screen zoomed in on a fight breaking out in the MOBA, one of the players using Merlin’s ultimate, filling the floor of the area around the heroes with dozens of purple portals, eldritch arms reaching out to claw out at Merlin’s opponents and lifting up his allies. “He always seems to be one step ahead of nearly everyone. Maybe that’s his greatest trick. When the printing press was invented, he made sure the Arthurian myths were published early, written well and spread far and wide. Then cinema. After that, television. Now... all this,” the Chinese god sighed. “I would admire the style of it, if it only he would share those secrets with the rest of us.”

“The Merlin’s greatest secret was that he never claimed to be a god, but was happy to be a myth,” Veronica offered. “That made him much harder to extricate from the world, because myths are simply stories that inspire the retelling. And you have to admit, getting people to chant your name in a stadium for something like this? It’s kind of genius.”

“I need admit no such thing,” Shango snorted dismissively. “You have brought us here to authenticate another capture? Let us dwell on that, and not this white-skinned trickster.”

“He actually didn’t look that light skinned to me,” Tabitha said, and suddenly it was almost as though the entire stadium fell silent, both of the gods turning to look at her intently.

“You’ve... you’ve seen him?” Shango asked.

“He’s here, somewhere,” Tabitha nodded. “He wanted me to promise not to disrupt his event.”

Zhurong looked up at Shango. “Could he have heard your slander?”

Shango sighed and shrugged. “Either he did or he didn’t. Either he’s angry or he isn’t. There is nothing to be done about it now, so let us do our jobs.”

Tabitha turned Emily around and bent her forward. “You can watch the whole crowd as we do this, Emily. But you can’t scream.”

“No worries, I’ll just watch the match...”

## 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 panty-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."

## Chapter Ten

“Hello mother,” Tabitha said, looking across the room to lay eyes on her mother for the very first time.

The saying was ‘better than devil you know than the devil you don’t,’ but other than the facts that this woman was Lucifer and that she was Tabitha’s mother, she didn’t know much of anything about her. However, she was here, and Tabitha realized she might never get another chance to know her mother, so she resolved to try and keep her temper in check.

The devil looked nothing like Tabitha had expected her to. She realized her darker skin must have come from her father, because Lucifer was mostly light skinned, not completely pale, but a sort of light beige like coastal sand, with hair much fairer than Tabitha would have expected. Not blonde, but a sort of woody pale brown, like freshly disturbed earth. It was done up in a casual bun along the back of her head, with a baby blue scrunchy around the base of it. If she’d been human, Tabitha might have guessed she was from France or Spain perhaps, something Mediterranean or maybe even Middle Eastern, although her hair seemed likely a few shades too light for that.

Lucifer was sitting at a table inside of the coffee shop but didn’t look tall or looming. In fact, she seemed almost small and slight, as if she saw no need to make herself appear impressive and instead preferred going unnoticed among the masses. She couldn’t be much more than five feet tall. She had an almost hawkish face, her nose a bit sharper and more beakish than Tabby would have expected, and she wore a pair of heavy oval-shaped, black-rimmed glasses over her eyes, although they had to be purely decorative. Tabby couldn’t imagine the devil having less than precise vision.

Wherever the devil had gotten her suit, it must’ve been custom made for her, a deep shade of navy with daring crimson piping along the seamlines, drawing attention rather than hiding where the seams were, counter to how fashion often preferred to approach things. There was no padding in the shoulders, no effort to try and apply a masculine outline to a feminine form, and nothing around the bosom to hide her figure. Tabitha found herself smirking at the notion that the devil didn’t have humongous tits. Fantasy illustrators all around the world would collapse into piles of sadness to know that the most demonic woman around was only a B cup at best. In addition to the slender bust, the devil didn’t have much in the way of an ass either.

In fact, nothing at all about her mother exuded raw sexuality or carnality or lust or even excitement. If anything, the devil looked more like a local branch manager for Bank of America. There wasn’t the slightest bit of danger or demonic nature about her, at least on first glance.

And then Tabitha narrowed her eyes to peel behind the veil.

She suddenly had to slap her hand over her eyes as the light seemed to flood in from every crack, like looking directly into the world’s most powerful flashlight, the intense illumination nearly overpowering her, making her want to drop to her knees, but once she forced her mind to restore the veil back over her vision, she could feel the pressure dropping from her skull and started to be able to breathe again, realizing only in that moment that she’d somehow just stopped breathing moments earlier without noticing.

How could someone *forget to breathe*?

When her hands pulled from her eyes, she realized her hands were covered with tears and makeup, and she reached into her purse to get out a tissue, dabbing it across her cheeks. “Sorry,” Tabitha said suddenly. “Not entirely sure what came over me there.”

“Tried looking behind the veil for a peak at what my true form is, did you, daughter of mine?” Lucifer chuckled. “You’re lucky you covered your eyes when you did. Looking for longer than a few seconds would’ve risked melting your eyeballs. Not the sort of forces you should be playing with lightly, my dear. I would’ve thought Veronica might’ve warned you what to expect should we encounter one another, but I suppose she felt maybe you needn’t know much of anything about me until I presented myself of my own accord. My true form is difficult for even the most powerful of mystical creatures to look upon easily. There are only perhaps a dozen or so humans that could ever do so, and

even the Nephilim have difficulty looking for too long. Perhaps if you had grown up seeing me every day, your optics might have adjusted and adapted to the point where you could stand to look upon my natural appearance without too much distress, but sadly, we could not be afforded that luxury. Will you sit and join me? I did come all this way to get a look at you for myself.”

Tabitha almost wanted to storm away, cussing her mother out the entire time, but she also recognized that her mother probably had quite the story to tell. Besides, how many people could say they’d sat and had coffee with the devil herself? “You never thought to check in on me, mother?” Tabby said, moving over toward Lucifer’s table. It was in that moment that Tabby decided to start thinking of her mother as Lucy. It stripped some of the inherent power that the name Lucifer carried with it. “Stopping in one singular time in twenty years doesn’t make you any less of a deadbeat mother. Your record remains rather unimpressive.”

She moved over to the table, where Lucy stood up, taking a step back to get a good look at her. “You make it sound like I haven’t been looking out for you, dear daughter,” Lucy chided. “I’ve seen you plenty over the years, albeit from much further than I would’ve liked to be. Or in photographs taken by those I’d set upon you to watch you and guard you.”

“You didn’t think maybe having someone *talk* to me might’ve been of use? Especially since I was starting to think I was crazy before all of this started up, what with all the things I’ve been seeing since childhood that nobody else could,” Tabitha sneered. “You don’t think that was hurtful? You don’t think that set me apart from all the other kids growing up?”

“No,” Lucy tsked. “What set you apart from all the other children was that you were never going to be saddled with a nine-to-five job, nor were you destined to be asking that omnipresent question, ‘Would you like to make that a combo?’ No, children were afraid of you because on a deeper level, a primal level, they could vaguely sense the immense power laying dormant within you, just waiting for the right moment to awaken.”

“And the visions?”

“I made sure that the therapists you saw never told you that you were crazy, that they never said medicine or therapy would get rid of them, and that it would just be something you needed to keep to yourself,” Lucy replied, as she moved over and ran her hands along Tabby’s shoulders and down her arms. “It’s been far too long since I’ve been able to see you in person myself. What’s it been, Veronica? Four, five years?”

“Six, m’lady,” Veronica said deferentially. “You came to see Mistress Tabitha in her high school play, although she did not know you, that *we*, were there, obviously.”

Tabitha glared daggers at Veronica, but the demoness was looking down at her hands, unwilling to look up at either her or Lucy for the moment, as if unsure of what to do with herself, torn between her loyalty to her old Mistress and her new one.

“I can’t imagine you were all that impressed with me playing Peppermint Patty in ‘You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown,’ mom.”

“On the contrary,” Lucy said, dusting off Tabitha’s shoulders. “I was delighted to see that you inherited your father’s ability to carry a tune and didn’t rely on my more deceptive tactics to make everyone else simply fall into matching pitch, as I have done to hide how poor my musical skills are. Not that you would’ve been able to do that at that point in your life, I suppose, but you might have tried awakening your abilities sooner than you should’ve, and that’s the last thing you would’ve wanted to do. You would’ve been a wreck, presented with so much power so young, so unprepared.”

“As opposed to now?” Tabitha scoffed. “It’s not like I was given much of a handbook or a manual about how any of these abilities of mine work. In fact, the first day I met Veronica, I felt... less like myself than I ever had, like some other, more malevolent part of my had been awakened and had taken the driver’s seat inside of my brain. I found myself... I took control of Veronica like she was nothing, like whatever will she had was simply a toy I could remold to my will or completely discard if I didn’t want her to have any drive of her own.” Tabitha moved to sit down at the table as Lucy retook

her seat. “I don’t want mindless flunkies, although I think Roni was a little frightened I might strip her of any sort of self-control. I didn’t have a choice, so I decided I would just take what I needed from there on out. First and foremost, I needed a guide, someone to help me navigate this little deathtrap game you’ve set up for me. Thanks for that, mom.”

Lucy rolled her eyes a little bit. “Now you’re just being overly dramatic, like your father was. It’s unbecoming. Contests to determine suitable heirs as a tradition go back further than written history by orders of magnitude of generations. I can’t simply turn over Hell to just anyone.”

“Why turn it over at all? Better yet, mother, why even *is* there a Hell in the first place? I thought you rebelled in Heaven to go against God’s will, to say that plans were for suckers and that if God was going to invent free will in the first place, why not let everyone have a go at it?”

Lucy sighed, shaking her head a little. “I’d hoped you might’ve intuited the bigger picture yourself by now without having to have it spelled out, but I suppose cosmic concepts can be a little difficult to interpret without a local guide pointing out the pitfalls.” She picked up her cup of coffee and took a sip from it, the liquid much less dark than Tabitha thought it would be, but apparently her mother liked lots of cream and sugar in her coffee. “Roni dear, come have a seat and tell me who’s been assigned as the adjudicators of this particular instance of the game.”

Veronica moved over and sat down on Lucy’s lap; her head was still mostly tilted downward. “The adjudicators for Mistress Tabitha are Zhurong and Shango.”

Tabitha cleared her throat and suddenly Veronica looked up, her pained gaze turning to look at Tabitha before looking back at Lucy, who couldn’t have seemed more amused. Veronica’s facial expression was one that Tabitha had never seen upon her before – abject terror. This was, she supposed, the demoness’s greatest nightmare, but the one thing Tabitha wasn’t going to let her mother do was push her the fuck around.

*You can’t just take what’s mine, mom.*

Tabitha could feel Veronica’s will being tugged upon by Lucy’s casual force as well as Tabitha’s own none-too-slight abilities starting to take hold. The demoness’s breath caught, as if she was being choked out by the tug-of-war being played with her essence, a slightly pained tone to her whimpering.

“Veronica,” Lucy said, her tone that of a parent bordering on being cross as the demoness had risen up again and begun to move away from the devil’s lap. “What do you think you are doing?”

“I’m sorry, Mistress Lucifer, but if you are asking me to choose between my loyalties to you and my loyalties to Mistress Tabitha,” Veronica said, each word taking sizable effort, as if they were being peeled from the inside of her skull one bit at a time. “Then I must choose to side with Mistress Tabitha, as much as it may pain me to go against you, when you took me in. But you said that if I felt Mistress Tabitha stood a chance of succeeding in your task that I should invest all my energies into her. Could... could you both please stop trying to shred my brain?”

Lucifer looked over at Veronica, then at Tabby, then back to Veronica, a slightly amused laugh rolling from her lips. “Alright, Veronica,” she said, leaning to settle in her chair. “Go back to your little Nephilim and hope she can protect you from the coming storm.” Lucifer lifted her coffee to her lips once more. “You know, Tabitha, Veronica used to be one of my lovers. Until I bored of her. That’s why I gave her the assignment to watch you. Not that she’d done anything wrong or right. I simply didn’t want her clinging to my ankles, desperate for my attention all the time.”

“You can be a real *bitch* when you want to be, mother,” Tabitha said as Veronica moved around the table and slid her ass onto Tabby’s lap, exhaling a deep sigh of relief. It felt like her mother was goading her, trying to bait her into rash action.

“I just wanted you to know I fucked her, your right-hand woman. Before she was in your service, she was in mine. You deserved to know that.”

“Interestingly enough, mom, I don’t really give a *fuck*. She’s not with you anymore; she’s with me. And she’s happy with me. We’re happy together. We work well together. She’s got nothing to do with you anymore, and she’s better off for it,” Tabitha said, as a waitress finally brought a couple



additional cups of coffee over for Tabitha and Veronica. “She might have started as yours, but she’s ending as *mine*, so stop fucking around with things that don’t belong to you.”

“Don’t belong to me anymore,” Lucy corrected.

“Whatever, mother. She’s mine. Hands fucking off.”

Tabitha did her best to keep her expression blank, but she felt a certain level of pride in having stood up to her mother. The three of them enjoyed their coffee in silence for a minute or two before the devil spoke again. “So, Shango and Zhurong, Roni said?” Lucy asked. “Have they been fair in how they’ve been treating you?”

She nodded, a sly smile crossing her lips. “The representative of the angelic forces, Sandalphon, was trying to send nightmares to me, to keep me on the back foot, but I pointed out that it was in violation of the rules of the contest. Sandalphon tried to claim it was only a bit of harmless fun, but the two old gods agreed with me that a disruption is a disruption and sentenced her to a punishment of experiencing a life engulfed in flames and fire for a day.”

“How did she handle that?”

Veronica started to giggle, but Tabitha narrowed her gaze at her and shut it down quickly. “Not well,” Tabitha said, “but that’s good. If a punishment can be shrugged off lightly, then it isn’t really a punishment. And I don’t take lightly to people fucking with my sleep.”

“Think that’ll come back and bite you in the ass?”

“Actually, I don’t think so,” Tabitha said before taking a sip from her coffee. “I saw her a little bit later, and she wasn’t upset with me over it, so maybe she understood the crime fit the punishment.”

“If I might interject, Mistress?” Veronica asked.

“Alright, Roni,” Tabitha said. “What’s on your mind?”

“I sort of feel like Sandy wasn’t testing the boundaries of her own volition, but more like she was induced to try and push the line by upper management on her team,” Veronica said quietly. “Sandalphon’s many things, but cruel or vindictive isn’t one of them. Sending nightmares to you doesn’t feel like it’s something she would’ve done on her own initiative. She wants the game to be fair, first and foremost, and I think she was arguing about the interpretation of the rules mostly because she didn’t want to be in the wrong, but once it was settled that she was, she accepted it and resolved not to make the same mistake twice. And she even gave you a peace offering in exchange.”

Lucy arched an immaculately tended eyebrow, a coy mysterious smile crossing her lips. “A peace offering? From an angel? Haven’t you heard that you should never accept gifts from strangers unless you’re certain there aren’t any strings attached.”

“She wasn’t asking for anything in exchange for getting it,” Tabitha said, “and I certainly didn’t make any promises I can’t keep.”

“What did she give you?”

“She said there are several people on *both sides* that would love to see me fail, which, I mean, I suppose it shouldn’t come as *that* much of a surprise, but you have any clue who they’re talking about specifically, mother?”

“There are both demons and angels who would love you to fail, my daughter, but as for specifics? You might as well ask me to name single drops of water in the Pacific Ocean,” she sniffed slightly dismissively. “They’re only threats if you let them be, and you should know far better than to be distracted by such small things. Have they had any real impact upon your challenges so far?”

Tabitha looked back to the window of the café, seeing a smartly dressed couple looking at the pastries in the window on display. “Nothing that gave me real concern. They tried to dissuade one of the girls who would eventually come to be part of my stable that she shouldn’t have anything to do with me, and when I tried to trace back the source of the slander, the man who’d said it had already been killed, so it wasn’t as though I could have a conversation with him.”

“Veronica could’ve.”

Tabitha turned her gaze to look at Veronica, who frowned a little. “It’s true, Mistress, I could’ve

gotten his corpse to answer some of your questions, but with the police around, I thought it would be best if we di—”

“Roni, let *me* decide those sorts of things. You’re probably right that we wouldn’t have wanted to intrude upon the cops and an active murder scene, but I think that’s the sort of thing I would’ve liked to know you were capable of.”

“Yes Mistress. Sorry Mistress.”

The three of them were silent for a long moment before Tabitha spoke again. “You can talk to dead bodies?”

“Newly dead bodies, yes, Mistress. Anything that’s been dead more than five or six hours, though, is generally beyond my abilities. That’s also a contributing factor why I didn’t mention it before, but I acknowledge not telling you was my failing and I will not do that again.”

“Who your enemy *is* doesn’t really matter, daughter,” Lucy said, shaking her head a little. Tabitha found it harder to remember that Lucy was her mother when she barely looked a day over thirty at the harshest, and maybe even looked younger than Tabby herself in the most generous light. “Many hands would love to hold the knife trying to stab you. There’s always going to be people coming after you and yours, so if you get caught up in the particulars of who any individual one of them is, you’re going to miss the bigger picture. Don’t worry about *who* they are until you’re in a position to *do* something about it, Tabitha. Right now, make sure you’re doing everything you can to win the competition, to ensure that you remain alive.”

“I meant to ask you about that, mother. Why would you set up such a game in the first place? Are you really so anti-children?”

Lucy looked at Tabitha with an almost pitying smile. “You’re not a parent, so you wouldn’t know, but there’s something horrible about the notion of bringing something into the world that’s always going to be less than you. I don’t know how God does it, actually, and with such astonishing regularity, but I suppose, that’s why She’s the Almighty and I’m just The Adversary, although She doesn’t really think of me that way. At least, that’s what She’s said to me the last few times I’ve seen Her. She says everything I’m doing is according to Her plan.”

“God’s a woman?” Tabitha asked in amusement.

“God’s neither female or male, neither woman nor man, but easily both and all the shades in between, as well as shades you can’t even imagine. I’m the same, of course, as are all pureblood angels and demons, but we find a form we like and it takes on a certain familiarity for a time. If I wanted to, I could manifest a penis, take on more traditionally masculine features, but it’s all so... rough,” she said with a laugh. “I prefer the more luscious and soft curves of a female form. This body is looked upon with envy, lust and respect by most, and that lets me have an advantage in dealing with the humans.”

“Always looking to make deals for souls, are we mother?”

Lucy scoffed, shaking her head. “Mindless propaganda, put forth by the angels in an attempt to portray the idea of rebelling against God as one of betrayal instead of one of independence. They tell the humans that rejecting God will result in being sentenced to a place of fire and death and torture and suffering... but that God *loves you* in spite of what he will do if you reject him.”

“Well, isn’t that true?” Tabitha asked. “Aren’t those who go to Hell those who’ve rejecting God and, er, Her teachings?”

“You might be surprised to learn this, Tabitha, but nobody *has* to go to Hell,” Lucy said, a very amused tone to her voice. “The only people who actually go to Hell are those who choose to. It’s quite a personal commitment, so those who have decided they want to go to Hell are, of course, allowed in. And yes, many of those people believe they deserve to be punished, and we’re happy to indulge them with that notion, since that’s what they want. There are those who claim they don’t *feel* like they should be punished, but one of the advantages of being divine – that is to say angelic or demonic – is that we can compel humans into a state where they are unable to lie to us. Those are the sociopaths, the psychotics, the people who are convinced their horrific actions aren’t awful and repugnant, and when

we apply the gaze of truth upon them, their true hearts are revealed, and they know they deserve to be punished, and so we do so.”

“For how long?”

“Why, for eternity, my dear. Or until they feel like they’ve suffered enough, endured enough, and changed because of their punishments,” Lucy replied. “That almost never happens, but I suppose almost never isn’t never, and that’s important. God told me once that everything She makes is capable of change, growth, evolution... progress. So maybe eventually they’ll all be ready to leave, all have moved to a point where they feel like they no longer need to be punished.”

“Won’t that be the day,” Tabitha said. “What will you do then?”

Lucy shook her head, looking down her nose at her daughter. “You still don’t get the point, do you, my daughter? I take no personal enjoyment in torturing those in Hell who believe they require punishment. In fact, I find myself getting along much better with those who are happy to see Hell as a paradise of an afterlife.”

“You’re... mother, are you telling me there are *nice* parts of Hell?”

Lucifer laughed, nodding, her smile broadening, as if she had been waiting for the conversation to get to this point for some time. “*Very nice* parts of Hell! Some of it is an idyllic countryside, something akin to Tuscan Italy. Some parts of it are lovely beachfront, like Ibiza. If you want something woodier, we have portions like the Alaskan woodlands. Looking for the mountains? Hell has those too. And those who think of Hell as a fine place to spend their afterlife, they’re able to migrate between all of them. I never understood the expression ‘a snowball’s chance in Hell,’ when it’s well-established we’re much better at snowball fights than our angelic brethren. Of course, for those truly invested into seeing the sort of fantasy ethos, we do have lakes of fire and all the sort of *expected* things, but like all of Hell, it’s basically optional.”

“You’re genuinely telling me that eternal damnation, an existence trapped in hellfire and suffering, is... what, *optional*?”

“Regardless of what you think of me, dear daughter, I’m not a monster. That’s just bad publicity, although they do say any publicity is good publicity. Hell, like Heaven, is simply what you make of it. Loads of souls have chosen to give it another go after spending long enough in the afterlife, and I can’t say that I blame them. So we send them back into the Well of Souls and they’ll go back and get a second go at it sooner or later. Or third go. I think the record holder is on something like four hundred go arounds, although I’m sure they’ve lost count themselves. They only remember all of the cycles when they’re back in the afterlife. No way a human brain could comprehend all of that. Of course, they haven’t always been human, in those cycles though.”

“No?”

“They tried going through some parts of the animal kingdom. A hawk for flight. A whale for swimming. Insects. House pets. And even spent a few centuries as a redwood tree. There’s wisdom to be gained from each and every perspective. Lots of people are trying it these days. Reincarnation’s all the rage, as people think, ‘next time, I’ll do better.’” She shrugged. “Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don’t. It doesn’t really matter.”

“Is there no end planned?”

“*Planned*? Oh, sweet summer child, you are asking the *wrong* person about plans. There’s only one Big Plan, and God doesn’t share that with anyone. Maybe it ends. Maybe it simply goes around and around and around. It’s ineffable,” she chuckled. “That doesn’t mean ‘unfuckable;’ it means ‘unknowable,’ as in God is never going to share that with anyone. There’s a comedian I quite liked who had the best bit about the unfathomable *thing* that is existence – he said... let me see if I can remember it correctly. He said, ‘The world is like a ride at an amusement park, and when you choose to go on it, you think it’s real, because that’s how powerful our minds are. And the ride goes up and down and round and round and it has thrills and chills and it’s very brightly colored and it’s very loud. And it’s fun, for a while. Some people have been on the ride for a long time, and they begin to question: ‘Is this

real? Or is this just a ride?’ And other people have remembered, and they come back to us and they say ‘Hey! Don’t worry, don’t be afraid – ever – because... this is just a ride.’ That’s truly the best way to think about it, to realize it’s nothing more than a ride. As long as you aren’t staring down the barrel of soul destruction, that is, as you are, my dear.”

“You mean—?”

“Yes,” Lucy sighed. “Should you fail in your quest, your soul will be reduced down to the primal dust from which all new souls are created, and you will return to stardust once more, for God to create something new from.”

“Why would you come up with such a horrible challenge, mother?” Tabitha said, finishing her coffee. “Why condemn your own offspring to a fate of oblivion?”

“It’s a test,” Lucy said, letting a breath of air escape her lips between her teeth. “One I choose to engage with voluntarily. God told me that if I wanted a challenge, I needed to set forth to producing an heir, someone who could live up to the legacy I’d set for myself by meeting or exceeding my expectations. There’s nothing quite as infuriating as your Creator telling you to go out and create something for yourself. And so far, all my creations have been failures.” Lucy turned to level that gaze directly into Tabitha’s, and suddenly Tabitha felt like she was gazing into something infinitely bigger and more majestic than herself, a single glinting moment of the radiance that lay beneath. “But you... I think you’ve got the potential to maybe go all the way. So I’m looking forward to continuing to watch your progress. And... I thought it might be beneficial for you to know that I’m proud of how far you’ve come. It isn’t easy, being forced to live within a shadow as long as the one I cast, but I think you’ve mostly handled yourself admirably.”

“Mostly?”

Lucy grinned a little bit. “I might’ve given Merlin a bigger piece of my mind in your shoes, but I can at least respect why you chose to employ tact rather than bluster. He’s another who casts a very long shadow, so perhaps your approach was wiser than the one I might’ve taken. He’s a difficult one to get a read on, that Merlin. But do be mindful that you have a reputation to uphold, my daughter, and winning the competition is truly only the start of your journey, because as difficult as this herculean task might seem, it’ll pale compared to the challenge of figuring out what to actually *do* with Hell once it’s yours.”

“What do *you* think I should do with it, mom?”

Lucy wagged a finger at her. “I’ve had my turn at Hell’s big chair. There’ll be no second term for me upon that throne. I do hope we’ll meet again, on the other side of this, when I’m handing you the keys to your new kingdom, but if we don’t, know this, my child – of all the progeny I’ve had over the millennia, I think you were my favorite. Take care, daughter of mine, and never doubt for a moment that you are capable of this. Remember... Lucifer’s daughter doesn’t take *shit* off of *nobody*.”

The devil brought her thumb and her middle finger together and then snapped. While her presence was gone, there were a lingering number of long black feathers fluttering to the ground around them, and the sound of distant, powerful wings flapping.

“Okay, Veronica, all will be forgiven if you can teach me *that trick*...”