

Mernation

Episode 9

The Nines

By A. C. Zito

I watch as the pedestrians make way as we ride passed them. They didn't seem to make any notice to the carriage or of which of the nine families it had inside.

"They're all going to be so envious of me! So envious; Nathaniel Westbay, also known as: The Swordfish. He welcomed back Lady Gretchen Marseilles of the Starfish Family; oh, happy days!" He went on like this for the entire ride, all the while, as I watched the castles near. The nine castles were all clustered together with high walls separating them from the rest of the Level. We left the main marketplace and headed down a few streets before we were finally in front of the main gate: the nine names were carved into the stone above the entrance: Bordario, Dorchester, Kamali, Locklear, Marseilles, Okafor, Sutiono, and Westbay.

One, two, three, four... I began to count out the names in my head.

"Eight," I said out loud. Westbay nodded as he saw that I was looking up at the names.

"Oh, yes," he remarked. "The nines: Bordario of the Octopus Family, Dorchester of the Jellyfish Family, Kamali of the Sea Urchin Family, Locklear of the Sea Turtle Family, Marseilles of the Starfish Family, Okafor of the Stingray Family, Sutiono of the Sea Crab Family, and then my family, Westbay of the Swordfish Family." I counted up the names in my head just to be sure.

"Yes, but that's only eight! Where's the ninth family?" Westbay looked at me like I was absurd.

"Ninth family; what are you talking about? I *am* the ninth family! Look!" Westbay yelled this out as he pointed up at the stone architecture.

"No, you're the eighth!" I pointed at where there should've been a ninth name but there was none. He began to try to examine the names once more, but it was already too late. The gate had been drawn, and we were already entering the grounds.

"Oh, come off it, Lady Gretchen; you didn't leave for Atlantis so you would learn how to *count*, now did you? Now, here," Westbay began counting the castles: "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and *nine*; now, you see; you are Lady Gretchen Marseilles of the Starfish Family, and you are part of the nines! Now, let us be off with this silly-willy nonsense! Come now, there's Castle Swordfish up on Fish Drive next to the Dorchester's castle and your parent's castle. Now, I do believe Madame and Monsieur Marseilles are out at the moment, as I last recalled. Your father was out on the hunt shooting game with Okafor and your mother was at a play... or an opera, I seem not to remember. But so be it, a ball is bound to take place due to your swift return home. It was swift, now wasn't it?" I was only able to give a nod as we came upon the castle. A statue of a swordfish sat in the center of his main grounds and

the front steps led up to an ornate set of twin doors painted a dark shade of blue with a red trim lining etched into its curves with such dexterity and precision.

"This is your home?" I asked, baffled. Westbay let out a contemptuous baffle of words I wasn't able to comprehend. For what I got out of it, however, was an undulated amount of irritation brought on by my simple question.

"It isn't big enough!" He finally ended the incoherent gibber gabber. "Not like Bordario; that man has an estate far more inconceivable than the normal nine. Prestige, that's what I want. I want prestige and an arrogance of never having enough of the finer things in life. Like what *he* has! Absolutely preposterous, that's what it is!" Two of Westbay's servant boys opened the doors for us while Westbay led the way inside, swinging his short golden-stained cane around in a swinging motion. "Make yourself comfortable." He motioned toward the entire foyer as he walked off into a parlor to the right of the main entrance. "I have to go write up some contracts with a couple of lowdown, dirty, pig-swindling merchants from Level 3." And at that, he disappeared from view.

BAM The doors shut with a thud behind me. I looked at the two servant boys and smiled at them, meekly.

"Oh, would you leave them open... Mr. and Mr...." I didn't know what to call them. I looked at them hoping they'd give some confirmation that they did *have* names. But only awkward silence followed with a fit of uncomfortable coughing brought on by one of them.

"Eels," finally one spoke up.

"Why would you call us by anything other?" The other asked, shakily but, yet, disturbed that the conversation had, at all, arisen. "We haven't had names since we were taken off the streets and locked into this never-ending contract!"

"Never-ending?" I looked at the ground feeling the weight off my body slipping out of me and melting into the floor.

"Lady Gretchen?" was the last thing I heard. I fainted. And as I fainted the words of never-ending went on repeat, over and over again, in my head as I slipped into unconscious; almost like I was drowning in them.