

ROUGH DAY
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LATE SEPTEMBER

“You were told not to camp here. You were told where to find the shelters.”

“It’s one shelter, it’s always full, and it’s across town from the only clinic that takes me.”

“Not my fuckin’ problem,” said Officer Ward. He nudged a damp shoebox with his foot out of idle curiosity, then kicked it hard across the grass. Tissue paper and plastic wrap trailed from the box as it tumbled away.

“Hey! That’s my stuff!” cried the other man. An oversized coat teamed with his unkempt hair and beard to hide his youth, but it showed in his eyes and his voice. “You don’t have to smash it, I’m moving.”

“Yeah, you and everyone else,” said Ward. Noise from the overpass above smothered much of the conversation around the small camp. Police and workers in coveralls dismantled tents and stuffed everything in sight into trash bags. To them, it was all garbage. To others, at least some of it held value.

“I keep my meds in there,” said Timothy. “The baggies are how I keep the schedule straight. I showed you the prescriptions.” Wincing at some unspoken pain, Timothy knelt to collect it all.

“Uh-huh.” Ward looked across the small encampment to the skyline. Past the tents, the site gave a good view of the stadiums and Seattle south of downtown. “Bet living outdoors really helps your conditions, too.”

“You think we’re all out here by choice? We’ve got nowhere else to go.”

“Nah, not that. I’m thinking you probably don’t pay for those meds, right? Getting them on some kind of public assistance or some shit. Seems like a waste of effort to me is all.”

“Ryan,” said the angel behind the cop.

“Yes?” replied another angel.

“Your boy here is a giant bag of rotting dicks,” said Rachel.

“I—yes,” Ryan sighed. The glory of his halo and his wings didn’t seem so great when his shoulders slumped and his head hung low. “Sometimes that’s fair.”

“C’mon, get it moving,” complained Officer Ward. He never once noticed the figures at his back. “I haven’t got all day.”

“Why, you gonna deal with some actual crime at some point?” asked Timothy.

Rachel snorted. Then Ward deliberately stepped on one of the little sandwich bags, crushing the pill bottle inside. “Seriously, what the fuck?” she asked.

“He believes the job has made him harsher,” Ryan began, but shook his head. “He’s wrong.”

“Yeah, I know he’s wrong. His problem is he’s an insecure fuckin’ shitbird in a position of power and he takes his insecurities out on people who can’t fight back.”

“And his peers tell him he’s the good guy for it and cable news feeds his paranoia,” said Ryan. “Yes. It turns out I know.”

“What the fuck, man?” Timothy snapped. “You get to go home tonight. What about me?”

“Hell, I probably won’t even think about you tonight,” said Ward. He nudged another little bag with his foot.

“Stop!” shouted another angel. She dropped out of the sky beside the pair, tall and tanned and beautiful, with wings and a halo as bright as any. “No more.”

“That’s enough, Bill,” Ryan told the cop.

Ward held his pose.

Ryan stepped beside him, hardly inches from Ward’s shoulder. “You’re better than this.”

“Get your act together, kid,” said Ward. “This is pathetic.” He stepped away.

“Hey there, Melissa,” Rachel greeted the other angel sadly.

With his tormentor’s back turned, Timothy’s shoulders slumped with only a moment’s relief. It didn’t last. He had more left to salvage than his medication. Timothy turned to the woman standing over him. “Can’t you help me?”

“I am helping, Timothy,” she said. “Keep going. I’m here.”

“Whoa, he can see you?” Rachel asked.

Timothy returned to his salvage. His guardian turned to her peers. “He sees a blur of light between his eyes and the sun. He hears as much of my voice as that one hears of Ryan’s,” she said with a gesture to Ward’s back. “None of it is by my design. He has a talent. And you’re one to talk. How many mortal friends do you have now?”

“Look, I got caught in some freaky occult sorcery ritual bullshit, okay?” Rachel fumed. “You think I had a choice? It wasn’t my idea.”

“I’m not judging.” Melissa folded her arms across her chest. “I’m envious. And pleading. You could do something about this.”

“Yeah, and I’m here.”

“No. Directly. You have a freedom to interact with mortals the rest of us do not. You don’t run the same risk of harm through contact the way we do,” said Melissa.

“What am I gonna do? You know how much the divine voice can fuck up their brains. And their souls. Plus I suck at that trick,” Rachel admitted. “Best I can do isn’t any more compelling than an ordinary mortal voice. Ultimately that’s all either of you did here.”

“You can do more than that. You have the authority now.”

“I am not doing a full-on appearance, Melissa. You know how complicated that shit gets. Being in Dominion is exactly why I can’t—huh,” she grunted, stopping in thought.

“What?”

“I wonder if that’s why they gave me the job.”

“Of Dominion?”

“Yeah. You realize a whole fuckload of angels really *don’t* want us to do anything, ever at all, right? It’s safer for mortals to see and hear me than other angels, sure, but I’ve still gotta worry about all the other complications just like you.”

“Complications?” Melissa waved at Timothy, and Ward, and then to the rest of the camp being driven out. “You see this suffering and you worry about the complications? I thought you were different, Rachel. I thought you wouldn’t be paralyzed like all the rest.”

“I hate this whole fuckfest, too, Melissa! What happens if I stop it? What? Whether I jump out and go ‘Booga Booga, I’m an angel, motherfuckers!’ or if I use my normal voice like a rando mortal protestor. What happens if I stop this?”

“Aside from the consequences of divine contact on unprepared mortals?” asked Ryan. He shook his head. “This is delayed a few days at best. Several of my charges live in this city. This is not a matter of one camp and a few individuals. This is the city’s leadership, caving to pressure from many sides, compromising its way from help to harm. Seattle is awful to the homeless.”

“You see?” Rachel asked Melissa. “We can’t dive in and fix this. It’s not so simple.”

“Is that why you focus your time on hunting monsters and demons?” Melissa snapped.

“Yes! Because then I don’t have to worry about every fucker with an opinion crawling up my ass to argue about faith and free will! Because none of us know the way to fix all this,” Rachel

went on, waving to the camp. “And because if we can drive all those evil fuckers out, maybe that takes some of the pressure on all the normal fucks to be shittier to each other and maybe the rest of this starts getting better. Maybe.”

Melissa still fumed, but she didn’t shout. “Demons do not cause this. Mortals decide this all on their own.”

“I know.” Rachel’s shoulders sagged. “I know. I’ve gotta watch over the whole city, even when it’s being shitty and cruel and dumb. And I’ve gotta play referee for all the guardian angels here, too. You’re *both* right. We’ve all been through this before. This isn’t anyone’s first time around the block.

“Let’s do what we can here, okay? I’ll hang around and help as long as I can. Take care of your guy, Melissa, and Ryan... I dunno, try to do something with your asshole.”

“He has his virtues. His sins have limits. Were he beyond redemption, I would have left him,” said Ryan. “I believe you’ve had recent personal experience with greater changes.”

Venturing deeper into the little camp, Rachel threw him an irritated glance. “Pretty sure she never stepped on anyone’s anxiety meds. And she only steps on people when they ask for it.”

* * *

“No one hired me for my benevolence, Matthew. I wasn’t brought on to appeal to anyone’s good nature.”

Despite her pleasant manner, her words stopped Matthew cold—again. She’d done that several times now, along with the other two at the conference table. The first couple of halts were largely a matter of good looks and charm. She knew those reactions well. Now they needed to come to grips with her strategies and her approach to their task.

Matthew tapped his pen on his notepad, tugged at his collar, and searched for words. “So you understand...the conservatory is a non-profit organization.”

“Of course.” Lorelei glanced to the marbled walls, the floor-to-ceiling glass on the other side of the room, and the paintings in custom frames. “Lovely scenery for a non-profit. Do you think this oak conference table was a donation, or was it bought at a yard sale?”

“Are you accusing us of hypocrisy?” asked the older woman at Matthew’s side.

“No, not at all, Elizabeth,” Lorelei assured her. “I point out the world in which we operate. The scenery is a necessary expense. We must appear modern and professional. We must give the impression of security and class. All of that attracts money, which the conservatory needs, and which I mean to help acquire.

“You have donors who support the conservatory because they care about music and the arts. We don’t need to worry about losing them. Their hearts are already invested. We only need to make them feel appreciated and included. They’re part of the team. That’s important.

“The greater challenge, and I suspect the greater share of funding, is from those who care about appearance and acceptance. They don’t come for the performances. They come because this is what wealthy, high-class people are supposed to do. Charitable tax breaks can be found in any number of ways. They come here to *belong*.”

Light shimmered in the interior windows behind her counterparts. Lorelei didn’t let the new arrival distract her, even as the source of that light stepped through the glass. No one else noticed. Their eyes were still on Lorelei.

“I know how to appeal to those desires,” she finished. “That’s why I’m here.”

“That’s a deeply cynical viewpoint,” said Elizabeth.

“Oh, I vastly prefer the company of idealists.” Lorelei glanced at the angel behind her. “None of this is to devalue ideals. Again, we should reinforce our appreciation for our true supporters. I’m only focusing on those who might waver.

“So we don’t cut the catering budget,” Matthew sighed, looking at his figures.

“Or take the less expensive venue,” said Elizabeth.

“No,” said Lorelei. “We don’t have to increase anything. Keep the status quo and let me work from there.”

“Sounds good to me,” piped up the man at the head of the table. Murmurs of agreement from others backed him up. Matthew frowned at his dashed hopes of cut costs. Elizabeth frowned at Lorelei.

She was used to that.

“Shall we move on with the agenda?” Elizabeth threw a glance at Lorelei. “I don’t believe you’re involved in the next item.”

“No, I am not, and I need to take a call,” Lorelei said pleasantly, rising from her seat.

“Matthew, I don’t have an office here, would you mind?”

“Uh, sure. ‘round the corner in the hallway.”

Lorelei took in the spread of disappointment and relief in the conference room as she left. None of it surprised her. As soon as she was out the door, she heard from the only opinion in the building she truly cared about. “That was some blunt-force shit in there,” said Rachel. “I figured you were the finesse type.”

The hallway was largely empty with the conference still going on. No one else would have heard or seen Rachel regardless. Lorelei could cover their conversation with magic, too, but she held her response until they were in Matthew’s office. Supernatural powers were a waste when one could rely on a closed door.

“Elizabeth annoyed me, so I pushed back,” Lorelei explained. “She knows I’m right, but she prefers not to say the quiet parts out loud.”

“She smells the brimstone on you,” said Rachel. “So do a couple of others in there.”

“I am used to it. The rest are not so wary. They see me, they feel the appeal of my glamour and charm, and they want more—and I’m used to that, too. They want to associate with people like me. They want to belong.”

“Gooooood callback,” said Rachel.

“Thank you.” Lorelei stroked Rachel’s cheek, knowing it wasn’t time for more intense affection. “What’s wrong?”

“Shows that much, huh?”

“We’re all still new to one another. But you haven’t come to me in public and waited out my conversations before. And you lack a certain spark of anticipation.”

“Oh I dunno, getting bent over the desk and demon-fucked might put my day behind me,” the angel said with a frown.

Lorelei’s twisted smile left the option open, though she left it alone. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yeah,” Rachel sighed. “No.” She looked at the ceiling and sighed again. “Yeah.” Lorelei waited her out. “I’ll be okay if you tell me no or if it’s weird, ‘cause I’m an angel and I can deal. But my day fucking sucked and the world is shit and it sure would be easier to deal if I could cry on someone’s shoulder.” Her eyes lifted with a note of apology. “You’re a scary hard-assed killer demon type so if that’s too weird I won’t ask again.”

“Then let’s try. What is it?”

“The city broke up a homeless camp today. It was shitty, the cops were shittier about being shitty than they needed to be, I couldn’t do shit about it, and a couple of my angels made me feel like shit for it anyway.”

“I am sorry,” said Lorelei. “Do you want me to get involved?”

“No? I mean not unless you wanna take up homelessness in Seattle as a cause and turn the whole stupid city around on it?”

“That might not be the best match of my abilities and interests,” said Lorelei. “I am not without sympathy. Such causes are not my calling.”

“I know.” Rachel nodded. “It’s fine. I’m not asking that.”

“And your peers?”

“Can’t really do much about that, either.”

“No.”

“Means a lot that you’re here, though,” said Rachel. “Can’t really talk to anyone else on this level. You might not be in my club, but you get the complications.”

“I do,” said Lorelei.

“Sounds like they piss you off?”

“You have no idea,” Lorelei replied softly.

“But not at me?”

“No. I know you.”

Rachel looked for confirmation in Lorelei’s eyes. She found it and leaned forward. Lorelei took her lover into her arms.

“Why can’t they just share?” asked the angel.

“Many do. You know this.”

“Okay but why can’t the ones with lots to share do it?”

“Because that’s how they acquired so much in the first place.”

They held each other in silence. Rachel sniffed. “I didn’t know if I could talk to you about this,” she said.

“We plan to be together for a long time,” said Lorelei. “We’d best get used to listening.”

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“Knew they were gonna be out of space. Fuckin’ knew it. Waste of time.”

He pulled the worn-out blanket tighter over his shoulder. The doorway offered partial shelter from the wind and the rain, but not the cold. Any random police might force him to move on in the night, too. They didn’t always, but the spot still left him vulnerable.

“Don’t even have my tent now,” he went on. He spoke barely above a whisper, but his voice still cracked. “Why’d they take my tent? It was mine. Who were we bothering?”

“You have to go back to the clinic in the morning,” said a feminine voice over his shoulder. “You have to keep trying.”

“I know. I know.” He buried his head in his arms.

The exchange reframed everything. He wasn’t speaking to himself at all. He responded to a voice others weren’t meant to hear. The subterfuge wasn’t perfect, and didn’t need to be when it came to mortal witnesses. It also presented another risk.

The crack in his voice was more than enough to make the risk acceptable. This had gone on long enough.

Lorelei dropped her enchantment of concealment as she stepped around the corner, allowing herself to be seen in her black overcoat and umbrella. She stopped short of the doorway’s shelter. “Hello? Pardon me,” she said. “Are you Timothy?”

He looked up in surprise, seemingly as much for her approach as the sound of his name. “Yeah? Who are you?”

“My name is Lorelei. May I speak with you? I heard about the camp earlier today. It seemed likely many of you might find yourselves in this neighborhood tonight.”

“The shelter was full when I got there,” he said. “Is this your building?”

“No. You’re in no trouble, Timothy. I would like to help you.”

His brow furrowed. Lorelei heard nothing of the other voice, though that might be a matter of greater care now. She felt the eyes of a guardian on her nonetheless. “Are you a social worker or something?” asked Timothy.

“No. I have no such skills.”

“Then how do you want to help me?”

“With a place to stay. A motel for tonight at least, then something more stable you might manage on your own in time. Possibly a job, if you’re able. It’s only ushering at a concert hall, but it’s a place to start.”

His hesitation held again, and with it his suspicion. “What’s the catch?”

“That’s a fair question. I am not looking for anything in return. The catch is I can’t do more than this. I am not a caregiver by nature.” Lorelei still couldn’t see the other presence, but his guardian had to be there. “Perhaps once arrangements are made it’s best if I keep my distance. For both of us.”

“For real?” Timothy leaned over to look around the corner of the doorway. “You just walk up to homeless people and offer them a place and a job?”

“Not out of habit. Only tonight.”

“Why? I mean I could use the help, but...why?”

“Because you are in need and I have the means.” She spoke with hesitation of her own, though with very different reasons. “I know the world doesn’t work this way. No one ever walks up and offers to fix your problems for nothing. There are no fairy godmothers or genies from bottles to grant wishes. Life is far more complicated than that.

“Except I do have the means to help, and I cannot see why I should not.”