

Midveil

Chapter 1

In the afterlife, you might be headed for the serious strife

When: Day 1

Where: A field of endless green

I was dead.

I was dead, and there was no way around it.

I was dead, said the nice man in the nice suit sitting behind the nice desk in his nice office. As dead as... Some dead thing back in the living world. "I mean everything old is new again, isn't it? Hard to know what's dead and what's not anymore. Take, oh I don't know, vinyl. Probably thought you would never be seeing that stuff again, right?" I think he was looking for a laugh, but I was fixated on those three words. "You're dead now." Was that four words? Just because there was a contraction did it count as three words? *Is that really the important thing right now? Get a grip.* But I couldn't. I had proof positive that the afterlife was real, if I hadn't just been drugged and this was all some elaborate prank for some new TV show, anyway. What had happened to me? How had I died? I didn't *feel* dead, I felt, well, like myself. I still had teeth, and hair, and fingers. Should I have those things, being dead? I wasn't a ghost, floating and transparent. I was wearing clothes for goodness sakes. Would I need to, being dead? I seemed to recall a good enough, if short, life. But now this guy was saying I was dead?

"You're one of the last to arrive, and I'm sure you have plenty of questions Denice. It is Denice, right? Denice Aberdine?"

I mutely nodded.

"Wonderful. Let's get you down to the presentation which I'm sure will answer many if not all of your questions and your new life, that is to say your new afterlife, can begin."

"K," I squeaked, the only thing I could manage at the moment.

And so I found myself sitting with five hundred other souls, as the "screen" that hung in midair before us played a video about our new community of Midveil. We had left the office by the same door I had come in through, and I expected the room with the "Everything Is Fine" written on it, but instead we had descended some steps into what was essentially an empty field. Even in my dazed state I looked around and took in some details. There was the grassy field, there was more grassy field. In the distance, more grassy field. Perhaps sunlight glinting off a body of water of some kind? Hard to say. At the horizon there seemed to be a ring of mountains surrounding us, as if we were in the center of a mountainous ring, and as I turned around I saw the large building behind me. This was the only structure in view, and it looked like a really huge warehouse of some kind. Doors and windows dotted the walls I could see, heading off to my right. The only other thing of note were the five hundred chairs and four hundred and ninety nine people currently in them. An attractive looking woman stood before them, and as I got closer I noticed most of them looked as shell shocked as I felt. I took my seat, the man joined the woman up in the front, and the presentation begin. The quality of the image was exceptional, better than life. Colors and text, rich and sharp beyond my knowing filled the screen as everything was explained in simple terms I could easily grasp. The music, the man on the screen talking, (I noted it was the same man that greeted me) seemed to be right next to me without being too loud. All too soon (had it been ten minutes? An hour? Two?) the presentation was over and the man, who reintroduced himself as Michael, and the woman as Janet, stood before us all. The screen was gone, vanished as the presentation ended. "Any questions?" he asked, giving us a smile. I blinked and looked around. I had been staring at the screen without really seeing it, listening to the man's voice without really hearing it, and suddenly realized I hadn't retained a single fact that had been presented to me. Other eyes, also frozen with indecision, stared back at me as they turned around to see if I had

comprehended anything. No one moved. No one coughed, or itched, or shifted position. I wasn't even sure they were breathing, I wasn't sure *I* was. I was dead, right? Presumably everyone here was. Why would we need to do any of those things anymore? Still there was a tension in the air, everyone silently screaming to everyone else to please, *please* be the one that asks what's actually going on around here so they didn't have to.

"Anyone?" asked Michael. "I mean I know I do a mean presentation but there must be some point you're not clear on? Hello?"

Silence.

Someone has to do something. Say something. Have him run the video again? Explain what's going on himself? What is going on? Am I really dead? It seemed to be up to me. I had to take one for the team, step up and give voice to what I saw on everyone's faces. They weren't going to do it, I could see it in their eyes. It had to be me. I hesitantly raised my hand. Michael clapped once as if with relief and pointed. "Yes, you in the back. Our last arrival, Denice. Don't be shy, stand up and ask your question."

Don't be shy? Four hundred and ninety nine pairs of eyes (plus Michael and Janet's) pinned me to the spot, but this had to be done. I stood, those nearest me awash in relief that someone, anyone, was going to give voice to their concerns. To be the first one to take a stand. To beat back the darkness and wring some answers from this guy. I had to make it good, everyone was counting on me. I had to be clear spoken, firm, no nonsense, and unrelenting. We needed answers, and it fell to me to get them, it seemed. That was fine. I was ready, I was willing, I had the spotlight and I wasn't going to back out now. I summoned all my courage and asked- no *demand*ed to be told;

"What?"

I felt my face turning red. Was that still a thing here? Did I even have blood to rush to my face if I was dead? That was really the best I could do? *I'm letting everyone down, aren't I? I'm a horrible person, why did I have to put my hand up in the first place? This is awful.* I wanted to run, to hide, but where? I was in an endless, empty, grassy field. Trying to hide behind the building was no good, I was going to carry this shame forever, wasn't I? If I was dead, there was no dying to get away from your problems like when you were alive. No, I had to own this one moment for the rest of eternity. I expected everyone to burst out laughing, at me, at my stupid face, my dumb question, and my crappy life in general. I braced myself for it. Some part of me even welcomed it, to give validation to that voice in the back of my mind that I was worthless and this, *this*, would show me.

But no one was laughing, in fact I even got the sense that most were grateful for even this one word question. Everyone slowly turned back to Michael, smile slipping off his face. "Ah," he said, now looking a bit out of sorts. *How can I see him so clearly when he's in front of all these rows of people? I never needed glasses but at the same time everything looks so clear here.* "Maybe I have been rushing you a bit. Never mind. Take a brochure, pass them back." I noticed Janet was handing out something at the front of the group. "It explains everything. Had them printed up special, so you could refer to them going forward. Big experiment we're running here, have to keep everyone in the loop. Can't really go over everything again, we have a schedule to keep. Come along. You can look the paperwork over later. Next is the warehouse tour. Chop, chop! This way. Everyone keep up, here we go."

He headed back towards the building and everyone looked to me, some with questions on their faces, some with incredulity that my bravery had not been rewarded. I had nothing to give them, I was in the same boat as them. I wondered if sitting down and refusing to move would be a power play or the equivalent of a temper tantrum by a two year old. It didn't matter, my chair was gone, vanished as if it never was once I had stood up. Had it ever existed? Did I exist, if I was dead? But I still felt real, and all those eyes felt real, so what did being dead actually *mean*?

“I guess take a brochure and let’s follow him,” I said to them with a shrug. “It can’t hurt at this point, right?”

Betrayal? Was that what I saw reflected in their eyes? Should I have done more, demanded more? Taken a stand against this Michael, if that even was his real name? *Wait, if we’re dead is that the angel Michael?* I knew the name but not much else, I had never been very religious. *But no wings, he just looks like an older gentleman one might see on the street. Would an angel hide their wings?* Everyone looked around and with no other soul managing to take the initiative back from me started to get up. As they did their chairs too vanished, so soon this would be a completely empty field again. I made sure to get a brochure even just to have something solid to hold on to, and we headed back towards the building. It seemed I was waking up, my brain finally getting into gear and taking charge again. I looked the crowd over. If we were really souls like he claimed why were we all still wearing clothes? Shouldn’t the denizens of Heaven be beyond such things? Where was the love of God, shining across our faces and giving us feelings of contentment? The wispy clouds? The chorus of angelic beings singing God’s praises (that was basically all they did up in Heaven, right?) in the distance? Heaven? No, if this was heaven West Virginia really did have their slogan right, which would be the saddest thing I had ever heard. But it couldn’t be the other place, right? No trip to Hell would begin with a kind looking old man and a video presentation, right? *Midveil, that’s what he said this place was called.* It was also printed on the front of the brochure. *It must mean something. Not Midvale, Midveil. Odd.* As far as the people went I saw they had seemingly come from all over, given how they were dressed. There was a lady wearing something from India, there was a very dark skinned man wearing not much at all. Another lady wearing a hijab, another man in a fire fighter’s uniform? *Okay that makes no sense. Unless... That’s how he died?* They seemed to be all ages as well, I saw kids and the elderly alike, though all seemed spry enough. Backs unbent, heads held high, no walkers or wheelchairs among them. *But if we’re dead, where is everyone? Why only these few? Hundreds of people must die every minute on Earth, it doesn’t make sense.*

We pressed on, through the large doors in the building and lights started coming on high above us. Even given how large the building had appeared the interior looked larger, and an amazing sight met my eyes. Rows of machines to one side, stacks and boxes and bags of materials to the other.

“As you can see,” Michael was saying, “in Midveil you will be provided everything you need to build the community of your dreams. This way please.” He moved towards the materials side of the place, and I stared. *Is that huge container really heaped with gold?* It looked like gold, and the sign on the side of the blue plastic box read “gold” but that must be impossible, right? “Each container is labeled, and basically infinite. For example, if you look over there to that stack of plywood.” He gestured, and everyone looked over there. “If you took twenty pieces of wood from that stack you would find the height of the stack had not changed. Same with any container in here. You don’t need to worry about running out of any raw material, and every earthly raw material can be found here. There’s no need for that,” he said suddenly, looking back at the container of gold. Two people froze, hands on the gold and pockets clearly stuffed with the stuff. “You can always come get some later, this is your home now, and that’s only worth anything as a raw material. No money here, get it?” They sheepishly started putting the gold back.

Awkward. Well, we know what kind of people get... So are we in Heaven or not?

“Sir,” said a voice. “What’s in that container?”

We all looked at where the guy was pointing, and while I could see the container just fine the sign had a chemical formula or something on it, not a name like everything else seemed to.

“Oh, that. You don’t have a name for that on Earth yet, you haven’t discovered it,” he explained. “It’s a room temperature superconductor. I think it’ll be discovered in space in about six hundred earth years?”

“Six hundred eighteen years, seven months, sixteen days, twenty two hours, three minutes, and eight seconds from... Mark,” said Janet, looking pleased.

Yeah but how many milliseconds, bet you can't tell me that! Who is that lady? Some kind of angel of knowledge?

“Unobtainium?” someone else blurted.

“If you like.”

I looked back over at it, and did a double take. Now the sign read “Unobtainium” just like that.

“There’s a few others like that, and even some material from your fictions we’ve managed to whip up,” he explained. “Vibranium and the like. We want you to have every opportunity.”

There was a general ripple of excitement in the crowd. I had heard that name before, but I couldn’t exactly place it. Marvel movie, maybe?

Michael was already moving on, back to the other side of the place. I gave a quick look to the side I was on. It seemed that just about everything was here, stacked neatly or rolled or in bins. Paper, cloth, metal, wood, in various shapes and sizes, colors and weights. All rows far enough apart machinery could move between the rows easily, for easy access and transportation out of here. Stacked on shelves, in bins, all according to how it was best to contain them. You didn’t want your gold nuggets rolling around on the floor, now did you? Of course not.

“And here we have all the machinery we’ll think you need. Earth movers, trucks, saws, over there you’ll find a variety of hammers, screwdrivers, that sort of thing. You need to build your own village but we’re not making you start out banging two rocks together. That would really be cruel.” He laughed at his own joke, but no one else did.

Tough crowd. May as well keep up the momentum, now that I’m thinking a little more clearly.

“Does anyone here know how to use any of these machines?” I asked. Ninety percent of people shook their heads.

“I did a little carpentry, I can nail things together,” one person said. “Never built a whole house though, nothing like that.”

“So what good does all this do us?” I demanded. “You might as well show star trek replicators to a person that can’t speak. How are they going to ask for their tea, earl gray, hot?”

“Tour isn’t over, we’re not just dumping you here, you know. You really didn’t get anything out of the presentation? This was all in there.”

I started to feel a bit angry. Who did this guy think he was, anyway? Jerking us around like this! “I got told I was dead and two minutes later you expect me to be taking notes at a collage level seminar? You’re crazy! You haven’t even offered me any proof I’m actually dead and this isn’t some gigantic prank. Though the screen was... Invisible so I don’t know how you managed that otherwise.” *Huh. And the chairs vanishing, that was a neat trick. And all these machines, and those raw materials... What else could it be?*

There was a general agreement that went through the crowd. Maybe I was winning them back a bit from my earlier misstep.

“Oh dear,” he moaned. “I guess it was a lot easier when this place was fake, huh Janet. We didn’t have to actually worry about them understanding it.”

“And most of the ‘residents’ were in on it,” she seemingly reminded him. “You *wanted* the humans to be uncomfortable and confused. Now we want the opposite, however we seem to have done a poor job of it. Perhaps the founders should have come to speak to them directly?”

When this place was fake? The founders? What in the world are you blathering about now?

“Maybe. Too late now though. Can we at least get through the tour? Please? I’ve been excited about it for weeks now, we can have a question and answer section afterwards. Promise!” He crossed his heart. “And the answer to your question, by the way, is the next stop on the tour, so don’t think I’ve forgotten. I haven’t.”

“Seems we have nowhere to go, out into the endless field outside,” I grumbled. “Please, by all means, if this tour is sooo important to you, let us continue.”

“I really have made a mess of this, and I really thought I had it this time. Sorry about that, I’ll try to make it up to you. Somehow. This way, please.”

Had ‘it?’ What ‘it?’ And what ‘this time?’ What is going on around here?

We moved through the warehouse, past rows and rows of pristine construction machines I had no technical names for but had always seen in use everywhere, and Michael opened up a door in the wall and we all headed up a flight of stairs. The ceilings were pretty high here, so we all trooped up for quite a while, and he opened the door at the top letting us through. He was looking all proud again and as I got through the door I could see why. The vibe here was very different. Rather than a plain metal and concrete storage area with no furnishings whatsoever this place looked like an old library. That you might find at Hogwarts. The ceiling here was high as well, making me wonder *was the outside of the building this tall? That’s a lot of ceiling to stack one on top of the other.* A huge chandelier provided light for the place, and racks of books stretched endlessly in all directions. The floors were carpeted in a rich red, there were tables, desks, and areas with squishy beanbag looking chairs to read in. Tapestries covered the walls, making the place look more inviting, and were those fireplaces I saw along the walls? That cozy glow could only be made by real fire, right? A huge staircase in front of us led to yet another level, with more books beyond. Everything wood looked to be a rich mahogany or something, what did I know about different types of wood? But the place smelled of ink and paper, the first scent of anything I had smelled since I got here, and I realized the answer to my question *was here before he even spoke.*

“Here you will find books on any subject, from how to dig sewers to how to erect skyscrapers. You’ll first want the manuals for the machines downstairs I expect, with a bit of practice you’ll be using them in no time. Then you can worry about how to shape glass, how to mix chemicals, all that stuff. It’s all here. Please, take a look. Let’s go over there first.” He pointed in a random direction and we moved as a group, all of us a bit awed by the sheer number of books we were in the presence of. “Even how to create the latest in quantum processors found on Earth,” he went on. “And it’ll update itself too. If they discover some new process on Earth, it’ll be reflected here instantly. Of course if you come up with something novel using the new materials we’ve provided that discovery too will be reflected across all libraries here. And it’s not just technical manuals, either. On the second floor you’ll find books on a wide variety of subjects such as psychology, ethics, even fiction. Every book, every play, every published journal entry is here somewhere, from the beginning of human history to today. You don’t want to see the card catalog,” he joked. “And the same principal applies here. One person takes a book down, that’s not the only copy, another person can take a copy of that same book down. But it’s the *same* book, you see? So if you make a note in one it’ll be reflected in all copies. I’m especially proud of that property. Books away from shelves last for 24 hours and then sort of dissolve, so you’ll have to come get them again. Didn’t want you making a book fort or anything instead of building real buildings.” He paused for laughter.

But I was only half listening at that point. Something in the distance caught my eye. Something impossible, even beyond what I had seen already today. Infinite warehouses full of tools and raw material? Please, ho hum, so boring. Lame, even. But this?

“Michael, what is that?” I demanded to know, pointing.

Chapter 2

Getting some answers at last

When: Just then

Where: The great library

“What? The section on magic?” he asked, looking confused.

“Magic?” everyone seemed to say and started cramming in to look.

“Ah, that’s right!” He snapped his fingers. “You don’t have that on Earth, do you? I always forget. Yes, the founders were adamant about including it, or something like it. One of the founders, a woman named Tahani made it her mission to start learning everything she could about every subject on Earth. From wielding to growing bonsai trees. But she worried that with an unlimited time to study eventually she would run out of things to learn. But with magic in place around here, and the uses of magic being nearly infinite, we included it here for your enjoyment.”

“We can do magic?” I asked, a tiny spark of hope kindling inside me for the first time.

“You can do magic,” he assured me.

“Like, honest to goodness magic? Incantations? Say a few words, wave your hands around, and you get a result? Not just illusion and slight of hand like we have on Earth?”

“It more hands seals, but yes, that kind of magic.”

“Oh.” *Maybe lead with that next time? I don’t know.* “And it’s useful? It could help us in our current situation? Building, creating?”

“Magic can do almost anything.”

“Now you have my attention.”

“I’m glad to see you interested in something. You can always come back here and look later. For now shall we continue?”

“Of course,” I waved him forward. *But I know where I’m coming back to when I get the chance.*

We completed the tour, him showing us the various sections and how to navigate the place. There were signs hung everywhere that pointed towards the exits, and at the end of each row was a map. The place was huge, even packed together on shelves taller than the tallest person here the accumulated knowledge of mankind was going to take up a few volumes. And it was *all* here, from how to make and play musical instruments to how to bake a pretty cake. Of course books were duplicated so there wasn’t exactly one copy of any book anywhere. You could find, for example, a book on growing the perfect apple tree in the fruit section, the trees section, the farming section, and the genetic engineering section. It was all the same book, like Michael had said earlier, just placed in multiple locations so whatever you thought it should fall under, you could find it. Finally we gathered in the entrance again and Michael asked Janet for the chairs back. “In a circle, maybe? Just here?” He made a circle with his finger and she nodded. “Of course Michael.” She gestured, and the chairs were back.

Oh ho, I have to get my hands on some books of magic. I mean come on. That’s what she must be doing, to have created these out of nothing, right? Magic! Can you believe it? Real magic!

“Everyone have a seat, and let’s get your questions out of the way.”

As they got settled everyone was looking to me, and I sighed. *That’s what you get, speaking up like that before.* “Fine,” I told them. “I’ll start.” *But where to start?* I looked down at the Midveil brochure in my hand and gave a quick nod. “Right, start here.” I shook the thing at him. “What exactly is Midveil? Where are we?”

“This is a place between The Good Place and The Bad Place,” he began. “Newly opened to residents once we discovered the point system wasn’t exactly working out as intended anymore.”

“Purgatory?” one person asked. “Is that where we are?”

Michael looked uncomfortable. “We don’t use specific names like that,” he hedged. “They come with a lot of negative connotations, in many cultures. But if it helps you think of it like that, be my guest. It’s a stop on your larger journey, let’s say that much.”

“Larger journey?”

“That’s right!” he brightened. “There is a good chance each and every one of you will one day go to The Good Place. Earning points will be tougher here, it’s true, but our success condition for the Midveil experiment is a single person qualifying for ascension. That happens and we know it can work, and the program goes full speed ahead. Everybody migrates here and starts building. Failure would be, I guess, a number of years and no one earns enough points and things not working out here. I mean we’ll figure we’ll know it when we see it. If the Bad Place people start crowing about how bad the place is, that’s a good sign. I don’t know what will happen in that case. We’ll have to come up with something else but I don’t know what. It took us so long just to agree on this place.” He shuddered.

“So that’s why there’s nothing here?” I pressed. “This place has existed but was never really used before?”

“Yes!” He seemed pleased to be away from the subject. “When The Good Place people were negotiating with The Bad Place people-”

“People?” one woman blurted. “You keep saying people. You can’t be people like us, can you? There must be angels, there have to be!”

“Celestials,” he clarified. “We’re celestials, as a common term. Again, angels, demons, we don’t like those sorts of labels. Too much baggage around those terms. No matter who we ‘worked for’ if you will, Good or Bad Place, we are all celestial beings. These human looking bodies are for your protection. You wouldn’t like seeing me as a truly am, believe me you wouldn’t. Even the least attractive celestials can blind with how beautiful they are. But we are not, strictly speaking, angels or demons as you might find in religious texts on Earth. The truth of our existence is far more complex than your ancient scholars would have been able to imagine. But please think of me simply as you see me. Michael, here to help. Not a celestial but just a person who has been here awhile. Janet by the way is different again, she’s something else.”

“Not a girl,” said Janet.

“Right. Think of her as an Artificial Intelligence, the ultimate artificial intelligence actually, projected into your reality from a central processing core containing all the knowledge of the universe. She can also create anything you can think of, she made the warehouses and everything in them. She’s where all the books came from, she’s that library too.”

“Just in a far more cute and compact form,” Janet agreed with a grin and a wave. “Hiya!”

“So do you know kung fu?” asked a man.

“I do know kung fu.”

“Cool.”

“Why do they always ask that?” Michael muttered. “Anyway, where was I?”

“We’re not people,” Janet reminded him.

“Right. When the four founders, who were people by the way, the Judge, and various celestials such as myself from either side got together we realized something had to be done. *This*, Midveil, is that something. We can’t do away with the points system, but we can work within it. So, in a nutshell, anyone with negative one or less points goes to The Bad Place, as always. Those with zero to four million points come here. Anyone with five million or more goes to The Good Place. But this place can’t be bad or good, you see? Compromise. But we did agree to give you the library, and the materials, and the machines. If you want a paradise, build it. If what you build is crappy and you’re all miserable, well, that’s on you. We can’t interfere. But at the same time we don’t know if this system is going to work any better than the old one. Janet may know every fact about every person on Earth, and be able to predict the future there, but here anything could happen. So we need to do a trial, see what shakes out. That’s all of you. Randomly selected to come here from the available souls at that instant, we

picked out a random five hundred. If you can make it, if you can build a life for yourselves here then the floodgates open and everyone from The Bad Place that has served their time can come here too. Everyone that dies on Earth gets their point total calculated and can come here. Right now they just go into a waiting area, they aren't aware time is passing. It's up to you all to determine if this will work, or if the Judge just pushes the button that resets everything. She was strangely adamant about doing that, almost gleeful, one might say. We offered this as a solution and she took it, but we don't want to tempt her again by letting this fail. But it's up to all of you, I can't interfere beyond general advice and such. Both sides agreed to that, given my history of meddling in things. They both wanted a fair contest. If that's even the right word."

So no pressure.

"There's a button for that?" someone asked, horrified. "It's not a two part switch or a password protected system or anything? It's just a button?"

"Yes. Don't worry, it's under lock and key. You're safe for now."

"Uh huh..."

If I was designing a universe, I would have left that part out.

"Does that answer the question?"

"That one, I guess. It raises five more. Founders? Points? Judge?"

"Don't worry about any of that for now."

"Fine. Tell us about this place. What do we have to work with out there?"

"Janet, can I get a map?" Michael asked. "Say 5,000 kilometers out?"

"Sure thing, Michael." She gestured, and a map appeared floating in the air. It was mostly empty space, but I saw what appeared to be a house some distance away, along with train tracks and some bodies of water. Otherwise there were black rectangles and green grass.

"Here's us," he told us, pointing to the center black rectangle. "Every 200 kilometers is another warehouse. We didn't want you to have to drive materials all over creation from this one spot after all. They're connected via underground tunnels too, so if you want to move between them you pretty easily can. There are natural lakes, rivers, and streams dotting the landscape but it's mostly empty space. It's up to you to figure out what you want to build and where you want to build it. The train tracks lead to The Good and Bad places, and that's the home of Mindy the original resident. The only person ever to get exactly zero points at the moment of her death. I'm sure you'll meet her eventually. Don't try following the tracks. Without Janet summoning a specific train, they'll just seem to be endless. Not that you would want to go to The Bad Place but you can't break into The Good Place either. Let's see, it's summer time here now, I would call it mid-summer, and yes you'll get all the seasons. Again, balance, because some people prefer summer and some winter. We can't make everyone happy all of the time. That's what The Good Place is for. You'll have a day/night cycle, though as souls you don't need to sleep if you don't want to. It's more, again, because some people like the night better than the day. Balance. There is a moon, and stars, though I supposed trying to reach them would be pointless. The grass doesn't grow, don't worry about cutting it or anything, but any seeds you plant will grow. Man, what am I forgetting? I'll be around you know, you can always ask stuff later, I just can't physically help you."

"There are seeds too?" a woman asked. "I can have a garden, like I did when I was... alive?"

"Yes, in the raw materials section, look around you'll find them."

"Okay."

"Does that cover it?"

"So there's weather?" I asked.

"Yes, all sorts. You'll get rain, snow, winds, nothing too destructive of course. No tornadoes or huge blizzards. No earthquakes, volcanoes, or meteor strikes. I mean we have to draw the line somewhere!"

What about giant monster attacks? Any of those? But that does mean we'll have to build houses, unless we want to freeze in the snow for months at a time. Great. “Thank you for that. And it's unlimited? The space? I mean if we're eventually going to host every person that ever died and didn't have enough of these points for The Good Place, we're going to need a lot of space!”

“Unlimited in all directions, that's right.”

“That can't be true,” I protested. “I saw the mountains in the distance. Or is there a land beyond?”

He shook his head. “That's an illusion. Travel thousands of kilometers in one direction, and those so called mountains will still look exactly as far away as they do now. We did that just to give you something to focus on. You may have noticed that as souls you have perfect vision. Better than perfect, as far as humans go. While you still can't see an infinite distance of course, the mountains are for your... I don't want to say protection...”

“I understand. Its just more comfortable for us than just seeing to an infinite horizon.” *As presumably this place is actually flat, not a sphere floating in space. I wonder what we could do to find out? Build a balloon? But no a sphere would be finite, it must be a plane. It simply extends to infinity. To infinity, and beyond.*

“Exactly.”

“Okay you said we don't have to sleep.” I waited for his nod. “Do we have to eat? I mean I feel like myself, am I going to feel like myself only hungry in a few hours? I can't eat gold, unless I can now?”

He shook his head. “The energy of this place sustains you. But we realize eating is a social activity and who can resist an ice cream from time to time? That's why we've put seeds on the list, so you can grow things to eat.”

“And what about bacon?” one man asked. “Didn't see any pigs around here. You got any bacon seeds?”

“Ah.” He looked a bit concerned. “No meat in Midveil, I'm afraid. You're all officially vegetarians. Oh don't get me wrong Janet could whip up some spiritual pigs but killing them the same thing would happen if you got killed. They would just vanish. You wouldn't get any meat out of it.”

Wait there's no cows either so how would we get cream for ice cream? “Hold on, we can die? Here?” I asked. “But we're already dead, how does *that* work?”

“You can be hurt or killed, yes,” he agreed. “If you get run over by a truck, you'll know it. Everything is spirit energy here, so naturally you're vulnerable to it. You believe you have bones that can break, blood that can leak. So that sort of thing can happen here too. But your 'death' wouldn't be permanent. You'll come back into existence with the next sunrise, at the location you designate in your mind as 'home.' Fully healed, ready for action.”

I guess that's something.

“But I was talking about seeds. All plants will seem to grow here as you expect, maybe a little faster? Naturally we chose the best seed stock. And of course you can do selective breeding as well, choosing the best plants to take seeds from to get even better plants the next time. You're a little late in the season for planting anything but trees for this year, so just plan out where you might want some fields for next spring.”

Ah, so that's another reason to have seasons and weather, even plants in the afterlife need spiritual watering?

“But if Janet could make us pigs, why not just skip all the messy slaughtering and make us ham directly?” the same man pressed.

“I can... And I can't,” she explained.

“Huh?”

“If this was The Good Place, you could just ask for anything you wanted, no matter how fantastical.” She closed her hand and a metal tube appeared in it. She flicked a switch and a beam of energy shot out, which she waved around. It made a distinctive noise. “This is always a popular request

for some reason.” She flicked it off and the tube vanished. “But this is Midveil. The only way The Bad Place agreed to even let you have this place was if I didn’t lift a finger to help you. So anything you want you have to make yourself. I’m sorry. We didn’t really think about food items you can’t get any other way. We’ll have to have another meeting with them and see if they agree.”

“Please do, if it’s not too much trouble. An eternity without bacon? That’s just not right.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” Michael promised him.

“You said we shouldn’t try to sneak into The Good Place,” I went on when no one asked anything next. “But is the opposite true? If we have relatives there can they come and see us?”

“Eventually, yes,” he agreed. “But given how the system broke down, no one has gone to The Good Place in about two hundred years.”

“What?” everyone exclaimed.

“I know. I had the same reaction,” he admitted. “That’s why we had to spring into action. So unless some of you died more than two hundred years ago no one is coming from that direction. In any case, we’ve closed that off for now. We want you to succeed or fail on your own. You get famous designers or engineers from there to help and that invalidates the test. We need to know if regular people off the street can ‘make it’ here, what they do once they get here. If you all just fall into a torpor, and get depressed, and lay in the snow a few months from now and freeze to death every day we know we got it wrong.”

It’s a test, and all of humanity is at stake. Every person ever born, we are holding their future, their eternity, in the palm of our hands. Are we up to it? I hope so. Looking around I don’t see a lot of confidence here. Everyone looks more worried than ever. I need to reassure them, somehow. “Fine,” I told him, standing up. I looked around at everyone. “If we get one shot, we take the shot. I’ve always believed people have a great potential within them, let’s see if I’m right. Everyone, we can do this, I’m sure of it.”

“That’s the spirit!” Michael praised.

“Yeah, we can do this,” said a man, nodding. “Read those books, figure out how to use the equipment. Use magic. We can shelter here this winter if we don’t get too much built. They have to give us a year, I mean come on. We’ll show these celestials what we can do if we put our minds to it!”

“Yeah!” more people said, jumping up. “We can do it!”

“So where do we start?” one asked.

Everyone looked around at everyone else. *Yeah, that’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?*

Chapter 3

Getting a little organized

When: A moment has passed

Where: Library in Midveil

Everyone looked around at everyone else, and I could imagine why. *Rebuilding civilization from scratch, where do you start? How do you start? It's just such a gargantuan task...* "We have to break it down," I decided. Everyone looked to me again.

"What do you mean?" one man asked me.

"I mean the job as a whole is just too big. Restart civilization from scratch? Okay we've got a lot of materials there's no doubt about it but the modern world is supported by things that have been built up for hundreds of years. Sewers, power lines, whatever the heck runs the backbone of the internet. Natural gas pipes. We need to start small and work our way up, just like we did when we were alive. Right?"

There were general nods of agreement.

"Okay, fine. Someone, uh, you." I pointed at random at a youngish looking man. "Run down and grab a bunch of paper. I saw a huge spool of it, right?"

"There's paper," Michael agreed.

"Great. Grab some. As we can't ask Janet to make us some..."

"Sorry," she said sadly.

"It's fine. We need to create some maps, put down on paper where things are going to go. Now, aren't there city building games? I'm sure I had a friend that was into one. City something? City builder?"

"There's City Skylines," said a kid. "And the game that came before it. Sim City. I played both of those a bunch over the years!"

I looked him over, he looked twelve. "Uh, how old are you?"

"I'm eighty four."

Everyone burst out laughing.

"What?" he asked petulantly.

"Oh, right, don't let appearances fool you," Michael told us. "He probably is."

"Explain?" I suggested.

"You're souls now," he told us. "To a certain extent, you have become how you see yourself. This man still sees himself as a twelve year old boy. So, here, in this place, he expresses as a twelve year old boy. At the moment you all look human, but with the right amount of self reflection you could just as easily have cat ears or devil horns. You yourself, Denice, look to be about twenty five. But how old are you?"

Never ask a lady her age, but twenty five? "I'm fifty-ish," I said, putting my hands to my face. "Are you serious?"

Nods all around. *Oh man, for a mirror, my kingdom for a mirror.*

"So you're eighty four?" I asked the not-kid.

"That's right. Stefan Brandt, at your service." He bowed. "I must warn you though I was never all that *good* at Skylines. I pattered around and had some fun but this is our actual lives we're talking about here. Our un-lives?"

"Unless there's an actual city planner around here..." I waited. No one spoke up. "You're it, kid. While we're getting some paper maybe get some books on city planning? There must be something like that."

"Oh sure," Janet told us. "I... can't tell you their titles or anything."

"I'm happy to look," he told us, not sounding all that happy about it.

“Great. Uh, you, you, you, and you.” I pointed to four people randomly. “Grab an armload of books. Whatever you think we need in the short term. Making wire, making electricity, making pipes, making roads, house construction.”

“Maybe we should just bring up one of every book,” the second guy grumbled.

“No, she’s on the right track but that’s going too far,” the third guy insisted. “Just focus on large scale stuff for now. Making wire, making pipes, houses can come last. We need to know what we’re in for, what sort of factories we need to build to make the things to build into houses when we start building them.”

“Or should they come first?” asked the fourth guy. “It rains two days from now I would rather have an unpowered roof over my head than a bunch of wire sitting somewhere to be strung up. Plus what are we going to power with electricity even if we figure out how to make it? *You* know how to make light bulbs?”

Right, can’t make toasters, don’t have bread. Don’t need refrigeration, we have no food. No TV, as no actors or artists or broadcast towers. We know all these things are possible, yes, but we have to make factories to make all those things and right now all we have are empty fields.

“I... don’t...” the second admitted. “Huh. You’re right. What *should* we build first?”

“First we have to know we can use those machines down there,” said the first guy. “I say we get those manuals and look them over. Maybe practice digging some holes? Pouring some foundations?”

“See, that’s the difference between a game and real un-life,” explained Stefan. “In the game I just pointed my mouse at where pipes, or roads, or wires, or where houses needed to be. And they magically appeared. Or I could make them magically vanish too. But we spend two weeks putting up wires and then realize, uh oh, we did it totally wrong now we’ve lost those two weeks and will lose more time fixing the issue.”

“He’s got a point,” said the second man.

“Okay,” I decided. “Still get paper, still get city planning books, you and you,” I pointed to two ladies, “get books on village planning, like, you know a medieval village? We got along just fine without power for what, thousands of years of recorded history. We can get along for a few here while we get things going. See what they did. How did they make roads? How were their houses made? That sort of thing.”

“Right, on it.”

“You four get books on how to use the equipment. The big stuff, like the cement trucks and earth movers. Peasants may have built everything by hand but we can speed things up using the machines we’ve been given. May as well take advantage.”

“Right!” said the four.

“You and you,” I pointed to a man and a woman. “Bring up some books on beginner magic. Maybe we can skip all building if magic can just plop a house down somewhere. Let’s see what it can do for us in the short term.”

“You got it.”

They scattered, but other people stood up.

“If it’s okay I’ll go look into making pipes,” said one man. “I was a plumber so I know how to fit them together but not exactly how they were made. Before we pour any foundations we’ll want to put pipes in place. I mean people are going to want water in their houses, right?”

“Sure, go for it.”

“I’ll be back.”

He left.

“Er, I have a question for Michael,” one woman spoke up. “Siew Yan She, nice to meet everyone.”

“Hello Siew Yan, what’s the question?” he asked.

“As we’re souls can we get pregnant?”

“If that was your hope, I’m going to have to say I’m afraid not. If you didn’t ever want to, then no, luckily you can’t.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you.”

“So wait, there’s no disease here, is there?” asked a man.

“No disease, that’s right. No viruses, bacteria, fungi... Anything you don’t want anymore can be recycled with the special bins in the warehouse. No need to wait for things to break down or anything. Because they won’t, is what I’m saying.”

“And no pregnancy?”

“I see what you’re getting at.”

“Do you?” He wiggled his eyebrows up and down.

“Yes.”

And please stop that, it’s creepy.

He turned to the group. “Don’t you think that’s pretty amazing? Think about what that means!”

Everyone around the circle indicated that yes, that could be pretty amazing now that they thought about it. Siew Yan didn’t exactly seem thrilled though.

I wonder if she had a rough time of it, back when she was alive? “I admit that once we’re all toasty warm with blankets and shelter and a fireplace we may want to explore the possibilities of what a ‘free love’ society might actually look like but for now we- What are you doing?” I demanded of a man who was currently tearing his shirt off. “This isn’t the time for that, what was I just saying?!”

“No, no, it just made me think of it.” He looked down at himself. “Look at me! I’m not pudgy anymore.” He flexed. “I’m not a bodybuilder either. What gives?”

“You just see yourself as normal,” Michael explained. “Your ‘bodies’ if you want to call them that are basically perfect, without going too far into any extreme. I mean if you really thought you should be overweight you would start to look like that over time.”

“But doing physical labor or working out wouldn’t get me anywhere because I’m a soul and technically don’t have muscles anymore?”

“Not true. Working out you would expect to see ‘gains’ I believe your people call them. So you would see ‘gains.’ It just depends on your strength of will if you could see ‘gains’ without doing the physical labor that in a physical body would produce those changes.”

“I get it. Well!” he announced. “A perfect body and no consequences. Things are looking up.” He put his shirt back on.

No consequences? If that’s what you think you’ve never tried to have a relationship with two people at the same time. Imagine if everyone can have a different partner every day of the week? What does that mean for the type of society we’re going to build here? Or does it mean anything?

When the paper arrived and we found some pencils in the library below (that stayed there even after we took them, which was pretty trippy all by itself) I folded it into a large square and set it on the ground. I made a square in the middle, then tore the paper where I had folded it. Thus I had a straight edge (of sorts) and was able to use that to make a grid. By that time everyone had come back, and Stefan was looking through his city planning book.

“Now we don’t have roads,” he began. “In Skylines I could put factories anywhere because trucks could go back and forth between them. Not so much here. So I propose we designate this section,” he put a squiggly line in a square around the warehouse, “as land for factories. That way raw material can flow out and simply be brought next door to where it’s turned into goods. Those goods then exit the back to the houses, here.” He pointed to the area outside the square. “With each square here being at least a couple of kilometers that should give us plenty of room.”

“We need to not make the same mistakes though,” said a man. “I’m Ramesh, and I am from India. Air quality there is terrible, and getting worse all the time. We have to do things the right way, to make

sure we do not spoil the air and water here. We will be living here a long time, perhaps even longer than when we were on Earth. We cannot be careless like we were in life.”

Everyone agreed this was sensible.

“Making pipes is going to be a problem,” announced the plumber. “This entire book is dedicated to making copper pipes.” He slammed it down. “We would need several factories just for this task. Taking the raw material and melting it, which means taking it up to over a thousand degrees Celsius, deoxidizing it which traditionally on Earth was done by adding phosphorus, keep oxygen away from it while it’s being poured into huge molds, (which we made beforehand... somehow?) which just make solid tubes of copper, then you core them out, then you squish them in another machine to reduce the diameter and make the walls thicker, then you anneal it, that’s another 700 degrees Celsius, clean it, and finally you’re done. The molds need to be iron, I would assume, to stand up to the heat. So we would have to make them first. And furnaces, and of course we’re burning stuff to make it that hot so we’re going to get smoke we need to deal with. It might take all us just to do that!”

“Then that will have to come later,” I admitted.

“You know what we could do?” Stefan decided. “Dig channels in the ground and pour concrete or something in them so they stay empty. Cover them up so people don’t fall in them, and just mark where they are. Then we can shove in pipes, wires, whatever we want later, easy. Then we don’t have to rip up houses to put pipes under them once we have pipes.”

“Yeah that could work,” the plumber admitted. “Access points every so often. We could do houses the same way. Leave a lot of access points in the walls, so we can run things more easily when the time comes.”

“I think that’s our priority,” I told everyone. “Housing. Let’s get some walls between us and the elements first, it’ll be winter before we know it. And we’ll need to figure out how to heat our pipes or they’ll be freezing, which would really be a problem. So forget that for now. Heck, even if we don’t have interior walls yet, that’s better than nothing.”

“You want to make five hundred houses in a couple of months?” said one man. “That doesn’t seem possible even with us all working together.”

“No,” I admitted. “It’ll have to be larger structures, and for the moment each person just gets a room and several roommates. You just need a quiet place to sleep, if you wanted to. We don’t have any stuff to put in any rooms so they don’t have to be big. Technically they’re just a place snow isn’t, so when it’s winter we have places to go and not freeze to... further unlife.”

“Maybe make greenhouses? That could help keep us warm too,” someone suggested. “And we could grow some stuff in them too at the edges.”

“There is glass making material available in the warehouse,” Janet told us. “That is a possibility, glass is not that hard to make, if you take magic into account.”

“There are various examples of houses in the books on the middle ages,” one of the woman who went to get those books said. “Does that book have blueprints as well?” she asked Stefan.

“Yes, though reading them is going to be tricky.”

“These seem simple enough,” she told us, showing them by spinning the book around. “Something like a longhouse would be easy to put up. I hope?”

“Hummm,” Stefan mused. “At ten people per house that’s 50 of these things. Each one would have to be... Let’s see each room should be 10 meters square, right? So 50 meters long, 30 meters wide so there’s a hallway in the middle. Put some distance between them so the machines can maneuver around, say another ten to twenty meters. Oh my goodness we need to invent calculators right away!”

“Never mind that,” I told him. “We just make houses until everyone is housed. We can even have teams making different types to see which is easiest, most sturdy, and will keep out the cold the best.”

“But do we put them in a circle, in a grid?” the woman asked. She showed us pictures of various villages in the book.

“On the one hand we don’t have to be space efficient, we won’t run out,” I told them. “But on the other we don’t have vehicles, who wants to walk everywhere?”

“Especially to the bath house,” Siew Yan agreed.

“Bath house?” I asked.

“Sure.” She looked confused. “We are building things like that, right? If we’re going to be working every day in the hot sun, we’re going to want to bathe even if there’s no bacteria here to make us smelly. I assumed we would pencil in a space for a bath house.” She tapped the map with a finger.

“Until we get home plumbing working.”

“And washing our clothes,” another woman said. “We’ll need a place to do that. Repairing them by hand is going to be a nightmare, but at least you can do that anywhere.”

Making completely new ones will be worse though. There may be sewing machines down there not just construction equipment but that’s still a lot of work.

“We could divert some of the stream that’s nearby to run through the village we’re making,” Stefan agreed. “Just scoop out a channel with an earth mover. The bath house and laundry could then sit next to them.” He made some marks on the map and put some squares he labeled with a 1 and 2, noting what they were on the side.

“Factories will need water too, don’t forget,” said Remesh.

“Oh yeah.” He went to erase the line, thought better of it, and just added another that flowed past the space he had reserved for “factories.”

“Ugh, we haven’t been here an hour and already we’re planning on ripping the countryside up,” someone remarked.

“I don’t think it can be helped,” I remarked. “No water source is near enough a warehouse so even if we went to another one first we would be in the same boat.”

“Yeah I guess. Still seems wrong though.”

“Speaking of things that seem wrong,” said Ramesh. “How are we going to insure everyone works?”

“Why wouldn’t they?” I asked.

“Once someone got their house put up, what incentive do they have to help put other houses up? Or build factories? Or do anything, really!”

“Of course everyone is going to help their community!”

He looked at me like I was crazy, which I had to admit that statement did sound a bit Disney. “Okay, maybe not. What do you suggest? I hope you’re not suggesting some kind of currency? Because that doesn’t seem feasible around here and I’m not going back to having rich people and poor people *in the afterlife*. People complaining about socialism back on Earth can at least make some good points because until we have a space based economy up and running, resources are scarce. Not so much here, we need to be better than we were, and not allow anyone to be homeless *at a minimum*.”

He shrugged. “What else is there? I know we have unlimited quantities of resources, but there must be something that’s still rare enough one would work to accumulate it.”

“Favors?” one man asked with a wink.

“There is,” Michael broke in. “The points.”

“You told us the points didn’t matter!” I insisted.

“I said not to worry about them at that particular moment. Remember, your goal here is still to get into The Good Place. You do that by earning points. You earn points by doing good in the community. Anyone that doesn’t do at least some good in the community will never earn points and thus, never enter The Good Place. They want to sit around here for all eternity and do nothing, well, that’s on them.”

“I guess that’s acceptable,” Ramesh said.

“And of course you can trade them,” Janet told us. “If say someone liked making baskets and you needed one, you could give that person some points in exchange for the goods. Get them closer to entering The Good Place at your expense. It could be used as a currency.”

“You say of course like we should know all that,” I told her, after looking around the room. No one else seemed to know what she was talking about.

“Your status screen shows how many points- you really didn’t get *anything* out of the presentation did you?”

“Status screen?” To my surprise a semi-transparent “window” appeared in front of me, making me jump back. It moved with me, so I just leaned away from it.

“It won’t bite you,” she informed me with a trace of annoyance.

“And this is my... You know?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” I looked it over, meanwhile everyone else was saying “status screen” and looking theirs over too. It had my name, my current “stats” and at the bottom corner a point total of over 9,000! In fact it was closer to three million, as realized as I counted digits. *Not bad, not bad at all if I do say so myself.* Everyone was expressing their amazement at this new revelation but I was a little more focused on practicality. “Give five points to Siew Yan She,” I said to the air. Bing! My point total went down by five, and she lit up.

“I got five points! Thanks!”

“I guess we know it works.” I hit the X in the upper corner and it vanished. “Any other surprises like that?”

Both Michael and Janet shook their heads.

“Fine, we can mess with that later. Does that answer your concern, Stefan?”

“It does. If I help build a house for my neighbors and someone else doesn’t, and I get points and they don’t, that’s totally fair. I’ll wave goodbye to them on the train to The Good Place.”

“Great. My next concern is magic. What can it do for us in the short, medium, and long terms?” I turned to the two looking over the magical books.

“As far as that goes,” said one. “I’ve got your basic good news/bad news situation. Which do you want first?”

Chapter 4

We get the ball rolling

When: Still at the initial planning session

Where: Library portion of the warehouse

“Give me the bad news first,” I told her, trying to brace myself. *There’s some kind of horrible cost to it, isn’t there? Or you have to bleed yourself, or give up part of your essence every time you cast a spell, so you become lesser and lesser until one day you just vanish?*

“Okay. It turns out all people can’t do all magic.”

“Right,” said the other one. “It seems people have an affinity to a certain type, though there is certain magic that anyone can do that has no type. But that’s more rare.”

“That doesn’t sound nearly as bad as I was thinking, don’t scare me like that! What are the affinities?”

“There’s wood, fire, earth, metal, water, and celestial,” the first explained.

“Very rare for a mortal to have the last one,” Michael informed us. “No one here does. I mean no mortal here does. I mean no former mortal- you know what I mean. I have it, most celestials do.”

No surprise there. “So what does that mean for us exactly?”

“It means some shortcuts do exist. For example, someone with a metal affinity could probably use magic to make wire, or pipes. Because *they* can manipulate metal but someone with a water affinity could not. Someone with a fire affinity could heat metal up, but not shape it. Someone with an earth affinity could find metal in the ground, if we didn’t just have crates of it downstairs but you get the idea. A metal spell that can shape a big, molten ball of metal can make us all the pipe or wire we need. No need for big machines!”

“So we basically just have to work together?” I decided. “That doesn’t seem so bad.” *As long as the affinities are somewhat evenly split among us, that is, and metal spell users don’t mind learning that magic.*

“The good news is, magic *can* do just about anything. You just have to practice the right spell.”

“And what’s a spell in this case?”

“Using hand gestures to basically manipulate certain energies both within and without, it says here. There’s a table of them, and descriptions on how to feel out and utilize those energies.”

“But how do we know what our affinity is?” Siew Yan asked. “Do we just have to guess, try spells until something works?”

“These.” She put her hand on a stack of paper squares she had brought with her. “Everyone that’s interested, take one. Put it between your hands and concentrate on it. Apparently we’ll get a result that should let us know.”

A bunch of us shrugged and she handed them out to us, and we stood for a moment, our eyes closed concentrating on the feel of the paper between our hands. Mine turned into so much water my hands flew apart and splattered the people near me. “Oh!”

I opened my eyes and saw the others had gotten some measure of success as well. Stefan almost dropped his, it was red and clearly looked charred, while Ramesh was holding a small pile of dirt. Siew Yan held up the two pieces hers had become with a confused look on her face.

“Ah, someone with a dual nature,” Michael told her. “That’s pretty rare as well. Looks like you’re both wood and metal. And Denice, well done. Looks like your magic will be particularly strong.”

“Thanks?” *Don’t know what I did to deserve that, but I’ll take it. Interesting about Siew Yan though. One of her pieces does have a metallic sheen, and the other has what appears to be a wood grain pattern. Interesting.* “What if someone *did* have celestial type?” I asked. “What would that look like?”

He reached over for a paper himself, holding it just between two fingers. It started to glow.

“That figures. Did everyone get a result?”

Everyone nodded, smiling.

“Great.” *So that much checks out. We can all use magic. I hope that will make our lives easier, especially in these early days.* I looked around, and no one type seemed to outnumber the others so I figured we were okay in that department. “Those of us interested in magic should start picking up ‘spells’ we think can be immediately useful for helping to build our houses. Meanwhile mark off where the houses should go, where the river should go, and note down any other buildings you think might be useful. We don’t need defensive walls because mongol hordes aren’t coming over the horizon, nor do we need stables because we don’t have any horses. No restaurants, no food yet. No stores, we have no goods to buy or sell. But there could be something, we’ll need to plan out where things go. We could probably use sand or rocks to mark them out, everyone talk to Stefan about that. He’s our foreman I guess.” *That way we can visualize a bit where things are before we start digging the ground up. Make sure the trucks can get through, that sort of thing.*

“I said I was terrible at it, remember? Are you sure you want *me* to do it?”

“See if you can find anyone else that played those sorts of games, put your heads together. Anyone with even the remotest experience is all we’ve got at the moment, so just do your best. Think of it as temporary anyway. A proving ground, if you will. We bunk up this winter, see what worked and what didn’t, by next spring we’ll know more magic, have invented things, and can just knock it all down, recycle everything, and do it better the next time.”

“Yeah I guess.”

“Wait though,” said a voice. A woman stepped forward. “Before we just head off to start doing our own thing, I think we need to set some ground rules or something. I mean we’re a nation without laws at the moment. How do we govern ourselves? What’s illegal here and what isn’t? You seem to have stepped up and taken control, and I have no problem with that but shouldn’t we actually vote on who we want to lead us?”

“But no one knows anyone here,” protested another. “How can we vote? I say let Denice lead us until we see she’s either screwed it up so badly someone else has to step in and shut her down or she doesn’t want the job anymore. She’s doing great so far as far as I can tell. I mean I figured I would be freaking out learning I was dead but everyone is here, talking stuff over calmly, and we have some idea what we’re doing. She took charge of us, and if it doesn’t work we know who to blame too.” He chuckled.

“I think,” said Stefan, “there’s a reason we’re not freaking out, and that we’re just calmly sitting here. Deep down on some level we know we’re dead.” He paused, looking around. “I mean can’t you feel it? Like Michael said when we arrived, we’re dead and there’s nothing we can do about it. There’s no denying that field out there, or the warehouse, or the library.” He rapped on the table. “Feels real to me. This is our reality now. I mean yes it’s a shock but we all knew our demise would happen one day. And maybe this isn’t the afterlife we imagined for ourselves but it is *an* afterlife. We’re not in The Bad Place, we have a chance to ascend, even with nothing to our names but our clothes and a pamphlet on the afterlife I think we have it pretty good. Of course it could be we no longer have brains, so hello immunity to zombies!” Everyone tittered. “But what I mean is, there’s probably not mental illness here either, as most of those are physically based in the brain and not simply thought patterns. We’re not in pain, we’re as perfect as we think we are, and this place just feels a little bit unreal. That’s not to say you haven’t stepped up, Denice, you did! But I think that’s why we haven’t panicked and gone into fight or flight mode. That’s a physical response, and face it: we’re not physical anymore. And I don’t know what that means, what ‘physical’ law, if any, actually exists here. Is gravity still as strong? Is lightspeed the same speed? Until we can measure it we won’t know. But we have enough people here that, working together, I bet we can come up with something special.”

Nice speech. Thanks. “If someone thinks they can do a better job than me, they’re welcome to it,” I told them. “But right now we’re just focused on getting ready for the coming winter. I’m not telling

anyone exactly what to do, I'm suggesting that if you don't want to freeze for a couple of months help yourself. And there's all sorts of work to be done. If you've always wanted to get into the cabin of a dump truck now's your chance. If you want to study magic, or make blankets, or help figure out where to put everything, go for it. There's lots to be done and we have to figure out how to do it all from scratch. Instruction manuals are all well and good, but we still need practical experience. But I agree," I glanced over at Siew Yan, "we should have some ground rules in place. This isn't anything goes, but at the same time I don't think we shouldn't stick to the laws of the living mindlessly. We'll have to take a look at what best serves *us* in this place. Did you have something in mind?"

"Yes," said the woman. "And I think it is sort of anything goes. Anything that doesn't harm another person in some way should be allowed. You of course have to prove actual harm, not just 'oh I think that's icky what that person is doing' and punishment should be relative to the crime. We don't want to start building jails after all."

"What, so if you're caught stealing you get your hands cut off?" scoffed one man.

"That sounds about right," she agreed. "Or you have all your own stuff taken away."

"You can't be serious!"

"I am. That's why I bring it up now, while we're all here, so we can agree on it. Back when we were alive there were too many laws, I'm sure you would agree with that."

"I suppose."

"And as soon as some new thing came along, like vaping, new laws had to be put in place. We need the simplest law possible that covers every situation old and new. You want to vape, is it hurting anyone else? No? Good, go do it. I mean it's a bad example you can't die from lung cancer here--"

"Hey, I think I died of lung cancer!" someone called out.

She went on. "But you get my point."

"Seems pretty harsh."

"So was locking someone up for years of their life. Especially when they were innocent, or were non-violent, or just were trying to survive. Are we going to lock someone up for eternity because they can't die? No. Punish them and be done with it."

I wonder if she spent some time in a jail? It's possible. And taking otherwise productive members of society out of it for some of the things we did, it didn't make a whole lot of sense.

"Proving harm though..."

"I agree there may be gray areas that one person thinks is not harm but is for another. But many cases will be clear. For right now, as a foundation to build on, can we agree that causing deliberate harm should result in some sort of punishment, to be determined by a vote maybe? I mean it's that or we sit here for the next week and write some kind of constitution or whatever it would be called. I don't know any of you. Maybe you're all ax murders that also volunteered at your local soup kitchens a lot so your points balanced out. I don't want to set foot outside this place without knowing at least some 'community guideline' exists. What am I allowed to do, and what am I not allowed to do? And that goes for things being done to me, too."

The man looked sour. "I'm sorry something happened to you in life that made you so paranoid."

"It's called being a woman. You should try it some time."

Did she kill someone while defending herself, and went to prison for it? I could see it, there were some strange cases back in life. Probably best to not ask though, whatever she did in life, she got the points to come here, so someone judged her acceptable. Can I do less?

"In this place, it's entirely possible I can. Okay, hands up, all of you. Proven harm is punished accordingly, otherwise go nuts. All in favor?"

Most hands, including mine, went up. *I just hope those hands that aren't up are not going to make trouble for us later. But what would they prefer, anyway? Again they can't be bad people, they came here. I guess you can't please everybody... So you've got to please yourself.*

“Thank you,” she said.

“Of course. Is there anything else we should talk about?”

We looked around. No one seemed to have any other topics, so I nodded. “Great, we have a civilization now, as we have law and order. Everyone, pick an area of interest and go to it. Janet?”

“Yes, Denice?”

“Can you tell me how long until the sun goes down?”

“Yes. You have three hours and fifteen minutes of sunlight left.”

“Great. Meet back in the library then, we won’t get much done at night with no lights. We can get to know each other better or sleep or whatever until tomorrow.”

“Hey, should we keep a calendar?” one man asked. “I don’t know if this place has the same number of days in a year, or even if the days are twenty four hours long. Unless you can tell us?”

Both beings in the know shook their heads. “You’ll have to find out yourselves,” Michael said.

“Fine. Anyone interested in making the first calendar? Maybe making the first clock? This is supposed to be mid-summer so call this the first of ‘August’ maybe? But how to know when a year has passed... Wow, this is year 1 of the Midveil afterlife.”

Right, without a calendar how can we know when to have New Year’s Eve?

“We have stars, right?” one man called out.

“You’re all stars, in your own way!” Michael told us.

“I mean in the sky,” he clarified with a sigh.

“Oh. Yes.”

“And they act like stars back on Earth? They’ll have a regular cycle we can track?”

“They do.”

“Then maybe someone can sketch the sky, and when the stars are back in that position we know it’s been a year. And there’s a moon, so there must be moon phases as there’s a sun too, someone can keep track of that.”

How does the sun work if this is an infinite plane? Or should I not think about it?

“I’ve always been interested in ancient calendar systems,” one woman spoke up. “I’ll be happy to keep track of days and the moon cycle. Maybe we can even build our own Stonehenge someplace!”

“I bet I could make a primitive sundial out of whatever wood we have downstairs,” another man spoke up. “How slowly or quickly the sun moves in the sky can give us a good idea of how many hours are in a day.”

“Yeah clocks are pretty complex,” another man said. “We won’t be building any of those for a while.”

“Days are good enough for now,” said the original man. “I just don’t want to lose track of them. We’ll need to know when the seasons are going to change next year, so we know how long we have to harvest and whatnot. Or if we get an extra long summer, or a short one, or what.”

“And how long we’re going to be stuck with forking winter,” said another with a laugh. He looked confused and stopped. “Forking winter. Gosh darn winter. Fork winter right up the brash soul. Okay what’s going on?” he demanded of Michael.

“Did I forget to disable that?” Michael wondered aloud. “Sorry about that! Too late now though, you’re already here. You’ll have to live with the filter turned on.”

“We can’t swear here?” someone asked. “Fork!”

“That’s a crock of whit!”

“Whose flitty idea was that?”

“People, please, it’s not a big deal,” I told them. “It took you this long to notice in the first place. Right? Don’t worry about it, everyone knows what you’re trying to say, it’s fine.”

There was some grumbling but what could we do? Most headed back downstairs, but some got together up here to figure out what manuals to bring down while I headed to the magic section.

Magic! Real magic! What person didn't dream of saying a few words and waving their hands around to solve their problems? Lots of times when magic was presented in movies it was only used destructively, or maybe defensively if you could make a shield with it. But hardly ever constructively, with magic being used to build things or solve problems. Oh healing with magic was always done, in games especially but characters with magic always had attack magic and that was it. Did they ever use it to change the color of their hair, or cook food, or keep the rain off themselves? No. If this magic could do anything, within the sphere of our affinity, great! *Let me at it.* I sat down at a desk with a beginner book and looked up my own nature of water. I was hoping it would be more than just moving water around because that would be lame, and I was pleasantly surprised. Water covered various aspects of magic, including cold, darkness, creating illusions, knowledge of all sorts so I could do divination for sure, and weather in general. Moving things apparently fell under wood, but teleportation did not, so anyone could learn that. Not that we had anywhere to really go at the moment, but it was just one example of a spell that didn't fall under any one affinity. There were lists of spells I could perform, and while I wanted to try them all out, realistically I knew I needed just one useful spell to practice for the moment. *Knowledge* I thought. *That's what we need now most of all. If I can put a spell on someone to help them learn something, or remember something they've read, that would be ideal. Those people using the heavy machinery for the first time, they'll benefit from something like that most of all. I could learn some divination magic, get some answers to our questions like how many days in a year but honestly, why take that one woman's fun away from her? She seemed willing to keep track of the days and the moon cycle so just walking over to her and saying 'oh by the way magic told me there's such and such days in a year' would just be mean. But this spell here, to enhance someone's knowledge about a topic so they perform better? That's useful.*

I stayed and read over the requirements for magic. I would need to do several complex hand gestures perfectly, plus focus magical energies within and without at the same time. There were beginner exercises in doing this listed, so I made note of them and resolved to practice them that night once the sun went down. There was no way I was sleeping on my first day in the afterlife, after all. With my curiosity sated for the moment I reluctantly left that section and headed out to see how everyone was doing. They had thrown the warehouse doors open and were figuring out how to get some of the machines out. A few people were cataloging exactly what raw materials we had; exact lengths of board, non-mortal materials, and the like. There may have been every kind of wood in existence somewhere inside the warehouse, but if you wanted a wall that was three meters high made of wood but only two meters sections were available, you better know how to cut a meter off one section and stick it onto another. So while "every" resource was available we learned that not all configurations of every resource were available. But we could make do. Anyone standing around unsure of what to do I tried to suggest things to.

"I don't know how cold it will get here at night, even in the warehouse," I told some. "Find some good fabric we can use for blankets and cut it up into good sized pieces. Most of that stuff is on giant rolls as far as I can see."

"Why not head down to the water," I told others. "Bring some buckets of it back, so people can wash up after working today. Maybe find a good spot to start digging so we can bring it over here?"

"A school?" I asked one woman who came up to me and asked if we should try building one. "I didn't even think of that."

"It just occurred to me," she admitted. "That one little boy said he was in his eighties, and I have no reason not to trust him, but there were other young looking people in the group. But they could also be very old."

"True. Go find Janet and-"

“Hello.”

I jumped in shock, and whirled around. There was Janet!

“Did you... right. You know everything, right? So of course you would know I would want you... wait no that can't be right. You said you couldn't predict things here. How did you-”

She laughed. “That's right, I can't. But you can summon me by saying my name. It's a recent perk we implemented here, not that I'll be of much use to you as I can't actually make you anything.” *She looks down. She may be an AI but she does seem to have feelings. I guess treat her as a person?* “But say my name and I'll appear and do what I can for you. Well, one of my threads will appear, anyway.”

“Threads?”

“It's a programming term on Earth. When a program needs to do more than one thing at a time it starts a thread. The thread does the task and reports back to the main program. I can do the same thing, so I can talk to more than one person at once.”

“That's handy,” I admitted. “Just that as a superpower would be amazing. Anyway, are there any actual kids among us? I could go ask everyone, but it's okay if you tell me, right?”

“That's okay, I can tell you that. No, we excluded everyone not considered an adult by their society when we randomly selected the five hundred.”

“So we don't need a school, not yet. That's good news, but thanks for thinking like that,” I told the woman. *Ugh, but we will one day. What are we going to do when kids start showing up here while their parents have years or even decades to live yet? Will they grow up here? A battle for another day, Denice.* “If you come up with anything else-”

“Hang on, I just thought of something horrible! Status screen!”

“What? What is it?” I gasped.

“Kids can't get into The Good Place! With this point system that's in place,” she pointed to her point total, which I saw was a bit over two million, “they wouldn't have enough time to earn enough points. And kids are brats, they would surely be negative!”

Janet shook her head with a grin. “That's not exactly how it works. Whoever set this up isn't a monster, you know. Babies start with six million points! They lose them very rapidly day by day until they're of an age to make their own decisions. Then the point system catches up with them, assigning their real point totals, and they go from there. A baby that dies too soon *does* go to The Good Place. When we said no one had, we meant any adults. Sorry, didn't mean to scare you!”

“That is a relief,” she breathed. “There's still so much we don't know about this place.”

Yeah, like who exactly set all this up? I was never that religious but even I know God is the most vein being in existence. Why else would one of the commandments be “you shall have no other God but me?” If He was in all things, any worship should reflect upon Him. I figured He would be announcing Himself to us, so we could praise Him and give Him the worship He desires. But not so much. It's just Michael and his AI. Very odd. I really hope this isn't something he's doing on his own and will get in trouble for it, and then we're screwed. “And we will,” I assured her. “One day at a time.”

“Not like we have any other choice, I guess.”

“It could be worse!”

“Oh, believe me,” Janet agreed with a nod. “You really have no idea.”

Chapter 5

We taste victory and loss close together

When: The next day

Where: The field

We had spent the rest of the daylight hours marking off where the buildings would be and defining the square around the warehouse that was reserved for factories. With the sun going down I realized we probably had better night vision than back on Earth as well, but given our inexperience with the machinery I thought it best to turn in for the day. I didn't feel it was fair insisting we work through the night, for one we were already dead so what was a couple of hours and two even if we didn't "need" sleep we were still used to it. *Let's not spoil what success we had today by pushing on and meeting some tragedy in the dark.* We had accomplished a few things after all and I was feeling pretty good about how our first day in the afterlife had gone. We went back up to the library as it was at least a little nicer there and went around introducing ourselves and telling what sort of things we knew how to do. Naturally there was no way I was going to remember everyone's names but at least we were starting to become a community instead of just a random group of people that had been thrown together. We had come from all corners of the world, all sorts of professions, which was sure to come in handy sooner or later. Also Michael finally explained we could all understand one another despite us all speaking our native languages, which apparently we were still doing.

"We didn't want to make things any harder on you guys," he explained. "Though in reality we didn't have anything to do with it. Good or Bad Place it's always been that way."

Yeah, imagine coming here and you can only talk to a fraction of the people here. That really would have been a disaster, there are so many languages on Earth and it looks like we've got a number of people here who would have been cut off from anyone else because only two or three people speak that language!

We took it easy that night, some people deciding to curl up next to a fire with a blanket and try to get some sleep, some read fiction books, while others such as myself used the time to explore the place more or start practicing magic. Either night wasn't very long or the time flew by, but before long sunlight started streaming into the windows again. I wasn't sure if I was casting the spell right or not, it really didn't have anything physical happen, but I did feel a bit of a tingle making me think I was at least moving energies around a little bit.

"How long before we have coffee?" was the most common complaint as I moved through the place, getting everyone back together. Naturally I had no answer for them. Privately I wondered if coffee would do anything for us anyway as we didn't really have bodies in this place. *But even in the afterlife some routines are more psychological than anything else I guess. People get up, they want a coffee, but I suppose that will fade before long.*

"So what's the plan?" I asked Stefan once everyone was accounted for. "Mr. Foreman?"

"We've been discussing it, and we think the simplest structure we can get away with is probably best to start making at this point. So we're going to start making the pieces of our houses that can easily be combined. Step one will be to dig a shallow foundation. As we don't have water here yet we can't make concrete despite having what I believe is concrete mix in the warehouse. So we're going to use wood. I mean sure we could drive the truck down there, somehow get some water in the back and start it mixing, but this will work just as well."

"Do we need a floor? What's wrong with the ground?" someone asked.

"No one wants to walk on the cold ground even inside. So we're making a 'floor' by laying down enough 'modules' to cover the hole. At the right depth its should be even with the ground so we don't have to step in or out as we go inside. Now what's a module, you ask? We're going to crank out a ton of the same thing so we can focus on making one thing really well. It's going to be a piece of wood,

typically as big as we have in inventory, with some legs nailed to it. We flip it over, stuff it full of insulation, and nail another board to the top of it. This will become either a floor or a wall, so just crank them out and haul them to the nearest place that needs one.”

“Hang on,” one person said. “Shouldn’t we start with the furthest away house, and build towards the warehouse? We don’t want to be dodging finished houses with the trucks right?”

“The nearest place being the furthest away place!” Stefan clarified.

“Got it.”

“For the roofs we’ll make a bunch of triangles out of two by fours, nail them to the top of the structure, and then just nail more boards on top of them. To make corners we’ll dig some holes, stuff a nailed together group of two by fours into it so we have something to anchor it to, and just nail the modules to that. Hopefully with something similar between each module it’ll hold together and stay up even in a strong wind. I’ve got dimensions we’ll need all figured out, because some need to be shorter to fit into the spaces we’ve made so I’ll assign some groups to make full sized ones, some groups to cut down wood to the right size, another group to use that wood. I want some people diverting the nearest stream so we can get water over here, some people are going to need to haul the dirt away. My thought is, cut the wood down, haul it out, nail it together, load the finished module onto a truck, the truck takes it away. Start the next module. If we all crowd into the warehouse we’ll just get in each other’s way. Any questions?”

“What are we doing with the dirt?” someone asked.

“Dump it into a big pile,” Stefan decided. “We may want to put it back later or use it for flower boxes or something. I wouldn’t recycle it in the warehouse, it would probably be lost forever. Besides we’ll have enough trucks going in and out carrying wood we don’t need dirt being hauled in as well.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve never nailed anything together in my life,” complained one woman. “I hope someone can show me how.”

There was a general agreement anyone that didn’t know how to use a hammer could be shown.

“Or if you don’t want to nail stuff there’s lots of other tasks. Cutting the wood up, that’s pretty easy as long as you can handle measuring it right. Moving cut wood to where it needs to be. Keeping the teams stocked with nails. Helping put the walls up or getting the floors into position. Running the machine to dig the holes, filling the holes up with dirt once the posts are in place. There’s lots to be done!”

“What about doors or windows?” one person asked.

“Ah. Doors will require hinges, one thing we will have to make ourselves as it’s not a raw resource,” he explained. “For now we’ll just leave a gaping hole in one side we can fill up later. It’s not like there’s going to be anything to steal in there.” Everyone chuckled. “Hopefully a metal worker can make some hinges with magic? They’re pretty small, and we just cut some wood to fit. Windows... I don’t know. The tools all seem to be powered by magic or something, same as the vehicles. We can carry them out of the warehouse, chop some holes in the outer walls and fit some glass into them. But that’s going to let heat out unless we can seal them up pretty good. We have wax, maybe some people can start making candles, I mean in the winter there won’t be much to see outside but snow, right? So do we really need windows? And we need to heat the houses somehow so I figure that would be a source of light too. For now I would say get walls up, we can always cut holes later.”

“What about the greenhouse idea?” someone else asked.

“Oh right. Sure, go nuts. If one group wants to investigate that, making a structure completely out of glass, maybe stacked together so it’s stronger? I don’t know how thick the stuff we have is, but see if it’s feasible. But honestly I recommend getting a house or two up just so we know we’re on the right track and we can experiment once we have a good process down.”

“That’s reasonable,” the man allowed.

Presumably once we've done it a few times we'll need less people because we'll know what we're doing at that point. So then those people can go do something else.

With no other questions we headed outside, and broke into teams to hopefully get a start on all this. An earth mover machine rumbled past us, headed to the furthest site we had marked off to start the first house. We worked all day, realizing it was much easier to bring a large pile of material out to the site for assembly rather than trying to move one module worth at a time. Michael and Janet were both there, and they could offer some tips to us even if they couldn't really lift a hand to actually help. That was okay. We worked as a team and got at least part of a house done, putting up enough outer walls the inner walls had something to be braced against and had about half a "house" with a few "rooms" done by the time the sun was going down. No roof yet, and it looked ugly being just wooden boards we had glued and nailed together, but I still felt a sense of accomplishment. *This could work! Even without magic we're not doing too badly here, and while it's not going to win any awards, our wooden box should keep out the cold. I'll have to have some people researching magic to provide heat and light for the winter. We should make sure that's easy enough to do or start figuring something else out. Maybe make kerosene lamps or something if those with a fire nature can't easily get us what we need.*

As the sun was going down we all headed out to the nearby river, and they had made progress here as well. It was going to take some time to dig a channel from one place to the other even with modern machinery but that wasn't a concern at the moment. We wanted to cool off in the water, and with no swimsuits everyone just said "fork it" and we just stripped. We splashed around a bit, finally being in 'my' element again felt wonderful. Then we made our way back and reviewed how the day went, some choosing not to get dressed again as why should they bother at this point? Stefan was pleased his plans were working out, and that the 'module' idea had worked. We hadn't gotten that much better at making them in only a day but the assembly line had been invented for a reason. If you are doing the same thing over and over you eventually get better at it. I went back to studying magic, and this continued for the next two days. We put a roof on the first house by the end of the fourth day and picked randomly who would stay there the night. We needed to know if it swayed in the wind, or creaked and made noises while people were trying to sleep. What we didn't expect was for it to catch fire, which is exactly what it did.

"Help!" we heard from downstairs, and everyone looked around.

"Sounds like someone is crying for help," Siew Yan remarked. "Should we go see what's going on?"

"We better. Let's go," I told her. We headed down the stairs and ran into the "homeowners" on the way up.

"It's awful!" one of them said. "It's burning down! We have to do something."

"Burning down? How did that happen?" I demanded.

"We have no idea," he insisted. "We were just, you know, having some fun and suddenly realized the place was on fire. I called out and got everyone up, then we ran over here."

Having some fun? I did a quick count. Yes, there's more people on the stairs than we picked to stay in the house tonight. Sheesh, you get some walls around people and they don't waste any time, do they? I mean, okay, there's no risk... Now that I think about it I'm a little miffed I didn't get asked! Not that I would have accepted but- Not the time. "Show me."

We headed outside and even at this distance I could see a glow in the distance. The glow of a fire. We piled into a truck and drove out there, but there wasn't much we could do. The water didn't reach this far yet, and no one knew enough magic to do anything about it. Heck I still wasn't sure waving my hands around was doing anything, though some people had gotten a minor spell or two to work so I knew it was possible. We stood there, stunned, some of us simply slumping to the ground with a groan.

"If we had some marshmallows at least we could have taken advantage of it," someone joked. "This sucks."

"Yeah, when I get my hands on the son of a snitch who burned our only house down..." threatened another.

"But how did they do it?" I asked. "Why did they do it? Everyone here should be at least somewhat above reproach, right? We not Bad Placers. What gives?"

"There's no matches at the warehouse," Stefan told me. "They aren't exactly a raw material. There's no clouds, couldn't have been lightning. Someone practicing a fire spell?" He looked the people that had been in the house over.

"I'm fire nature," one admitted. "But I wouldn't play with fire in our wooden house, you think I'm crazy?"

"Same here," said a woman. "I didn't make any fire, I swear. You really think we would be stupid enough to play with fire in the house we were currently sitting in?"

"I'm just trying to get to the bottom of it," I told her. "Hey, wasn't there that firefighter guy? Get him down here, maybe he can give us some ideas of how this fire could have started!"

"I'm the firefighter guy," a naked man said glumly. "I left my clothes in there so now I've got nothing. Didn't even think to grab them when I ran out. Some firefighter I am."

"Wait, the only building we've managed to make burned down *with a firefighter inside it?*"

"Yes. Look, I don't have any of my tools, or a truck, or even water. Buckets aren't a resource and we haven't made any, so there's no chance of a bucket brigade even if it would help. The water is too far away, we hauled the dirt way over there, there's no sand. What did you want me to do about it? The whole thing went up at once, it wasn't natural. We were lucky to get out with our un-lives. In fact I hope no one did get burned up, but I guess we'll know in a few hours once the sun comes up, huh?"

"I suppose so," I admitted, slumping. "But this is a nasty setback." *We were doing so well, why did this have to happen? It's the afterlife, we should be beyond this sort of thing. Right? Man, this is a mess.*

There really wasn't anything we could do, and there was nothing nearby enough to catch fire, so we just headed back to the warehouse. By this time everyone was up and around, wondering what had happened. I told them, but said we would investigate in the morning. Everyone seemed down and rightly so, why would someone do this? How could someone too good for The Bad Place cause such a tragedy? It didn't make sense, but maybe magic could help uncover the person that did it. *And then what?* a voice inside my head asked me. *Set them on fire? What is the punishment here? By our laws it must fit the crime and the crime was burning our only house down. Maybe they have to live out in the cold for a whole year? Well, worry about catching them first.*

After the sun came up everyone wanted to rush out there but I said everyone should stay back just to see if any clues had been left. We had a police officer among our number so he took charge, looking around the place. Michael was shaking his head though. My eyes narrowed and I turned to him.

"Do you see something we don't? You're not supposed to help us physically, but if we're missing something I think you have an obligation to speak up."

He thought about it a moment. "Very well. It may be over the line a bit but you won't have had time to learn to feel magic like I can. And it's odd enough that maybe no one will mind. I'll just tell you; this fire was set by magic. But it feels like a celestial did it, which is impossible. Right Janet?"

"There has been no train in or out of this area since Midveil began," she agreed. "If there's a celestial here they've been hiding here for days."

He shook his head. "Impossible, I would have felt them."

"Why would a celestial burn down our solitary, ramshackle house?" I asked, putting air quotes around house. "I mean at least wait until we think we're done with the little village we were making and then strike. This just puts us on our guard!"

“That’s what’s so weird,” he agreed. “It doesn’t make sense. Like it’s a random act of violence with no thought behind it. Any celestial would strike with maximum efficiency, like you said. But to be clear it wasn’t fire, not at first. It was just raw destructive magic, like a celestial would wield. The wood then caught on fire from there. The house could have just been destroyed, but whoever did this seemed to cast the spell in such a way it would burn the place down. Like they wanted to watch it burn maybe? It doesn’t make sense.”

“You said that,” I told him. “Make it make sense. What do we do about it?”

“Post guards at night?”

“You can’t be serious! It’s the afterlife, why do I need to have people wandering around keeping your kind away from us? That’s not our job, we’re supposed to be relaxing after a life well lived! To make us make our own homes and then immediately burn them down? Someone has to pay for this! And what would we do about it anyway if we did stand guard and catch them? Any celestial good enough to hide from you and do this is going to swat us aside! I can barely do one spell and that’s to make people better at doing things. I don’t want to make them better at attacking us!”

“Yeah, aren’t we even safe from violence in the afterlife?” Siew Yan asked him. “If this is a celestial *you* need to deal with it!”

“Yeah!” everyone agreed.

He put up his hands. “Now look everyone, there are sure to be some celestials that don’t agree with this whole Midveil plan because it gives them less people to torture. But that’s why we blocked off the entrances to the other Places. So it can’t be one. And yet, it seems to be one. It’s a paradox.”

Maybe. But there is a celestial standing before me right now. You. Maybe you did this, I mean it would explain everything, wouldn’t it? I think we’ll have to watch you just as closely as we do for this “phantom” celestial you’re going on about.

He went on. “I’ll help you stand guard, and so will Janet.”

“Don’t speak for me, please,” Janet told him. “I’ll help you stand guard,” she told us.

“Oh kay, whatever. If it is a celestial we’ll deal with it. You have my word.”

“You better,” I told him. “Siew Yan is right. We haven’t even been here a week and already we’re threatened by something? Even Midveil should be better than this, it’s not The Bad Place. We should succeed or fail by our own efforts, not because of interference from your kind.”

“I agree! We’ll get to the bottom of it, I promise!”

“I hope so. Everyone, get to work. We’ll clear the remains away and start again. What else can we do?”

Chapter 6

We try to protect what we've made

When: Day 7 in Midveil

Where: The second (and once again only) house perimeter

As I couldn't ask anyone to do anything I wasn't prepared to do, I suggested our guard rotation be, well, rotated. So I asked for different volunteers every night and put myself out there as well. We spent the night with sharpened sticks (oooh so effective against a celestial) and the like in our hands, wandering around and making sure the place didn't burn down again. *But we need to catch the person that did it, and will they attack in the same way again? I wouldn't. But we have nothing else to protect at the moment. Are we going to be looking over our shoulders forever now, even as our village grows?* I was seething, this was taking me away from progress with magic which by that time I had at least managed to cast with some success. That day I had used my spell on the person out by the river and he said he suddenly felt a lot more confident behind the controls of the earth mover. Watching him before and after the spell his movement of the arm and shovel were much smoother and faster once I had cast it, and I felt a connection between us meaning the magic was working. I wanted to now practice some kind of defense spell, or at least moving water around in case there was more fire. That didn't seem too hard reading it over from the book, but it was impossible to practice and keep a watch out so I didn't. Several with an affinity for fire had small flames following them around, *so cool!* which at least made the night a little brighter for us as we patrolled the area. Good as their word both Janet and Michael stood guard while the sun was down, and so far nothing bad had happened. Until it did, because that's how it goes even in the afterlife.

"Help!"

Every eye turned in the direction of the cry for help, coming from far outside our perimeter. *Some sort of trick to lure us away?* "You and Janet stay here," I told Michael. "We'll go see what this is about. You, stay with them." I pointed at someone random with a flame above their heads, and he nodded. *Keep an eye on them* my eyes said to them. The rest of us rushed over to the two people still crying out for help, a man and a woman, both naked. Our firefighter friend had of course spent the day that way as he had no clothes now and he said trying to make something would just be a waste until closer to winter. "Let's get the houses put up and worry about small stuff later," he insisted. "Or big stuff, if you know what I mean?" We had all groaned and wished we had something to smack him with. "I'm not hurting anyone being like this so the One Law is on my side." Others had joined his example, figuring why get their only clothes dirty when they didn't have to. *Or something like that, I think it's just an excuse.* But whatever the reason, this wasn't much to comment on, and they collapsed as we surrounded them.

"What is it, what's happened?" I demanded to know. "Did something attack the warehouse? Is it burning down? *Can it burn down?*" *I hadn't even considered that, being built by the celestials. I figured it was not vulnerable to attack but maybe that was a mistake.*

"Nothing like that," managed the woman. "It's horrible. A monster of some kind. It..." she couldn't manage more.

"Monster?"

"Attacking the channel for the water. We saw it. Horrible," said the man.

"Catch your breath and- you don't really need to breathe," I reminded them. "Remember that you're dead, physical exertion won't cause you to get winded so hurry up and tell us what happened."

They blinked at me and straightened. "Oh, right," said the woman. "Forgot about that."

I resisted the urge to sigh, or scream. "So what happened?"

"We headed down to the water to have a late night swim," the man reported. "We were splashing around and heard something. So we came up and saw the creature."

“It was horrible,” the woman said. “Big. Claws. Horns. Scales it looked like? But it stood on two legs, like a man! I would have called it a demon before I knew there were just celestials of various sorts. It was doing magic I guess, collapsing the channel we were making for the water. I saw magical energies being used, there’s no mistaking that now.”

But we don’t exactly know what they look like in their true forms, now do we?

“What?” everyone reacted.

“Show me,” I told them.

“Right this way, come on.” The pair led us towards where the channel was, and even in the dark I could see where the workers had ended that day was messed up. We followed it further on, and the whole thing had been collapsed. We were of course digging it out from the water, but connecting the water source and the channel was the last step. We were going to dig out a trench, then line it with either wood or metal to prevent erosion. Then we would connect it and have the water flow down past the warehouse. We were going to have to do all that work again now, as the two sides had been collapsed into the middle. “Great. You,” I pointed to one random woman. “Go get- I’m stupid. Janet!”

“Hello! Oh.”

Of course I had to whirl around, she had appeared behind me as usual. “Tell your thread near Michael to get over here. We need to talk.”

“I’ll fill him in,” she promised, and vanished.

“Right. I still have a job for you. Keep going, see if this damage goes all the way. But I bet it does.”

“I bet it does too. Whatever did this was just finishing the job when those two saw them. But I’ll check.”

“Right. Thanks.” She moved off and a few minutes later Michael and Janet appeared.

“This is awful, you did all that work!” he commiserated. “What are you going to do?”

“Never mind that, are you still claiming this is the work of a celestial?”

“I feel magic here, this wasn’t done by hand.”

Well of course it wasn’t, that would take a similar number of hours to us digging the thing in the first place.

“It was a monster,” the original woman insisted. “We both saw it.”

“We did, she’s not crazy. I thought I was going crazy. It was real.”

“But can a celestial use earth magic?” I pressed. “You said celestials had destruction, and light, and creation or something right? Not earth! This was earth moving without machines, or could simple destructive magic destroy what we did in this way?” *I mean how do you destroy a hole? You fill it up, but that’s creation magic not destruction. The earth here has been moved, not just filled in.*

“No,” he admitted. “This wasn’t done with destructive magic. But the cause... It’s too horrible to contemplate.”

“But you have some idea what’s going on?” I pressed.

“I do. This nearly confirms it. Come on, let’s head back to the warehouse. Everyone is going to need to hear this.” We walked back to the warehouse in silence and got everyone together, telling them what had happened.

“All my work was for nothing!?” said the earth mover operator. “That’s bucked up!”

“This place is turning into a wit toll,” agreed another. “What are you trying to pull here Michael? You enjoy watching us run around like clucking chickens with our heads cut off trying to build things only to wreck them?”

Clucking chickens, that’s a good one!

“Please, everyone,” he cried, “I have some idea what’s going on. Please let me speak!”

“This better be good,” someone grumbled. Everyone agreed.

“There’s a technique,” he began hesitantly. “A forbidden technique, obviously, one that... Well, it... Janet you have to tell them!”

He seems distraught. Just what sort of ‘technique’ is this?

“Essentially,” Janet took over, “a celestial destroys their independent existence to bond with a human soul. This reduces their power but allows them to become a ‘hybrid’ creature, if you will. Neither celestial or human soul, and thus they can pass as human. They’re essentially ‘sleeping’ if you will inside the human, and can activate themselves at will. Think of it as a possession if that makes it easier. The human then becomes more like a celestial and gains access their magic. Of course they loose their own free will in the process and may not even remember their actions while controlled. But the hybrid being can access both magics, which it seems to have done in this instance. Naturally when the celestial is in control their bodies change so that explains what this couple saw, too.”

Naturally? There’s nothing natural about any of what you just told me.

“So hold on,” someone said. “Someone with an affinity for earth magic has essentially been ‘infected’ with a celestial, shows no symptoms of such, doesn’t even know it themselves, and is now here walking around planning on destroying everything we build?”

“That seems the likely situation, based on what the two who saw the hybrid described, plus the use of both earth and celestial magic,” Janet agreed.

“Someone killed themselves,” Michael whispered. “A celestial. They gave up their existence to come here and make trouble for us. They felt so strongly about it they snuck into the candidate queue without us knowing, and corrupted one of the people coming here, ending their existence. Who would be so reckless as to do that?”

“So one from Bad Place,” I reasoned. *And why didn’t they wait? Why destroy one house? One bit of dug out ground? Why not wait months until we’re not on our guard at all and take the whole thing out in one night? Didn’t want to give us a chance to learn magic, maybe? Or have they lost their reason becoming “small” enough to “fit” inside a human soul? That actually scarier than them being calculating because who knows what they might do next?*

“Most likely,” he agreed.

I rubbed my forehead. “Great. What are we supposed to do about it? Earth affinity is one sixth of the population here, that’s almost a hundred people. We can’t lock them all up!” *We have no place to lock them all up into, in the first place.*

“Yeah, is there any way to tell?” asked someone.

“None.”

“That’s just great!”

“It is?” Janet asked. “Wait that was sarcasm, wasn’t it? I always have trouble with that one.”

“So how are we going to deal with it?” someone asked.

“Yeah can you build a detector or something?”

“Janet, you can make anything right? Even if you’re not supposed to make stuff for us,” I asked her, “this is a bit different. You aren’t giving us anything. *You* can use the detector and make it vanish again. I mean it’s only fair the problem is a celestial so it should be solved by celestials.”

She shook her head. “Somewhat unsurprisingly, this ritual isn’t that widely used. So it hasn’t been studied all that much either. I don’t know what I would even look for. I’m sorry. It’s only been done twice in recorded history and those that did it fled, as they were doing it to avoid detection from other celestials. We think they give up most of their intellect, and act only on instinct at that point. But we aren’t sure. It’s not something any celestial likes to think about, even among those in the know. The ritual isn’t common knowledge after all, but it is out there, as this proves.”

And why does our kind and benevolent Michael here know about it, I don’t hear myself asking for fear I wouldn’t like the answer. Like, maybe he allowed it to happen, to see what we would do about it? But there is something safe I can ask him. “Why would your kind need to hide from others of your kind?” I asked Michael. “After so long, you couldn’t commit crimes against each other, could you?”

“Nothing like that,” he assured me. “Maybe to avoid retirement? I could think of a few reasons. We can still be punished for failure, after all. We have bosses just like- Never mind that, concentrate on what we’re going to do about the present.”

Retirement? Bosses? That must not mean what I think it means.

“Chain everyone together?” one person asked. “Don’t let anyone be alone?”

“But then someone is chained to a dem- a celestial,” another person complained. “I don’t want to be the one stuck with someone that might transform and tear my head off. Even if I would come back the next day!”

“So we chain everybody up every night!”

“What, no!” everyone cried. People started arguing over what to do, and I stood there thinking. Finally I waved my hands for silence and everyone quieted down.

“Chaining people up is only a short term solution anyway,” I told them. “We need to have things for this hybrid to destroy. Chaining ourselves up just postpones the problem. Catching them must be the priority.”

“How do we do that?”

“Just shouting at each other isn’t going to get us anywhere. Maybe submit your ideas in writing and I’ll look them all over?”

“No one with earth affinity can be a part of that,” Siew Yan spoke up. “We can’t share our plans with them or they’ll just work around it!”

“Good point,” I agreed. “For now, all construction is off. Take a holiday while we come up with something. Study magic, or how to invent things, or just relax. It’s your afterlife, it’s fine, no one will judge you. If you have an idea write it down and bring it to me. I’ll test your affinity, if you’re not earth I’ll accept it and in a few days hopefully I’ll have a good plan. We’ll go back to construction mode and I’ll talk with people I can trust to close the trap. Sorry, earth users, but you’re all under suspicion right now. The majority of you haven’t done anything wrong and I’ll do my best to get to the bottom of this quickly. Meanwhile no one is to treat them differently. Something was done to one of us, we’re all the victims here and I won’t have victim shaming! Is that clear?” Everyone indicated that was, in fact, clear. “Okay. Get some rest. No sneaking out to swim either. Those two got away because it seemed the hybrid wasn’t interested in harming them, just staying out of sight. It was probably as surprised to be seen as you two were to see it. But next time maybe it attacks. Yes, maybe we’re in the afterlife and we would be fine,” *if Michael is telling the truth about all this, which we can’t verify independently without potentially killing somebody*, “and maybe not. Let’s not risk it.”

The group broke up.

“Are we still watching the house?” one of the former guards came up to ask me.

“Guah! No!” I decided. “We’re doing a lock in. Janet!”

“Hello!”

“Is everyone accounted for? We’re all here in the warehouse?”

“All five hundred human souls are in the warehouse,” she confirmed.

“Great. Let’s see if we can secure the doors. Anyone that tries to get out at this point is our prime suspect. Worst comes to worst we’ll just watch the doors. Easier than wandering around in the dark out there.”

“You got it, boss.”

The night passed uneventfully, with a few people giving me ideas on what to do to catch the hybrid which I appreciated. I waited two days to see if there was any more trouble or ideas and picked out Siew Yan and Stefan to help me out. Between the three of us we had water, wood, metal, and fire affinity and I figured a small group would be best to handle this. Janet was there as well, I figured she could offer some suggestions or answer any questions we had. *We may need more people later but for now a small group means less chance of our victim/hybrid learning about the plan.*

“And what is the plan?” Siew Yan asked. “If it involves violence I guess it’s fine, I can handle myself.” She didn’t seem all that fine as she said that, but went on. “I died thinking to escape such things.”

“Wait, do you remember how you died?” Stefan asked.

She shook her head. “Not in any detail. But I feel like that’s the case. I remember it wasn’t exactly my choice, I wasn’t that old, and I hoped my son would be okay without me but that finally my pain would be gone. Look where that got me.”

“You had a son? I had kids and grandkids, by the time I kicked it.”

“It is so weird hearing that from someone that looks twelve.”

“It’s true though.”

I suspect more and more that Siew Yan didn’t have an easy life. “I don’t think violence will accomplish anything here,” I told her. “It’s more about coming up with a plan that lets us catch the victim in the act of destroying something. With their cover blown and with nowhere to go I’m hoping they’ll just give up. I have no idea what we’ll do with them after that...”

“Leave that to us,” Janet told us. “I have been conferring with several masters of magic on both sides, and we believe that one way or another we can magically suppress the celestial so they can’t take control anymore. Another option would be to force an even greater hybridization. This would allow the human soul access to the celestial magic, but the celestial personality would be completely gone. In any case we have options, we can leave it to the victim to decide once we figure out who they are.”

“That’s great news, Janet!” I told her. “Thanks for looking into it for us.”

“Of course.”

“With that said,” I took one of the slips of paper I had been handed, “I got a bunch of plans but let’s see what you think about this one. Janet, can you bring some dogs here? Or at least something that looks like dogs? Something that can bark or make a noise? I’m sure noise will carry pretty well here as there’s nothing for it to bounce off of. We need a motion sensor and as we don’t have motion sensors yet, a living animal will have to do.”

“Certainly. And you’re right, sound will travel quite a ways here.”

“Okay. We’ll probably have to sacrifice the current structure and maybe start a second one to provide a juicy enough target, but as far as everyone is concerned life is just going back to ‘normal’ around here. I’ll tell everyone we’re still working on it but we can’t stop building for any longer because we don’t know when winter is starting. But I want everyone back in the warehouse at night. Meanwhile I won’t order any earth affinity people watched too closely, because I want them to slip out. When they get too near the houses the dogs will start to bark, alerting us that they’re out there. We lock the doors to the warehouse, take a headcount, and the person that isn’t there is our hybrid. We then just confront them when they get back.” *And start building the house for a third, and hopefully at that point, final time.*

“What do you need us for, then?” Stefan asked.

“We’ll have to build a pen of sorts to keep the dogs in, right? Can you get us actual dogs or...”

“If you wanted dogs they would be dogs,” she told me. “Changing them in any way they wouldn’t be dogs anymore. If you wanted smart dogs that wouldn’t wander off I would have to make them, and that’s making something for you to solve a problem and that’s forbidden.”

Even though we’re solving a problem not of our own making but something that happened because you didn’t watch us closely enough before we got here. “So we’ll have to come up with a fence we can easily put up at the end of the day the dogs can stay in, and still be able to see the hybrid coming and alert us. Then take down in the morning before everyone gets out there so the plan isn’t revealed.” *I suppose we could just put leashes on them and stake them to the ground but I would want them to be able to run around if the hybrid comes after them. I guess they would just come back the next day if killed anyway but...*

“I’m learning a spell to reshape metal,” Siew Yan told us. “I might be able to use that to create some kind of fencing.”

“And I can help by melting the metal together with fire magic,” Stafan told her. “So you have lots to work with in one place. We don’t need to involve anyone else!”

“Exactly,” I told them. “Figure it out tonight, practice the spell or spells, and hopefully you can have something done by tomorrow night. If not let me know we’ll only start building when you can get it up. Hopefully they’ll strike soon and we can put this behind us.”

“That is a plan that doesn’t revolve around violence,” Siew Yan admitted. “I like it. It has my support.”

“It could work,” Stefan decided. “Let’s do it.”

“I think we all saw enough violence in our lives,” I told them. “Let’s try not to bring that here into the afterlife with us.” They both nodded their agreement. “Let’s head to the library, we have spells to learn.”

Chapter 7

We catch the guy

When: The next day

Where: Library

“We’re not doing anything?” the man before me said. I scanned the crowd before me and some looked upset, others confused, there was even some relief there. *It could be dangerous I suppose, and some like Siew Yan may not want to take part in a violent action to try and subdue one of their fellow souls.*

I had explained the not-plan to everyone, that we would simply continue on as if we were not host to a hybrid soul. I did not tell them about fences, dogs, or my actual plan because that would defeat the point. Even trying to separate out the suspect earth affinities, word could get back to them in a careless moment and we needed the element of surprise if this was going to work. *I just hope they don’t fight me on this because I can’t tell them the actual reason for it until after it’s been successful.* “For the moment, that’s right,” I told him. “I’ve been given plenty of good ideas but I need some time to look them over and come up with the best one. Then fabricating whatever the plan needs, getting it set up. Everyone’s been sitting around for two days and we don’t really know when winter is going to start. For now we’re going to just focus on houses, leave the waterway alone. When we know it won’t get messed up we’ll restart that effort.” *There can be only one... target. That will force them to head to that one place and alert the dogs we’ll have out there. Trying to cover two places, and the waterway is pretty far away anyway, just isn’t going to work. But I think we can figure the hybrid will come from the warehouse and thus hide the dogs around the back of a building out of sight. They walk up, and it’s bark city. Then we’ve got them.*

“But we’re going to have people watching the houses right?”

“No. I feel it’s safer if we stay away from them at night. I don’t know what that hybrid would do if we confronted it out there. Better to have a plan in place before we do anything. I would rather lose some wood than any of you. Maybe you’ll reappear in the morning and maybe not, but even if you do you’ll probably have the memory of being ripped apart by the hybrid. Are you willing to risk that?”

“She’s right,” Michael told us. “We won’t be censoring your memories if you die here, because it’ll be your own fault. Unless it’s really traumatic I mean, a case could be made but if you get torn apart by magic or claws you’re going to remember that happening for a very long time.”

“But we can’t just let it destroy the work we’ve done!”

“I don’t like the idea either but there’s much less risk this way. Think of all that effort as simply practice for now. Let’s try to find the best way to put the sections up. Magic? Machines? Heck, break into groups and I’ll award 20 points from my own total to each member of the group that does the best at building a house. Best here being relative shortness of putting it up, sturdy enough to survive the winter, that sort of thing. Time how long it takes, Michael can judge the quality of construction, right?”

“I can do that,” he agreed.

“And I’ll award a winner once every team has finished at least one house. If you can put up a house in half an hour but it blows over in a stiff breeze that’s no good. So just being fastest isn’t enough, you have to really build something that will work but do it as quickly as that allows. That way once the situation is dealt with we can use the best method and get back on track quickly. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yeah I get it. You would give us your points?” He seemed suspicious.

“It’s my fault for not being able to put any of the plans into action right away,” I half lied. “I need to make it up to you. This is the way I can do it. As long as each team doesn’t have more than twenty people, sure.” *I’ve got enough. Heck, successfully saving Midveil from this hybrid may even earn me some, as the implementation of the plan is mine. And I don’t want them just brute forcing the problem with a hundred people, though that many may actually work against them as they get in each other’s*

way. *But twenty is reasonable and if we really can figure out the best way to get these houses made in a short time, it'll be worth it.*

“Actually, I’ve got an idea,” another man said. “If you’re worried about what you’re building burning down, let’s build something that won’t. I bet we can get some water affinity people together and pull some water into an empty cement truck and bring it back. Then we can make mortar and start putting up a factory building. Made of brick. We have plenty of brick in storage, we just need to hold it together. We need a place to make the house parts that’s away from the warehouse, right? And it rained yesterday, we wouldn’t have been able to work outside comfortably. But if we had a factory building, we could have done a bunch of work and today just carted what we made out to be assembled. Those we can make more sturdy from the start because we know we’ll always need big, brick buildings near the warehouse anyway.”

“Yeah okay, I could go for that.”

Did he forget that it wasn't fire magic that burned the house, it was destructive magic? So that would be able to destroy brick as well as wood I would think. But whatever, if it gives him something to do as long as somebody builds a house the hybrid can go after I'm satisfied. We need one in front of the other so the dogs can be in the middle. “Great! Let’s get back to work, then!”

That night, and the night after, Siew Yan, Stefan, and I put up the fence they had made and took it down as the sun was coming up. Janet had agreed to hide it in her “void” whatever that meant so at least we could get it out there quickly once everyone was inside. Michael then put the dogs out and the three of us listened for their barking the entire night. I hadn’t ordered the doors secured, counting on human nature to make everyone think it was someone else’s responsibility so it wasn’t done at all. We stayed near open windows, practicing magic but really hoping to hear the dogs so this could be put behind us. Thus on that second night when the dogs started barking I hurried downstairs and called for the doors to be sealed. *This could actually work!*

“What’s going on?” someone asked.

“Just do it. And get everyone here, earth affinity people in particular!”

With the doors locked and everyone there the three of us started calling out names from the list Janet had gotten us. We had made some strips of cloth, so when one of us called someone’s name we tied a rag around their arm while the next name was called. Everyone was a bit confused as to why we were doing this but I just told them it was part of the plan. Soon every person with an earth affinity was tagged. All but one, that is.

“Ramesh Chadiwal,” Stefan called out. “Last chance, anyone here Ramesh Chadiwal?”

Silence.

“That’s our guy,” he announced. “He’s on my list and he’s not here. Every other person with earth affinity is accounted for.”

“So he’s out there right now?” one woman asked. “How do you know?”

“You’ll see,” I told her. “For now everyone else take a ribbon and affix it to your arm like we’ve been doing. I don’t want Ramesh slipping around us and joining the crowd without us knowing. He might look different if the celestial inside him has changed his view of himself.”

“But he could be destroying everything!” someone protested.

“So hurry up and get that ribbon tied on so we can get out there and confront him!”

“Oh. Right.”

Finally everyone was ready and we passed through the doors to the outside. I checked for the ribbon as they went past, and everyone had one. We were ready. We headed off towards the houses, and now everyone heard the barking.

“Wait, so you had something set up the whole time?” a man asked me. “This whole ‘we’ll think about it’ business, that was a trick?”

“That’s right. I had to make you believe I didn’t have a plan to draw out the hybrid so that they thought our guard was relaxed and would go burn the houses down once more before we got organized. Draw out Ramesh, I guess I should say. Joke’s on them, we did have a plan and it’s about to come crashing down on the celestial that decided to do this.” *I just hope they don’t brush us aside like we were nothing, but according to Michael they lose most of their power doing this. Let’s hope he’s right.*

“Not bad.”

“Thank you. But it wasn’t my idea, I want that made clear. I would suggest throwing a party for the person who did come up with it, but we don’t have anything to party with. Maybe we can make them a medal or something...”

As we got closer we saw the frames of the houses were again on fire, and the fencing we had put up was twisted and thrown aside. The dogs were running around and came over to us, seemingly happy to see us.

“Can we keep ‘em?” Stefan asked, doing a good impression of an actual twelve year old. “Can we? Can we? Huh?”

“That’s up to Michael. Spread out, look around,” I called. “Ramesh must be around here someplace. No one goes alone, and everyone keep an eye out for someone without a ribbon. Move with a group, that’s the safest way. Fire users, get some floating fires going, why did it have to be cloudy tonight? Someone work on inventing the flashlight tomorrow, this is crazy.” *Of course if I knew any weather controlling magic, like a proper water magic user would, I could clear the clouds out. But no, this all had to happen two weeks since we got here.* “If you know any spells to put out fires, that would also be appreciated.”

We broke into groups and searched for about a half hour (it was hard to know, as watches hadn’t been made yet either) but finally someone ran up to me and said he had been caught. My group and I headed out with them, and I saw Ramesh on the ground being held down by several people.

“Janet! Get Michael over here!” I called.

“You got it,” she said from behind me.

“Denice! Thank goodness you’re here,” he called to me. “These people went crazy, tell them to let me up!”

“Tried to slip into our group,” one of the men holding him down said to me. “Took us a minute to realize he didn’t have a ribbon. So we jumped him.”

“You did good,” I told him. “Ramesh, just stay calm. “You’re the hybrid, Michael can hopefully do something for you.”

“Hybrid? Impossible, no I’m not. You’re lying! She’s lying, there’s no way I’m the hybrid! Let me up, I did nothing!”

“So where’s your ribbon, huh? Why were you out here?”

“I... I...”

“You don’t know, do you? It is you! You smashed up our houses, sass mole! Sneeze us geist, I can’t even call this guy a mass shoal- this place is really starting to tick me off!”

“It wasn’t him,” I admonished the man. “He’s the victim here, remember? He needs help, not you trying to swear at him.”

“Oh, but it was, in a way, Denice,” said Ramesh, his demeanor changing. He had stopped struggling, and the others suddenly jumped away as he started changing. Horns sprouted from his head, his skin became more like scales, and his clothes melted away as he started growing. “Midveil, what a joke. You should all be in our torture pits. Every one of you!” he screamed, pushing himself to his feet. He brought his hands together, probably to do a spell but hesitated as more people were running up. *Yes, even with better magic can you fight all of us? And even if you win, what then? We’ll be back tomorrow and we know who you are. Plus you can’t fight Michael who is still a full celestial. You’re trapped!*

“Kill him! Kill him!” someone was shouting.

“With what?” someone else was shouting.

“That’s about enough of that,” Michael said, coming up. Janet was by his side, and she gestured, thick chains appearing around the figure. They pulled his hands apart, pinning them by his sides. He struggled, but couldn’t bring them back together to do magic and free himself. “You sell out!” he called to Michael. “Traitor to your own kind!”

“Hardly,” he refused, slowing and coming to a stop before the hybrid. “The system was broken. I fixed it. At least that’s the hope.”

“Fixed it? By letting these human souls stay *here*? That’s not fixing anything. The system was designed to be perfect, who are you to go against the wishes of the Great Architect?”

“The who?” I asked.

“No, The Who were an English rock band formed in London in 1964,” Janet told me. “The Great Architect is how celestials refer to the being that set everything up. Set the universe in motion, created the totality of existence. Of course no one has met this being so their existence is purely speculation. Even I have no information on the Great Architect being more than a myth.”

“Something made all this, made all of us. If not the Architect, who?” Michael asked. “And the point system works, none of us could have done such a thing. Keeping track of the actions of every human, every second of the day and cataloging all their actions as moral or not and then assigning a point total to every action? I mean the scale of it! Doesn’t it boggle your mind? And while it worked up until now, I admit that, it broke down. Something needed to be done.”

“You speak blasphemy against the Architect? You’ve fallen lower than I thought, Michael. Their plans are perfect! Do you hear me, humans? Perfect! The point system is perfect, as are all systems created by the Great Architect. We are flawed only because we turn away from them. You don’t belong here, no one does. One day they shall show themselves and you will be punished! You’ll be sent where you belong, mark my words!”

By what, going to The Bad Place? Where we would have gone anyway? Sorry but that’s not much of a- Wait, are these two talking about religion? In the actual afterlife? I mean I get why humans do it; worshiping something supposedly greater than ourselves, but celestials do the same thing? They have a creation myth, like we do? They really don’t know the truth any better than we do? This can’t all be an act, what would the point be? That’s either extremely disappointing or comforting, I can’t decide. So he’s accusing Michael of turning away from this ‘god’ because he feels things are not being done the right way? So the celestial that took over Ramesh is just a believer? Though I guess any terrorist would claim the same back on Earth. His faith was so strong he gave up his existence to merge with a human so he could come here and make trouble? That he wants us in The Bad Place is secondary to him, I think, he just wants us where we ‘belong.’

“Why create this place if not to one day have it populated with human souls?” he asked.

“I do not question the designs of the Great Architect! I keep the faith, unlike you!”

“How do you know their design wasn’t for this to happen?”

Oh boy. There it is. You start arguing that and religion falls apart. Because no one knows the ‘great plan’ but everyone assumes there is one, all suffering is ‘a test’ or someone being ‘a sinner’ because of course ‘God’ is perfect. But you can’t have it both ways. This place exists, ergo it must be part of the plan. To claim otherwise means you’re just supposed to follow blindly whatever your ‘faith’ demands instead of using your own head to ask ‘does this even make sense?’ If you are not the Architect you can’t know their intent, not really, so saying anything is their ‘plan’ is disingenuous from the beginning. Best to just decide where your own limits are and if you should meet the being behind it all and they say you were wrong, you can at least say you lived according to your own principals and they should have been more clear from the start!

“Nowhere is it written this place is to be handed to the humans!”

Bingo. See what I mean? Neither side can be right or wrong, because neither side really knows. Unless the Architect shows up in the next two minutes, anyway, it'll all just be speculation and thus, neither side can be in the right.

“Nothing says it can’t be used that way though. Look, I’ll be happy to debate religion with you on the way. Janet, let’s get him on a train. Everyone, I really do apologize about this. Hopefully he should be back in a few days.” He started rubbing his hands together. “Oh yes, we’re going to learn so much by having this one to study.”

“While helping him, you mean,” Janet clarified.

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“Listen to me, all of you,” said Ramesh, pleading now. “It’s not too late. You were duped by Michael, like a child simply following the orders of an adult. I don’t hold that against you. No true believer would. Return to The Bad Place where you belong, where you will be welcomed. You know you belong there as well as I! Your sins stain the very air, like a dark shadow all around you. I see them. You know you should be punished for them, I was inside this man’s head. I know his thoughts, I know all humans know, on some level, they didn’t do enough in life. Am I wrong? Does your conscience not demand you-”

“Enough!” roared Michael, his hands a blur. A gag appeared around Ramesh’s mouth, and he was cut off. “He would have gone on until we got him on the train. Come on you.” He grabbed the chain and started dragging Ramesh off. “We’ll see you in a few days, everyone. Sorry about this, again.”

He dragged the struggling form of Ramesh off, towards the direction of the train tracks.

That’s a bad look, Michael. Just silencing someone is a bad way to go. I mean sure, back in life I sorta wished I could do the same thing to people like, oh, Tucker C. as an example but he should be able to say what he thinks. Maybe not on national television especially when other, shall we say less savory countries start using him as part of their propaganda efforts. If morons believe him well that’s on them, isn’t it? Was what he was saying so dangerous you needed to cut him off like that? I don’t think any of us were going to line up to go to The Bad Place and be tortured. But take away discourse and what are you left with?

“So he just left?” one man said, after a moment when Michael could no longer be seen. “Why do I feel like I’m a teenager and my parents just left town?”

“Come on, we’re all adults here,” I told him. “Tomorrow it’s back to work with or without Michael. At least now we won’t have to worry about our stuff being destroyed. I’m sure J will come when we call her, if he had any problems, so-”

“I’m not an adult!” Stefan announced, hand in the air. “And I still want a puppy!”

“What?” I looked and the dogs were still running around. “He didn’t take the dogs back. Yeah I guess, anyone want a dog? Hey so are you eighty four or not?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t think it matters. Let’s head back.”

Chapter 8

We talk about needing a government or not

When: Day 26 in the afterlife

Where: The village

In the two weeks we had before Michael returned with Ramesh construction of the basic housing units proceeded well. They were not turning out pretty, as expected, but they were going up. They were one floor affairs, and each person basically got a “room” with only three walls allowing for enough space for a bed and maybe some sort of clothes storage if we ever got around to making some more. But I felt they would work to protect us from the coming cold, which is all we needed for the moment.

Someone got the bright idea to saw a hole in the middle of each module that was destined to become a wall, and reinforce it all the way around with more wood. This could become a “window” fairly easily by just slipping glass into it. So not exactly a modern window that could open and close but at least it would let some light in during the daytime. We figured out glass was fairly easy to make too, being a certain type of sand (which we had in the warehouse) mixed with a few other things and melted. It took several people with fire magic to produce the needed temperature but Janet assured us as we all got better at magic it would take fewer people to do the job. But we proved we could do it, measuring out a metal “pan” to pour the molten glass into that was the same size as the wooden cutout. Someone with earth affinity could then just lift it out with movement magic, and while the glass wasn’t anywhere near “modern” glass with no impurities it would do the job. (It also wasn’t that shatterproof, we needed to cool the glass a long time to achieve that property but no one was going to hit it. We just wanted something we could see through for the moment.) We had fire people working with metal affinity people at the moment to make things out of metal though, like hinges for the doors and fasteners like clamps to hold things together while glue dried. Heat was heat, I didn’t care what they made hot it was all good practice. They could make windows once the units were up, I didn’t care what order they did things in. I had originally said we could cut holes in the walls later but it really was easier to do it beforehand, put the wood in so the insulation didn’t escape, and nail that all together before it went up. I can change my mind about things. Good as my word I awarded points to the team that figured out how to put them together as efficiently as possible, and they were going up more quickly now that people were getting the hang of the machinery and magic.

Our diversion of the nearby river was also going smoothly. We got the trench dug out (again) and lined it with wood. I doubted it would ever rot as there was no bacteria in the water to attack it, so figured we didn’t have to figure out how to join metal pieces together for that. We got a little fancy with it too, digging past where we wanted the houses to be, creating a wider area for the “bath house” that could be blocked off for the day, then another channel “behind” it that could let the water out again. That way fresh water could be brought in every day, heated, then flushed out again when we were done and the place “closed.” Building the structure for the bath house would come later, we would build it “around” the waterway here but at least we were ready for it. At the end of the waterway we had those with earth affinity pull up as much of the ground as they could making a deep hole. We didn’t put any paneling there, just leaving it dirt so the used water could flow into it and then down into the ground naturally.

Janet appeared to us on the morning of the twenty sixth day to announce the train with Ramesh was leaving The Good Place for his return. She said he had successfully learned to control his hybrid form and suppress the remaining consciousness of the celestial, and would be no more trouble for us. She graciously created a banner for us welcoming him home as we didn’t have the time to do it, and we hung it up so he would see it coming from the train tracks. (We didn’t exactly have a train “station” it just stopped wherever it needed to, being under Janet’s control in the first place) Not everyone came out to greet him, there may be hard feelings there, but at least most of us showed our support for the guy. He looked a little different, though if this was because he saw himself differently now or just

because his ordeal had been mentally exhausting in some way, it was impossible to say. He didn't want to talk about exactly what he went through to get the celestial under control only saying he wouldn't wish the procedure on anyone.

"At least of this does happen again we'll have a better idea what to do, and what not to do," Michael told us. "Of course given we know now the human soul can suppress the celestial consciousness I don't think any celestial will be in a rush to destroy themselves in this way."

I hope so. "It's good to have you back, Ramesh," I told him.

"I like what you've done with the place!"

"It's not much, but hey, it's home," I joked. "Yeah, we'll have bars, a strip mall, and I think we've somehow already got a Starbucks just over there so it's going great."

"A strip mall or a mall strip?" someone called. Someone naked, I noticed. Everyone groaned.

"Juvenile humor aside, now that you're back we're at the original five hundred again," I told everyone. "Let's finish up early today and head to the library. I think it's time we answered some important questions about how we're going to take things going forward."

"I've had a crash course in magic," Ramesh told me. "Anything you need done with earth magic I can probably handle. I'm ready to pitch in again, make up for the trouble I caused."

"Which we all realize you were not to blame for!" I hastened to assure everyone.

"I still feel bad about it."

"Well don't. Let's see where we can put you to work..."

Later that afternoon everyone gathered in the library, and Janet announced we were all there. I had some books on government out and I called the meeting to order. "People have been coming to me and asking 'do we need to have some kind of government and if so, what kind?' I agree that we're setting the stage for every resident of Midveil that comes here in the future so with us all here let's discuss it, or at the very least start thinking about the problem. Everyone around here has been behaving, keeping to the No Harm rule, but others have rightly pointed out we can't assume that will always be the case. The question is a valid one in that sense, so let's discuss it."

"Why not?" someone asked. "This isn't Bad Place. Anyone here has earned a spot doing good in their lives, enough good to not go there. Why would anyone violate the One Rule on purpose *here*?"

"Consider what Michael told us," I retorted. "Those in The Bad Place will still be tortured for their misdeeds. That torture will earn them points the same as our doing good deeds for each other does here. Once they hit positive points they come here. Will they have learned anything from their time in Bad Place, being tortured? No, I don't think so. They'll be just as awful as they were in life. The torture program isn't a rehabilitation program, just like prisons on Earth weren't. We need to anticipate that kind of person coming here." *Mentally scared. Maybe looking to lash out, make up for the 'injustice' they've been put through. After all, no one blames themselves when they do bad things, that's how they live with themselves after the bad things are done.*

"Yeah, people can be jerks without breaking the One Law," one woman spoke up.

"But is the One Law government?" the first guy asked. "Is it good enough?"

"I'm glad you asked," I told him. "I've been looking into it. The function of government, that is. Janet can maybe tell me if I missed anything but the high level overview is this; Protect their citizens from other countries. Print and manage currency, regulate infrastructure, create and enforce laws. Did I miss anything?"

She shook her head. "Those are the fundamentals of government."

"Okay, so let's take them one at a time. There are no other countries at the moment, obviously, but is there anything else we might need protection from? Michael, should we be worried about celestial attack from The Bad Place?"

"Highly unlikely," he told us. "Not to say it couldn't happen, for whatever reason, but celestials from The Good Place would really be your only defense in that case. Until you've all had several

lifetimes to study magic none of you would be a match for a celestial. And even then, they wouldn't be trying to kill you, just bring you back to Bad Place where they think you belong anyway. Killing you would actually be counterproductive, as you would just poof away at that point."

"Okay, I can accept that. Otherwise we're one continent and we're all souls. There's no language barrier, there's no religion as we're actually *in* the afterlife, and we can look like anything we want given some time so there should be no prejudice." *I have noticed changes to people's looks. Even with just a couple of weeks people look fitter, more attractive, and even taller. They think they should be getting stronger with all the manual labor they're doing, and it works. No one has sprouted cat ears or anything crazy yet, but Michael says it's possible.* "So I don't think we need protection from anyone so that function of government can be ignored. Any objections?"

There weren't any, I waited at least a minute (I think) for anyone to speak up.

"Very well. Next is currency. As you know, we have none. Nor do I think we can really come up with one apart from the points. Every other resource is limitless here, unless we wanted to start minting some kind of coin but honestly magic probably makes forgery extremely easy. Can anyone think of a good reason to not just use points, which are basically the ultimate expression of money anyway? I mean you've all at least gotten some by now, I would hope. I haven't seen anyone slacking off, everyone is helping the community in some way." There were nods all around, but then would anyone shout out 'I haven't gotten any!' at this point and show themselves to be the losers? Of course not! "There's an infinite yet controlled supply as those that earn more points leave for Good Place," *in theory*, "and every transaction really makes you think about it. Is giving someone your points really worth them possibly getting to Good Place before you? And we can't have the 'mega rich' like on Earth because anyone with that many points is going to move on. It's a pretty good system from what I can tell. So we just let the screens handle it. It can't be stolen, forged, or lost. What more could you want?"

No one came up with anything.

"Great. Next is regulate infrastructure. We're trying very hard not to have any though are we going to have something like the post office? Do we need to regulate air quality and such? Thoughts?"

"Air quality would be harm though, right?" asked one woman. "Anyone polluting the land is doing harm, and is already covered by the One Law."

"If we have a mail system that means we'll open ourselves up to junk mail," cautioned one man. "I don't want that!"

There was a general agreement on that stance.

"But at the same time we can't throw away the post office for what someone might do," I countered.

"If only we could have, like, a million trained owls..." one woman suggested. Everyone laughed. This idea would, of course, never work out in practice. Imagine getting a new TV or a stationary bike delivered by owls.

"I admit it's a tough one," I admitted. "We would have to staff it, and that would be a full time job in a place we never thought we would have full time jobs. We would have to keep track of where everybody was. And who knows how many people we would have at one time here. A million? A billion? More? We don't even have calculators again we can't keep track of a million people. Personally I would forgo physical mail and just move straight to e-mail. Figure out computers, we want them anyway, tie them together because that's where we were going in life at least before Amazon came along. As there is no Amazon here, and it better be a long, long time before we see Bezos around here if you get my drift," everyone laughed again they got my drift, "we come up with a better way to move goods. If we even have goods, apart from anything big enough to just pick up and carry home ourselves."

"If we were moving goods we would need trucks, and roads too," one man reminded me. "Trains, planes... or maybe not the warehouses are connected underground, right? We could move goods that way I guess. Still, we would need vehicles of some kind because it's 100km to the next warehouse so

someone is going to live in the middle. And you can't carry a chest of drawers 50km on your back. But I admit we're a long way from that."

"Agreed. So maybe we will need some kind of post office, if anyone has any ideas let me know later, I'll write them down. No need for it now, but that's probably the biggest government service that exists in terms of visibility. We won't create a government just for that, but maybe in the future we'll start one. Okay, next is laws if no one has anything else about infrastructure?"

"But what about infrastructure itself?" asked a man. "Roads and such?"

"Well, we won't need bridges because the ground really is flat here. Roads though... That brings up a good point I wanted to raise after this discussion. It goes without saying we'll survive the coming winter, even if we're miserable while doing it. But what then? More people start showing up, right, and we expand to use more warehouses. Do we want every location to be cookie cutter houses like our sad little boxes we're making here? I wouldn't think so. Maybe a bunch of people want to live like elves and grow a forest, and make their homes out of trees... To pick a random example."

"Random, uh huh," a lot of people said.

"Anyway," I said, coloring, "would they want roads full of cars blasting through their forest? Probably not. But they might still want wi-fi and cell service, so they would need some kind of cabling though it could be underground. It wouldn't be right to force them to have roads if it didn't fit the theme of their zone, if you follow me."

"I think that's not exactly what we're talking about here," said the guy. "I think it's more a standards body than anything. How wide are roads? What frequencies of wavelength can be used, and where? What does signage look like? Traffic lights and intersection laws. That sort of stuff."

"Oh I didn't even consider stuff like that! We would need at least some kind of committee that defines how long a meter is, and what a kilogram weighs, and that sort of thing. Decides when roads are bad enough to need repair, where new ones should go."

"If we even have roads," Stefan spoke up, pushing to the front. "But repair isn't forward thinking enough."

"What do you mean?"

"We have better materials here, don't forget. And we don't have to skimp on using it, like they would in the comics. Our roads can be made of nearly indestructible materials. Set in place with magic, they'll just sit there forever so they won't need repair. I mean we don't- we didn't- make metal roads because of cost, and they would still break down over time just the same. Not so here! So let's do it right the first time."

"Okay, something to think about," I told him. I wrote down "post office" and "standards office" on a sheet of paper I had to take note on. *Still nothing we would need a whole government for, just agreed upon people to decide what's what.* "He's right though, maybe everyone will just learn teleportation magic, or be teleported by others. Open gateways between warehouses? That could be a thing right?" I looked to Michael.

"Sure, there are ways that could be done," he agreed.

"We have to think about *why* we had things like roads, I think. Sure, we wanted to live in nice neighborhoods, and commute to our factory jobs so our factories weren't in our back yard. Well, too bad, because the resources come from warehouses here. Unless we forgo factories in some parts? But just like being a postal worker, who wants to stand at an assembly line and make cars all day? Sure maybe someone likes *rebuilding* cars, or working on them at night as a leisure activity where they restore some old hot rod or motorcycle to get girls (pretty sure it doesn't happen the other way but I mean it could...) but that person doesn't want to make the Prius day in and day out. If we can come up with a better way to move things around that doesn't involve a million miles of road, let's do that. I mean people have to study to get a driver's license back home. Or a broom license, in the case of the owl world," everyone chuckled, "let them study teleportation magic. Stefan had the right idea, let's

look to a ‘magical solution to all our problems’ to quote some bearded big guy and use the old nasty way of doing things as a last resort.”

Everyone seemed to agree.

“But I do agree there have to be standards, so there could be a standards office. Not opposed to that. So that brings us to the final part, creating and enforcing laws. What laws are we going to have that aren’t already covered by the One Law? Do we need more? There is no death here, probably no way to get high or harm oneself, so that sort of thing isn’t an issue. Of course holding someone against their will is a no-no but that’s harm, already covered. I just worry. Laws mean courts, and lawyers, and how can you punish someone anyway?”

“And what if punishing them doesn’t work?” someone asked. “Like someone that steals, and we catch them, take their stuff, and they keep stealing?”

“You can lose points if you really go out of your way to be a jerk,” Michael spoke up. “Actually you could use the point system in that way as well.” He looked thoughtful.

“Explain?” I demanded.

“Think of it as a fine. Offer the choice between punishments. For example someone is caught stealing, like Joanne said there. So the perpetrator has a choice. They can do 100 hours of community service with no point gain, become Joanne’s butler for a year, or give Joanne a number of points equal to the agreed upon point total value of the item. That puts them in danger of being expelled to The Bad Place if they go negative.”

“And the bigger the crime, the more people involved, the harder a point total loss would hit,” I agreed with a nod. “You steal a painting normally seen by hundreds that hangs in a gallery and everyone that would have seen it gets 10 points. That could be hundreds of people. That’s not a bad deterrent, if deterrents to crime actually worked. We can’t just have anarchy though so that’s a decent way to make someone at least think twice. But we can’t exactly *take* points from someone against their will, can we?”

“Only an official celestial judge could do that,” he agreed. “They would have to agree to it, that’s why you give them an option. We can call a judge if the case is that high profile but obviously we want you all to solve your own problems.”

“Obviously,” I agreed. “That could work. Okay, I want everyone to think of laws-”

“Rivers!” someone blurted, snapping their fingers.

“What what?”

“The elves. They may not want roads but they might want rivers. What if instead of cars we just dug out enough waterways to transport everything by boat? Water is basically infinite, right Michael? We can dig our own waterways and the water level won’t decrease, right?”

“He’s right, it won’t decrease.”

“We line the banks like we did with the bathhouse water, and it’ll stay there. No earthquakes, and we can build bridges over the waterways if we need to. I mean what’s a river but a road that never needs paving?”

“It’s an idea,” I agreed. “I’m not opposed to it.” I made a note. *Waterways not roads, boats not cars.* “Would there be floods though? We have rain...”

“Not specifically caused by natural disaster,” Michael assured us. “If there was some kind of blockage, unless you were *pumping* water in some way, it would just stop. It wouldn’t rise above the banks of whatever channel it was in. You don’t have to worry about floods.”

“Great! So what was I saying?”

“Laws?” Janet prompted.

“Right! Laws! If you think of anything not covered by the current One Law let me know. Something you would want illegal that isn’t strictly ‘harm’ as we’ve defined it. Which is to say we ask a third grader ‘do you think they shouldn’t have done that?’ and if they say ‘no’ we’ve got them.”

Everyone laughed.

Ugh, that brings up schools, and how to teach kids that come here how to learn things. Would they be motivated to learn on their own? I suppose there are people that do like teaching, maybe that will work itself out naturally.

“Hopefully we’ve got a few weeks before there’s even a hint of snow. Things have worked out for now, there will be plenty of time to discuss all this in greater detail when it’s blizzarding outside and we have no TV to watch. I just wanted everyone to know it was on the table, we’ll come up with some kind of formal document and everyone can sign it, and that’ll be the law for the moment. We can always rip it up and change it later. But now let’s talk about zoning!”

Everyone gave me a funny look.

“Don’t look at me like that! This is the good part about living in the afterlife. We’re going to talk about how you can all live in the fantasy world you always dreamed about.”

Chapter 9

We lose one of our own

When: A moment after

Where: Library

“Janet,” I said, turning to her. “If you wouldn’t mind, can you create a map in the air here of the surrounding area? Centered on us here, and showing the nearest...” I counted in my head. “Eight other warehouses?”

“Of course Denice.” The map appeared in the air.

“Great, thanks. Now, according to Michael and Janet these warehouses,” I pointed to the squares at each edge of the square around what was our current location, “are 100km apart. Whatever we define a kilometer to mean around here.”

“That’s right,” she agreed.

“So what if we designate a zone, 50km square with the warehouse in the middle? That gives us 100 square kilometers to work with. That forms the boundary of the zone and each zone can have a theme. Maybe there’s a factory zone, or a park zone with no houses, and a forest zone for elves, or a castle zone, or a ‘modern city’ zone.”

“Oh I want to live in the vampire zone!” said one woman. “Everything is all Gothic and mysterious.”

“I want to live in the queer zone, where everything is rainbow colored!” said a man.

“Wait, I don’t want to live in between the vampire zone and the queer zone,” said another man.

“That would really be weird!”

“Well we can’t have the vampire zone right next to the queer zone,” said the woman. “All those rainbows would be trying to creep into my Gothic castle!”

“That’s a good point,” he agreed. “And all that negativity would make our rainbows gray.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” agreed a man. “But I don’t know how it would work in practice. That could be going a little too far Denice.”

“You think so?”

“But how is my rainbow castle going to look next to the Gothic castle if we put them in the same zone?” protested the man. “I like the theme idea!”

“What if every other zone was just a normal one? With just houses or whatever?”

“What’s normal?” asked the guy who wanted the queer zone. “Normal for modern times? Where? Rural China? African villagers? Eskimos? Go back in time a little bit and now we’re talking about those on the Oregon Trail? Or even further back so it’s cavemen?”

“Uh...”

“We’re going to get people from all walks of life, and from the beginning of civilization onward. There’s not going to be a normal!”

“I suppose. Huh. Maybe we’re thinking too small again. Like maybe every four warehouses worth of space is a zone? I don’t want a hundred different queer zones.”

“Well I don’t want a hundred samey cis white male hetero zones then!”

“What does that even mean?”

“Oh you know exactly what it means.”

“Wait, there aren’t going to be black and white zones are there?” asked a man with dark skin. “I’m not going to support that in any way!”

“People, please, it’s just a thought. Think it over. Before we start any large scale construction I’d like a direction we can go in. Mix and match or zones or something else. Obviously outward appearance can’t be a factor because it’s malleable here. We are all souls, there is no race only what we choose to look like. Subconsciously or not. It’s just an idea. We have a chance to actually plan our future living conditions in a way no one ever has before. We know what kind of buildings are possible,

we know what those buildings need. We have a blank canvas here, you know how things were back when we were alive. One way streets, slums, some areas had super tall buildings and sirens blaring all the time. I'm not saying everything has to be ruler straight either, I just think we need to be mindful of what we're creating here so we don't find ourselves in the same situation we did before. I know we can do better."

"She's right," agreed Stefan. "In the city building games I could tear down a neighborhood and rearrange it with the click of a mouse. But here there's actual people we have to consider, and the time, and the labor doing such a thing requires. I'm all for thinking about what the plan is once we know we can build things. And it looks like we can, so we'll have to start thinking about it soon."

"Talking about plans," Michael spoke up. "This might be a good time to tell you about some of ours. That may influence your decisions here, after all."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Our hope is to double the number of people that come here every time. As soon as you have enough houses for fifteen hundred people, we can bring the next thousand here. They can help you build enough houses for the next thirty hundred people."

"You mean the next three thousand?" I asked.

"That's what I said."

"We don't say... never mind. Sure, each new group helps get set up for the next group. That's logical I suppose."

"No it's not," complained a man. "We started here with nothing. You didn't give us any houses. Why should we make houses for other people?"

Many pointed out this was only fair, after all.

"Because you get the points for it," Michael reminded them. "So you'll get to go to The Good Place sooner because of it. And they'll be paying it forward making houses for those that come after them. And so on, and so on."

"Well, okay I guess. But what if I should choose not to?"

"If you do nothing for the community your points stop going up and you'll just be stuck here for all eternity. I personally don't care but you may want to consider your actions carefully because if you want to use points to get people to do things for you, like making things, your points need to go up to replace the loss or soon you'll be at negatives and you know what that means."

Isn't this the guy who started that group building the factory building? "You can just continue building factory buildings if you want," I told him. "If you don't want to build houses for other people. That counts, right?"

"It counts," Michael assured him. "In reality anything that enriches the lives of those around you counts. That can be playing an instrument to keep their spirits (no pun intended) up or simply watering flowers."

Of course we have neither instruments nor flowers but I take his point. "So just keep doing that. Actually, when we have enough homes for just us this winter we may stop building homes and switch to factory mode. That way we can use the winter to invent and make things, pile them up in storage areas, and when the snow melts again just haul them out. Wouldn't making homes go a lot quicker with a stack of a thousand or more of those insulated panels already made? Planting what we want to grow won't take *that* long (I hope) and we can slap up the houses and get a thousand more people here to help us." *We have lots of farm equipment and the ground is as level as can be. By then we'll have plenty of experience with earth magic too and can hopefully just tear up some fields and plant lighting fast.*

"Actually, if you have the material to build the houses that could count," mused Michael. "We could bring them in and they could put up their own houses, using the materials you made while you do the planting. We just don't want them out in the cold when they could just as easily have a place to live."

Ah, so he noticed as well. Solve homelessness not with soup kitchens or cops harassing panhandlers but by giving everyone a home and going from there. He wants to make sure no one is homeless before they arrive, that everyone has a space that's at least somewhat protected from the elements because without that, they've got nothing. "We're going to need more people, that's just the reality of the situation," I reasoned. "If we ever want modern computers and cell phones and whatnot, unless we can build tons of robots to manufacture everything that means a lot of people. How many people does a company like, I don't know, Apple employ? They were busy trying to make the whole 'widget' if you will, right? Their own processors, their own custom cases, their own software, their own phones, that's closest to our situation right now. We're not Dell, we can't just call up Intel and ask for a million processors to slot into our generic office PCs. We have to make *everything*. That's going to take a lot of people."

"How would we even get started?" one man asked. "I'm a programmer, but I have no computer to program. Even if you could magically make some kind of computer appear before me, it would be blank. It wouldn't do anything if you turned it on. We would have to program it. Back on Earth primitive computers helped create more sophisticated computers. Are we going to have to use, like, what were they? Punch cards? Magnetic tape? How do you even *make* magnetic tape? Are we going to have to make a *vacuum tube* computer first?"

"One problem at a time," I told him. "We'll need factory buildings to have a chance at making anything, even snow shovels, so let's get our houses up and then start on that."

"How are we going to heat our homes in the winter?" one woman asked. "We're not putting in furnaces just bare walls."

"Hopefully magic," I told her. "If each house has someone with a fire affinity, we can put together some primitive stoves easily enough. A large cube of a metal with a high melting point, set far inside a cage of a material with an even higher melting point so someone doesn't brush against it accidentally. Heat up the cube, and it should radiate heat for a long time. Hopefully enough to warm the whole house for a few hours between castings of the spell. That way they won't have to concentrate on it the whole time."

"And hey, nothing says we can't sleep a few people to a bed," said one man. "That should keep us nice and warm."

"I suppose. That would mean far less houses needed too," she mused.

"Sure! Actually..." I thought a moment, then grabbed a sheet of paper. "I'll start a list. Right now we need fifty houses if we have 10 people to a house, right?" Nods all around. "If you're willing to sleep two, or I guess more because why the hell not at this point," I drew a series of squares on the page, "put your names in a square. That's one less room we need for each person past the first in the room. Maybe we can reduce our need for houses down to 40 or so? Anyway doesn't have to happen right this moment we've only been here a few weeks. As everyone gets to know each other you can decide, we've got plenty of time." I labeled the paper "Bed Plan" and set it aside.

"Hold on," said the woman. "I'm not just going to go writing down who I'm sleeping with! That's a huge invasion of privacy."

"Yeah, what if I'm doubling or tripling up with different people every night?" asked one man. "I mean have you seen this?" He indicated himself. "I can't keep this all to myself, I have a duty to share it!"

"In your dreams," she muttered.

"Look, nothing is implied by this," I shook the list at them. "It can just be you willing to share a room with someone so we get more people here faster. Sleeping side by side to be a little warmer or going at it like rabbits. I don't care. I doubt anyone does, it's not about that. And even if it was no one would care. We can't get pregnant, we can't get sick, if you haven't committed to someone and would thus cause harm by being with someone else, I fully expect most people to be sleeping double before

too long. Isn't that just human nature? We're a small community, working closely together for our own survival. That's going to drive people together, especially as it gets colder. No?"

"I guess," she accepted.

"We have to stop thinking like people, like we used to on Earth. That way of seeing the world no longer serves us. We have to start thinking like souls. That- no this is our reality now." I indicated the library around me. "Put aside all your fears, your old ways of thinking. We can do better, we have a chance to start over."

Looking out over the crowd it seemed some people were not exactly on board with my whole idea. *They'll come around. They have no choice it's not like we have anywhere to go.*

"We'll put our names on the list," said one couple, coming up to me. They were holding hands, and the man continued. "We don't care who knows we're together. But this, uh, isn't set in stone or anything, right? I mean if a month from now..."

"It's just an estimate, a tool to see how many houses we need, that's all," I assured them.

"Hand me a pencil."

"Okay," I said when they were done. "We need one less room. Anyway, I'll leave it at the front of the library for now. I've said what I came to say so keep it in mind, sign up when you can or just put Xs or something just so we can keep the count right, and keep up the good work."

Several weeks passed. Things progressed smoothly with several more houses going up and our first factory building being almost complete. Those with fire and metal affinities were learning to work together well as shaping metal without heavy machinery and molds was turning into one of the most useful things ever. A group of them was currently making supports and metal sheets for the roof of the brick building that would become our first factory. Others were putting up a metal frame for the second one at Michael's urging, explaining how it could make the process easier in the long run. Wood affinity was also in demand as they could move things around the most easily, replacing say twenty people trying to carry a huge crossbeam to the factory and lift it into place. Of course we could use a machine for it but magic seemed much easier. Earth affinities helped there too, manipulating gravity to make it easier for the wood types. And of course easily cutting bricks apart, digging foundations for the next factory building, and smoothing out the waterway leading to the bathhouse. That left us waters a little out in the cold, which we could manipulate if we had any. As people got more used to the equipment they needed my magic to enhance themselves less and less, but we were at least able to help move water around into the mixers to make concrete and mortar. But we needed something useful we could make our own too, keeping the skies clear could be useful but it didn't rain *that* much around here and it was honestly a welcome change from the sun beating down on us. *Maybe illusions, to show what buildings could look like before we begin construction? Everyone but us water types seem to have a real niche they've been able to get into to really help the community. Maybe I should look into generic, non-typed spells and we waters can specialize in something like that. I've wanted magic all my life, I can't get bummed out I'm water I have to make it work for me.*

To that end I focused on learning an area effect teleportation spell, which was a bit tricky, but would save us moving piles of material from place to place. I had just succeeded in taking a stack of bricks to the next factory site, more for practice than any practical need, when I saw Siew Yan looking around seemingly in distress. I waved her over.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Have you seen Ramesh lately?"

"Come to think of it, no. I guess I didn't see him this morning but I didn't think anything of it. Five hundred is a lot of people to keep track of and I still don't think I know everyone's name. Why?"

"Because I haven't seen him for two days and I'm worried. I asked big J but she said she couldn't tell me where he was. I've been looking around but no one seems to know where he is."

“That’s worrying. If his inner demon got loose again, but nothing’s been destroyed. Would it try to run away? Head to a different warehouse and just set up shop? Wait... Janet.”

“Yes Denice?”

I turned to face her. “I hear from Siew Yan you can’t tell us where Ramesh is right now?”

“That’s correct, I cannot tell you where Ramesh is at the current time.”

“Could you give him a message that we want to see him and to meet us over here?”

“I cannot do that either, at the current time.”

She keeps saying that... “Can’t or won’t?”

“What?” Siew Yan blurted.

“Can’t,” Janet agreed, confirming my suspicions. “In the case of sending a message, that would be no problem, under normal circumstances.”

“We could use you as a texting service? I never thought of that, but I guess you could ‘thread’ and be near any of us at one time, couldn’t you?”

“I could. I would not mind, because it would get me out of my void and interacting with people, which I think I like doing.”

“You think-”

“Forget that, why can’t you send a message to Ramesh?” Siew Yan pleaded. “He must be somewhere, you have to tell me where he is!”

“I cannot tell you what I do not know, Siew Yan. In a normal situation, unless a person gives me their permission first to be tracked, a message between the two people would be all I could do. But in this case you asked if I could tell you where Ramesh was, I told you I could not, and you ran off without further explanation. I still cannot tell you what I do not know, I’m sorry you rushed off before getting more clarification. Will there be anything else?”

“Could you tell us if he wasn’t Ramesh anymore, as in he had taken his hybrid form and run off somewhere?”

“He would still be Ramesh as far as I was concerned.”

Siew Yan and I shared a look. “And you have a complete knowledge of the entirety of Midveil, not just where we are now?” *It’s a long shot but...*

“Correct. Apart from the residents and Mindy some distance from here there are no spirit energy signatures anywhere else in Midveil.”

“Tell Michael we’re going to meet him at the entrance of the warehouse. He needs to be told one of us is missing.”

“Very well.” She vanished with a nod.

“Let’s get going,” Siew Yan told me, turning.

“Wait.” I raised my hands and started making the sequence of hand seals I had used to get here. I mentally decided I only wanted myself and Siew Yan to go to the entrance, the bricks could stay behind. “This will be faster.”

Once I managed to take us to the warehouse (which honestly wasn’t that far away, but at least I got another successful spell casting under my belt) we impatiently waited for Michael, who didn’t take long to appear.

“Janet told me why you needed to see me,” he told us. “Ramesh is missing?”

“Apparently. If he’s not here, where did he go? Was he killed by someone maybe, just after sunrise? So he’s gone until tomorrow?”

“One moment,” Janet told us. She put her hands together in front of her, then made a half circle with each hand which opened into a portal of light. When she was done she stuck her hand into it and seemed to be rooting around. She withdrew her hand and the portal collapsed. “Nothing was there.”

“So where does that leave us?” I demanded. “Did he go back to Earth? Was he just in a deep coma this whole time and just woke up or what?”

“Impossible,” Michael assured us. “If he’s here he’s dead, end of story. No, there are only two other places he could be...” He trailed off and looked off into the distance, first one way and then the other. “He didn’t have enough points to ascend, you’re still closest there Denice, and I doubt someone from that side would have broken the treaty and come to get him without us knowing.”

Wait, what? Go back to the part where I have the most points?

“That leaves only one other place. If they learned what he was, and what he had done about it, maybe they took him to try and undo what I had done. Unleash his inner demon again.”

What would have been blood drained from my face. “Can they do that?”

“I suppose anything that has been done can be undone, with enough effort,” he decided.

“Then there’s only one thing we can do,” I decided. “We have to follow him into The Bad Place and rescue him.”

Chapter 10

We take our first look at The Bad Place

When: Day 70 in the afterlife

Where: Next to the train that has pulled up

“So how did someone from The Bad Place get here anyway?” I asked Michael, who was pacing back and forth in the train car. Siew Yan had said she would go with us, and even Stefan who now looked closer to fifteen than twelve had volunteered. “Go on an actual rescue mission? Like in a video game? Are you kidding? You’re not leaving me out of this!” he had said. The train had been more Hogwarts Express than a Japanese Shinkansen but the seats were fairly nice and after telling everyone what had happened we were on our way. No one else seemed interested in going to The Bad Place, risking their existence in Midveil to help with the rescue so it was just the five of us against every celestial being between us and Ramesh. *Easy, right? But then, a larger group would be harder to hide and we can’t rely on numbers anyway. Twenty is too many but all five hundred of us wouldn’t be enough to take on every celestial in BP.*

“A small hole in the barrier could have been made,” he admitted. “Allowing a team to simply follow the rail to the established part of Midveil. They grabbed him up and teleported back to the barrier, then slipped through again.”

“I’m actually somewhat surprised you all decided to come,” Janet told us. “It could be very dangerous, you know? I’m sure Michael and I could handle it.”

“When I was alive,” Siew Yan told her, “no one came to help me. I swore to myself that if the situation were ever reversed, I would not do the same. It is as simple as that.”

“Oh, yes,” she agreed. “I can see how you would come to that conclusion based on how you lived.”

“What did you do in life?” Stefan asked her.

She looked away. “It was not an honorable profession. I would rather not speak of it.”

“Were you a thief? Come on, you can tell us if you were! An assassin? A drug lord? Wait, it can’t have been that bad you’re in Midveil!”

“Nothing like that.”

“If she doesn’t want to talk about it, drop it Stefan. She’ll either tell us when she’s ready, or it’ll just be a bad, fading memory of her life. Unimportant now, and best forgotten. Siew Yan, we’re here for you. I’m sorry for what must have happened and I won’t ask you to give us any details but if you ever did want to talk, I’m here.”

“Thank you.”

“Yeah, okay,” Stefan decided. “But I still say it couldn’t be that bad. I’m here for the adventure! Sneaking around, breaking into a high security facility? I’ve done it so many times in video games, but now I get to do it in real death? It’s going to be awesome!”

Yeah, that’s one word for it. “I’m here because these people seem to look up to me,” I told them. “If I learned one of my... What would you call them? Not followers-”

“Minions?” Stefan asked.

“No,” I snorted. “Fellow souls, let’s call them that. If I learned something had happened to someone and did nothing, could I really face anyone there again? No, I have to bring him back, and protect him from this happening again. It’s my job, even if it’s self appointed. They look to me for answers, I have no idea why, but at least things seem to be working out after I suggest them.” *Give them some time and they’ll see the zone plan is a good one too. I want to live in an elven forest, gosh darn it! With pointy ears, and a bow, and jumping through the trees, and playing with fairies, and maybe have my own personal-*

“Prostitute?”

“Stefan, drop it!” I angrily told him. “It is her choice, and in the past. She is just a soul, like us, and what she did in life has nothing to do with what she will do here in Midveil. The system itself put her here, she is a good person.”

“Fine.” He scrunched down in his seat and looked out the window. “Don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Thank you,” Siew Yan whispered to me gratefully.

“Of course.” Then to Michael, “what should we expect when we get there?”

“The train station should be empty,” he decided. “No reason to use it now, with the trains blocked from running. Not that they ran between Good and Bad Place all that often anyway. So that’s not a problem. The problem is leaving the station. Any celestial that sees you will immediately know you are not one of us. Nor are you a tortured soul; you’re too clean, and dressed too well. We’re going to have to stay out of sight as much as possible. If we can disguise you somehow after we get there we would probably be able to move around more freely, we’ll have to see what we come up with once we’re actually there. The biggest challenge I foresee is finding him. The Bad Place is pretty big, as you can imagine. He could really be anywhere.”

“That’s a problem.” *And now I wish I had worked on divination magic, which would be counted under water because it’s about knowledge.* “But we can narrow it down, right? There can’t be that many places to do the sort of thing they would need to do in order to undo what you did, right?” *Wait, shouldn’t Janet be able to tell?*

“That’s a fair point,” he agreed. “And would they take him to the furthest away one?”

“Sure,” Stefan spoke up. “If they knew someone would eventually come after him and wanted us to check every single possible location to slow us down.”

“Do they think like that?” Siew Yan asked.

“The question is would they even consider someone coming to the rescue,” he mused. “Celestials in The Bad Place have a fairly low opinion of humans because they only see the worst of them. Granted, even lately the worst have been fairly benign because of the whole points system breakdown but still. I think...” he paused in thought, “they would think you would write him off. I mean think of what you’re proposing to do! So they shouldn’t be expecting us.”

“That may be the one thing that works in our favor in all of this.”

He nodded. “Maybe, if we get spotted, we can talk our way out of it. Obviously only a few celestials would know about the kidnap plan. So most would be more curious why a bunch of Midveil souls were walking around The Bad Place.”

Is there any reason we couldn’t? We can’t go ‘up’ obviously, but what’s to stop us ‘slumming it’ and going ‘down’ to see how Bad Place souls are treated? As long as we didn’t bring any back with us, why would they care if we were there or not? Heck, maybe we want to torture our ex’s or something and they would happily help us! That would be more in line with how they think humans think, according to what he just said.

“Tell them we’re low on points and this is to motivate us to change our ways before we’re sent here permanently,” Stefan suggested.

“Hey, that’s not bad, kid! That could work!”

“I could pop up a fake status screen if someone asked to see it,” Janet told us. “Just say something like ‘status scream’ or ‘stasis screen’ something that sounds similar and I’ll make a fake one someone can look at.”

Huh, a variation on the old Chewbacca ploy huh? I guess it’s better than having no plan at all.

“Still, better safe than sorry, right? Janet, three really sharp knives and some leg sheaths please.” He held his hands out and Janet nodded, handing him three long knives with a strap on them so they could be, will, strapped on. He pulled one out, inspected it, seemed satisfied, and held them out to us.

“Awesome, a starting weapon!” Stefan jumped out of his seat and grabbed one. He pulled it out and started swinging it around. “Does it have any special powers or bonuses to attack?”

“We can’t go around stabbing celestials!” I protested. Siew Yan also was glaring at the knives still in his hand.

“They aren’t to stab anyone with, my goodness you humans are violent. They’re to use on yourselves if you get captured.”

“Come again?” Stefan blurted, the knife flying out of his hands, pitching out the window, and being left behind. Janet gave a ‘tisk’ and handed him another. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, if you get grabbed, use the knife to cut your own throat out. It’ll be better than being captured, believe me. You’ll have to wait a day to attempt another rescue, but at least you’ll be back in Midveil.”

“...Right,” I told him, still hesitant. Stefan calmed down, sliding the knife back and now really looking at it.

“I guess this is pretty serious, huh?” he asked softly. “No save points...”

“This is no game,” he agreed. “Go ahead, take one.” He jiggled them, and though I pressed my lips together in silent protest, I took one, as did Siew Yan. We buckled them on so they could be drawn easily. *Can I really slash my own throat out, even if I did get grabbed? I wondered. There’s no evidence but his word I would even come back, not that I really have reason to doubt him. Michael has seemed to play it straight with us this whole time, even helping Ramesh. Supposedly. If this was all some joke, like his inner demon was just playing along and went into hiding after a few weeks to lure us to Bad Place... But to what end? If celestials wanted us there, how would we humans really have stopped them? And why just the three of us? No, this must be real. We are dead, what else would logically happen? A second, different afterlife? Clearly not. Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that so I have to make that choice.*

“Anything else?” he asked.

“Yeah, a working suit of Iron Man armor, my own clone army, that weapon satellite from Akira, maybe a kaiju as a distraction...” Stefan listed off.

“Wouldn’t an invisibility cloak be better in this situation?” I asked dryly.

“Right, a couple of those.”

“Anything else that’s practical and actually exists?” Michael clarified.

Wait, why wouldn’t Janet be able to make something like that? Magic exists, doesn’t it, and can’t she make anything?

He sighed. “No. We have to stay out of sight and even all that might not be enough to assault all of Bad Place with. Thanks for taking all the fun out of it.”

“If it keeps you from having to respawn,” he announced with a smack on the back, “you’re welcome.”

“At least he’s speaking my language,” he muttered.

It was hard to say how long the train trip took, with the ring of “mountains” in the distance staying exactly relative to our vision and there being nothing else but the occasional warehouse seen from the tracks, it was hard to say we were moving at all. Oh, I could lean out the window and see the wheels spinning on the engine that wasn’t a problem. But there were no plans to make because they depended wildly on what the situation was in Bad Place and how we could react to it. Without even knowing what kind of building he would be held in we couldn’t make plans to attack it. So we just sat and waited for the train to get where it was going. But eventually it did, slowing to a stop in front of a glowing barrier covering what looked like the mouth of a cave. This was just stuck up out of the landscape so the tracks must have gone down from here, “underground” if you will. “Come on,” Janet told us. “I’ll add your names and bio-metric signature to the allowed list for now.”

You’ll do what now?

We followed her off the train and to the entrance, which Michael was scowling at. “There, see?” He pointed, and looking through the shimmering energy barrier I could make out some equipment on

the other side, though it didn't look upright at the moment. *Maybe tossed aside when they came back through?*

"That would do it," Janet agreed.

Michael put his hand near the barrier. "Field has been weakened all right. That's how they got through. Sadly, they have Janet too."

"Over here," our Janet told us, moving to the right side of the "hill." She pressed a part that looked like any other and it gave a click, swinging open to reveal a control panel of sorts. She typed in a very long code at a speed I couldn't keep up with on a key panel to the side, and it lit up. "Right, just put your hand here and the system will recognize you and let you through."

Stefan shrugged and stepped up first, putting his hand on the glowing square she indicated. It did the usual sci-fi scanning light beam and she nodded. "Next." We all put our hands to the panel, she locked it down and closed it up again, and we headed for the train.

"Wait, so the barrier isn't going down?" Siew Yan asked. "We're just driving the train right through it?"

"It's not a solid barrier, we could just teleport past that," Michael explained. "We had to account for all forms of magic. It's not solid, not in the sense you're used to. Walking across or flying or riding the train would produce the same result. Try to cross it without being in the system, which by the way can only be done here, on this side, and not remotely, and you'll go through it. You'll just be vaporized. I mean it's meant to give celestials pause, imagine what it would do to you? Oh, you would come back don't get me wrong, just not quite as quickly as if you blipped out any other way."

"Maybe we should just run a quick test, make sure the system took our readings properly," suggested Stefan.

"It's fine," Janet assured us. "I do know what I'm doing, you know?"

"No, I, okay."

We climbed back aboard and the train plunged through the barrier and headed "down." We couldn't help wincing as the energy barrier swept over us, but apart from a slight tingle nothing happened. The lights came on as the train headed into the dark, and soon we were pulling into a station. Our mission had begun!

Stepping off the train the station, which was somehow filthy despite being empty, we looked around. It looked like a fairly standard train station, one that served only one train, anyway. There was a nasty smell in the air, most of the lights were out, and those that were not were flickering or casting a sickly yellow light over everything. Siew Yan was trying to look in every direction at once, and I noticed she had taken what looked like a martial arts stance too. *Huh.*

"Stairs are this way," Michael pointed, and took off confidently.

I looked back the way we had come and then the other way in the dim light. How had he known that? We hadn't gotten twenty steps when I slammed into Siew Yan who had skidded to a halt to avoid Michael, who had stopped suddenly. Stefan slammed into me from behind, and we all took a second to get our balance back.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded.

"We're not alone," Michael whispered.

"What?"

"Who's there?" said a voice, and a ball of light flared to life above the hand of a person getting up from a chair in front of a set of stairs. "Human souls? Michael?"

"Uh, yes, I'm taking them-"

But he didn't get to finish, as Siew Yan, probably more freaked out about all this than she was letting on, put her hands together and made several motions. With a cry she made a throwing motion, and a nearby bench flung itself towards the figure, catching them by surprise and knocking them back. She gasped and we looked at her, she looked like she was regretting it already.

“Sorry, I just...”

“Can’t use that excuse now, get past him before he recovers!” Michael told us.

We raced towards him to get to the stairs, but I knew it would only be a second before the celestial untangled himself from the bench and came after us. I had to buy the group more time. I started making the hand signs even while I was running, and skidded to a halt when I figured I was in range.

“Come on!” Michael urged.

“One second!” I finished the final hand seal, then slammed my hands together. I wanted just him, not the bench, just in case weight played a part in this. I had never gone very far but I put everything I had into my desire to go back to Midveil. Both of us winked out of the train station, and while normally it was instantaneous going from one place to another I felt us smack the barrier this time. Naturally I was allowed through, hadn’t I just been added to the system? The celestial “beside” me wasn’t so lucky, and took the brunt of the force of whatever it did to those *not* in the system. But it had been weakened, so when I appeared at the top of the warehouse, positioned so I was at the edge but the celestial was *over* the edge, and fell, I got a glimpse of their true self as the disguise they wore started burning away. I didn’t wait to see them hit the ground, I darted back so they couldn’t see me, and repeated the gestures. *I can’t believe that worked!* In a wink I was back in the train station, and the others were standing there slack jawed.

“Come on, back to the train!” I told them, grabbing Siew Yan’s hand and dragging her. “It’s our only chance!”

“We can’t just leave!” she weakly protested, trying to pull be in the other direction.

“Trust me!”

We ran back to the train and climbed aboard. I pushed them all down and we crouched by the window. I waited several heartbeats. I saw from the corner of my eye Michael was casting a spell, or at least he was making hand signs like he was. There was an unholy scream and a large burst of wind as a large *something* teleported back into the place.

“Where is she?” the something roared. “I’ll make her blushing wish she had never plucking died!”

Yeah, isn’t that really the default state of most though? Hold on, can celestials not swear here any more than we can in Midveil? That’s odd.

I heard the thing stomping around, and the lights were going crazy, the figure must be hitting them but I didn’t want to risk a look at them over the windowsill.

“You can’t run from me!” The sound of it pounding up the stairway echoed through the place, and with another roar of frustration the pounding feet got fainter and fainter.

Whew.

Chapter 11

On the trail of Ramesh

When: A tense moment later

Where: Still on the train

“They’re gone,” Michael whispered to us. “What did you do to them? They were leaking all over there place just then.”

“Teleported them past the barrier back to Midveil. Dropped them off the side of the warehouse and made them teleport themselves back.”

“Such brutality,” he told me, sounding more than a little pleased. “Nicely done going so far, I knew from the start your magic would be powerful. Didn’t I say? And with so little practice with magic under your pants too.”

“Belt. Under my belt.”

“Are you sure? Anyway Denice, for someone with your point total it seems you can really be a mean switch when you need to be.”

A switch like a top or a bott- oh he means the other thing. “It was the only way! I didn’t take any pleasure in it.”

“Yeah, too bad the barrier had been weakened or they would have really felt it. Still, you at least got through the outer disguise and hit their essence by the feel of it with that little trick. It’s a good thing you can’t understand our native language, the things they were saying about you! Whew! They were mad, that’s for sure. What made you think of here to hide though?”

Wait, all that thrashing around and moaning and screaming and their celestial form bulging out of their human disguise wasn’t them “really” feeling it? What would it take to seriously hurt one of these guys? I have to keep in mind, this “kindly old man” exterior used by Michael isn’t his real face or form, probably not by a long shot. Never really asked why they all run around looking like us, but at least we can interact with them this way. Seems like they’re really weakening themselves by taking these disguises, there must be a reason for it though. “They would have expected us to run, not head back to the train where we had just come from. Figured I would hide in a place they wouldn’t immediately look. Still, we better go before they figure that out.”

“Right. Siew Yan, maybe let me do the talking from now on? We did have a cover story if you recall?”

“Sorry, sorry, I just lashed out. I was so scared-”

“It’s okay, honestly. It’s your first rodeo, that’s what humans say right? Bound to be a little hiccup right at the start. But no more slip-ups, okay?”

“I’ll try. I’m really sorry!”

“I know. Come on.”

We pitter-pattered as quietly as we could to the stairs again, and I noticed the concrete here had been burned by some kind of misshapen set of feet. *Some kind of fire celestial? Or some secondary effect of going through the barrier? Or just a consequence of their disguise burning off, because it dampens their power while wearing it so they don’t just destroy everything around them all the time?* Heading up the stairs Michael crouched by the exit, peaking around the edge. “They went that way, we’ll go this way,” he decided, pointing. “We can lose them in the city easily enough. Come on.” He straightened up, took a deep breath, and tried as casually as possible to leave the train station without attracting attention. This was easy as anyone in sight was currently looking in the direction the celestial must have gone. We slipped out and followed him down the street a ways, ducking into an alley and zigzagging our way through the... Let’s call it a city.

And it was, if a collection of smelly, filthy, crowded, run down, tired, falling to pieces set of buildings could be called a city. People were everywhere, as we got further from the entrance to the

train station it became apparent they had no idea what had happened and were just doing their normal thing. Which seemed to be sitting or laying around looking miserable. The buildings were tall, looking like apartment buildings one after another, but all the doors looked boarded up on them. There were streets, but not cars, so people were mostly just lying or sitting everywhere, making us have to carefully pick our way through so we didn't step on anyone. Looking around I saw what Michael had meant, these souls were filthy, what clothes they had were in tatters, and none seemed particularly interested in us which I supposed was a good thing. Despite there being no cars it sounded like we were in the middle of a heavy traffic jam, horns honking and sirens in the distance blaring. (Honking, of course, when in traffic invariably made the situation better which is why it was done so often) Even the air was filthy, as though exhaust from countless cars had been building up here for hundreds of years. I had to keep blinking my eyes, they were starting to burn a little and it was hard to see. Also I felt heavier, like gravity was stronger here, or something was sapping my strength and will to go on. It was no wonder no one looked at us, they wouldn't want to get noticed and dragged off for more torture.

"Why is everyone out here?" Stafan whispered. "Can't they go into the buildings?"

"Nah, it's part of the torture," Michael told them. "When they're not being tortured they live, if you can call it living, in places like this. The buildings are all pristine inside, with nice rooms, clean water, soft beds, you name it. But one can only see that through the windows, not actually get inside to experience it. Actually, I'm not sure if that's just an illusion or not. Huh, it could actually be, now that I think about it."

Would they not be tortured all the time? Oh, probably ratio of celestials to human souls, we outnumber them, so there's some schedule or another. Also probably "part of the torture" dreading your next session with whatever celestial is assigned your "case."

"But isn't most torture over?" Siew Yan asked. "With the agreement between Good and Bad places, and Midveil. They could use them now, right?"

"Yes, but I guess they just haven't considered it," he explained. "I hadn't counted on this, but I should have. The torture pits are being emptied of those who now qualify for positive point totals, so at least they have that going for them. We need a quiet place to plan our next move but I don't know if we can find one."

"These people don't look too interested in us anyway," I told him. "I doubt they would care if we just stood here and discussed it. Is this what we're going to have pouring into Midveil when we have more houses? These defeated people? They're not going to want to build anything, look at them!" *And the scope of the problem! As far as I can see this same scene repeats endlessly in all directions. It's just these buildings, streets, and people who have given up. What are we going to do with all these people? How can we get them interested in existing again? Building, making art? Solving problems. I mean couldn't they work together and get some of the doors open to the buildings? What's stopping them? Their years of endless torment sapping their will to do anything? That's not ideal once they get to Midveil. Or maybe they did, found it wasn't as the scene through the windows suggested, and gave up again.*

"I know, we celestials from BP are good at our- I mean, ahem. I agree, it's a problem. Maybe some kind of memory block can be applied?"

"Hold on," Siew Yan demanded. "We celestials from Bad Place? As in you and others? As in you worked here? You're not a celestial from The Good Place?"

"This is my old neighborhood so to speak, yes. You all thought I was from Good Place?"

"Yes!" we all said, seeing what Siew Yan was getting at.

"You were helping us!" I told him. At the same time that Siew Yan said "You tortured people from the beginning?" and Stefan said "We trusted you!"

"One at a time!" he told us, holding his hands up. "And maybe not so loud?"

"I don't believe this," Siew Yan huffed, throwing her hands up. "All this time. I trusted you. I thought you were one of the good ones!"

We all did. We all assumed because he seemed to have our best interests at heart he was from Good Place and not Bad. But we never asked outright, and that's sort of on us I guess.

"I am one of the good ones," he protested. "Believe me, I had to fight pretty hard to get a meeting between Good and Bad place, and set up Midveil in the first place. Just because I was assigned here all those eons ago doesn't make me a bad celestial. You're thinking of classical demons again, which is kind of racist honestly. Our jobs don't define us or make us evil, it's just what we were chosen to do."

"I guess I can relate to that," Siew Yan admitted. "You were forced into it, the same as I..." Her mouth snapped shut and she looked away.

Gee, maybe Stefan was right about her. Not that it matters now. But there is a critical difference between the two lines of work. "And did you take pride in your work?" I asked Michael quietly. "Torturing souls, I mean."

"Well yes, there was no reason to be bummed about it. The work was there, it needed to be done. Talk to the being that set it all up if you want to complain. If you can find them, I mean, I've never seen them. But I could never work here now, Chidi showed me that I should have protested the point system harder from the start instead of just accepting it. Even back then when it did make more sense because of-

"Who?"

"One of the founders. A human, like yourselves."

Ah yes, he's mentioned them before. If they even exist. "Let's table this for now," I decided. "We have to move forward and rescue Ramesh. That's what we came to do. Let's focus on that." *And I suppose even celestials should be forgiven their past, just like we will have to do once these poor souls start pouring in to Midveil. They have clearly been through enough, even if they haven't really learned anything from it. We have to be the ones that do that, setting a good example for them when they arrive. I just hope once away from here they start to perk up a little. But I think this place isn't doing them any favors, I feel dragged down myself, and I've only been here a few minutes. Imagine years of this feeling.*

"Fine," she allowed, "But I'm not happy about it."

"So you were wrong about the train station being empty," Stefan spoke up after a moment more of picking our way through the listless crowd.

"Yes, it seems they did leave a guard, that celestial wasn't just there by happenstance," Janet agreed. "They really didn't want to be followed."

"I guess I underestimated my fellow celestials, or the one that went into Ramesh made plans in case something like this happened," Michael admitted. "So that they could be 'reactivated' if we suppressed them."

Help, help, I'm being repressed! "They know someone came after him though, they'll probably be on high alert," I mused. "This is going to make it a lot harder. If only I could have made us invisible or something, hidden the whole train maybe?"

"We should have stopped short of the station," Janet decided. "Walked the rest of the way. I'm sorry, but Michael was so sure..."

"There's plenty of blame to go around," Michael hastily assured us.

"Umm no, no it's just your fault," Stefan told him. "All of this is your fault. You didn't anticipate someone from BP coming here, so we didn't post any guards to protect Ramesh. You didn't anticipate the guard they left, so they saw us."

"A bit harsh don't you think?"

"How is any of this anyone's fault but-"

"Wait, that guard!" I grabbed Stefan and Siew Yan, stopping them in their tracks. Janet and Michael took another step and turned to see what had happened. "We need to get back there!"

"Go back? Are you crazy?" Siew Yan blurted. "You want to get caught?"

“Not exactly. But you’re right. Janet!”

“Yes?”

“I need a drone. A good one. Small. Silent. Good optics. Quick!”

She looked to Michael.

“Come on! It’s not Midveil and I’ll give it back. But we have to catch that guy and we can’t risk getting near him!”

He nodded, and she held out a strange rectangular device and if my dim recollection from seeing it once was correct, a “scouter” from Dragon Ball Z. It was basically half a headphone with a piece that fit over one eye, and acted as a scanner and portable computer.

“What’s this?”

“You wanted a good one,” she said in a bit of a huff. She stuck the eyepiece on the side of my head where it stuck and I *felt* something as the display lit up. The device in her hand started to glow and rose into the air. The display changed to be looking at Stefan, who was looking up at it in awe.

“Anti-gravity? There’s no blades! Wicked.”

“Naturally.”

“But how do you-” I realized that *feeling* I had was where the drone was in relation to me, and I simply decided I wanted to see a view from higher up. The drone shot up, giving me a bit of vertigo as I watched the image but the drone reached the height I wanted and screeched to a halt. “Never mind. Come on.” I sent the thing ahead, and turned back around to retrace our steps. It took a little bit of concentration to send it silently dodging around buildings and walk at the same time without tripping on someone but it seemed to be reading my mind, rather than me controlling it every second. It knew what I wanted to look for and where I had been, it seemed, and was happy to search for that target without my direct input.

“Man, I want one of those!” Stefan announced. “Can you tell power levels with that thing too?”

“You’ll have to make one yourself when we get back,” Janet told him.

“Spoilsport.”

“Get into Good Place and I’ll happily hand you anything you can dream up,” she told him. “That’s the deal, remember?”

“I don’t get why we have the one,” Michael remarked. “What are you planning?”

“Neo isn’t with us. We could really use that guy too,” Stefan told him. “It’s the afterlife, we should be able to do crazy, reality breaking things!”

The One? Oh my goodness. I rolled my eyes. “Once that celestial finishes stomping around and realizes they’re not going to catch us, what’s their next move?”

“Teleport back to base to report in,” Stefan suggested. “It’s what I’d do.”

“But that’s the thing, I don’t think they will,” I countered. “We rode a train to get here. A stupid *train*. Michael could have just teleported us to the entrance, entered our data, and then teleported us to the city. But he didn’t. Magic is new and exciting for us, but old hat for celestials. So they do things the hard way, like riding a train. They’ve got all the time in the world, why rush? Now think about the one we saw; Their disguise is partly gone, they’re angry and frustrated they didn’t catch us. I think they’re going to stomp through the streets and cause a stir, because they’re bored, want to let off steam and want to get a reaction. We’re simply going to follow them. They’ll head back to their base or whatever to report in, and get their disguise fixed. It’s where we want to go anyway.”

“Using the drone so they don’t sense us, we can stay away from them,” Siew Yan reasoned.

“That’s right. We don’t have to comb the whole city, just see where they go.”

“You’re *really* smart,” Stefan praised. “Use this guard against them, that’s quick thinking right there.” I felt myself blushing a little, it really was no big deal but it was nice to be recognized. “I should have thought of the drone thing! I’m glad you did. I’m glad you came. We’re going to do it, aren’t we? We’re going to find Ramesh and bring him home.”

“That’s the plan. Got them, okay, hang back, they’re still stomping around...” I watched as the now injured celestial grabbed up people and tried to get them to talk about seeing us. They were “leaking” out of their suit and I wasn’t sure what to make of what I was seeing, but didn’t zoom in that closely to try and get a better look. With the drone locked on, and seeming to know it was in enemy territory I felt it activate some kind of cloak, and I knew it had vanished. *Very nice.* I urged it a little closer but it wasn’t going to lose the target at this point. A little patience and we might just be in the clear here.

“Wait, they’re coming this way,” I realized. “Uh... Okay, got it.” I reoriented the drone to look at the top of one of the buildings, and gestured for everyone to gather around me. “Stay close.” I gestured, forcing myself to relax and go through the hand seals I had memorized. Better to be a little slower and accurate at the start then try to go too fast, flub it, and get flustered. We appeared on the top of the building, it was a bit weird watching “myself” appear where “I” had been looking a second ago, but the drone locked onto the celestial again and I breathed a sigh of relief. “I think we’re in the clear, I doubt they’ll check every rooftop around here.” *Hopefully they can’t sense us up here, but we’re not actively using magic so... Give up already!*

The celestial stomped around a bit longer, demanding to know where we had gone by the looks but the apathy of the people below was clearly winning out. When their back was turned I did catch a smile or two, making me silently thank them because it seemed some *had* seen us, and were not going to give the celestial that had been assigned to torture them any satisfaction. They got more and more frustrated, finally seeming to give up and heading down the street. They didn’t care about going around anyone either, they just plowed straight ahead. I felt bad for everyone they stepped on, but they would be fine. *Right?* The drone easily kept pace and I kept the others up to date until Janet brought out a screen with the projected image of what the drone was seeing. They finally went into a building that looked different than the others, in a district surrounded by a high fence so there were no human souls sprawling everywhere.

“Interesting place to have gone,” Michael remarked.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Hospital.”

“Hospital?” we all echoed.

“Not in the human sense, of course,” he went on. “More a repair facility if our disguises get damaged. Of course even we can be hurt; spells gone wrong, carelessness around the torture machines, that sort of thing. And they do spell research here, so medical attention is close by if that goes sideways.”

“So is this their first stop or their only stop?” I mused. “Do we wait for them to come out or try to go in ourselves?” *Again, for some really good divination magic that could tell us if he was in there or not!*

“You guys figure it out,” Michael told us. “I’ll get something ready.” He motioned to Janet, and the two moved off and started speaking softly to each other.

“Fine. Remind me what spells you both know?”

“Just the standard stuff,” Siew Yan told me. “Telekinesis, manipulating metal, and, uh, I’ve been learning magic to help plants grow. I thought it would help next spring so I wanted to be ready.”

I snapped my fingers. “You’re the reason there’s been all those flowers around the library!”

“It’s not only me,” she admitted. “A couple of us have been working on it. The place looked okay but it was still kind of sterile.”

“Yeah, I liked it. Okay, Stefan?”

“Heating things up to help melt metal, increasing people’s strength to help in the construction efforts, creating and manipulating fire.”

Yeah, the standard stuff. We’ve just not had that much time to really explore magic what with trying to build enough houses for all of us. Okay. “We’ll have to make do. I can get us there, right to the roof

of the place. Siew Yan, can you maybe float us around so we can look in the windows? Maybe we'll get lucky and just see Ramesh and I can go get him."

"You don't think he would be in some secret lab?" Stefan asked.

"There would be no need to hide him," I reasoned. "They aren't doing anything wrong, from their perspective."

"I can maybe manage two of us," Siew Yan told me. "I don't want to screw it up and drop us. Unless the fall killed you, and you just went back to Midveil, it would be pretty painful right?"

"Let's avoid falling, yes. Okay, take Stefan. Check the rooms starting from the top of the place. If they're empty, set something in the room on fire. A small fire, don't blow the room up. We want it to grow into a distraction, and people- sorry celestials- can then evacuate by going down. Leave any occupied rooms alone. When you find Ramesh come get me. Take me down there, I'll teleport us in, and then back to the train station."

"We're taking the train back?" Stefan asked.

I shook my head. "No, you're wrecking the train and the tracks. Maybe Janet can get you some seeds or something, mess the station up so they have to spend time clearing it. That will delay them from coming after us right away. We'll teleport back to the barrier, get through, and hope we can strengthen it again using that equipment. It weakened it in the first place, right? Then we file a grievance with Good Place that Bad Place celestials are interfering and they need to cut it out." *Can't expect them to actually do much about it, but at least we'll make the complaint so they can be sanctioned or whatever.*

"And if he's not there?" Siew Yan asked.

"If he's not there, it's not the end of the world," Michael told us, coming back over. He had a book in his hand which he handed me. "Look over the spell on page forty five. You're getting the hang of the hand seals, maybe you can cast this by looking the directions over if you do it carefully enough. I'm counting on your strong magic to take care of the rest."

"How is any one spell going to help us?" I asked, paging through the book. *Maybe if it was divination?*

"You'll see."

I got to the page and read over the description of the spell.

"No way," breathed Stefan, who had been reading over my shoulder. "You're telling me save point magic really does exist?"

Chapter 12

The final rescue of Ramesh

When: No time has passed

Where: The Bad Place

I flipped the book over to the cover and it had water symbology all over it, and flipping to the index I saw it contained other water affinity spells as well. I looked back up at Michael. “You’re telling me I can do time magic?”

“That’s right. Not something widely known, and you should probably keep it to yourself, but yes those with a water affinity can also manipulate time.”

“Save points! Real save points!” Stefan was hopping from one foot the other excitedly.

“Yes...” I slowly agreed. “Explain?”

“This spell will serve as a temporal anchor, if you will, allowing us to return to the time and place the spell was originally cast. So if you run into trouble, or find out what room he’s in, you can release the spell and come back here. Then just try again, or go to the room directly now that you’ve seen it.”

“Nothing in the library suggested I could use time magic,” I complained. “I’ve been all over that place, looking at interesting spells I want to one day one. No book even listed it as a category!”

“Yes, the higher ups have been very careful to keep that knowledge away from even most celestials,” he agreed. “We don’t all have celestial affinity, you know. Some do get fire or metal too. So that means water, and that means time, and that means danger. With a capital D. Do you want the D? I don’t think you want the D.”

“That means something else entirely,” Stefan announced with a snicker. “And I assure you, she wants the D.”

“Shut up,” I told him.

“Make me!”

Is this kid really in his eighties? “You know nothing about what I want and don’t want, Stefan, so I’ll thank you not to make assumptions about me.”

His eyes widened and he started to say something that would also have been wrong.

“You seem to know a lot of things you shouldn’t,” Siew Yan remarked to Michael, probably trying to defuse our upcoming argument. “About the hybridizing technique, and now time magic.”

Thank you. Now isn’t really the time to go into my interests, or lack thereof, in romantic partners.

“I’m a curious and inquisitive person. Nothing more.”

“Uh huh.”

“Can you do it?” Stefan demanded to know.

I sighed. “The hand signs aren’t any different than normal water ones, it’s the order you use them that make the spell. Along with how you move the magical energies around of course. It’s all right here. I would rather have a week to practice it but yes, in an emergency like this I can take a shot.”

“Is this dangerous?” Siew Yan asked critically, stepping backwards as though the book itself was going to explode or something. “There must be a reason time magic is so... taboo.”

“I agree, it is one of the most potentially powerful branches of magic that can exist. Allowing travel through time, seeing through time, one could conceivably *attack* with it, just like any other elemental attack. Even I don’t know what that would mean. Ripping someone apart by sending pieces of them into different times maybe? Not even a celestial could withstand that sort of magic. But this one is fine. Yes, it can seemingly create knowledge out of nowhere from anyone not in the loop, but not paradox so much.”

“Fine.” I looked the spell over again, it spanned several pages. “Janet, can you make me a single page, like, poster sized sheet with all this on it? I don’t want to have to be flipping pages in the middle of this.”

“Of course Denice.” A large sheet of stiff material appeared, propped up on an easel, and I nodded closing the book. I stuck the book into the back of my pants and looked it over.

“As you won’t need it I’ll just take the book back-” she reached out a hand.

“No I don’t think so,” I told her. “I know the truth now, so you’re just going to have to live with me knowing.”

“I’m not alive,” she hastened to assure me.

“You know what I mean.”

“I can’t really let you keep it though,” Micheal told me. “Remember how I was just saying about forbidden-”

“Tough. Maybe you should have done a better job keeping your kind out of our business,” I replied angrily. “Again, this is *all your fault*. You knew hybrids were a thing but didn’t watch for them. So one slipped into Midveil. Then when your kind came for Ramesh again your protections on the boundary between our lands was breached without us even knowing there *was* a boundary barrier. So we didn’t know to watch it. That’s not on us, that’s on you. You say celestials are afraid of time magic? Good. Maybe with this knowledge they’ll be a little less hesitant to attack our lands and *abduct our citizens*. The book stays with me, and I want all other books on time magic made available to me when we get back. That’s your punishment for allowing this all to happen. You did cause harm, after all, and that breaks our One Law, which you’re subject to while you’re in Midveil. Or did you think, because you’re a celestial, that the law doesn’t apply to you?”

“Daaaang,” Stefan drawled. “You go, girl.”

“Or maybe they’ll be more likely to attack us, to take that knowledge back,” Siew Yan mused.

“Yes, it’s a risk,” I conceded, turning to her. “But you’ve trusted me this far, and I think you know I only have the community’s welfare in mind. I am the unofficial leader of the whole place, at least everyone comes to me to ask what I think about everything. You’ll just have to trust me with this, too. Don’t worry, I won’t let any old water user know, just those that have proven they can be trusted.” *A secret society, perhaps? This is what distinguishes us from the others, makes us on par with them, even if they can’t know it.*

“I do trust you,” she told me. “You’ve done well by me, don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“Oh dear...” Michael moaned.

I suppressed the urge to smirk at him and took a deep breath instead. I needed a clear head if I was going to pull this off. “Now let me concentrate.”

I teleported us all to the roof of the hospital first, not wanting to try holding onto the time spell at the same time, though this was a bit riskier. I gave the drone controller unit back too, I didn’t need any other distractions for this. Stefan looked like he wanted to take it over and play with it, but the way Janet was still glaring at me over the book issue he decided against making a scene. I carefully followed the diagrams for the time spell, and was rewarded with a sense of magic in the area that wasn’t there before. “It’s set up,” I told the others. “Get to rescuing.”

“Right,” they both said, nodding. Siew Yan then made the hand seals for telekinesis and picked the two of them up. They went over the edge and the plan to rescue Ramesh went into action. Something was bugging me though. I was concentrating on the magic but I could still talk.

“Janet, aren’t you supposed to know everything? I mean not about the future you said it was too chaotic here or something but anything physical you should know, right?” *She would never have given me the book if she knew the future, that I wouldn’t give it back, so she clearly doesn’t know everything.*

“Wondering why I can’t just tell you where Ramesh is now that we should be right on top of him?”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

“If another Janet is actively working against me they could hide that knowledge,” she admitted.

“Even Good and Bad place Janets aren’t meant to work against each other. When we do it’s... sad.”

She even sounds a little sad, she's really not just a walking database and replicator after all. “So a Janet could hide Ramesh, but we know he might be here. Can a Janet hide themselves from you?”

Her face lit up and she smiled. “No, they can't.”

“And are there any of your threads in this building right now?”

She nodded and ran to the edge of the building. “No, not this side,” she called down. “There's two Janets on this side of the building,” she was pointing. “Start with the sixth floor and then check the second! Ramesh will more than likely be with a Janet!”

“Right!” came wafting up from below. We waited a moment. “Yeah, he's right-” This was cut off with a flash of light, a scream, and the sound of glass breaking. Janet and Micheal ran to the edge. Janet put her hands over her mouth. “They've been destroyed by celestial magic!” she called back to me.

“Oh great, here comes trouble,” Michael spat. I heard something climbing up the building and that twisted shape I had seen before hauled itself over the edge.

“I knew you would come,” said a deep voice. “Now for the other humans, and we can talk about what you did, Michael.”

“Now, let's not be hasty,” he said back.

“Yeah, especially when I can *reset*.” In a blink, and with some sort of temporal yanking I had never experienced before, we were all back on the roof before the operation began.

“That didn't go so well,” Stefan decided, looking around.

“You remember that?” I asked, aghast.

“Oh, the dying part? Yeah, not my proudest moment,” he agreed. “Hard to dodge when someone else is steering, I learned that one today.”

“It was horrible, we were flying and suddenly this beam just smashed out the window and hit us,” Siew Yan reported. “We died... Re-died? There was so much pain...”

“Never happened,” reported Michael. “Put it out of your minds. So now what, we know they're down there.”

“I'll set up the spell again. Stefan, you're going to pilot the drone after all and show me the room. I'll teleport us into it. Michael, I'm trusting you to handle your buddy there while I get another casting of the teleport spell underway. We're just running back to the barrier like I said.”

“Yeah, I don't want to get killed again,” Stefan agreed. “I mean again, again.”

“Can you handle a teleport and the time spell?” Siew Yan asked.

“Going to have to. If I take it slow it should be fine. First one isn't the problem, it's the second one I'm worried about. Have to take that one slow too. Think you can come up with something, Michael?”

“I'll do my best,” he promised.

That's not the level of effort I've come to expect from you, but okay. “Then get ready.” I cast the spell again, again taking as much care as I could, and Stefan got the drone into position. Janet again put up the screen that showed what the drone was seeing, and we looked into the room. There was a Janet, dressed differently from ours and looking at her phone, bored. The misshapen celestial still half stuck inside their human disguise. A few human looking people that were no doubt other celestials, and Ramesh in his hybrid form, struggling to get free of his restraints. Machinery and magical energies could be seen in the room as well, they were clearly trying to do something to him. *Hang on Ramesh, we're just outside.*

“Wait, go over to the next room,” Michael suggested, and with a shrug Stefan sent the drone over. “Empty. Good. Let's appear there. I'll blow the wall down, that'll surprise them. Give us a little bit more of an edge.”

“I'll smack that guy with a fireball,” Stefan told us. “That should distract them a bit.”

“And the bench worked before,” Siew Yan agreed. “Maybe he's weak to flying objects? That one boxy thing in the corner, I'll throw that at them. Right out the window, if I can.”

“Nice!”

They both nodded to me and I readied myself. "Here we go." I started the hand signs for the teleport and our view shifted, into the empty room I had been looking at. Michael gestured and the wall vanished with a flash, meanwhile the others were getting their magic ready. As the surprised faces of the others came into view when the dust settled Stefan let a fireball fly making the celestial stagger back, and Siew Yan hurled the machine at them. They went smashing through the window as intended, and we crossed over while the other celestials shrank back. They seemed to be gesturing they surrendered, holding their hands up but I wasted no time in starting my next casting of the teleport spell.

"We just want our friend back!" one cried.

"Please, let us try to get them back!" said the other.

"The what now?" Michael asked. "Back?"

"It was stupid, what Sebastian did, we tried to talk him out of it," the one said. "Going inside a human, what could he have been thinking? We just want to pull him out of this human's soul!"

"I don't think-" he started to say, and we shifted back to the train station. I had taken the bed with me, Ramesh and all, so he and the others were around me. We were almost in the clear.

"Janet, acorns or something, some big tree seeds. Put them where the tracks are. Siew Yan, make them grow as big as you can. Stefan, warp the wheels on the train or something!"

"I do remember the plan," he grumbled, started to cast. I ran to Ramesh's side, he seemed to be calming down and I yanked the buckles off the restraints they had used, getting at least one hand free.

"Denice?" he asked, clearly not expecting to see him.

"That's me. Get the other hand, I'll work on your legs."

"You got it. We're escaping then?"

"Once they can't follow by train for a bit."

"So how are we leaving? Actually how did I get here? Was I that out of it?"

"Talk less, escaping more!"

"That's reasonable." We got his restraints off and he hopped down off the bed. "Here, let me help." He started casting and the ground around the tracks under the train started to buckle. Meanwhile trees were growing at a fast pace blocking the tracks further down.

"Good enough," I called. "They could guess where we teleported to at any moment. Let's go." They ran to be around me and I once again teleported us back to the Bad Place side of the barrier. Even without wanting to undo what they did, Ramesh wasn't added to the allow list and *him* hitting the barrier wouldn't be pretty, given what I saw what it had done to an actual celestial being. We had to be on this side to get the barrier down and walk him through. I was shocked to see the two celestials that had been in the room were already here.

"Thank goodness you didn't try going straight home," said the one. "That would have been a disaster."

"Now we don't want any trouble," I told them, "but you're going to back off and- what?" *Wait, they aren't attacking us to take him back? I expected trouble here.*

"Right!" Michael snapped his fingers. "Ramesh isn't on the list. How did you get him through the barrier the first time, anyway?"

"Bent it enough to pass him under it," explained the other one.

"We can show you how to work the equipment, and then how to strengthen the barrier again," said the other one.

I started to say yes I had worked that out for myself, thank you very much, but Ramesh had a little something else on his mind at the moment.

"You abducted me! Strapped me to a bed, you were using me for experiments or something. Why should I believe you now?"

"Like we said, we just wanted our friend back," said the first one. "You didn't even give Joseph a chance to explain. He said you just attacked him after the train pulled up. Typical human."

“Oh, so typical,” agreed the other.

“That was Joseph? Did he have a new disguise or something?” Michael asked.

“The very latest, they were looking for a change and decided to upgrade too. The new ones are so much more comfortable than the last generation, it’s crazy,” said the first.

“I can’t wait to get out of this itchy thing,” agreed the second. “I’ve got a next gen on order, I’m so excited about it.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” I asked, as my brain finished rebooting.

“We wanted to bring Ramesh back here, see if we could extract Sebastian again. It was a long shot but...”

“By force?” he sputtered. “You expected me to just cooperate with you? You could have just asked!”

“Oh, we know humans, honey. You would have said no, don’t try to tell us you wouldn’t.”

“So that celestial by the train station?” I asked. “This Joseph or whoever?”

“Right, they were supposed to bring you to the hospital if you showed up. We weren’t sure if someone would care enough to come or not. Turns out you did. I guess we all made some assumptions, didn’t we?”

“I didn’t,” Ramesh grumbled. “I just got grabbed off the street and whisked away in the night.”

“Sorry about that,” said the one, and the other echoed them. “Yes, if we hadn’t succeeded in a day or so there was little chance we would and we would have just put you back through again. Easy peasy. But your friends came charging to your rescue. How about that?”

“Yes, who would have thought?”

“Can we just go?” Ramesh asked. “I’m too old for this lit.”

“Oh honey, come talk to us when you’re *a million*, okay? Then we can talk about being too old for stuff. Come along.”

True to their word the two used the machine to bend the barrier up off the ground enough Ramesh didn’t have to touch it on the way through, and brought it back up to full strength once we were all past it. With that they vanished again, taking the machinery with them.

“Thanks for coming to rescue me,” Ramesh told us. “I don’t know if I believe those two, and their story about letting me go after giving up. Seems odd.”

“We’re not evil you know,” Michael told him. “Not in the classic sense anyway. I keep saying that...”

“They grabbed me out of nowhere- you know what, I don’t want to debate you on this. Let’s just go.”

I teleported us back to the tracks near the Midveil village so we didn’t intersect anything and walked the rest of the way. But something was off. As we came into view of the place there were a lot more buildings than I remembered, and trees, and everybody had beards. The men had beards. The woman had beards. The kids had beards. Even the dogs had beards. Someone ran up to us, a woman with a long beard.

“Denice? Stefan? Michael? Where have you been? It’s been twenty years!”

“What?” I screamed, whirling on Michael. “Are the warnings after the spell, or something? Did I screw it up? What did you make me do?”

“Spell?” asked the woman.

“No,” Michael said faintly. “That’s impossible. There’s no way we-”

“Surprise!” The woman ripped her fake beard off and everyone did the same. The “city” shimmered and went back to the way I remembered it, and there was a big “Welcome Home Ramesh” banner hanging there. “Janet agreed to make us the beards but we made the banner. I wish we had cake but, uh, welcome home!”

“Oh, you guys are so dead,” I promised with a huge grin. Everyone was rushing us now, slapping Ramesh on the back and asking what happened, was everyone all right?
You know something, it's good to be home.

Chapter 13

We find out Michael didn't deceive us

When: Day 87 in the afterlife

Where: Midveil

Over the coming weeks we kept an eye on Ramesh who had agreed being alone probably wasn't the best plan for him. No more celestials tried to grab him though the response we got from Good Place was the equivalent to a shrug and "what do you want us to do about it?" So we got back on track building houses and factories and the bath house. I had convinced Janet to set us up a motion sensor over the barrier protecting us from the Bad Place entryway so we could at least be forewarned if a train or individuals passed through there. I also badgered Michael until he gave me the books on time magic which he only did after showing me a spell to keep them in an offset dimension so they couldn't be taken. I hadn't found a ton of time to be alone and look them over of course because everyone was always asking me the best ways to do things, but I figured I had the time to pursue them at my leisure.

But that's a trap I have to be careful not to fall into. With eternity ahead of me putting things off 'until tomorrow' could become a habit. Opportunity knocks once I'll reach out and grab it. Together we'll nab it! We'll hitchhike, bus, or... I realized I was swaying to the beat and humming to myself. What was I saying? Right, I can't keep putting anything off forever. I'll sneak away at some point, go up to the roof of the warehouse or something.

It was mid-afternoon that day when someone came tearing up to me, a horrified look on their faces. I was down by the river helping move water around to make concrete when a woman saw me, waved frantically, and came running over.

Elizabeth, right? "Liz? What's wrong?"

"Denice, you have to come right away, something terrible has happened!"

"Did Bad Place celestials come back? Are they demanding Ramesh again?"

"No."

"Did someone's spell go out of control and the whole village is on fire?"

"No."

"There was an accidental decimal point miscalculation and so everyone at a million points only has a hundred thousand leaving some people with negative points and they've been whisked away to Bad Place?"

"No."

"Janet needs to be rebooted?"

"No, look just come and see for yourself!"

"Fine." We headed back towards the construction site and there was a ring of people around an earth mover machine. We pushed through and there laying on the ground in obvious agony was a man with two crushed legs. From the look of it the machine that was right next to him had backed into him and then off again. This theory was borne out as another man, looking haunted, hustled over once he saw me.

The first words out of his mouth were "It was an accident, I swear!"

"What happened?" I asked him, kneeling by the other man.

"It was an accident," the man managed. "I was looking the other way, he backed into me."

I looked down at his mangled legs. "Are you okay?"

"Oh sure," he rather sarcastically insisted. "Get me an aspirin and I'll get back to work- of course I'm not all right have you seen my legs?"

I'm looking at what's left of them, anyway. "Doesn't anyone know any healing magic?" I asked, looking around the circle of people. "That's wood, right? Wood affinity? Anyone?"

“No one practiced healing magic,” said one man, stepping forward. “We’re dead, we didn’t think we would need it.”

“Clearly not our best move,” I decided. “As I guess we can be injured after all. Someone run and get a book that covers healing, there must be one wood user good enough to do it from the book directly. Or they could work together, maybe?” No one moved, and most looked over at Michael. “What are you looking at him for? He didn’t cause this, did he? Go get a healing spell!”

“I was saying before you arrived,” Michael told me, “easiest just to kill him at this point. He’ll be back tomorrow healthy and whole at the next sunrise.”

“And I was saying, no way in Hell,” said the man. “There’s got to be another way.”

“Agreed, I don’t like the idea of a... mercy killing, I guess you would call it,” I agreed. “Can’t healing magic deal with this?”

“He would need to be regenerated,” said a woman. “I don’t think just healing would do it, as there isn’t a lot there left to heal. That’s a harder spell. If we get it wrong something bad could happen.”

“We don’t want to make his problem worse,” agreed the man.

“How can they be *worse*?” hissed the man. “My leg’s are off!”

“It’s true, best not to chance it,” Michael agreed. “Here, I’ll even help out. Janet?”

“Yes Michael?”

“One super sharp knife please!”

“Right away.” She was holding a wicked looking knife as long as my forearm. “Now that’s a knife,” she said, pitching her voice lower as she handed it to him.

“Yes, I asked for one didn’t I?” He turned it around and held it out to me. “Would you like to do the honors?” He looked a bit excited for once, like he was looking forward to watching this a little bit.

“No I would not!” I exclaimed. “Honors? Slitting his throat? That’s honorable? How?”

“Oh, you’re right, he should cut his own belly open as he can’t work anymore,” Michael agreed. He switched to looking at the man. “Here you go. Do the honorable thing, like humans of old.”

“Go flunk yourself,” the man told him. “There’s got to be something you can do!”

“I can’t kill you, if that’s what you’re suggesting. You know I can’t interfere. What’s the big deal? He’ll be fine, you’re all already dead. You know that, right? I made it clear when you arrived? I thought you had all accepted it.” He looked confused.

The big deal is, do we trust you? “Look, why don’t you just leave this to us,” I told him. “We’ll discuss it and do what we feel is best.”

“This pour soul is in agony,” Michael reminded us. “Your hesitation causes more harm here, Denice. Aren’t you breaking your own law now?”

“I’m just in pain, killing me is doing me harm,” the man said. “Do you really not understand that?”

“I guess not.” He set the knife down. “I know you’ll want it, in the end. Come along Janet, we’ll let the humans *discuss* it if that’s what they want to do. Honestly, I don’t see what the big deal is.” He stomped off.

He’s so getting back at me for the books on time magic. Right? Handing me the knife, smooth as you please. “Oh, just slit the man’s throat and get back to work, Denice. What’s the big deal? You scared?”

“So what do we do?” asked Liz.

“We have no evidence he’ll come back,” I told everyone. “Just Michael’s word it’ll happen. He doesn’t exactly have the best track record, do we trust him?”

“He wouldn’t lie about something like this, would he?” asked one man. “That deception would be clearly obvious at the next sunrise. We would never trust him again.”

But how would we get rid of him even if we didn’t trust him? He’s a celestial, that barrier to keep celestials out only served to make that one angry when I forced them through it. We don’t have magic stronger than that currently. He laughs in our faces about believing him at the next sunrise and what recourse do we have? “Even a lie by omission, or him being wrong about it, is just as bad. He

could claim he's as 'shocked' as anyone when this man doesn't return. How would we tell the difference?"

"It's worse than that. What if he comes back, but not all the way? What if some of his 'soul energy' is gone or whatnot? Like you die twenty times and you may as well be a baby at that point?" another woman asked.

"How does he keep his spot here?" asked a familiar voice, and I saw Stefan poking his head through. "You saw the people in Bad Place waiting to come here. What if he moves to the back of the line and one of them comes through now that there's an open slot?"

"That we can probably ask Michael," I told him. "But I doubt it's that automatic. Run and see what he has to say."

"Yeah okay." He left again.

"How long would you need to practice this regeneration spell you're thinking of?" I asked.

"How are we supposed to practice it?" she countered. "Cut someone and then try to heal them, over and over again? Cutting them is causing harm!"

"Er..." *I mean I guess in the most strict sense you're not wrong.* "Say I said yes. In theory, how long?"

"At least a day, he's got a lot to regenerate there!"

"A day?" croaked the man. "I can't stay like this a whole day. I'm in agony but I can't even pass out from it because I'm a soul. It has to be like he said, just kill me already I'll take my chances."

"But," I glanced at the knife, still laying there, "just slit your throat? Really?"

"Use magic, I don't care!"

"Does anyone know a spell to kill him painlessly?"

"Painlessly?" several people echoed, looking unsure.

"I guess not. Wait, I think Stefan is back."

"It's not automatic," he reported. "His spot here is safe."

"That's something. Thanks, Stefan. Fine. I don't think we have a choice. We don't have any hospitals, and leaving him laying somewhere in pain is causing him harm. But so is killing him. I must choose the least harm, and by every account he will return tomorrow. Unless someone has another idea? Speak up now." I waited, looking around at everyone who was there. No one spoke.

"I guess I can do it, I hit him, after all," said the driver. He reached for the knife. I shook my head.

"I think that would just cause more resentment. People look to me, I'll--"

"I can't ask you to do this," he insisted. "This is my problem to solve really."

But then you'll be the man that both crushed his legs and slit his throat afterwards. Even back on good old Earth didn't those on death row not know their "killer?" Like several people pushing a button but only one of the buttons worked? Never really looked into it because I wasn't a morbid lich, I didn't really care to know. What sort of ill will will knowing his killer cause him? I have to make sure he doesn't know exactly who does the deed. Even if he asks for it, there could be feelings of revenge for having 'killed' him here. "Look." I knelt by the man. "Close your eyes, okay?"

"Fine." He did.

"Anyone willing to end this man's pain, please remain here, and remain silent. Anyone else please disperse. It's not entertainment let's allow the man a bit of dignity here." Most agreed this was probably for the best and wandered away, but we were left with five people, not including me. I pointed to myself, then the others. "One, two, three..." I gave us all a number at random. "Janet."

"Hello. Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"Yes. A random number between one and six please." *And sorry for using you as a random number generator but what else do I have? Now that we're back here you won't hand me as much as a six sided- Crud, he knows it could be one of six people out of the five hundred. But it'll have to do.*

"Two," she answered.

Number two paled a bit but nodded.

“Thank you, Janet.”

“Of course.” She stood there, clearly waiting for what was next.

“Thank you, *Janet*,” I stressed.

“Oh. Subtext. Right. Always have trouble with that. Very well.” She vanished.

What is it with these people? “Right.” I handed him the knife and put my hand over the guy’s eyes. “I’ll make him pay, somehow, if he’s wrong,” I whispered. Nodding, number two slashed the guy’s throat out. He jerked but vanished almost at once. *No body to take care of. Now we wait, I guess.*

It didn’t take long for word to spread throughout the community and it was clear everyone was bummed about what happened. Especially the man who had been driving the earth mover.

“I should be punished,” he insisted. “I caused harm.”

“Unintentional, I’m sure.”

“But you can’t know that. Heck, even I can’t know that for sure! Maybe I subconsciously had it out for that guy, I don’t know.”

“But what’s your punishment? Getting your legs crushed in the same way? That’s no better.”

“Something. Clearly I had no business driving that thing, look at what I did!”

“It’s been months, it was just an accident.”

“But don’t you see, it has been months, and this is the first accident. *I* caused the first accident in Midveil, and I’ll have all of eternity to live it down. Super! Clearly I was slacking, not paying enough attention. Had I been properly trained, had I not let my guard down he would still be alive. Dead. Half-you know what I mean. He would still exist.”

We do need new vocabulary to express exactly what we are now. I suppose that will come, in time.

“No one can have ‘proper’ training, we’re all on our own here. But this does remind us to not take anything for granted. Maybe you got a little complacent because of how long you had been doing this work. I don’t know. Now we know what can happen. You decide what your punishment should be, and enact it. Unless you need someone’s help, of course.” *Fifty lashings in the public square?*

“You can’t assign me to assign myself my own punishment!”

“Of course I can. If you really do feel guilty about this you’ll choose something appropriate. If not, well, no punishment I assign you will change your feeling on the matter. That’s all this is about, making you feel better about hitting that guy. What’s done is done, otherwise. Like you said, if you do find a suitable punishment and everyone sees you enacting it, they too will consider the matter closed.” *At least, they should, if they have any soul at all.* “But if they don’t, you’re going to have an eternity of people shunning you for it.”

“I suppose.”

Meanwhile no one was in the mood to get anything done, so we all just sort of waited around for sunrise. I was pretty sure the warehouse would be his point of return so we all pattered around there. Michael was a bit disgusted with us, insisting it was fine and we should all snap out of it.

“Maybe you’ve watched a million souls vanish and reconstitute,” I told him, “in the course of your tortures of us over the eons or whatever, but we haven’t. This is our first accident and our first... vanishing, if you will. Besides, how do you know it works the same way here? Did you test it?”

“Test it?”

“Sure. You’ve presumably seen it work in The Bad Place...”

“I have.”

“But what about here? Are the rules the same here? Why would they be? You’re assuming something you haven’t observed for yourself. We may never come back if killed here.” *Or maybe there’s another ‘layer’ above this one we’ll go to. How would you know if that was the case?*

“I can’t imagine it working any differently here than in Bad Place. I mean be reasonable, Denice.”

I guess I can take some comfort in the fact he didn't test it out on some poor soul, destroying them to make sure they came back. "I am being reasonable. I'm waiting to see the evidence of what happens for myself. Meanwhile we know we can be hurt now. That's shaken us up. I mean why allow us to be hurt in the actual afterlife? What does that achieve?"

"So you can be tortured in Bad Place, of course!"

"Of course." I rolled my eyes. "If I ever meet the being that set that all up, remind me to thank them for the whole system." *I mean, would it have been so hard to simply put rules in place that are different for each location? You can be hurt in Bad Place but not anywhere else in the afterlife. Ugh, does this mean souls in Good Place can be hurt as well? That's hardly fair. I'm sure accidents happen there as well, that's just the nature of being 'alive.'*

The hours ticked by. Small groups were huddled together, softly talking or holding hands or just waiting. "Five minutes to sunrise," Janet announced suddenly. "I thought you might like to know."

I sent a group up to the library, in case Greg, yes we had figured out who it was by that point, appeared there, and everyone perked up a bit. He didn't have a house yet, so we were pretty sure he would appear in the warehouse somewhere, and spread out. After another eternity Janet announced "Sunrise."

"Now we can finally put this behind us," Michael exclaimed. "Honestly."

"Where is he?" I demanded. "Does anyone see him?"

"Not here!" everyone started calling.

"Michael?"

"He's here someplace, give him a minute. He'll turn up."

"He better."

Moments later the group from the library spilled out from the door to the stairs, smiling and whooping. We all looked over there and they were waving their hands in the air. He was back, and seemingly none the worse for wear.

"I wasn't anywhere, that I could tell," he finally told us. "Once that knife cut me, I just sort of appeared up there. My legs were fine and it was like no time had passed at all."

"Glad to hear it," I told him. "Let's all be more careful in future, shall we?"

"Agreed," he agreed. "But I did have a thought."

"Some kind of safety regulations while on the job?"

"Huh? No, I came back. Don't you see what that means? We could have the ultimate fight club here in the afterlife!"

"A fight club?" I asked after a moment, after he didn't elaborate. *There was a movie about that but I never saw it. Is he just expecting me to know what he's talking about?*

"Yeah. Injuries don't matter, we really can fight to the death and be fine the next day. Imagine it! Imagine the level of skill dedicated people could attain by having real fights for a hundred years! All that stuff in movies could be only the beginning, especially if they could incorporate magic into their martial art too."

"I am, and it sounds like a horrible idea. Even with our miraculous return seemingly guaranteed that's no cause to abuse that property of our afterlife. We don't know what it's cost you, for example. I mean you seem fine--"

"I feel fine. Great, in fact!"

"If your 'essence' if you will has been diminished in even the slightest way, even if it takes a thousand 'deaths' to start to notice, by then it would be too late. We have to consider the bigger picture, or should I say the longer picture. One death per a hundred years could add up over eternity."

"Bah, you're overthinking it."

"I hope so. There is also the moral consideration though." *And the mental toll it would take being killed over and over can't be ignored either.*

“The what?”

“Training to be a great martial artist, if that’s what someone wants to do, is a worthwhile pursuit leading to mastery of the self. I have no problem with people doing that. But is fighting to the death, even if you know you’ll both come back if you die, moral? I mean even if two people step into the ring willingly, can we suspend the One Law for that space? You’re causing harm even if both agree to it.”

“Denice, we’re totally in charge now, you realize that right? If we say the One Law doesn’t exist in the ring, then it doesn’t. We know how it all works now, the points system. We can’t ‘sin’ we’re already in the afterlife. Heck, providing that entertainment to others watching may even earn us points, again as long as both participants are willing.”

“I just think the ramifications of such ‘entertainment’ are both broader and more nuanced than you’re thinking right now.” *Both for those watching and those participating. I mean do we let kids watch such brutality? Participate? Where is the cutoff, if someone arrives here at twelve and still seems twelve in a hundred years because that’s just how they see themselves? Even knowing it’s ultimately harmless to all involved, what road does this ‘fight club’ take us down?*

“Guess I know who I’m *not* inviting to opening night.”

“I suppose I can’t stop you if you build some kind of arena somewhere, but can we please have an afterlife without violence? At least for now? Is that too much to ask? Let’s put any plans for a fight club on hold for now, we have more important concerns. I’m just glad you’re back.”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess you’re right. Thanks for worrying about me.”

“Of course.”

Chapter 14

The secret factory

When: Day 132 in the afterlife

Where: Midveil

When day one hundred and thirty two rolled around in Midveil it started just like any other day. Spirits (pun intended) were still high, after our rescue of Ramesh and gaining the knowledge our existence was indeed permanent. Greg showed no signs of being worse for wear because of his trip through non-existence but those near construction sites were still being extra careful. We had thrown ourselves into our work, raising houses and factory buildings and studying magic. I had learned a spell to talk to someone over a long distance, and a spell to help people be unaffected by weather. Naturally I had continued to study the time magic but I hadn't memorized any of those spells. Some could be quite dangerous, and did list the consequences that had happened to those that messed around with them. So I was saving any exploration of time magic until I was a bit older, wiser, and more familiar with magic in general. It was somewhat of a shock, then, when evening rolled around and the sun began to set, when several people marched out of one of the factory buildings holding what they did.

It caught all of us by surprise. I hadn't really been "checking in" with the factory buildings once they went up, figuring most everyone was hard at work putting up housing units before the winter season. The plan, after all, was to spend the winter using the factories to make and store things we would then use once the snow was gone. Logical. Little did I know not everyone thought that way, as it seemed one of them had been used during that time. The group of about 20 people was predominantly white men, though there were two women in the group, advanced on me and planted themselves in my way. Those nearby and myself gaped at them, I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing. I couldn't even figure out what to ask first, it made no sense. As the various questions in my mind struggled for dominance the man in the lead spoke up.

"We're taking over," he announced, "and if you have anything to say about it..." He patted the thing he was holding. "You can discuss it with my friend here."

Okay, let's start there, then. "You made guns?"

"That's right. Crude, obviously, compared to modern standards but the instructions for how to make them were in the library. I assure you they work, so don't try anything."

"Guns?" I repeated, glancing around the crowd. It seemed each was carrying a primitive looking firearm, clearly made using metal manipulation magic and probably some basic chemistry for the powder in the bullets. "We're out here, day after day trying to get enough houses built so those poor souls in Bad Place can start migrating here and you're off working on something stupid like guns? I don't believe this!"

"There's no rule that says we can't have them!" one man spoke up.

"Of course there is!" I countered. "They can only cause harm! Of course the One Law makes them illegal, how can you think otherwise?"

"Actually," said the leader, Jeremy I believed his name to be, "as long as we don't fire them they don't cause harm, so they're perfectly legal."

"That is the most bizarre chain of logic I've ever- Even if you did fire them, you do realize even a headshot is only going to make someone vanish for a few hours, right? It's an inconvenience but doesn't solve anything. You would still have to deal with that person when they got back."

"One step at a time," he told me smugly. "We'll figure that out if it comes to it. Now, are you going to step down or do we have to make you?"

"Step down from what? What are you even attempting to do here?"

"We're taking over, how many times do I have to say it?"

"Taking over what? We don't have a government yet, remember we talked about that? Months ago? You were there, I remember seeing you."

“We don’t like how you’re running things, so we’re going to make the decisions from now on.”

“I’m *not* ‘running’ anything, though. Don’t be stupid.” *Ugh that was the wrong thing to say wasn’t it?* “I suggest things yes but no one has to do what I say. Anyway we’re just building houses so we don’t freeze all the time in the coming winter. So what would you have done differently up to this point? *Not* build houses, freeze all winter? Great plan! You had your say the whole time, all of you did. The group decided what we were going to do not me. I asked all the time when we held meetings and no one spoke up. So you can’t claim I’m some kind of dictator, you had your chance to debate policy and you didn’t take it. Then you go and do this? You can’t make people defer to you at gunpoint you know.” *Though I suppose in places like North Korea, that’s exactly what happens.*

“That’s just it, you’re the closest thing we have to a leader. But not anymore. And I think I can.”

Okay so insanity exists here too, that’s good to know. “Fine. Let’s go announce it then.” I turned and started walking back to the construction zone where most of the people would be. I needed a moment to think, and basically had an idea of what would happen once this small group faced everyone in the town.

“You’re giving up, just like that?” he asked, sounding quite surprised.

“I never wanted the job in the first place,” I told him. “If you think you can do better, so be it. I’ll happily ‘step down’ as you call it.”

He and the group rushed after me, clearly they hadn’t expected it to be this easy. “So you’ll tell everyone we’re in charge now?”

“Absolutely.” *And then we’ll see how they take it.*

So we headed to the more populated area and it seemed word of our arrival had gone ahead of us, as people were gathering to see what was going on. I had thought someone had gone running off when these people first showed up but I hadn’t wanted to draw attention to them so I didn’t look around to make sure. But it seemed it was okay, and 400+ people were now somewhat angrily about to demand why I was being led by a gang of thugs holding guns. *Yeah, this should be a treat.* Michael was there, of course, looking interested to see what I would do, no doubt.

“Good, it looks like most everyone is here,” I told them. “As you can see, the so called gentleman behind me, and I suppose the so called ladies as well, are not happy with the way I’ve done things. So they’ve decided I’m not to be consulted anymore. Their leader will now tell you their grand plans for Midveil which I hope still includes you not freezing once winter gets here.” I stepped to the side, and all pairs of eyes focused on the gang.

“Uh, er, oh, right,” he began, which I thought was a great opener. Really showed them who was who, no doubt about that. “As you know,” he finally decided, “some people are simply better than others. Those of you who know that you’re in that category, if you meet our criteria, can come with us. We are heading to another warehouse.” One of the other men poked him and they had a hushed conversation. “What I mean to say is, we’re staying here, anyone that isn’t with us has to go to another warehouse and start over. That’s what I meant to say.”

They’re stealing our housing units? Making us start over? What are they going to do with the empty ones? There’s only twenty of them. We have more than two units made do these guys think everyone is just going to let them sit empty?

“And what, exactly, is this criteria?” Ramesh growled, beginning to change into his hybrid form. Claws sprouted from his hands and he became more animalistic as he changed.

“Now now, none of that,” he hastened to say, raising his gun.

“Go ahead, see how far it gets you,” Stefan told him, stepping out of the crowd with a fireball ready in his hand. “You got 400 rounds there? Because if you don’t it’s not going to go well for you.”

“You can come with us,” Jeremy told him. “You don’t have to defend these other people.”

“What other people?” Siew Yan asked, coming to his side. “If you say white people I will kick your sass.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” he insisted. Naturally this didn’t go over well, more than half of the assembled people there weren’t ‘white’ and even a lot of the people that were looked uncomfortable and wanted to distance themselves from these others. Both sides were tense now, shouting at each other and posturing but neither side wanted to make the first move. I waved my hands for silence and stepped between them. The crowd quieted.

“Let me make sure I understand this,” I said to the group. “You are, to put it bluntly, white supremacists. Which you realize is insane, right? That lady over there has cat ears and a cat tail! Eighty year olds looks like twelve year olds, there’s a celestial being standing right there, a living computer in the shape of a woman is next to him, and you’re still obsessed with *race*? Of all things to be hung up on, in the flunking afterlife, you decided upon *race*? We’re souls! When are you going to get that through your head?”

Everyone now behind me agreed with me, shouting I was right and they should leave if they were so superior. See how well they fared with just the twenty of them.

“Fine, I’m a white supremacist, are you happy?” he shouted. “I just don’t see why I have to work beside some black person or some Chinese person,” he indicated Siew Yan.

“I’m from Singapore, you racist!” she shouted back. “Can I hit him now?”

“They’ve worked just as hard as you have,” I said quietly. “Maybe harder. What gives you the right? To make guns, to threaten us? You’re supposed to be at least somewhat enlightened, you got into Midveil first thing. Michael, how could you have let people like this in here?”

“Ideas don’t cost or gain you points, only behaviors,” he explained. “Sorry. Even this technically won’t lose them points, if they stay non-violent.”

“I’m just expressing my beliefs,” he maintained. “I won’t live next to some nig-” He was blown off his feet and landed heavily some meters away. Everyone looked to see who cast the spell. A dark skinned man, looking furious, had his hands up.

“No,” he said simply. “All my life I had to put up with that kind of thing. I won’t put up with it here at well.”

“Agreed,” I told him with a nod. “Take them, but don’t hurt them.”

The crowd surged forward, Siew Yan at the front who smashed into the nearest person with some kind of martial arts move, and then kicked out at the guy next to him. Ramesh, right behind her, tore the gun out of the hands of another and clubbed him in the head with it. The racists further back got a few shots off, but Stefan had been right. They didn’t have near enough ammo to decide the issue, and a moment later all of them were restrained with bands of earth, metal, ice, or nothing at all. *Hopefully we didn’t lose too many, but they’ll be back.* They were knelt before me, and now I had a new problem.

“What are we going to do with them?” everyone wanted to know. They turned to me.

I put a hand to my face. “I have no idea,” I admitted. “You guys have really put me in a bind here, you know that. And you?” I walked over to the two ladies. “How could you? I mean, really? I can see the men being this stupid but women? After what we put up with in the world? How can you think such a thing would be acceptable?”

“You know we’re right,” said the one.

“I know no such thing. All I know is your insanity at thinking race matters, or really ever mattered, for that matter. Clearly we were just souls the whole time, having an afterlife proves that. Our bodies should have been inconsequential on Earth.” I shook my head. *Did we really put so much stock in physical form back in life. Crazy.* “Gather up the guns, come on, first things first.” We marched our “prisoners” to the factory and blew the door they had constructed down. Gathering up all the machines and powders inside we piled them all up and I had those with fire nature simply explode the whole mess. “We can recycle the slag over at the warehouse later. Now for you all.”

“You can’t kill us,” said Jeremy triumphantly. “And more people will join us, you’ll see. We’ll have our own section of this place before long!”

With blackjack and hookers, no doubt. “We’ll see about that,” I told him. The delay had given me time to think, and if it worked I had the perfect punishment lined up for them. “Bring them, we’re heading to the library.” They looked confused but had no choice but to follow me, pushed along by the others. “Stay here,” I told them, once we got to the top of the landing. “Watch them. Waters, with me please.” Now *they* looked confused but I headed to the magic section and got out a book. I flipped to the spell I was sure was in there, and showed it to them. “Do you understand what we’re going to do?” I asked. “Because we haven’t practiced this spell we’ll have to work together to make it stick, but with all of us working together it should be fine.” *I mean I hope us all casting the same spell at the same time will strengthen it, usually we just work alone but more people lifting a heavy box makes it easier, right? Why would this be different?*

“Will that really work?” one man asked. “I mean I see where you’re going with this but...”

“Agreed, it may not stick for too long,” I admitted. “But long enough. And we can refresh it if their attitudes haven’t changed in, say, a month or so.”

“I mean is it right to do this?”

“What else can I do to punish them?” I asked. “As I can’t exactly send them to Bad Place, and even if I did what would they learn from the experience? This doesn’t harm them, though they may claim it does, and settles the matter. No, this is the only way. Unless you’ve got something else in mind that doesn’t tie us up, doesn’t mean building a jail, or simply banishing them.” *Because then people really might start following them, leaving our community and following them, and that’s a much worse situation to be in.*

“We’re with you,” said a woman. “Let’s do this.”

We headed back and got set up. We divided the group up among all the water users and Janet made us more poster sized hand charts we could follow. A bit of magic later and I nodded. *It worked, just as I suspected. Let’s just hope they get the message and let it go before I have to think of something even more drastic to do to them.* “Release them. You’ll stay like this until you realize exactly how stupid you were today. I’ll expect an essay on the subject, or at least a public apology with a very convincing speech.”

“What did you do to us?” Jeremy, or I guess Jenny now? asked.

“Congratulations,” I told them with a big smile. “You get to walk a mile in another person’s skin. Literally. Welcome to being the most marginalized part of the population on Earth. Black and female. I wish I could give you the full experience, by getting you all pregnant despite the lack of decent healthcare or child care options available to you after your baby is born but I can only do so much.”

“You can’t do this!” They were all looking at their hands, arms, and for most, new anatomy high on the chest.

“I just did.”

“How did you do this?” Siew Yan asked.

“Easy. Water is the domain of knowledge. Your ‘physical’ form in this place responds to how you think you should look. That’s why the cat ears, and why Stefan looks fifteen now and not in his eighties.” *If he really is in his eighties, that is. He doesn’t act like it.* “And everyone looks much more muscular than when we got here, haven’t you noticed? We simply used a spell to push the idea that all these people looked like women with dark skin and Midveil did the rest for us. That’s their punishment. They want to be white supremacists? Super, they can do it in the body of a black woman. See how far that gets them. And I’ll say this to all of you, one. Last. Time. We are *souls*. We are *dead*. Please try to put your outdated, earthly prejudice behind you. I will turn you all into Smurfs if I have to, to prove the point. Got it?” *Huh, I actually wonder if that would work? One house could house all of us if we were the size of a fairy or something for the winter.*

They got it.

“An interesting solution,” Michael said to me as the protesting ladies tried to get people to undo what had been done. The group was heading back downstairs, ignoring them.

“I hope it’s a solution,” I told him. “What else could I do? Lock them up? I need every person building so we have enough houses before winter. I don’t have the resources to reeducate them, which I doubt would work anyway because they’re a bunch of morons who think they’re in the right. Plus, again, that takes time away from construction. Not ideal. This should drive the point home, and maybe start other people experimenting with their looks. We’ve not had too many that have done physical changes on that scale, but of course we have just died. Our self image would be pretty strong at this point. But maybe in the future we’ll wake up with a different hair color every day, or as a different anthropomorphic animal. Who knows? Oh, and thanks for warning me about the guns, by the way. Both of you. Well done.” *I’m sure Janet, at least, knew about it.*

“You know-”

“You can’t interfere, yes, you keep saying that. Why do you hang around then? Don’t you have other things you could be doing?”

“Oh, uh, not really. Like I said I was a celestial assigned to The Bad Place. But I rebelled against them, so they really don’t want me back. And I can’t go to Good Place, the division is clear. I tortured souls. Even if it was my assigned job they would never quite accept me, or trust me to run anything after so long working in Bad Place. So where else am I supposed to go?”

Wait, he’s actually homeless? I never even considered... “So where do you go? At night I mean?”

“Oh, I wander around. It’s no big deal.”

“Wander around? I thought you went home, teleported back to your apartment or wherever celestials live.”

“Don’t really have a home now.”

I felt a little bad for the guy. No one should be homeless, whatever the reason. But he hadn’t complained once, just went along watching us build something he couldn’t have again. “I see. Maybe we can build you something, a place of your own.”

“You would do that?”

“I’ll ask if we want to pitch in and do it. I’m not a leader, as I was just telling Jenny a moment ago. I can ask, not command.”

“Fair enough. I would... Like that. Thank you.”

“Sure thing. Now come on, still plenty of daylight left, and there’s lots to do.”

Chapter 15

We get an offer of help

When: Day 165 in Midveil

Where: Atop the warehouse

Ah, autumn! When the leaves on the trees start to change, not that we had any trees. When pumpkin spice makes a triumphant return, not that we had pumpkins, spice, or anything to put such delicacies in. What we did have was colder weather, grayer skies, and people complaining it was getting too cold to run around naked anymore. I didn't care one way or the other but they seemed bummed about it.

Michael's house was coming along well. At least one person from each affinity volunteered to help once I revealed he had no place to live, so he was instructing them and helping put it together. Because it was for him and not us Janet could easily make whatever pieces were necessary, but he wasn't building a palace or anything just a modest structure he could call his own. I saw an opportunity in this as well, which we discussed without him being there, that of simply paying attention to how he said he wanted it built. Our books on the subject were all well and good, of course, but this was a being that actually knew what he was doing. His construction techniques could be invaluable for our future efforts, and everyone working that project agreed to pay close attention and pass on how he wanted things done to the rest of us. It was shaping up to be more than just a box with some partitions, and I had to agree it would be a nice little place once it was finished.

The racists had been behaving themselves, though only three had officially apologized in a way that satisfied me. As it hadn't been thirty days yet any that "reverted" back to their "old selves" were changed back, but the magic had done its job pretty well. Most that had been changed now firmly believed this is how they should look, with only minor alterations occurring in them. Making some mirrors hadn't been that hard, they were paraded past them every day so their current form was hammered in at least once a day. What was most surprising was one of them coming to thank me, she said being a woman actually seemed to be growing on her, and felt more natural than being male.

Of course, once we had shown it was possible to use magic to change your appearance (however indirectly this was done) those with water affinity were suddenly in higher demand. They all learned the spell and now we had many more people with animal like features walking around. Along with at least one person with four arms, a centaur, those with fangs like a vampire, several people with various types of wings, and those now seemingly made of metal or diamond. That was just appearance though, they were still just made of whatever we souls were made of at the moment and could be cut or hurt by falling just as easily. Naturally no one looked old anymore, Ramesh in particular had still looked to be in his seventies and now looked to be in his twenties. Stefan insisted being fifteen was just peachy with him, and while he did take a monkey tail for some reason and was often seen practicing martial arts with Siew Yan, he remained as he was. With every passing day more and more people decided "what the heck" and had at least one "alteration" done to themselves, so the racists were looking more and more crazy by the day. (As for myself, being a mermaid would be *completely* impractical unless I wanted to use magic to move a bubble of water around to get anywhere so I had to settle for sort of an exotic, "fishy" look. My affinity was water, after all, and I was going to honor it! My ears looked more like fins, my eyes were iridescent, my hair was super long and a pale blue, and my nails were long and pointed.) Several people had gone full "furry" going so far as to ask to not just have cat ears or a bunny tail but a complete transformation, now looking like Judy Hopps or the foxy Robin Hood were now living in Midveil. *They* weren't complaining about the cold, walking around naked like they had before, and I had to admit that was a lot easier than trying to make winter clothes for everyone.

With colder nights more people signed up for sharing a room, while others (such as myself) looked into exactly how to heat our homes or provide warm enough clothes for everyone. Those with metal affinity found some easy to do spells to cut cloth apart and rejoin it without having to tediously sew it,

so several people were making sure there would be enough winter jackets and snug thermals for the coming season. Naturally us water users could use the anti-weather impact spell but there were less than a hundred of us, and trying to cover four people per one of us probably wasn't practical, especially as spells went away if you went to sleep. Blankets could be made once and reused, to badly quote a certain Scrooge. (Not the duck, the other one, we didn't have any anthro ducks walking around. Yet.) So those in particular were being churned out and stored in the now repurposed "gun factory." I was still shaking my head over that, and being more proactive to poke my head into each factory building every so often to make sure no one was cooking up meth or whatever next crazy idea these people had. I didn't know if drugs would even *work* on us anymore, but I didn't relish some nut job wondering and then having the initiative to actually *look up* how to make them and *find out*.

I mean could you even imagine the problems *that* would cause? Even if we couldn't be "hurt" by them, being dead, I had enough problems without people tripping on LSD or whatever. In this place, who knows what *that* would do to people. Turn them into mushrooms themselves I shouldn't wonder. I knew it was only a matter of time before there were so many factories this was impractical, but for now I wanted to keep our problems to a minimum. And speaking about problems, I was up on the roof that evening getting in some magic practice when there was a noise behind me and both Michael and Janet were standing there.

"Do you have a minute to talk?" he asked.

"What's up?" I asked, snapping the book shut and turning to face them.

"I got a message from a Bad Place Janet," Janet told me. "Some celestials would like permission to cross the barrier and come into Midveil. Their primary purpose, according to them, is to see for themselves what progress is being made here. Their secondary purpose is to see how Ramesh is doing and see if any hint of their former companion remains. They actually do seem to miss the guy."

"I have to at least give them credit for asking, this time," I mused. "And you, Michael, will take responsibility if they start destroying our town?"

"They wouldn't do that," he scoffed. "But sure, I'll vouch for them."

I guess I have to think of them as celestials doing a job, that of torturing humans, and not demons with horns and pitchforks. They aren't evil, and should be treated with at least some respect given their station. There's no reason to antagonize them, sooner or later we'll build next to the space the train comes from, so better to be on good relations with "the neighbors" than not. This could be the first steps towards that. "Very well. No more than, say, five of them at least for now, we can meet them at the border tomorrow morning and escort them back here. I'll be happy to show them around, unless you want to do it, and maybe we can have some kind of crude table made so we can sit and discuss things."

"You made the place, you can show it off," Michael told me. "But of course I'll be nearby to smooth over any cultural differences or misunderstandings that arise."

"All right. Go see if Ramesh wants to meet with them. I won't force him if he's uncomfortable with the idea."

"Very well. Have a good night." He gestured and vanished.

And so the next day a little after the sun came up several of us were standing next to the barrier between our two realms. Siew Yan, Stefan, and Ramesh were among the group, and I had chosen out some other people where were decent at magic in case we got into a scrape. I had no illusions about our chances if it actually came to that, but it was all we had so I went with it. We could see a train pulling up behind the energy barrier, and those of us already added to the system passed through. We headed to the train and several beings were stepping off. I counted five, so far so good. Well, six, if you counted Janet, once again looking bored and doing something with what looked suspiciously like a cell phone.

"Welcome to Midveil," I greeted them. I recognized two of them from the hospital, two seemed to be female and the final one was a man. One of the women stepped forward.

“Thank you for allowing us to come,” she said. “I’m Betty, this is Lucy. I believe you’ve met Paul and Tina, and this is Archie.”

“Nice to meet you all,” I told them. “I’m Denice, sort of the leader around here for the moment.” I introduced everyone else as well. “Janet?”

“Yes?” ours said, while the other one gave a curt “What?”

I blinked. *Isn’t she just a thread? Why would her personality be so different?* “Uh, our Janet. Uh, I’ll call you Jan if that’s okay?”

“Oh, I’ve not had a nickname before, this’ll be fun!” Jan agreed.

“Anyway, are there any others on the train?”

“Unless that Janet is blocking me, no, there are no others on the train,” Jan told us.

“You don’t mind if I check, do you?” I asked the celestials.

“Not at all,” Betty allowed, stepping out of the way so I could go up the stairs and into the train car. I cautiously poked my head into the car, it seemed to be empty. We walked the few cars that were there and true to their word only the five had come. “Jan, could there be celestials down the track, with another of your threads, ready to teleport past the barrier when it goes down?”

“In theory, anything is possible. But I’m not reading any other threads in the area but my Bad Place counterpart which is already here with us.”

“Very well,” I told her, stepping off the train again and coming over to the group. *Trust has to start someplace.* “Everything seems to be in order. We can get the barrier lowered and be on our way.”

“Why don’t you all board the train?” Michael suggested. “I’ll bring the barrier down long enough to get it through. We can all ride back to Midveil together.”

Neither side had any objections so we all got on the train which started to move forward. With the barrier down the train rolled through, and Michael jogged along after it and jumped up to get on once past the opening. The barrier went back up and we were on our way again. Paul and Tina swarmed around Ramesh almost at once, pestering him with questions, but the others just sat down. *Probably want us to make the first move, so they’re not perceived as threatening. We’ll just wait to get back to town to talk.* We sat down in the other row and waited for the train to arrive.

Finally in town I walked the celestials through what the place looked like so far, from the factory buildings to the houses.

“And this is the style you’re going with, is it?” Betty asked politely.

“For now. As none of us really had any experience building houses we wanted something simple to start. After the winter we’ll have more time and experience and can hopefully build nicer places to live.”

“That’s actually partly why we’ve come,” she explained. “Your progress has been, no offense, quite slow has it not?”

“With only five hundred people here, yes there’s only so much we can do in a day, even not needing to sleep strictly speaking. We still get bored, mentally tired if not physically, and some of us like myself have more interest in studying magic than physical labor.”

“Yes, I can imagine. I can dimly remember my own early lessons in magic. Ah, those were the days. Still, shall we sit somewhere and I’ll come to the point of our visit?”

Wait, who taught celestials magic? Didn’t they figure it out themselves? Or were more created past the first, so she’s just younger? There’s so much about them we don’t know, and Michael won’t or can’t answer my questions about their species. “We can head back to the warehouse, it’s still the nicest place we have. We were going to try and make a table, but then we realized we would need chairs, too. Didn’t really have enough time, I didn’t want to keep you waiting after Jan told us of your request. We can head to the library and use those tables if you want.”

“I was hoping to see the warehouse anyway,” Archie told us. “I know it was set up by us but I wasn’t part of that effort. I’d like to see what they came up with.”

“Sure thing. This way.” We headed there and they looked around the place as we walked through.

“Interesting,” remarked Tina. “To think, all this is needed because these people can’t use creation magic. They have to build everything themselves.”

“Can you even imagine it?” Paul tittered. “Actually why don’t we just make them a table, rather than going up all those stairs?”

“I’d still like to see the library though,” Archie told him.

“Stefan, would you mind showing him the library?” I asked.

“Fine with me, if you would like to come this way?” The two moved off and the other celestials pulled chairs and a table out of nowhere with their magic.

“There, that’s fine,” Betty decided. “Let’s get down to it.”

“Yes, Michael said you wanted to see our progress, you’ve seen it. But you said there was something else?”

“There is, actually. I’ll need to start with a bit of history. You’ve seen The Bad Place for yourself, yes?”

“When we went to rescue Ramesh, yes.”

“So you know the problem on the surface.” *I do?* “But the fact of the matter is with the number of people we are now allowed to torture growing smaller every day, it won’t be long before some celestials will simply have nothing to do. This concerns those few of us that try to keep an eye out for future problems and we discussed what to do about it. We were selected to come here and ask for your help.”

“Our, wait, *our* help? What can we do that you can’t?”

“You can trust us and open the border, allowing celestials with nothing to do to come here and help us get rid of all the souls we can no longer touch. It’s becoming a real nightmare on that side, you know.”

“I don’t follow at all, sorry. I mean there were lots of them, but you have unlimited space same as we do, no?”

“That’s not exactly it. Of course you wouldn’t be privy to our procedures, let me explain further. Well, time was, before the Midveil plan was enacted a lower class celestial could and was expected to sweep up any number of human souls and deliver them to the torture pits for the day.”

“Lower class?”

“Those not promoted into other positions. After all, someone had to devise new tortures, build the machines, do record keeping, all that sort of thing. Plus any celestial that got funny ideas could then be threatened with demotion, losing their status and having to go back to the streets.”

“My own promotion to architect was fairly recent,” Michael explained. “My boss wasn’t convinced about the ‘get the souls to torture themselves’ plan, it took me fifty years of proposal submissions to move it forward.”

“The what plan?” I asked.

“Didn’t I tell you about how this all came to be? The founders? Tricking them into thinking they were in The- well, never mind not relevant to the discussion at hand.”

“Right,” Betty went on. “While important work everyone dreams of climbing the corporate ladder, even where we live. To return to my story, after that batch of humans was gleefully tortured-”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Er, that is to say after they had been dispassionately processed using the chosen torture of the day, they were released back into the streets to await their next session.”

“Oh, you still use the wheel to choose it?” Michael asked. “I so missed the spinning ceremony once I got promoted.”

“Naturally, the wheel of misfortune we call it. Very reliable, spinning it was always considered a sacred duty, people would show up to work hours early to try and be first in line that day. Not important. The problem is, now that the point system has made many ineligible for torture we can’t just

grab up any old souls every day. We have to check their points, and of course no one wants to cooperate with us so it takes three times as long. And some people achieve a sufficient point total before the day is out and have to be released early so we have to shut the whole thing down while they're transferred out. People have been complaining about it, and coupled with the fact we believe soon there just won't be enough human souls to torture we may have a rebellion on our hands. Many celestials already think Midveil is a stupid idea, but if it puts them out of work? Whew, I don't even want to consider what they might do."

"So you want to head off any issues like that right now. By taking celestials out of Bad Place and assigning them here, to help us?"

"That's right. They'll have a purpose again, and honestly it's much nicer here than at home, so again we can offer this place as a reward for good service, and you can control them by threatening to send them back. Those that actually like torturing humans can keep doing it, and those that don't have other options. Everyone wins. You *do* need the help, don't you?"

"But... But you can't," I sputtered. "Michael goes on and on about not being able to help. He couldn't even hand me a pencil I dropped one time, though no offense I've always thought you were a little more sadistic than you let on, Michael."

"Me?" he asked innocently. "No!"

Betty laughed. "He's a special case. As part of the deal to create Midveil in the first place Shawn--"

"That's the name of my boss," Michael put in.

"I was going to say that! Shawn stipulated that Michael would be unable to help you. The project would succeed, or more likely according to him fail, all at your hands. Human hands. He doesn't think much of you, by the way."

"I'll be sure to send him a gift basket to help change his mind."

"But none of us agreed to that so we're in the clear. We can help you all we want and technically he never said we couldn't so all he can do is fume about it. And I think we better. If this fails, you heard about the button, right?"

"The reset everything button?"

"That's the one. The judge was apparently seconds from pushing it and hoping a better system would arise the next time. Even as old as I am, I'd like to keep existing thank you very much."

"Same."

"Right now you've got five hundred chances one of you earns enough points to go to The Good Place. We need to get more people here so you have more chances. That means building places to live. It's something we can do almost endlessly, because there's so many human souls around to house. Plus if there ever became some kind of equilibrium of people entering and exiting so we didn't need *more* houses, we could always start making *nicer* houses. Or forest trails. Or amusement parks. The success of the endeavor is still up to you humans, in fact with more people it could be harder? I don't know. But at least this will relieve the pressure we're under at home. Once our neighborhoods start emptying out we can tear down those awful fake buildings we put up. Maybe do some art or something, I don't know. But that too will be something to do, which we'll desperately need very soon."

"And have you brought this to Shawn?" Michael asked.

"Oh heck no!" Betty assured him. "We're only allowing celestials that have no direct contact with him and won't be missed to come here. At least until the plan either succeeds or falls apart."

"I see."

Great, so if he does learn about it, what does that mean for us? Will he just come here and smash down everything they built? Punish us somehow for allowing it? Ah, but that means a more likely failure, which means button. He goes into non-existence too. But there is a story about a scorpion... I sat in thought for a moment.

"We were also sort of wondering something," Lucy spoke up, looking at Michael.

"What's that?"

“Why this odd progression? I mean you wanted five hundred to start, and then double that, and then double that, right?”

“That’s the current plan, yes.”

“But why? If they have the space for new people, let new people come. It’s not like there’s paperwork on either end, we just allow the release of so many people at random. And like Betty said, the more people you have here, the more good that can be done and the more points there are to earn. All we need is one person ascending and the experiment is a success.”

Michael looked a bit embarrassed. “I just liked round numbers, that’s all. Plus it’s easier to have an orientation for a large group than as they trickle in.”

“We’ll do the orientation,” offered Betty. “That will also give our people something to do. You wanted newly deceased humans for Midveil at the beginning, but we need to clear out The Bad Place before we release anyone from stasis that died after the project began. They already know the score, they won’t need much in the way of tutorials.”

And our initial ‘orientation’ was so rushed we hardly got anything out of it. I was dead and suddenly at a graduation ceremony that would determine the course of my afterlife. Not really all that well managed, honestly.

“I guess you’re right. What do you say, Denice? Do you want people to trickle in?”

“Probably?” I hedged. “If we can get more hands doing work sooner, I think that’s better than trying to get a thousand people here at once and working.” *Honestly I wasn’t sure how that would even go, we would be suddenly outnumbered. Of course we would have magic and experience on our side but if the thousand decided what we built was Shmitt they might just tear it all down leaving us with nothing. Or worse, just decide to do nothing because they ‘got theirs’ i.e. getting out of Bad Place and screw anyone else.* “Plus if celestials are here to help for the orientation of the new people, sure, it could work.”

“So we can come?” Betty asked. “Celestials can come and help you?”

“A few at a time, I don’t want ten thousand of you suddenly stepping off a train. No offense, but you’re going to have to work to earn our trust. This is our-”

“Did you hear that Lucy?” she squealed, grabbing her friend up in a hug. “We can come! Crisis averted!”

“She’s a bit of a pessimist,” Lucy explained while being squeezed. “A real sky is falling type.”

“But now I can breathe easier,” she exclaimed. “Oh Denice, you won’t regret this! I promise. This is a new day for both our people. Oh we have to get back and tell everyone.”

“A few at a time!” I reminded her.

“I’ll make sure she understands,” Lucy said. “I hope you like hugs, she’s going to hug you about twenty times before you get rid of her.”

Betty broke the hug off and looked hopefully in my direction. I shook my head and stood up.

“Hugs are fine, come on then.”

“Yay!”

Chapter 16

The new people are a problem

When: Day 172 in Midveil, evening

Where: Library

The celestials were as good as their word, rotating in every few days so a new group could come “up” from Bad Place and help us. It seemed they had a good policy in place, the newcomers always knew where the old group left off, getting right to work and being generally pleasant. If you didn’t know they were essentially demons from Hell that had spent all of human history torturing those that hadn’t earned the proper number of “points” their demeanor wouldn’t give it away. When I brought it up they assured me some celestials back in Bad Place *did* fit that description and they had carefully vetted the members of the “help Midveil” group to make sure this all went smoothly. I told them I appreciated it. They also told me there was a quiet effort back ‘home’ to start getting souls up to speed about Midveil and offering them the same sort of library we had so they could start studying up on areas of interest, shortening time needed here to become a productive member of society. It would be a long time to know if that helped, but at least they wouldn’t have to sit around doing nothing so that seemed like a step in the right direction.

With the host of celestials helping out construction was going better than ever, and with people willing to share space in the houses we did have a slow trickle of souls from Bad Place begin. This almost immediately caused us problems as it was random. We had gone back and forth, trying to figure out the most fair way to bring new souls in, with some arguing the oldest souls should have the first chance to migrate. The problem there was, those would be among the least skilled and hardest hit by their time in Bad Place. If you can’t even conceive of a combustion engine, and you’ve been tortured for thousands of years, you’re not going to spring up the next day and volunteer to learn how to drive a dump truck. Plus the longer you had been in Bad Place the more you deserved to be there, as the point system hadn’t broken down until the “modern” world began some hundreds of years ago. So we would basically be getting the worst of the worst right away, which wasn’t ideal. In the end we decided to just make it totally random, which I admitted was perhaps not the most fair but I had my village to worry about. Those with archaic beliefs for example about how women should be treated, former slave owners, actual killers, and the like would need some time to adjust to their new reality. We had to hope for the best at the moment, we didn’t have the personnel to play psychologist and get them up to speed so just taking a random selection would hopefully keep the worst of the worst to a minimum until we could deal with them.

The first problem that arose wasn’t us getting serial killers or anything like that but two children, old enough to have had their “proper” point totals begin but not yet be adults. Thankfully as Janet had long ago explained no babies would be showing up, they went to The Good Place because anything else happening to them would have been monstrous and just who did you think the creator of all this was, anyway? But these kids, having no time to develop in the oppressive atmosphere of The Bad Place were now even worse off than when they had died. Their parents were out of reach, they were messed up mentally from the torture, hadn’t learned anything new since they died and so probably would struggle to learn now, and needed someone to watch over them and make sure they were “waking up” so to speak. We set up a new list, anyone willing to adopt newcomers that didn’t just look like kids but who actually *were not yet adults* signed it so we could pair children with foster parents. They were placed right away and someone who had been a social worker in life volunteered to set up regular meetings with the new parents to make sure the kids were being taken care of properly. They couldn’t be malnourished or anything here but we weren’t going to just throw these kids at someone we really couldn’t do a background check on and hope for the best.

The second problem was one I anticipated, and we were now meeting about it in the library to see what was to be done about it. There was a sizable crowd around the table, though if you wanted to

speaking you had to tap someone and they gave up their chair. It would have just been a lot of shouting otherwise, this kept order but still gave everyone a chance to speak.

“So the points offer didn’t help?” I asked. Everyone around the table shook their heads.

“They just aren’t interested,” Monique agreed, the approved speaker for the moment. “For those that are coming from Bad Place, this place is *already* paradise. No torture, no traffic noise going on constantly, the air and water are clean. We get rain and not acid, or blood, or magma raining down. They have no incentive but to lay around. After all, they’ve got a roof over their heads now, and we can’t just in good conscience chuck them out of it. We offered them factory jobs, the study of magic, even just supervising for now so they could contribute *something* to the community. Even agreeing to pay them a ‘salary’ from all of us above and beyond the points they would get normally from working to benefit the community didn’t interest them. All turned down. They just want to lay around, I guess. The carrot didn’t work, we have to think of a stick now.”

“We have to give them some time though,” I protested. “That one man has been in Bad Place fifteen hundred years. Two weeks here isn’t enough time to bounce back from that.”

A man raised his hand and Monique nodded and gave him the chunk of gold that conferred speaking rights to those at the table. *Jerome I think?* “That’s not the biggest issue here. Them being in the way, it’s annoying but manageable. A lot of us have discovered we like to build things, but by the same token I would like to be building things for people I also see doing work not just laying around. Several of my workers are now questioning why they should continue to build houses for ungrateful souls such as these. I’m afraid they will walk off the job and then nothing will get built.”

It’s true. They’re not professionals, none of us are. They’ve volunteered and anyone would rightly become disillusioned after seeing a repressed people move in and then not work to further help their community. Can I plead for more time to help them get adjusted and interested in doing something? A couple of weeks is nothing. Were we not on the winter deadline, anyway. But at the same time we don’t have many trained in psychology to help them through their trauma so is it fair to them to push them into helping before they’re ready? That could backfire, making them take an actively destructive role instead of just passively not helping. “I don’t have any answers,” I told him. “I don’t want to further punish these people, they just escaped that environment. But I want to be fair to you all too, you’ve really put in the hours to make our little village possible and you should be proud of that accomplishment. Does anyone have any thoughts?”

One woman tapped another and she got up to trade places. She took the gold chunk. “I’m Leslie,” she said. “What about the celestials? They’re either playing a long game or they’re on the level. Let’s allow more of them into Midveil to build houses so we don’t have to. It can be their penance, for torturing so many souls for so long. Then we don’t have to build houses and can do other things.”

“That would be an option,” I agreed. “If not for the whole torture thing. What if one of our residents recognizes the celestial that tortured them? Attacks them? Sure, a celestial can take care of themselves but think of two months from now. Maybe we have more people from Bad Place than original residents of Midveil. What if they decide to all get a little payback? At the moment we can keep the two groups away from each other easily enough but that will change as more souls come here or more celestials do.”

“Oh. Yes, that could happen,” she allowed. “I don’t want to put anyone in danger, forget I suggested it.” She put the chunk back on the table and got up, signaling anyone could take her seat. Siew Yan stepped up and sat down.

“I say we give them a few more weeks,” she told us. “We’re looking at eternity here, are we really worried about what a handful of people have done over the span of a few weeks? Back on Earth, everybody had to work and somehow justify their existence that way. People like me, who were poor, had little education because of where we lived, or for whatever reason were forced into doing things we may not have chosen for ourselves. Do we really want a repeat of that? While I admit in these early days someone not pulling their weight doesn’t look good, think about your own futures. Say you would

like to take a few weeks off next summer to just lay out on the beach you helped make. Your contribution to Midveil will stop and people are going to be complaining about you suddenly. Do you want that? Let's choose compassion for these people recently from Bad Place and show them this place is different. It can be a place you can work when you want, doing the things you actually like doing. Honestly, if we work hard and put up lots of houses and factory buildings and get things rolling here and the original five hundred of us head to Good Place one by one and those left just want to sit around and never get anywhere, let them."

A man raised a hand at the table and she passed him the chunk.

"I'm Yasin, I don't think they will. It was a common theme back on Earth that if you just gave people money for doing nothing they would do nothing. But doing nothing isn't sustainable either on a personal level. People *want* to do things, they want to make a difference in the world around them. At least, I have to believe that. I think if we give the newcomers some space and some opportunity, they'll come around. Right now it's autumn, they can watch the houses going up, or sit around outside. But when there's snow on the ground and everyone is at the factory or the library they're going to be lonely and seek us out. Heck, if they don't know magic to keep them warm and those of us that do aren't around, they won't sit there and freeze! That's when we put them to work, asking if they want to try doing whatever it is we're making at the time. Or learning a spell for themselves. I think if we use enough magic around them even the most intractable character will perk up and want to see what else magic can do." He handed the chunk back, but another woman tapped him out so he handed it to her and she sat down.

"I'm Arabella, if it's okay with everyone we have lots of books on psychology in the library. What I mean is, if it's okay with everyone I'm willing to look those books over. Instead of building, I mean. Maybe I can learn some techniques to help them out, help them deal with their trauma. It's better than nothing, right? Maybe if we work with the ones that seem most interested we can get them doing something small at least, and work up to those that seem the least interested and get everyone doing big stuff. Maybe they're just intimidated by us?"

"It's fine with me," I told her.

"Okay thanks!" She put the chunk down, but then picked it up again. "I mean we just have to be nice to them and draw them out of their shells and tell them we're not scary and magic is nothing to be afraid of and if they want to help us build a paradise--"

I held up a hand. "We get it. I'm hearing that while people are concerned with the long term effects of Bad Place souls coming here and being unwilling to work in the short term we can show a little understanding and not push them into what they're not comfortable with?" I looked around, and saw a fair share of nods. "Any strong feelings against this? And I'm opening the floor to dissenting voices now, I don't want anyone going behind my back and making guns or whatever to try and solve this. You know who you are."

"We're never going to live that down are we?" one dark skinned woman said.

Everyone laughed. But no one spoke up.

"Okay, this really is the time so if you don't speak up I assume you have nothing to say against this plan. Keep an eye on them, I mean don't watch them like a hawk but don't ignore them either. We can move the room assignments around, let's put original residents in with newcomers so they see us bustling around and maybe that will shake something loose. We'll give it another two weeks at the very least and see if anyone has improved. If there's no improvement or they're seemingly worse, we'll revisit the issue."

And so we had to revisit the issue two weeks later, because things had gotten worse. Only a few had shown any interest in even the easiest of tasks and the others had gone the opposite way. They were starting to whine about everything. Not having all sorts of clothes to wear. Looking so ordinary. (It was the rare individual of the 500 that hadn't started seeing themselves either through just living here or

magic as having some sort of unique feature from green skin to cat's eyes. But no one with water affinity would help them change, for obvious reasons) Not having cell phones. Women walking around "uncovered." (As in not in a burka, the animalistic people were still just relying on fur but most others had at least some clothes on now because it was getting colder by the day) Not having anything to eat, not that they needed to. The list of grievances went on and on. This was starting to get on the nerves of even the celestials, who said they would gladly take the whiners back to Bad Place for a bit of reminding how good they had it here. I refused, that wasn't the way to handle it but what was? That was the question. It was a far different group that met that evening, with far more scowling faces. The celestials had decided to attend as well, they were starting to regret wanting to come here as they were getting some flak too. For not building nice enough houses or not doing it "right" whatever that meant. I didn't want to lose them they were a fantastic resource in both building and planning where to put things. When not designing elaborate tortures they were quite competent at city planning, but I supposed millions of years of existence would do that to a being.

"I have heard you the last two weeks," I told everyone as I brought the meeting to order. "And I agree something must be done. Tensions are starting to rise around here and that's the last thing I want. The newcomers are proving to be more of a challenge than I feared, their time in Bad Place has done them no favors. They learned nothing there, and given most belonged there they are simply picking up where they left off. I am totally with you on that, I want that out of the way. We are here to come up with a solution, and more time doesn't seem to be the answer. Let's keep to the same format, and keep it civil. Remember where you are, and remember we're trying to be better than we were on Earth. Okay? Who is up first?" I held the chunk out, and one of the men at the table held his hand out.

"Can we just kick them out?" he asked. "Build them a house at the next nearest warehouse and wave goodbye?"

"I suppose that would force the issue. But I don't want them swearing revenge on us either, for doing that," I told him. I wrote down "build separate colony for complainers" on the sheet of paper that was next to me. He handed the chunk to the next person, a woman.

"Is that likely?" she asked. "I'm Zainab by the way."

"Right now I'd be surprised if they did anything but sit around and complain," I told her. "But I can't rule it out. Even if it's a year from now, they could be dangerous. Let's try to keep bad vibes to a minimum so they don't have reason to make trouble."

"I guess. My idea is actually somewhat close to that anyway. The main problem, as I see it, is that they lay around and complain and those of us working at trying to build a better community don't see any consequence of this. They aren't causing harm, exactly, so they can't be punished, but at the same time we all need to work together to make this a home to last for all eternity. Does anyone disagree?" She looked around, and people were shaking their heads. "So let's give them a consequence. Slowly enough that they have time to change their behavior but also an 'it's out of our hands' component so they can't say we original five hundred are directly responsible and retaliate against us somehow."

"What can you possibly have in mind?" I asked her. "That's an awful lot to account for."

"I think it's simple. Michael, I recall you saying that people can lose points here, correct?"

"It is possible to both gain and lose points here, yes," he agreed, also looking like he wasn't sure where this was going.

"So there's the answer. Anyone that doesn't gain a point in the span of sunrise to sunrise loses some. You want to be lazy and not help the community? Fine. But you can watch your points trickle away until it's back to The Bad Place with you for some reminders about being a good citizen. At that point when they get back here they'll either have so few points a few days will send them back again unless they get their act together, or they'll be on board with helping the community enough to avoid losing any more. Even if they can do only one good thing for someone else in a day, it's a start. Maybe the next day it'll be two things. Then three. And so on."

"Interesting," I told her. "Michael, is this even possible to implement?"

“It is. We can make minor modifications to the points system just not abandon it outright.”

“So the idea is doable, let’s discuss it.”

Zainab held the rock out, moving away from her seat and a man took it and sat down. “I’m Liam. I don’t like it. I may want to go on vacation so why should I, a hard worker the rest of the time, be penalized and lose points?”

“Maybe some kind of pause could be initiated?” I suggested.

He shook his head. “Not if we want to keep it totally hands off, like Zainab suggested.”

“Ah, right. Still, a vacation is just that, isn’t it. Even if you just don’t go into work instead of going somewhere, it would cost you, right, because you aren’t working and it costs money to just live?”

“I guess?” he admitted.

“And just like a vacation you could work harder before and after it to make up those points.”

Zainab came back and held her hand out, and Liam handed the chunk back to her. “Remember, my proposal is for a person not earning a single point in whatever counts for twenty four hours around here. Even on “vacation” and where would you even go at this point, if you do some good like help carry something for someone, that could get you a point right?” She handed the chunk back.

“I’ve never tracked it that closely,” he admitted. “And I suppose I would have enough points losing a few over the course of a week wouldn’t be that painful.”

“Exactly,” I said. “This is just a slow countdown for those totally against doing anything for the community. Even ‘selfish’ acts like painting pictures would get you points if you gave them away to others later. Watching a child, teaching them something, it would all count.”

“Yeah okay, I get it. Next?”

A woman stepped up, telling us her name was Adele. “I’d like to have a dialog with Zainab,” she said.

Ah, the option to talk to someone at the meeting without passing the chunk back and forth. I give up my right to speak for the moment and whoever she names takes my place. “Go ahead,” I told her.

“How many points are we talking about here?” she asked.

“I was just thinking one?”

“I was afraid of that. I’ll support the plan but it has to be more than one. Doing extra torture beyond what would now get you into Midveil with zero points gets you points, right?” She looked to Michael, who nodded. “So someone tortured for five hundred years above the new requirement could come with a million points. I don’t want to watch them lay around for a million days before they get banished. It has to be enough to be noticeable.”

“But what would be fair? It has to be enough to be ‘painful’ but not enough someone who does just need a little time to recover from Bad Place won’t be sent back there right away.”

“How complex can this be?” she asked Michael.

“I... What do you have in mind?” he hedged.

“Every sundown the number of people that didn’t earn a point is calculated. That’s how many points you lose. Now maybe it’s per warehouse block or something, and not all of Midveil? That would be fine. I can see people working or not in my local neighborhood but I can’t get people motivated to work two warehouses down. And if I’m in a room with two hundred people just doing nothing I know I’m going to lose at least two hundred points that day. Everyone would push everyone else to work lest the point loss be horrific that day. For now it’s the same thing as it’s just us, but as we expand I think you shouldn’t lose a million points in a day if we decide to have a holiday like Christmas or something where everybody takes off.”

“That could be calculated,” Janet admitted.

“And we could fudge the numbers,” Michael decided. “Do an extra few days of torture just so everybody comes with enough points to have some leeway once they get here. Or maybe their final day is extra awful to give them a bonus?”

It would be rather cruel to plop someone down here, give them the tour and demand they get to work on something immediately or get sent back the next day. I don't like the idea of extra tortures of course but if we can't just give people a starting pack of points, if you will, I guess I'd have to live with it.

"Then that's what I would support. Back to you, Denice." She put the chunk down.

I nodded, but then brightened. "Wait a second. Instead of extra tortures why can't those of us at the top simply give our points to newcomers to give them that buffer?" I held up a hand as several people looked like they were going to jump up and grab the chunk. "I know what you're thinking, why should you give up your points that you earned to someone that didn't? Call it a loan, that they have to repay when they get settled, or consider this." I paused a second. "This noble sacrifice of your points is sure to *earn you some points*, resulting in a smaller loss. *Then* if you get the loan repaid you're ahead of the whole game. Think about it." I tapped my head with a finger.

"Wouldn't that be cheating?" Michael asked. "I'm not saying it wouldn't work but you could just pass points around and get infinite points."

"Not so!" I countered. "It would have to be done with the right mindset. That you are sacrificing your points for others with no expectation of reward. If you then later did get points for that sacrifice, making some of them back, well, that's just a bonus. If you gave points away thinking you were going to recoup them instantly I doubt it would work. You really would lose them and they would be gone. It's just an option."

"I would find it difficult to believe any human, no offense, could adopt such a mindset."

"I don't deny that could be the case," I admitted. "We're just throwing ideas out here, remember."

"Well throw that one right out!" he joked. I glared at him. "Carry on," he told us, hands raised in surrender.

"Eve here," said a woman stepping up next and taking the chunk.

"Not *the* Eve, surely?" I asked, just to make sure.

"No, not that one," she agreed with a grin.

"You realize around here I have to check?"

"No problem. Anyway, what happens to the lost points? Are they just gone?"

"Good question. Michael?"

"What would you want done with them?"

Eve shrugged and held the chunk up. "Any takers?"

A man stepped up. "I'm Anika. Why not reward them to the person that made the most points in the last thirty days? Put them into a pool, we can watch it grow, have a leaderboard the whole works!"

"Opposition?" I asked. One man stepped up.

"Declan here. I don't like it. Aren't we trying to avoid the traps of Earth? The rich get richer and all that?"

"Ah, but unlike Earth there's a cap," I reminded him. "Enough points and you go to Good Place. No one person can have more than six million points or whatever it is."

"True. But the hardest worker is probably the hardest worker several months in a row. I say go all the way and have a lottery. The top percentage of people we decide on get entered, one of them wins every thirty days."

"Why not just the top one hundred?"

"Because when it's only five hundred of us that makes sense. When there's twenty billion souls here it doesn't."

"Ah, you may have a point. But again it could be by 'district' near the warehouse, as that's where the points are coming from."

"True. But won't some districts be more popular than others? We have a theme park district with a thousand miles of theme park it won't be houses, so population would be lower."

“Agreed, again don’t get hung up on details yet we’re just seeing what’s possible.”

“Right.”

Zainab stepped back up and was handed the chunk. “How about the top ten percent most improved from the month before? I mean if it can be as complex as we want thanks to Janet...” She paused and waited for Janet’s nod. “Then calculate who earned a great deal more points than the previous month meaning they are really trying to improve both the community and themselves, and enter them. They get a shot at the points ‘left behind’ by those who are not working. Then it’s not just the rich that are playing, it’s those that are improving, and those losing points know about the lottery so they know their points are going to someone that unlike themselves is helping the community.”

“Now that I like,” I admitted. “You put in extra effort and you get a chance to be rewarded with a windfall. You don’t put in any effort and you contribute to the windfall, and then you go back to Bad Place. As long as we can put controls in place, for those really, truly at risk after coming here. I don’t know what ten days of torture does to a person much less a hundred or a thousand *years*.” *And why some kind of cutoff wasn’t put in place from the very beginning I would like to know! What kind of sadistic mind thought that up? Eternity is a long time, should punishment for a wrong done in life never, ever, stop?* “For some people just getting out of bed and getting dressed may be a huge accomplishment we should not punish. Those that actively seek help, or at least are not getting in the way while they recover shouldn’t lose points.”

There was agreement around the room, everyone had remembrances of hard times in their lives it seemed just getting up might be too much to ask. We continued to talk it over with Michael and Janet, but in the end everyone was feeling better about it. Those that were annoying would be punished by the world itself for being that way, their points would be given to those more deserving but only if they really were slacking and not earning a single point in a day, and the first Midveil lottery would be held thirty days from now!

Chapter 17

We write a formal document of law

When: Day 214 in Midveil

Where: Library

It was officially winter in Midveil. We had our first snow, enough to cover the ground and then some but things like shovels and snowshoes were pretty easy to make. Construction had slowed down, but not because we couldn't use magic to clear the snow or anything, but because everyone wanted to play. Those with Earth affinity magic had worked to create some hills, and the kids we had plus those that looked like kids and more than a few adults were happily sledding, skiing, and snowboarding down them. I had been happily watching them when I realized there was something we hadn't thought of when designing the new lottery. I didn't have to search for long to find Michael.

"I need to make a change to the point system," I told him. "It was an oversight on our part and hopefully this won't be too big a deal."

"All changes are a big deal," he told me. "And are you going behind the other's back? Usually you have a town meeting for this sort of thing."

"I don't think we'll need it for this, no one would- no one currently here would oppose what I'm about to ask."

"I'm glad you made that clarification," Janet added. "Because there are people on Earth that would oppose just about anything. Even the most sensible and well thought out argument can be lost on just about anyone."

"And they should rightly spend some time in The Bad Place. Now, here's what we have to correct; We have to exempt the kids from losing points. I don't want a kid who studies diligently all day and goes out to play in the snow to lose points because they didn't tangibly benefit society yet. I don't care what they study, it can be magic if they hate math, or gardening if they hate being in a stuffy classroom, but as long as they're learning something and growing as people towards adulthood, until our community considers them adults we can cut them some slack." *After all, they may never show signs of age if they don't want to. Not here. But if they've been here twenty years it's time for you to step up and do something that benefits the lives of everyone in Midveil. Hopefully by that time you've discovered what you're good at, and can be reasonably expected to do it. Maybe you can't calculate the area of a square but if you need to learn to do that, you probably will to do something else you do like, figuring out how many plants can be in a lot for instance if every one needs a certain amount of space. Give kids a reason to seek out areas of study instead of causing resentment by forcing them to without context.*

"I see what you mean," Michael told me. "I'll submit the request, you don't have to worry about it. Janet, submit the request!"

"Submitting! Request submitted."

"I submitted the request," he told me.

Don't strain yourself. "Thank you."

With several more days of snow and the cold temperatures keeping the snow we already had around it was getting pretty deep, but those with magic were keeping houses warm in whatever way they could. Fire users were of course in the most demand, with water users coming second to allow one to simply ignore the cold. We discovered a spell for those with wood affinity to do a small scale telekinesis allowing objects to be vibrated, and thus heated up and metal affinity could call up bolts of electricity which could serve to warm up coils of metal if properly applied. It was only those with earth affinity that were left out in the cold, so to speak. With construction slowing down (even the celestials didn't like slogging through deep snow) we moved into the factories, and started to experiment with

crude versions of what we all knew back home like lights and ovens. We did plan on planting crops come spring, after all, and I for one couldn't wait to have that first slice of warm apple pie.

Meanwhile, the arrival of those from Bad Place showed we needed to get some things down on paper, a "constitution" if you will. How would we elect a "leader" in the future, if we felt we needed one at all? How would punishment be decided? There were a lot of issues to think about and I had been distributing and asking for contributions on various topics over the last two weeks. Anyone interested was then invited to the library for the first debate around the constitution. Should it go well and everyone agreed it would then be formally written up and we would have a signing ceremony where everyone was invited. As usual I sat at the table with the chunk of gold, lots of papers before me with various parts of what I wanted to include and snippets from other documents like this from various countries on Earth. Probably about a hundred people were there, including Siew Yan, Stefan, and Ramesh I was glad to see. However, this might be my last time in this chair, a fact I told everyone as the meeting came to order.

"I would like to first bring up the matter of electing a leader," I told them. "If we decide to elect one, and we know each other pretty well by now I think, they should take over the duty of getting this signed. I started it because I felt it was my duty as unofficial leader, but we either need to make it official and set some kind of term limit, or find who is going to be official. Thoughts?"

"No electoral collage crap," Stefan said after taking the chunk. "It made no sense on Earth and it certainly wouldn't make sense here. A vote is a vote, we don't get one person's vote being 'worth' three times as much as someone else's vote because of where they happen to live."

Siew Yan took the chunk. "Do we have to vote? I propose that the world has already given us everything we need, we simply must recognize it. To that end I wish to put forth a hierarchy that negates the need to elect a leader because the afterlife has already done that for us. We have a perfect system already in place, the point system. We simply use it. In all cases where there is some question over who is 'right' the person with the highest point total is assumed to be right. This goes right to the top. As the person with the most points cannot be challenged, they are the de facto leader."

"I suppose the person with the most points can be assumed to have done the most for the community anyway," I mused. "Or who was the nicest person on Earth before coming here. I have no objection to stepping down in place of such a person. Janet, can you tell us who currently leads in points? Are they here?"

"You do, silly," she told me. "Was there ever any doubt?"

"Wait really?" My eyebrows shot up.

"I don't lie," she said with a little pout.

"So you put her up to it?" someone said, jerking a thumb to point at Siew Yan. "Because this seems fixed."

"She didn't!" she insisted.

Janet shook her head. "I assure you, neither one came to me to discuss such a system beforehand. As far as I can tell, Denice is genuinely shocked to learn she is in the lead."

"Still seems fixed."

"I'm not surprised," Ramesh told them. "I mean she risked herself to rescue me. Everyone comes to her for advice or orders on what to do next. She took the lead against the racists and solved that problem."

"Hummm..."

"And in all honesty," I told him, "there is a way you can 'vote' in a new leader if you want them. People can vote with their points. Nothing stops me from giving someone my points, I did it when we first discussed it as a currency system. You want someone else as leader, put together a campaign and get everyone to donate their points to that person. If you feel strongly about getting rid of me, give them fifty of your own points and hope you can get enough. Of course you have to be careful, too many

points given to one person and they just head for Good Place and you're back where you started. And you're further away, as they take their points with them. That sets a nice 'term limit' too, no one can stay the leader forever because eventually you'll have the points to move on." *I mean unless you keep giving them away but to never go to Good Place? Is that realistic just to stay in 'power' here? Maybe.*

"I guess that could work," he admitted. "But isn't that too big a job for one person? We can't just think about our community, but whatever we have a thousand 'years' from now."

"I would say as far as a leader goes, it applies per warehouse," I explained. "So in this case, the highest point total person is the authority for five hundred kilometers in every direction from whatever warehouse they live next to. And no more."

"Better say that explicitly, and I have no further objections." He put the chunk down.

"Very well." I made a note. "As I am still leader I will carry on running the meeting. What's next?" I consulted my notes. "Punishments for crimes. I would say that because we are eternal, even a murder victim will be back to face their attacker. So in most cases the punishment for the crime can be decided by the victim of the crime. We don't need courts, judges, or lawyers because there's magical ways to verify if a crime has been committed. Truth magic, mental magic, divination magic, probably others." *Time magic.* "Naturally if it seems too harsh the leader can override it. Punishment must relate to the crime in some way, so if you burn someone's house down deliberately you could be set on fire but not drowned. It's the victim's call, they were the one wronged and thus only they can know what will satisfy them. A judge just saying 'that's all you're getting' isn't all that fair."

"Setting people on fire seems fairly horrible," said a woman, taking the chunk. "Even knowing we come back the next day, is that justified? A more creative person could come up with a more creative punishment than someone else. How is that fair?"

I shrugged. "So discuss it with others, nothing says you have to come up with it on your own. Plus as it's nearly impossible to commit a crime here that can't be undone with a little work, even murder," *though I can think of a few things psychologically scaring that would be worse,* "punishment must be known to be harsh, creative, and swift. I know, it doesn't prevent crime because no one expects to be caught. But it's a little different here- we have access to magic. Once we have the personpower I envision an anti-crime unit being formed that can use divination magic to send 'officers' if you will to wherever crime is going to happen that day. No crime will be overlooked here, they'll be ready to pounce on any act as it's being committed. Meaning, every criminal *will* be caught and punished. It shouldn't take long before people get it through their heads *not do to crime*. Plus I have hopes that crime will simply be low in Midveil because it's the afterlife and those here will finally know better." *I mean a girl can dream, can't she? But murder is useless, there's no concept of wealth but points which can't be forcibly taken, I guess theft could be a thing but again, magically determine who the owner of something is. Done.*

"Ah, but can't magic also block divination magic?" she countered.

"I... maybe?" I admitted. "But it's pretty clear people can cooperate in casting magic. I would have to hope five or ten people putting their efforts to see what crimes will be committed in the next hour would overpower any single person trying to hide that crime."

"But it could happen. Say a person is tied up for a month and finally escapes. How can you believe them and rightly allow punishment if this anti-crime squad of yours didn't pick up on it all that time?"

"There is magic that can help," I hedged, thinking of temporal magic that water affinity people could use. *If you can simply look through time you can verify any story. No amount of anti-divination magic can prevent that.* "I can't be more specific than that, let's just say not every spell is to be found in the library, and I've been given access to some of them. Call it a reward for going to rescue Ramesh."

"She was quite insistent on it," Michael agreed. "I know what she's thinking of, and it would work, you have my word on that. If you put in the effort like she says, there's no reason any crime would be hidden well enough to avoid detection."

“Well, if you say so. I don’t plan to do any crimes so...” She handed the chunk back.

“Seems like an invasion of privacy,” Siew Yan remarked, taking the chunk again. “How is this divination magic going to work, exactly?”

“Creatively,” I answered with conviction. “The easiest divination magic simply allows you to get a yes/no answer to a question. I envision each district around a warehouse to have their own team. They have a map with a grid on it. The grid to start is fairly big and they can just ask say nine times “in the next hour will a crime happen in sector A1? Then B1, C1, A2, and so on. They get a ‘yes’ answer and they pull up a map that is only that sector, blown up. Now they ask a tougher spell which gives better answers where in the next hour a crime will happen. They get a new set of coordinates. They dispatch someone to watch that area for the next hour and see what they find. Naturally once there they can narrow it down further, asking if this is the street the next crime will happen on. We can refine it later I’m just putting one example out there how it could work. They wouldn’t be looking into every house to see if someone was planning a crime, if that’s what you’re asking. We wouldn’t have the numbers for that.”

“And what is crime, anyway?”

“Breaking the One Law, of course. Causing harm. That would be clearly defined. They wouldn’t be chasing after someone littering just those actively causing harm to another.”

“So just because two people are engaging in some activity one of the members of this ‘enforcement squad’ maybe doesn’t like, as long as they’re not causing harm it won’t be investigated?”

“No, only harm. I’ll write up language to that effect, Siew Yan.” I made a note. *I’ll have to define harm, or at least give examples. Loss of property, of autonomy, physical or mental harm- no can’t use the same word in the definition.*

“Thank you.” She set the chunk down.

“Anything else on this topic? Naturally I’ll get the wording down and everyone will have a chance to read it before signing.” I looked around the room but there wasn’t. “Okay, I’m not sure where this would go but to avoid any unpleasantness like last time all factories can be inspected at any time. Any research or construction of objects clearly dedicated only to harm, and you know what I mean when I say that, can be shut down.”

A man raised his hand and came forward, taking the chunk. “Do you need that level of detail?” he asked. “I’m Travis by the way. As long as you define harm to include making something with the intent to harm someone this anti-crime unit of yours would come up with it at once right?”

“Ah, maybe,” I decided. “It would have to be expanded, if the person making the item doesn’t intend to harm someone with it, but give it to someone else to cause harm, that wouldn’t work. We would have to define it as making something that will later be used to cause harm. If you wanted to create a decorative sword but it would never be used to harm, I mean I guess that would be okay.” *I could see someone taking up forging as an art form, same as any other, and almost anything can be considered art, even swords.*

“And then you would catch someone making a frying pan that would later go on to hit someone in the head,” he countered. “They can’t be held responsible for something someone else does.”

“No, I’m okay with a frying pan,” I decided. “That can be made and used until the day it causes harm. Then then anti-crime squad would pick it up. Okay, I’ll just make a note to define harm to include this but not make it a separate section. I still don’t think factories should be closed to whoever wants to inspect them. I mean we had safety inspectors back on Earth for a reason. Even with healing magic I would rather keep them safe and not producing things to later cause trouble for Midveil.”

“I’m fine with that.” He held the chunk out and someone else took it.

“Omar here. I just wanted to ask if there would be some kind of local ordinance, I think it’s called. Like if I want to take a warehouse area and declare no other permanent structures can be placed there, so it’s just an area for tents and nature, can I do that? Someone coming along and building a house doesn’t cause me ‘harm’ but it’s still against the spirit of the place I want to create for myself.”

“I guess as long as you posted the laws around the perimeter,” I offered. “Or otherwise made them available to those coming into the area.”

“Wait a second,” said a woman with dark skin who came forward. She grabbed the chunk. “So someone can just post a sign ‘no blacks’ and have it enforced? Those racists from before will love that! Once they go back to being white again, that is.” She snickered.

“Ah,” I countered, raising a finger. “Discrimination is harm. Saying a zone is clothing free, or building free, or every seventh day is a huge party isn’t. A local rule can’t override the One Law. Nothing can.”

“As long as that’s clear,” she muttered, handing it back.

“So I can do something like that?” Omar asked.

“It goes along with me wanting to create an elven wood, so I think it’s fine,” I told him.

“Obviously you’ll have to get enough people to go along with it, to support whatever local conditions you want to enforce. If you say everyone in that area has to be shorter than four feet tall but only ten people show up, well, we don’t have any shortage of warehouses but you’ll be a long time building anything for yourselves with only those ten other people.” *Unless you gave up points to have someone else build you stuff I guess. But that’s an option for everybody.* “And the more people you attract, the greater the chances someone with a higher point total comes along and reverses it. So sure, if you can get enough people to agree on some local rule,” *good luck with that,* “go for it. Again, as long as it causes no harm to anyone who would want to join you. My elven paradise has to accept people without pointed ears, but they’ll have to live in the trees along with everyone else, for example.” *Because trees are what we’ll have to live in.*

“Okay.”

“I’m Phoebe,” said the next woman to take the chunk. “I fully support an elven wood, as long as we get some unicorns to frolic in the fields nearby. But that brings up a point. All boundaries between different zones have to be kept clear. If I want to visit someone on the other side of the elves’ forest I don’t want to have to make my way through the trees. There has to be at least some space between the forest and the mermaid cove next door. Because I don’t want to swim across either. I just want a nice, even, grassy path I can use.”

“That’s sensible.”

“Write it down!”

“I’m writing!”

“Fine. Here you go.”

I didn’t actually have anything else, but said I would get started on writing up a document with everything we had talked about formally laid out so we could all sign it. Stefan stepped up and wanted the chunk though, so he took the floor.

“I just want it said this document should be as clear as possible. Even if it has to be bullet points. Everything defined if it needs to be, no flowery language. I see you looking at that “in Order to form a more perfect Union” business there. If you’re thinking of writing up something like that, forget it. Remember the whole “other high Crimes and Misdemeanors” business? Without defining those things that statement can mean anything. Make it clear, as unambiguous as possible, and straightforward.”

“Very well,” I sighed. “You have a good point.”

“Thank you.”

“In fact, there’s no reason you all can’t help. Let me get out a fresh sheet of paper and we can get this thing written up right now!”

Chapter 18

Somebody's getting married!

When: Day 224

Where: The Library

And so the provisional constitution was written up and signed, with an option to renew every year for the first ten years, then every ten years after that. Life went on as it had only made clear what we were already basically doing, no one's behavior had to change. But at least I could breathe a sigh of relief that we had accomplished something 'intangible' like agreeing how we would govern ourselves. Yes, it was still rather loose compared to the stacks of lawbooks you would find on Earth but everyone had agreed having one simple law was better than dozens and dozens of obscure ones. As we were still basically stuck inside we continued studying magic, and planning out what we would do when the snow melted. I was having a conversation with some people that wanted to start growing things about what to grow.

"Coffee beans I get, even if we don't get sleepy here people like drinking it," I told the group. "But cocoa beans not so much. We can't make milk chocolate without milk!"

"Can't make chocolate milk either," remarked one. I glared at him, but he put on an innocent expression. "What, it's true isn't it?"

"Technically," I agreed. "But really there's going to be a lot of things we can't make. Cakes take eggs. I guess we can make pie crust with vegetable fats rather than butter or lard, once someone figures out how to make vegetable shortening. No cheese or other milk products like yogurt."

"Unless..." said Madeleine, staring off into the distance. "Hey Janet?"

"Yes?" She appeared next to us.

"Once we start growing things can certain foods be added to the warehouse as raw materials? Maybe in a refrigerated section? We'll need milk and eggs to start. That could be considered a resource, right? Just like raw metals or paper. We'll want to turn them into other things by baking."

"I don't see why not," she agreed. "But I would have to clear it with both Good and Bad places. I expect as food ingredients are neither good or bad both sides should agree fairly quickly."

"What if you didn't have to do that?" I asked.

"Then I can't add them?" she asked, looking confused.

"What I'm saying is, those dogs are still around for instance. But they're just the souls of dogs, just like we're the souls of people. Bring up some souls of cows and chickens, and let us harvest our own eggs and milk. Now we won't be able to have chicken *wings*, or burgers for that matter because killing a chicken or a cow will just make it vanish I assume."

"That's correct. It would return the next day," she confirmed, "same as you."

"So no ham and cheese sandwiches, but at least we could have scrambled eggs in the morning. We would have to build some barns to keep them in over the winter, but I don't see that being a problem."

"Wouldn't need to grow grain to feed them either," Madeleine mused. "Just keep them warm."

"Right. So what about it? Can you get us chickens and such? Maybe goats if people want goat milk?"

"Sure, I don't have to ask about animals, you would have to do any work gathering eggs or milk yourself. So that's neutral."

"Okay, great. So put down cocoa beans on the list."

"You got it, boss!"

"I hope you're prepared to work for those," Janet said with a giggle. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

Twenty minutes later we realized she was right, as we crowded around a book detailing how to make chocolate. It wasn't that any one step was difficult, it was that each "pod" contained only a few

“beans” that could become cocoa powder and thus become chocolate. At least on any kind of scale people were used to. *The chocolate industry must be huge, to support all of Earth if you have to go through all this, even at an industrial scale, to make the amount of chocolate bars I see in stores. Sheesh.* “Well, we’ll plant some anyway, someone is going to want chocolate badly enough to do all this,” I told them. “Maybe we can find some magic to make it easier...” *Grinding things without modern equipment would take forever! We really need to invent ways of generating electricity safely. Making solar panels, though we have step by step instructions, still takes machinery we don’t possess.*

With the farm plan drawn up I figured I would go back to studying magic but two people, a man and a woman that were holding hands came up to me.

“Denice?” the woman asked. “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I’m Tamara, this is Umar, we want to get married.”

“Really? That’s great news, congratulations! I’m happy to officiate if that’s what you need.”

“We would love that, but that’s not why we’re here,” Umar told me.

I looked between the two, and they didn’t seem as, well, giddy with happiness as one might expect at the prospect of marriage. “What’s the problem?”

“The problem,” said Tamara, “is that we’re both still married, technically. To other people. That aren’t here in Midveil yet.”

“Ah.” I was starting to see the problem.

“So we need to know if our getting married would cause harm,” Umar went on. “To our spouses, when they show up. I mean, I got married ‘till death do us part’ but now it seems death will one day bring us back together.”

“But that could be in a hundred years,” Tamara put in. “Especially at the speed houses are going up. Though of course we’re getting better at it, and maybe more people will accelerate the process but still. There’s a lot of souls waiting to come here, right?”

“There are,” I agreed. “This is a problem. Do you forgo happiness in the short term, on the off chance you’ll see your previous partner again? I mean, you could be in Good Place by the time they get here, or they could go there without ever setting foot here. To say nothing of them moving on and maybe finding someone else, and now they come face to face with you again and think, uh oh what have I done?”

“Exactly,” Umar agreed. “What are we to do?”

“Yes, what is the moral thing here?” Tamara pleaded. “You have to tell us, Denice. I don’t want to be punished later, by my husband if and when he comes here because my marrying Umar did him harm.”

“Wait a minute, I’m no kind of moral authority,” I protested, hands out. “You can’t ask me things like that!”

“You’re our leader,” Umar told me. “That’s also the closest thing we have to a spiritual leader too. Michael wouldn’t give us an answer, only that morality was largely based on the time period you lived in and what other people thought about things at the time.”

I scratched my head. “Then the thing to do would be to ask around, see what everyone else thinks?”

“You would do that for us?”

“I meant you should do it!”

“Oh no, we can’t do it,” Tamara protested. “If anyone knew we were asking for ourselves their answer might change based on how they viewed us.”

“That’s... not unreasonable,” I decided, thinking about it for a second. *Personal bias may influence a question like that. If they like the pairing or the people they would be more inclined to give a favorable answer. That’s why I always thought it a bit odd for a jury to see the person they were*

passing judgment on. Even the judge shouldn't see the person until after the trial is over, to prevent just such bias. The law is the law, a judge shouldn't hand out a harsher sentence for someone they see as less attractive or because they're a certain race. You hire a musician for a band based on how they sound playing the instrument not by how they look. Right? Same thing here. Even job interviews should be held without actually seeing the person, but of course no one does that. Because the world of the living is horrible and messed up. We have to do better here in Midveil. "I can ask around."

"Thank you!" they both cried, clearly relieved.

So I walked around and asked people what they thought. I didn't name any names that would defeat the whole purpose, but I did give them the gist of the situation. Should we allow marriage here between people already married to others? Many said they wanted to think about it, but a few people had some good insights.

"Are we going to start labeling everything like we did on Earth?" Stefan asked. "I mean look at me. I'm supposedly an old man. I'm pretty sure I died in my eighties with a wife, kids, and even grand-kids. But I've always seen myself as just a boy that never grew up. And when I came here, the world itself seemed to agree with me. Should I be labeled as one thing or another? Isn't that what you want to do with these two people? Give them a label? If they want to be exclusive let them, they don't need a piece a paper saying that. It's not like they'll get tax breaks or anything for being married. And they won't be having kids of their own, so what does it matter?"

"I think it matters to them," I explained. "Marriage means something, it's more than just a party you throw for your friends and oh by the way we're promising to be together."

"Does it?" he asked. "They can make that promise to each other without me labeling them 'married' right? In fact why is it any of my business if they want to be exclusive, or not?"

"To throw away all our traditions just because we're dead seems wrong though. Marriage was practiced around the whole world."

"Practiced, but can anyone claim they had mastered it?"

I scowled down at him. "I'm being serious here."

"It's just an odd term, I get what you're saying. Well, I'm not morally opposed to the term whatever it means here. I guess it depends on their partners, if and when they ever show up. Those are the people going to make the punishment according to the One Law, right? If they think those people are vindictive and will make a stink, maybe reconsider. Or absent the spouse draw up divorce papers, give them thirty days to appear and sign, and when they don't it's made official in their absence. Then if they do show up they can just be presented with the 'legal' paperwork and told they were officially divorced."

"I guess that's one option. Thanks, Stefan."

"Sure thing."

"What is marriage anyway?" Siew Yan asked.

"Don't give me that, they must have marriage in Singapore," I told her.

"But we're not in Singapore anymore, we're in Midveil. How are we defining marriage *here*? Remember, you're talking about a long, *long* time to be married. On Earth there was always an understanding, however subconsciously that eventually the marriage would end. Not so much here. I think we're going to have to define what marriage is for us. Maybe have each couple define it for themselves."

"So, wait, if one person says they're married but leaves it open to be married to someone else and the other doesn't agree..."

"Then maybe these people shouldn't be getting married in the first place?"

"So what you're saying is marriage isn't one thing or the other here? That it's however the couple defines it? So being married could mean one thing to one couple but something completely different to

another?” *Doesn't that sort of make it meaningless to tell people you're married? It could mean anything. That goes back to Stefan's labeling thing though. He said why label things at all, she's saying let the label remain but let it mean different things. It really only has meaning to those people who want the label in the first place. No one should care how someone else's marriage is structured. If we're moving past how things were done on Earth, anyway.*

“Right. I would say the best wedding ceremony would be for both people to present their contract of marriage to the other person. They read it over. They make any changes they deem necessary and sign it, handing it back. The other person then reads over the changes and if they agree, they sign it. Boom, the couple is married. They can still kiss, if they want.”

“That would be the most boring wedding ceremony ever!”

“Would it?” she asked with a laugh. “I think it would be a real nail biter. Are they going to go through with it? Did he put in a paragraph about having someone on the side and she's going to stalk off leaving him at the altar? Maybe she wants him to stop looking like a fox person or specifies the number of kids they're going to adopt. He could run away screaming.”

I snorted. “I guess. Seems unbalanced if one party was a lawyer in life though.”

“No rule that says you have to write it alone.”

“Humm. It would be easier to show harm done if both people agree what the marriage is to look like beforehand. I guess I wouldn't even have to codify it as law, as it's whatever both people want anyway. I might have someone write up a template to get them started, maybe build in a renewal period of five years, where both can make changes to the 'contract,' and decide if they are still married or not.”

She nodded. “Giving people an easy out is going to be paramount here. Even I still have trouble grasping that I'm going to exist like this forever. Well, I mean not like this,” she indicated herself. “I hear looking like an elf is going to be big next year so I might try that on for size.”

“Very funny,” I told her dryly. *Never should have brought that up. Should have just waited until everything was settled, and then just causally gone and grown a forest somewhere I could elf out in for a little while. I mean is that so much to ask?*

She grinned at me. “But even if I got crushed by a building falling over I would be fine the next day. I'm permanent in a way I've never been before. Will my ideas about how I should live be permanent? I might fall in and out of love with a dozen people in the next thousand years. Why should I limit myself *here* if I don't have to? Anyone I partner with should understand that I probably won't be in love with them forever, nor would I expect them to be in love with me forever. But it might be nice to be married, or not, whatever that means for me at the time. As far as causing harm if we break up... that's why you set the expectation at the beginning, so they can't say they didn't know it was coming.”

“No, I hear you,” I told her. “You make some good points. Thanks.” *Right, ugh, what if one person isn't in love with the other anymore? Wants to leave? Emotional harm for the one still in love, and easily proved by magic. 'Does person such and such still love person other person? Yes/No.' Done. Proven harm. I mean if they're a jerk about it. But even on Earth wasn't that the case? Did a person really think at nineteen we'll say that they would love the fifty year old their partner became? Sure there were the lucky ones that did, maybe even loved them more. But getting out of a bad marriage was still costly both in terms of resources, emotions, time. We need to do better here.*

So I switched tactics, asking people what they thought of defining marriage differently here in Midveil. Naturally there were some that said it had to be the same for everybody, or it was meaningless. To them I argued “But say we do define it completely. Given how many different cultures there were on Earth and people's ideas now, there's a good chance it'll look nothing like how you want it to look. Isn't it better to have flexibility so you can marry how you want to instead of how I want you to?” I was also sure to remind them that in the future people from all different places and times would be coming here, and it would be impossible to accommodate them all with one set of rules. Most

agreed that might be the only way to allow marriage and still be able to call it that. But they didn't look happy about it. *I guess there will always be people that want to control how other people think or behave. Well, too bad because this place is going to have to accommodate everybody. And we really do have to set the precedent now, before even more closed minded people come from Bad Place. At least now I'm trying to convince somewhat modern thinkers this is a good idea. Someone from say 3rd century China? I have no idea how flexible someone from that place and time would be. Maybe more flexible than me, I don't know, but that's the point. I have to plan on less, so I'm delighted if it's more.*

I gave everyone two days to think it over, meanwhile I found someone that at least had some legal experience and could write up a template those that wanted to get married could use to get started. This could be a bit more 'flowery' than our constitution so it started: *Henceforth, let it be known that the undersigned shall consent to marriage before these witnesses, to last _____ years until renewal. With love and understanding do they come together, pledging for the time above to observe what marriage means for them, as laid bare in this writ of binding.*

You get the idea. I suggested some generic things like not cheating, and to leave space for each person to write in their own stuff. I was going to make a few copies once it was done but Janet stopped me.

"If you want, I can make it like the books here," she explained. "We can create a filing cabinet with documents like this in it, that can be taken out but remain to be taken out again. Of course any copies that come out wouldn't be linked, so they can be filled in separately. That would save you some work, correct? And if you want to change the 'master' copy you can just tell me, and I'll let you (or the person with the highest points obviously) replace this copy with a new one."

"That would actually be great," I told her. "Thanks."

"Sure thing. I'm married, you know."

"Really? I didn't actually know that!"

"To one of the founders, Jason."

"He must be quite a man, I'd love to meet him." *I hear about these 'founders' but I still don't know much about them. They must be exceptional individuals, to have convinced the celestials to begin the Midveil project. I wonder how they got picked? Are they enjoying their time in Good Place, and that's why they never come here to see how Midveil is doing?*

"Uh... Yes... He's that all right. Yes, what you said, is what he is."

"Okay?" *Not convinced?* "You're not regretting it or anything, are you?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. The others look down on him, I mean he did die believing a snorkel would allow him to breathe inside a safe-"

"I'm sorry how did-"

"And yes, he was trying to rob a bank, and may still have some off the walls ideas about things-"

"A bank, you said?" *Wait, how did a bank robber, or at least one stupid enough to die in the attempt, come to be a 'founder?'* *Who are these founders anyway? What really happened before we came to Midveil?*

"But he saw me as a person, and so we got married!"

"You... you realize that's sort of the minimum standard for that sort of thing."

"I do."

"Well, okay then. As long as you're happy." *Because you're going to be stuck with him for a long time.*

And so Umar and Tamara agreed to separate, fill out the form to define what they wanted their side of the marriage to look like, and have the first Midveil wedding. With no cake, no music, no fancy clothes, no gifts, and held in the middle of a factory building with the tables and things shoved to one

side. I said they could use the library but they wanted to be somewhere made by human hands, not simply wished into existence by Janet, which I respected. We managed to fit everybody that wanted to come inside, and as there were few changes to the contracts on either side (*whew*) Midveil had our first married couple. They had to renew every 'year' once we figured out how long a year was around here, and agreed if their previous partners showed up they had the option to marry them at once as well. Of course the new arrivals would have to agree to allow the other marriage, but given they might never make it here, or it could be a hundred years from now and these two were broken up long ago, it didn't seem like a pressing concern. They seemed happy, and I was happy for them. *On to the next crisis, I guess.*

Chapter 19

We learn about a special door

When: Day 247

Where: Library

“Denice?” someone softly said, somewhat surprising since silence surrounded sincere study. I jumped and looked behind me.

“Janet!” I exclaimed. “If I had a heart it would be racing, why did you sneak up on me like that?”

“I apologize, I don’t like to thread near someone that hasn’t called me but Michael is concerned and sent me to fetch you.”

“Concerned about what?” I snapped the book I was looking at closed and stacked it on top of the other books nearby.

“There’s an unscheduled train coming towards us.”

I started to feel a chill. “From Bad Place?” *Is someone coming for those celestials that have been helping us?*

She shook her head. “Actually, from Good Place. He doesn’t know what it could mean. If Bad Place gets wind of it and thinks you’re being helped by them...”

You mean if the faction not already helping us learns of it? We should take care of this as quickly as possible in any case. “I’ll meet you out by the track.” I raised my hands, gestured, and vanished from the library.

Looking around I didn’t see Micheal around anywhere but Janet was right by my side. “I’ll have my thread stop the train here,” she told me. “You can probably see it coming.” She pointed, and I could. It looked the same as The Bad Place train which didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me because *shouldn’t it be nicer?* But it pulled up and stopped and several people, including a Janet, got out. She was dressed and looked identical to the one next to me, and both nodded to each other. *Parts of the same whole I suppose, I wonder what it’s like to look yourself in the face. Huh, have to ask a twin sometime. Oh man, I just thought of a prankster’s dream- have a water user change you to look like someone, and do pranks or other mischief where you can be seen. I’ll have to write that down, anyone that professes innocence to any crime could be telling the truth even with witnesses, we would have to use divination magic to get to the bottom of such a thing.*

“Thank you for coming to meet us,” said the man in the lead. He looked much like Michael, in an outdated suit but without any outstanding features. He looked younger though, if that meant anything to beings that were only disguised as humans. Two others were with him, a plain looking man and woman who were looking around from the stairwell down from the train. “I’m Ezekiel. With me are Daniel and Mary.” He indicated the other two that stepped off the train and waved. “We must speak with Michael right away, as well as the leader of Midveil? I understand you’ve recently selected one?”

“That’s me, Denice,” I told them. “Would you like to head back to the warehouse or just wait until Michael can make it over here? He should be along any second.” *He can teleport just as easily as I can. And Janet should be able to tell him where we are.*

“This concerns all of Midveil,” said Mary. “We should hold a general meeting if possible.”

“Very well. If you would like to follow me?” I gestured towards the town and they all nodded, so we started off. I noticed they were stomping through the snow as though they had never done so before, and to be fair they probably hadn’t. I cast a spell to blow it out of our way, it wasn’t exactly water but it responded just as easily to water controlling magic. At least for me. They seemed grateful and filed in behind me. They didn’t seem angry or looking for a fight, so I had no idea what their purpose was in coming here. *Great, did we do something wrong? Is our time up? We didn’t even get a year though, they can’t end this experiment yet. Do they want The Button?* My thoughts were fairly dark as we approached the town when suddenly the three celestials perked up.

“Excuse me,” Daniel said, heading towards one of the houses. We all went after him, I was asking if I could help him with something. He ignored me, yanked the door open and peered inside.

What, does he think this is some kind of RPG, he can just go into anyone’s house he wants and steal their stuff?

He turned to me. “You have celestials here?” he demanded. Past the door I saw a few people, playing some kind of game with dice with one of the celestials from Bad Place. He sheepishly waved.

I guess they can sense each other. “They were helping us build things,” I told him. “But even they don’t like to work in the cold.”

“They? There’s more than one? This is highly irregular! You, I don’t recognize you! You’re breaking the treaty being here, you’re from Bad Place? But you’re helping the humans? Explain yourself!”

“Not why we’re here,” Mary told him, gently taking the door handle from him. “The humans are trying their best to get people out of Bad Place. If they got some help, should we say that’s wrong?”

“Of course it is! This creates an imbalance here.”

“You’re welcome to send representatives and come here yourself, if you want to balance things out and help as well,” I told him.

“We may have to, *those* people are not to be trusted!”

“Hey!” said the man inside. Daniel slammed the door on him, making Mary rub her hand as he had yanked it away from her again.

“Let’s go. Honestly, letting them come here, humans really do have terrible judgment. Or no, I suppose he’s right at home here, isn’t he? Have you made a casino yet, I think the phrase is ‘with blackjack and hoo-’”

“Daniel, this is not behavior befitting a celestial,” Ezekiel told him. “Maybe cool it with the insults? We’re trying to make a good impression here, yes?”

They are? Why?

“Ah, here’s Michael,” said Mary, no doubt trying to change the subject. We turned to look and he was coming towards us, along with another Janet. “Is he helping you build as well?”

“Actually no, only the occasional consult,” I told them. “He’s tried to stay as neutral as possible.”

“At least someone knows how to follow a contract,” Daniel muttered. “Let’s get out of this cold already. Honestly Michael did you have to push for so much snow?”

“It’s random, balanced with the amount of sun they get in the summer, as you well know,” Michael told him. “Also, while it’s so great to see you and everything, what are you all doing here?”

“Once we’re inside,” Ezekiel told him.

“Oh very well. Let’s go.”

“One second,” I told them. I turned to Janet. “Janet, can you pass a message on to everyone? I know, normally you would say you can’t but this seems to be important. Tell them we’re meeting at the warehouse about something important with three,” I glanced over at the celestials, “ambassadors from Good Place. I don’t want to keep them waiting while we get together, after all.”

“Very well.” She vanished, leaving only two of her threads there.

“Now we can go.”

Twenty minutes later most people were in the warehouse wondering what was going on, and Michael said they should get started. “So what’s this all about?” he demanded.

“It’s the you know what,” Ezekiel told him. “It’s doing that thing again, you know?”

“They didn’t.”

“We think they did.”

“Why?”

“You think we know? You’ve been around them longer, you tell us.”

“I can’t even imagine. Well, maybe I could? Great, this is just- How many?”

“We’re tracking four.”

“Unbelievable. To think they would do something like that! To risk so much, and for what?”

“I know, but we need to do something too. But we can’t stress the system any more than it already is so we came here. You know no one from our side would go back there at this point. Plus they probably wouldn’t have the skills.”

“Yes, yes, and no one from the other could be trusted at this point, yes, I see your dilemma.”

“Excuse me,” I broke in. “What in the blue blazes are you talking about? What you know what? I don’t know what. Explain!”

He stared at me for a moment, in between glancing at everyone gathered around us listening. “I should probably just tell you...”

“Get on with it already.”

He looked out at the others a final time and sighed. “Fine. There is a way back to Earth. One door, closely guarded and locked with a single key. We celestials can use it to travel there if we need to. But we don’t, typically. But when we do, our powers are sealed. We become essentially human, our outer disguises becoming our true forms. There isn’t that much magic on Earth to begin with so even if we could show our true forms we couldn’t do much. But there’s enough they could cause problems even then.”

“And how did they use such a portal, it must be guarded against just such an unauthorized use, yes?”

“The real door is, yes. Some time ago, as part of a plot to disrupt my plans with the founders, Bad Place created their own. Some celestials used it. It was crude, didn’t work as well, but got the job done. They could use it to go to Earth without using the main door. But we found out about it because our door started to, for lack of a better word, show static. Distortion. When they used their door it reflected in our door. And of course we happened to be focused on the area they went, which helped.”

“And it happened again,” said Ezekiel. “So we looked into it. Four celestial signatures have been detected on Earth. Their seals are holding, they’re still human for the most part but we can’t imagine why they went down there.”

“Why wasn’t this rogue door destroyed when it was found?”

“It was,” Mary assured me. “Someone built another. Of course we couldn’t demand they hand over all research that made the first one possible. I mean, we could, and they might have even given us some. But they can make a copy as easily as anyone else. We could never be sure they gave it all to us.”

“Naturally.” *Except with divination magic? But then it’s 50/50 because they would protect it from divination magic with anti-divination magic I expect.* “And you came here to...”

“Recruit,” Daniel told us, looking sour. “We need someone to go down there and find out what they’re up to. Then bring them back. We’ll get the location of the new door out of them ourselves, and destroy this one too. Those in Good Place aren’t suitable for the most part for such a mission, they’re running around living out fantasies and whatnot. Their skills will have totally degraded by now, and they’re too far removed from human life to function there. Celestials can’t go, it’s a miracle as it is going though an unauthorized door sealed their powers but it happened. We can’t risk anyone stronger going and we all suddenly find ourselves ripped out of our disguises.”

“And you can’t send any human souls from Bad Place, I’ve been there and seen what that place does to them,” I finished. “That leaves us.”

“Exactly.”

“We would essentially be returning to life.”

“You would still be souls?”

That took me back. “You don’t sound sure.”

“Honestly, we’re not.” The three celestials traded a look. “We can use the portal just fine. But a soul like yourself using it? We actually aren’t sure what will happen in that case. If it’s been done we don’t have a record of it.”

“So we could just poof into non-existence, or be totally unable to pass through at all?”

“Or be trapped between worlds, unable to interact with either,” Ezekiel suggested.

“You could always be thrown backwards in time, to the moment of your death,” Daniel informed us. “Made to relive it again, then make your way back to this point in time unaware you’ve done it before, only to be made to relive it again in an endless time loop.”

“You guys aren’t building a good case for yourselves, you know that right?”

“Every action carries risk,” Mary sighed. “Even for us. Naturally we cannot force you to go, and we are planning to go to Bad Place after making this stop. See if we can track the rogue portal down from this end. You could accompany us on that mission if you desire instead.”

“I think we better do both.” I turned to the others. “So I’m looking for volunteers for two missions. The first is back to Earth, braving the danger of being ripped apart or whatever trying to go through the door, to look for the celestials that have gone to Earth. You say there are four of them down there?” The celestials nodded. “Fine. Myself and three others, that seems balanced and that’s what Midveil is supposed to be about. I also want several people to go with these three, to Bad Place, and help them look for the portal. It could be guarded, I suggest you know some kind of battle magic or at least a spell or two that can be used that way. Waters? Step up and represent, your divination magic may be needed here.”

“I’ll go with you,” Ramesh announced, stepping up. “You came to my rescue, it’s time to pay that forward. And as I’m part celestial now anyway maybe I have the best chance of making it through the gateway in one piece. It’s calibrated for ‘me’ anyway, right?”

“Or you’re in more danger because of your dual nature, but it’s up to you,” I told him.

“What’s this?” Mary asked.

“Never mind. Anyone else?”

Stefan and Siew Yan stepped up, both grinning. “I’m up for another adventure,” Stefan told us.

“And I have a feeling you’ll need my talents,” Siew Yan told me. “If we don’t have magic, I’m really the only one who can defend themselves. No offense, Stefan, you’re learning but you’re a green belt at best. That’s a karate thing, right? You know what I mean?”

“I get you,” he sighed. “I’m not stopping you!”

“Thanks,” I told them gratefully. “And for the other?”

Several people stepped up for the other mission and the Celestials went back to the train. Janet summoned another one for us, but before we left I asked her who was going to be in charge while I was gone. She pointed him out.

“Otis!” I said, putting an arm around his shoulders. “Buddy!”

“Hello, Denice.”

“So here’s the deal, k? I’m gonna be gone a minute here, right? When I come back, this place better not be on fire. Or changed all that much, we clear on that? In fact due to my heroic actions on Earth I’ll probably come back with a mess load of new points, further putting me ahead so don’t get any ideas, you hear me?”

“I get it. I’ll keep things going while you’re gone don’t worry. No major policy changes, I get it.”

“Good man! Actually I should have appointed a vice president sort of role so people could go to number two if I was busy. I’ll get on that when I get back. You up for this?”

“Going to have to be, aren’t I? Yes, yes, don’t worry I can handle things while you’re traipsing around on Earth. Bring us back something.”

“What, like a balloon? A fish in bag? A stuffed toy? You got it.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I said seriously. “Hope I see you again. If not, just, keep this place going, okay? I’ve been trying my best and I have no idea if we’ve got a good foundation here or not but we’re going in a direction, and that’s something. I wouldn’t want to lose that now.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

We rode the train with Michael and Janet over to Good Place, and I was feeling excited to get a little taste of what we were all working towards. However, once we pulled into the station Michael simply teleported us to our destination, so I didn’t get to see anything there. We made our way through a strange emptiness, a maze of catwalks held up by nothing in a dark void. There was no light but we could see perfectly, and Michael seemed to know exactly where he was going as he didn’t hesitate at any intersection. We finally made it to a desk manned by a single bored looking man, beyond which was a shimmering doorway. Or more accurately a door frame, where a white mist swirled between.

“So these are the four, huh?” he asked, standing up. He didn’t look like much, just a normal person in a guard uniform. He wasn’t huge, bulging with muscles or crackling with magic.

This is the guard? I mean not to let appearances inform my thinking but I think I could take him. Why didn’t these other celestials just come and use this door? Building their own must have been a hassle. Four of them could overpower this one guy, right? Doesn’t seem right. Do they rotate? This must be the most boring job in all existence, there’s not even a field of grass to look at or any books to read! How does he stand it?

“These are the ones,” Michael told him. “You’re putting them down in the area the signatures were detected?”

“Of course. We can’t do better than that. You’ll have to take it from there,” he told us.

“I figured. Anything we should know?”

“There is one thing.” He reached down and picked something up, handing it to me. “Here’s the key.” It was a regular looking door key, with a fob on the other end that had a button. “When you’re down there, hit the button to summon the portal to your location. Please don’t lose the key, we don’t have any other ones.”

“I’ll try not to then,” I told him. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” Janet said, holding something up. It was a necklace with what looked like a crystal in the center of a glass ball. “Here, this is for you.”

“Hey, if you’re giving her stuff I want a light saber!” Stefan protested. “I mean I *want* Iron Man armor or a Green Lantern ring but I’ll *settle* for a light saber.”

“I’m breaking the rules giving you this as it is,” she told him. “But it’s an extreme circumstance so...”

“What is it?” I took it and looked it over.

“Crystallized magic. The others will be fine, but you, Denice, have more powerful magic than they do. That means you draw more magic than they do to cast spells. Normally you don’t notice because there’s lots of magic around here. Down there though, you will notice the difference and won’t be able to cast spells very well. I think you’re going to need to, so I made this for you. It will get used up, and you can try casting spells without it first, but use it sparingly.”

Great, the person with divination magic isn’t going to be able to use it without pulling some from the ‘tank?’ That will limit our options as we need to track these celestials down the hard way. “Thank you.” I put it around my neck and tucked it under my shirt. “I guess you can’t come with us, huh?”

“Sadly, no. I mean yes, I could, but I too would just be a person. No ability to summon things. That’s tied to my existence here.”

“I see. Well, if there is some kind of deity behind all this, send them a prayer on our behalf. See you all soon.” I moved around the desk towards the door, and the others followed.

“Simply tell it to open and hold up the key,” said the guard.

“Very well.” I held it up. “As the holder of the key that unlocks the door separating life and death, I command the way be parted! Let this door be opened at my command! Eleas! Rath! Mucha!”

“Very nice, I’m rubbing off on you,” Stefan remarked as the space between the door turned from a misty white to a city scene.

“Thank you. Avengers assemble.” I stepped through. As my body passed through the door a sudden thought struck me. *I still look like a fish person. How am I going to change that when I-*

I was through the door.

Chapter 20

We figure out Earth

When: Day 247

Where: A city street

I stood stock still on the side of the city street, waiting for the screams or at least some funny looks. I heard and saw neither. The people walking by seemed unconcerned by my presence there, and seemed to avoid the gaping door to the afterlife as though there was something physical there they didn't want to run into but otherwise didn't think twice about. I was just congratulating myself for not exploding or being thrown through time when I turned to see an old man I had never seen step out of nowhere. He looked around and caught sight of me.

"Ah, we made it," he said.

"Who are you?" I blurted.

"Denice, it's me, Stefan," he said. "Why do you look so old? And did you get shorter?"

"Stefan?" *This old man? Oh no, don't tell me-*

Two more figures stepped through the portal to the street. Siew Yan I recognized, she always looked the age she had been when she died, but following her was another old man I hardly recognized. "What a trip," he said as the doorway vanished behind him. "Now, where did Denice go? Do you see Stefan anywhere?"

"I'm right here," Stefan insisted. "What are you all-" He brought his hands up and looked at them in horror. "What's happened to me?"

We were now starting to get some funny looks, as the two old men were standing there in what looked like their pajamas. Siew Yan was wearing a very short dress, something you might go to a nightclub in, and I was just wearing jeans and a t-shirt. The same jeans and t-shirt I was wearing "I just remembered how I died!" I blurted. Yes, I even had my purse, where had *that* come from? Siew Yan wasn't carrying anything.

"Me too," Siew Yan remarked, a dark look on her face. "They didn't say that would happen. Didn't really need to relive that moment, thank you very much."

"I died in a fire," said Ramesh. "I was in bed, is that why I'm wearing this?"

"Come on, we need to get off the street," I told them. "Work out what to do next."

I dragged the two old men with me, heading for a starbucks. "You can go sit down and hopefully not attract so much attention. I'll get us a coffee." *If I have my purse my wallet must be in there. I doubt my credit cards will work but I always have emergency cash as well.*

"Not so fast," complained Stefan. "I'm not as young as I used to be." Of course he was looking around at the city instead of paying attention to where he was going, which wasn't helping.

How I am supposed to find four celestials and drag them home when two of my party just got aged into oblivion? This is not going well. And the noise! After being in Midveil for so long I have to wonder how people put up with it. Look at that traffic, I almost forgot what a car looked like. And so many people, where and when are we?

But it got worse. We entered the starbucks and I went up to the counter. "Can I get four medium coffees, or whatever you call medium size around here?" I reached into my purse hoping everything really was still in there. If it wasn't this was going to be a short transaction.

The woman behind the counter stared at me like I had just come back from the afterlife. "Garble garble garble?" she asked me.

"What did you say?" I blurted.

"Garble?"

"Oh, I'm going to *kill* Michael when we get back." I held up four fingers and pointed to the middle size of cup they had on display. She nodded, understanding this much, and rang me up. I found my

wallet, wondered when the heck the price of *coffee* had gone up so much, and managed to pay without further incident. At least numbers and math still made sense to me, and she accepted my bills. So that hadn't gone crazy since I was last, you know, alive. I carried the coffee to the others and sat down.

"Don't burn yourself, old man," I couldn't help but saying as I handed one over to Stefan.

"I'm not that old," he replied. "I'm only eighty four."

"Coffee!" exclaimed Siew Yan. "I've missed you!"

"Is it just me or is everyone around here speaking gibberish?" Ramesh asked, taking his.

"I couldn't understand the barista, something weird is going on," I told him. "I mean, apart from the obvious." I indicated us in a general way.

"Seems clear enough to me," he said, sipping his coffee. "We're back in the real world, and that means physical law rears her ugly head once again. No offense, physical law. Midveil allows us to change our appearance, but this world doesn't. We're back to being how we left this place."

"Not exactly," Stafan told him. "I was bedridden before my passing. I can at least walk around now. I feel, okay not exactly *young* but at least better than I was before I died."

"My eyes are up here, by the way," I told him icily. He jerked them up to my face.

"Sorry, it's just..."

"I know you've seen them before on others, people were walking around naked back home. Why the sudden interest?"

"You don't feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"That." He pointed to my chest.

"What?" I slipped the necklace off and held it away from me. Come to think of it, I did feel something coming from it.

"I think it's magic," Siew Yan said. "I feel it too. I think we got so used to feeling it, now that it's gone that concentrated source of it is like a beacon."

"Great, one the celestials will no doubt feel coming as well." I grumped. But there was some kind of energy coming off the orb, I was pretty sure I could close my eyes and point to it. If someone else was holding it, of course. I put it away again. "So we're old again. I'm in my fifties, you two are ancient-"

"Hey!"

"Good thing Siew Yan died young. Wait, that came out wrong."

"Believe me, it was something of a relief. But I have missed my son."

"You had a son?"

She nodded sadly. "And I'm pretty sure trying to contact him would be a big no-no. Can you even imagine it?"

"Yes, let's try to stay away from anyone that knew us in life," Ramesh agreed. "But what about the language thing?"

"Near as I can tell, we came from all over the place right?" Stafan asked. "I'm from Germany, you, India, etc. But we can all understand each other. Stands to reason we're now speaking the language of the celestials. So of course no human can understand us."

"How can that be?" Ramesh asked.

He shrugged. "Ask Michael when we get back. They made us forget how we died, who knows what else they can do to us? It may just happen automatically to souls, and no one ever stopped to think about it because no one ever came back here. Man." He looked around. "I'm back in the world again. That's crazy."

"I'm surprised you're asking that question, Ramesh. After all, you had a celestial put inside you, so you should know anything is possible."

“True,” he agreed. “But of the two, I would rather have not understood all of you if Denice could talk to people around here. As it is, how are we going to ask around about these celestials if we can’t talk to anyone?”

Maybe this was done deliberately, to actually keep us from talking to anyone? I can’t even read that sign over there, it’s just gibberish and this seems to be my home country. The others may not realize it but it was more than just speech that was changed. We aren’t supposed to be here, after all. “How would we ‘ask around’ for celestials anyway?” I asked. “They just look like humans.”

“I guess,” he decided. “What is our plan, anyway? We sort of rushed here but got no real assistance from Michael or Janet. And she clearly can break the rules as she gave you that magic well. She could have outfitted us a little better. I mean she claims to know everything but she didn’t say a word about any of this.”

“You don’t think it was Michael, do you? Trying to get rid of us?” Siew Yan asked.

“But we would be back eventually, and looking for some payback,” I protested. *And why involve you? Wait, he didn’t involve you I did. Maybe he just wanted to get rid of me? But to what end, haven’t I been doing what he wanted? I even had people build him a house to live in. A place of his own. Am I never going to get over my suspicion of that guy? Kinda odd to involve celestials from Good Place too, unless they weren’t. The train could have gone by, then just come from the other direction once I was there. But would Janet go along with something like that? Plus we have the door control, unless it’s not going to work when I press the button because it’s a fake? And how did he know I would come here? I mean yes based off past action it’s in character for me to rush to do something like this but if he was trying to get me here, it was a risk. I didn’t have to go, I could have stayed and ordered others to do it. So figure it isn’t directed towards me or if it is, he took a risk of getting someone else and having to think of something else to get rid of me.*

“Against a celestial?” Ramesh countered. “I’m half celestial and get flashes of knowledge from that side. I can’t imagine what being one for a million years would be like. Besides, how do we know we won’t just *poof* if we die here? Are we still souls? Is it Midveil bringing us back? Would we go back there or back home here or nowhere?”

“Let’s hope we don’t have to figure that out,” I told him. “As for a plan, let’s review the magic we know and where we might go from here. They’re supposed to be close let’s hope they didn’t get that wrong. Heck, maybe they’ll come to us to investigate this.” I tapped the necklace.

So having gotten out a pen and making a list on the back of the receipt I got I looked over the list of magic we had access to; Move water, augment skill, teleportation sphere, pocket dimension, withstand weather, distant conversation, save point, illusion, elemental aura, question, measure, telekinesis, manipulate metal, plant growth, manipulate plants, healing, lighting blast, heat material, giant’s soul, create fire, manipulate fire, manipulate emotion, move earth, shape stone, phase, sense spirit, and point of gravity.

“Twenty seven in all,” I counted. “That’s not nothing.”

“You know twice as many as us,” Stefan complained. “What, do you do nothing but study magic?”

“What else am I supposed to do all night?”

“Maybe have some fun? I mean even I’ve found someone that doesn’t mind that I look like a teenager.”

What does that say about them, though? “Studying magic is fun.” Wait, if an actual teenager came here and he got together with them... What’s the age of consent in the afterlife? How does it interact with the One Law?

“Not as fun as what I’m thinking of.”

“Oh, let her spend her time as she wants,” Siew Yan said in my defense. “But let’s go over these spells, some of them aren’t obvious to me. What’s a pocket dimension?”

“Hey, that’s right!” I snapped my fingers. “If it even works, I’ve got some books of magic in there. Basically Michael gave me some books on time magic and I put them into a space only I can access. Let’s hope I can get them out. Let’s further hope I don’t have to invoke *time* magic while we’re down here. There’s warnings all over that stuff.”

“Time magic, huh?” Stefan asked shrewdly. “Is that what the save point thing is all about? There’s more spells like that?”

“Yes, it’s what you think. But it’s a high level spell, I don’t want to push it given how little magic is around here. I don’t know how long the well will last.” *But maybe doing it once, now at the start, can save us later? But I would hate to have to relive say two hours if it takes that long for us to mess this up. But then couldn’t we just skip those two hours and go directly to whatever caused the issue?*

“That’s fair.”

“Don’t go telling anyone time magic exists, by the way. Most with water affinity don’t even know. Michael wasn’t even going to tell us about it, but wanted a backup when we went to rescue you, Ramesh. I’m not sure who I’m sharing it with at the moment. I need to be able to trust them with it.”

“Okay,” they all agreed.

“What’s this aura all about?” Ramesh asked.

I colored. “Ah, that was just something I was fooling around with. It basically creates an energy field around me that, uh, looks cool. I guess it’s water type and would destroy things if I punched them with it going? I never did that, of course.”

“I need to get that spell!” Stefan announced. “I guess I do need to spend more time in the library. Denice, you’re 20% cooler than I thought, aren’t you?”

“Clearly! So what’s giant’s soul?” I asked, changing the subject.

“That’s one of mine,” Stefan said proudly. “It makes you stronger and lets you lift more but doesn’t change your size. I use it in construction because I’m smaller than anybody and want it to stay that way.”

“I see. You learned a spell to manipulate people’s emotions?”

“I only use it with consent,” he assured us. “Sometimes people get sad, and I help them feel better.”

“I see.”

“What’s sensing spirits?” Siew Yan asked.

“It gives me an extra sense, sort of?” Ramesh answered. “Using it I can tell how energetic someone is. I walked around with it once, Stefan here actually has the most inner power of anyone in Midveil at the moment.”

“I always was active as a child,” Stefan admitted. “Most kids stop running around like crazy at a certain point but I never did. I was on so many sports teams. Ah, good times.”

“And that gravity spell?” I asked.

“Just what it sounds like. I can manipulate gravity, not as good as a wood nature’s telekinesis spell mind you. But again used in construction to help lift things into place it’s ideal. Basically a zero g spell but on a planet. Actually I would usually work with a wood user because it made their job easier, lifting something in zero gravity instead of one gravity.”

Right, all the magic we learned apart from anything we just wanted to fool around with was geared towards helping us make things back home. Metal manipulation to make metal things, earth moving to make foundations or move bricks around, that sort of thing. At least I did pick up the easiest divination spell, even if it only gives yes/no answers. But of course I’m the most handicapped if you will because I will have a limited number of spells I can perform. I have the most need for magic and can do the least of it. Neat! “So does any of this help us?”

“Can you change us with illusion?” Stefan asked. “So we can walk down the street without a cop stopping us to ask what nursing home we just escaped from?”

“That’s a good place to start,” I decided. “Here, hold this.” I handed the necklace to Siew Yan and concentrated. Almost at once as I started making the gestures for the magic I noticed something was

different. Energy started building around my hands, the same type as I felt from the necklace, but I hadn't gathered nearly enough as I completed the spell. Ramesh now looked like he was wearing normal clothes, but Stefan was unchanged.

"Well, you got it half right," Ramesh decided, looking himself over.

"There's too little magic here, all right," I told him. "I'm going to have to get you both separately. A pain, to try and concentrate on two spells at once, but I would rather do that and have more magic to draw on in an emergency."

"Better make sure you know how to use this before it gets that bad though," Siew Yan told me as I started the second casting. I nodded, but got the second spell off.

"That worked."

"Actually..." Ramesh said, looking pensive. He brought his hands up and did a spell. "Seemed perfectly normal to me." He looked around. "Yup, Stefan, as old as he is, still has the most 'ki' or whatever you want to call it. The spellbook said different cultures call it different things."

"So do we risk casting a question spell or two?" Siew Yan asked, handing me the necklace back. "Or do we come up with some other plan?"

"Let's talk about possible plans," Stefan decided. "Like, if this was a video game, what would I do? Answer, follow the waypoint." He looked around. "No such luck. Look for the foreboding building sure to house the boss? Again, probably not going to happen."

"Back in reality," Ramesh cut in, "one possibility is simply to try drawing them out. Choose this point we appeared in as the center and walk the streets. We pass by every building, the celestials are sure to notice the orb and come to investigate. After all, they might like more access to magic when they're here."

"Risky," I decided. "We wouldn't really see them coming, they would look like people until they were right on top of us. I don't want to get into a brawl on a city street." *Plus they could just run the other way, because the only reason something like that would be here was to look for them. Why risk capture?*

"Agreed."

"Hey Ramesh, does your spell distinguish between celestial energy and human energy?"

"It does, actually. Yeah, if I had that spell going I could probably tell."

"Could you use your spell to augment someone's skill to make him better at that? Maybe boost the range or something?" Siew Yan asked.

I shook my head. "Can't use magic to boost magic skills. I tried, didn't work. Some kind of feedback loop, I had to drop it."

"Too bad. What's the range on it?"

"Couple of meters at best."

"So if they're above the second floor in a building..."

"Yeah, not going to be able to tell. Sorry."

"We could call them out!" Stefan realized. "Illusion magic. Make an illusion in the center of town. Something huge, a kaiju like monster. Every human flees the scene while it's speaking gibberish, but you're actually calling the celestials out to give themselves up. They could understand it."

"What's to just keep them from running home after that?" Siew Yan asked. "We wouldn't know, and be stuck here now looking for celestials no longer causing problems."

"Er, nothing? I guess."

"Exactly."

"So what's your great idea to capture them?"

"Uh... similar but without so much panic in the streets. Use illusion to put a message in the sky. Like door malfunction, don't use remote could explode, must discuss immediately. And a big arrow pointing to the top of a building. Make them come to us."

"Hey, now that's not half bad!" I praised. "That's actually the best we've come up with so far."

“Thanks.”

We sat and finished our coffee but didn't come up with anything better. I could ask a hundred question spells and maybe narrow down where they were if I had a map, but making them come to us seemed the best way to go. We headed out into the city. I was pretty sure it was New York, there were plenty of high buildings we could choose from, so we did. Heading around back of one and hoping no one was looking in our direction we worked to get to the top of it. Ramesh negated gravity above us and Siew Yan helped control our accent, bringing a large dumpster with her.

“If it gets nasty, I want something to throw,” she explained. Once high above the city I dropped the illusion on Stefan and Ramesh and turned my attention to the sky. Another spell later and we had our glowing message hanging there, and we settled down to wait.

I just hope they don't have cell phones or some other way they've agreed to be contacted in the event something goes wrong. But they couldn't have been here long enough for that, right? Good Place would have come as soon as they discovered the rogue portal. I guess we'll just have to hope for the best. And while I see this as “English” and can understand it, I just hope it's actually a different character set altogether and looks like gibberish to those on the ground. We'll have enough panic lighting the sky up like this without people wondering which door they use next is going to explode.

We waited about three hours before the group teleported up to the top of the building with us, looking around to try and find us. Some helicopters had been by, making us hide as best we could but Siew Yan and Ramesh had basically used magic to wield the door that opened to the roof closed so while we heard pounding on it, Siew Yan's telekinesis magic and their previous efforts kept anyone from getting up there. Some people were looking at us from other buildings, nothing we could do about that. They were four regular looking people, all men dressed in modern enough clothes to not be looked at twice. “Get rid of that thing, what are you, nuts?” called one when they saw us. “We're supposed to be keeping a low- hang on. You're humans.”

“Can't be humans,” said the one next to him. “They've got magic.”

“Well they aren't our kind. Hey, humans, come over here!”

“Let's go,” I told the others. “Let me do the talking.” *I have a plan. Michael probably won't like it, but they would probably go along with it. Best if we just keep it simple though and make them deal with me.*

“Of course,” the others muttered. We stepped closer to them.

“Souls,” breathed the third. “Wait, did Good Place send souls *back* to this plane? Those goody-goodies? I can't believe it. How many forms did they make you fill out for that little privilege?”

“None, we were in a hurry,” I told them. “You're the four celestials that came through the unsanctioned door?”

“Obviously,” said the first one. “They really just let you come here after us?”

“They seemed to think you could cause some trouble.”

They snickered. “Got that much right. So, you're here to take us back then? Think you can manage it?”

“Actually, I've came here to bargain. I want your door.” Behind me the other three gasped. *Yeah, I figured that would be your reaction. That's why I didn't tell you.* “Or at least the plans on how to build our own.”

“Wicked little souls, you're worse than us, aren't you? Want to come back to life? Oh, Good Place won't like that. Hell, I'm inclined to say yes just because of how ballsy you demanded it. Really teach those Good Place people a lesson. Maybe Midveil isn't so bad, if it's got people like you in it.”

“Never you mind what I want it for,” I told them. “The deal is, you go back, we take your door, we tell Good Place the problem is solved and your names stay out of it.”

“You don't even know our names!”

“Ah, but I could find out, now that I've seen you. Divination magic.”

The one looked back at the others who gave a curt nod. They didn't know I didn't know that spell, and it could probably work any time, asking the magic the identity of each of the celestials I saw on the rooftop one by one.

"Or we could just disintegrate you right now. Wonder what would happen to your essence if we did that!"

"We're not afraid of Good Place anyway," said another. "What are they going to do? Come to our realm and demand we hand ourselves over? Not likely."

I shrugged. "Still, word gets around. You want to be laughed at by your fellow celestials for getting caught in our trap? Forever is a long time to live something down."

"Hummm..."

"Why did you do all this, anyway?"

"We're bored! With so many people off limits there aren't enough souls to torture to go around now. So we figured we would come here, take our frustrations out on the living."

"Of course, I should have guessed." *Don't do anything constructive, like clearing areas for them to live while they wait or just torture more one on one instead of in groups like they're used to. Build a portal to the living world and come here. Sure, that's logical.* "So, what's it going to be?"

"I like your style, don't get me wrong. But I think we're going to stay here. Get them!"

Chapter 21

Humans vs. Celestials

When: A second later

Where: Rooftop

Now I had a problem. The four celestials probably knew lots of torture magic, perhaps even spells to destroy us outright like they had said. So while I had been expecting an attack what exactly was I supposed to do about it? I had no water I could throw at them while up here on this roof, nor was I trained in any kind of hand to hand combat style. Still, I knew some people who were, but Siew Yan had her dumpster, a far better attack to use than hitting someone. Stefan would no doubt throw fire at them, leaving Ramesh. Not much earth or stone to throw at them up here either. But his hybrid form did have claws and he might rush them, so I chose to put my elemental aura on him. I stepped back away from them and brought my hands up, starting to make the seals.

“Oh no you don’t!” said the celestial furthest to the right, bringing their own hands up.

The one right next to them also started casting something, while behind me Ramesh gave a battle cry and transformed, becoming bestial.

“What?” the celestials all exclaimed as the dumpster next to Siew Yan shot forward towards the two on the left. Both put some effort into getting out of the way but only one managed it, getting slammed into the thing and shooting backwards.

“Christopher!” screamed the one.

“Blah!” he gargled back.

Stefan gestured, and the celestial on the far right flinched back as fire erupted around them. It looked like he was still casting though.

The celestial that had dodged out of the way ran to his friend, ducking behind the dumpster and out of sight.

Ramesh shot forward, faster than anything I had ever seen, but not so fast my magic couldn’t catch him. I finished it up, making sure to draw magic from the well as I did so, and a water aura sprang up around him. He struck out with both hands, claws outstretched. Both sprang away from him though, unharmed.

Siew Yan started gearing up for another spell, while the one celestial casting something pointed at me. I felt magic swirling around me and willed it away, because that’s just a thing you can do with magic, did you know that? It’s true. Just think really hard about it and you can make a spell not take hold in the split second it hits you. Try it some time. I managed it, the spell seemed not to take and the celestial swore.

Then Siew Yan finished her spell, and a bolt of lightning shot out of her hand towards the celestial still trying to cast his initial spell. He tried to jump aside which is a thing you can do when lightning is about to hit you. Try it some time. He managed it too, and the bolt went wide.

Stefan tried the fire again, why change a winning strategy? The same celestial got hit with it, he was finishing up his spell. “Kill her!” he shouted. My eyes went wide with fear. Somehow he had turned Ramesh against me, who was now advancing on *me* instead of the celestials. He looked even more bestial now, drool dripping from his open mouth, sharp teeth glistening in the sunlight. He was bigger, hunched over, and only inches away from me. I screamed and started backing away.

What can I do? I can’t hurt Ramesh, and I don’t have any combat skills anyway! I have to get away. Far away. Teleport? Can’t allow him to hurt the others. Have to do something.

So I did. I fell over, my feet simply whooshing out from under me. I tried to scramble backwards but I couldn’t find any purchase, like friction had simply gone away from the area. I was too panicked to care about the meant, simply kept trying to get away from the nightmarish Ramesh before he got to me.

“Ha, nice one,” said one of the celestials. “Now let’s have some real fun.” He started casting.

Suddenly, the figure of Ramesh vanished, and I saw he was standing over the celestial that had cast the spell on me. Blood dripped from his claws, and the celestial was down, his disguise torn at the chest to reveal some kind of swirling energy beneath it.

“Nice one, Ramesh,” Stefan cheered, beginning his “create fire” spell again by the looks of it. I still couldn’t stand up but that oppressive fear I had been feeling was completely gone. One celestial was peeking out from behind the dumpster while the other was casting something. Still, they wanted to play fear games? We could play fear games. I started casting an illusion.

The celestial stopped casting and had a thorned whip in his hand, he took a step back to get a good bead on Ramesh. He was so focused on that he didn’t see the lighting bolt coming for him from Siew Yan, so both electricity and fire hit him in the body. He cried out but was still up, holding the whip.

“Wait, maybe we should talk about this?” the celestial huddling behind the dumpster called out.

“Too late for that!” I told him, finishing my spell. Both saw Ramesh grow in size, wings sprouting from his back as he roared, fire shooting out of his mouth as he became even more demonic looking.

“Impossible!” said the celestial with the whip. “That can’t be!”

You’re right, it can’t. But looks like you believe it anyway.

Ramesh took a swipe at him, I couldn’t disguise that but his timing was messed up. He was looking up at the giant figure rather than where he actually was, and he too went down in a heap.

“I surrender!” screamed the one that was left, holding his hands high and stepping out from the dumpster. “I won’t cast anything, don’t hurt me!”

I found I could get up again, and stalked over to him. Ramesh looked menacing beside me. “You surrender?”

“That’s right, yes, yes, don’t hurt me. How can a couple of humans best four celestials? Even with most of our powers sealed...”

“Easy,” I told him. “We only know basic spells, that are fairly quick to cast. You guys went for complex ones that took twice as long. Our spells went off first, we won. Now, who has the door key?” *It also seems Ramesh is pretty strong in that form, and fast, and with his claws and my water magic, your disguises didn’t stand a chance. I guess you are basically human when you’re through the door. Good to know.*

“I do.”

“That’s a nice coincidence. Hand it over.”

“Of course, anything you want!”

“Uh, are they dead?” Siew Yan asked.

“You can’t kill a celestial, no matter how hard you tried,” he sneered at her. I had the illusion roar at him again and he cowered back. “I mean, no, no, their disguises are just disabled. They can’t move around in them until they’re repaired.”

“Fine.” I took the button from him and pressed it. A red looking shimmer appeared in the space I pointed at, and I nodded. Handing our button to Siew Yan I told her “Get these others back through our door. See if Good Place wants to patch them up or put them on trial for all this. Ramesh, you’re with me.”

“Right,” he said.

“Stefan, help Siew Yan,” I told him.

“Are you really going to-”

“Not a word about what I’m doing to Michael,” I told him. “Janet may know everything that happens here but we’re not going to be here. I’ll join up with you shortly. Leave our door open until I get back.”

“You got it,” Siew Yan told me. She started gesturing to pick up the “corpses” after activating the door back to the afterlife.

“As for you, you’re going to tell anyone through that door to stand down and leave. Can it be moved?”

“I guess. There’s a lot of pieces though.”

“That’s fine. Come on Ramesh.” I dropped the illusion so he was back to “normal” but he didn’t transform again.

“What are you?” the celestial asked. “I feel...”

“Never you mind,” he growled. “Move.”

“Okay, okay.” We passed through the portal and there were two more celestials there, monitoring the equipment. The celestial told them it was over, the three had been caught. I promised if they left now, their names would not be mentioned, and they scurried out of there. The jig, as they say, was up. They probably could have squashed me like a bug but I was back in the afterlife now, and other celestials from Good Place were involved. I had no idea the politics of the situation but they did seem eager to not have their names mentioned. ‘Killing’ me would only delay their punishment for so long. I looked the place over. It was a fairly typical room and had what looked like computers hooked up to a hastily constructed metal archway. Wires were everywhere.

“What makes it work?” I asked.

“Magic, mostly.”

“But these are computers,” I protested.

“Those are run by the generator there, which runs on magic. The computers control various aspects of the gateway modulated by certain control structures embedded in the archway.”

“Nice!” I smiled. “Going to have to get me more of those. Okay, get it shut down, we don’t have a lot of time here.” *I don’t want to teleport an active gate to the land of the living. I can’t even imagine what could happen. Nothing? I hope so but on the other hand, I’m not chancing it.*

We watched as the celestial turned everything off, then moved all the various bits around the archway. I had been thinking furiously where to put the thing, and for the moment I had it. *Under the warehouse. No one goes into the tunnels yet because there’s nothing at the end of them but another warehouse like you just left. But with no people there to greet you. So that should be safe for a minute or two. It’s big enough too.* “Once I get it somewhere I can just turn it back on, right?”

“You aren’t holding me hostage to work it for you?” asked the celestial.

“We’re going past the gate,” I told him. “I’m not leaving it here in Bad Place for you to just destroy or copy or use again behind our back. Unless you want to hit that barrier between our realms on the way over, that’s not an option.”

“No thank you! Yeah, if you just boot it up it’ll work like it did. But it’s a prototype, it’s pretty finicky you don’t want to mess around with it.”

“I’ll figure it out. I’ve got lots of time and desire to make it work. Thanks for your cooperation, by the way.”

I envisioned where I wanted to go and started making the hand gestures. He backed off, leaving me alone with Ramesh. We vanished, all the equipment coming with me and neatly fitting into the tunnel. I started to separate everything again so we could get it back up and running. “Okay, let’s get it turned on again,” I told Ramesh, who was settling back into him totally human form. “We need to get back.”

“You really stole their gateway,” he said, sounding a bit shocked and impressed.

“Yeah, I really did,” I agreed. “How many months have we been here? And not a word that there’s a way to actually leave the afterlife from Michael? Oh sure, we might have been tempted but it’s the principal of the thing. What else isn’t he telling us? I want options.”

“No, I hear you. Let’s get the auxiliary units as far away from the doorway as possible. They had them spread out, there may be a reason for it.”

“Right.”

We activated the portal and stepped through, and as I hoped it simply defaulted to the last place the door was opened from, so we were back in the city again, high above the streets. Siew Yan was there and the place was cleaned up. I nodded my approval and hit the button to turn the rogue doorway off, and it vanished. I stuck the key in my pocket and suppressed a grin.

“Ah, there you are, wasn’t sure how much longer I could stall them,” she told me.

“Yup, no problem, time to- wait.” I thought struck me. “One second.” *They said they came here to torture people. Were they in the middle of that when we showed up? More importantly, are there victims that need our help somewhere in the city?* I raised my hands and cast my divination spell, getting back a yes answer. “Crap.” I plunged through the blue gateway and came face to face with Michael again.

“Everything okay there, Denice?” he asked.

“No, it’s not,” I told him. “Those fo- three were torturing people and I’ve just asked my magic if they’re still in trouble. They are. We need to help them.”

“Do we though?” he asked.

“I’m not leaving them. If they’re tied up someplace helpless they could die. I don’t want to confront them *here in the afterlife* as to why I didn’t go and help them when I could.”

“What do you suggest?”

“I have no idea. I’ll go back and get a better divination spell, maybe I can track them down that way.”

“Wait,” Janet told me. “Here.” She handed me a sword, of all things.

“Little late for that, and besides, I want to heal these people not stab them.” *You’re just breaking the rules left and right today aren’t you little thread? Good on you!*

She shook her head. “It’ll guide you to what you want to find. Go back and concentrate on finding the victims. It should lead you right to them.”

“A sword?”

“Yes, a sword. It’s from a set of twelve, don’t lose it.”

“Didn’t plan on it. Come on Stefan. Michael, we’ll be back soon.”

“Very well, I suppose you’ve been back there’s no harm in finishing this up.”

“Good answer.” I plunged back through the doorway, followed by Stefan.

As good as her word, the sword Janet had given me, with an arrow on the hilt in white, vibrated when I pointed it in a certain direction. Clearly magic, I could feel the energy in it now, of a different type than in the well. *She just created a powerful magic item just like that. I mean I know she claims she can create anything, but refuses to, so it’s nice to know she’s telling the truth about her abilities.* I cast an illusion spell over it, making it look like a dog was simply walking before me, and once we teleported back to the ground we set off, following the blade. We didn’t have too far to go before we came to the Museum of the Moving Image. A rather strange place, I thought, but the sword (i.e. dog) pointed right to it. The building seemed closed though. Several people were standing outside looking impatient but I had no idea when the place opened because I couldn’t read the sign. We headed around the corner, there was a wall between the building and the next one, and several cars were parked there. The blade was only vibrating when I pointed back at the main building.

“Grab onto me,” Ramesh told us, as we were standing there looking at the wall. He cast a spell and nodded, then walked through it.

“Oh, that’s what phase means,” Stefan announced. He followed, and we soon followed him. We remained phased, easily passing through the wall of the building from the back, and followed the blade downstairs through the museum. *Huh, there’s Kermit. Hi, Kermit!*

Down in the lower level we found about a dozen people, tied up in various ways and looking worse for wear. Some were conscious, others were not, all showed signs of trauma including cuts, bruises, burns, and worse. Siew Yan started healing them, I figured *well why not, I have a sword don’t I?* and started cutting their bonds. The sword tore through even what looked like braided metal cable with ease, meaning this sword must be the sharpest thing in existence. Surprised me the first time, so I was super careful with it from then on, and soon all were free. Most were out of it, but some were gibbering at us. No doubt asking what was going on, that sort of thing, but of course we couldn’t exactly answer

now could we? But as we made no move towards them and those with it and up saw their wounds being healed before their eyes, they must have decided we were there to help. With everyone untied and various magic used (giant's soul, telekinesis) we easily hauled those that were still unconscious up to the main level. We made them comfortable while one person ran off, hopefully to call a hospital to get several emergency vehicles there. Meanwhile I asked my magic if there were more locations with people in trouble from the celestials we had taken out, got a no, so Ramesh put the spell on us again and we ghosted through the walls. Better for them to see that and have a ghost story to tell than opening a door into the afterlife and going through right in front of their faces and have them think it was aliens that rescued them. *Still, what story are they going to tell about all this? At least they'll be alive to tell it.*

Back outside we were behind the wall again but I headed for the outside. The others ran to catch up.

"What are you doing?" Ramesh asked. "Shouldn't we be going back? Are there more victims?"

"Nope," I told him. "But I've still got my purse, and I have some money. There's a few things I want to pick up as we're here. Who knows if we'll ever get the chance again?" *We aren't turning that other door on again until we have gone over and over it, and hopefully understand the principals behind it. Perhaps even worked out the "bugs" that one mentioned. That guardian will be alerted, just like he was this time, so it'll have to be a real emergency that sends us back here. Unless we can get rid of the telltale "ripple" in the original door so we can use it without detection, that is.*

When we did go back into the afterlife it was with a bag full of things. Mostly solar powered calculators, so we didn't have to keep doing basic math by hand. Also some wind up clocks and wristwatches I had found at a used item shop the sword led me to. I *hated* not knowing what freaking time it was! Of course if time wasn't a 24 hour cycle they would be sort of useless but at least then we would know how "hours" there compared to hours here. Anything more complex than that would have to wait, and we would probably have to steal it to boot as that was all the money I had, but what was it going to do? Lose me points? I didn't think so. But even if Michael asked what was in the bag he would probably allow it, I wasn't sneaking back cocaine or anything.

We got back to an anxious Michael, talking about frogs, of all things, with the guard. At least, that's what I thought he was saying when we came back through.

"Finally," said the guard as I handed the key back. "I don't like this out of my sight."

"I can accept that," I told him.

"I told you they were shopping," Janet told Michael. "Nothing we can't allow them to take back."

"Fine," he reluctantly agreed. "But consider that stuff your reward."

Oh, I got my reward. It's sitting back at the warehouse, thank you so very much. "No, I'll consider the punishment of those celestials my reward," I told him. "How are they, anyway?"

"Once back here they were fine," he told us. "They're getting patched up. We don't know what we're going to do with them. You destroyed the portal they were using? Janet said you went through it."

"That's up to you. Just so long as I get to watch. And yes, they can't use it anymore. Had to get a little creative but it's not a concern. Bad Place no longer has a portal to travel to the pre-afterlife with. Here's your sword back." *Notice I didn't lie, saying I destroyed it. A fine point, but if he doesn't ask I'm not going to volunteer that information.*

"Thanks." Janet took it and made it vanish. "Was it bad? I mean I already know," Janet assured me. "But the polite thing to do is ask so that you can tell me about it."

I told them about it on the way back by train. All trying to distract myself from grinning, I had a working portal back to Earth, now to tease out its secrets and maybe use it for good instead of evil. I had some ideas how it could be used, I just hoped they panned out. The first order of business was to

hide it better, I figured just putting it in the next warehouse over would be fine for now. *Maybe gravity magic and TK can whisk it down the corridor and put it into place. Then it'll be time to tear it apart!*

Chapter 22

Bad Place could become a Slightly Less Bad Place?

When: The next day

Where: Lower level of the warehouse

I distributed the calculators, pleased to discover they worked in the “light” of the afterlife, to those that could use them. I put the small clocks in various locations so they could be seen easily, such as when just entering the warehouse or by the front desk of the library. Everyone agreed to check them and keep them wound but I actually assigned someone to go around and check them every day because as soon as “everybody” was going to do something “nobody” would do it. (for the most part) The calculators were the bigger hit though, people were getting tired of trying to do math in their heads when trying to figure out how many bricks to bring for a factory wall and such.

We were telling the story about returning to life when Michael came in, looking serious.

“You haven’t changed your mind about the calculators, have you?” I asked him. *Please don’t say you found the gateway. It would be just my luck you would go down there for some bizarre reason or felt it with some weird celestial sense I don’t know about or Janet told you because she knew it somehow or...*

“What? Calculators? You can have all the calculators you want. I’m here about the three celestials you caught on Earth.”

“They didn’t escape, did they?” *Whew.*

“Escape? No. But come to think of it that would make our lives a lot easier. I’m here because we have no idea what to do with them. Oddly, celestial society, if it can be called that, doesn’t have a lot of rules in place. Especially for illegally constructed gateways to the living world. We figured the first one was a fluke and didn’t bother to create any laws banning them. Honestly we didn’t think any but the main gateway *could* exist. But now we know differently. They can be built, have been built, and the inhabitants of Earth harmed by celestials. Clearly there needs to be some kind of punishment but we can’t agree on what. The Good Place celestials want to just forgive them, while the Bad Place celestials want to torture them. More for getting caught and making them all look bad than for the actual deed, but there you are.”

Torture, of course. The whole only having a hammer situation.

“Then it was suggested we take a page from your lawbook, which I take it still only has the one page?”

I nodded.

“So, you figure it out.”

“What?”

“We can’t exactly go back to Earth and ask them what punishment they would want for these three. You’re the closest to human souls we have, having never been tortured and thus, still have your faculties. And you’re the leader so whatever you want done with them, that’s what it’ll be. Punishment by proxy, but it’s all we can offer you by way of restitution. Until the original humans all die, but making them wait around in a cell until that happens doesn’t seem right either.”

“I want them as my butlers!” someone in the crowd shouted.

“We’re not having them as butlers,” I shouted back, exasperated. “Please be serious. Stefan, was that you?”

“No! I mean, no,” said a voice trying to sound deeper.

“Uh huh.” I sighed. “Where are they?”

“Bad Place. Good Place doesn’t have a lot of holding cells.”

“Really? Imagine that. Fine, let’s go see what they have to say for themselves. Stefan, you seem keen on this, you can come too.”

“Do I have to?”

“You do now!”

“Fine. Was going to ask if I could go anyway! So there.”

“Of course you were.”

I was joined by Ramesh and Siew Yan and we boarded the train bound for Bad Place. *Ugh, really wanted to hide that machine before I left, but hopefully this won't take long? And there's no reason to go down there. Please, no one, go down there. It's bad enough these three know-*

“What are you thinking about?” asked Janet. “Your face is all scrunched up.”

Not an illegal portal back to the living world! That's for sure! “Just how strange this situation is. A human soul passing judgment on a celestial? Don't you have a court? I've heard about this judge so I assume you do.”

“No one likes disturbing the judge, and we only have the one. She likes... extreme solutions.”

“Like The Button.”

“Exactly like that. If we can keep her out- I mean if we can not bother her with this, I think everyone will be happier.”

“How do we know the whole button thing wasn't an act, and she just doesn't like doing her job and plays up situations in the hope you'll think exactly what you're thinking and leave her alone?”

“In that case, mission accomplished I guess?”

I laughed.

“Oh, I made a funny? I could never get the hang of human humor, maybe I'm getting it a little.”

“Don't try to force it, you'll only make it worse.” *Please don't start telling me knock-knock jokes. I know you know every one in existence.* “And it's tough. Torturing human souls was all they knew for thousands of years. It's been less than a year, can I really blame celestial beings for being slow to adapt? Humans are slow to adapt, and that's our specialty.” *After racism, I mean.* “Computers have been around forty years or more now in their current state, but some people are still clueless about them. That's just one example. It's all they know. Granted they really went out of their way...” *It's like they're addicted to it. They were looking for their “fix.” You don't punish an addict, you get them clean and give them coping mechanisms so they can manage the temptation to use. How can I do this here? In this case I've got a whole species of addicts to deal with, not just these three. They are just the first to be caught. The more souls leave, the more of a problem it's going to be for them.*

“I'm sure you'll come up with something fair.”

“I hope so.”

Leaving the station we saw conditions hadn't improved since the last time we had been here. Souls still stood, sat, leaned, or lay anywhere they could. They hardly glanced at us coming out of the building, and we again got the full effect of the traffic noise and bad smells the place was generating.

“Why did I agree to come back here?” Siew Yan asked rhetorically.

“To keep me safe,” I told her. “And I'm grateful, you didn't have to come but I appreciate that you did.”

“Oh, no big deal.”

“The prison is several miles away from the station,” Michael told us, pointing. “Maybe Janet can make some kind of flying car if you don't want to walk?”

“Didn't you come from there?” I asked. “Just teleport us over there!”

“Magic, right. Always forget about that.” He gestured, and we vanished. The guards waved us in and after a moment of passing through security doors and such we stood before the three who had caused us trouble. They looked fine, their human forms completely restored.

“This is your plan, Michael?” said one, gesturing to us. “Human souls? Come on, make a decision already!”

"It's not for me to decide," he told him. "You hurt humans, so humans get to determine your sentence."

"That's crazy! They're nothing. I've been alive a million years, you think I want to be talked down to by a stupid ape? I'd rather be retired, at least that's a dignified end for a celestial."

Retired? No idea what that means. "No remorse then, not sure what I was expecting," I told him.

"Of course not. We have one job to do. Torture you people. If you aren't coming here fast enough then we'll just have to find other places to do our job."

"Just the way it is, huh? The old status quo. That's how it's always been, and what not."

"That's right. It's nothing personal."

"Fine. Then that's your punishment." *I was going to offer them community service or something but they're annoying me. A better soul would forgive them, but me? I'm only human.*

"What?"

"You want to torture human souls? Great. Hope you really, really get your kicks from it. That's all you're going to do from now on. That. And nothing else. Ever. Janet, can chains be made that they can't break with magic?"

"Not really," she admitted. "But tough enough they would be caught before they got them off."

"Fine. They will be assigned a small booth and be chained there. No communication with them by other celestials is permitted. A single human soul will be brought to them. They may perform the one torture they have chosen for the standard length of time that torture typically takes. That human soul will be taken away. Another soul will be brought. If another is not available, they will simply wait. They will never see the outside of their cubical again. They will never speak to anyone of their own kind again. They will simply perform their one selected torture, over and over, until the end of time or until there are no more human souls to torture." *I can see a day, in the very, very distant future, where we can finally do away with this place. Where people don't go negative in their lives because they actually see more than what's in front of their noses. That portal we had, that could be the start. But how to do it? Carefully, but it could be done.* "That's their punishment, giving them exactly what they have just told me they want."

"Uh..." they all said, seemingly not sure if I had just threatened them with a good time or that eternity doing only one thing and not ever seeing anyone ever again wasn't what they had in mind.

"Perhaps, if I remember, in a million years or so I'll stop by, see how you are all doing. If I remember. Does that satisfy, Michael?"

"You've pronounced justice, I'll make sure it gets done."

"Fine. I no longer wish to look at these so called 'celestials' because they are going to be mindless automatons for all eternity, while I change, and learn, and grow. They are beneath me." I spun on my heel as they cried out and tried slinging magic at me or rattling the bars or whatever. I didn't care to look. I figured the cell was proof against such things how would they still be in there otherwise? Their dedication to fairness? No. I left without another word.

"Wow, that was, that was something," Michael told me as we left. I was seething. Celestials, above us? How dare they? They *chose* to emulate us, to walk around in human form, and even reality itself forced them into becoming us if they went to the living realm. They may have been "alive" longer, but there was work to be done here. A lot of work. And they were off building portals to Earth and torturing people? Because they were *bored*? Because they couldn't think for themselves that maybe they could do something else in the meantime? It had to stop. But I couldn't just order them to stop, that would not go down well. I had to give them something else to do. I knew what, but not how.

"I simply gave them what they wanted. Is there any way to broadcast a message to all the celestials in Bad Place? I want to make a few things clear to them."

"Yeah, sure, I guess. We can record a message for broadcast, unless you want to do it live?"

"No, that's fine. Let me type something up and record it."

“We can head to my old building, my office should still be there.” We teleported there and I got to work. Some time later I was seated in front of a desk, a teleprompter scrolling my message so I could read it into the camera.

“Greeting, celestials of The Bad Place. I am Denice Aberdine, recently brought to Midveil as part of the treaty between Bad and Good places about what to do with the points system now that it no longer serves as it did. I realize this has disrupted your way of life. I sympathize. Looking around at Bad Place you have truly built a testament to human suffering that not only combines the worst we’ve inflicted upon ourselves, but adds new and inventive tortures besides. Your dedication to furthering that craft is to be commended, and you have done so with zeal and dedication for thousands of human years. Even now, those human souls still available for torture are fought over like a dragon’s treasure, as you seek to fulfill the purpose you have all been given. I know your bosses don’t say this often enough but I will gladly say it from the heart: Well done. While you do not use the word ‘demon’ I have no qualms about bestowing that title upon each and every one of you. You *are* demons. In every sense of the word. You have, I am sure, exceeded even the creator’s plans for this place in numerous ways.”

I paused, and stood, and leaned over. “Those days are over. Just recently I pronounced sentence on three demons that actually *went to Earth* to try and find more souls to torture. I went there after them and dragged them back here, broken and pleading for *my* mercy.” *I really didn’t do much of the work, admittedly, I need to learn more attack magic but believe me I’m going to.* “I invite you to inquire as to their fate later, but know this. The days of endless torturing of souls is done. Now and forever.” I sat down again. “You have a new purpose. Remake The Bad Place. A hundred thousand years of humans living and dying has swelled our ranks here, and migrating them away from this place will take time. Your task is to get them ready. That means unlocking the doors to the buildings I see and letting them take residence there. Cleaning up the air. Quieting the horns and the sirens. Yes, not everywhere will need this treatment. There will still be souls that need to be punished for many years to come. They will need somewhere to stay. Separate those from the others so it’s easier to find them. Your task now, for the majority, is to transform this place into The Waiting Place, rather than The Bad Place. Figure out some system if rotation if you must, so everyone gets a chance to torture souls, but know that if you continue as if everything is the same you will be disappointed.

“Yes, this is a human soul saying this. Yes, compared to you I am currently small. Weak. Helpless. But I am also eternal. I will study magic, I will *create* new spells if I must to get my point across to you. Let us work together to give everyone a place in what *you have already agreed must be done.* This isn’t just me talking. *You* agreed to the Midveil plan. *You* allowed us to exist there. Now you have to own that decision. Find new work. Explore a new passion. Help us in Midveil, you will be accepted if you come to us and ask what use you can be put to. You have many options. Whatever it is, decide quickly. Because we will defend Earth and ourselves if you do not. I offer my hand in friendship.” I raised it, reaching for the camera before me. “I think we can move forward, together, and reach new heights none of us anticipated. Will you come with me? Will you move forward, or will you remain stuck in the past? I invite each and every one of you to ponder that question and find your own answer.

“That is all I had to say. Thank you for watching to the end.” *Hit like and subscribe!* “I’ll be looking forward to your answer.” I put my hand down and held it a beat, then nodded. The red light winked off. “Okay, let me watch it and if it’s okay, broadcast it.”

“You’re declaring war on us?” Michael asked.

“Are you still ‘us,’ Michael?” I asked sweetly. “Last I looked, you had a very nice home in Midveil. You’re basically an honorary human soul now. I’m declaring war on ‘them’ if you can even call it that. I’m simply reminding them things have changed. A heavy handed message, perhaps, but how else do you get through to beings a million years old and not ready for change? I just hope there’s enough types like the ones already coming to help us to keep the pot from boiling over, so to speak. We

would need a thousand years of studying magic before I was even comfortable saying we could defend ourselves, much less win a war against celestials.” *Could even celestials withstand a thousand spells cast all at once? I hope not, and soon we’ll have those numbers. I do have to hope Good Place would come to our aid, but I can’t count on it.* “But it had to be done. They can’t keep building portals to the living realm, or worse torturing people that no longer deserve it. I had to set the tone now, early, that human souls and more importantly human *lives* are off limits. We can best them on Earth, they know that now, word will get around as to why those three are living in a cell for all eternity. Let’s hope that shows we mean business, even if we can’t exactly back it up just yet.” *I intend to make sure that one day, we can.*

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Believe me Michael, so do I.

When we got back I claimed to need a break and headed to my room to “be alone.” But in reality, once I was away from Micheal and Janet I used my magic to talk to Rameh and Siew Yan, and had them meet me in the basement level of the warehouse. I suggested using gravity magic to haul the equipment to the next nearest one but both looked at me like I had gone nuts.

“You teleported it here, right?” Siew Yan asked. “Just do the same to take it there.”

“But I’ve never been there!” I protested.

“So let’s use magic to fly there, then come back here and make the switch. Much safer than the magic failing and the stuff smashing into the floor.”

I stared at them for a moment. “Or we could do it that way.”

“Honestly, Denice,” Ramesh said with a shake of his head. “Why do you always have to do things the hard way?”

So we did just that. I also “spoke” with Stefan, to gather up some “tech bros” if we had any (or “tech sisters” I wasn’t going to discriminate) that he trusted and could come look at this thing. He seemed pretty excited about it and said a few people came to mind, those in the hardware or software industry back home. *Good thing the souls that were first chosen to come here were at least somewhat modern, so they have the background to do that work.* They would be more than happy to tear apart something tech related, see how it worked, and get it running well enough to use safely, he was sure of it. I told him to get them together, and to keep it on the down low. “I’m not stupid, I know how dangerous this is,” he said before he signed off.

I put the thing in a back corner of the library knowing there was no way I could really lock it up to any degree even if I could build a wall around it. For the moment I just had to hope no one came over here, I had no idea why they would, and stumble across it. I did leave a note though, “if you’ve stumbled across this, yes it’s a portal we’re messing with, don’t tell Michael, come see Denice or whoever is currently in charge” sort of thing. With that done I headed back home, hoping to not hear a hundred celestials pounding on the doorway to Midveil to come make me pay for my ‘fighting words.’

The night was quiet, maybe things would be okay after all?

Chapter 23

People refuse to give up their old prejudice

When: Day 251

Where: Library

I heard, long before I saw, the two people coming towards me. It sounded like a child crying, and I spun in my chair. Things had been quiet the last few days, thankfully, so while no new celestials had taken me up on my offer none had started screaming for my head, either. Those that regularly came there said the celestials were talking about my broadcast, but most were taking a “wait and see” attitude. This little experiment could fail, after all, if no one ascended to Good Place with enough points. Immortal beings could afford to wait a few months (or even years) to see how things shook out. Those impatient ones were the outliers, they told me, and word about them was getting around too. Sentiment was we were more alike than the celestials had ever credited, given my punishment and trying to boss them around. “A very celestial thing to do,” they said. So we didn’t have any kind of retaliation against me to worry about. They did report there was *some* interest in doing what I said, cleaning up The Bad Place a little if only to make it easier on them in the long run. They had to be extra careful not to torture someone that already made up their point total for fear of breaking the treaty so setting up a “waiting area” for those eligible to come to Midveil once we had the capacity just seemed like helping themselves. Even if the idea had come from a ‘mere human,’ they had to admit it was a good one. I was studying an attack spell anyway, an explosion of water from nowhere that I was about to go outside and practice. But the woman dragging the child behind her by the hand cut short that plan.

“Denice, I demand you do something about this at once!” She hauled the child before me and I looked them over. A fairly “typical” catperson, with cat ears, a cat tail that was lashing back and forth, some fur, but otherwise naked. *Catgirl*, I corrected myself. Of course no cat had pink fur, or that pattern, or purple eyes, but hey *you do you, girlfriend*.

“Something about what?” I asked, somewhat annoyed to be interrupted for what seemed to be nothing. I put on my best lecturer tone. “Nearly a quarter of all Midveil residents have shown tendencies towards an animal form, especially now that it’s winter and clothes are actually rather tedious to make.” I myself had given up on the fishy form I had taken and settled on a more unicorn looking form. Don’t ask how this worked, it did, it was the afterlife, deal with it. I tapped my horn to prove the point. *My beautiful, beautiful horn, made of alicorn. It even lights up when I do magic, so cool!*

“Not that! I don’t care about his ears, there’s a lot of you weirdos walking around here now, you’ll come to your senses eventually. It’s just a fad.” *Excuse me?* “No the issue is I adopted a son not a daughter. Someone has done this to him. You have water magic, change him back and find the person responsible.”

“I would rather hear it from... them.” *Yes, that seems safest.* I looked over at the kid. “Is she correct? Did a water user use mental magic and force you to see yourself this way?” *Of course they could have make them forget too, but for what purpose?*

“No,” she insisted. “This is who I am. Honest. I never felt right before, but when I woke up like this, I finally did feel right. Don’t let her change me back, please? This is who I am, I want to stay like this!”

I glanced up at the woman. “You heard her.”

“Ridiculous. He’s far too young to know what he wants.”

“Too young?” I scoffed. “He’s old enough to have come here to Midveil, isn’t... She is old enough. *She*. Ugh, you’ve got me doing it now. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay,” she mumbled.

“It really isn’t, but we can pretend.” I turned my focus back to the woman. “She came here, that means she died after becoming old enough to not have an artificially adjusted point total. Seems to me

that's the universe itself telling us she is old enough to decide for herself. Case closed. I'm not changing her and if I hear you've bullied some other water user into doing so I will be very cross. You may go."

"Fine," she snapped. "But as I adopted a son, and now I have no son, 'she' can just find someone else to be adopted to. I'll find another boy to adopt later. You can deal with this one." She turned to go.

"Hold on there," I shouted after her, jumping up from my chair and making her turn back. "You agreed to look after this person and you can't renege on your word just because she sees herself in a certain way. She's done nothing wrong, this is just the world responding to her wishes, just like it does for everyone else. You're really going to love her less, think less of her, because this is her true self?"

"I didn't adopt a boy to love him," she told me like she was telling me she had just stepped in something unpleasant. "I adopted a boy to raise him into a proper man. I can't do that with this so called girl now can I? I can't make a man out of her."

"Proper man?" I exclaimed. "What does *that* mean?"

"You know exactly what it means."

"No I don't. You stupid- Look, there are no men here. There are no women here. There are only souls. Malleable, eternal, magic using *souls*. How many times do I have to say this? Do I need to put up posters? Have daily broadcast reminders?" I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. *Yelling won't get me anywhere*. "I get it. You spent a lot of time on Earth trapped in your physical form. We all did. We haven't even been here a year. It's going to take some getting used to. But you're going to have to. The body that soul existed in," I pointed to the girl, "is dead and gone. It's rotting in the ground or was cremated or whatever. So was yours. So was mine. What we *actually* are came out, and came here, to the afterlife. We can be anything we want to be now, we don't have human limits anymore." *In fact I fully expect more and more non-human forms to start cropping up once people get used to the idea. You haven't seen anything yet, not really*. "You pledged to help this soul mature here in Midveil and by the creator that is what you are going to do. No matter what she decides she looks like. Do you understand me?"

"You can't force me to take care of... her."

"I'm not. Your own words force you to do it. Did you not make the pledge in front of everyone?"

"This isn't the person I pledged to! I pledged to raise a *man!*"

"She's the same person!"

"Please don't fight," pleaded the girl, but we both ignored her. I continued.

"I should change you to be 'male' for the harm you've caused with your actions today. Maybe that's the only way I can get the point across with someone as stupid and stubborn as yourself." I raised my hands, about to start forming the seals.

"You wouldn't dare!" shrieked the woman, raising her own. She gestured, and I went flying backwards, smacking into a bookcase and rattling the books on it. Some fell, and I fell to one knee.

"Now you've done it," I snarled, and gestured myself, almost without thinking. The spell that came to mind was the one I had been practicing for like two hours that day already. My new attack spell. It worked great, a small ball of water appearing behind her and expanding almost instantly. But the girl had seen it. She gave a cry of "mom!" and threw herself in the path of it. My eyes widened as she took the impact, being thrown against the woman's back and sending them both sprawling forward. It also hit several nearby shelves, smashing books back and tearing the shelves themselves up. "No!" I shouted, getting back up and running over there. She was still there, I hadn't done enough damage to make her dissipate, but the elemental attack had hit them both hard. Just as with the man with the crushed legs she couldn't pass out either, and she looked to be in a lot of pain.

"You saved me?" asked the woman, clearly not understanding what was happening. "Why did you do that? And you still called me mom? After what I said..."

"Never mind that. We have to get her healed up. You're clearly wood affinity, get to it!"

"I didn't study any healing magic!"

“Why does that not surprise me?” I muttered. I raised my hands and cast another spell. “Siew Yan, where are you?”

“Denice? I’m working on metal stuff in factory three. Why? You need something?”

“Factory three. Got it. Need your healing magic, be there in a second.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll teleport to where Siew Yan is, I know she knows healing magic.”

“Don’t you know anyone else with healing magic? We can’t take her to the shore!”

Oh now she’s a she- I blinked, her words catching up to me. *Take her to the shore? What does a body of water have to do with-* *We were talking about Siew Yan, did she just call Siew Yan-* “... Excuse me?”

“There’s rumors she was... You know... A prostitute back on Earth. Oh sure I can say it that way...”

My rage threatened to overtake me again, and I grabbed her throat, yanking her close to my face. “You have problems,” I growled at her. “Fix it. Or the next time I see you so help me-”

“Please, don’t fight,” the girl managed.

“I’ll deal with you later,” I told the woman. I let her go and made the gestures for the spell. We vanished and appeared in the factory building, where metal users were busy shaping metal into useful forms we would need for spring. Hinges for doors, doorknobs, wire so we could start getting electricity to various places, that sort of thing. Siew Yan was on the lookout for me and ran over.

“What happened?” she gasped, looking down at the catgirl.

“I’ll explain later, can you do something about it?”

“Of course, of course.” She began the spell for healing, and the girl visibly relaxed as Siew Yan cast healing magic over and over on her. Finally she was able to sit up again.

“That wasn’t pleasant,” she remarked.

“I’m sorry about that,” I told her, knelling down. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I broke the One Law, I caused you harm. I’ll accept my punishment.”

“Maybe I’ll make you my butler,” she said with a wink. “It’s fine. But do I have a mom now or what?”

“I just wanted you to be normal,” said the woman, who was now getting healed herself.

“Even on Earth there was no such thing as normal,” I snapped. “Get over yourself and apologize to your daughter.”

“Just because you tried to save me, I haven’t changed my mind about you,” the woman told her, pointedly ignoring me. “If you stop this nonsense and go back to the way you were I’ll take you back. Otherwise don’t bother coming to my house. And don’t ever call me mom again. Get away from me!” She shoved Siew Yan away who gave a startled “hey!” and stalked off.

“Your room, you mean?” the girl muttered. “So now what happens to me?”

“We reintroduce you, I suppose,” I told her. “You can take a new name and we’ll simply see who comes forward to adopt you. There are other people on the list we can go see.”

“Sorry.”

“Hey, none of that, you have nothing to be sorry about.” I shook my head. “This is going to keep coming up though. Especially when people who died a thousand or more years ago start turning up. We can’t change minds with a simple presentation either, it’s going to take a lot of time and effort to finally get rid of the prejudice we had as living beings. You’re only the first who is going to have to bear the brunt of it.”

“Goody, something to look forward to.”

“I guess. I’m taking her name off the list of possible candidates for adopting someone though,” I mused. “That’s her punishment for causing harm. Someone like that doesn’t deserve to influence someone growing up. Come on,” I held out my hand. “Let’s go check the list of names, see if we can track down someone who will accept you for the person you- what?” Siew Yan had grabbed it instead.

“Just one second,” she told the girl, dragging me away. “Just have to have a word with Denice here.”

“What’s this about?” I asked her when we had put several people between us. I could still see the girl, looking around at what everyone was doing, now that they were going back to it. She dropped my hand.

“What exactly happened with that girl?”

“The woman that stalked off had adopted her as a boy. Said she wanted to raise a son. When that son turned out to identify as female, and be obliged by Midveil giving her that physical form the woman told me to change her back with water magic. I refused. Things got... a little heated, I admit. She shoved me with magic and I hit her with the attack spell I had been practicing. The girl jumped in front of it and took the brunt of it. I brought her to you. Happy?”

“Not exactly.” She stared at me for a moment, as I wondered what else to tell her. “So it was just an accident.”

“Yes, of course it was. You saw her so called mother walk off without her. She attacked me first. What, did you think I had attacked her on purpose or something? Of course not!”

“I just had to be sure.”

“Of me?” My eyes narrowed. “The one with the most points in a place that awards points for being a good person.”

She shrugged. “Even you could change. You do seem to think yourself better than us, maybe it went to your head, I don’t know.”

“In what *possible* way have I have implied I was better than you? Than anyone? I’ve defended you! I even did so again just a minute ago with that woman when she implied you were- never mind what she implied.”

“You’ve refused people asking to sleep with you. Men and women alike, from what I’ve heard. Everyone says you think you’re just too good for us. So, are you? Do you think that? After this I have to wonder.”

“It, what, preposterous, it’s not like that at all!” I sputtered. “Is *that* what you’re basing this on? Me not wanting to sleep with someone?”

“Partly. It must be something. You don’t think you’re better than us because you have more points?”

“No, of course not.”

“Or because you got picked as the leader?”

“Look, everyone decided on the points thing not me. Just because I happened to have the most points only reinforced the fact that my taking charge in the beginning was the right thing to do. But I didn’t do that because I felt I was better than anyone else it was just no one else seemed to be stepping up and I knew someone had to.”

She regarded me a moment. “So why refuse people’s offers? You’re the one who came up with ‘no harm’ and ‘let’s sleep together to get more people here faster’ so I know you’re not morally against it. You never talk about any lover back on Earth so I doubt you’re waiting for someone.”

I was stuck for it now, wasn’t I? It wasn’t really any of her business but at the same time I could see how it looked from her perspective. I hated this part of myself but she had stuck by me enough to deserve an answer. *I may as well just tell her the truth about me. We all have our hangups and demons, even here, and if I can clear this up now, I should. Maybe she’ll even understand it?* “It’s just... I’m just not interested in that sort of thing.”

“What?”

“Don’t look at me like that. Even on Earth it was the same way.” I sighed, remembering. “I would date someone, because it was expected and I thought if I just found the right person something would click. It didn’t happen with men so I tried woman. Same story, when they inevitably wanted to get

physical and I had no desire to, they didn't stick around. Soon I just gave up looking, it was easier than putting myself and someone else through that."

"So you have no desire at all to..."

I shook my head. "No. It's ironic, isn't it?" I gave a rueful laugh. "I can finally do what I want, with whoever I want, no fear of consequences of any kind. But I would still rather sit and study magic all night than jump into what passes for a bed around here with anyone."

"I see." She looked troubled. "I guess I was mistaken, then. I mean I got turned off it because of my, uh, work back on Earth but even I've been... I mean lately... Because I get to choose my partner and not have to... Right, time to apologize and get back to work. Sorry. I had you pegged wrong- I mean I had the wrong idea about you. I guess we all have our demons to face, huh? Not that your lack of sex drive is a demon, oh I'm screwing this whole thing- I mean I'm messing up what I want to say."

I laughed. "Maybe you should just stop talking."

"Sorry! But I had to be sure. I'll let the others know they shouldn't be gossiping about you behind your back. Sorry." She hastily walked away, so I shook my head and headed back to the girl.

"Ready to find a new family?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said, smiling up at me. "And I decided, you can call me Liz."

"Okay Liz, welcome to Midveil." I offered her my hand again. "Let's go find you a home."

Chapter 24

We decide to take a more active role

When: Day 315 in the afterlife

Where: Out and about

Spring was in full swing in Midveil. Kids were singing “winter wrap up” which I guess was from a cartoon back on Earth as snow was melting. We put away the hills we had made for them and started planting our seedlings. I had been surprised to learn some industrious people had been preparing trees and things in a “greenhouse” they had made in the warehouse, and got them planted as soon as the ground was warm enough to accept them. We were plowing fields, deciding what crops to grow where, and generally enjoying being outside without freezing again. I had a new list in the library about basically “pie in the sky” type projects we could one day undertake and creating a huge dome, like you see in fiction where people live on other planets or underwater, was on it. A place where no snow would fall, so you could lie on the beach or whatever in winter in perfect comfort. We could hardly build a single modern office building at the moment but it was good to dream big. As there was no going anywhere in Midveil where it wasn’t winter when it was winter, if we wanted a vacation spot we would have to make it. I figured with magic and enough people working on it one day it would be possible.

Our current houses had weathered the winter storms fairly well. Repairs of course had been done at the time but we took the opportunity to look them all over now, see what had worked and what hadn’t for the future. Bad Place celestials were back, and in greater numbers, to help put up more houses and get their realm emptied of souls that no longer belonged there. They had revealed the existence of Midveil and what we represented, and the occasional trainload of souls arrived from there, people that didn’t mind “roughing it” (even being outside was a paradise to someone stuck in Bad Place the last five hundred years after all) and making their houses as they went. As that’s what we had to do when we first arrived, I said the more the merrier and welcomed them.

“They can put up their own houses same as we did,” I told the celestial that had come to me with the idea. “We have the techniques now, and some sort of formalized process. We should try to make two story buildings now but sure, they’re going to come here sooner or later so it may as well be sooner if they know what they’re getting into.” *And any that are lucid enough to come probably were not all that bad and were not tortured very much. That’s the kind we need, people who will get to work on housing and maybe know about putting up electric lines and water pipes and whatever else we need as a society. Though I’m leaning towards a home generator, based on the design that runs the portal turning magic into electric power. Much easier to deploy and no wires strung everywhere. Once we figure out how it works we can duplicate it.*

This too was very organized, hundreds of thousands of years of bureaucracy at The Bad Place had allowed them to perfect organization of just about anything, so things were going smoothly. My theft of the portal technology had gone unnoticed and after months of studying it Stefan and his team were pretty sure they understood how it operated, at least well enough to activate it in the future. I had no plans to do so, as I knew it would alert Good Place just as it had when The Bad Place used it, but they wrote up a manual for it and were figuring out how to make others that might be safer or more stable. It was a good thing we had studied it, because that day Janet and Michael were hanging around as usual when she suddenly said “uh oh.” We all looked around, wondering what she had meant because I didn’t see anything amiss in what we were doing at the time.

“What’s uh oh?” I asked her.

“Er, nothing,” she hastened to assure me. “Michael can I talk with you a moment?” The two went off to talk, so we went back to our business, but they soon came back over to us.

“We have a bit of a situation here,” Michael informed me. “How would you feel about a whole lot of people from Ukraine coming here in the next week or so? They would be jumping the line of course,

but given their situation I feel bad leaving them in limbo to be chosen by lottery. If they can all come here together it might ease their passing. Keep families together and such.”

“I don’t really mind,” I told him. “What’s happened? Some kind of accident? Building collapse? Earthquake? Power plant meltdown? How many people are we talking about here? We can get everyone together and discuss it, maybe they can start at the next warehouse over,” *in the other direction as my stolen portal that is*, “if there’s going to be that many you’re worried about it.”

“There could be a few,” he admitted. “Get everyone together and I can explain the situation.”

“Sure. Awful forthcoming of you though, it must be big. Usually you don’t want to tell us anything about what’s going on down on Earth.”

“You can’t do anything about it, and you’ll hear about it from them anyway, once they arrive,” he told me.

We’ll see about that.

So we got everyone together and Michael addressed them. “Everyone, it seems that Vladimir Putin has decided to invade Ukraine. There’s been a lot of fighting there and the dead with enough points could come here directly. With your approval they won’t have to go into stasis and can get here before those from Bad Place. Conditions there are slowly improving anyway and with almost a year of practice at magic and construction you should be able to build houses for them fairly quickly. Naturally, being from the modern world they know what machines are and can help. What do you say?”

“Go back,” said one man. “Putin did what?”

“He’s rolling tanks and troops into Ukraine,” he explained. “Some who don’t even know they are in Ukraine and have no wish to fight. But there you are. He’s decided he’s going to take the place by force. They are, to use a human phrase, shooting the place up, so the number of dead right now is only the beginning.”

“Will it be World War Three?” he asked. “I mean they have nukes. Like everyone else, I guess.”

“Indications are... cloudy,” Janet reported. “Something is interfering with my statistical capability to predict the future. I can’t tell you what the final result of this action will be. It’s never happened before, if I had human emotions I would be... worried, right now.”

A ripple went through the crowd.

“In any event, there’s nothing you can do about it now,” Michael told us. “You can only choose to accept these victims now, in a group as they come in, or later as part of the whole group currently in stasis.”

“That is where you are wrong,” I told him, stepping up beside him. “Everyone, listen to me. We have gone to Earth before, to retrieve the rogue celestials that went there to find people to torture. We could do so again. We could go down and stop this conflict before it resulted in a total war. We have the power, and we know the celestials will simply stand by and do nothing. But we aren’t like them. We act. Accept these people or not, I’m fine either way, but before more are killed let’s *do something* about it. Let’s go down and show the world we exist, that the afterlife is real and killing people over land is pointless.”

A cry went up from the crowd, it seemed they liked the idea. I saw smiles and raised fists, it seemed they were not against the idea of going down there and kicking Putin’s-

“But- Hold on,” shouted Michael. “There is no way in the Bad Place that Good Place is going to let you use the portal to Earth again. Especially not for something like this.”

I laughed. “Oh Michael, did you think I was going to ask their permission? Don’t let that worry you, we’re not going to use theirs.”

“No, impossible!” He staggered back a step as the crowd quieted again, waiting to see what he would do. “You didn’t?”

“I did. The one The Bad Place used to go to Earth is under our control. Stefan?”

“It’s true,” he told us, working his way through the crowd. “We’ve been looking it over since we got it and the last time Good Place basically hobbled us using their portal. I must assume it works the same way. There’s actually all sorts of options you can set when opening it. We didn’t need to revert back to how we looked when we died, they set that as an option. And we can go there and appear as ghosts, or be completely unseen by them, or be ‘solid’ and untouchable by physical forces. There are a couple of sliders to control how physical we would be there. And there’s plenty of magic on Earth too, Denice was just sealed like a celestial when she went there, and given that orb so she could do magic at all. Probably as a way of controlling her, because her magic is stronger than most. But we can turn that off too, so she could be at full strength. We could do it, go down there and save Ukraine.”

“What about the language thing?” I asked.

“Yeah, setting. We can set it to basically ‘program’ us with any language, or give us the universal ability to speak and be understood by anyone. Like we currently enjoy. They really went out of their way to make sure we couldn’t talk to anyone down there the first time.”

“Of course we did,” protested Michael. “To interfere in the living world? That’s the most iron clad rule we have here.”

“Maybe *you* can’t,” I told him. “But I fully intend to. Unless the being that made these so called rules wants to appear before me and give me some good reasons why, we’re going. I’ll give them, oh, to the count of ten. That should be enough for such a powerful and *reasonable* being, no? Here we go; One.” I slowly counted to ten, and no one appeared there. “They haven’t managed it, looks like they’re okay with us going.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t command the architect of the universe to just appear before you.”

“I just did. Look, Michael, we can stand here and argue this all day but in the end, you yourself have pledged not to interfere with us, correct?”

“Correct,” he said, looking like he was eating a lemon.

“So thank you for the information. Make whatever plans are needed to get the lost souls here as quickly as possible and get them up to speed. Meanwhile we’re organizing a strike force to go to Earth and stop this senseless violence once and for all.” *This, and ultimately all other.* “You can’t interfere so please stay out of our way. Right!” I turned to the crowd. “I want three teams. One team of good magic users or physical attackers going to Earth. Go to my right if you want to be one that team. You don’t have to be a fighter, but if you have good support magic to put on those that are fighting it would be helpful. One team is support and guarding the portal, only should need a few on that team. One team will welcome the new arrivals. They should go to my left. Be quick about it people, the longer we take the more people die on Earth.”

The groups swiftly came together and I marched everyone down to the warehouse. Michael and Janet were just standing there, looking lost, but I had no time for them. “Are we going right away?” Ramesh asked on the way.

“By tomorrow at the latest, there’s still a few things we need to do to prepare,” I told him.

“Like what?”

“You’ll see, let me think. We need to get this right...”

At the warehouse I called all the metal users forward first. “Right,” I said to them. “Talk to me. This non-earthly metal we’ve got access to, can you make us some swords and shields with it?”

“Swords and shields would be fairly easy,” Siew Yan answered. “But why?”

“We have to look the part,” I explained. “And would taking it across the barrier turn it back into mundane metal, make it crumble, or what?”

“I think it would keep the properties it started with,” Stefan decided. “But that’s just speculation. The settings are for us, not for what we bring back and forth.”

“Good enough for now. Metal users, get to work. I want plain but sharp swords and indestructible shields. We can make stuff like that, right? We have the metal?”

“We can make impossibly sharp swords,” a man told me. “Controlling metal almost down to the molecular level with magic will do that. And we can make all of it out of that ‘vibranium’ stuff, swords or shield should be unbreakable and perhaps even have other properties.”

“Good. I want big ones, small ones, medium sized. The guards on the gate should have really big ones. Don’t need to be fancy, but if you can make them fancy without any time lost, do it.”

“You got it.” Fire and metal users started moving off in that direction.

“Those that can work with cloth, make us some angelic looking robes. White, obviously. Water users, we’re going to change everyone that’s going. We’re all going to have big, white, wings. Support people, anyone not comfortable with fighting, you’re coming through the portal to guard it and give us all the support magic you can manage. Make us stronger, faster, whatever you’ve got. We are going to blaze across any battlefield and tear the oncoming army apart. That should make them think twice about starting wars in the future.” *And by ‘them’ I mean the living.*

“We’re impersonating angels?” a man asked.

I snorted. “What exactly do you think we are now?” I asked him. “We aren’t human. And celestials aren’t the classic angel either, that’s clearly a human invention.” *A wrong one, but there you are.* “One that is instantly recognizable though. With no ‘real’ angels to come later and ask what the heck we thought we were doing we might as well look the part. We need to get their attention, and in a big way. Using magic, slicing through tanks with our swords, everything to convince them we are from the afterlife. That fighting is pointless because you’re going to have to face those you killed once again. Once they realize we can’t be beaten they should turn tail and run back home, and we can announce how things *really* work and maybe put an end to 90% of the violence on Earth in one stroke.” *How did wars ever work back on Earth anyway? Every major religion has an afterlife, after all. Did soldiers just not think they would have to confront those they killed when they themselves died? Or did no one really believe in an afterlife after all, and everyone was just pretending they did?*

“But we’re killing,” Siew Yan pointed out.

“No, we’re not.” I looked around. “I want that made clear before anyone steps through the portal. Smash up tanks, jeeps, even planes if you can. Tear guns out of hands, strip the soldiers naked, whatever it takes. But do not purposefully kill anyone. The same goes for us, you don’t want to face the person you killed either, I would assume. Drive their armies back, yes. Head into Russia to have a few words with Putin, yes. But no killing. Got it?” *We’re still a part of the point system, I won’t lose anyone to Bad Place because they murdered a bunch of people. We can do this without killing anybody, a soldier with no gun is pointless on a battlefield. We can remove the threat they face and force them back to their home country.*

I saw nods around the group.

“Good. Get to work.”

And so they did. Those with the spells to control metal started working on our equipment, while I and others started working on the people. Everyone stripped down so their wings didn’t destroy their clothes, and while we didn’t make any major changes to how anyone looked I made sure everyone saw themselves as their best selves. A bit taller, a bit more muscular and fit, it went a long way towards selling the fact we were from the afterlife. Any features the person themselves decided on I left, figuring, why not? *After all, why can’t there be catgirl angels? Or bunny angels? Or unicorn angels? They don’t know. It’s better than wheels of fire or serpents with a zillion eyes as angels are described in the bible. Though Michael has always been cagey about his true form, and the forms of his fellow celestials. Could they have actually tried something like this in the past and it went badly? Is that why he was so against it? Why not just say that, in that case? But their mistake would then have been leaving, allowing people to then speculate and embellish the stories. We’ll stick around to make sure everyone believes what we’re saying. As we didn’t actually weigh anything those with wings were flying around getting the hang of it, making me wonder why we hadn’t thought of something like this*

before. *We should have had wings all along, really.* With some simple “toga” like garments made we were starting to look the part, and the metal magic users were having a blast going all out. They didn’t just make us swords and shields, they made gauntlets, breastplates, headbands, helmets, shin guards, anything we wanted. Stefan reminded us it was all for looks, we would step through totally immune to physical forces on Earth but this was about shock and awe tactics so I approved anything that made us look more imposing. The metal was light enough, and we could be strong enough that huge swords and shields were no problem for us to handle so even the most skeptical of people would say “okay, no human could lift that and use it effectively so maybe they’re telling the truth.”

“Can I get a halberd instead of a sword and shield?” one person asked. “I think that would be easier to use than a sword with no training.”

“Whatever you want,” I told him.

“None of us have any training in a weapon!” protested another. “Being invulnerable is all well and good, but aren’t we going to look like idiots waving swords around? I want to help but I don’t see how I’ll be able to!”

“You know magic, right?” *Any spell could be useful down there after all.*

“Sure.”

“Then you’ll be fine. I’m thinking of having a split line, front and back. Magic users in the back rank, physical attackers in the front. Everyone is to carry at least a sword at their hip so we make them believe we all *could* use a sword if we wanted to. If you are more comfortable in the back slinging spells, so be it. Your job is to protect the front rank and sew confusion in the battlefield as those with weapons in their hands won’t be able to make the gestures and do magic. Sound reasonable?” *And water users like myself can make even the most inept person look like an expert using that first spell I learned to enhance someone’s knowledge of a subject.*

“It does. Okay, make me a sword, a really big one! I bet we would stick it to my back with some of those really powerful magnets they have in the bin over there.”

“Go nuts! But don’t take too long to get ready.”

It took several hours but we were finally outfitted enough to look like an angel squad ready for action. By that time new people had started arriving, rather confused by what was going on but greeted by the welcoming team. When they learned what we were about to do they gave us their full support, pleading with us to protect their homes and families that were left behind. I told them that was exactly what we had in mind and they could count on us. And I had to admit we looked pretty impressive. Our equipment, being brand new sparkled, and everyone stood tall and proud, wings folded behind them. I smiled as I looked them over and went to stand in front of them. *I wouldn’t want to see that force coming at me, if I was still human. Especially if I was a soldier and bullets were bouncing off the thing I was shooting at.*

“I’ll keep this simple, because we’ve not really done anything like this before,” I told them. “The most important thing is to stay together. We’ll form two lines once we’re on Earth. Support people use whatever magic you can to help the front line. Attackers, chop up machines, guns, uniforms, but not people. Let them run, and believe me once they see our wings and bullets bouncing off us they will. We’ll move as a group, I’m trusting anyone at either end of the line to watch our backs and make sure no one sneaks up on us. Otherwise, tear the battlefield up and drive Russia back to where they came from.”

“Victory!” cried one man.

“Victory!” everyone shouted back.

“Let’s go. I’ll teleport as many as I can to the portal device and come get the rest.”

“Wait, please,” pleaded Michael. “Don’t do this!” I saw him walking towards us, Janet beside him. “This is wrong.”

“Shall I count to ten again?” I asked sweetly. “No. What’s wrong is humans not knowing the truth. Squabbling over which lie they believe because of where they were born and all being equally wrong. Of attacking another country on the flimsiest of reasons and cutting short countless innocent lives. What’s wrong is you having the power to stop it, of *always* having that power, and simply doing nothing. And for what? Following the ‘rules’ of some creator you’ve never seen? Who set up a points system that would eventually break down? Pathetic. How would human history have been different if you had come to us and told us the truth long, long ago? When the Mayans were doing human sacrifice you could have come and told them, hey, maybe *don’t* do that? When Jews were persecuted how many lives could have been saved if you had said, actually, you’re both wrong? Where would we be today? How much more advanced would we be, had we not been fighting each other all the time over which lie was the right one? Time and time again you had a chance to actually make it right on Earth. Time and time again you did not. We’re not going to make that same mistake. Humans are going to know what they’re getting into, what their actions are going to do to them, here in the afterlife. They are going to make fully informed decisions, maybe for the first time in our existence. I have nothing more to say to you on the subject, so I’ll see you when I get back.” I turned away from him.

“If you’re going, at least let me come.”

“What?” everyone said.

Chapter 25

Battle for Ukraine

When: Twenty minutes later

Where: Earth

The portal could be set for anywhere on Earth so it was an easy matter to go near the border of Russia where the fighting was taking place. We rushed through, those staying back to guard our way home heading through first. They had shields bigger than they were, that they could plant in the ground and then cast magic around. They did so, setting up a perimeter around the shimmering portal. Then we came through, ready for anything. *Good, the portal settings worked. We retained our appearance going through, let's hope the rest worked as well. I don't want us getting cut down by machine gun fire in the first ten seconds, that would really make us look stupid. No real way to test it though except in a live fire situation.* The fighting was up ahead, we could hear and see weapons fire so we didn't have far to go. Michael and Janet were the last ones through.

"Are you sure about coming with us?" I asked him. "You won't get in trouble for this?"

"Oh, we're all in trouble," he admitted. "But hopefully I can keep you from making too big a mess of it."

"Whatever."

"At least now we know why I couldn't predict the future anymore," Janet put in. "Interference from Midveil. Now that I'm 'physically' here and events are proceeding I'm getting a clearer picture. Interesting. Of course the loss of all my other powers isn't great so don't ask me for anything at the moment."

Wasn't going to. "Okay, we are now in enemy territory," I shouted to everyone. "Those staying behind, get any magic going on us you can, we're moving out." Spells were cast, making us better while freeing up our own concentration for the battlefield. "Let's move out!"

We started forward, keeping our two line formation as we neared our target area. It was a mess. Fires and smoke poured from buildings, and I was pretty sure I recognized at least one or two people lying in the street as now being in Midveil. The place had been shot up as Janet suggested, but it seemed the advancing army lacked even our minor discipline. Soldiers were wandering around seemingly almost at random, while an assortment of tanks in no formation whatsoever rolled around the city streets.

Naturally. This is an invasion. The only people they have to fight are civilians, not other soldiers. Civilians which would have run away screaming in the other direction when it was clear what was happening. Also this isn't the open field warfare of old, they're advancing on a city. There's cars and buses, vans and trucks all over the place slowing their advance. Sure they can shoot a building or two up but how much ammo does a tank have? They aren't that big, so I'm guessing it's not a lot. "Hey Janet, how much ammo does a tank carry with it?"

"Less than sixty shells for the main gun, less than six thousand rounds of ammunition for the smaller guns."

I snorted. "And the 'smaller' guns can probably fire that amount in less than a minute."

"Not taking reloading time into account, yes. Why?"

"Just wondering if we're actually going to face any resistance here, or if they've used up their ammo and are now waiting for resupply."

"I believe you are about to find out."

She was right. Ahead of us the soldiers were pointing and hesitantly raising their guns, unsure what to make of us. Those in front started running so we picked up the pace to match them, and the soldiers started blindly firing at us now that it was clear we were headed in their direction. Shields came up, I heard bullets bouncing off them and thankfully no one went down. By the time we reached them they were confused and terrified, shooting with no discipline whatsoever. That didn't help either, even when

they hit us the rounds simply acted as though they had hit an immovable object and splashed off. We hardly noticed, making me almost wish I knew more about physics to understand how much kinetic energy or whatever was being diverted to make that happen. *There's no doubt something supernatural is going on, exactly as I intended. Run, cowards! I live!* The front line went to work, slashing through their guns to make them helpless. *They were right, with our enchanted strength and the sharpness of these blades we should have no trouble disarming them in a spectacular fashion.* We in the back went into action too, slinging spells at them including illusions, telekinetically tearing their helmets or backpacks off, or blinding them with lights. The nearest tank started towards us, so the earth users simply tore the ground up in front of it, making half of it drop into a crack in the ground it couldn't move out of. Then the metal users started tearing it to pieces before the guns could orient on us. The crew scrambled out, clearly terrified, and started running away from us with their companions so recently disarmed. *So far so good. No one was killed, and as they saw bullets bouncing off us they didn't try attacking us bare handed.* "Let's go take care of more of those tanks," I shouted. "They're the real threat." *Those shells may just bounce off us too but I bet the explosion might impact our line, make it harder to stay together. And if they shoot and miss us, they could kill others nearby or cause more damage. Let's take them out!*

I was correct, the nearer tanks oriented on us before we could get near and started shooting us. This scattered us a little forcing us to take time regrouping but to our credit we held the line, coming back together after dusting ourselves off. There was really nothing they could do to harm or even slow us down, making me realize what super heroes in stories must experience as we tore through their ranks. Our swords proved sharp enough to slice through tank treads, barrels, jeeps, and of course hand guns while metal magic users simply twisted any war machines into scrap by working together. By the time a half hour passed (I was guessing) the force in this area was retreating back the way they had come, and this suited me just fine. We needed to go where they went, as it would be the next fortified position we would need to take out. No soldier had died at our hands, and any civilians still alive that we passed were healed and told to hide. They of course were torn between gratitude and utter terror at staring into the eyes of an angel, and didn't stick around. The next thing we faced was a line of tanks.

"They're getting more organized," Siew Yan remarked as we got into visual range of the line. "They can't hurt us, but they'll shoot this area up trying. We need to get closer and fast to take them out."

"Let's teleport right up to them," I decided. "Flying would be more dramatic, but we really couldn't practice it so we would look pretty silly if we didn't nail the landing. Everyone close to me, those with teleport magic we're heading right in front of that middle tank."

"Right," several people said, raising the hands as everyone gathered closer. They raised their shields, ready to move.

"Now!"

We appeared in front of the line and started tearing it up, this close the big guns couldn't open fire without risking their buddies but it seemed one group was panicking and about to do just that.

"That one is going to fire!" Janet shouted, pointing to one that was swiveling to orient on us.

"I'll give it something to fire at!" I cast, creating the illusion of a huge warrior, towering over us with a flaming sword, ready to strike. The tank reoriented, the barrel pointing upwards now as the shell exploded out of it. This of course sailed through the open air because there was no figure for it to hit, and the shell landed off to the side someplace. *Hopefully somewhere empty, but at least it didn't cause problems for us here.* The others went to work, tearing up the ground, twisting the barrels, whatever they could do as multiple tanks sighted to fire on my imaginary soldier. A few more got shots off before the tanks were disabled and the occupants tumbled out. Some got brave and tried to attack us physically, because that's what you do when a group of beings that stand there tanking gunfire and waving their hands around crushing your tanks are worried about. They got thrown back as well, either with magic or just running away after they tried smacking someone and it didn't work.

“Thanks for the warning,” I told Janet, my illusion vanishing as I lowered my hands.

“Well I hated to get this blouse all dirty with explosion debris,” she explained.

“Naturally,” I agreed, rolling my eyes. “Where to next?”

We spent several hours chasing after retreating soldiers to their next fall back point, smashing the heck out of it, repeating the same thing as the group of soldiers got bigger and bigger. There seemed to be a supply line of trucks coming from Russia so we smashed that up too. It was just sitting there practically begging us to take it out, how could we refuse? As we walked the next two days (we didn’t need to sleep any more here than we did back at home) Janet warned us of incoming air strikes, ambushes, minefields, they were throwing everything they could at us. The planes were a problem, we weren’t as fast in the air as they were, but with Janet there to tell me exactly where and when to cast my elemental burst their missiles and bombs exploded in mid-air. Yes, they were busting in air. That gave proof, through the night, that we were still there. Where there was nothing interesting for us to destroy we teleported forward to the next interesting point, Janet showing us pictures from captured soldier’s phones of where we needed to be. Finally we reached the place Putin had been evacuated to and tore the front off that place, confronting him at last.

“Vlad!” I greeted him, as he cowered in a corner. His security detail was just as effective as anything else that had been thrown at us, which is to say not very. They were smashed up against the wall with magic, their guns crushed into twisted wrecks in a very satisfying way. “Can I call you Vlad? Do you prefer Puti? Vlado? Mr. Shirtless? I’ll just call you Vlad. Vlad. We have to talk.”

“What are you?” he stammered.

“We’re from the afterlife,” I told him. “The wings may have given it away?” I stuck the right one out so he could look at it. “Anyway, about this little conflict of yours. It’s over. In fact, all conflict on Earth is over. We in the afterlife are no longer going to allow people to live in ignorance or claim religious reasons for being horrible to each other. You want to be horrible to each other? Go ahead. But you’re not going to be hiding behind doctrine to do it. Now. You’re going to issue an order pulling back all your troops, those we didn’t route on the way here. You’ll also be sending reparations to Ukraine for the stunt you pulled and the lives lost.”

“You can’t make me do anything!”

“True,” I agreed after a moment. *And false. I could push thoughts into your head to make you believe you wanted to do just that, just like I do for people who want to be catgirls.* “But I bet I know who can. Michael!” I snapped my fingers.

“What is it?” he reluctantly asked, coming over and clearly looking like he dreaded the answer.

“Tell our buddy Vlad here how negative his point total is, if you don’t mind.”

“Sorry about this Mr. Putin, we’re not really supposed to-”

“Michael! The point total, if you please?”

He gestured towards Vladimir and his status screen appeared. “As you can see he’s at negative two million, four hundred seventy six thousand, three hundred and twelve points.”

“Oof, that’s a lot of negatives.” *Did he get negative points for every person his soldiers killed? I hope so.* “And tell me, based on current averages how many days of torture will our friend here undergo in The Bad Place because of his choices in life?”

“Days?” he clarified.

“Days,” I agreed with a grin in his direction. “Of unimaginable tortures.”

“Uh, that’s math. Janet?”

“Vladimir Putin will currently spend fifty six thousand, nine hundred and forty total days being tortured in The Bad Place until his total reaches a positive value high enough for inclusion into Midveil.”

“Wonderful,” I told her breathlessly. “That sounds like an awful lot of days, doesn’t it Vlad? And we won’t exactly welcome you with open arms, believe me. How are you doing, by the way? You don’t look so hot.”

"I'm fine!" he insisted.

"He's not," Janet countered. "He's actually pretty sick."

"Oh dear," I tisked, shaking my head. "Not much time to put things to rights. I'll give you some hints though. Set up some recording equipment and start broadcasting. Make sure it goes global- I'll be understood through video won't I?" I asked.

"From what I understand, yes," Stefan answered.

"Great. Let's get this party started."

Half an hour later a camera was pointed at me, Vladimir looking pale and small at my side. Janet assured me it was going out as a stream on YouTube, so I better make it good. Everyone that had come with me was standing behind me, swords and shields out, looking impressive.

"Hello everyone," I began. "As you may have already seen from footage these last two days, we, residents of the afterlife you might well call angels, have had enough. We have come to Earth because this man," I indicated Vlad, "decided he wanted to roll tanks into another country and take it over by force. This, and any acts like it, I'm looking at you China, will now be met with overwhelming force from us. You have seen us tear apart tanks, rip up the ground, and we knew exactly where Vladimir was hiding. We will know where you are hiding. We will come for you, in the same way. We cannot be stopped. War... Is over... On Earth." I paused to let that sink in. "I will now explain why. I will tell you the truth of the afterlife. Yes, there is one. Yes, there is a Good Place, a Bad Place, and a place in between. Those like this man," I indicated Vlad, "will go to The Bad Place. Michael?" He groaned and stepped forward. "This is a celestial, currently bound into a human form for your convenience of comprehending a being that has existed since the beginning of time. Michael, can you tell me what your position in the Bad Place was?"

"I was an architect," he explained. "I designed tortures for human souls."

"And were you good at it?"

"Oh, I was very good."

"What did some of those tortures entail, if you don't mind telling us?"

What followed was a very graphic description of the tortures employed by Bad Place we won't get into here.

"Thank you for that," I told him, as he seemed to really be getting into it now.

"But that's only the beginning!" he protested. "That's only the tortures starting with the letter 'A.'"

Ah, no wonder so many were about the butt. "We can do a separate video on that," I promised him. *In fact we probably should.* "Suffice to say, a human's actions in life will result in consequences in the next life."

"That they will," he agreed.

"Thank you. Now tell me about the great architect. The being that put all this into motion."

"I can only tell you myth, not fact," he admitted. "Indications are that there was one, given we exist, the point system exists, the Good and Bad Places exist. But we have never spoken to that being, never gotten any direction from them about what we are supposed to do. We are, to put it bluntly, simply doing the best we can with what we found laying around up there."

"In effect, God has left the building."

"That's one way of putting it."

I turned back to the camera. "Religion is a set of beliefs inherited from those older than you, based on geographical region and time. Nobody worships Zeus anymore, for instance. The presence of more than one religion on Earth disproves the very concept of religion. You need to set it aside and instead come to realize that no one cares. There is no one in the sky that you can pray to that will solve your problems. Instead, recognize the truth. You must solve your own problems and come to your own conclusions about what a good life is. We too will not answer individual prayers, even if we could somehow hear them." *Divination magic? But 'they would be wanting magical solutions to everything'*

as Hagrid said would really only be the beginning if we did. “But we can help you with the big stuff. For too long the afterlife has been kept separate from the living world, and I mean to change that, here, today.

“The truth is we are here. Ask yourself if we are a hoax, why did the attack on Ukraine suddenly stop after only a day? How did we do all that we did? How was the army of Russia smashed to pieces by a force of a hundred or so men and woman? The inescapable conclusion is that the afterlife exists, and you will one day be a part of it. You can enter it having led a good life, and spend only a few years in the middle making up the points you need to enter The Good Place, as we are currently doing now, or you can enter it having led a bad life, and experience tortures from A to Z. And possibly numbers. The choice is yours. I know you are skeptical. I would be too. I’m not asking you to abandon your beliefs overnight, simply that you give us a chance to prove to you what we are saying is the absolute truth of existence.

“To that end; In the coming days we of the afterlife are going to take a good, hard look at what’s going on here on Earth, and we are going to help you fix what’s broken. We will tear apart armies, clean up the land, heal the sick. In time, seeing what we can do, seeing the problems of the world shrink, I think even the most skeptical person among you will have to admit we are not trying to trick you, that we are from the afterlife and we are here to help. Governments of the world I now implore you; do the right thing before we are forced to do the right thing for you. We will not kill your people, ask Vlad here how many of his soldiers died at our hands. But we will bankrupt you by smashing your machines to pieces. By taking the resources that would go to war and putting them to a better purpose. He have the power,” or we soon will, via spells, “as you have seen for the past two days. If we have to smash every tank, every plane, every truck, every gun, every bomb,” better start with those actually, “we will do it. No more will humans kill each other like animals fighting over a scrap of meat. We will show you a better way.

“This is where I leave you for now. Heed my words carefully. We will be watching, and we know your every move the second you make it. Let this be the dawn of a new peace on Earth, a real peace, and a new partnership between the lands of the living and the lands of the dead. Goodbye for now, peace be with you.”

The red light on the camera winked out.

Whew.

“You’re really going to do that?” Michael asked me.

“Until and unless some higher power stops me, yes,” I told him. “We’re going to build more portals, set up an angel corp that comes to Earth as healers, teachers, and yes even soldiers as needed. Janet can tell them where they need to go I’m sure. But the senseless violence we’ve inflicted upon ourselves up until now? The hurt we’ve done to the planet? To each other? It stops here and now. Come on, let’s head back to the portal. I’m sure Vlad here has some orders to issue, don’t you?” I asked him sweetly.

“It seems I do, but this isn’t over.”

I laughed. “Yes it is. You’re a mortal. And you’ve got a long, long time to spend in the tender care of The Bad Place before we’ll ever meet again, no matter how much good you do before then.” *It wouldn’t count anyway because you were doing it for the wrong reasons.* “Don’t make me come back here in the time you have left.” I gestured, creating the illusion I was holding his severed head in my hands, dripping blood. He recoiled away from it. “This could still be you. I just don’t want you in my afterlife just yet. Come on, let’s go.”

We headed up and out, and Janet pointed the way back to the portal. “Let’s go. We’ll teleport after a bit, I want to be seen leaving this place.”

“Why did you station those people at the portal anyway?” Michael asked. “You should have turned it off. If it’s anything like our portal there must be a button that summons it from this side.”

“I do,” I agreed. “I wanted it to be found. I wanted it to be guarded. I want cameras to watch us go through it and then vanish again. Oh sure, you could do it with special effects in a movie but it’s just one more piece of evidence I’m telling the truth. It’s going to take a lot, you know.”

“I still can’t believe you told them.”

“They deserved to know the truth.”

“If they learn about the points system it will taint their behavior!”

“Not completely,” I countered. “They may earn points slower at first, but those doing things to try and get points will raise kids who saw their parents doing the right thing for whatever reason. They’ll continue that tradition, I think, and give less and less thought to what’s behind it.”

“Maybe.”

“And even if their total is near zero because they avoided doing bad things for the wrong reason, they still won’t have done those bad things. They won’t get negative points. That’s better than before Midveil where they did the right things but still got negative points, right?”

“We’ll see how it goes.”

“That we will.”

As I expected, the portal had been found and people were packed around it. No one dared approach too closely and the guards I left were working just fine. We cleared a path with magic and vanished through it. “We’ll be back,” I told the people standing around. “You’re safe now. You have my word.” I vanished through it.

And something strange happened.

A bright light and a pure tone sounded all around me, and everyone turned back to look at me.

“Congratulations,” Michael said, seeming surprised. “I guess the point system agreed with what you did. You are now welcome in The Good Place.”

“I got points?” I asked, completely shocked. I opened my own status window and there they were. “I did.” *Did I get a bunch of points from avoiding all the deaths that would have occurred had I done nothing? Every life that was saved because of my actions, just like every death from Putin’s actions, got me points?*

“You did. Midveil is a success, I can breathe easier though no one will get that many at once, you cheater. You want to leave right away or...”

“Leave?” I asked, aghast at the idea. “I can’t leave. There’s still too much to be done. We’ve only just gotten *started* around here! It hasn’t even been a year, I want to see the crops put in, and the trees grown, and what the town becomes. I can’t just leave.”

“But you can’t be our leader anymore either,” Ramesh told me. “Refusing to go to The Good Place is your right but someone that should be gone should not be allowed to lead.”

“Maybe I’ll just do some naughty stuff and lose points again,” I suggested with a wink. “But seriously, I’ll step down. Change my points if you have to. One Good Place point, in other words. I’ll stay on as an advisor and there will be consequences for what I said down on Earth. I won’t run from them.”

“I can accept that,” he told me. “Let’s have a celebration, our town is a success and Denice has ascended. We stopped a war and told Earth to get its act together. We did it! Against all odds, we did it!”

Epilogue

When: Some years later

I was going over the latest numbers from Earth in my office near the original warehouse we had been shown all those years ago. There hadn't been a murder in the last five years down there, and violence of any kind was now almost unheard of. We had fifty portals between Earth and Midveil now, most set into "One Way Mode" coming from Earth, with staff on either side to assist in the transition between the two. You didn't get to go back and forth, obviously. Anyone sick, too old to be further healed with magic, or simply desiring their next great adventure was welcome to join us, point total appropriate, of course. Those that thought they could escape The Bad Place were sadly mistaken. Though it was more a rehabilitation center than purely torture at this point. There were still people there waiting, turns out there had been a *lot* of dead people over the years that modern humans had existed, but buildings were going up at a frantic pace so it would soon be empty. In a generation or two maybe completely, as less and less people had negative point totals or at least *as* negative as they had been for the last five hundred years. And of course many had left for The Good Place, freeing up space. The problem was those who had spent a long time in Good Place coming *here!* If they wanted to be challenged again, made a difference on Earth again, or just take a break from paradise to see how the other half lived, we welcomed them. They could learn to do things for themselves again, rather than asking Janet for everything. They had the most crazy ideas, like building floating cities or a civilization underwater populated by 'merfolk.' I approved, but of course I had given up leadership long ago so I could only give my thumbs up to the idea and hope they made it happen one day.

While we hadn't brought Earth any materials like "vibranium" in quantity (that would be cheating) we had allowed scientists to study samples to see if they could be replicated at least in part there. With budgets for military shrinking to almost zero a lot more money was being poured into research, and it wouldn't be long before a permanent Mars base would be established. We had helped create a magnetic field for the place, don't ask how it took dozens of magic users digging continuously for Martian months to get to the center of the planet, but at least the Earth's nuclear waste wasn't a problem anymore. (There were a few less iron asteroids in the vicinity as well, take that as you will) There were no poor, no hungry, now that people knew simply walking past someone like that and not helping them cost them points for the afterlife. Politics had calmed down too, now that people knew the truth about souls and how they worked. *All it took was a little truth from us, was that so hard, Michael?* I hadn't seen him lately, he was off doing something or other, maybe on Earth? I wasn't sure. But the numbers were good. Really good. *Maybe they won't even need us pretty soon,* I thought to myself. *And that would be ultimate win for all of us.*