

The Library of Good and Evil
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Chapter 1

The Key to it all

The man, striding boldly across the sidewalk to a destination we can only guess at, happened to glance down through the bushes and notice a glinting in the grass that was unmistakable. It was the glinting of treasure, of possibility, of excitement for the future. And it's a good thing the man did see the glint, because otherwise this would be a much shorter story. He came to a sudden stop and pivoted, trying to keep that glorious spark in sight as he navigated the greenery around the building he had almost made it to. The promise of light where there should be none drew him, teased him, called to him like the sirens of old. He was gripped by a powerful curiosity to know what that sparkle was, and no mere shrubbery would keep him from it! Bending down, he snatched the item up into his hand, looking it over curiously. It was a key. A small, silvery, well-made, metal key.

But what sort of key? he wondered to himself idly. *It's not an old chunker, that might open a great iron lock upon some rusting gate, an equally rusting chain falling away as the deed is done. A fine mansion thus awaiting me on the top of a darkened hill as a thunderstorm rages in the distance. I can hear the organ music now. Nor is it the type to open an old tomb, the 'skeleton key' as it were, leading to a long forgotten treasure, buried and forgotten with its miserly master. Wait, I said forgotten twice, that's no good! Never mind, never mind. It's not for a car, and it simply cannot be the key to my heart. For it is not in the shape of a cupcake. In fact it seems to be a perfectly ordinary key. But what, pray tell, is it doing here? And not to put too fine a point on it, what exactly am I doing here?*

The man looked around, briefly wondering exactly where *here* was. He must have had some reason for being in this particular spot, but that purpose eluded him for the moment. He had been walking as if he had a clear destination before, hadn't he? To where? For that matter *from* where? He couldn't, at the moment, recall either. Feeling perhaps less troubled by this than he would have first thought possible, he took stock of his surroundings. The weather was pleasant enough, with the sun shining down through white, puffy clouds high above. He was dressed not in finery or in "working clothes" one might see on a farm or worn by a painter, but in pants of decent make and a button down shirt. He wore no watch or other jewelry he could detect, and his pockets, as he patted them, were found to be empty. It seemed his only possession, and here he patted his pockets again and yes, they were still empty, was the key he had just picked up from the ground. Maybe he should check the pockets again just in case? Shirt pocket? No, leave it, they were empty for sure, he was quite certain of it.

Seems a strange beginning, he decided.

With no clue upon his person as to his identity and goal, he turned his attention to the path, as every path leads someplace. Of this he was reasonably certain, and in this case the instinct served the man well. The path, a worn concrete he noted but in good enough repair, led directly to a building to his left. It was brick, tall, wide, a proper destination for a man, such as himself, to have in mind. But on the other hand, with no suitcase, briefcase, art portfolio, toolbox, laptop, phone, or even a pencil to his name what business would he have at such a building?

Perhaps find out what the building is, then my purpose here may be revealed? The man smiled, gave a brief nod to himself- as he was quite alone in the shrubbery- and strode towards the building

once more. The key he gripped tightly in his hand, clinging to the one thing it seemed he owned in this world like a lifeline thrown to a drowning sailor. His journey was uneventful- it was only a few steps after all- and all too soon he found himself standing in front of a door. It was glass, a double door that allowed the entrant a full view of the dim interior.

Dim?

He peered through the glass and yes, it seemed the building was quite unoccupied at the moment. The man scowled, was there no help to be had here? He looked up and found a metal plate above the door, worn by time but read easily enough by a man of learning and sophistication such as he imagined himself to be.

"Library," he read definitively, as that is what the letters, on the sign, spelled out.

A nearby chipmunk froze at this sudden noise, looked up at the man, took his measure, and went about their business again feeling him no threat at all.

"This place is a library!" he insisted to himself, his powers of deduction working overtime but the conclusion was quite plain. He felt much like that superhero detective from the stories... what was his name? Hung out in a cave most of the time? Liked bats? The name was on the tip of his tongue. In fact everything about the man was bat themed. His throwing weapons were shaped like bats. His costume was shaped like a bat. His cape- bat. His car- bat. "The nocturnal detective? It'll come to me." He shook his head, this was no time for idle fancies! He returned to his examination of the door, finding it to normally push open, informed by his amazing insights into the situation. However, it didn't budge an inch when he gave it an experimental shove. He also gave it a tug, just in case, but again was stymied.

"Closed," he read, catching note of the sign hung about at eye level for the average sized adult human type being that no doubt frequented the place. "Ah, that explains!"

But now the man was troubled. His eyebrows bunched up in a very unattractive way and he scowled, whirling around in a way that quite spooked the nearby chipmunk. The man looked up, past the nearby trees and to the overhead sun. He deduced (*The Shadow? No, that's somebody else*) that it was, perhaps, early afternoon on a beautiful summer's day. How could a library, of all things, be closed on such a day? There was no treacherous snow to navigate, the ground was not rumbling as if an earthquake was going on. There was no acid rain, no razor hail, no swarm of insects or bombs dropping. Holiday perhaps? Not Christmas, unless he was in a region that celebrated such in warm weather. *Meliki miki maka, that's a thing to say*. If he listened he could hear the nearby sounds of traffic and of life going on nearby, so this building- this library- *should* be open. The affront of it, (*was that the right usage of that word?*) the *audacity* of the building to be closed! Shameful. He raised his hand to knock, that was the logical next step was it not? There could be someone inside after all, though he had no specific book or research request in mind to demand, should someone appear at the door. *One step at a time*. He was about to forcefully pound on the door when he realized perhaps smashing into a glass door with his fist would work better if he wasn't gripping a key tightly within it, and opened his hand. The key lay there, quite inert, and his gaze fell upon the singular lock that secured the door. *No*, he shook his head with disbelief. *It can't be*.

He looked from the key to the lock and back several times, and realized there was only one way to find out. Two ways. Two ways to find out. The first was the obvious one; Sit on the step and wait for someone to come open the library again, and ask them if they lost a key recently. But no! He was a man of action! At least, he believed himself to be in that moment. He seized the key by the back part (*does it have a specific name? Keymakers must be able to refer to different parts of the key, right?*) and jammed it forcibly, or rather tried to gently insert the key into the lock as though entering Marion for the first time. *Wait, Marion NY, or Marion OH?*

It bounced off and almost squirted out of his grasp.

He looked around, suitably chastened, the chimpunk had moved on so no living soul had witnessed this disaster, and he turned the key around. Thus correctly oriented the key easily slid into the lock, and he, with great satisfaction, gave it a turn. Then a turn in the proper direction, which he felt disengaged the mechanism and allowed the door to open.

Now we're getting somewhere! he thought gratefully to himself. *But where? Duh, inside the library you dolt. If you decide to go through the door you just unlocked. But why was the key way over there?*

Having no time for this pointless speculation he withdrew the key, safely stowed it in his pockets (which were still empty, he checked again) and pushed the door open. It opened! The man stepped into the somewhat dark, chilly, room beyond and the door closed behind him.

The man sneezed powerfully.

How long has it been since anyone came in here? He looked around and found a light switch on the wall, in fact a whole bank of them. He flipped them with gusto, illuminating his path forward into the building and the dust that hung in the air. *Huh.* He happened to glance up and saw a sagging welcome banner, which he was quick to read and understand, like that bat fellow whose name he still couldn't remember. *Battective? No, focus!*

"Welcome to the Library of Good and Evil," he said into the stillness. *Well, that clears things up. Guess I'll be on my- it doesn't tell me anything!* He moved past the vestibule area and into the library proper, noting with some trepidation the amount of dust covering all the displays in the front. And the main desk. And the shelves. And the floor.

"Hello?" he softly called out, not expecting any sort of reply. Which was good and met his expectation because he didn't get any. His voice was swallowed up by the books and the sheer size of the place, which he had to admit was impressive. "Hello?" he called out again, more loudly. Still nothing. He had to chuckle at the sign that caught his attention, a person making a shushing noise to remind patrons to be quiet in the library. "You got me, sign," he admitted. "But I had to check. I did just sort of barge in here, though in fairness I did have a key." He dug it out of his pocket, leaving them once again empty, and held it up so the sign could see it. "That means anything the key unlocks belongs to me, right? Aaand I'm talking to a sign. I need to get out more..."

He put the key away again and went over to the windows. There were displays there, books quite obviously, and he turned the little control rod to open the slats and let in some of that "accursed natural light!" he madly intoned, jumping back as the sunlight hit him and shielding his eyes from the horror of it. Then he realized he had been outside before, and so probably was not a vampire. *As if there was some doubt. Vampire bats! Right. The human bat? No, that's a dumb name. Wasn't there a human fly? Something about an accident victim who got metal bones or something...* He moved to each window in turn, letting in more light and finally arrived at the front desk. There was a computer there, a handheld scanner, a mountain of books piling up from what looked like a chute nearby that was now completely jammed with the things. The usual pencils, paper, and a dusty old printer under the desk were not unexpected and the man nodded solemnly. Yes, everything was in place. But why had the place been closed for so long? It didn't make any sense at all. There were no signs of a fire, no storm damage to the building that allowed in the elements. The books were clearly there, ready for lending so there hadn't been theft. Every indication was that the place should be open and ready for business.

The man stood, stumped. He had no idea his next move. He couldn't just leave and start accosting people on the street about why the library was closed. He would be locked up for sure. *Ah!* His eyes widened, then he rapidly blinked them trying to get the dust out of them. He strode to the front desk and took a more detailed look. Perhaps there was some clue a budding detective, such as himself

and *maybe I'll stick to Sherlock Holmes as I can't remember the name of that one bat fellow. Bat Fellow! No, no, that can't be it.* A budding detective might use to put some context to all this. But his hopes fell like a brick whistling through the air, dropped as a prank by a teen delinquent from a small aircraft onto a cow, (that bastard, what did the cow ever do to you???) as he found nothing. No notes explaining the fire marshal had closed the place until further notice, no discovery of radon in the basement. It seemed business went on as usual until one day the place got locked up, the key tossed to the side, and that had been that. The building went unused and unopened until a few moments ago. As far as he could see there was no caution tape, the upper floors hadn't come crashing down, nor were there gaping holes in the floor at this level. He walked around the desk again, heading around the displays and through the shelves. As one might expect, there were books, many undisturbed books, upon the shelves. He found some stairs leading to a higher level, and a sign noting what books were to found there, but continued on his way on this level. He found a child's area, a magazine area, a listening area, a computer area. All standard library stuff. Everything seemed in good repair and unvandalized. Dusty, which he again noted with dismay, as if seeing it for the first time. The place was heavy with it, but that could be taken care of with a bit of work.

The power still works, the lights came on. So it wasn't that.

The man was at a loss- but at the same time- it wasn't actually his problem. He could turn the lights off, go back out the door, lock it behind him, put the key back where he found it, and walk away. He stood between the dusty shelves and went through these actions in his mind. *Say I do that. What then? What's my next destination? I don't seem to have one. Was I simply out for a walk and suddenly forgot my entire identity? I have no idea where I live, what I do here in this... city? I don't even know it's a city, to be honest. I feel like I should be terrified of this notion but yet, here I am. Standing calmly inside a clearly abandoned library like I owned the place. Do I own the place? I don't think I do. Yet I feel at peace here, like I belong. Not like I've come home after a long journey, no... But as if I've found something precious. A place to belong, a place I could make my own and make great again. MLGA.* He shuddered. What was that awful feeling he just had, like he wanted to commit violence on something orange? Was he sick? He ran his hands over his head. *I don't feel concussed. I don't feel dizzy or lightheaded, as though I was in an accident and wandered away from it. I can recall topics such as Moby Dick, Dick Tracy, and Tracey Gold. Goldman Sachs, Saxophones, Phone a Friend, Friendship is Magic, Magic the Gathering. Gathering dust. Dusty trails. Trail of tears. But nothing about myself? I suppose my next move would be to ask where I might find a hospital, or some sort of care facility and explain my memory is gone. Get checked out. Yes, that would be the logical thing to do. Forget this strange library and head back outside. Find a friendly passerby and ask directions. Or perhaps...* The man headed back to the front desk, a new idea freshly burning in his idea tank, which as everyone knows is a thing. What the man needed was maps. Or more specifically to his own situation, a map of the local area rather than some kind of world spanning atlas that showed far off, interesting enough places to be sure, but not totally relevant. *People must ask for directions at libraries, right? I mean they probably used to, before GPS. Hey, that's another thing I remember. GPS. CIA. JFK was blown away! We didn't start the fire, it was always burning since the-* He shook himself. No time for that. He carefully went through the desk looking for a map.

He did not find one.

Typical. Everyone uses their phones and suddenly paper maps are out the window. Come on, that was a good idea too. He looked out over the displays. *I guess I could take an atlas. Or some book of maps. You ever see a hospital move? One problem... where am I right now? I hoped to find a local map and search for this 'Library of Good and Evil' as it's called, thus pinpointing my own location. Maybe...* He looked at the computer. *I know how to use that. Power button, mouse, keyboard, 'hello computer.' Heh, good old Scotty. Transparent aluminum. But does the internet still work here, as the bills will no doubt*

have gone unpaid? I guess the electric still does. Only one way to find out. Trace the cables back to the source and see if the modem lights are blinking. They must have a networking closet or something, right? He turned the desktop around, looking at the cables in back. *I think this must be the ethernet cable, where do you go little cable?* He stuck his head into the cavity, squinting and trying to follow the cable. *Floor jack? Along the desk and into the wall somewhere? Better check my pockets for a flashlight, it's dark in here I can just make out-*

"Hello?" The voice was extremely loud and scary in the silence of the library, and the man (as was his right and privilege being scared of his mind like that) screamed like a little girl. He also, in the span of only a second; jerked backwards, whacked his head on the inside of the cupboard, clutched said head, stumbled backward, fell over, kept screaming, which of course set off the man who was looking down at him over the counter who started screaming himself. This seemingly started some kind of screaming "contest" to see who could carry on the loudest, if the rising pitch of the two men was to be believed.

The poster on the column nearby did *not* approve of all the noise. But it was just a poster, so it really couldn't do anything about it.

Chapter 2

Taking it over

"Terribly sorry about scaring you like that," said the man, setting down the teacup. They were currently seated in his office, located down the stairs from the main library and down a hallway. After what seemed like several minutes of carrying on like they had seen Bloody Mary herself coming out of a mirror, both men realized how foolish they looked, got themselves together, and once again started behaving like civilized people. Of course civilized people drank tea, so that is what the man invited the interloper in the library to do. Civilized people also accepted other people's invitation to drink tea, so the man was stuck for it. At least on the way down to the office his heart rate had settled down to a more reasonable pace. As the other man had prepared the tea the first man looked around, finding the office to be quite cluttered with a wide variety of things; Old phonographs, wooden masks, a single ski pole, a shining, shimmering, splendid orb suspended above a platform with what must be magnets.

Magnets. How do they work? Must be an antique dealer, or just likes to collect strange things. What's that called again? Hording? "Quite all right," he assured the man, taking one, then another, then *another* spoonful of sugar and dumping it into the tea. The man didn't recall much but he knew tea was a vile substance unless certain measures were taken, this being one of them. Chilling it and adding a 50% mix of lemonade could also reasonably disguise the taste, but that seemed out of the question in this situation. He would just have to make do as best he could. "I was, after all, a rather unexpected visitor." He lifted the cup to his lips and took a sip. *Okay, that's not too bad. Not what I would drink on a daily basis of course but this won't kill me and perhaps this guy can give me some information about... things.*

"Indeed. I heard something rummaging around but the lights were on. So the possibility you were an animal that had somehow gotten in here was remote, but not out of the question."

"Does that happen often?"

"Not that I can recall. But there's a first time for everything."

"Yes, I suppose you're right about that." Both men shared a quiet chuckle.

"I'm Ezekiel, by the way," he offered his hand.

"Stephen," Stephen said easily, taking the hand and shaking it. Then he did a double take. *Oh right, my name is Stephen. Funny how I never thought about it until just now, but when I needed to recall it, I did so as simply as any other would. Wait what did that guy say his name was?* "Er, how do you spell that, by the way?" *Yes, good save Stephen!*

"I would spell it S. T. E. P- oh you meant my name!"

"Yes, that's exactly right!" He forced a chuckle.

"Oh, it's just how it sounds." The man seemed to be daring him to admit he already forgotten it, eyebrows just the tiniest bit raised as he sat and gave Stephen a look.

"Really?"

"That's right." He began to attend to his own tea. "So I suppose the library will be reopening soon?"

"That's excellent news!" Stephen told whatever his name was, brightening. "I was worried, given the state of the place, it was shut down for good. Glad to hear it."

"Yes, I figured you would be." The man looked at Stephen curiously, but it was clearly lost on him.

"I wonder if I might trouble you to take care of something? You work down here, right? Perhaps you can hold onto this key I found outside and give it to whoever comes to open the library back up." He got the key out and slid it over to the man, who regarded it as one might a dangerous viper, or the yearly tax forms.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," said the man, setting his cup down. "I thought *you* were here to open the library again. That's what you were doing up there. Are you saying that's not the case?"

"I wasn't asked to, I don't think," Stephen admitted. "I just found the key out in the grass outside and happened to try it in the nearest lock. That lock happened to be in the door to this building. I let myself inside because I thought it strange the place looked so empty on so nice a day to be out and about. I hadn't been there long when you, ah, startled me."

"So you weren't sent by someone to get this place back up and running?"

"I wasn't." Stephen braced himself. *Here it comes. He'll make some excuse about getting more hot water or something for the tea, and call the cops. They'll come here and I'll be arrested. I have no ID, nor do I even have an address I can recall, though maybe if someone asks me for it I'll rattle it off as easily as my name just then. Best thing to do is, when he leaves the room, make a break for it. Vanish into the crowd. Find a charity box, break into it, and switch clothes as he's seen me in these and so will describe them. Perhaps a wig-*

"Would you like to anyway?"

"Look, I'll just go no need to get any police involved. I didn't really touch anything upstairs and- what did you say?" Stephen blinked, staring at the man across from him in a daze- as if seeing him again- for the first time. The man's words were hardly what he expected to hear, like he had just jumped up on the table and started a "goodness this is such great tea we're having" dance.

"Would you like to? Get the library running again I mean. *Someone* should, and you're here. Do you have something else pressing to attend to?"

I don't want to admit to this stranger that I've lost all memory of myself, do I? I don't know this guy, he could completely take advantage of me in my muddled state! But I must have a life somewhere, out there, beneath the pale moonlight. Isn't someone thinking of me? Missing me, tonight? I can't just drop everything and take over some library. I don't know the first thing about running a library! I wonder... if there's a book in the library about how to run a library? I suppose I am in the best place for looking up how to do things.

He went on. "Most people in Midveil struggle to find some purpose when they first arrive. It's an awfully big transition, after all. Honestly, this project falling into your lap could be considered a real blessing. Even if you just wanted to get it up and running, and advertise the position- your position- is open so someone else comes along."

I hope that something better comes along. "Wait, I can't just breeze in here and start mucking about. Or un-mucking about as the case may be, it can hardly get dirtier up there. There are laws and such!" *Midveil? Is that the name of this place? The town, or the city, or the country? Why can't I remember that? I recalled my name, but Midveil doesn't sound familiar to me at all. At least I've remembered to repeat it to myself so I don't forget it instantly like some other names recently. Midveil. Midveil. Midveil. Oh great now the spirit of Midveil will show up...*

"Goodness, not around this!" He scoffed at the very notion. "Perhaps where and when you came from there were laws that might make what we're discussing difficult, but you'll find things are rather relaxed here."

"When?" That didn't make any sense to him. *What an odd thing to say.*

"Exactly. You aren't hurting anyone. In fact you're doing the place a big favor. I would say go for it."

"Go for, what? The position of head librarian, or something?"

"Sounds about right to me. You can call yourself whatever you wish. The title isn't important it's what do you with it."

"What about you?"

He waved that off. "I just rent the space down here in the office area. Nice and quiet. Moreso lately, of course. I'm not head librarian material. No, the key came to you, so I would say the post is yours."

"How do you know *I'm* head librarian material?"

He bobbed his head from side to side. "I guess I don't, until you try the position out. Well, it's up to you of course. I could take the key if you're not convinced?" He made to take the key up from the table in a questioning way.

"And there must be forms to fill out," Stephen protested. "I would have no idea what forms or where to submit them to. Libraries are government- they're supported by the government and whatnot. I can't just claim to be an employee and therefore I am one. Someone would have to hire me! But there's no one to do that." *Maybe why the place got shut down. But there must be someone, a town hall or something, the mayor could do it. Does this place have a mayor?*

"I don't think that's how it works?"

"If that wasn't how it works then anyone could just come in here and claim to run the place!"

"Sure, just like you're doing now. You've got it. But if you were here, you could refute them, having the prior claim. But there is no one to refute *you*. So there's no problem with you taking the place over."

"There's a great number of problems!" *Does this guy think it's really that easy, this entire building is finders keepers?*

He looked confused, then brightened, snapping his fingers. "Oh of course, where you would be staying. Drink up and I'll show you the library's quarters. They're on the fourth floor. There's three floors of books, then the apartments. You would, of course, get the largest one being the head librarian. Any of your employees would then be able to pick from the others. Or if they've made other arrangements, just stay where they are. Totally up to you and any deal you work out with them. Drink up, drink it while it's blistering hot I always say!"

I do need a place to stay... until I can figure all this out. If I can claim to be 'getting the place ready to open' I can probably stay here, like he says. The key is in my possession, and the place is clearly undisturbed. No one would throw me out or even know I'm here. "Okay, fine." He sipped his tea. It was blistering hot, even scorching hot, now that the man mentioned it. That didn't seem to bother him though. Odd.

"Splendid!"

"It's been a real tragedy, the place being closed," the man told him, leading him up the stairs. "Unfiled books and dusty displays are the least of our problems. This place has a lot more significance than you would think."

Historical building? Hard to get anything changed if that's the case. Worse than an HOA, historical societies. "Yes, I assumed as much given the state of the place," Stephen agreed. *I bet it's problems with the plumbing? It's always the plumbing. I bet it's electrical too. Mouse droppings everywhere I shouldn't wonder.* "That's why I'm surprised it has been closed for so long. Did no one investigate until now? Everyone that came just... looked at the closed sign and went away again? That doesn't seem right."

"Can't tell you anything about that. I come in through the back, you see. I don't venture into the library part, normally. Place has been closed for years, feels like. I've only been here a few months. Space isn't at a premium, as you no doubt saw on your way here, but a *quiet* place? That's a little harder to find. Whoever decided to put offices down there really knew what they were doing. I wonder if the previous renters left when the place got shut down? I didn't wonder that, but now I do. Rented it easily enough. They didn't say I couldn't be here... Ah, here we go." He stepped back and let Stephen go first, who in his excitement rushed to open it, ignoring the man holding up a finger and about to say something. He slammed into the door, foolishly thinking he could simply open it and go inside. "It's locked of course," he announced, looking away to pretend he hadn't seen Stephen making a fool of himself. He put his finger down too.

"Of course!" He produced the key and unlocked the door, which led to a hall of many doors.

"Here's yours." The man took him to the first door on the right, and this time Stephen put the key in *first*. But then he paused.

"Hold on. There must have been other librarians in the place before it closed. Other staff: janitors, bookkeepers, night watchmen. Loads of people! One person can't run a whole library, especially one of this size. Why didn't one of them take the place over?"

"As I said, I don't know what happened, just that the place closed one day. I suppose you must be right. There are apartments for employees, logically it follows there were, at one time, others working here. I wonder what could have happened to them all?" He shrugged. It wasn't his problem either.

Stephen looked down the hall at the other doors. "These other apartments- they've all been empty this whole time?"

"As far as I can tell. Never heard anyone until you came along. And unless someone has the master key," he pointed to the lock, "they wouldn't have gotten this far. There's only the one route up here, you just took it." His eyes widened. "I hope nobody has been *trapped* up here this whole time! Though I suppose there is the fire escape, in a pinch."

Stephen scowled, taking the key out. He headed to the next door over and tried it. Unlocked. He pushed it open and looked inside. It was a fairly large apartment, just as much dust here as there was downstairs, and clearly no one was living there. "Hello!" he called out, just in case. He got no reply. Taking a quick look through all three of the empty apartments showed the same thing, only the larger pieces of furniture left. Though he saw what must be the key to the main door hung or put somewhere, so unlike his key these hadn't been thrown around. "So everyone left at the same time? I don't understand it." *If it had been a gas leak or something they might have closed the place yes, but then repaired the glitch and opened back up. Why abandon the books? Move them to a new building if this one is condemned in some way.*

The man sighed. "It is rather a mystery, isn't it?"

Hang on, he's not an employee of his own admission. How did he know about the apartments up here, and which was mine? They aren't marked that I can see. Did he get a tour of the place? How? He says he only came here recently, he couldn't have been up here before. I have the only key! He glanced at the man-

"Batman!" He pointed excitedly, face lighting up as he suddenly recalled that heroes' name he had been struggling with before. "Ha ha!"

"I'm sorry?" the man said, clearly confused.

"Never mind, can't believe I couldn't... never mind. Let's check mine out next." *Better keep an eye on this guy. I wonder if he's what he says he is. Of course I remember 'batman' but not this guy's name. Maybe I should just ask again. Ugh, he'll know I can't be trusted then. Why didn't I repeat it to myself when I first heard it? I'm such a bad person. Ugh, is that you, Anxiety? Get away from the console,*

I need Logic or at least Joy at the controls right now, not you. Sadness, don't you dare! Not one finger on that console. Paranoia? You can stay.

"It's the only one left," he agreed. They headed to the door and went inside. It was larger, that was true, and seemingly the previous owner hadn't bothered to take their stuff with them when they left. Not that there was a lot of stuff there, but it was more than the other three apartments.

"Now don't that beat all," the man wondered, looking around. "They left their stuff?"

"Okay that makes zero sense. One day the head librarian decided, after firing or otherwise getting his staff to abandon the place, to simply walk away, chuck the key, and never come back? And this was years ago. Did no one miss him? No one looked?"

The man shrugged. "Like I said, can't tell you. Maybe investigations were done, maybe they weren't. All I can tell you is what you see before you. There may be some clues here?" He gestured at the place in general.

"Sure..." *If he was in debt and running from that, there would be lots of bills. Gambling debt? Threatening letters. Maybe the head librarian was a woman, and had to suddenly get away from an abusive relationship. Can't assume anything at this point. The door was locked, the key 'lost.' So clearly they weren't under duress when they left. Unless they dropped the key hoping someone would find it and investigate, and no one ever did. Great. Maybe the other librarians simply quit after the fact, when their boss never came back? They would probably have a spare key or keys somewhere. But then why not leave them with each apartment's key? "I guess I'll look around. Box up this stuff so when they come back, I can give it to them." Perhaps a diary or journal was left. Is there a computer? If it's not password protected I can get in, see their browser history or something. If they were looking for good spots to jump off a bridge, that's a pretty big clue of where to start looking to... you know. If they were booking a trip to Mexico that's yet another clue. Huh. Mexico. I can remember salsa, but not where I come from? The mind is an undiscovered country.*

"I can leave you to it."

"Huh? Oh." Stephen's CPU cycles freed up and he unfroze. "I'm not sure what's the most pressing thing to do right now. Start work on the library or this place."

"Fairly late in the day to start downstairs," the man decided. "There's days of work down there, for one person. Especially if you are going to be staying here in the meantime. You'll want to change the sheets on the bed and whatnot. See what's left, that sort of thing. I doubt the previous librarian will want any of this after so long, and really they have no claim to it if you think about it. They left, abandoning the whole place. It's your stuff now. You could toss it into a recycler with nary a twinge of guilt about the act."

"I would still box up any personal items, just in case. No need to get anyone mad at me."

"That would be the decent thing to do. Anyway, must get back to work. Good luck with the place, it's your library now."

"I suppose it is. Thanks for the tour."

"Think nothing of it. See you around!" He turned and left, and Stephen listened as his footsteps receded down the stairs. He stood there a moment, lost in thought. *So to review; I somehow lose my memory on the way to somewhere, on foot. I happen to find a key in the grass. The key is to a whole building, which turns out to be the 'Library of Good and Evil.' Still am not sold on the name, but I could rename it. The metal sign just said library, it was the banner that gave the full name. The one occupant knows nothing about the history of the place except it closed some time ago under mysterious circumstances. Am I that old librarian? Did something happen to me and I've been wandering around in a daze ever since? And I 'found' the key because I dropped it there and some part of me still remembered? Now I've come out of it, found myself back where I belong, and all this stuff was actually mine to begin with? Am I the guy that bought that tacky painting over there? I don't feel like the guy who would buy that tacky painting. That painting has to come down! It's awful.* He went over to it and

took it down, setting it on the floor and pointed away from him. *Now I feel I've accomplished something- this room feels better already.* He took a deep breath. There was nothing for it. He had to stay somewhere until he figured himself out, and this place seemed to exactly fit the bill. He was staying for sure. But before he could settle in and start really looking the whole floor over he had to lock the door to the library again. Turn off the lights, draw the blinds. *It would be a disaster if someone came in now. Let's get that done. Secure the place so I won't be disturbed and let's see what this library is all about.*

Chapter 3

Fairy, cross the Mersey

The man, Stephen, awoke in his new bed the next morning with a lot of things on his mind. He had gotten to sleep quite easily it seemed, barely closing his eyes before now opening them again to a brand new day. He felt good. He felt energized. He felt maybe he could just stay in bed and forget the whole thing. Just go right back to sleep, why not?

He sighed. He knew why not. There was a library in need of his "expertise" whatever that was. But it was the night before that somewhat troubled him. He stared up at the ceiling, illuminated by what light filtered through the cracks in his draperies, and wondered. He had worked for hours, going through each room in the apartment and collecting that which he felt he could reasonably keep (a plush bear), what he could toss (a used toothbrush) and what he would save for the previous owner (that horrific painting). Without thinking about it he had found fresh bedding, changed it, and dropped into the bed. He had completely forgotten to eat or drink anything, and now expected to be ravenous. But he wasn't. He felt as if he could get up, right now, put on his clothes (he needed to get some new clothes!!) and head downstairs for a good day's work. He had no interest in eating at all. Which of course was crazy. There had been little in the way of food in the kitchen, a fact he was quite glad about though at this stage anything that had spoiled would be basically dust. So even if he wanted to, he couldn't exactly eat anything. And if he wanted to go shopping, not that he knew where any stores were, there was another problem.

He had found no money, or at least anything he considered to be money, lying around. No wallet, not even a change bowl or some loose pennies in the cushions. He had checked. Twice. There had also been no passport, no computer, no photos of who may have lived here before. Nor was there any mail with a name on it, calendar hung on the wall, or planner of any kind on a desk somewhere. *I mean come on, where is your little black book with girl's phone numbers in it? At least I could call and ask them who went missing from their life who was a librarian and get some answers here! Though I guess phones would have taken over that duty as well. And naturally that went with the old librarian. Didn't find it up here.* There was also no land line phone, as he had the brilliant idea to ask that guy downstairs- whatever his name was- for his phone number so he could call it. Caller ID would thus show the name of who was calling and help solve that mystery. But no, it couldn't be that easy.

With more of a sigh than a groan, Stephen got up. He felt... well rested. *XP boost for the next four hours! Nice. Or was it twelve hours? Never mind. Batman...* He shook his head, then bounced a little on his feet. He really did feel fine, especially after having nothing to eat yesterday, stumbling in here, and basically playing maid. With a shrug he pulled his clothes on and, checking his pockets again (still empty) he picked up the key and headed down the stairs. *I guess if I get hungry I'll see what ol-what's-his-name suggests for a penniless bum off the street to do. If I'm going to be running this place, I'll expect the head librarian's salary. Who pays me, and how do I tell them to start letting those dimpled shinies come rolling in?*

He looked around, snapping the lights on, and the place looked just as dirty and depressing as it had the day before. And it seemed colder, somehow, which was also a treat. He shivered a little. The sign

needed to be rehung, the displays refreshed, the books at the counter checked back in... what was that noise? Looking around, he did notice the air seemed clearer, and there was a piece of paper on the main counter. He went over there and took it up.

Good Morning!

I took the liberty of turning on the HVAC last night to help clear the air around here. Hopefully that helps. I can show you where the controls for the building are later, you might want to inspect the hot water heater system and such but what do I know? Oh, and maybe change the filter for the air system after pulling so much dust from the air. There should be spares, I hope. Come see me when you want to look stuff over.

You know who

Wow, he's really going to make me ask again, isn't he? The system would be pretty stressed, especially if he left the old filter in there to start with. Let's go take care of this first, I don't want to find out a week from now that the water heater has been leaking all over the place for the last ten years and then be on the hook for that water bill.

He walked down to the offices and, before knocking, checked to make sure there wasn't a nameplate on the door. Naturally, there wasn't. He sighed and knocked.

"Pull the bobbin, child, and the latch will fly up!" he heard from within, followed by a mad cackle. Stephen scowled but opened the door. The man he expected was sitting there, looking expectant at him from his desk. "Ah, Stephen! Good morning. Found my note, I expect."

"Yes, thank you for turning the system on. You said we should check things over?"

"I've never seen any maintenance personnel in here, but everything does seem to work. Better safe than sorry though. Tea?" He gestured to the teapot.

"I'll just get to work for now, thanks."

The man's bottom lip quivered, perhaps in sadness or perhaps in rage as his offer of tea had been refused, but he mastered himself and stood up. "Very well. Come with me."

The two completed a tour of the rest of the building, visiting the area below the offices and the roof, and the man was surprisingly competent or at least seemed so to Stephen. He pointed out various things, features of the building and what to look for, where the electrical fuses were, all that sort of stuff. Thankfully before leaving his office he handed Stephen a clipboard with some paper on it and a pencil so he could make notes, which he did.

"How do you know all this?" he finally asked as they headed back to the office.

"Oh, you get a sense of these things when you've been around as long as I have," the man said humbly. "You'll be that guy at some point. You pick things up. Nothing to it. Now, anything else?"

This guy doesn't seem all that old though? He hardly seems older than me, actually. "You tell me! I've got no clue about any of this."

He laughed. "What we've been through will get you started. Nothing looks too far gone. You can have a contractor go through the place once you've made up your mind to stay or not. Or pick up the skills yourself. Whatever."

"From the library. Right. Okay." He gathered up the papers and made to hand the clipboard back, but the man held up a hand.

"Keep it. Can't be a head librarian without a clipboard. Makes you look more professional. Let me know if you need anything else today."

"Thanks. You've been a big help already. I doubt we'll see anyone here today, word is going to have to spread the place is open again." *Maybe I can put an ad in the newspaper.* He snorted. *Newspaper! Ha! What century am I living in?*

"True. Well, good luck!"

Stephen got the windows uncovered, even opening some to let more fresh air in. He stood for a moment, debating, but figured in the end there was nothing for it. He walked to the door, unlocked it, paused again, put his hand on the sign, and before Anxiety could grab the controls back he flipped the sign to "open."

He took a step back.

He waited.

Nothing.

Letting out a breath he went back to the library and decided to look over the front desk, as that's probably where he would be spending the bulk of his time. He made sure the computer was plugged in, realizing he never did check the networking closet, only noting it in passing when that other guy pointed it out. With a shrug he powered it up, not expecting too much, and grabbed a cart to take care of this blockage on the return chute. Grabbing books from the full cart he put them into the empty cart, causing more to tumble down the chute and need to be collected. They made a huge deal of noise as they thudded together, which he winced at as this was, after all, a library. What he didn't expect to hear was the high-pitched *shriek* as the next set of books tumbled into the place, and the tiny person looking woozily up at him.

"What's the big idea?" the thing said. "Tossing me around like that? Can't a girl sleep in- hey, is the library open again?" She looked up at him with her tiny, yet huge blue eyes and his mouth dropped open.

"Fair- Fair- Fairy!" he stammered. "Sleeping in the book return?"

"A fairy good deduction," she agreed, shakily getting to her tiny feet. She smoothed out her flower petal dress and checked her hair. Her ponytail was askew and she took it out, shaking her long golden hair out behind her. Then she gathered it back up and secured it somehow, her hairband must be too small for him to see but her hair was looking neat again. She fluttered her gossamer wings, rose into the air, and seeming satisfied she could, alighted on the books again. "You're looking at me like you've just seen a ghost. A ghost, get it?" She laughed uproariously, slapping her knee. Finally she stopped. "You didn't laugh. That's fairy rude."

"Just... can you..." He rubbed his eyes. No, the fairy was still there. "Can you just stay here a minute? Just stay right... here."

"Want to get a camera? I don't blame you. I was once voted prettiest fairy in the circle." She stuck one leg out, posing. "I'll let you take... three pictures of me- no nudes- in exchange for something sweet to eat. I will go topless, but only from the back, and only for one picture. How does that sound?"

"Uh, um, sure. Three- for something sweet. I'll be right back." *Crap did I just make a deal with a fey? But if I don't take the pictures I don't owe the favor, right? Or crap, is she going to hang around until I take the three pictures? Don't say thank you in her presence, what other fey rules are there? Think man!*

"Deal!" she announced. "I'll wait right here. Think about what sort of backdrop you want. Probably books, as you're a librarian. But whatever. I'll think about how much leg I want to show. If you ask nicely, and politely, maybe a lot. Who can say?" She hitched up her dress just a tiny bit.

She is perfect. A perfect, tiny... I have to get someone. That guy. The only guy I know. Have to get him. Fairy. Fairies are real. I'm talking to a fairy.

"I thought books were for checking out, not me?" she asked sweetly. "I'm not raising it higher than this for now. It's just not my Hemingway."

He realized he was just staring at her. "Just... stay!"

"I'm not a dog. Woof!" She laughed again.

Stephen turned and ran.

Pounding on the door he hoped what's-his-name hadn't gone anywhere.

"Yes? Oh, Stephen, what's wrong? Did you discover some dark secret about the library and have unwittingly unleashed a tentacled horror upon the world that had been sealed here?"

"What? No? Is that possible? It's a fairy!"

"A what?"

"A fairy. I was clearing the return chute and a fairy tumbled into the place. You have to come and look. Maybe I'm just going mad. But I spoke to it- her. I spoke to her. Said I could take three pictures in exchange for something to eat."

"Ah, and you don't have anything to give her. I think I have some tea biscuits around here, let me check." He turned to go check. "You a fairy lover then?"

Stephen waited a beat. "You're taking me seriously?"

"Why wouldn't I?" was the muffled reply. "They're common enough. Good luck to have a fairy hanging around. They give out picture rights all the time though, but food is a common ask. Heck I might even have some fairy pictures around here if you want a look at them."

"Really?"

"Ah, here we are!" He held a bag of biscuits up. "No, not really," he snorted. "They're just as lucky, or not, as anyone else. Or did you mean the pictures? Yeah, someplace." He looked around, scowling. "Let's not keep her waiting. Did you find a camera or something? Didn't know you had one." He headed past Stephen and out into the hall.

"Forget the camera. It's a fairy, a real, live, honest to goodness fairy! I thought I was going nuts, talking to nothing. But you're acting like you see them every day!"

"Not every day, but near enough. I see all types coming into work, I'm surprised you haven't. Come along, Stephen!"

Stephen mutely followed him, and the two headed back up. *I forgot that fairies were a thing? What else have I forgotten? This is worse than I thought. And now I look like an idiot, great job, me!* The fairy was looking around, tapping her little foot but brightened at their approach.

"Two of you now? You want the fairy same deal?" she asked. "No discounts, or just breaking one of those in half! I can tell you know."

"Three pictures, right?" he asked, hefting the bag and showing her. "That sounds pretty fair."

"Pretty fairy," she corrected with a giggle.

"Where are my manners. Stephen, why don't you go ahead and introduce me? As you're the one who met her before, the task does fall to you, does it not?"

Stephen glared at the man, who was looking at him with a very smug and amused look on his face. *He knows. He freaking knows, this guy!* "Actually..." he stalled, trying to think of some way out of this. "It's considered... in my culture, that is... very rude... to... give someone's name... for them. Yes! The act of giving one's name... is very personal... so we feel it... should be... done... on that person's... own terms. Also so the pronunciation is done right and all that!" He shot a triumphant look at the man. *Yes, checkmate! Take that!*

"Huh." The man scratched his head. "I've never heard of that custom, have you?"

"Fairy much no," she replied.

"Where did you say you were from?" he asked.

Stephen waved that off. "Never mind that, the little lady is waiting." *As am I.*

"I suppose if it's important to you *culturally*." He said this as if not believing a single word. "I'm Ezekiel." He gave a slight bow.

Of course! Ezekiel... the... freakiel. Ezekiel not meak-iel. Not sneakiel, nor sheikiel, this man's name is Ezekiel. Got it. Ezekiel. Ezekiel.

"I'm Morning Blossoms, nice to meet you." She gave a very nice curtsy.

Morning Blossoms. Ezekiel. Well, the dress is a clue there isn't it? Morning Blossoms. Ezekiel. Write them down when you get a second.

Ezekiel continued. "Nice to meet you as well. If I may be so bold, what made you sleep in the library's book return slot?"

"Oh, well, I'm uh," she colored and looked away, "sort of between things right now. You know how it is. Hard to find work when you're my size, even demonstrating we can keep up with any of you big people. Plus the return slot seemed to never be cleared so I felt it was safe booking it there when I needed a rest. So much for that idea."

"How do you feel about library work?" he asked with a grin.

"You're hiring?" she shot into the air with excitement, eyes wide with promise.

"Uh..." said the guy actually, supposedly in change of that sort of thing.

"You need the help," Ezekiel told her. "And she almost literally fell into your lap."

"Yes, I mean, but she's a fairy?"

"I thought I explained that fairy well?" she pouted, stomping a tiny foot in the air which to be honest just made her look cuter not more angry. "Fine, I'll show you." She concentrated, and her body lit up for a second. The light traveled up her body, across her arms, and she dramatically clapped her hands together. "Give me the might of a thousand fairies!" she intoned dramatically. The light faded.

Er, that still isn't very much though, is it? Hold on, did she just do magic? Is that a thing I forgot about too? She lit up, didn't she? Was that a spell? Did I just watch a fairy do literal magic?

Thus empowered she zipped over to the cart and put her tiny hands on the handle. Buzzing her wings she gave a mighty push, and the cart actually started moving. She pushed it to the end of the desk, around the side, up one of the aisles, and back down another.

"Of course, it's more like six or seven at the most," Ezekiel explained as they watched. "That was fairy exaggerated, taking the strength of a thousand fairies."

"Don't you start," groaned Stephen.

He snorted. "Good casting though, took back the leakage, used extra mana to affix it for an hour rather than maintain it. She's done her magical homework."

I guess that's good? Wait, he could tell all that?

She flew over to the desk again. "See? I could do that all day."

"So you can put books back," Stephen admitted, trying to not jump up and down that not only fairies were real, magic was too, and could he please have some of that? Ezekiel clearly knew about magic, there was no reason a human like him couldn't learn it too, right? "I assume you can lift one, despite most books being three times your size?"

"Judge me by my size, do you? We'll bookmark that for now and move on to how else I can help around here."

"There's more?"

"I see this place is filthy. I know a cleaning spell too. How about you hire me and I keep the place clean? In a pinch I can return books. I'll happily learn the layout and help direct people to them, and I can even entertain kids with my magic. You won't find a better employee than me!"

"The thing is, I just got here yesterday myself. I don't know how I'm being compensated for this. I can't give you anything!"

"You can have your pick of one out of three- admittedly similar- apartments to live in on the fourth floor," Ezekiel offered, pointing upwards.

"I'm fairly certain I don't need a whole apartment to myself," she scoffed. "Maybe just a dollhouse in a corner? I'll stay in *your* apartment if you promise not to peek in the windows. You aren't getting a room with a view, I'm getting the view of the room. One room, with a fully furnished dollhouse on, like, a table or something so it's not on the floor. That's my requirement."

"You really want a job that badly?" Stephen asked suspiciously. *And where's the promise she won't be peeking out, humm? But if it's in a room then probably the main door would be closed so it's fine.*

"Hey, told you that you didn't know how good this library gig could be," Ezekiel said with a smirk. "Didn't I say?"

"I'll be happy with a place to stay, a place to work, and things to do," Morning Blossom told him seriously. "Everything else is secondary."

"Sweets are secondary?"

She cleared her throat seriously, looking away. "The occasional tasty tidbit would be fine."

"That's what I thought. Er, one second," he told her, motioning to Ezekiel. They moved off, and she looked over at them expectantly but stayed where she was. "Should I really hire a *fairy* to work here? They aren't tricksters or anything, are they? Can she really handle it?"

"No more than anyone else. As for handling it, depends on what magic she knows. I doubt she would lie about it, though of course there is a proud tradition of, shall we say, padding the old resume? Give her a shot, you may be pleasantly surprised. You can always kick her out later. I mean she was sleeping in our book return. Have a heart!"

"If you think it's okay, fine. I do need the help." He shook his head and cast his eyes skyward. *A fairy. What's next, a talking bird? 'Holy cow,' said Peter. 'A talking bird!'* "Okay, you're in," he told her. She gave a cry of delight and spun around in the air.

"I'm a librarian! Thank you so much! As I've been appointed, you won't be disappointed!"

"I hope so. Can you start now?"

"Work in this filth? In my best dress?" She indicated herself. "Granted, it's my only dress at the moment. Good thing it's wash 'n wear otherwise laundry day would be a real pain in the butt. But I know where to get a good uniform. Can I start tomorrow?"

"Sure. I need to figure out how to check these books in anyway. And I'm not dusting this whole place."

"Right, the whole place..." She got a faraway look in her eyes as she looked over the shelves from her vantage point. "Three floors... I knew libraries had the most stories, but this is ridiculous! It's fine, it's fine. I can do it! I'll have to borrow it..." she trailed off.

"No rush," he admitted. "It'll be days or weeks before we get actual customers back in here."

"I could spread the word too!"

"When we're a bit more ready," he agreed. "For now, starting tomorrow will be fine."

"Oh thank you, thank you!" she gushed, wiggling as though unable to contain her happiness. "I'll be here bright and early. I'll just come in through the return slot and get right to work. Oh, what's your name, boss?"

"His name is- oh right, the cultural thing," Ezekiel stopped himself. He dramatically put a hand to his chest. "My apologies! I meant no offense."

He just wanted credit for remembering my name when I didn't remember his. "I'm Stephen. Welcome to the Library of Good and Evil."

"I'm going to be the fairy hardest worker you ever had. You'll see! Bye for now!" She zipped into the return slot.

"I could just open the door for- and she's gone." *Well, that just happened.*

Chapter 4

Surprising discovery about the library

Scratching his head, Stephen grabbed the mouse that was next to the computer, looking at the unfamiliar layout on the screen and wondering just what sort of machine this was. There was no apple in the upper left corner, nor panes of glass icon in the lower left. Linux, maybe? A library would try to save money, I guess? Poking around, and at least the mouse worked as he expected, he managed to find the library software and open it up. He was tempted to find the browser and see if the internet was working but, in the end, decided that was secondary. Everyone that came in would no doubt have the internet at their fingertips, so his priority was what they didn't have- library stuff. Thankfully the book management software opened without any kind of password, and he spent some time poking around trying to familiarize himself with it. It didn't help that the thing seemed *extremely* sluggish to even his inexperienced eyes, but he soon realized the problem.

It's been sitting here unused for years. Probably should have been replaced with a newer model at least once or twice by now. Of course it's slow. I just hope it's not some kind of hardware issue. I wouldn't be able to fix it! Maybe Ezekiel would know who to call. Who am I gonna call? Bug Busters!

Humming some theme song or another to himself, he found the check-in function of the software and picked up the first book off the stack. He hardly glanced at it, reaching instead for the scanner but then turned it this way and that looking for the barcode to scan. "*Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Exploding Androids.*" He did a double take. "What?" The cover was that of the man, the myth, the legend, Holmes himself with the famous pipe and hat, but he seemed to be overlooking a crime scene out of a cyberpunk genre video game, not old timey London. He flipped through it, and while he picked out names like Watson and *he's putting what where? Their relationship certainly has progressed, I guess the book banning people haven't found this one yet,* the premise did seem to involve some kind of industrial sabotage of home androids. They would be purchased, put to work, and then days later explode, burning whatever house or building they were working at to the ground. He stared at it in confusion, then snapped his fingers.

Copyright ran out! At least on the character as he was presented in the beginning. Like Winnie-the-Pooh, didn't someone immediately rush out and make some kind of weird horror movie involving the character? So someone just did the same here, and published it. Weird, but okay... He can be a cyberpunk detective I guess. That's the whole reason copyright does expire, to allow for expansion of the original work. Disney, looking at you, kid! Little odd to see a real physical book but hey, I approve of the spirit in which the story was written.

He checked the book in, noting the overdue date which *couldn't* be right, and clicked the button that was presented to verify that yes, the offending lender had been sufficiently punished for daring to bring a book back late.

Thankfully, the computer takes my word for it. That number of days though, it's absurd. Of course, the computer's date is probably all screwed up too. Battery probably died. I should set it, but I don't know the date any better than it does! Sorry Mr. Computer, you'll have to do the best you can for now. Strange it didn't set itself, but that's a strike against the internet working around here. He sighed. *I*

hope that doesn't cause problems later. 'You should make a checklist of things to do.' Yes, yes, Twilight, I hear you. A nice long checklist, just for you. Dear Princess Celestia, today I made a new friend- a fairy, if you can believe it- and offered her a job as a librarian. Neither one of us really knows what we're doing so we're good company to each other. Please send a manual, should you have run into one in your thousand-year reign, for how to run a library right away. Your student, Stephen. Hey how did Twilight know how to run a library when she first got into town? It's not like she had run one before... I guess if an imaginary pony can learn how, I sure can!

He set the scanner down and went to put the book somewhere, but realized now he had a new problem. He had taken the two carts up front and filled them up with the books from the book return. So he now had no place to put the books he had checked in. Rolling his eyes at his inability to think ahead two minutes, he set the book down, went in search of an empty cart, and returned with it. *So this is my life now? What am I even doing here? I thought I was supposed to be figuring out who I was, and using this place as an excuse to have somewhere to stay. But no, a cute little fairy needs a job and falls down the book return- scratch that. Reverse it. And now I need to actually get this place going. At the same time, I feel no real anxiety about finding out who I was. You think I would! Strange.*

He stuck the book on the cart and made his way through the others, scowling at just about every title as he decided upon the next one to check in.

"Yoda Goes on Holiday."

"Smurfs invade Whoville. Part III??? Maximum Bloodlust?? The heck? Is this fake? They aren't even at the same scale. I mean Smurfs were small but wasn't Whoville contained in a single snowflake? It doesn't even make sense they would be aware of the other's existence." He paged through it, it didn't look fake and had the barcode. He moved on.

"Everything is Made Up but the Points do Matter. How to make the most of your points and one day travel Sunward."

"Harry Potter and the Chamber of no Antisemitism, Dumbledore is Gay Right from the Start, Trans Students Exist, and Harry isn't an Idiot and Solves Some of his own Problems Instead of Letting Others do so? That's the longest book title I've ever seen! What is up with these books? The copyright on *that* character can't have expired yet! Right?"

"The Uncomfortable Truth About Ped- What?" He stared at the cover, not believing his eyes. He looked around, knowing that no one was there but still not wanting to associate with a book having that kind of title or imagery right there on the cover. Yes, it was only a drawing, but still! How could the library have accepted a book like *that* and put it on the shelves? Any sane librarian would know that as bad as censorship was, as horrible as book banning was, there were still lines ones didn't cross! But it got worse.

"Hitler was right? Part Seventeen? These books can't be real!" He furiously typed into the search function and brought up book after book, all showing as checked out because there they were. His eyes nervously darted to the banner that still needed to be adjusted- and dusted. "Good and Evil," he breathed. "It's impossible. No library would carry- even one that called itself- these can't be real." He tossed the books on the cart furiously scanning the titles. Half seemed made up, fan-fiction nonsense that couldn't be real while the other half should never have been on shelves in the first place. He staggered back from the carts, breathing heavily. *This is all some huge joke. It's got to be. But to fill a library with bizarre books such as this, knock someone out, drug them, time them waking up just as they walked up to a library and hope they found the key to the place. Am I on some kind of sick reality TV show? Is someone going to pop out and yell "You got Suckered!" and I turn around to see a studio audience I somehow missed.* He spun around, but it was just the library behind him. "Where are you?" he shouted. "I know it's a TV show, you might as well come out! I mean you could have been a little more subtle with the book titles, how stupid do you think I am?"

Silence.

He waited, trying to get his breathing under control. *Hold on a minute. I've got it. They wouldn't be able to fill a whole library with stuff like this, right? Only these books have the funny titles, the ones from the return I was sure to see first. I've got them!* He rushed to the stacks, scanning titles and becoming more and more confused by the second. It was more of the same. Some serious works, some derivative works, and then stuff like how to make someone lose everything and get away with it. He climbed the stairs to the second and third floors and found even more of the same. *It's madness. How is this possible?* He sank into a nearby chair on the third floor, immediately regretting it because it sent up a cloud of dust. He almost put his arms on the table but jerked back, it was filthy there too. Instead, he scooted the chair around and rested his elbows on his legs, trying to make sense of it all.

But he couldn't. There was just too much evidence this was a real library, and these were the real books inside of the real library. He didn't want to be a book burner, or take books off shelves for content he found objectionable, but wasn't this going a little too far? *Maybe the reason the place shut down is because of the types of books they offered. The previous head librarian refused to back down, to stock only 'normal' books and so walked away from his post as a form of protest. "You don't like the kinds of books I offer? Now you get no books at all, teehee!" He- or she obviously- was a believer that all books, no matter how weird or disturbing their subject matter, were valid. Do I believe the same thing? If I really do reopen this library, will I be forced to make the same choice they did? Ban books or compromise my morals?* He walked back to the front desk in a daze. He wasn't sure. He picked up the book with the objectionable cover and turned it over. The blurb on the back made it seem like a certain type of attraction had a reasoned argument to be made in its favor, and the content inside was laid out nicely, so someone had taken their time with it. *And someone checked it out. I see they didn't have the courage to return it themselves though, or was the library closed by that time?*

"Excuse me," said a voice, and Stephen yelped, threw the book in the bin again and spun. There was a woman standing there. A perfectly ordinary woman. She had brown hair, medium length, and a necklace that had half a heart dangling from it. Her shirt was a solid blue, and she wore a patterned skirt as it was again a nice day outside. Stephen's face was on fire as he wondered if she had seen him holding that book and looking inside. *How did she even get in here? Oh, right, it's a library and we're open. I unlocked the door. Don't we have some kind of bell or something?*

The lady went on. "The library is open, isn't it? I haven't been here in so long I almost forgot where it was. But there seems to be no one here. Are you alright? You seem flustered?"

"I'm fine!" he hastened to assure her. "We're open! Yes! Books, we have many books here. In the library. This building is, in fact, a place for books that you can check out. In other words, a library!" *Smooth Stephen. Really smooth. Scare off our only patron why don't you? Get ahold of yourself, man! Stop babbling!*

"Oh good. I've just adopted a child, and they would like to get a dog. So I'd like to get a book on the care of dogs. I know, I know, that's what we have the infoweb for. But darn it if I don't want to snuggle up with him on my lap and read a physical book with him about the care of dogs and see cute dog pictures and talk about responsibility with him before bed. Is that so much to ask?"

"Not really?" he answered, fairly sure this was the case. "Congratulations on the adoption."

"Oh, thank you. There's just so many needy kids out there, you know? And I always thought to myself, no kids! Right? But you exist for so long and you find yourself wondering if you couldn't do more, you know? And helping raise a child, I've heard, really helps your point total rise fast. Not that I'm doing it for that reason, which would make it drop, am I right?" She laughed.

He gave a confused grin. *The heck is she talking about? Infoweb? 'Exist?' Points? She doesn't look that old either, not enough to be 'so long.'* He glanced at the book about the points mattering.

Maybe take another look at that one? "Right... so a bog on dooks. I mean a kook on dogs. I mean a book. On. Dogs. Raising dogs." *I'm useless!*

"With pictures of cute dogs to see what kinds exist in Midveil, yes."

What are certain breeds banned or something? "Let me see what we have." He went back to the search function and typed in dogs, figuring that would be generic enough to serve as a starting point. He stared. *Should have been more specific. Why are there over a hundred titles here about bestiality? Do we really have that kind of space?*

"Now you've gone pale, are they all checked out?" the lady asked, concerned.

"Just one minute, please!" he pleaded. He added "care of" to his query and was rewarded with more relevant search results. "Oh, here we are."

The two walked through the library, an awkward silence stretched between them. The place was quiet. Too quiet. *Maybe a bit of soft classical music playing? Having no one but the two of us here is creepy. It must be much worse for her. Also, now that I think about it, how long has this place been closed for? She didn't even realize it. Without me coming here yesterday and finding the key, it would still have been closed. She would have gone away disappointed. Wasn't there some announcement the library was closed?* "Here we are," he announced, almost jumping at the sound of his own voice, he was that on edge. "Right where it should be! What a guy that Decimal was!"

"You mean Dewey?" she asked with disgust. "Surprised a librarian would invoke that name, actually."

"What?"

"You really don't know? Did you just take this job or something? He's Darkward. Or was. I suppose even his point total could be raised. Man was a total jerk; he went Darkward for sexual harassment, racism, and surprise-surprise, antisemitism. I suppose he's kicking around somewhere though. The founders always said everyone should be given a chance at redemption. And I suppose that's true. It's just tough sometimes, you know? Anyway, if that was a joke it was in poor taste. We just call this number system 'the filing' as I understand it. Unless he's atoned for his actions and I missed the announcement?"

"Er, no, I haven't heard... I actually just took this job yesterday. The library has been closed for years. You didn't realize it?" *More words I've never heard before. Darkward? Founders?*

"I wondered about all the dust, and no one being here. Thought it was just a slow day. That wouldn't explain the dust of course..."

"Of course. So I'm a little out of the loop. I was just... assigned here. I didn't mean any offence, I'm still adjusting."

"You just came to Midveil and they've put you to work right away? Someone must have a high opinion of your skills! Did you run some big library before?"

"I'm still trying to work that out myself, actually."

"Oh." That seemed to confuse her a bit. "Well, I'm sure you'll do fine."

"I hope so. I... hired a fairy to help out? You actually just missed her, she starts tomorrow. She's going to handle the cleaning, she says. Magic, you know." *Because of course everyone knows about magic but me. She didn't react, she does know about it. What in the actual heck?*

She was nodding like a mention of fairies and magic was no big deal. "A fairy? As a librarian? An unconventional choice but they're just people, same as us. May as well give one something to do instead of sneaking around and playing pranks. Yes, this book will be fine, plenty of pictures!" She paged through one of the "care of dogs" books on offer, and seemed satisfied.

"Let's get you checked out then!" *If I can figure that much out without setting fire to the place or whatever.*

The lady handed him her library card, which he scanned, and of course it said it was long expired and did he want to renew it. He clicked yes, and it wanted to make sure her address was still up to date. He told her as much. "Oh of course!" She pulled out another card and handed it to him. It was fantastic; a fully lifelike, 3D hologram of her sprang out of it while the particulars of her address, 'point total,' and more he didn't understand scrolled by. He tried not to stare, *has technology advanced this much? But I know how to use this computer so wouldn't I recall having an ID like this? Or is this simply magic? Why would I forget magic existed? None of this makes any sense.*

"Most people just scan it?" she offered, pointing to the symbol in the corner. "That should update everything? I know, it's an awful picture of me, I'm really embarrassed about it. Even here we can't get a good picture on an ID card? It's just one of those mysteries of the universe I guess."

"Ah, right!" *I'm so incompetent now! I feel like I remember only half of what I should know, and still nothing about myself but my name.* He ran the scanner beam over it, and the information seemed to be accepted as the window closed. "There you are, all set for the library card. I'll just check this out..." He fumbled with it but finally got her on her way. "I'm not sure of the date on here, have it back in two weeks?" he guessed.

"I will," she promised. "Good luck with the library and..." she looked around with a trace amount of disgust, "everything."

"Thanks."

He collapsed into a nearby chair as a buzz sounded, corresponding to the door opening. *That was nerve wracking. I see, there's a buzzer but I missed it because I was upstairs at the time. I didn't see her because I rushed back down here to look at the... he shuddered... crazy book. What if someone wants help finding that book? Or one of the 'other' dog ones? As head librarian I feel it's my duty to serve everyone, equally.*

No answers came to him, so he decided to just take it one step at a time. He spent some time checking everything back in, hitting 'penalty applied' for each overdue book. He then had to traverse the library trying to put everything back. Thankfully he found the creaky old elevator, so he didn't have to lug the cart of books up and down stairs, which helped. It didn't help that he didn't really have a mental map of where the various sections were and had to go up and down many times, but at least he decided the elevator was still safe to use. He got so caught up in it he didn't even think about breakfast or lunch, and while checking out all the drawers and things in the front desk Ezekiel headed over to him. He had cleaned the desk out, organizing it to his taste and was wondering what his next steps should be.

"Closing time," he announced. "Unless you're staying open late to celebrate the reopening? Be dark soon though. How was the first day?"

"It's been a day already?" he asked, shocked. He looked out the window, and yes, the sun was getting real low in the sky. "I can't even tell you. Had someone come in, *that* went oddly I can tell you that. But she did get the book she wanted." *What's points?* he almost asked. But he had the book, he hadn't put it away so he figured he would read up first, so as to avoid making any more mistakes like he had before. "At least I got the books from the return all squared away and the front desk isn't a disaster zone now."

"That's great!" he praised. "You'll be ready for day two then. And you'll have help, right?"

"If you call a fairy that promised to clean the place up help, yes," he admitted. "Which I do, of course!" he hastened to add. "Obviously, I do. Totally normal thing to do, have a fairy working here."

"It might be. Well, be sure to lock up. I'm headed home. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you then," he replied with a wave. Ezekiel headed out the door, making it buzz again. *Probably more convenient than whatever door he comes in. I can lock it behind him, after all. Better do that while I'm thinking about it.* He went over and did that, flipping the sign to closed.

What a day.

Chapter 5

Shaking the dust off

Stephen truly wanted to read the book on “points” that evening, and even brought it with him to his apartment. He sank into the couch, not exactly feeling tired but certainly feeling a bit worn out. He still wasn’t hungry or thirsty, a fact that didn’t seem to bother him as much as he would have thought. *Should I find something to eat anyway? I know there’s... water... in the tap. I guess I’ll read for a bit and go through the kitchen again.* He sighed, picked up the book on points and settled back to read. *Sleep would be nice right about now though.*

He woke with a start, the sun was shining in through the windows, and the book had clearly tumbled from his open hands the night before. He groggily looked around, unsure where he was for a moment, but quickly realized he had spent the night on the couch. *Was I really that tired? I don’t recall ever falling asleep quite that easily before. Running a library, even one that only got one customer-borrower- is more intense than I would have believed.* He got up and stretched, picking the book up and looking around. *Well, don’t need to change, I guess. Only have these clothes anyway. How am I getting paid for running the library again? I’d like an advance. Maybe buy a few things? And still not hungry.*

Making his way downstairs he was surprised to see Morning Blossoms flitting about the place, running a huge (for her) feather duster over the displays. It was bigger than she was, made of feathers by the looks, but she seemed to be having no problems with it. She saw him and waved excitedly, so he went over to her.

“Good morning,” he told her. “You’re here early!” *Or am I up late? I need a watch.*

“Hiya! Got started already as you can see!” She indicated the newly dust free areas. “Are you impressed yet? Cleaning might turn out to be my soap-erpower.”

“I’m more impressed by how you got that huge thing you’re using down the return chute! Or did you find it around here?”

She shook her head. “You like it? It’s enchanted to suck up dust. See?” She turned it and there were several small jewels stuck to the handle, all in a row. “I borrowed it from my godmother.” She lowered her head but raised an eyebrow, as if expecting something from him.

He knew what it was.

Don’t engage with it. That sort of thing will only encourage her. Don’t say it. Don’t. Don’t say- “Your fairy godmother?” I told you not to say it! Look how smug she looks now! She’s going to be insufferable all day!

“I would have thought that much was obvious,” she agreed, clearly trying to hold back a laugh. “And I didn’t use the chute, not for this. I used magic to unlock the door. Worked right away, either there never was any protection on the lock or it’s faded. Might want to look into that.”

And why, pray tell, did you learn a spell to unlock things in the first place? “Who would break into a library they could just as easily walk into and take out any books they wanted? Are they so lazy they can’t return them?”

She shrugged. "Hey, this is Midveil. Some just can't help but move Darkward, you know. Say do you like my uniform?" She set the duster aside and did a twirl in the air.

"It's a tiny maid's outfit!" Stephen exclaimed, looking it over. It was a complete maid's outfit, in black, with a short skirt and white apron. She even seemed to be wearing tiny stockings and had little shoes as well. "It looks really good, where did you get it?"

"Oh I know a guy. Fairy lover. Sews little clothes for us, makes tiny accessories too." She wiggled a foot at him, showing her little black shoe. "I offered him a better than standard deal. Eight pictures-five normal, three tease- if I could keep the dress. He accepted. He's got lots, don't worry. And I'm sure he'll replace this one, he loves seeing us in different outfits. This gives him an excuse to make one in a slightly different style."

"Teas?" he asked, thinking there was a pun in there somewhere, knowing her. "Like posing with a tea tin? Or did you actually climb into a cup of tea?" *Because that sounds weird.*

She laughed, gripping her sides. "Teas! That's a good one!"

I take it that's wrong.

"But no," she finally managed, getting ahold of herself again. "You know." She posed like she was bending over, lifting her skirt a little in the back. Then she spun around and gave him a "come hither" glance, pulling the side of the outfit down one shoulder.

"Oh, a tease," he realized. "And your flower petal dress is safe somewhere?"

"I brought it with me, as I haven't moved in yet. I... can do that today?"

"I've got the space for you, it's fine. I'll have to find a table somewhere, to put the dollhouse on. Assuming I can pick up a dollhouse from somewhere, of course." *Maybe Ezekiel will know where one is to be found. Charge it to the library or something.*

"Great! I'm sure you'll knock it out of the park."

"Huh?"

"You're going to do a home run for me?"

He rolled his eyes. "So how does the duster work?" he asked, changing the subject. "If it sucks up dust because of the enchantment, how do you ever make *it* clean? If you shake it out, wouldn't it just suck the dust right back up?"

"Not familiar with enchanting?" she asked, zipping back over to it. "If you remove any of the gemstones the enchantment fails. Obviously I won't demonstrate here." She pointed to the top one. "I'll do that outside. Then I can just shake it out, put the gemstone back, and it'll be ready for the next pass."

"Oh. That makes sense."

"But I'm not making any cents just standing here, so I'm going to get back to it." She gripped the handle and rose into the air again. "Call me if you need anything, boss."

"Right." *Must be using her strength enhancement spell again.* She got back to work, and he watched as the duster needed only to be brought near something to attract the dust into it. *That's going to make the job much easier. Guess I should get to work too, I can't be upstaged by a fairy.*

He was up and had no idea the "normal" hours of the library so he went over to the doors and made sure they were unlocked. Morning Blossoms had locked it again, so he flipped the sign and was about to walk away when he noticed something outside. Poking his head out the crack made when he opened the door it turned out to be Ezekiel, leaning against the wall.

"Morning, Stephen!" he called out. "Can I get some help here?" He indicated a large box beside him, on a two wheeled handcart.

"You want that brought inside?" he called back with a wave. Ezekiel nodded and tipped the box, letting it roll. Stephen held the door for him and followed after, wondering why he hadn't used the more convenient to his office back door.

"Hope Morning Blossoms actually shows up," he remarked. "Or this was a lot of effort for nothing."

"Did I hear my name?" said the fairy, flying over. She set the duster aside and hovered in front of him.

"Ah, morning. Nice uniform!"

"Thank you!" She did another twirl. "Let me know if you want any pictures."

"I'll keep it in mind. For now, brought you a housewarming gift!" He indicated the box.

Oh, it's for her. That's why he waited at the front door. What could possibly be that huge though? It's half as tall as I am. Don't tell me he already found one?

"That's a bit premature," she mused, one finger on her chin. "I don't have a house yet. And clearly a house *warming* gift would be a space heater, which I can't use, because again I don't have a house to warm up."

"On second thought, help me take it back through the door, Stephen. I'll just dump it in the river I guess."

"Wait, nooooo! I want it!" she cried, hugging one corner of the box. "I want it so bad what is it? What's in the box?"

"Hummmm... Fine. You'll see. Help me get it up the stairs."

"Me?" She indicated herself and her tiny height.

"No, Stephen. It's going into his apartment after all."

"Gotcha. So it is what I think?"

He nodded with a smirk.

"Huh?" Stephen managed, not really getting it. "Oh, sure. Up the stairs, right."

"That's it exactly."

The two men wrestled the thing up the stairs and into the apartment, then Stephen sighed and ran back down to the front. He locked the door again and flipped the sign to closed, just so someone didn't wander in while they were busy. Now back upstairs again he found both looking around.

"Where do you want it?" Ezekiel asked.

"Wait, slow down. I want to be clear here because you haven't actually said what this is. You really went out and got her a dollhouse?"

"Sure did," he replied modestly. "What else of this size would I be delivering? Figured you wouldn't know where to look. Bit of a fixer upper to be honest. Don't suppose you know a repair spell?"

"Of course I don't!"

"I meant Morning Blossoms. I know *she* has magic."

"I actually do," she admitted. "Good thing too, otherwise repairs might have been a real pane in the glass."

"Great, hoped that was the case. Yeah, put out some feelers, managed to snag it. Consider it my gift to you. As long as you work here, anyway," he hastened to add. "I'm officially donating it to the library, we're just keeping it up here for now."

"Thank you fairy much!" she replied, clasping her hands together in front of her. "Don't just stand there, get it open! I want to see it!"

"Table first," Stephen insisted. "We'll need to lift it out of the box and onto the table. I don't suppose--"

"Down in the library storeroom should be tables," Ezekiel told him. "And again you're not technically taking it out of the library, so it's fine."

"The old Narnia coats defense. Sure," he agreed with an eyeroll. "I'll see what I can find." He headed back down, then into the back area that was "employees only" where they kept various stuff for the displays. It was down another set of stairs and didn't have much light at the moment, but he knew it

was fairly big from the tour before. They had a mess of shelves and old displays down there; he hadn't actually walked the whole thing yet as it hadn't been a priority. *Soon though.* He found a table and, careful not to knock into anything on the way, dragged it upstairs. He had Ezekiel help him set it up in a side room, by the window.

"My own house, I'm so fairy excited!" gushed Morning Blossoms. "I guess we're really ceiling the deal now, huh? No excuse I can give not to go to work."

"I hope you don't mind the boxes," he told her. "This is the room I was storing the stuff I figured the old librarian might want back, if they ever show up again." He indicated the boxes stacked in one corner. "So they're staying."

She waved that off. "Table up, box open!" She was wiggling again, zipping back and forth in the air around the box.

"I think she might be a bit excited," Ezekiel remarked. "Let's not keep her waiting." He got the top of the box open, and the two men looked inside, deciding on how to best lift it. They were discussing various places they could grip it; they didn't want to damage it further after all, and it was heavy.

"Oh, you two are useless," she chided, landing on the roof of the place. She gestured dramatically, turning into a tiny ball of light again. "Let this object be moved by my will!" she spoke, throwing her arms up and slamming both tiny palms onto the roof. The power once again flowed along her skin and down her arms, soaking into the object below her. The house slowly rose out of the box as she straightened up, raising one hand slowly at her side in what some may consider an overly dramatic fashion. But they clearly have no understanding of the arts and shall be ignored. "Forward!" she cried when the house was high enough, and it smoothly headed to the table, then settled.

"Hang on, you *could* have gotten the box up the stairs all on your own!" Stephen protested. "Instead you watched us fight with the thing! And you acted all shocked too, like Ezekiel was being unreasonable about you getting it up the stairs!"

"You didn't ask me specifically about magic to do it," she reminded him, zipping around, and looking in the windows. "Oh there's the furniture. This is so great!"

"I'm glad you like it," Ezekiel told her, standing with his arms folded but he didn't seem concerned. He looked to Stephen. "It's a fairly weighty spell, takes a lot of mana to move something as large as this."

"Fairy weighty," she agreed, but only halfheartedly. "And there's a little door! It works." She opened and closed it a bunch with a squeal and finally headed inside.

"It splits open," Ezekiel told him, showing him the hinges and the split. "If she wants help setting the furniture up. You would have to be careful closing it up again, of course."

"I suppose I could get the furniture into the right room, at least. She could place it where she wanted it." He looked the outside over, some of the roof "shingles" were missing, and it could stand to be painted. Two windows were broken, the glass missing, and it looked banged up in places. But it was the right size for her, standing more than a meter tall and looking like someone simply shrank a house down. *Someone put in a lot of effort at one point. It's very detailed. Or did they actually shrink a real house down to this size? Can magic do that?*

"That's the spirit. I'll break the box down, I can take it from here. Thanks for the help."

"Thank you for the house. Are you sure I don't owe you anything? I mean that the library doesn't? Because I have nothing, I remind you."

He waved that off. "Happy to help. You're the one that now has a fairy for a roommate." He tapped the side of his nose knowingly. "I don't envy you."

"I do, don't I?"

They left her exploring her new place and Stephen opened the library back up, Ezekiel vanishing down the stairs to his office for the day. Several minutes later Morning Blossoms happily got to work again, so Stephen went over to her.

"How does it look?" he asked.

"My repair magic will be able to do some things," she replied. "What's missing is of course a problem. Nothing my magic can do about that. I can repair a crack but not wish material into existence. On the other hand, it doesn't actually need to keep out rain or anything so that's just aesthetics. Maybe we can fix it up together over the long term, if you don't mind heading to a local warehouse with me to get the material. I will need your help tonight getting everything in place, clearly it was opened up and everything just shoved into one room to keep it from bouncing around. I don't want to have to drag everything out of there and to the correct room. What would take you ten seconds would take me an hour or more. It's not easy being this size, you know."

He nodded. "Sure, I can help with that. Hang on-" His eyes narrowed.

"Thanks. I mean, what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

He glared even more suspiciously, leaning over closer to her. "Do you have magic- specifically- to solve this problem?" *Like with the moving object spell, I'm going to ask directly. Just so she can't weasel out of it later.*

She blushed and grinned, like she had set a little 'trap' for him and was pleased he had seen through it. "Yes. I could make myself bigger, and do it myself. But I thought us working together would be more fun! We are roommates now, like Ezekial said. We should get to know each other, and this would be a good way to do it."

He snorted. "In exchange for my help I'll want two pictures, in that outfit. One normal, one tease."

"Now you're getting the hang of it!" she agreed excitedly. "You got it!"

Warehouse? And I don't even have a camera yet... "For now, can you work on the banner?" He pointed to it. "Let's give anyone that comes today a good impression of the place. Then do the displays, though I'll probably refresh them once I figure out what we have in the storeroom. Leave the shelves for later."

"Banners up! I think I can manage something. I'll dust it off first and see if I can tighten it up."

"Okay. Take a break when you want, no timecards here... yet."

"Great, I'm on break!"

He glared.

"Kidding, just kidding!"

Stephen busied himself with washing all the windows, he had found some cleaning supplies in the desk the day before and put them to use. *Much better if people are walking by and look in the windows, if they can actually see in the windows and tell we're open again.* He looked up. *I'm surprised the lights still work. It doesn't look like I need to change any bulbs.* With the windows done he cleaned off the screen of the computer, then looked up as Ezekiel walked up to the front desk.

"No one's come in?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"I see. Say, how good are you with computers, anyway?"

Stephen thought for a moment. "I have no idea. I got this one running, it's true. But that all seemed obvious to me. I just turned it on and used it, I didn't need to fix anything. Why?"

"I wanted to print some fliers to put around town, saying the library was open. But my printer won't print. Wondered if you could come take a look?"

"I mean, I guess. Hey Morning Blossoms!" he called.

"Yes?" A tiny head popped up over the shelves.

"I'm heading downstairs a moment, let me know if anyone comes in."

"Okay!" She waved and vanished again.

"Let's go see it."

The two went down to his office and Ezekiel showed him the printer. He scratched his head. "Does it not power on? Does it power on but make a funny noise? Does it power on, not make a funny noise, but not feed paper? Does it feed paper but nothing comes out?" *I mean there's as many ways for a printer to not work as there are parts of the printer. I need more details, man!*

"Uh, it tries to power on but makes a funny noise," he reported.

"Might be jammed, when was the last time you used it?"

"Since before I moved into this office. I don't need to print a lot of stuff."

"Okay, let's take a look." He lifted the cover and stared into the inner mechanism of the device, caked with dust and what looked like a mouse's nest. "I think that may be the problem."

"You may be right. I'm just not that technical!" He laughed.

"Lifting the cover to see if there's an obstruction isn't technical though?" Stephen wondered, more to himself. He started pulling stuff out of the printer while Ezekiel got a vacuum, and he gave the thing a good cleaning. It went back and forth now, and seemed to be happier. In fact, as the document was already waiting to be printed, once it was powered up it started feeding paper and sheets were being spat out.

"Ah, now see, that's bitten me once before," Ezekiel admitted. "I tried printing something again and again when it was unplugged one time. Then I got sixteen copies of the thing. Won't make that mistake again! Print something once, and if it doesn't print, sending it again won't make the situation better. Fix the problem, *then* send the job if it really doesn't print."

"I'm just surprised the ink still works after this long!" Stephen remarked, picking up one of the pages. *Come to the Library of Good and Evil, now open once again to the public.* "Would have figured it had long since dried up." *That happened all the time with this kind of printer, right? I think I'm right about that.*

"Dried up? Why would it do that?"

He handed the page back. "Because that's how ink works?"

Ezekiel regarded him skeptically. "Are you sure about that? The ink has a purpose, to be put on the page. Not to dry up in the cartridge. But like I say I'm not very technical, so you may well be right."

"The ink has a *purpose*?" Stephen repeated, not buying it for a second.

"Most things do."

"Well, maybe it's magic," he decided with a shrug. "It's working now, that's the important thing."

"Any technology that can be distinguished from magic is not sufficiently advanced," Ezekiel announced. "I've always said that."

"Sounds backwards to me, but the meaning is clear enough. Thanks for printing these. Once it was cleaned up more I was going to ask where we should announce the place was open again. Like a town newspaper or something, if that exists here. Newsletter, more like? Maybe this will be enough to get people talking."

"That's the hope. I'll put them up on my way home. I'll go a different way the next few days so they get scattered about."

"I'd offer to help but I would probably get hopelessly lost."

"It's a big place," he agreed, "Midveil. The largest, really. You do have to be careful, best to find your footing here before you head out there. Take it one step at a time."

"And then I can be footloose?" he asked dryly, imagining a tiny face lighting up at the banter.

Ezekiel slapped him on the back. "That's the spirit. Thanks again."

“Sure thing.” He headed back up the stairs, only to meet Morning Blossoms on the way to see him.

“Customer, boss,” she reported. “Wants to return a book.”

“I’ll take care of it, then,” he agreed. “Thanks for coming to get me.”

“You were fairly specific about what to do...”

Chapter 6

Charity begins at home

As Stephen approached the man his eyes shimmered with newly restored hope. Like the headman's ax was about to descend but a dragon had shown up and disrupted the proceedings and allowed his escape. Of course, the dragon had sealed its own doom, hours later, by appearing in that way but the dragon didn't know that. *Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin, something something, something. And more words, in the tongue, of the dragons so mean.*

"Head librarian?" the man asked hesitantly.

Back in the present Stephen rounded the desk and nodded. "How can I help you?" He looked the man over: T-shirt with a strange logo he had never seen, jeans, brown hair. Not in the best of shape, but who is? *Another perfectly ordinary library patron. Great to see it!*

"You're not the same guy that was running this place before, are you? I have that right?"

"Under new management, you're entirely correct," he agreed. "Found the place abandoned, and I've taken it over. So far, no one has appeared to say I shouldn't so it's full steam ahead." *Of course it's only been like two days...*

"That's great! Good for you. I can finally return these books." He patted the stack on the counter. "I was worried when I saw the lights on and such..."

"Worried? What would you be worried for? Is the library being open not a happy occasion?" *Did the community get it shut down because of the books? Will there be violent picketers outside my door before midnight?*

"The last guy, he was pretty strict. These books are very overdue, I had no idea what he might demand of me. Nonetheless I was honor bound to make the return. I heard stories that even a single day would result in the most horrible of humiliations. You- you're not like him, right?"

"Not that I know of. Uh, tell me, what else do you know about the last guy? All we can figure is he left rather suddenly, but we can't tell why. Don't suppose you would have any idea?"

He shrugged and shook his head. "Only interaction I had with him was at the front desk. Of course he usually had others working the desk; he only personally handled *overdue* books. Some kind of perverse pleasure in seeing us squirm no doubt."

"Humm, well, don't worry about it. With the return chute clogged as it was, I consider the fact you couldn't return these books in a timely manner the fault of the library. And you brought them back as soon as you realized you could, another point in your favor even knowing there could be... repercussions. So there will be no penalty for them being late. Just let me get them checked back in and you can be on your way." *I can't exactly tell him I have no idea what the penalty actually is: money? But I find no cash drawer anywhere, so it can't be that. Unless this society is completely cashless but then where's the credit card reader. Or equivalent? Or does everyone just bump phones or something? It could be this points but how are they gained, lost, or transferred? Again, there's nothing set up for that around here. And now this guy is saying the last librarian just sort of made up a punishment? Humiliated people? That can't be right. What would be the point of that? The threat of punishment doesn't deter crime, just ask any city with a prison. Prison gets filled up. Yeah, great deterrent, not. Yet we still kept*

building them, instead of looking to the root causes of crime and just working to undermine them with, you know, the power of friendship or whatever.

The man visibly sagged with relief. "Oh, thank you so much! This is such great news, it's been a real burden for me." He straightened and beamed. "I've stopped by once a week since the library closed you know? To see if the place was running again. Finally I can be free of this albatross."

Albatross! Get your fresh albatross right here. "Wait." Stephen leaned over the counter. "How long have you been coming by here, exactly?"

"Oh, uh, I think about twenty years or more? I'd have to try counting it up."

"Twenty years?!"

"I didn't feel right keeping the books!"

"That's not- how-" He looked the man over again. *There's no way he's forty years old, he looks twenty. He must be having some fun with me. Or his math is way off, like he's thinking a few months was a year, I know I could never really say when stuff happened. Though the amount of dust...* "Okay, whatever. The library thanks you for your dedication. Still seems a bit much though. You came every week?" *Shoot, how many other books are out there in the hands of those not quite as dedicated to the task of returning them as this guy? Can I search that? Overdue books? Trigger some kind of notice to go out? If the addresses are even still right. Little bit unfair, to demand books back that may have been lost long ago for whatever reason. But I can't do nothing about it, either.*

"You're right," the man decided. "I have been stuck in a rut lately. Always walking the same way to work. Checking the library like clockwork. I need to mix things up. See some new faces, try some new restaurants or something." He stood up straighter and smacked the counter. "You've convinced me. I'm taking a completely different way to work tomorrow! Returning these books is going to be a wakeup call for me, I'm- I might even get a whole new wardrobe. Start working out again? Finish those old projects I started and let go of? Well, no more! Yes, it's a new me from tomorrow on! Just you wait!"

"Good for you!" By the way do you actually eat? I don't seem to. And where do you get clothes? Who pays you, and what form does the currency take? What do you do in the city? How long have you lived there? And so on, and so forth. "I'll need your library card, hopefully you-" The man practically shoved it into his hand, along with his ID which sprang to life just like the last woman's did. "Thank you." *Where did you get this?*

Checking the books in, he handed the cards back. "All set. Your library card has been updated and can once again be used. Feel free to check out more books-"

The man backed away, waving his hands in front of him and fiercely shaking his head. "No way! I can't risk that. Maybe in a few months, if you're still here. No offense, but with my luck I'll get more books out, and three days from now this place will be shut down again. I'll be right back where I started, you understand don't you? I can't risk it. The new me can't risk it. The new me doesn't take that many more risks than the old me. One step at a time, you know?"

"The chute would be clear by then..."

The man started on his way, shuffling to the side towards the door. "Not going to risk it! Bye! Thanks maybe see you in a few months good luck with the library hope it doesn't close again byeeeeeeee....." And the man was out the door.

Huh. Well, I can't say he doesn't have a point. Good luck out there, random sir.

Stephen figured he may as well get these books reshelfed, and headed out into the stacks. Thankfully the man hadn't taken out anything too embarrassing, not that he had paid attention at the time. *So maybe checking out 'certain books' won't be that bad. For either party. Of course as I become more familiar with the process I'll be able to pay more attention to the titles of the books rather than the process. Still, just don't look at them. Like someone in a low-cut top- you just don't look at them those. Easy enough, right? Ah who am I kidding? I would look.*

Shaking his head at his own weakness he slid the next book back where it belonged and went in search of the next location. He seemed to find it a few moments later, but there was a problem. There was no space for the book to go into. He scanned the shelf, wondering what was happening, and scanned the titles.

"The Philosophy of Morals and Values."

"New Age Philosophy for a New Existence."

"Meditations with Dolphins."

"The Diary of Smaug, a Dragon's Tale."

"Sunward bound."

"Philosophical Musings Relating to Music."

"Hang on." He backpaddled, eyes coming to rest on the offending title. "Ah hah! A misfile! No wonder there was no space on this shelf." He took down the Smaug book and looked it over. "Explore the tale of Smaug, who did no wrong," he read from the back. "How would you feel if you were a dragon and some upstart, invisible, little thief came along and started poking around *your* hoard? But no, somehow the thief is hailed as the good guy and the dragon is in the wrong? This is the tale from the dragon's point of view, from his tireless work to grow his hoard as a young hatchling, to the very end when he was tragically murdered for simply defending his home." *And this somehow got into the philosophy section? I mean I can kind of see it, I guess. Still, shouldn't be here. Let's get you back home little one.* He shook his head. *Just what sort of library was that guy running here anyway? Misfiled book! Unacceptable.*

Stepping jauntily with another job well done, Stephen returned to the front desk to see what the next thing he could do was. He glanced at the banner, which was now taut and brighter. Clearly Morning Blossoms had gotten to it and cleaned it off. He gave a nod; she seemed to be a good worker at least for the moment. *And if she runs out of steam in a day and decides this isn't for her, at least the place is that much cleaner...* He glanced down. "Ah hah!" *I can't exactly ask a lady of her stature to wrestle a vacuum cleaner around the place. Now maybe she could do it with magic, but what kind of boss would I be if I just stood there watching her struggle with the thing while I did nothing? A typical one, that's what. And do I want to be a typical boss? No! No I do not.* He quickly ran down to see Ezekiel and borrowed his vacuum cleaner, lugging it up the stairs and to the front area. *I can at least do this area right now. Then I'll give her a little break, watching the front for more people visiting The Library and yes I capitalized it in my thoughts thank you very much. I'll then head around and vacuum between the shelves.*

He looked the vacuum cleaner over, he hadn't really paid attention to what Ezekiel had been doing with it, and was surprised to find it had no cord. He looked at it this way and that, but still no cord appeared. *How does it get power? Wait a second...* There on the main part of the body he saw some glittering gems and smiled. *Ah hah! I've got you. It's powered by magic, bet you a dollar and a dream!* He hit the switch and it roared to life, making him nod. *And it's so light,* he mused, rolling it back and forth experimentally. *It looks like an industrial unit, it's like a solid piece of metal. But yet I can lift it almost with one finger. Crazy! Was it enchanted to be lighter too? Just how easy is enchanting anyway? Huh, wonder where I could go to find out the answer.* He leaned over, looking out across the many shelves. *Where could I gooooo... It's a mystery.* He chuckled to himself and started in earnest to give the floors the attention they so rightfully deserved, holding everything up as they did. *Don't get enough credit, floors. They're the foundation you might say.*

He enjoyed the task for all of two minutes or so before it became a total drag on his psyche, but he put his back into it and emptied the canister into the wastebasket (carefully) every few minutes. The floors were filthy, and were actually quite colorful under all the dust. Who would have guessed? He had to run over them several times before the torrent of filth began to subside, and he could finally move on to the *other* side of the desk. *This is going to take a while.* When he got too far to keep an eye on it he

found Morning Blossoms and asked if she could watch the front desk for a bit. With a cute little curtesy she said it would be her honor, head librarian. They both laughed.

Perhaps two hours later he had bags of dirt, dust, and old rubbish from when the library was open before to get rid of, and he again trooped down to see Ezekiel.

"Where do we put our garbage?" he asked, sticking his head into the door. "I got the first floor done at least. The other two are going to take the same amount of time, I hope I can even finish today."

"There's a dumpster around back," he reported. "It's picked up to be put into the recycling machines at the nearest warehouse on a regular schedule. At least it was. I always just took anything over directly so I could get credit for it. I can put in a call and make sure the service is resumed. I have to guess the library gets the credit for anything in there? And thus by extension you will? We'll probably generate trash- I mean you'll generate trash, the library I mean."

"I get it." *There's actually a credit program, like returning cans with a deposit on them? Interesting. I guess they take recycling seriously in this city. Good to hear.*

"Fine, fine. I'll call them. Just head out the back door," he pointed with a thumb. "You'll see them, can't miss it."

"Okay, thanks."

He headed up to get the bags but stopped dead in front of them. *The outside. Shoot! I've been focused on the inside of the building, but there's all that greenery on the way in here. There was probably a service that came and trimmed the bushes and things! The grass didn't seem too long, thankfully, but...* He sighed and headed out the front door, looking around. The trees and bushes around the front of the library could use a trim, that much was certain. It was standing there looking things over that Stephen realized something. He had been facing the library when he 'came to' and while yes, he had cleaned the windows and so, from a certain point of view had seen 'the outside,' his focus was on the windows themselves. He hadn't really looked at the city, and the busy street there in front of the building. Or the other buildings for that matter, which he now took a look at. He rubbed his eyes and stared. He couldn't believe what he was seeing, not really. Quickly turning he made his way back inside and headed up the stairs. All the way to the top, to the door Ezekiel had pointed out was the roof access. Slipping the key from his pocket into the lock and turning it, he pushed the door open and stepped out. His building was fairly tall, and this change in perspective hadn't changed the situation on the ground one bit. On the street he could see horse drawn carriages, sleek looking hover vehicles, odd looking bikes, people on skates, all just going about their business. Meanwhile, the buildings were just as diverse. From his vantage point he could see a building seemingly made completely of glass, another of stone, while a third hovered in the air and had metal ladders hung out the sides so people could climb up to it.

And the people, if they could be called that; small people, tall people, dark people, green people, fairies, people with animal ears, people with tails, people that looked like the gray aliens from pop culture. Was that *Thor*? He was carrying a hammer, and there was a mermaid swimming gracefully in a bubble of water that just seemed to keep pace with her! They were *all* down there, just going about their lives like it wasn't a scene from a very strange asset flip video game. He stood, frozen, just trying to take it all in. *How could I have forgotten so much? This city, the people- who am I? Should I be down there, walking along like it's just another day? I mean magic, sure, but this? How can I account for this? Illusion magic, maybe? Could be cheap. Wear a different face every day? I still do see 'normal' people down there, and two have come into the library. Maybe they turned off their 'illusion' when they came in? Perhaps that's just good manners. Maybe that guy was a centaur before he came in, the lady a... I don't know. Catgirl or something. Not everyone looks crazy. Oh, maybe that's why they looked so young- they had illusions going but just to look younger. But why the carriage, if stuff like that hoverbike, the person on it waved to him as they zoomed past, and he hesitantly waved back, exist? None of this makes sense.*

After a moment, Stephen came to a conclusion. A big conclusion. Massive, even. The conclusion was this: he was not going to think about it. He went back inside and locked the door, vowing to give himself at least a week before venturing out into that chaos again. *Give yourself time to get used to the idea. That's the ticket. And if a mermaid comes in here, I'll just politely ask her to not drip on the books. That's for the best. Right.*

With the sights of the city firmly shoved to the back of his mind, bolted down, a vault installed over the top of them, locked, and then chained shut, he went back to the garbage bags. Picking up two, he headed to the back door and out into the alley behind the place. He kept his eyes down, not looking or at least trying not to look at the forms of the other nearby buildings that shared the ally. He found the dumpster, and tossed the bags into it. His sane, brick building was the only one he-

"OW!" echoed within the dumpster.

Holy cow, thought Stephen. A talking dumpster!

A head popped up from the dumpster. "Whatsa big idea, dog?" said the young man from over the side. He was dark skinned, needed a haircut, but was otherwise obscured by the metal sides. "Dumping that shizz on me? I should beat you down, make you respawn or some shizz. You tryna start something with me?"

"What? No," Stephen insisted. "This isn't on me. Why are you in my dumpster? How was I supposed to know someone would be in there? Isn't that dangerous? What if you got recycled or whatever?"

He barked a laugh. "This crate ain't moved in a tick, dog. Ey, you ain't telling me this place is live again, is it? Dang, bro, I gotta find a new crash pad? That's whack!"

"Crash- you aren't *living* out in the dumpster, are you?"

"You call this living, dog?" He spread his arms out, indicating the general area. "You gotta weird sense a humor."

"You know what I mean! Where are your parents anyway?"

"My what? Dog, even if they made it here they ain't caring enough to find me. Good riddance."

"Oh really?" *He looks barely sixteen. What is wrong with this city? Oh right, the same thing that's wrong with every city. We don't try to solve homelessness, just make them scarce enough so we don't have to look at them.* "Well, you can't stay here. This dumpster is going to get stuff tossed in it again because yes, the library is back."

"Figures. Had a good thing here, now the man has to go ruin it for me. I'll find some other pad then, get outa your hair. Fudging bell!" He started climbing out of the dumpster, and Stephen made an executive decision.

This was a 'good thing?' How low do you have to sink for that to be true? "How about I give you a place to live?" The kid stared at him as if he had started growing a tail. In the silence Stephen had a thought. *Did he say 'respawn?'*

Chapter 7

And then there were two

"And this whole shebang could be mine?" asked the kid, looking around the place like it was a palace. Rather than what it was, which was a rather small, empty, apartment. But you have to start somewhere.

"That's right," Stephen told him. He had convinced the youth to follow him through the library and took him up to the apartments. Along the way he explained about finding it empty, and recently taking it over. The youth was quite upset when he learned the key to the place had just been lying there the whole time, if he had gone around front he could have started the place up again himself. But no, he stayed in the back, "out of the way" and so missed the opportunity. And wasn't that just the story of most everyone's life?

"And would you be able to keep a library of this size, heck any size, running for any length of time?"

"I dunno, dog," the kid replied. "Wouldv'e beat sleeping in a dumpster tho."

"Of that I have no doubt."

"So what do you think?" Stephen asked him. "Want to sign up? There's plenty of work to do, and I can't do all of it by myself. I've already hired a fairy, I can introduce you in a minute, she's been dusting the place. I was just starting to vacuum and needed to go up to the second and third floors. If you take the job you can watch the front desk. She can clean and help direct people, and I can do... head librarian stuff."

"Sleep in yo office, you mean."

"I don't know that I have an office." *Do I have an office? I haven't opened all the doors around here yet, come to think of it. I should do that at some point. Put it on the list.* "But no. Once I vacuum I'm going to refresh the displays out front, I think. I need to walk around our storage area, see what we have down there. I haven't done that yet either. I looked at the huge room we have down there and decided it could wait. Hire someone to trim the bushes out front. Give the plumbing a good looking at, I really should have made that list my inner Twilight demanded two days ago."

"Yo inner who?"

"Never mind. So what do you say?"

He looked skeptical. "I just gotta watch the front desk? Sounds too good to be true, dog."

Stephen nodded solemnly. "There are various responsibilities that come with role." *Yeah, that sounded appropriately boss like.* "You have to check out books, accept returns, put them neatly on the cart to go back. I'll take care of that so the front desk is staffed at all times." *Though the next person I hire can do that.* *Returns. By the time we have that many it's a full time job I'm sure someone else will show up to do the work.* "Update library cards, keep the desk clean. Librarian stuff. Nothing too strenuous."

"That's what I mean! There must be a thousand souls lined up outside yo door for a gig like that. Watchu hiring me for?"

"Because you were living in the dumpster behind the place," he explained simply. *And I've only met three people around here, and one of them already has a job.* "You need the opportunity. I can only help those I can see. I mean if you think it's going to be too much to handle--"

"I ain't sayen that. I'm just sayen I get this swanky pad and work is right downstairs? Don't need no bus pass or nothing? I can really just stay here? I... I won't be homeless no mo?"

"We're *all* staying up here, so you can't have any parties or anything," he cautioned, looking ahead more than two seconds for once. *He can be taught, yes ladies and gentleman he's not a complete loss in the brain department. Thunderous applause from the crowds here folks, they are going absolutely bonkers up in the house.* "Unless I'm invited, that is. But it's a place to stay. Maybe earn some points." *That's the thing to say, right? I really need to read that book, but everyone keeps saying it.* "I can't promise you anything but a place to stay and possibilities--"

"I hear ya, dog. My natural born point total going up is good enough fo' me! You think it'll really happen?"

"I don't see why not." *Ah, it was the thing to say. I might just be learning 'the lingo' even if I have no idea what it actually means yet. He accepted it, so I'm on the right track. Points is like money?*

"And canni, like, chat up cute girls or whatever that come in here?"

"Chatting them up is fine. Don't take it too far. Don't need any harassment lawsuits filed against the place."

He looked offended. "Course not, dog, I ain't no creep! I just wan some action, you know? Can't know if some cute thing is interested les you ask. That's 101, dog!"

"I suppose that's true. So is that a yes?" He held out a hand. "Employment, as a librarian under me, the head librarian, until I say otherwise. You slack off and you're out. Back on the street. This is your chance, don't throw it away."

"Nah dog, I hear ya! I'll take it!" They shook hands.

"In that case you're hired. I'm Stephen."

"Name's Dajuan. And if I hear one mustard joke, an I mean one... Dog I'mma cut a beech."

"You won't hear one from me, Dajuan. But I do employ a fairy. She may be... fairy merciless."

"Aw, I know about them, dog. No worries. This my key?" He gestured to the counter, where the key was.

"Yup. Or should I say, try it first. Then I'll head down and introduce you. Show you the post and we can all get back to work."

"That's cool." He took the key and they tried it, finding it to indeed lock the door to the apartment. He slipped it into his pocket.

"Don't lose that," Stephen cautioned. "I have no idea how to get another." *I'm not keen on breaking the door down if you lose it someplace.*

"No worries, I'll keep a eye on it."

"Good man. Let me show you to your post."

So Stephen took Dajuan to the front desk and showed him the software, going through the checkout procedure. He warned the kid the system was pretty slow, but it seemed to work well enough for now. "Then you click here--"

"Nah, I think there's an easier way to do it, dog," he protested.

"What?"

"See these little subscripts here?" He pointed. "Betcha that means you can hit the F key and not click. Makes sense, no? Only got two hands, don't wanna be reaching for the mouse every time. Lemme try it." He got in front of the machine, an amused Stephen getting out of the way, and the kid swiftly went through the screens just by touching the keyboard. "Thought so. You make it too complicated, dog-er, guess you boss now, boss."

"I guess I did. How did you even see that?"

"Just logic, man. Like I say you got two hands, right? One hand needs to hold the scanner, one on the keyboard. Ain't got no third hand for the mouse and you not in the right position for it. What you gonna lean over? Nah. Makes sense to make everything work by keys. So I looked and there it was. Easy."

"Who's the new guy?" a small voice asked, Morning Blossoms flying up.

"Ah, there you are. Morning Blossoms, this is your new co-worker. He'll be manning the desk from now on. Dajuan, this is Morning Blossoms. Morning Blossoms, this is Dajuan."

"Hold on a second, let me ketchup," Morning Blossoms insisted. "I thought in your culture it was rude to say someone else's name. Bun now here you are, just saying our names like a hot dog. What gives, I mustard you wrong before?"

"You see how it is?" Dajuan complained. "That's my life, boss. Can't have a moment's peace."

"Ease off, Morning Blossoms, let's not make a bad first impression."

"Okay fine," she pouted. "Can't let a girl have a little fun? It's not like I relish it."

He gave her a blank look.

"Okay, okay, last one, promise. For now. Nice to meet you, Dajuan."

"Same here, Blossom. So you're the maid right now, huh? I do like your uniform."

"Thank you. It wasn't maid to order or anything, I just know a guy. So back to the culture thing?"

"You got me," he admitted. "I just didn't remember the guy's name. So I made that up."

She gave a little gasp, putting her hands over her mouth. "You're worse than me. That was a good one too. I almost believed it. Wow."

"What's this?" asked Dajuan.

"Nothing," Stephen insisted. "There's a guy that rents office space downstairs. Ezekiel. He may come up here, just send him on to me if he needs something. You got it here?"

"Easy boss. Check in, check out, put them on the cart. No big."

"Right. Search is there, I'll expect you to get familiar with the layout so you can direct people, answer their questions. If you have something you need to deal with, just come find me. We're not penalizing people for overdue books, obviously, at this time. Anything checked out *now* is a different story. Just check them back in. Nothing fancy."

"I can dig it."

"Okay then. I'm headed up to the second floor to continue attacking the carpets. You two play nice down here."

"Sure boss."

"Ya boss!"

At least both should keep an eye on the other now. I doubt he'll run off with the stapler or anything, though it is a Swingline, they don't bind up as much, is what I've heard. But he is a kid I just hired literally off the street. Still, what interview questions am I going to ask him? Where he sees himself in five years? I have no idea where I'll be in five years. I don't know where I even was five days ago! The outside has mermaids and Tron lightcycles, and I now live with a fairy inside a tiny house inside my apartment inside a library. You just have to roll with the punches around here, is what I'm learning.

Stephen finished the second and third floor carpets by closing time, and flipped the sign to closed for the evening. Morning Blossom reported good progress dusting everything, saying she was almost done with the first floor, and Dajuan reported several patrons both returning and taking out books. He figured out how to see the log on the computer and praised the kid for a job well done.

"Oh I know," he crowed. "Point total already up, I'm finally Sunward bound. This a sweet gig, boss. Thanks for giving me a chance."

"Of course." *How do you know?* "Let's work on your house, Morning Blossoms. See you in the morning, Dajuan."

"Yeah. Cya then."

They went their separate ways and Stephen helped Morning Blossom move her furniture into the right rooms. It was a complete set, with even a tiny bathtub and sink of all things for the bathroom. Not that they worked, but it did give him an idea. When they were about done he took the tiny tub and filled it with hot water, then brought it back with a washcloth from his own bathroom. "Thought you might want a soak," he told her. "I can come collect it when it's cold. This should be a good towel for now?" He held up the washcloth. "I'll put it here for you." He folded it neatly into fourths and set it next to the tub.

"That... would be wonderful," she admitted. "Thank you."

"Sure thing. I'll close the door on my way out. No worries. Just let me know when you're done."

"I will."

Some time later she appeared, wrapped in the cloth, and said she was done with the bath. He washed out the little tub, put it back, and closed her house up for the night.

"Good night!" she called from her front door, sticking her head out.

"Good night," he answered and headed out, closing the door again. *Hang on, this door was shut when I came to get the tub. How did she get out of the room? Or did she just close the door behind herself again? Eh, that's as minor a mystery as they come. What a day. Hired someone, got more cleaning done, had some actual borrowers come in. This could actually work!*

The next day Stephen knocked on Dajuan's door but got no reply, and wondered how heavy a sleeper the kid was. *Still, I could let him sleep in this once. He's probably not had a good night's sleep, in that dumpster, since he came to this city. We can manage and I'll pretend to be cross when he comes down and tell him he needs to be on time from now on as he only lives upstairs. How can he really be late?* He went down the stairs and walked past the desk to unlock the door but found Dajuan tapping away at the computer.

"Morning, boss!" he greeted Stephen.

"Good morning. Did you sleep at all? You're up early." *Much earlier than I expected. Guess I shouldn't have assumed.*

"Eh, figured I slept enough till now. Wanted to get a head start on this!" He pointed to the screen, and Stephen leaned over the counter to see what he was working on.

"What do you have there?" *Looks like a lot of squares on a white background.*

"Map of this place. Saw we didn't have one so I walked around and noted down what the sections are." He held up some rough drawings that were labeled. "This way I can print some up, put 'em around the place. Plus if someone asks I can just look at the map rather than try to remember. Don wanna give nobody wrong directions. Send 'em up the third floor when they need the second, or whatever."

Stephen was taken aback. "That's a great idea, Dajuan. Very helpful. And you can use this computer to do that?"

"Got some whack drawing tool on this shizz. I'll make it work, tho. Jes need lines and text, really."

He nodded. *Sure, the tools don't make the artist. Unless you have the raw skill the best tools in the world will still only make mediocre art. But a real artist could take only the colors black and white and create an evocative piece. Or just tape a banana to a wall, whatever.* He grinned. "Okay! Great! Just hired yesterday and already bucking for a raise. Keep up the good work. I'm going to work on the displays, so I'll be around."

"Sure thing boss. I'll watch the doors, no sweat."

Stephen went down to the storeroom and stood at the doorway, mouth set in a line as he surveyed what he could of the place. He couldn't see very far, there were high shelves packed with stuff in the way. *Shoot, I should have had Dajuan look for some kind of inventory list on that PC. They would have kept a record of what they had down here, right?* But he saw what he needed at the moment, and that was empty boxes. They were broken down and flat, stacked on a nearby shelf and he grabbed a few, heading back up the stairs. *I'll pack these displays away, mark the boxes with the contents, then walk around and get some ideas about a new set of displays.*

Setting the boxes up, he grabbed a cart that already had some books to go back and collected all the freshly dusted books from the front tables. It seemed to be a mystery themed display, with some brightly colored, illustrated kids' books on one table, YA novels on another, while on a third, more adult oriented mystery novels were set up. Along with the usual props like magnifying glasses and some crudely made "Jump into mystery" posters. The books went on the cart and the props went into the boxes, carefully labeled on all sides, because apparently Stephen believed in redundancy. This was a shock to him as well, don't worry. The problem he had now was the cart was made for books; it was like a mini shelf on wheels, not made for carrying boxes around. *So I'll have to carry the boxes down there. That's fine, I can make two trips or whatever, they aren't that heavy. Let's put these books away first though. I'll be glad when that map Dajuan is making is done, why didn't I think to do something like that? At least some crude effort as a guide I could refer to. Oh well.*

With that done, he headed down to the storeroom with a box, hoping to find a good spot for all of them. He shoved some stuff around to make room on one shelf he decided was wide enough to hold all three, deciding there was no logical structure to anything down here anyway. Things were just strewn wherever, spilling out of the shelves seemingly at random. Props of all kinds, from kids toys to adult toys (which made his eyebrows climb) it seemed could be found here. *Which makes sense. You can find anything in books so you might want to make any sort of display. But seriously, where did all this junk come from? Donations? Was the last librarian a hoarder or just liked to frequent garage sales or something? For the Hoard! More work? I'm on the job!*

Heading back to the front area, he noticed Dejuan pointing in his direction and two people in suits were standing there, looking over at him. They both wore sunglasses, indoors because they were just cool like that, and they both looked like some kind of government agents at this distance. They both gave a curt nod to the boy and started walking his way.

Oh boy, here we go! Don't like the looks of this. Stay cool, Stephen. Shields to full power, red alert!

Chapter 8
They're not ICE, baby

"Stephen?" asked the agent on the right.

"Yes," he replied, shields already taking damage. Both agents looked no-nonsense, in crisp black suits. He couldn't exactly tell if either was male or female, and the voice of the one wasn't any help either. They stood there rigidly, looking down on him as they were both taller than he was. Short, cropped hair and pale skin completed the look. "Can I help you find a book, maybe?"

"Not at this time," replied the agent on the left. They looked around suspiciously, but there were books on offer so they couldn't exactly say the offer wasn't genuine.

"Stephen," the one on the right went on. "I'm agent Danyelle but please call me Danni or Dan." They whipped off their glasses, folding them and putting them on their jacket pocket. "This is my partner, Daniel."

"Please, call me Danny, or Dan," said the agent on the left. They too took off their glasses and extended a hand. "Glad we caught up with you."

"Danny," Stephen greeted them. "Danni. What *can* I do for you, if it's not books you're after?"

"We're concerned, Stephen," Dan told him seriously.

"Very concerned," Dan agreed. "About you."

"Have I done something wrong?"

"Let's have a seat," Dan suggested, pointing to some study tables that were nearby.

"Let's sit and we can discuss things," Dan agreed.

"Alright." The three headed to the table and both Dan and Dan sat across from him, rigidly upright. Dan folded their hands in front of them while Dan reached into their shirt pocket for something.

Who are these jokers? Didn't show any badge, not that I would recognize one if I saw it. Would I? No, probably not.

"This is you, isn't it?" Dan asked, sliding an ID card across the table.

Stephen touched it and his image appeared hovering over it. He looked down at himself, the image was him, there was no denying it. Same clothes and everything. He squinted at it. *Horrible picture. Just like that lady said, it's universal somehow. Some innate quality of the universe that cannot be matched.* "That seems to be my ID card, yes."

"You admit it?" Dan asked, seeming a bit surprised.

"Why would I try to deny the truth?"

The two agents glanced at each other. "Truth can be a tricky thing, Stephen," said Dan.

"Some people can't handle the truth," admitted Dan.

"Some people think the truth is lies, and the lies are truth," Dan went on.

"What does that have to do with me? Thank you for bringing me my ID card. I wasn't sure how to get it."

"That's what concerns us," Dan told him. "A person named Stephen was scheduled to arrive in Midveil. We got his ID card. It was on the table, same as all the others. But then, and this is the key point,

the man himself didn't arrive. At the end of the orientation one card remained. This card. No takers. It concerned us."

"Very concerning," admitted Dan. "Never happened before. Every person that enters Midveil gets the same orientation package, and an ID card."

"Very detailed, our orientation package," Dan agreed with a hint of pride. "Lots of work put into it. Not like the one in the early days."

"Very much not like it," Dan admitted. "Hard to believe the difference now."

"Then you came along, or as we said, you didn't come along, which brings us to now."

"Right, you did not come along at all, is our concern," Dan nodded along. "We were left at the end of the day with one ID card. *Your* ID card. It isn't like you can get lost, entering Midveil. We checked the tapes--"

"They aren't actually tapes, of course."

"Yes, that's just a saying we use. We checked the tapes, no Stephen was there that day. It wasn't simply that you forgot your ID card. You never arrived to pick it up. But yet here you are. In the city. Doing... stuff." They looked around again suspiciously. "Unknown stuff. Bad stuff? Remains to be seen."

"That's all true," Stephen admitted. "I'm a little fuzzy on that myself."

"Fuzzy, he says," Dan questioned seriously.

"That's what he said," Dan agreed.

"You leave him alone!" Morning Blossoms cried, zipping between them and holding her arms out to her sides as if to shield him. "He's done nothing but good here!"

"A fairy," said Dan, looking down at her.

"In a maid's uniform," Dan remarked. "How cute."

"I believe the term is winsome."

"You could be right. I think I have a candy somewhere on me, if you want it." Dan started patting their pockets.

"You... you... you can't buy me off with sweets!" Morning Blossoms insisted, stamping a foot. "You leave him alone!"

"Yeah, if he has to shut this place down," Dajuan remarked, coming over, "what happens to us? I don't wanna run this place. Was talking shizz before, but manning the desk is fly. I can do that. Did he do wrong or what?"

"That's what we're trying to determine," Dan told him. "He doesn't seem to be combative, so we aren't sure what to make of it."

"Very unexpected," Dan remarked. "No candy, I was incorrect there. Apologies. He sat down with us. Admitted the ID card was his. Unprecedented situation."

"You have that strict a security coming into the city?" Stephen wanted to know. "That one lone person like myself is tracked down by agents like you?"

"Wouldn't call it security," Dan countered. "Equity and Inclusion."

"That's right," Dan agreed. "Everybody gets the same chance here."

"That's true," Dajuan admitted. "We went through it when we got here. I mean I did, don't wanna speak for you, Blossom."

"Sure, you have to do orientation. How are you going to know *anything* otherwise? Did you really not?" She spun and looked up at Stephen. "That is weird."

"As far as I know, I ended up here. I don't know *how* I got into the city," he protested. "My first memory is being outside the front doors and noticing the key in the grass outside. But I'm not a criminal or anything. I want to know the truth same as you do!"

"That can't be determined," Dan told him. "Point total is zero."

"Totally locked out," Dan agreed, touching the card. "Another anomaly. Two at once, very bad look for you."

"No way!" both Morning Blossoms and Dajuan said, looking at his card. Where Dan had touched it, a zero with a lock on it was displayed. "Howzat even possible?"

"We were hoping he could explain," Dan explained. "But it seems he cannot. If he's not lying."

"I'm not lying!" Stephen insisted. "I don't know what's going on."

"When you come to the city you get the orientation," Dan droned. "Offered provisional housing. Training in an area or areas of interest or expertise. You have one year to distinguish yourself, and make points. After that you're on your own. Everyone has points when they come here. Positive or negative. Up to them where they go from there. But not you. You have zero points. Why is that?"

"If everyone in the city gets housing, why were both of these people living on the street?" Stephen demanded.

"The housing is only good for the year," Morning Blossoms explained. She sighed. "Like I said when we met, it's tough being this size. My point total didn't rise quite fast enough. Don't get me wrong I like being who I am, but it does come with certain disadvantages."

"For me, nothing really fit," Dajuan admitted. "Tried my hand at some stuff, ya know how it is. Not lazy or nothing, I swear. I just needed more time! But rules iz rules, so they say." He indicated the agents.

"Yes, that is correct," Dan agreed.

"Rules are indeed rules, that statement is true," Dan said.

"I suppose it's more than most places would do," Stephen mused. "A year is better than nothing. Still, to have no further safety net than that..."

"Our resources are technically limitless," Dan told him.

"But our patience is not."

"What?" Stephen asked, eyes budging a little. "Magic?"

"Never mind that," Dan brushed that off. "Back to the problem of you."

"Or more specifically, the anomalies surrounding you," Dan clarified. "Dan meant what to do with you."

"Yes, I didn't mean to imply you were a problem. My apologies. You seemingly retreated to this building, and have been here since your arrival?"

He nodded.

"So you didn't make trouble, and you claim no outside force--"

"Everything okay, here?" asked a new voice. Everyone looked over to see Ezekiel standing there. The agents turned to look at him and then back to each other as one.

"Ezekiel?" one asked. "What are you doing here, if you don't mind my asking?"

He shrugged. "Little of this, little of that. Thought I felt something moving up here, came to have a look. And who do I find but Dan and Dan. You hassling my boy here? Shame on you two!"

"We needed to track down the person 'Stephen' and learn why he did not go through the orientation. That is all. There is no shame to it. Only- the question of why."

"He didn't?" His eyes narrowed. "That does bear investigation. I don't see him causing trouble in a library of all things though."

"We do not assert that he would."

"We simply wished to deliver the card, and solve the mystery."

"And did you do those things?" he asked.

"The mystery remains," Dan admitted. "We wish now only to ascertain his intention going forward."

"That's reasonable," Ezekiel decided. "Well, Stephen?"

"If it's okay I'll stay and run the library," he told them. "Someone needs to, it seems. I don't mind doing it, if that's okay with the city or whatever controlling board or mayor or whatever has jurisdiction."

"How did you find him?" Morning Blossoms spoke up. "This city isn't exactly small, and it's only been a few days."

"We have our ways," Dan told her.

"I believe a more complete answer would not undercut operational security."

"Then I concur. Rumors of a library opening, and a new face in this part of town. We do keep an eye on residents, to make sure they aren't too badly off you know. We can do simple arithmetic."

"Ha! Sleeping in a book return isn't 'too badly off.' Tell me another one."

"Believe what you wish. You were getting along well enough."

"After all this time, you still really don't understand us, do you?" Ezekiel asked, giving his head a rueful shake. "Only to be expected. So, he wants to stay and run the place. You have any problems with that?"

"I do not."

"Nor I. If these two can vouch for the man's character thus far?" They looked to the other two.

"He treated me more than fair," Dajuan told them. "Gave me the apartment right next to his. Said it was mine long as I worked for 'im. Fair shake better than I got from anyone else. Tell ya that truth."

"Same here," Morning Blossom agreed. "He's been great. Only cares about doing the right thing. Didn't peep on me in the bath either, I actually respected him for that. When he *offered* the bath I thought- never mind. I see now why he was so confused about certain things. You didn't have to hide your... unique circumstances... from us, boss."

"Sorry. Didn't know how you would take it."

"I can understand it. Suddenly finding yourself here, it must have been terrifying!"

"Not as much as I would have expected actually. No."

"Really? Still, he got right to work as far I as I can tell. He seems genuine and clearly doesn't have any magical abilities. Not that I've ever felt. He didn't do this, it was done *to* him. He's the victim."

The two agents again shared a look but then glanced at Ezekiel. He gave them a brief nod. They stood as one, got their glasses out and crisply put them back on. "Very well," announced Dan. "We will continue our investigation. Both into why your points seem locked at zero, and how you were delivered to the city, bypassing the usual orientation."

"We will let you know of any results," Dan further added. "Please inform the nearest information booth if you choose to move locations."

"Reminds me, I need to do that," muttered Dajuan. "No mail delivery at a dumpster."

"Of course. Thank you. I want this mystery solved just as much as you do, believe me."

"We believe your sincerity at this time."

"Your sincerity is not in question. We simply don't want this to become a systemic issue. If our process is somehow breaking down, we need to know about it now."

"I understand. I'll help however I can, of course."

"We are pleased to hear it!"

"Most pleased indeed. We will take our leave. Have a pleasant day, and good luck with the book repository."

"Thank you."

The agents left.

Shoot, I should have asked about taking the orientation now? Or did I simply miss my opportunity? They seemed to know Ezekiel and sort of backed off when he showed up. It wasn't lost on me. Coincidence? And he knew them, called them by name. He looked the man over.

"Glad they saw reason," he finally said, after a moment of silence. "Of course, it's not your fault either way. Does explain a few things, like Morning Blossoms said. Hey, you need anything just ask, okay?"

"For real tho, you didn't go through orientation?" Dajuan asked. "And you points locked? That's jack, man! How you supposed to pay for anything? Or go Sunward? You stuck here, boss?"

"I noticed that," Ezekiel said, looking down at the card with the big zero still hovering there. "Very curious."

"What are they?" he blurted. "You keep talking like they're important but I have no idea what they are!"

"Points? It's how you go Sunward or Darkward," Morning Blossoms explained. "You have enough or too few and you have to move on. If you're locked at zero, you'll be stuck here forever. Not that it's a bad place to be, mind you. They're also used as a currency. You help someone get Sunward faster by giving them your points and they give you stuff in return, like money. It's not just photographs you know. That's just a bonus." She did a twirl. "Barter is big too, not just points."

Need to ask about those terms but for the moment the biggest concern is "And you earn them by..."

"Doing good," Dajaun explained. "Helping out. Like I got some working the desk yesterday. It's automatic. Magic or some shizz no doubt. Donno how it actually works. Way above my clearance, you feel me? But it does."

"And I can't earn any, so I can only promise favors to people not give them- *That's* why you signed up so fast, the both of you! You knew you would get *points*! From helping me out, the library, any borrowers that came in here. That's your 'salary,' it was automatic. You didn't need me to pay you."

"Man, that's basic of the basic," Dajuan lamented. "You really don't know you stuff? Kinda wondered why we're going on 'bout it."

"I really don't."

"Okay," Ezekiel decided. "If you do need something from someone and they only want points, come to me. I'll be happy to cover you for now."

"Me too!" echoed the other two.

Stephen couldn't help but smile. "Thanks, everyone. That means a lot to me. I do feel better about this being out in the open." Everyone smiled back at him. *So this city somehow, magically?, incentivizes people to do good for each other. It's a visible karma system, or 'standing' like from video games. You do jobs for the clan and the clan rewards you with stuff. But your 'clan' is the whole city by the sounds of it. The scope of it! How can these two have been homeless in that case? Wouldn't someone helping them earn points? Ah, I bet there must be some kind of checks and balances! Two people can't drop something between them continuously and each pick it up for the other. Thus netting them 'a point' for their 'good deed' of helping and racking up a thousand points a day or whatever. It has to be genuine and probably without expectation of reward. Seeing a homeless person you can't say to yourself 'I'll go help them and make some points.' They might even go down at that point! That's how I would do it. Do the cards act as signal boosters or something? Keeping track of all good and bad done by the person that carries it? Relays it back to a central point? That seems like an awful lot of magic to be throwing around. Not that I know anything about magic...*

"So back to work then, boss?" Morning Blossoms asked.

"I guess," he agreed. "We won't solve this mystery on our own. Not if those agents say it's never happened before."

"Weird tho, right?" Dajuan wondered. "Somebody smuggle you into town so you can, what? Run a library? Don't make no sense. Maybe you fell outa plane or some shizz and landed here? Why bring you here?"

He laughed. "It's true. A 'help wanted' ad would have been a lot easier. Or just ask me, 'hey dude, you want to run a library?' after the orientation. Why the subterfuge?"

"You might have said no," Ezekiel pondered.

"Sure, but how many come to the city? One of them would be looking to run a library, right? There's nothing special about me that gives me insight into library maintenance or whatever."

"Don't sell yourself short!"

"No points," he joked, taping his card. "Can't sell myself at all." *How many points do you get for selling yourself? In the carnal way, I mean. Now there's a system I wouldn't mind exploiting!*

"Be that as it may, I'm sure it's just some glitch. They'll clear it right up."

"I'm trying to remember what was in the orientation," Morning Blossom piped up, face scrunched up. "You must have so many questions!"

"There are some terms I don't understand, but I'm sure I'll pick them up."

"Don't hesitate to ask us!"

The other two agreed.

"We can sit down after the library closes, maybe. See what you can remember until then. We may have borrowers in here after all. We are open, and *someone* is supposed to be manning the desk!"

"I been peeping it, boss! Nobody came in, I woulda seen to 'em right quick."

"Okay, fair enough. Back to work for now, and Ezekiel, thanks for backing me up on all of this."

"Of course. My door is always open to you. Unless I'm not in the office. Or I'm on a call. Or I'm in the middle of something, like doing some... calibrations. But any other time--"

Stephen laughed. "I get it. Thanks."

"Then I'll see you all later." He nodded to the others and headed back downstairs.

When he came up to the table, Ezekiel said he "felt" them. Were they magical, or have magic on them? Is that what he was feeling? And they knew him right away. Should that worry me? They didn't seem afraid just 'oh, you're here?' Though it was tough to tell with them, they were really weird! Dan and Dan.

"Thanks for taking a chance on me, boss," Dajuan told him. "Means more now that I know what I do. No orientation. Crazy!" He returned to the desk, shaking his head.

"I'd give you some points right now, if I could," Morning Blossoms said sadly. "But I just tried and it got rejected. Never had that happen before. I hope you figure it out. My magic, such as it is, and I will help however I can. I may be small, but I am fierce!" She did some martial arts poses, which frankly looked ridiculous on her in the maid outfit.

"Thanks. You're the best!"

"Finally, the recognition I deserve! See you later boss." She rose in the air to go back to work.

Now, where was I? "Oh wait, Morning Blossoms?"

"Yes boss?"

"Come with me!" He picked up the other two boxes and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 9
Demon-strating the open-door policy

"You want me to dust this whole place too?" Morning Blossom asked, wings wilting as they both looked over the storage area.

"Shouldn't it be fairy easy?" he asked, indicating her enchanted feather duster.

"Hey don't be stepping on any toads now," she playfully told him, putting her fists on her hips. "Only I can say things that way. It's a fairy's prerogative."

"My mistake, I'll be more careful in the future." He suppressed a grin. "But yes. With the display now packed up I'll need to get some new props from here. I'm going to wander around the library a bit, see what the next display should be. When I figure that out, I'll get the props from down here. It wouldn't do to replace a bunch of dusted props, and good job on that, by the way, with a bunch of dusty ones."

"So the opposite of waiting for the dust to settle?"

"Right. This area would have to be done anyway; let's start it now. And if you see anything that could make a good display, I'm open to suggestions."

She looked up at him. "Really?"

"Of course. You're just as much a librarian as Dajuan. I didn't just hire you to clean. Yes, do keep up with that and I'll help with it as well once we've gotten this place fully running. But if you have ideas for the library in general, I'll happily take them under advisement. We'll each work according to our capability. If you think you can do a better display than I can, I'll leave the design to you and just move the stuff as you direct. Like Dajuan clearly being better with the computer than I am, if you have a strength I won't- humm- hide your light under a bushel basket."

"Oh." She looked away and scuffed her toes on the shelf she was standing on. "Thanks," she said quietly.

"You're getting your shoes all dirty."

"I was thinking that too," she admitted, raising the foot and looking at the sole. "This place is a pigsty you should *really* get someone down here to clean it- oh nooooo." She wiggled and made a big production out of realizing she was the someone with her palms against her cheeks.

"Glad we're in agreement."

"You know, it's dust to dust around here but this is ridiculous. I'll get started, boss."

"Thank you. I'll be back!"

So Stephen wandered the shelves, wondering about library displays and trying to think back to when he was younger and went to libraries himself. Of course, like the rest of his history, his childhood was a big blank so that was no help at all. There was a slight tap-tap-tapping at the windowpane *and let us see what that there is, and this mystery explore* of his vault. *Why did I put windows in my vault? That was a dumb idea.* But it wouldn't go away so he headed up to the roof again and looked around. Same busy street below him, with the variety of vehicles passing by which he tried not to think too much

about. What he was getting an idea about was the *method* of conveyance, in other words the vehicle. And where did a vehicle take you? Someplace else, of course.

So why not a display on travel? Travel by train, travel by ship, travel by plane, and travel by... blip? Teleportation magic? Is that a thing? Let's go see what travel books we have! He descended the stairs and looked at the signs for each floor, scowling all the harder as he descended. Finally reaching the ground floor he went over to a library terminal and put in some search terms. It seemed there were no travel guides to "exotic locations" at all, which surprised him. Travel was both good and evil at the same time, wasn't it? He figured a library such as this one would thus be packed to the brim with books trying to get people to travel so they could experience both the good and the evil: traffic jams in unfamiliar places, your hotel claiming you had no reservation, how exhausting a place like a Disney park was to get through in a day. *Wait, how do I remember that but no specifics about my own childhood? That's odd.* Then there was seeing new things, eating tasty regional foods, and meeting exotic, scantily dressed ladies. Who had of course been forced into the service industry because their native culture had been subsumed into the conquering nation that took the place over *and wow did that take a dark turn! Good and evil, what did I tell you?*

He headed back to the storage area and walked the shelves until he found Morning Blossoms.

"Hey boss. Any brainstorm?"

"Maybe. I was looking for travel books, but we don't seem to have any."

"Travel? You mean like Sunward? Course you won't find any books on that."

"I mean to, you know, other places!"

She looked at him like he was a particularly large dust bunny. "Stephen, there are no other places. There is only Midveil."

There is only Zuul! "... What? Hang on, it's like some kind of mega city? It goes forever in all directions?"

"You got it. Hardly anyone goes anywhere once they find an area of the city they like. We have all sorts of different 'biomes' if you will. Places like we are now where there's lot of buildings, rural areas, farmland for those that enjoy that sort of thing. Snow areas. Hot areas. Rainbow Lands. That place those weirdos who are ponies hang out... But it's all Midveil."

Oh it's the ponies that are weird- says the literal fairy. "Huh. I guess anyone that chooses to live in the country would be uninterested in moving to the big city, otherwise they would have settled there in the first place."

She gave a happy nod. "That's it exactly! Of course there is some movement, nobody wants to be stuck in the same 'biome' forever, but that's not really travel. It's more like stepping through a gateway and now you're someplace else."

"Ah, I thought teleportation magic must exist!" He snapped his fingers. "I was right." *And why everyplace is just 'Midveil.' If everywhere on the planet can be reached with a step, are there really 'countries' and 'towns' and what-have-you? No. The 'mega city' is a trope that I'm familiar with, and it seems we managed one. Neat.* "So how about books featuring travel? Stories must still have trains and cars and whatever for characters to get around in. Or maybe historical accounts of how we used to use trains and planes and boats?"

"I think I saw some model trains over there." She pointed. "That's a good start, right?"

"That's a great start, thanks! Let me know if you find any planes or ships."

"Aye-aye, captain!" She saluted. "Let's make some waves!"

It was late afternoon or so by the time the displays were nearing completion. It had taken some searching of the shelves for books predominantly featuring trains, boats, carriages, and the like because while the search was great at finding book *titles* and *authors*, it wasn't great about *content*. He resorted to looking through the fiction sections at titles he guessed had to do with some kind of travel, and briefly

skimmed them to make sure. If the characters boarded a train, had a shootout on a train, or observed the mighty pistons of an ocean liner they got put on the cart. He found some model airplanes, ships in bottles, and of course the model train set Morning Blossoms had pointed out. He was heading back up to the front with a box in his hands full of toy horses when he heard a voice. "Oh, excuse me! Do you work here?" He turned, ready to say yes, when his eyes fell upon the horns of the person trying to get his attention. The man was bald, dressed in a gray suit, and had clearly real, red horns sticking up out of his forehead. Looking the man quickly up and down, he also realized he wasn't wearing shoes, because he had no feet. Just hooves.

Well, why wouldn't he? Stephen thought to himself. *Some people have cat ears and this guy has horns. He's either trying to get a reaction out of me, or he just likes the look. No reason to be alarmed.* "Yes, what can I help you with?"

"I'm hoping you can help me find a book I'm looking for. I found the right section but it's not there."

"One moment while I put this box down..."

"Of course! No rush. Take your time- I'm just pleased the place is finally open again at last. I can wait a bit longer."

"It's just right over- It's just in front- I'll be right back." He hurried over to the front and set the box down. *What a strange thing to openly wear. Maybe he's pranking me, or this is some kind of test by those agents, Dan and Dan? Wanting to see if I'm able to help a guy that looks... well you know? Joke is going to be on them! I'm going to be so sweet to this guy he'll be brushing sugar off himself for the next three days!* "So sorry about that!" he apologized when he returned. "What can I help you find?"

"The series is *The Illustrated History of Torture*, by Shambles Stabimup. Delightful author, are you familiar with the work?"

"I'm still familiarizing myself with the contents of the library, actually. I only just got the place open again, you see."

"I encourage you to seek out the author's other works, very knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects."

"I'm sure. History of Torture, huh? A bit of light reading for this evening? Bedtime story for the kids maybe?"

The man laughed. "I must say, you're a delight; not at all like that old librarian we used to have. Whatever happened to that guy?"

"We're not sure either. This place was simply abandoned as far as we can tell."

"Pity. Such a pity. Necessary institutions, libraries. This one especially, which I'm sure you're aware of."

"Of course. Now you said you found the section?"

"Right this way, I can show you." The two headed off and soon came to the correct shelf. "As you can see, volume one is right here where it should be. Along with volume three. Four. Five. Six." He was pointing at them. "Seven. Eight. Even the rare swimsuit edition. Ah, memories!" He shook his head wistfully. "And so nice to see the library offering such sophistication on their shelves."

"Stabimup certainly seems prolific," Stephen remarked, noting the thickness of each of the volumes. And there was the hole volume two should be in.

"Well, there's such a *long* history and it should be covered in detail but yes, he clearly enjoyed delving into the subject. But alas! Volume two!" He waved his hand into the hole. "The volume I so desperately need to gaze upon once again is missing! Oh, cruel world!"

Stephen nodded in solidarity. "That does seem to be how the universe works, doesn't it?"

"Indeed! Another of the creator's little jokes they programmed in, no doubt. Would that they could be changed but no, written in stone. Sometimes literally. Very strange being. I suppose you would have to be, to create all this." He indicated his surroundings in a general way.

"I don't know much about that. Let's go see if it's checked out?"

"Your- apologies- frankly outdated software claims not."

"You looked? Well, let me check the front desk anyway, see what it says."

"You're the librarian!"

The two men headed to the front, and Dajuan got a somewhat horrified look on his face to see the man with the horns. To his credit, he tore his gaze away and focused on Stephen.

"What's up, boss?"

"Illustrated History of Torture, volume two. Can you look it up for me?"

"Sure boss, sure." He tapped the keys. "Says it's on the shelf."

Stephen sighed. "I already found one misfiled book. This must be another. I'm truly sorry about this. We'll begin a search at once. I'll just get my other librarian up from the storeroom, be right back."

"No need to go back there, boss." He picked up the phone and hit a button. "Morning Blossom to the front desk." His voice echoed across the whole place. "Morning Blossom, please come to the front desk." He hit the button and set the receiver down.

"We have an intercom system?"

"Most place do, boss."

He's good. Maybe too good. Going to insist he run the place pretty soon, mark my words. "I guess. Anyway, tell her what we're after, will you?"

He nodded and Stephen turned. "Perhaps you would like to have a seat while you wait? Or perhaps you would rather return tomorrow, when we've had time to search? I'm sure your time must be valuable and this must be an awful inconvenience for you."

"How thoughtful! No, I'll be happy to look as well. Many eyes on the prize, or something like that."

"I leave that to you. Again, apologies for the necessity. We've only just reopened; I haven't had a chance to do a full inventory. I'm trying to keep a mental list but it's more like a rabbit is up in my brain. I see something that needs to be done and that somehow takes priority. I was getting the displays set up, but I should have been doing more important things."

"Quite all right. The volume is distinctive, I'm sure it'll just jump right out at us."

"Rar!" Stephen growled, making claws with his fingers.

"Yes, exactly!"

What has gotten into me? Control yourself! Just start looking and get this guy out of here. How did he manage to choose the one book of the series we don't have right there?

With the three of them on the case the book was located, Morning Blossoms crying out she found it, and the two men noticed her waving her arms and flying about, so they hurried over there.

"Here it is," she announced. "In with the section about advanced mathematics."

The man laughed. "And isn't that just torture for most? I can see how it would fit right in there. Ah yes, here it is right as you say. Wonderful. Thank you so much!"

"Sure thing," she replied, not at all like her usual cheerful self. "Glad to get you on your way."

"Yes, I'm glad we didn't have to search too long for you. Was there any other work you were interested in? We can get you checked out, that process at least works."

"You can check me out anytime- I mean I have my library card right here!" The man flashed it. "Shall we?"

He was escorted up to the front, Morning Blossoms peeking over the shelves suspiciously. Dajuan got his ID card scanned in and acted professionally, and the man turned to Stephen once the youth told him to please have the book back in two weeks.

"I'll say it again, so wonderful to have this place up and running," he gushed. "And the service- I would give you five stars if I could. Thank you so much for finding me what I needed."

"I'm just sorry it was necessary. Please be sure to come back any time you need a book. Good or evil!" He chuckled.

"I will. Goodbye for now!" He turned with a wave and was on his way. Dajuan looked ready to explode but waited until the door chime went off.

"We really gonna serve that kind?" he huffed.

"Yes," Morning Blossoms agreed, flying over. "He gave me the creeps."

"What are you talking about?" Stephen asked. "The man had horns. So? In just looking down at the street from the roof for two minutes I saw all sorts of crazy things. How is he different?"

"He's openly showing an allegiance Darkward," Dajuan protested. "If he wasn't one of the residents there himself. Would have to be a bigshot, to be so brazen 'bout it."

"I've heard that before; Sunward, Darkward. I take it Darkward is bad?"

"Not bad, it's..." Morning Blossoms struggled for the right word. "Necessary. But it makes most of us uncomfortable. Losing points, I mean you have to be pretty negative but it's always looming under us."

"So I shouldn't have served him? He had a library card."

"That's up to you, boss," Dajuan decided. "It's your library now."

"It's *the* library," he corrected the boy. "Of Good and Evil, I remind you. And you say Darkward isn't evil?"

"Those that go there are... Those that come from there... we're supposed to treat them as if they have paid their debt, and of course with a positive point total Midveil agrees. But to openly walk around like he does? I would have said he was one of *them*, but why would one come to this place?"

Stephen wasn't paying much attention. *Some kind of prison? Of course, it's not an ideal society even with magic and mega-cities. Of course the 'officials' would want to take their undesirables away. They have the means to pinpoint your 'point total' right there in black and white. What politician wouldn't want that? 'We gave you a chance.' Didn't China have some kind of 'social score' experiment? - This is just the culmination of that, isn't it? Wait, why can I remember China but only Midveil exists? I'm so confused.* "But he was here. For now, the library serves anyone that comes through the doors and is polite about it. He was. And maybe that's just his look, we can't assume anything about those that come in here. Right?"

"Whatever you say, boss."

"Okay. You can tell me more about those places later, for now we need to get back to work."

Morning Blossoms nodded and zipped away, and Stephen turned to go back to the display.

Need to figure out why the library closed. Was it because it served those with some kind of fetish for 'Darkward?' Or because we didn't? That guy was surprised, said I was a delight and not like the previous librarian. Maybe I can look up articles from the time, I still need to see if the internet works. I should ask Dajuan, no doubt he's already waxed the modem, try and make it go faster. It's all about the Pentiums, baby! There's just so much to do. I need to look for more misplaced books, for one. Catalog the storeroom. See what's still checked out. Order replacements or get them back. Learn whatever I should have learned from 'the orientation' I seemingly missed. Figure out who I am... It just goes on and on.

Chapter 10
Ghost of a chance

"Boss, you better come see this," Morning Blossoms hesitantly told Stephen the next day. He was trying to figure out how to create new library cards, figuring as head librarian he should probably have one himself, right? If only to make sure he knew how to do it, as he wasn't going to rely on Dajuan issuing cards. He had his ID card to scan now, thanks to the odd pair, so he should be able to add himself to the system and assign a "blank" library card to himself.

"I just think ya should do it," Dajuan had told him the day before. "The head librarian should know who he's giving cards out to, is all I'm saying."

Stephen had agreed. But now there was this problem. *Nothing good ever came of an employee coming to the boss and saying, "you better come see this." Right?*

"What's going on, Morning Blossoms? Can it wait? I'm kinda in the middle of some... calibrations."

"I just found someone crying down in our storeroom. I think the technical term would be a banshee, actually."

"A what? This place is haunted? Is that why the last guy left?"

She scoffed. "Every place is technically haunted, boss. She's way in the back, looking miserable. You should go talk to her."

"How can every place- never mind. A banshee... that's a wailing ghost, right?"

"Whaling? Boss, there's no whales around here, no body of water large enough to support a whale." She put a finger on her chin and looked up thoughtfully. "There was a plan to dig a big hole and make, like, a really big pond, but I don't know if that ever went through."

He stared at her silently a moment. "If this was all some ploy to make that joke--"

"No joke, boss, she's really down there!"

"Okay. I'll be back, Dajuan."

"Bring her up here if she cute!"

"Not really the concern right now..." He followed the tiny fairy down to the storeroom and headed way into the back, marveling at just how big a storeroom it was and how much junk was down there. *I underestimated the scope of the problem!* And there she was. Floating there in the very back corner, in the dim light, was a miserable looking person. Her long hair floated around her like she was underwater, and he couldn't really tell what color it was supposed to be. She was dressed in a ragged gown of some kind, hard to tell as she was transparent, he could make out the wall beyond her. She gave a half-hearted sob that was more sigh than blubber but hadn't seemed to notice them. *What's the protocol here?* He looked to Morning Blossoms, who jerked her head as if to indicate "well, get on with it, I'm not talking to her are you crazy?" He scowled but turned back to her. *I don't want to scare her. Wait. What am I thinking here, it's a ghost. Ghosts are real! I'm actually seeing a ghost! I mean I'm standing next to a fairy, so this doesn't even rate after that guy with the horns but still.* "Excuse me?" he tried softly. "Er, ghost?"

"Eh?" she squeaked, giving a little jump, and turning her head. She stared at him, going completely still, even her hair stopped floating around as though it had all turned to ice.

"Are you all right, miss?" Stephen asked, plowing ahead. "Do you need help moving on?"

"Moving on?" she cried, animating again. "Oh, it isn't bad enough the library, my library, where I spent the best years of my death, working and slaving to make the best library with the vilest of books and the most goodest of books... hang on is goodest a word?"

"I... no?"

"The bestest of books? No, that sounds like I'm talking about the bestest boy, aren't you just the goodest boy? Oh no I did it again!"

"Wait." Stephen rewound her words in his head. "Are *you* the head librarian here? This is your library?" *A ghost runs the place? That would make a certain amount of sense, given what library this is.*

"Oh no," she replied. "I just worked here. Now you made me lose track of where I was, thanks a lot!"

"Slaving away?" Morning Blossoms suggested.

"Oh yes, that was it. ...Slaving away day after day, now you're kicking me out? What, turning it into a casino or something? Just throw the books on the bonfire, and let me haul myself upon the flames as well. That would at least give me a few hours of detachmentality."

"Bonfire?" she asked.

"Detachment?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, those. Thank you. Then I shall wander the city streets, alone! Unloved! Absentee!"

Absentee? "We're not burning any books," he insisted. "Though I understand the historical precedent you may be thinking of." *Is it even possible to reason with a ghost? Sources are mixed. I'm talking to a real ghost!*

She put the back of her hand on her forehead. "Throw me into the shredder after them! Let me *feel* what they *feel*!"

"The books are staying where they are, we're opening the library again."

She slowly lowered her hand again, as if Stephen was a wild dog that might jump at her and she didn't want to make any sudden moves. "It's open?"

"Yes. No need for all the dramatics."

"Drama?" Morning Blossoms wondered.

"Now you've got me doing it! Look you want your old job back? Fine, it's a haunted library as well, why not?" He threw his hands in the air. "I'm still waiting for the talking dog to show up."

"You're teasing me," she decided, turning away again. "Dangling hope before me in some kind of schema."

"Scheme?" Morning Blossoms corrected.

"He was always correcting me as well! Just leave me to my sorrowness. Have you not salted my wounds enough?"

"Look, the library is open," Stephen insisted. "I have a homeless kid working the desk, Morning Blossoms here is dusting the place, go up and see for yourself. Having an actual ghost in the stacks certainly isn't beyond the pale- Oh my goodness I have a homeless kid working the front desk. Are there labor laws around here? Am I going to get it trouble for that? But he's not *that* young, right? And I'm not technically paying him... Wait is that worse?" *Unpaid intern for the win.*

"That's what you're worrying about right now?" Morning Blossoms asked dryly. "Labor laws? Not the ghost that's here?" She indicated the ghost.

"It's a going concern," the ghost agreed.

"You mean a major award? No wait that can't be right."

"The two of you are going to drive me crazy, aren't you?" Stephen lamented. "Seriously, how old are *you*? You're not, like, two or anything, right? I only have to worry about him? What are the laws around employing fairies anyway?"

She sniffed. "Never ask a lady her age. Don't worry, I'm old enough for you, old man."

"Midveil has one primary law," the ghost said primly, demeanor changing. "To do no harm to another, or through inaction allow harm to come to another. While certain practices are frowned upon, as long as all parties agree and no lasting harm is done, all behaviors are accessible."

"What she said," Morning Blossoms agreed with a shrug.

Why is she sounding all robotic all of a sudden? "That's- Look- Never mind that," he sputtered. "If the library was open again, which it is, would you want your old job back, whatever it was?"

"I hosted many of our social outreach programs, such as story time, adult education, and school research project assistance. When not engaged with that, I helped borrowers and provided companionship to those in need. The library was more than just books, it was a place to go if you needed some quiet time. No one is as quiet, but yet as warm and compassionate, as me."

"Well it's certainly less quiet now," he grumbled. "Fine, whatever. Do ghosts get points?" he asked Morning Blossoms.

"Everybody gets points, boss. Er, well, everybody but you I guess."

"Fine. It's not like I could get rid of you even if I wanted to. Will you take up your old position, then?"

"He's really serious about it?" she asked the fairy.

"As a dog with a bone," she agreed. "Get it? Serious? Never mind. Sorry it took so long to find you, this storage area is huuuge! Could have spared you a few days of feeling miserable."

"That's quite all right. I accept!" she agreed, smiling. Suddenly, the lights all along the way brightened, and her hair settled down into a long braid. Her clothing had changed too, becoming a long white dress with transparent sleeves, buttoned all the way up to her neck. "My name is Poppy."

What in the world? Stephen looked around in wonder. *Is that why it was so dark down here? Because she was down here and not because the lights needed changing at all? She was literally wallowing in darkness?* "Stephen, and Morning Blossoms. Dajuan is up manning the desk."

"I will go to see the state of the place at once, and make his acquittal."

"Acquittance?" both asked.

"Yes."

"Wait, I have many questions about the old librarian!" Stephen insisted as she started to drift past them.

"I will be happy to talk about that man later, once I see your words are true. Plenty of time. I will see you soon." She zoomed off, not bothering to go around anything.

"You'll just hire anyone, won't you?" Morning Blossoms asked a moment later as both stared after where she had gone.

"Should I not have? I don't know the rules here! And she at least claims to have worked here before. She has the most experience of any of us. She could actually tell us stuff about the past, and how to run the place!"

"I didn't mean it in a bad way," she protested, waving her hands before her. "You just seem to not hesitate. You give people a chance, I think it's sweet."

"Oh, thanks. Uh, speaking of nice you think we should have warned Dajuan a literal ghost was rushing up there to meet him? I don't want to freak him out too much."

She brushed that off. "He's a boy of the world, he'll be fine. Besides, she's no more of a 'ghost' than you or me. You didn't seem the type to focus on appearance why worry about it now?"

Stephen's CPU got pegged at 100% as he tried to work out this rather casual statement but came up empty. "Huh?" he managed at last.

She got a concerned look on her face. "I mean, you know where we are, right?"

"... Midveil? Though I admit not exactly knowing what that means. Is that not the name of the city?"

"Name of the- boss, I know you didn't go through orientation like the rest of us but you know this, the most basic of facts, right? You're just joking around with me." She had on a half grin, as if she was now desperately hoping he was going to let her know he was just joking around and they would have a hearty laugh and go upstairs and everything would be fine.

"Is there something I should know? Yes, I don't remember a lot and seeing fairies and now ghosts and everything outside was certainly a shock. But it all seemed so normal, nothing to get excited over. So I didn't. Figured I would work things out in my own time, learn where I came from sooner or later. What does that have to do with where we are?"

She paled. "You really don't know. It's been days and you've just been walking around thinking- what? Didn't you notice?"

"Notice what? Morning Blossoms, you're not making any sense."

"Like not being hungry?"

"I mean I sort of noticed but it didn't seem important, that's all. Is it important?"

She considered a moment. "You better come with me. It's time for some real talk, and I don't mean about fishing. You're not going to believe me so Dajuan can back me up on this. I can't believe you don't know!"

"Know what?" He was starting to get frustrated now.

"Just... just come on."

The two went back to the library proper and then to the front desk, Stephen noticing Poppy floating over to greet some people coming in.

"Welcome to the library!" she gushed. They seemed not to recoil in horror at being greeted by a ghost and said hello. "Are you just browsing today? Is there something specific you would like to check out? I can help guide you if you're in the mode!"

Mood, he silently correct. Also, I think there is such a thing as too much customer service. Dial it back a bit. Of course she would be excited to be back 'in the game.' Whatever, they seem fine with it, they're chatting with her. A ghost. In the library!

"She's a real character," Dajuan said as they approached the front desk. "How many people you gunna hire, boss?"

"Never mind that," Morning Blossoms told him. "It's more serious than we thought. He doesn't know."

"Know?"

"You know. All of it?" She made a circle with her finger indicating the totality of existence. It's a universal signal, clearly obvious.

"He must know about some of it," he protested.

"He really doesn't seem to. He thinks Poppy, and me, and you, and him are all different things."

"Nah!"

"Ya!"

"Can you please explain what you're talking about!" Stephen nearly shouted.

"Better sit down, boss," Dajuan warned him. "This is the big one."

"A real whale of a tale," agreed Morning Blossoms, who simply couldn't help herself, even in this situation.

He glowered but sat on the chair. "Fine, I'm sitting. So what, where are we? How can that ghost and you two be the same?"

"Okay," Morning Blossoms gestured at his hand, and he held it up. She alighted in his palm and started pacing a little. "How best to break the news... just come out and say it I guess. Like they do in the orientation. Okay, deep breath." She paused. "Boss, *Stephen*, this is your end."

This is the song that doesn't end, yes it goes on and on my friends... "End of what?"

"The reason you don't need to eat? The reason you don't need to sleep, why ghosts exist, and those like me, and everybody outside? We ended... and came here."

Wait, I don't need to sleep? But I've been sleeping just fine. And what does she do in her house all night if not sleep?

"We souls, boss. Nothing but soul," Dajuan agreed, thumping his chest. "Why you think we have the orientation when we come here? Why we lose our memories? Why Dan and Dan came lookn for ya? You really ain't pieced this together, dog?"

"He didn't want to believe it," Morning Blossoms realized. "Many don't. And he had no support like we did. Look, even now he doesn't believe it."

"How can I?" Stephen protested. "Why is there a library in... in the afterlife? That's what you're saying, right? This is the afterlife?"

Both nodded. "Story was, there wasn't at first," Dajuan told him. "We built it all. Every brick. Day by day. Waz an empty field when we first came here."

"Empty but for the warehouses," Morning Blossoms corrected. "That's where the material came from. And the original libraries of knowledge we used to learn how to build all this."

"You had to build your own afterlife?" Stephen couldn't believe what he was hearing. *If there was a library why did we need to build this one?*

"Midveil, the fulcrum between the light and dark," Poppy spoke up, and everyone jumped as of course they hadn't heard her arrive, "was populated in trial by 500 souls. When it was realized that paradise, or as it is called now, 'Sunward,' had not accepted any applicants in hundreds of years the founders investigated. Modern life had become too complex to gain the point totals necessary to gain entrance. As the only other option was the dark city, or 'Darkward,' all souls went there instead. This delighted the celestials there; they clamored for more and more souls to make miserable, as was their mandate. This place was the compromise. Neither wholly good nor wholly bad, it is what we souls would make of it. Now, the majority of souls come here, to further gain or lose points as they are able. Thus moving Sunward or Darkward according to their own proclivities."

"Nice exposition," Morning Blossoms grumbled, "but she's right. That's the official story of how it happened."

Stephen was holding his head. "But that still raises so many questions. Why do you all look so different?"

"Thing is boss," Dajuan answered. "We look how we think we should look."

"That's not-"

"What he means is," Morning Blossoms broke in, "when we come here we all do look like we looked in life. But what you believe to be true, in large part, is true here. Poppy knows she's no longer alive and thus associates that state of being with being a ghost. She then rather naturally has taken on that form."

"Doesn't explain you!"

"I admit," she agreed with a sigh, "my current form was a conscious choice on my part. There are spells to trick a person into believing they should look a certain way. I consented to having that spell put on me because I truly wanted to be a fairy right away. I *could* have waited for my body to catch up to my inner vision but apparently, I'm impatient. So as soon as I knew it was possible I went for it! So here I am, loving it! Maybe in a few hundred years I'll want to try out being a dwarf. Or a cute goblin. We have

eternity, if we want it, and the founders realized not everyone would want to be the same thing that whole time. So after a while I became this. Don't know what I'll be next."

"You'll be a pastel pony, don't lie!" Dajuan told her.

"I will not- okay maybe," she conceded. "Anything's possible."

"And that's legal!?" Stephen asked.

"We made it legal!" she said in a deep voice, then giggled. "But seriously, casting that spell with intent to harm sure isn't. Though of course it's not *that* hard to undo. You have to sign many forms to have it done, so there's a paper trail. But there's many clinics that will do it, and the ID cards automatically update with your new form so there's no confusion." She looked thoughtful. "It's not quite like trying on a new dress for us, but it's close. No one would make a big deal of you doing it as often as every month, if you wanted to experience being lots of heights or ages or forms. Why? Want to join me? Being a fairy is fairly nice, if I do say so myself." She started giggling again.

"So you have a really strong self-image then," he asked Dajuan. "Or are you new enough here it hasn't taken hold?"

"Feedback loop, boss. You see some cute thing with cat ears or whatnot, think to yourself, maybe I look good with cat ears, ya? Maybe try out an artificial pair, or use illusion magic. Start thinking what they be like. One day you wake up with em all natural like. Doesn't take much here. But me? Why change this absolute perfection?" He indicated himself. "Ya gotta see it, to believe it."

"I'll pass," he quickly assured the boy. "You aren't sixteen at all, are you?"

"More like two hundred sixteen. Don't tend to keep track. No point, see?"

"Oh boy. Hang on, you said you didn't know if your parents were here yet! How could they not, after so long?"

"Time ain't so linear here, boss."

"The point we're trying to make is you're a soul, Stephen," Morning Blossoms got them back on track. "You ended, and came here. Just like everybody else. Why to this particular spot? Why with a locked zero-point total? I don't know. But that's the truth. We're all the same, no matter what we *currently* look like. So think about how you want to look, and go wild. Believe me, you'll see some crazy things in this town just past those doors." She pointed.

"I just want to be myself, that's all."

"And who are you?" she asked coyly. "Who is the head librarian, when they can be anything at all, forever and ever?"

"That's... that's a good point. I don't really remember my past."

"Ya can be anyone ya want to be, boss," Dajuan told him with a smack on the shoulder. "Sky the limit here. Forget what ya were, think on who you is now."

"It explains a lot," he agreed. "Thank you both for setting me straight. It's going to take some time to process this."

"That's why we get the year," Morning Blossoms told him, bending down to pat his palm. "You've been thrown straight into it. I don't envy you. Take it slow if you need to. Lean on us. Figuratively. Even with magic you're still huge compared to me."

"I was messed up, coming here," Dajuan admitted. "Still was, two, three days ago!" he laughed. "Maybe still am now? Who knows? But this place, could be good for me, yeah?"

"You seem pretty put together to me," Stephen told him seriously. "But as we're all here," he turned to Poppy. "Why don't you tell us about the old head librarian?"

"What would you like to know?" she asked.

Chapter 11
About that old librarian

"Brenard was a disciplined man," Poppy told the group. "Very upcoming."

"Uptight?" Dajuan asked while Morning Blossoms asked "Forthcoming?"

She just stared at them.

"Disciplined how?" Stephen asked. "Like, he didn't wear buttons, but he had a cool hat? And everyone agreed that he looked good in black? Or do you mean stern?"

"He was also stern," she agreed. "Put in charge of the library or perhaps took on the position because he felt it was a place of order. Several others were hired to help, myself inclusive."

Included, he thought, raising a hand as both others drew in breath to correct her. He gave a small shake of the head, and they rolled their eyes, realized each had the same reaction, and grinned at each other.

She went on. "The Library of Good and Evil stood for many years with Brenard at the foredeck. All seemed well. By the time I was hired, the place was run like a well-oiled machete, everything in its place. After several years, however, something changed. While Brenard didn't speak of it, at least not to me, something harpooned. He became somewhat frantic, mumbling someone on the staff was working against him while wandering the library in a daze. He began firing us. As the last hired I was the least suspected, and the last to be let go. But let go, I was. It is my assuming that Brenard then tried to run the place on his own, but of course I was not present between the time of my firing and the closing of the library. I had wandered the streets, seeking further employing, but returned here adrift hoping he might take me back. The place was closed, dark, and forgiving. Perfect for a ghost such as myself to haunt. This delighted me for some time, but all good things must come to a bend. No one came to see the haunted library. It was like the place was forgotten. I became depressed and eventually ended up where you found me. I don't know how long I simply hung there, wishing for porpoise again. A porpoise you have given me." She looked away, cheeks getting brighter.

"What with the nautical theming alla sudden?" Dajuan asked.

"I don't understand the question."

"I think we all get the gist of it," Stephen told them. "Thank you, Poppy. So after a time something happened to the man or the library itself and drove Brenard out. I'm just concerned he had some kind of mental illness, paranoia maybe? Is that even possible here?"

"Nothing is possible *physically*, because of course we aren't physical," Morning Blossoms told him. "But we still have emotions, as Poppy illustrated with her depression. And the shock of ending up here takes some time to mentally work through, as I explained. It seems he had been here awhile, so it probably wasn't that. But his thoughts could have tended in that direction if he saw phantoms, no offense, where there were none."

"None taken," Poppy muttered.

"But why would som'one work 'gainst a librarian?" Dejaun wondered. "And he was proved wrong, yeah? He fired everybody and didn't get no better result. I'd say to tha guy 'maybe not fired all those people made the place run.' Like who even does that?"

"You would be surprised," Poppy told him.

"I'm concerned about our boss here," Morning Blossoms announced, looking at Stephen. "If someone is targeting the library because they want it closed, now *you're* going to be in their sights."

"You think someone, what? Drove him mad somehow?"

"It fits the available facts," Poppy agreed.

"And leaving here didn't allow him to get better? Once away from this stimulus he should have recovered, right? Once he was thinking more clearly, why didn't he seek help? Ask another to take the position and warn them something strange was going on? Do you think his point total was enough to go Sunward? Am I saying that right?"

"Only two places to go from here, boss," Dajuan agreed. "Up or down. Unless he gave his points all away, I doubt he went dark."

Morning Blossoms shook her head. "You can't give away that many points, the system prevents it. And you're forgetting about the third option."

"You mean the third, fourth, and fifth options," Poppy reminded them.

"Hold on, what else is there?"

"As I reckon it, there are five total options Brenard could have exercised once away from the library. The first, seek employment elsewhere and don't look back. Second, go Sunward if his point total supported it. Third, go Darkward of his own volition and willingly submit himself to the horrors there. He would be able to leave at any time, mind you, assuming he was not restrained. Most celestials would be honor bound to allow his egress, should he request it, as long as his point total was above a certain threshold. Fourth, begin again. This option is rarely taken but it is available. A soul can experience life again, but the process is random- you could just as easily be a disadvantaged youth as one of means. Most are not willing to risk it, as they would have to give up all memory they have accumulated here and any magic they possess. Their body would also be randomized, with a chance at birth defects or poor parentage according to the local ratios among the living. And finally, he could have gone through the archway. No one knows exactly what happens to souls when they do that, just that none have ever returned."

"The True End," Morning Blossoms said softly. "That's what we call it. Or perhaps you get reborn in another world, where you can spend 300 years maxing out your level killing slimes."

"No way that happen!" Dajuan protested, but not very strongly.

"Are there records of all this?" Stephen wondered. "Because there's a sixth option you're not addressing. He walks away from here completely insane and has wandered the streets ever since." *With all that going on outside, would anyone bat an eye if some weirdo was staggering around? Can we get drunk here? The idea of alcohol making us the idea of drunk? Or if we believe it should, something like that?*

The others shared a look. "With a good enough reason, you may be able to partition the records division and see if anything comes up," Poppy agreed. "At least for most of those opines. Returning to life is done at a special ceremony, held once a month, where all souls that wish to return have a grand party and step through a portal at the same time. A clear record is kept of them, so those that look for them know they have gone."

Right, a parent looking for a child or two spouses trying to reconnect. So they don't search an endless afterlife they can just be told, 'you won't find them, they went back.' "Hold on, you said he could be restrained, could he be killed? I mean if something heavy fell on me or for that matter any of- well not you, Poppy, obviously- what would happen? Would it just bounce off? What if he fell in a deep hole and got trapped? There are actually many other things that could have happened."

"If you believe you've been wounded strongly enough to disperse your essence," Morning Blossoms explained, "it happens. But you'll reform at sunrise the next day wherever you think of as

'home.' Believe me, I've experienced my share of 'accidents' being this size. You big people just don't look where you're going! It's so annoying!"

"I'm sorry to hear that. So he could be trapped somewhere. I feel like it's my duty to find him, make sure he's okay at least. Maybe find out what drove him away, so it doesn't happen to me." *I would want someone to find out what happened to me, if I simply vanished one day.* "Could someone have grabbed him? If he was being targeted, that would be the culmination of it. After all, the key *was* lying out in the grass. It could have been knocked out of his hand during a struggle."

"I'm not sure the reason he left will matter, if you're going to take up the mantle of finding him. The process will be largely the same. Talk to the people he knew then, see if he mentioned something even in passing that could be a clue. It won't be easy though, Midveil has 60% of the souls that ever existed in history. If you want to disappear, it's a good place to do it. Hard to imagine anyone being locked up for this long if they didn't want to be, though."

"All the more reason to make sure everyone is accounted for."

"I assume you checked his office for clues," Poppy commented. "Where else would I look, if I wanted to get a sense of his thinking at the time? No journal in the apartment upstairs I take it? What?"

Stephen was just staring at her. "The head librarian has an office?" he finally managed.

With the others back to work, Stephen and Poppy were standing in the office of the head librarian, after he unlocked it with his key. It was a bare room, with an uncomfortable, straight backed chair, wooden desk, various file cabinets and, somewhat out of place, an old record player on a small table. All just as dusty as the library had been, of course. On the desk was a monitor, lit up at the password screen, and bending over Stephen saw another vintage PC under there.

*How you waited, never napping, for the keystroke entered tapping,
as if he was gently rapping, rapping your electric door.*

Oh, but missing is your master, swallowed up by some disaster?

Followed close and caught up faster, password entered... nevermore.

He looked above the doorframe to find the bust of Pallas, but saw it not-

"So here's the lore," Poppy spoke up, breaking him out of his reverie. She gestured to the file cabinets, a gray metal with three sliding drawers. "You'll have to look it over, but all the records he kept should be here."

He pulled the top drawer out and looked inside. Folders upon folders of records were stored here, but at least they did have labels.

"Finding anything?" a small voice said. He looked over as he rolled it shut again; there was Morning Blossoms gripping her duster and poking her head in past the doorframe.

"I haven't even been in here two minutes," he protested.

"As I'm here I might as well start dusting!" She zipped into the room and started waving the duster over things. "Yup, I'm a real dust buster and you can't deny it!"

"I believe she is using her position as an excuse to be nosy," Poppy commented.

He shrugged. "Has to be cleaned anyway, may as well be done now. We can wait until the place closes tonight and have Dajuan look at the computer. I'll go through these records," he pulled out the second drawer and it was more of the same, "probably starting with the most recent if I can find them. But if what you said was true, I'm sure his filing system will be efficient and well managed. Maybe compare a recent record with one from years ago, see if his style changed or he emphasized different things. In either case, thanks for letting me know this was here. I would have found it *eventually* of course, I've just been busy with the obvious stuff." *Gotta open all the doors around here. Kick out those skeletons or start charging them rent.*

"Of course, making the place presentationable was a good goal at first."

"Can I have an office?" Morning Blossoms asked excitedly. "I've never had an office before."

"Are there other offices?" he asked Poppy. "You're all welcome to one if there's available space. Did you have an office under the old head librarian?"

"I did not. The other employees used the meetings rooms if they wanted to have a private conversation with a borrower. Only the head librarian had an office at the time of my employment."

"Aw!"

He chuckled. "Sorry. Maybe you can talk to Ezekiel, see who he rents the office downstairs from. There are other offices down there that are empty. I'm sure they'll accept photos."

"Doesn't seem the same, having to go down there."

Stephen combed through the records he found in the folders. It turned out to be monthly reports detailing the mundane goings-on of the library: how many books were lent that month; how many were returned late; descriptions of penalties given out so they could be escalated against serial offenders. Nothing in them suggested Brenard had slacked in this duty until the very last report, which contained exactly the same information as all previous reports. He even suspected they were generated automatically somehow, rather than begun anew each month, but he could see the man taking some kind of satisfaction from neatly filing each report at exactly the same time, each time. There was mention of the firings, but little more than "employee let go" giving no reason. A report just before they stopped mentioned "employee let go" which Poppy agreed aligned with her timeline for the place, so it seemed Brenard had lasted fewer than 30 days with no employees before he closed the place for the last time.

So no final note about why you never came back? No farewell, or a snide comment about how the library done you wrong? Really? You kept track of everything else but not what was actually important. Thanks.

"You wanted to see me, boss?" a voice asked, and Stephen looked up to see Dajuan standing there. He was followed by the two others; Morning Blossoms had cleaned the dust up quickly and had gone back to work since watching Stephen open file folders and look at them was boring. But with nothing else to do with the library closed, she and Poppy looked ready to help.

"Closing time already?" he asked.

"Yeah. I see, password eh?" He walked into the office and Stephen offered him the only seat. Poppy just hovered there silently while Morning Blossoms sat on the top of the monitor, kicking her little feet and remarking, "So much cleaner in here, don't you agree? I do fairly good work, if I do say so myself."

Doesn't the duster do most of the work? "Right. Can you do anything?"

"I can do one thing." He lifted the keyboard and made a show of looking around the underside. "Nah, got nothing."

"Come on, you can do better than that!"

He gestured at the screen after putting the keyboard down again. "Could be anything, boss. Type random stuff, see if ya get anywhere. Maybe a book title or some shizz? I didn' know the guy. Fo all I know, password be blank and we type stuff forever and he laughing 'bout it from wherever."

Stephen scowled and reached around him, hitting the enter key. *Password Incorrect* was the message. "Not blank. What about getting around it somehow?"

"Man, I ain't no hacker. Jus' cause I know my way around, don't mean I can snap my fingers and get into his system. Maybe his password 'round here somewhere, in case he forgot it. Look for something out of place?"

"The only odd thing in this office is the record player." They both turned to look at it. "Does a guy that runs a library, who Poppy here described as disciplined and strait-laced, have a record playing in his office? No. It's a library. He liked the quiet." *There wasn't one in the apartment, so clearly he wasn't a*

music lover. At least in this format. He could have had a phone with a billion songs on it for all I know, that he took with him.

"Record ain't a password, boss." But he got up and looked the thing over. "Now that's odd."

Stephen's hope was rekindled. All important discoveries in science began with the phrase "that's odd" or "why do you suppose that happened?" "A clue?!"

He scratched his ear. "Dunno. But look at the arm. The needle on the label, should never get there. Record should stop when it get ta the end, right? Arm back to home position or whatever you call it. This arm *put* on this spot, unless you think you bump it, walking around here?"

"I don't think so..."

"I sure didn't, not even a baby bump," Morning Blossoms announced.

"Kay then. Needle on a song title on the label. Maybe password is the name of the song?"

"But it could still be anything!" he protested. "His favorite line in the song, or the title, or the name of the pianist. We need to narrow it down more, somehow. If this is even getting us anywhere, by the way."

"All we got! May as well jive with it 'til we get something better."

"I guess," he sighed. "Okay, records came in protective sleeves, right? I seem to recall that, and if dust exists here then protective- why does dust exist here?" *What even is it?*

"Because people expect old, unused places to be dusty!" Morning Blossoms explained, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Of course," he muttered. "So that should be around here somewhere. I'll look for that while you try variations of the song title? Maybe it will hold another clue."

"That's word!"

"No, it's Access," protested Morning Blossoms. "We're trying to get Access to his computer. But what's the Outlook?"

"Outlook is, it's gonna be a real Project."

"Oh, oh, do you think when you log in the machine will go Bing?!"

"Mind being quiet for now? I don't need a Copilot."

"I thought we were on the same Teams?"

"I think I'm out of the Loop," Poppy complained. "Do you know what they're saying?" she asked Stephen.

"I don't think I care to know. Hey there's still some dust here, Morning Blossoms, you missed a surface."

"Did I not clean the Whiteboard?" she asked, looking around. "Oh I see it. I'd go get the duster but it's after business hours now. I'll have to clean it tomorrow. Don't worry, I'll Zune right in here in the morning and get it taken care of."

"Nothing's working, boss," Dajuan reported. He had, of course, been trying things while joking around because typing stuff used very little of his attention. "You find that sleeve yet?"

"No," he huffed. "It's not by the record player. Who takes a record out of the sleeve, then carries the sleeve somewhere else?"

"He was fastidious," Poppy reported. "It must be somewhere it would not accidentally be returned to circumlocution. It would be most distressing for a borrower to set their hearts on the work, only to find when they returned home the vinyl was misappropriated."

"I don't recall seeing anything like that in the apartment, but I can go through the boxes I packed," Stephen decided. "I wasn't exactly taking stock of stuff, just putting aside things I figured he might want back."

"Let's look around here first," Morning Blossoms announced, hopping off the monitor. "Have you opened every drawer? What about the desk drawers? Maybe it fell behind the cabinet?"

"I will look where you corporeal beings cannot," Poppy agreed, drifting behind the cabinet.

After a few moments of searching, she announced finding a safe behind the picture, and Stephen went over to it. The picture was just the front of the library, naturally the drabest thing possible Brenard could have chosen to hide his safe with, and swinging it away from the wall showed there was a hole in the wall back there.

"So now we gotta crack a safe, before we can guess a password?" Dajuan complained, shaking his head. "This some kinda *Inception* shizz, man? We gonna need ta find a key to a tiny box inside the safe that has a poem that's a riddle?"

"Thankfully, you have me," Morning Blossom told him, interlocking her fingers and stretching out her arms in front of her. She hovered in air, joining two fingers on each hand as light began to shimmer around her. "Let the state of this lock be reversed!" she cried, waving her hands around. The light concentrated on her right hand, and she pointed her fingers at the safe. A beam hit it, but bounced off. "Hey!" she cried, ducking away from it. "No fair!"

"Didn't even check, did 'ja?" Dajuan chuckled. "Even I coulda told you there was magic there."

"You know magic?" Stephen asked.

"Everybody learn at least some magic, boss. Too convenient not to. Should sign you up for lessons sometime, you interested too?"

Morning Blossoms was ignoring them. "He really bound that much magic into this? Should have faded long ago. What a jerk. Fine, I'll show you!" She pushed up her sleeves and put her hands before her as if cupping a ball. The space around her started shining much, much brighter than before, turning her into a little ball of light. Stephen shaded his eyes, wondering exactly what she thought she was doing, she wasn't going to blow the thing up, was she? But suddenly the light coalesced into a ball, and she shoved it forward. "Be dispelled!" she commanded. The ball hit the safe and seemed to peel away an energy field a few millimeters from the surface of it. With a savage nod she restarted her first spell, and this time it impacted the safe. There was a click and it slightly opened.

"There you go," she told everyone, blowing on her two fingers. "Autographs are 10 points apiece."

Chapter 12

The password hunt

With the safe open, Stephen swung wide the door, and peered inside. He was hoping for more answers than just the record jacket, but in this he was disappointed. That was the only thing in there, and he pulled it out and held it up.

"Anticlimactic," Morning Blossoms complained, peering into the safe and also finding it starkly empty. "Lame."

"There's something in here," he reported, setting it on one side so he could open it up. He pulled out the paper sleeve and a thin booklet, which turned out to be a lyrics booklet for the record. The others crowded around as he opened it up and flipped through it.

"Tha's the one," Dajuan announced, pointing to one section. "Tha's the song the needle of the record is pointing ta."

"Lift it up, will you?" Morning Blossom asked, landing on the other page.

Stephen obliged her, and she stuck her tiny arm through a hole in the page. "It's not a tear," she announced, pulling her hand back and looking it over. "Looks perfectly circular. Like it was made with a hole punch."

"And there's a second," Poppy agreed, pointing. "Two words have been surgingly removed from the lyric sheet."

"So do you think the two words form the password?" Stephen asked. "Could still be a thousand combinations of capitalization, ordering, underscores, numbers at the end..."

"Let's hear what the words are," Morning Blossom suggested. "Then we can speculate all we want."

"An by 'speculate,' ya mean me typing in try after try?" Dajuan grumbled.

"That's why you get paid the big points!" she agreed.

"I can't give you any points," Stephen reminded him. "This effort is purely voluntary and done at your own risk."

"Consult your health care physician to know if this medication is right for you!" Morning Blossoms added with a giggle.

"Yeah, yeah." He turned the record player on and set the needle down in the right spot. Stephen got out some paper and a pencil and they listened to the song, noting down the two words.

"Sapphire dreams?" he read. "Not what I expected."

"Lemme try a few things," Dajuan told them, sitting back down.

Moments later he was shaking his head. "Ain't getting somewhere like this. Feel like there more to it, somehow."

"It is curio," Poppy agreed. "That a librarian would hide their password in a song, and not a book. Does that not seem strange to you?"

"You think," Stephen said slowly, "that maybe the words chosen here point to a book, rather than being the password itself?"

"The work of mere moments to verify one way or the other."

"Agreed. Keep at it for now, I'll be right back."

"Sure, boss. Type, type, type."

Stephen went to the nearest kiosk and did a search for the book title *Sapphire Dreams* which, to his surprise, returned a result. He noted down the number and walked the stacks, returning with it. "It actually exists," he reported, setting it down next to the monitor. "But now what? We can't scour the whole book."

"Perhaps the author's name?" Poppy suggested.

Dejuan typed that in but shook his head after several more failed attempts. "Nope!"

"We actually could scour the whole book pretty easily," Morning Blossoms reported. "I dusted something that might come in handy. Come with me!"

Stephen picked the book up and followed her out, heading to the second floor where she stopped in front of a strange looking contraption with another monitor nearby. Morning Blossoms was humming to herself as she flipped a few switches, and the thing came to life. The screen brightened but didn't show anything. "Okay," she told him. "Put the book into the cradle there."

Stephen did as she suggested, cracking it open to the first page, and the pages were there on the screen, magnified. *Oh, those are cameras! They point at the pages, and the monitor shows them. An aid for the visually impaired? Wait, can we be visually impaired? Who believes themselves blind enough to actually be blind here? This must be for taking pictures of specific pages and not needing to lug the whole book around. We're just using it to show the pages, magnified, to everyone.*

"Talk about the words leaping off the page! Now we can see if anything jumps out at us!"

"I agree, this is easier than trying to all look at it at once, to make sure we don't miss anything. Let's see what we have here." He started slowly turning the pages, looking for anything that might stand out. *But in reality, it could be the first word on the first six pages, the first six words on the left side of the first page. We are still groping around in the dark.*

"Hold a moment," Poppy requested. "Do you believe this mark here to be some kind of printing error?" She pointed to the bottom corner of the page, which seemed to be marked with a small dot.

"We can't see with you in front of the screen," Stephen told Morning Blossoms, who had zipped in front of the display and was now looking the page over.

"Oh, can you see it now? How about now? Or now?" She twisted her body and covered different portions of the screen with her arms and legs.

"Really?" he chided. "Isn't that... like a dad joke or something?"

"I could be a dad. You don't know. Additionally, I resent the implication that only dads can use certain types of humor. Anyway, look here." She moved somewhat out of the way and pointed to a word. "It has a dot next to it as well."

"The," read Stephen. "I'm not convinced it's just a printing error of some kind." *Wait, is she implying she was a man when coming to Midveil? I guess, to be most accurate, she was a soul that took the form of her old physical body, which was male, and then took on a new form later, which is female. Are any of us really "gendered" in that sense? Does that even have meaning here?*

"Let's keep going."

In the end, the group found eleven such marks, and eleven marked words in the book, spelling out a rather clear sentence: "The key to my heart has not been found by another."

"Aw, he was lonely after all!" Morning Blossoms pouted. "You think that's the password? Lonely?"

"Heartbreak would be my guess," Poppy decided.

She shook her head. "No, that would imply someone did find the key to his heart and then broke it in half and stomped on it. He says here it's never been found. Well, don't hide it so well ya dummy!"

"You do have a point. I retract my speculative."

"That seems too simple, and yet too complex," Stephen remarked. "It doesn't feel right."

"That's 'cause they ain't right, boss," Dajuan agreed smugly. "Dictionary attack never gonna work 'gainst a librarian. Betcha I get it in three tries."

"Ten points!" Morning Blossom agreed.

"Oh, you not confident?" he smirked. "I can go as low as ten if you not feeling it."

"Hold on, you really think you have it?" Stephen asked him. "What's a dictionary attack anyway?"

"Doing what we doing, boss. Trying every word we can think of. Bound to get it right. But this," he tapped what Stephen had written, "too long to use as a password. But, less all this a red herring, we got everything we need. Common technique back in the day though. Show not tell- you takin' the bet or what?"

"Ten points!" she repeated.

"A'right. Ten it is. Let's go see."

He led the way back to the office and sat down as if before a grand piano. "I'll try all lower case, all upper case, and first letter cap," he announced. "Three tries, dig?"

"Trying what, though?" she wondered, landing next to the keyboard.

"Watch and learn, cutie pie." He punched in the letters *tktmhhnbfa*.

Invalid password

"Not a problem. Here come the next guess." His fingers were poised to type.

"Wait, what's that gibberish?" she demanded. "You're just typing random letters!"

"Nah. See, dictionary attack, no? We tried words, but best password seems random. But try remembering random shizz, ain't nobody got time for that! But remember a phrase, like our boy here, and you can just type the first letter of each word for a seemingly random password. Nobody ever guess it, dictionary attack don't work, but at the same time, remember the ditty and you golden!" He typed.

TKTMHHNBFBA

Invalid password

"Uh oh, I feel some tension in the air," Morning Blossoms announced. "Better not screw it up. What should I get with my ten points?"

"What *can* you get with ten points?" Stephen wondered. "What's the exchange rate with Norwegian Kroner?"

"Whatever somebody give you," Dajuan told him. "Ain't no gold standard here. Drum roll please!" *Tktmhhnbfa*

The password screen went away and showed the same strange desktop as the other computer at the front desk.

"My work here is done," he announced, standing dramatically and taking a bow. "What'll I buy with *my* ten points I wonder? Thinking a whole chocolate cake, eat it right at the front desk. One. Delicious bite. At a time." He mimed putting a fork into his mouth and tasting something yummy.

"Humph," Morning Blossoms grunted. "Guess you earned it. Status screen." A screen, not unlike the ID card Stephen now carried, popped into existence in front of her. "Transfer ten points to... what did you say your name was again? Colonel Mustard?"

"You know my name, Saltshaker!"

"Hang on, what's that?" Stephen wondered, pointing at the floating screen.

"It's just my status- oooooohhhh," she nodded knowingly. "No orientation, right. This is the original way we used to track things. Fell out of use, people didn't like anyone wandering by able to see their point totals and such when they went to pay for things. Plus, have you seen me?" She indicated herself. "Where am I going to carry that huge ID card? Or Poppy, for that matter."

Everyone looked to her, and she turned to the side and thrust out a hip. "Agreed, woman's clothing doesn't come with pockets, even in the afterlife. Someone should look into why."

"Not exactly what I meant but sure. So we have to use the old way."

"It just keeps going deeper, doesn't it?"

"Thas what she said," Dajuan agreed with a snicker.

He closed his eyes and began to count to ten, but only got to 2. "Hang on, there's no pregnancy here, right? There couldn't be. Or disease?"

"You just now figuring this out, boss? You really will make a *fine* librarian."

"Go ahead and laugh, I have a lot on my mind. Anyway, don't let me distract you from the bet payout." He made a "get on with it" gesture.

"Shoot, I hoped he had forgotten," muttered Morning Blossoms. She transferred the ten points and the group crowded around the computer. A few minutes of poking around showed this was probably going to be a dead end as well, for the most part. They found the template for the monthly report, a few archived flyers he must have sent somewhere to be printed, and his address book. No personal journal, juicy bookmarks, internet history, or even an installed game. Nothing but the essentials.

"So we can enact my plan," Morning Blossoms announced. "If you've got your heart set on this, Stephen?"

"You mean asking his contacts if they've seen him lately? Or if they know where he may have gone?"

"Exactly."

"Leave the library..." He took a shuddering breath. "I guess I'll have to, sooner or later."

"I'll go with you, don't worry. It'll be fun!"

"Yeah, fun." *But I can't imprison myself here. I'll be with her, it'll be fine. City living will come rushing back to me, just you wait. The rhythm of the city, once I get it down. Heck, I'll own this town! I won't wear a frown! Or was it something about a crown?* "Tomorrow, then."

"Sounds good! Wow, I get to play tour guide. I wonder if I should borrow a new dress from that guy?" She pondered.

"Just your original flower dress will be fine," he assured her. "I don't want you to go to any trouble."

"But the camera loves me! I can't deny fairy lovers their fix." She sighed. "You're right, not much time now. It's just I've never had a place to actually *put* clothes. So I only ever owned one at a time, whatever I was wearing. I want to start right away. I'd demand you get me a new dress with points for helping you out but... you know. Still, looking forward to having an income and being able to afford a new outfit now and again. Having a real wardrobe will make people less biased against me."

"Bias refers to cutting fabric on a diagonal, to be specific a 45-degree angle," Poppy whispered to him.

"I'm sure I didn't need to know that," Stephen remarked dryly. "But thank you." He cleared his throat. "Thank you, everyone. Especially you, Dajuan, cracking that password. I hope jumping through all those hoops gave old Brenard a bit of a grin, solving the little puzzle he left for the daring and clever. We have what we need to proceed. I'll head out tomorrow morning with Morning Blossoms, you two will manage the library as you have been. I have full confidence in you both!"

"Wish you luck boss. Gonna step out, see if something catch my eye that's under ten points."

"Rub it in, why don't you?"

That evening Stephen lay in bed, thinking about various things. His little team of librarians, what he might find outside the walls. Was he poking his nose into things best left uninvestigated? But he had already decided, hadn't he? Just like ships being honor bound to investigate an SOS call at sea, if a librarian was in trouble, another librarian must rush heroically to their aid. *Besides, it's just talking to some people. Seeing the city, learning to get around. I bet there's lots to see and experience in the afterlife. Who knows what they've come up with? This was all just flat ground according to them, and they've made a huge city out of it. Get to know it, as it's your home now. You'll be here... a long time. I mean, wow, I'm dead. But at the same time, not. I've managed not to think about it, keeping busy with the library, but who was I? What did I do? Does it even matter now? I suppose not. Do some souls try to find out, and how do they go about it? That Dajuan though, he's a lot smarter than I gave him credit for. They all helped find the password, but he got it in the end. Maybe things are more complex than I first believed, and sleeping in my dumpster isn't a reflection on him, but on the society they've created here. Sleep. The sleep of the dead! Morning Blossoms said I don't even have to sleep, but many do because it gets dark and newbies like me are just used to doing it. That's why I went to sleep so fast trying to read that book on points that first night. I had thought about going to sleep, and that's how it works here. You simply decide to go to sleep and-*

The next morning, Stephen found Dajuan waiting for him at the front desk, ready to open the library. With a grin, the boy handed him a white paper cup with a plastic lid on it.

"Fortification," he announced, "for the journey ahead. Real, actually, fake coffee. Close as we've been able to come to it, anyway. The original warehouses had some things, and we petitioned, or partitioned if you're Poppy, to have a few staples available on hand. So we can grow an approximation of coffee beans and roast them unto a passible brew. Keep in mind, you don't have a brain for caffeine to affect, but if you believe you should feel more alert after drinking it, you probably will. That's just how it works here, don't forget."

"Uh, thanks." He accepted the cup while eying the boy suspiciously and took a sip. It was coffee. Black coffee, still hot. "Huh." *Same as the alcohol thing I was thinking about earlier, then. But what's up with him?*

"Is it okay? Though I suppose if you don't recall the taste from life, there's no standard to compare against."

What's happening right now? "Uh, Dajuan?"

"Yes Stephen?" He looked attentive. He was the same young man, wearing the same thing, with the same hair, eyes, face, and posture. But it wasn't him at all, was it?

"I don't... this could be an awkward question..."

"Oh no! Did something 'shrink' in the night? It can work against us too," he agreed with a serious nod. "That's why I like to keep my prospects open, that feedback loop I spoke of earlier. The more use you get out of it, the bigger it gets, in my opinion. Believe me, it's worked out so far. Don't worry, it's a common enough problem I'm sure we can make it bigger again one way or another. Healers are very discrete here, just say a code phrase like 'I just got out of the pool' and they'll know just what to do. Not that much paperwork to sign either, not like turning into a fairy!" He laughed.

"No, not that..."

Relief was plain on his face. "Thank goodness! Of course!" He reached under the counter. "I ordered it black for you, but I got some passable creamer and sugar here if you want it." He spilled some packets and tiny containers out from a bag onto the counter. "Sorry, I should have said something, this is probably the first thing you've had here, isn't it?"

"I had tea... no, it's... how do I put this?"

"Be straightforward, please. It's just us two at the moment." He looked around.

"Are you talking differently?" he blurted.

"Oh dear..." he sighed.

"What? Is it bad? Is something happening to me? To you? What's going on?"

He put his elbows on the counter. "Thing is, you really must give up your preconceived notions that this is simply a different sort of physicality. It's not. Everything boils down to a concept here. You. Me. Let's start simple. Take a droplet of water, right? Or coffee, to be more topical. Back when we were alive it was commonly known that you could take that small drop of coffee and discover it was actually quite large. You could cut it in half again and again, getting a smaller and smaller piece each time. To a certain point, of course. Eventually you would have a single 'unit' of coffee, that couldn't be cut any further. Not and still be coffee, right?"

Stephen nodded, this all sounded fairly logical to him.

"And then, if you had the right tools, you could keep cutting. Split that coffee into various parts. Electrons and neutrons, and all that. Imagine you could separate the various parts, with very tiny tools. Okay? Then you start cutting them. Your parts become quarks, and maybe you get even better tools and start cutting up the quarks. You find even smaller parts, or vibrating energy ribbons or something. The point is everything is made up of smaller things. But it's not the same thing here. Once you got to your singular amount of coffee, trying to cut it again would simply make it vanish. Because it's coffee. Cutting it means it's not coffee, and that means it's not anything. So now you're asking yourself what that has to do with how you're experiencing my speech."

"Something like that." *I feel like I should be writing this down, will it be on the test?*

"It goes back to things being a concept. You had a concept of me in mind when you first saw me. Don't worry," he raised a palm, "I won't ask what it was. I had one of you the first time I saw you. It's only natural. But that concept has *meaning* here. It colors your perception of things, in this case, me. Let me ask you this: You think that's air you're breathing right now?" He laughed. "Sorry, old joke. There's no air between us, not really. Just as there isn't ground under this library. We're souls. I'm not really 'talking' to you by moving the 'air' with some kind of 'pressure wave' between us. I'm communicating concepts to you, which yes, you perceive as sound because it's what you're used to. Confidentially," he looked around again. "I think those that go through the arch, that one we spoke of, are welcomed into the higher reality the celestials inhabit. They are ready for 'the truth,' in other words, rather than this approximation of our old lives we all share. We are too rooted in our old ways to be ready for it, and must be prepared by having many experiences here, first. But that's just my theory. The slime killing thing is equally possible, even the celestials insist they don't know. They found the arch; they didn't make it. To return to your original question: No, I'm not talking differently than I was. But last night you must have changed the way you think about me. That changed your perception, and thus how your being understands the concepts my being is trying to convey to you."

"I'm a terrible person, is what you're saying? I never thought I would be 'that guy' but clearly--"

"Let me stop you right there." He held up his palm again. "The fact you've seen me in a new light so quickly is a point in your favor. Yes, I would have preferred to be seen as more capable, which is what I'm assuming you determined after I found you the password?"

He nodded.

"Fine. Capable right from the start. But you did find me in a dumpster, so that much is on me. At least you did change your mind after my demonstration yesterday. You may not remember your old life, maybe you tried to be a good person, maybe you didn't. With a zero-point total we don't have evidence either way. All we have is what you do with your existence now. If you are 'that guy,' at least your soul is learning how not to be. That is kinda-sorta the point of Midveil, if you think about it. Anyone can look like anything they want here. All that's left is the essence of us, which is essentially formless. Put aside any notion that what you're seeing of me is who I am. It's not, or at least it's only one expression of who I could be. Got it? And a word to the wise, don't mention this to others if it happens again. Most don't

like being reminded that it's as much their own outward appearance as the perception of them that matters here. They might get miffed you're experiencing them in a way that changes over time, or that they aren't deliberately trying to cultivate."

"This is a lot to think about. Everything here is. That acclimation year is sounding better and better." *I can't just hide away though, not after finding this place.* "What about Morning Blossoms? The way she talks? Why did I have a preconceived notion fairies should talk like that?"

He barked a laugh. "I think she goes out of her way to be difficult. In my experience, Midveil seems to operate under the principle that the funnier something is, the easier it'll be allowed. It's a minor form of magic, you might say."

Stephen was horrified beyond his ability to express. "The afterlife is a sitcom?"

He shrugged. "At least it's not a Road Runner cartoon."

"I... I know what you're talking about. Yes..."

"Oh, there you are, Stephen!" Morning Blossoms flew up to him, once again dressed in her flower petal dress. "Ready to go?"

He sipped his coffee; it was still hot. *Probably because coffee is supposed to be hot, and it's just the concept of coffee. It's not an 'iced' coffee, now is it? No, it's a hot coffee. I've got a lot to think about...* "Ready!" he announced. "Hey Dajuan, thanks for this." He held up the cup. "And the philosophy."

"Any time, boss. Oh and hey, if you get in trouble out there, just look for something to slash your own throat out. Then you'll reform back here tomorrow, none the worse for wear. Easiest way to get out of trouble, trust me. Have fun!"

"He was just joking, right?" he asked Morning Blossoms as they headed out the door.

"First stop, the knife shop!" she announced. "You like a nice, big one, right? This way!"

"No... it's all a joke, right?"

"... Right?"

Chapter 13

The city

Thankfully it *was* a joke, Morning Blossoms did not lead him directly to a knife shop. In fact, she seriously considered putting him in a collar and leash because he kept stopping to look at stuff that caught his interest. But he would probably like that, wouldn't he? Off we go, hounds! Woof!

"This place is just so incredible," he said for the sixth time. "Every building looks different. Every vehicle seems to be made with extra attention to detail, and the people!" He stared at a man who seemed to have a head that was literally on fire walking past him. "Hotman," he greeted with a nod. The man smiled and nodded back.

"Looks a bit different than from the roof, huh?" she asked with a smirk.

"You've got that right. I feel so plain here, like I should at least have robot legs or something. How does that person have robot legs?" He didn't point because that would be rude but she saw them.

"A lot of the special effects stuff is going to be illusion magic," she explained. "That fire guy was. You'll learn to feel it eventually, if you have interest in magic."

"Oh, I do!" he agreed, as a man in an orange gi floated by, sitting cross-legged on a cloud. "I feel there's just so much for me to learn right now."

"One day at a time, Stephen. Just like how this place was built."

"How was this place built, exactly?" he asked, stopping to rub a building that was seemingly made of a billion tiny, colored beads. "They really are individual beads."

"We could make a quick stop," she decided. "For certain definitions of quick. You did promise to go there with me anyway, so we could just get it out of the way."

"Do I look like I have a boomerang on my head? Wait why did I ask that..."

"So you're saying you're not a quick man? Anyway, where would the nearest one be?" She hovered in a circle. "Okay, over here, come on."

"Right!" *All eternity to see all this, I have to remember that. Strike a balance between not procrastinating about everything because 'I'll have time to do that later' and needing to experience everything, everywhere, all at once.* "Where are we going?"

"To catch-a-ride!" she singsonged. "District central is a bit far, not if we want to get a significant portion of that list done today. I was heading to a transit building but now we want local transportation, not district. There's one nearby that's purrfectly functional."

"I'm in your hands, I'll go see whatever you want. He's been gone for years, another day or two either way won't be the end of the world. If we do tourist stuff, or I guess orientation stuff, today that might even make talking to the people on the list easier."

"We'll see how it goes."

The pair came to a mostly empty lot with a banner hung across two poles at the entrance. "Kitty Kat Transport?" he read.

"I did say it was purrfectly functional, didn't I?" She flew past the poles, and he followed. In the lot were a bunch of round spheres, black, with a cat face on each one and cat ears at the top. Each one

had a part of its side flipped open, showing a bench inside and not much else. A figure with a cat theme of some kind lounged nearby each sphere. She flew over to one with a man dressed in casual clothes, but with cat ears on his head, leaning against it. Getting closer he saw there was a seat in there too, as well as the bench. The seat was in front. Next to the seat was a metal stand, on which rested a crystal of some kind.

Is that the control for this strange vehicle?

"Need a ride?" he asked. "Nyan!"

"To district central," she agreed. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Nyan."

"Thanks. Let's go, Stephen, into the catsule."

The three headed into the capsule and he sat down, Morning Blossoms on his shoulder. Their pilot closed the door, and Stephen was glad to see the interior was perfectly clear, like they were inside a glass ball. *One way illusion magic maybe?*

The pilot took a deep breath, bringing his hands together. His body began to shine with light just like Morning Blossoms' when she did magic, and he finally intoned, "come under my control." That was slightly worrying, but light rushed out of him and hit the walls of the sphere. A second later it smoothly rose into the air as the pilot looked around. When it was high enough, it headed in a straight line through the air.

A taxi. I'm taking an afterlife taxi, styled as the head of a cat, and my driver is a catboy that ends sentences with 'nyan.'" Wow. That is my singular reaction. Wow.

"If you feel you have any spare cat-pacity? Nyan." The pilot indicated the crystal next to him, and Morning Blossoms hopped up again.

"Sure, it's early and I'm feline fine." She flew over to the crystal and put a hand against it. She, and it, started to glow.

"You seem purr-plexed, nyan."

"Huh?" *No wonder she came here. Was it really the closest? I bet it wasn't. She just wanted to make cat puns, and have cat puns made at her. These are her people.*

"I'm making a mana donation," Morning Blossoms explained, looking back over her shoulder. "While he does this out of the goodness of his heart, with no expectation of reward as is proper, donating mana is simply the decent thing to do. It's a de facto currency among those that make their living in the spell casting business. As I have been, shall we say, blessed," she looked extremely smug as she said this, "with a great capacity for mana, I don't mind sharing it. This takes some of the burden off him. He can absorb it later, should he need it, allowing him to furry more people in a day than he would be able to otherwise." She glared at the man. "Of course, he should still be studying the meditation techniques to increase his own regeneration rate!"

He made a cat claws gesture at her. "Such cat-ittude, nyan. Who says I'm not?"

"Good!" She stopped the transfer and flew back to Stephen. "He's very mew," she explained.

"I got that impression, nyan," the driver replied. "Like a kitten who just got their eyes open. So adorable. We're a welcoming place, Midveil. Don't hesitate to ask basically anyone at all if you get lost or need some kind of assistance. Nyan."

"He's right," she agreed. "If we get separated for some reason, ask for directions to the nearest district transit building. Go through to district 17, which is just the order it was founded in. You can ask for directions from there back to the library. Even closed, it should still be in the transit company's records. They'll either direct you to a service like this," she pointed at the bubble, "or if you're close enough, direct directions."

"Seventeen. Got it." He couldn't help himself, staring out the window at all the fantastic buildings that were racing by. *Who lives there? What do they do? Do they need... a library card?*

He didn't have long to admire the scenery as they soon set down next to a utilitarian looking building with some large garage doors that were currently open. Nothing was coming out, but he could see a lot of construction vehicles parked inside. Looking back at the capsule he saw the cat face again, so it really was some kind of one-way illusion or another.

"Do you mind waiting a meowment?" Morning Blossoms asked. "We shouldn't be too long."

"The spell should last an hour, I'll only need a few minutes to get back. I can wait if you want to take my service elsewhere. Nyan." He took his phone out of his pocket and started looking at it.

"Thanks. Let's go, Stephen."

"Thanks for the ride," he told the man. He got a wave in return.

Once past the doors, he realized where all the building materials had come from- right here. Stacks, barrels, crates, bins, tubs, every conceivable way a material could be presented was here. These held raw material, from sheets of wood to different types of metal ingots, all simply out for the taking. There were no guards, no patrol robots, no eager ghosts wanting to know what they could help you find today, or were you just browsing? He could walk off with a hatful of gold nuggets, if that sign was accurate. And if he had a hat.

"If we had flies, you would be cat-ching them," Morning Blossoms announced with a snicker. "It's impressive, right?"

"So all of this," he indicated the interior in general, "became all of that." He turned and pointed out the door.

"That's right. What was once an empty field became a ramshackle group of houses. That became better houses. That became cities. It took a lot of work, research, and magic. But we had the time, and the desire not to live in log cabins or whatever. I mean, as a fairy, I'm fine living in a tree."

"Or a book drop," he teased.

"Yeesssss. But most people are not. This was set up by the celestials. An endless supply of material, and they're regularly spaced too. So you don't have to go too far to get what's here to where you need it to be. These single and double digit districts are pretty quiet now, of course. Construction here finished a long time ago, so only individuals needing raw material would really come here. We could go see somewhere still in active development, if you wanted to, later."

"Yeah, of course. Still, it's impressive. To reinvent everything from electric lights to computers! Ah, but you had access to all the smart people that originally did that, of course. They could tell you- or wait, no. They would have forgotten their lives of inventing same as I did. For all I know I could be the world's greatest inventor. But I couldn't tell you how to make bread. Mix flour and yeast? Something?"

She glanced over at what appeared to be a staircase leading up. "Yeah, something like that. Anyway, let's not keep our driver waiting."

"Hang on," he protested suspiciously. "What's up there?"

"Nothing!" He glared at her and went over there, climbing the stairs. "You don't want to go up there!"

He scowled, wondering what she was trying to keep from him, but popping his head over the top of the stairs he didn't have to ponder long. The second floor was a huge library, and a much nicer one than his if he had to put a number to it. Carpeted, with plush chairs for reading and fine, heavy tables for researching. Fireplaces full of cheery flames burned nearby, and another huge staircase led to an upper floor. *Which is clearly impossible as this building wasn't that tall.* He looked around angrily as she sheepishly came up behind him. "What do we need our library for?" he demanded. "People can just come here! No wonder no one cared if it was closed or not."

"Let's not jump to any cat-clusions," she chided. "See, this is why I didn't want you to see this. You don't understand the purpose of this library and now I have to explain it to you."

"So explain it- what you said!"

"This floor of the library contains writings on how to do things. Make things. Use the heavy equipment you saw downstairs. Use magic. On the floor above that," she pointed up the stairs, "are all the works of the human race. Every book of fiction, non-fiction, and weird made up lies by *who know who*, all can be found there. But that's not the full story, is it?"

"It sounds pretty complete to me! Do you see the size of this place? It's kilometers across! Somehow. You could read for lifetimes and still never be finished! Our library is terrible and pointless."

"That's where you would be wrong. Not about the size, measurements vary. See, while this library holds all the books ever made by the living, where do you think you would go to find a book written by the dead?"

"How can the dead write a- ohhhhhh." He nodded. "Wait, let me see if I'm understanding you. So I write a book, right? And conflict of interest aside, putting a thousand copies *in my own library*, I would need a library for people to come take it out from."

"Exactly. Creative types still exist here. Those with opinions still want to express and publish them. That's where libraries like ours come in."

Hitler was right, indeed. Ugh, some opinions we could do without, methinks. "I can accept that," he decided. "Where's the librarian here, though? Or does no one come to these places either, so they don't need one?" *No, can't be. People must come to read romance novels and whatever still...*

"People still come," she explained. "But the library maintains itself. Same as the stuff downstairs, taking a book here leaves a copy of that book for another. And books away from the shelves that go unattended vanish after a day. They didn't want to tie someone up maintaining the place, I suppose."

"The celestials?"

"Exactly. I mean we could probably do it with magic, for a book or two at a time, but the scale of a place like this, well, you said it yourself. It's a kilometer long if it's a millimeter. No count of the books has even been undertaken, that I know of. But you can bet it's a lot."

"I suppose when you can do anything, access higher planes of existence or whatever, you may as well make a self-cleaning library with that power. But they made us make everything in the city? When they could make one building that could hold a million people or whatever?"

"Part of the agreement between Sunward and Darkward." She shrugged. "The Darkward celestials were rooting for you to have a great fall, and to be your own architects of it."

And all the king's horses and all the king's men... why were horses involved in the first place? Not relevant. "Instead, it is endless summer. Neat."

"Oh we still have seasons," Morning Blossoms told him. "Look forward to snow and all that."

"Come on, you've got to be kidding me! Leave it in the winter zone!"

"Hey, I hear ya, and I ain't kitten ya. Come on."

"Ugh, Winter is coming. Just what I wanted to hear."

"Some people like it more, so to maintain balance, the celestials insist we have it. Those that don't like it just have to tough it out. Just like those that hate summer are doing right now."

"That's dumb and I hate it."

"Of course, those that do can literally just hibernate through it."

Huh, just decide to wake up in three months. Why not? Pay rent in advance so you're not disturbed? As long as their 'job' can miss them for that time.

The pair grabbed a box out of the "take a box" bin, and Morning Blossoms directed him to various materials needed to repair her house. He was able to load up, feeling slightly guilty about just taking all this stuff, but she was right. He took a few pieces of a lightweight wood off the stack and the stack didn't look any shorter. Same with the ingots of metal she pointed out.

"I can reshape the metal with my current spells, I'll need to learn a wood shaping spell to work with that," she told him. "But at least I'll have the materials on hand."

"It's not like this place will miss them," he remarked.

The cat taxi was still waiting by the entrance, so the two climbed inside and gave their next destination. "We'll have to go to district 08," she announced. "So we'll want the nearest transit building."

"You got it, nyan," said the man, closing up the door again. Once more, the "craft" lifted off the ground and shot forward.

"You said there are more of these places?" Stephen asked.

"Every 200 kilometers is the official measurement," she agreed. "It doesn't seem like much, now that we have multiple ways of moving around, and the city reaches far, far beyond those limits. But in the beginning, it would have seemed pretty far."

"I can imagine." And this explains all the variety I'm seeing. Souls from all timelines exist, and they had manuals on how to build just about anything, in the warehouse. So of course someone would go through the trouble of doing so. Also explains why things like record players exist, when they should have simply skipped over everything but the latest technology. Well, sort of. Either they simply worked their way up to make sure things still worked here the way they expected, or they worked their way down. In other words, someone made records as more of a hobby because they seemed to recall liking records. Or just wanted to see if they could build a record player from scratch, given the directions they had. Once they did, someone wanted it. Points were exchanged, and another was built to replace it. And another, and another. Repeat that for all technology going backwards to candles and stone tools. On the flip side, that's a record pun see what I did there, Morning Blossoms, I can do it too, see? On the flip side, you get to choose the best tool for the job, or at least explore every tool related to whatever job you're doing to find the best tool. Maybe vinyl really was better- I don't know. But given an infinite time to check an infinite number of configurations: wire material and length, speaker configuration and placement, needles, amps, you really could design the 'perfect' listening experience!

The pair said goodbye to their driver, and he lifted off again, so they went inside a building bustling with people. Morning Blossoms led the way, taking him through a line labeled 1-9 and he noticed there were many other lines, each with 10 destinations apiece.

"It would be annoying to have to expand the building every time a new area was claimed," she explained. "This way it uses ten times less space. We're heading to the portal that leads to the facility that contains the portals to the first 10 districts."

"I'm sure it all works very well," he agreed.

"Well enough."

They went through, following a line of people of all shapes and sizes like it was an amusement park ride. Back and forth in a snake pattern between some ropes. What they were heading towards turned out to be a simple hole in the air, surrounded by an archway, leading to another room with a wall of such holes. There were many attendants here, keeping everything moving, and they got in line for the 08 district and were shortly put through there. They came out of the building and looked around. The buildings here were shorter, and didn't look as complex as the ones he had passed in his home district.

Of 17, remember. Ah, this makes sense. If this is the eighth district to be created, nine more were made after it. Of course we're going to get better at it. Use what works, abandon what doesn't, and build taller and more extravagant to prove we're the 'better' district. Ugh, how many are there? Is district 27 to district 17 what district 17 is to district 08? Did I get that right? Higher districts will be so much better than mine, in proportion to mine being better than this one?

"Excuse me," Morning Blossoms asked a random person passing by. She was normal looking enough, if you took away the wings, harp, and diaphanous robe she was wearing. "Can you direct us to this address?" She gestured to Stephen, who gave a start and got out the paper with the address on it.

"Hello," he greeted her, handing it over. "Hope you don't mind us asking."

"Not at all!"

They got the directions and he wrote them down, because of course he was prepared with a pencil and small notebook he had found in the library. They thanked the angel, who nodded, and went on her way. It wasn't too far so they headed there on foot, Stephen doing his best to keep up and stay on task. *The fact I don't look like some anime character already outs me as having just arrived. Gawking like I've never seen a cascading waterfall building will just make it worse. Glance at it in passing, and try to remain cynical. Oh my goodness there's little rainbows naturally made by the spray as it comes off the building!*

He crashed into someone and went sprawling backwards. *Did I hit a wall? A lamppost? A forcefield?*

"Sorry!" he yelled out in a panic, scrambling up again. He looked up and up at the burly man with no shirt that towered over him. He had an ax in one hand, resting on his shoulder, and a beard a chipmunk could get lost in. *Oh my!*

"No problem," he said, stepping around Stephen and going on his way. There was a hint of pity in his eyes, for Stephen's scrawniness or for his distraction it was impossible to know.

"How could you embarrass me like that?" Morning Blossoms chided him. "Try to pay attention, will you?"

"I thought I was. It was just so pretty I couldn't look away!"

"I'm sure it was," she agreed. "Come on."

Soon they were knocking on an apartment door, and they heard a "just a minute" from inside. A paint covered woman answered, smudges all over her. "Yes?" she asked. She had dark eyes and hair, and was dressed in little more than a painter's smock, which was also covered in paint smudges.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Stephen told her, as Morning Blossoms gave him a shove forward. As much as she could, anyway. "But I'm looking for information about a librarian named Brenard that vanished some time ago. Would you happen to know him?"

Her eyes lit up. "Oh yeah, I do recognize that name. Just got the one painting, never ordered another. Did he not like my work? Strange to come asking about it at this point though, that was a long time ago!"

"We were hoping you could tell us," he insisted. "He's sort of gone missing."

"Oh dear."

Chapter 14
A bit of ritual

Seated in the painter's apartment, Stephen looked around as she poured them some soda analog from a large jug. Naturally she had washed her hands first, and her face for that matter once catching a glimpse of herself. There were paintings everywhere, and he felt he could detect a clear progression from them. *Some she kept for sentimental reasons, but clearly they are inferior to others which I take to be more recent works. She's truly passionate about painting, that much is clear.* "You really do excellent work," he praised. "You still take commissions?"

"Of course!" she agreed readily, eyes lighting up. "What subject did you have in mind?"

"Well," he started. "A certain fairy now owes me some pictures for my help in getting the material to repair her house." He indicated the box he was still holding onto, now beside him on the floor. "But I thought, perhaps, she might rather sit for a portrait rather than just a simple photograph. Mix it up a little bit. I would count the debt paid with just the one, rather than the agreed upon two. There would of course just be *your* fee, which is a bit of a problem for reasons I don't feel comfortable going into right now."

"Would the painting be displayed publicly, or privately?" she asked.

"Depends on the pose we agree to," he teased. "And the outfit."

Morning Blossoms snorted. "No nudes! Not for just what I owe you, anyway."

"So there is the possibility of nudes, for the right price? I did wonder..." *Like every time she mentioned it, she was waiting for 'but what would it take' sort of a question.* "What about a view from just the back to highlight your wings- wait why does being displayed publicly make a difference anyway?"

"If it's publicly viewable," Morning Blossoms answered quickly, cutting off the artist. "It's of benefit to society and she earns points. Ongoing basis. If it was just hanging in your room she wouldn't, and would want to charge you. Sorry, he's just arrived, and didn't pay enough attention at the orientation to know *the basics of the basics.*"

She's covering for me! Thanks, Blossoms.

"It's fine," the artist agreed with a chuckle. "We all start somewhere. You should see some of the stick figures I did when I was growing up. I mean, I have to assume I made some, and that they were terrible."

"In that case I have a fantastic idea!" Stephen decided. "Portraits of the librarians! We could hang them... somewhere... they would be seen by people entering the building. That way people would know just who to talk to. How would *that* be for visibility?"

"That would be wonderful!" she agreed. "I'll do as many as you need!"

"I could agree to that," Morning Blossoms decided, flying around and looking at the paintings. "It would be different, wouldn't it? Having a painted portrait done? An artist's interpretation of me you say. Need a nice dress, that's for sure. Have my hair done. Oh yes." She struck various poses in the air, looking at the paintings already done that cluttered the place up.

"I think we're agreed," Stephen told her. "I'm Stephen, by the way. That's Morning Blossoms. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Ira. We can work out the particulars later. Unless that was why you came?"

Stephen shook his head. "No. We came for information about Brenard. You did the painting of the library in his office, then?"

"Yes. A strange subject, and I never got any points for it. Can I ask where he put it?"

"Hung in his office, to obscure a safe in the wall." *I could put it out too, so she starts getting some points for it. Does it work that way? Does a painting deemed 'lost' but now seen retain enough of whatever makes that work the celestials agreed upon to still earn points?*

She sighed. "I should have charged more."

"Probably," he agreed with a nod. "But I can fix it. He seems to have been a very utilitarian man, and he picked the least offensive thing he could to hang in his office. A picture of the very building he worked in. But it is the man himself I want to discuss. He vanished, and we're trying to track him down."

"Right, so you said," she agreed. "There's not much I can tell you. He hired me to do the job, and I never heard from him again. Though now that I think about it," she put a finger to her chin, "I know who you might be able to talk to!"

"That's great news!" he agreed.

"Let me get my phone." She scrolled through her contacts and wrote something down on a sheet of paper. "This is the address of his parents. They contacted me once, didn't give any details but wondered if I had heard from the guy. Said I should get in touch with them if I ever did. Haven't thought about that for years. So he's still missing, huh?"

"He never returned to the library. We haven't asked the records division if they have any information."

"The paperwork would be painful," Morning Blossoms agreed, coming back over. "Or more specifically, trying to get access to it."

"What's your interest, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I'm the new head librarian. I feel we should stick together, one book lover to another."

"How noble. I hope you find him!"

"Me too, thanks." *And that he's still sane when we do. And it wasn't the library that made him go insane, so that I'm next. I need to know why he left, for my own sake if nothing else.* "Let me get your card so we can schedule the sitting. Of course I'll have to clear it with my other two employees. It would be four, in total, if that makes a difference."

"Card?" she asked, confused. But then laughed. "Oh, are you one of those that's against technology?"

"Not at all, I just don't have a phone yet." *Or ever, given I can't earn points.*

"Don't look at me, they don't make them small enough for fairies," complained Morning Blossoms.

"How do you do anything? Okay, I'll give you my number and you can call. From the *library*."

"Thank you. Sorry to make trouble for you."

She waved that off. "No problem."

"Good job getting her to open up," Morning Blossoms told Stephen on the way down to the street again. "It was a stroke of genius, I must say."

"What do you mean?"

"All that portrait business. You're not really serious about that, are you?"

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" *Cement the employees I have, that they're in this for the long term by increasing moral when I hang their portrait by the door. Give her some work and points, let her do what she loves doing. Everyone wins here.*

"You really think I would make a good subject for a painting? Color me intrigued."

"As part of a larger work," he teased. "Fruit bowl." He made a sweeping gesture in the air. Then put his two fingers together and lowered them. "And fairy."

"Humm..."

"Arrangement of flowers. And fairy."

"I see how it is."

"Old shoe. And fairy."

"Do you want to find this address on your own?"

"Do you want to carry this box of supplies back to the library by yourself?"

"I probably could, you know."

"And I could probably find the address myself! So let us both play to our strengths, and both be better for it."

"You as my porter? That sounds about right. Or pack mule, I can see you with a pair of donkey ears. Say, speaking of asses, I noticed you checking her out. You like that kinda outfit? What there was of it, I mean."

"She was wearing just the apron! What was I supposed to do, ask her to put more on? Make a point of looking away, like I was passing judgement on what she wears in the privacy of her own home?" *Honestly, I'm surprised anyone wears anything at all, during the nice months. Just another thing our souls are used to, I guess.*

"Probably wasn't expecting visitors. And what painter wants to get their clothes all messy? Still, good job being *mostly* subtle about it. I doubt she caught you- more than twice."

"You're just trying to tease me, and I won't take the bait. She could have put something more on before answering the door. Thus, she didn't care, and I looked. Not that anyone would think themselves unattractive here, and so they are, but she was quite attractive and I don't mind admitting it."

"Is that how you justify it? Wow. Well done."

"Are we going in the right direction here or not?"

"District 16, we'll need more than local transport. Back to the district transit building, which, think fast! Which way should we go?"

"You think I was paying attention?"

"No, that's why I brought it up. Admit it, you would just be lost completely without me."

"I'm willing to admit it. I've never been here before, I'm following you."

"You've exceeded my assessment. Assuming we make good time, we should be able to talk to Brenard's parents and be back before dark. I don't know this area ass well, we would need to ask someone about a local transport service."

"Am I going to be the butt of your jokes for the rest of the day?"

"Assuredly."

The pair made their way towards a more rural area, away from all the tall buildings of district 16. Stephen was riding a simple to use two wheeled vehicle, like a board with wheels and a grip to hold onto. Morning Blossoms was on his shoulder, while the box of stuff was being held under his name back at the transport building. He would have to go back that way, after all. He slowed the "mover" and turned it, heading down a driveway towards the house that was their destination. The place was a modest two story affair in a light blue, and the yard was full of bushes and flowers. Morning Blossoms nodded appreciably as they went down the driveway. She seemed to approve. As they got near they heard a sick guitar solo blasting out of the back yard, and shared a look. Stephen went to the door and rang the bell, marveling that 1) he remembered this bit of etiquette so well he hadn't even thought about it, and 2) they had gone so far as to recreate doorbells in the afterlife. *But then, what would they use instead? A goose?*

"I don't think anyone is inside," Morning Blossoms told him. "I'm going to fly around back and take a look." She lifted off his shoulder.

"Okay."

He stood there admiring the yard a few moments, the music cutting off soon after Morning Blossoms headed back there. Another moment later and he heard the door open behind him. A man with a guitar on a strap stood there, Morning Blossoms hovering behind him. He had black, scraggly hair and a heavy apron on, various woodworking tools sticking out of it.

"You can come in," he boomed. "If you're not here to talk to me about Jesus, my long-distance carrier, or my auto insurance. My wife isn't home if you're trying to sell vacuum cleaners." He roared with laughter, and Morning Blossoms smacked his arm.

"Good one!"

"What? No. I'm here about a man named Brenard. Librarian at the Library of Good and Evil. I'm trying to track him down."

His face fell. "That's what she said."

"I don't get it," Morning Blossoms told him. "Oh you meant me! Yes, that is what I said. Wow, never heard it used *that* way before."

"Come on in." He opened the door and stepped back, allowing Stephen inside. The living room was full of posters of various bands, all proudly holding guitars. "Have a seat."

"Thank you."

"Do you play?" he asked, taking the guitar off his shoulders and reaching for a stand.

"I don't remember playing guitar," he admitted.

"Just finished this one up. Isn't she a beauty?" He indicated the instrument as he set it down.

Stephen looked it over. It was a shiny red, styled mostly as a triangle with several gems along one side of it. "I don't really have the eye for it. But I can appreciate the construction, it looks well made. You made it from scratch?"

"That's right," he agreed with pride, sitting down. "Every detail, down to the final sanding, priming, and painting. Let me know if you want some lessons!"

"I'll keep you in mind for sure. Should we wait until your wife returns to begin or..."

"That depends," he sighed. "Is the news good or bad?"

"There is no news," he clarified. "We spoke to the painter, Ira, and she gave us your name. We figured if anyone would know where Brenard had gone, it would be you."

"Then no, we won't wait," he agreed. "It would just upset her. I don't like reminding her that our son simply walked out on us. Breaks her heart every time."

"What happened?" he pressed. "If you don't mind sharing, I mean."

"That's just it. We don't know." He sat in thought for a moment, and Stephen didn't hurry him. "Everything seemed fine. He was always too straightlaced for my liking, not really into music at all. And that was fine. He was my son and I loved him. We both did. Being at the library didn't really make Brenard *happy*, but he was content. He had found a place that seemed to fit him. We were both happy for him. One day we realized we hadn't heard from him in some time, and called the library. He had no interest in a personal phone. There was no answer. That concerned us greatly and we hurried over there. Place was locked and dark. We didn't know what to do. We had been reunited with our son here in Midveil, and he had never showed signs of wanting to get away or make changes to his daily routine. That was his whole life, or whatever you call this. To think he would give it up without any warning- it's inconceivable. We had dinners together every so often, he never mentioned problems at the library or with the staff. We tracked down some of them, including the painter, asked what was going on. No friends to talk to, maybe that was part of the problem? That's when we learned they had all been fired over the course of a month. We couldn't understand it. Finally went to the hall of records to see if he had gone back to the living world, or passed through the arch. Nothing. It was just like he was gone. We put

in a request to be told if he showed up, and had some mages look into it. They turned up nothing, and there's been no word from the records department ever since. He must be somewhere, but it's been years and short of putting his face on milk cartons, we did what we could to try and track him down."

"That is disturbing," Stephen admitted. "I found the key to the library in the bushes outside the building. I have to wonder now if he was accosted one day, and has been taken somewhere."

"But who would take my son?" he protested. "There's been no ransom demand, no gloating by someone of any kind. I don't have enemies, I can't believe my son made one either. To say he had a dry personality is to point to a sopping towel and say it's 'rather moist.' He was far too uninteresting to make enemies. I'm sorry to say it like that but he just was. His room in life, that we've been able to recall, was stark to the point of being a prison cell, and he liked it that way. His apartment was no better."

Believe me, I know. I'm beginning to suspect the painting and some of the things there were simply there when he moved in, and he never bothered taking them down. Too much effort, he probably just didn't look at them, or even spend that much time there. Probably was in his office or among the books most of the time. "I see. I wish I had some kind of news for you, good or bad. But I don't. I've only just taken the place over myself and felt it wrong he would just walk away from the place. Vanish into thin air. I'll continue to search, and you'll be the first to know if I find anything."

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "He's our son. We just want to understand, to know he's okay." He stood, and Stephen did also.

"I'm Stephen, it was nice to meet you." He offered his hand, and the man shook it.

"Ben. My friends call me Big Ben."

Big Ben this here's Rubber Duck, and I'm a gonna put the hammer down!

"Please let us know what you find, about our son. Good or bad, I know my wife would want to hear it."

"Hmm, oh, yes! Of course. I won't give up easily, so hopefully you'll hear from me soon. Let's go."

"Right behind you," Morning Blossoms told him. "Sir? Do you have any pictures of your son? Old possessions you won't miss? They could come in handy. Even if he believes he should look different now, it'll help to know what he did look like at one time."

"Of course, one moment."

"So now what?" Stephen asked as they rode away from the house. He had a photo of Brenard, taken when they were reunited, and a tie he wore often and had left one day accidentally, in his pocket. He wasn't sure why he had them, but Morning Blossoms had thanked Ben for them when they left.

"Now we take matters into our own hands," she replied, not ominously at all. She said nothing more than simply directing him to the city center, asking directions of those they met along the way.

Stephen pulled up to the local warehouse, disabling the "long range mode" on the vehicle, which dropped the shield that cut down on wind and let it move faster. "Back here again, huh?"

"This is what I can offer you," she agreed. "Come on." They headed up the stairs and to the magic section, Morning Blossoms talking as they went. "Magic has changed over the years, if you can believe it," she told him. "In the beginning we had to worry about affinities, and only certain people being able to do certain types of magic. That was great, then, because it forced everyone to learn magic so they could work together and build their homes. One person could manipulate metal, while another did wood. One person had telekinesis while another worked directly with the earth. But after a time this showed its limitations, and people started complaining."

"Complaining... about being able to do magic."

"Specific types of magic," she reminded him. "If you had no real interest in metal work but preferred sewing, you were out of luck. You were stuck with metal manipulation. The celestials finally agreed and dropped some of the restrictions. Made it more uniform for everyone."

"Seems like they can do just about anything."

"They have a lot of leeway here, it's true. But they can't change the underlying systems, like the points system. Otherwise, they may have just gotten rid of Sunward and Darkward altogether. So finally we had the current system implemented. It's more versatile, powerful, and convenient in the short term. They wanted magic to be mostly a localized phenomenon, so mana degrades quickly away from the spellcaster. But there is a way around that, and that's what we're on the track of here. This way." She took him to the ritual section and had him take down a book labeled "divination."

"You think we can track him down using magic?" he asked excitedly. "But his father said they tried that."

"I'm willing to go pretty big, as I'm sure whoever tried before only put in a token effort, to save mana. Put the book down here please?" She had him open it and start flipping through the pages, looking for something. When she found it, she studied it intently, arms crossed and tiny foot tapping on the table. Looking it over it just seemed to be a set of directions, some terms he didn't understand but the description claimed it could help locate a person by giving you the exact direction and distance to them. If you knew where you were and had a good map, that was good enough to at least get close enough to do the ritual again when you got closer, and narrow it further down.

"Can you do it?" he asked, after waiting for her to speak for several minutes. She was just standing there scowling at the book, no longer going back and forth over the pages of the ritual.

"I can do ritual magic easily enough," she agreed. "Anyone familiar with magic that can follow directions can do it. That's not the problem. It's the *cost* that's going to be an issue. To cover the area I'd like to cover, 10,000 kilometers, it's going to take *four times* as much mana as I have available to me."

She wants to cast a wide net. But then, Midveil is theoretically limitless, so in the end that's still hardly any of the distance he could have gone. Maybe. They still can only build so fast and out so far, because most people still want to be near where the ice cream is served, to pick a random example. Maybe she knows that's where most of the population is, and we could always do the ritual in some kind of "central" area. They would have expanded in a rough circle, right? "Does that mean it can't be done?"

She shook her head. "It means we need to go see someone about a crystal."

Chapter 15
Crystal Blue Persuasion

"Madame Bright's Crystal Emporium," Stephen read from the sign as the pair approached the building. "That seems crystal clear."

"Don't be stealing my routines now," Morning Blossoms chided him. "There's only room for one fairy in the party."

"Come on, you're so tiny. How many fairies would fit in a trench coat, for example? I'm sure there are groups made up of only fairies."

"Yeah, those T.B. followers down in the so called 'pixie hollow.'" She hovered near the windows, looking in at the displays. "This will do fine! Come porter, get the door for me, will you? Chop chop. Good man."

T.B? That almost rings a bell. He suppressed an eye roll and opened the door for her, following her inside. The place was small, but brightly lit. Various shelves funneling them to the front held crystals of different colors and sizes. On the side walls were various objects all with crystals somewhere along them, next to a description card. They were met at the counter by the shopkeeper, or as Morning Blossoms put it: "Ah, the titular Madame Bright, I presume? Watch out, we got a real ogler here." She indicated Stephen. "Might want to put on a shawl."

"Morning Blossoms!" he protested, too much. But he did look her over. Her eyes were purple and she had an enormous hat on, which held a variety of crystals that were seemingly growing out of the brim. Fox ears stuck out of it. Her low cut, light pink dress sparkled, and three fox tails swished behind her. Her nails were red and pointed, and she had on a bunch of jewelry.

"Thanks for the warning," she nearly purred, leaning forward on her arms onto the counter. "What can I do for you today?"

Stephen hastily looked away to the grinning fairy, giving her a look like "now what am I supposed to do in this situation *that you caused?*"

She looked back with the most innocent "I have no idea what your problem is" look she could muster. "We need a crystal," she announced. "One that can hold over fifteen hundred mana."

Now the witch stood back up and looked a bit cross. "You're not planning on blowing up the city or anything like that, are you?"

"Of course not!" she protested at once. "I'm going to use it to look for someone."

The witch hummed and looked under the desk, coming up with a crystal ball set in a base. The base had several crystals of varying colors spaced around it. "Tell me exactly what you will do with the mana, should I let you walk out of here with a crystal."

"I will use it as part of a ritual to track down the previous head librarian of the Library of Good and Evil, for the current head librarian who is with me now. I wish to cover 10,000 kilometers with the spell." She indicated Stephen, who gave a little wave. The sphere flashed green.

"Okay!" she agreed, smiling again. "Let's see what I have that can help you out." She put the ball back under the desk.

"Hold on," Stephen protested. "Why are we even here? Can't we get something from the warehouse? I mean I accept you needing to earn points and help souls out-" He stopped at her pitying look. "I'm missing something."

"You have not yet started your journey into magic, I take it?" Madame Bright asked.

"I only arrived a few days ago," he admitted.

"These crystals aren't just available from bins," Morning Blossoms explained. "They're *grown*. When the Big Switch happened, and the celestials updated magic around here, they debated if certain things should be added to the warehouses apart from updated books. Mana soaked metal, and crystals being two of the major components of the new craft. They decided to simply teach us how to make them, instead. Give more souls something to do, and more to learn and experiment with."

"So did you grow all these?" he asked Madame Bright, wondering how much time it took to grow one crystal. *Of course, she could grow twenty in a day if she was good at it. I have no idea what sort of effort this many represents.*

"Not all," she admitted. "But some. My interest is more in... customer service." She looked him up and down.

"I just bet," Morning Blossoms snorted. "Foxes! Anyway, I'm willing to rent and return with as much mana as one cycle. How does that sound?"

"Cycle?" Stephen wondered.

"Show me," commanded the witch, and she nodded.

"Minimized status screen: MP only." A blue window appeared before her, showing just one number, a 500, and she spun it around for Madame Bright to see.

"Acceptable," she agreed, and the window vanished. "And you *won't* have any trouble filling it, will you? Very well. Still, good thing you brought along your servant, it's going to be a bit more than you can handle. I hope he's not clumsy, they are rather fragile, you understand?"

"Yes, good help is sooo hard to find," she admitted. "I'm still breaking him in. If he is naughty, and drops it, he will be punished most severely. You have my word."

The two nodded to each other seriously. "I do have a selection of shock collars, to help if he often... misbehaves?"

"It may come to that," she agreed, trying to hide a grin behind her hands.

Really? he didn't say aloud.

"I believe this will serve your needs," Madame Bright said, coming around the counter. She headed for a shelf and picked up a crystal almost as large as Morning Blossoms herself. It just looked like a chunk of quartz, mostly white with a hint of blue. "I'll get your contact information and bag this up. When do you think it will be returned?"

"I'll get it done right away, only a few days," she told her.

"Very well." They headed back to the counter to take care of things, and he scanned the shelves. Smaller crystals had smaller numbers next to them, larger ones had larger. Perfectly logical. They seemed to be all shapes and sizes, colors and configurations. The ones on the left side of the aisle were listed as filled, or partially filled. On the right were the empty ones, it seemed. *So, this crystal will come back here and go on that side.* The completed objects all had a magical function, and a line about how many times they could be activated before needing a recharge.

"Come, porter," Morning Blossoms called to him. "We are ready to depart!" She indicated the bagged up crystal on the counter.

"Coming, mistress," he answered, figuring he may as well go along with the little joke. *As long as it doesn't go too far, of course.*

"So here's what we have to do next," she told him as they headed down the street again. "Charge up this crystal with fifteen hundred mana. I can do that in a few hours, maybe only one if my

little trick works out well. We'll do that tomorrow. Then I'll use the picture and tie in the ritual, you still have the book, right?"

"Right here." He showed her. "I put it in the bag."

"Good. The ritual will cover a large part of many districts, so we'll probably do it in the warehouse so it's somewhat central. Then I'll charge up the crystal again to return it, and we can head to wherever the ritual says he is."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we're sunk. I'm not throwing more than two thousand mana at this. The ritual will already be almost four hours long--"

"Four hours! I had no idea!"

"I know you didn't. It's fine, I hardly ever get to mess around with crystals and do rituals, and I have no expectation of reward from you, Mister No Points."

"Isn't that what we call gaming the system?" *As presumably she'll get points for helping me anyway, from Midveil.*

"It's a gray area. I doubt it'll be worth many but... One step at a time though, okay?"

"Fine." They walked in silence a moment. "She seemed impressed, that number you showed her."

"Thankfully, the system we operate under shows us numerically how much mana we possess at any one time. They didn't want us guessing at it. I happen to have twice what most people do, for whatever reason."

"Must be nice."

"It is. It makes it so I absorb ambient mana faster than most and can do bigger spells, or more of them between rests."

"And you'll be able to fill this crystal faster than someone else, I bet."

"That's right."

"And we're just renting it? You're going to put mana into it and give it back, like you did for that taxi driver?"

"That's right. Doing it this way actually gives a high return, because it's a very unselfish thing to do. You don't get the points for the action until someone uses up the mana you supplied, but because it's so far removed from you- and could be used for purposes you don't agree with- the point total is high. Giving that catboy the mana directly didn't give as many points, because he was right there and I had a good idea what he was going to use it for."

"Still, why don't you just do that all day, every day, for a year and get enough points to go Sunward? You could fill every crystal in her shop."

She shook her head. "Diminishing returns. You think the celestials didn't think of that?"

"It was worth a shot."

The pair made it safely to the library with the crystal intact, and went back to work for the rest of the day. The next day Stephen followed Morning Blossoms to another taxi service and to another district, one with a clear "fantasy" aesthetic.

"It's like coming home again!" she announced, stretching in the air as they stepped out of the building. "Wood, wood, wood, as far as the eye can see."

Stephen looked around and she was right. The buildings here were no taller than two stories and made primarily of wood and stone. Those he saw wandering past had pointed ears, looked like humanoid dragons, or were short and stocky. He stood out as being a mere "human," but no one gave him a second look. "I feel like I should be in green tunic and have a bow in my hand."

"Oh, aiming pretty high aren't we?" she teased. "You're a slightly humorous guy at best. A merry man? I'm not sure I see it. And certainly not the top guy..."

"Just because I don't laugh at all your puns..."

"What puns? I would never! Come on, forge is this way. Oh, and don't shame me in front of the dwarves, alright? I really look up to them."

"Wait, wouldn't a 'merry man' be the one telling the jokes anyway? Just laughing at someone else's jokes doesn't make one merry."

"No, a ring makes one marry."

"You're going to be impossible today, aren't you?"

"Sorry, a little nervous. This will work either way I just hope they let us in."

"Why wouldn't they?"

"The forge is open to all, but... you'll see."

The pair didn't have far to go, dodging horses in the street, ridden by haughty looking elves, and the occasional "steampunk" contraptions driven by dwarves. Those at least you could usually hear coming a mile away. Stephen also saw the occasional fairy, who greeted his companion cheerfully, and even a dragon flying high overhead. But finally they came to a low building, completely made of stone, and stretching to either side for quite some distance.

"It's a pretty big place," Morning Blossoms explained. "Easier to heat a hundred forges in one place than a hundred separate forges in a hundred separate locations. Plus not everyone wants to have the whole setup in their backyard. So they can just come here and rent one of the separate rooms for a day."

"I'll take your word for it. It's weird to even think you need old style forges anyway, as there must be much better methods of manufacturing."

"Of course there are. Even if swords and shields and armor are worthless here, they can still be an artful expression of the craft. No one is making horseshoes in here, or barrel bands. They're making period pieces for display and bragging rights. And I suppose tournaments and things. Because we can't really die, the market for fake battles one can gain 'much honor' from is actually pretty high, now that I think about it. I mean the battles are 'real,' just over nothing but personal skill or the tactics of the generals. So that's why they're fake. You get it."

Like real life video games, that you can respawn from the next day. Sure. I could see some appeal to that, if you wanted to hone and test your skills in hand-to-hand combat. "But we're not here for any of that, right?"

She touched the side of her nose. "Not us. Come on." She headed inside as Stephen opened the door. Heat blasted her backwards, but she recovered and pressed on.

"Whew."

"Welcome to the forge," said the bearded dwarf at the desk before them. "First time'r?"

Stephen looked the dwarf over. Skullcap helmet with spike. Heavy leather apron, tough looking shirt. Long white beard, curiously gathered to a point with a pretty bow, but he wasn't going to judge. "Indeed, sir," he answered. "My small companion can give you the details of what she wants."

"Actually, me pronouns are she/her," corrected the dwarf.

"What did I say about *embarrassing* me?" Morning Blossoms hissed at him.

"My apologies!" he hastily told her. "The beard- so dwarven woman also grow them? I thought that was just- right, foolish of me given where I am. I should have asked, sorry about that."

"Common mistake, even amongst dwarves," she admitted. "Why, I remember me first tryst with another dwarf, and finding out- as the clothes came off mind ya- that they too were female. Boy were our faces red!"

"But did you stop?" Morning Blossoms was dying to know.

"Now who is embarrassing who?" Stephen hissed back at her. "You can't just ask that sort of thing!"

"Nature spirits are very curious and have no boundaries. It's right there in our Wikipedia entry."

"I- wait, that does ring a faint bell..." He scowled at nothing, trying to remember.

"Anyway, what can I do for the pair of you?" asked the dwarf.

"We would like to use a forge station for a few hours," reported Morning Blossoms.

"Ye would?" She looked them up and down. "Because, and forgive me if I'm stating the obvious here, but ye seem to have no tools, nor ingots, nor plans of any kind about yer persons. You've come to a forge without anything to forge! Makes a girl curious, it does."

"You're not surprised it's a fairy asking? How would she hold the hammer?" Stephen asked.

"Magic, I assume," she answered.

"Yeah, don't ask stupid questions, Stephen."

"Sorry!"

"Never-the-less, despite all the 'handicaps' you have pointed out, my request stands," Morning Blossoms went on. "May we use the forge? We will abide by the rules, of course."

She scratched her head. "I suppose there's no rule about what you do in there. Very well. Forge number seven is free at the moment, go down that way, take a right, then a left. The doors are numbered. One point an hour."

"I'll take three hours then. Transfer three points to the Shooting Star Dwarven Forge."

The dwarf looked to the side. "Transfer complete. The forge is yours."

"Thank you. Come along."

"Thanks," Stephen told her. "Again, sorry about before."

She waved them off, and he headed down the corridor she pointed out. He waited until they turned the corner and could hear the muffled sounds of hammering before he spoke up. "Who do the points go to? Why do they charge for this place?"

"They go to the dwarves keeping the forges hot, and the rooms in good repair."

"Got it." *Though I still don't know why we're here...*

"So you're probably wondering why we're here."

Stephen had finished setting the crystal securely on the cushion that Morning Blossoms was now scooching around on, getting comfortable. She finally decided on a position and had closed her eyes, touching the crystal.

"The thought had crossed my mind, yes. Something to do with heat?" He had turned down the forge as much as he could, but it was still quite warm in the room.

"Nope!" she answered brightly. "Not even close. Let me start from the beginning. We're charging this crystal with mana, correct?"

"From what I gathered at the crystal shop, yes. Fifteen hundred?"

"Very good, you remembered. That mana is coming from me. But where does it come from before that? Well, it's everywhere, like air would be if we needed to breathe. I can't gesture right now but *imagine* I'm gesturing, to indicate the air around us."

"I'm imagining it."

"Thank you."

"So normally you use some, and that power is replenished over time from the 'atmospheric mana' if you will."

"That's basically right. We can't interact with mana very well outside ourselves, but we can feel it. It's there."

"Like... those neutrino things?"

"Don't use your fancy science words to muddle the issue. I didn't want to say anything like this before, but we've got a few hours and this place is pretty secure. I have to meditate (so my recovery rate

is as high as possible,) and overlap my aura with this crystal (to do the transfer), but I can still talk. Yes, yes, hold your applause. I *am* that good, thank you for asking.”

“Why would you need a secure location to talk about whatever it is you’re doing?”

“Because it’s something I thought of myself. See, like I said, mana is everywhere but the dwarves make sure it’s especially ‘thick’ if you will here at the forge. Mainly because working various metals in the presence of a high mana density can change the characteristics of the metal. I mentioned this back at the shop. Before you ask, I’m no dwarf. Much too tall. I don’t know the specifics, but we can take metal from the warehouse and turn it into mana-soaked metal in a place like this. Basically mana flows in, and it gets stuck in here. So the ‘pressure’ rises. Then during the forging process that extra mana is soaked up by the metal, and you have mana-forged metal. You see what I’m getting at? That’s also where the points go, to the dwarves maintaining the enchantments on the walls to raise the pressure. Again, I didn’t want to mention this outside in case someone was nearby and put two and two together.”

“So if I’m understanding this, the mana comes from you, but it starts all around. Like a balloon pushed underwater, the pressure would make the balloon shrink. The mana is ‘pressing’ in on you, and so it should be easier to recover it and thus, easier to charge the crystal!”

“Ding ding! That’s correct. I don’t want too many others to know because then the forge would be stuffed full of people wanting to use my technique. The lines would be outrageous! While this isn’t something I do very often, it’s still sort of nice knowing I’m one of the only ones that thought to try it, so I know a secret technique! Who wouldn’t want one of those? I am trusting you with this, so don’t go spilling the beans by the way. I’ll know who squealed if somehow everyone starts talking about a new technique.”

Somehow threats aren’t exactly threats from someone I could accidentally step on. Of course, she wouldn’t stay dead but... “I’ll keep your secret, roomie. But do I really need to? Do you really need to, I mean. Are lines your only concern? Couldn’t a separate facility, a bigger one, be made, just for that sort of thing?” *If you brought the technique to the masses, wouldn’t you get points at a steady rate as it benefited society? I guess not everything has to be about points.*

“I guess. Thing is, with the mana density raised *here*, that means the mana density *there*, meaning outside, is lower. Anyone living near the forge, who does any amount of magic, would notice. Their rate of recovery is less here than it would be elsewhere. So it would have to be in a place souls didn’t expect to do much magic.”

“Hold on though, those ‘elves’ and whatnot out there, they don’t do much magic? They’re the quintessential fantasy race!”

“Not *those*, no. That’s why you didn’t see any ‘wizards’ wandering around. You know, dudes in robes with long beards. Or women with pointy hats riding broomsticks. The usual sort for a location like this. This is more a ‘low magic’ area than a place without a forge, where you would find magic using elves, and wizards, and such.”

“And why it’s not that close to the portal, which I assume is magic?”

“Right again. It would interfere for sure.”

“So they put the forge here, and concentrated the mana in the area into it- some kind of attracting magic?”

“Yes, that too. The walls were made semi-permeable. The mana can come in, but it can’t easily get out. That’s why a lot of dwarves gather here. They aren’t typically expected to use magic directly, but instead make objects that happen to be magical.”

“And anyone that did work directly with mana could tell, and would learn to avoid the place, leaving those that wanted to live out the ‘elf fantasy’ if you will, but didn’t mind the low ‘mana pressure.’ Mana weather reports!” He snorted. “So there’s probably a mirror to this town out there without the forge, and the elves and fairies and whoever else lives there have the full mana recovery. And that’s

more what I would be thinking of if someone described a place elves and others lived. They probably do magic at the drop of a hat, and look down on the elves living here that don't."

"Oh, more than one believe me. After all you're still thinking of 'western' fantasy, not 'eastern' fantasy which can be quite different. And 'gothic horror' and 'modern fantasy' and 'hidden world fantasy' it just goes on and on. If we haven't yet made a district that caters to an individual's taste, they're welcome to grab an empty one and start building."

Hidden world fantasy? Probably those that like to live a 'normal' life while pretending they're not dead, yet still have 'the supernatural' be just around the corner. In fact it may be a sort of game between those that live there as maybe vampires or whatever, and they try to pass as human but if they get caught out they have to give up points or something. That could actually be fun, knowing your neighbor might be a werewolf and trying to prove it, while acting like you aren't trying to prove it. I should propose that game if it doesn't exist, not that I can get points for it at the moment. "And it really helps? This mana density thing?"

"Sure does. I won't need the whole three hours that I would normally. Now, if your curiosity is sated, let me concentrate, if you please?"

"Sure, go to it. Thanks for explaining. I'll just be hanging around... sweltering... bored... you know."

"I told you to bring a book! What kind of librarian are you that you don't have a book?"

"There were too many to choose from!"

"Uh huh. You could go flirt with that lovely lady at the front desk. Just don't tell her what I'm doing back here. She will try to get you to talk."

"This may come across... some way... given where I am, but I just don't see her as my type."

"Can't see past the beard, huh? Typical. A competent professional, well spoken, adventurous clearly, but she's 'not your type.' Unbelievable."

"Yeah, I know." *I'm a terrible person. In my defense I just got here? Yes, let's go with that.*

Stephen watched as Morning Blossoms sat motionless on the cushion, hopefully doing what she said because he sure as heck couldn't tell. *But then, it would be pretty far to go for a prank. Do you think she could sit there so long without bursting out laughing if this was some joke she had cooked up? No. The whole 'mana pressure' thing does make sense to me, in a way. Dwarves would want more mana if they could work it into metal, and when I get back I have to see if we have any books on the subject. I bet we do, as it's experimentation done here rather than material given to us. Someone must have tried it first, and recorded what happened. As for me directly, I do have a rare opportunity here, don't I? He* looked around. *I'm 'underwater' here, in mana terms. Others can sense mana, spells, and such, so clearly I should be able to as well. If I concentrate on what I'm feeling here, when I 'surface' again- in other words exit the facility- the pressure will drop. I should be able to feel it, right? Let's be still and try to feel out any differences between what I'm used to and what I feel now. That might be the first step towards me feeling out mana normally, and even casting spells on my own.*

"You fall asleep on me?" she asked, poking Stephen in the coconut. Oh she did. She did. He opened his eyes and blinked at her.

"Is it done?" he asked. "Or are you just taking a break?"

"Take a look!" She swept a graceful arc with a hand and indicated the crystal, which he noted was faintly glowing now, unless that was just his imagination.

"That's great! We're halfway there, right?"

"Right. We can collect Poppy and Dajuan and we'll head to the warehouse to do the ritual. Sadly, *someone* has to stay behind and watch the library. I guess that's you."

"Hold on, why do they get to go? Dajuan can watch the front desk! I trust him."

"Because I asked them, and they know enough about magic to actually help with the ritual. I can only draw mana out of the crystal and put it into the working so quickly. But with two others also doing the same thing, it'll go almost three times as fast. It's not a one to one ratio for reasons I won't get into now."

"Sure, overlap or whatever. Fine," he sighed. "The result is the result. I don't need to be there. I'll just be in the library. Worrying. Wondering. Doubting. Fearing. Dreaming dreams no spirit ever dreamed before."

"I highly doubt that's possible at this point, but sure. Pack up the crystal and let's go!"

Remember to try and feel the mana pressure changing as you leave.

The three said their goodbyes to Stephen, who was once again alone in the library. He was certain something was different, and it must be the mana pressure, but he couldn't exactly put a finger on it. *And that may be normal, it's not a physical thing but just a sense of things. I may now be the best at it! After one attempt. Yes, that's how it works for sure.* He wasn't alone for long, as word had been spreading and souls of all kinds were returning to see the place. So he hardly had time to ponder, much less worry, when the bell finally rang and the three returned. He rushed to hear the good news, but skidded to a halt as he saw the "I don't want to be the one to give you the bad news" looks on everyone's faces.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Did it break or something? Did the ritual get messed up? Can we try again?"

"It went perfectly," reported Morning Blossoms. "We did the ritual from the book and performed it flawlessly. 10,000 kilometers, as ordered. But he wasn't there. Brenard is *nowhere* in that area. He's gone."

Chapter 16

Bureaucracy

It was a somber group that met that night, after the library closed. Poppy hovered nearby, but the other three were crowded around a small table, looking glum.

"Have we done everything we could?" Stephen asked the group. "Giving up after trying only one thing seems wrong. But the one thing was supposed to be definitive."

"I don't want to go back to the forge again," Morning Blossoms told him. "Souls might start asking questions if I used my little trick too often."

"And what would further efforts in that vein accomplish?" Dajuan wondered. "We would have to chart out a search pattern of 10,000 kilometer blocks in all directions. There would therefore be a high probability of us searching the wrong direction multiple times, as we have no sense of where he may have gone from here."

"Could he be right under our nostrils," Poppy asked, "but magically hidden in some way?"

Morning Blossoms shook her head. "He could be magically protected, sure. But a ritual with that much mana behind it is going to punch through just about anything. He would have had to spend more MP on the protection than I did on the detection. Possible yes. Probable? Well, we know he was meticulous but to that degree? I don't know..."

"And if the soul went to that length to hide, he truly doesn't want to be found," Dajuan reasoned. "Just getting answers would not be enough of a motive to call attention to his present whereabouts."

"Ah, but you're assuming he chose such a thing of his own violation," Poppy countered. "He could be held in a secure facsimile, with high efficiency runes and specially prepared materials to deflect any such efforts."

"For this long?" Morning Blossoms scoffed. "Even if someone held a grudge against him, this would be going a bit far- don't you think?"

"And there were no signs of struggle- of course the grass and such would have gone back to normal by the time I arrived here," Stephen decided. *Plus, can you really hold a soul against their will? Has there been no slip-up in all this time? Not one opportunity to damage himself enough to vanish, returning to 'where he thinks of as home?' Which I would think would be the apartment. I don't know about that.* "And we're ruling out him going Sunward suddenly, or somehow losing enough points he went Darkward?"

"It is common courtesy, when going Sunward, to plan and host a send off party," Dajuan told him. "Those with the points to go Sunward have enriched the community to such a degree they are sure to have many friends and acquaintances. This sendoff, therefore, fulfills the dual function of receiving your hard earned congratulations from said friends and acquaintances, and for them to receive the departing soul's possessions in kind."

"You can't take it with you!" both Poppy and Morning Blossoms chorused, then started giggling at each other.

"There would be no need to 'take it with you' as they say," Dajuan agreed seriously. "Once Sunward, all desires can be fulfilled with but a thought. Not so much here. The distribution of their 'wealth' is as much a vital part of the ceremony as choosing others to take up their causes. To use an example near to us: if one ran a library, this ceremony would be where a successor would be named. To simply vanish into Sunward would be very, very unlikely, given the nature of those who have accumulated enough points to do so."

Stephen nodded along, this all made sense. "Right, you basically have to be a nice soul, have learned how to enrich the community to get the points. And really, you're saying goodbye to all those souls you know; at least until they too get the points to follow you."

"Your assessment is correct. Though of course those that have gone Sunward can visit here all they want. It's isn't that much of a goodbye."

"And Brenard wasn't such a jerk he would be losing points left and bright," Poppy told them. "Even in the time I knew him, he wasn't crass or mean to those wishing for books. He encouraged it, and was helpful enough to those that needed help finding something specific. Plus, celestial enforcer squads would have made sure *everyone* around knew they were taking a soul Darkward. It's not autocratic, just like going Sunward isn't. They get notified and go into an absolute frenzy, vying for the honor of being on the collection squad. He wouldn't have been taken in the night or anything. It would have been a *producer*."

"And going back to the living world, you explained that as a big ceremony and his name would have been recorded. No chance of slipping through the cracks and going back without anyone knowing?"

They all shook their heads.

"Right. So where does that leave us?"

Morning Blossoms sighed. "I need to return the crystal anyway. We can go tomorrow and check both location's records. It's not difficult to find, just to put up with. We can easily rule that out and meanwhile, start thinking of other things to try."

Stephen looked around at the others, who each gave brief nods. "It seems we have our next plan. Thanks for looking after the library today, by the way. And for doing it tomorrow while I'm gone as well. Seems like leaving isn't exactly head librarian behavior." *Joke's on the world though, I can't lose points for doing it!*

"Think nothing of it," Dajuan assured him. "This is a far better use of my existence than wandering the streets without a plan. I find I'm enjoying the work, especially as more cuties come in looking for books."

"I was just crying endlessly in the basement," Poppy agreed. "This *is* way better."

"Still, I do appreciate it. You coming, Morning Blossoms?"

"Right behind you."

The next day Morning Blossoms returned the crystal to the grateful Madame, and the two took a portal to the Sunward office. Or more accurately, they took the portal to the nearest train terminal, and rode the train to the office.

"One of the only things here when souls first started calling this place home," Morning Blossoms explained. "It originally bridged the space between Sunward and Darkward. Not that it was really used all that often of course. Why would it? The occasional celestial would go between to visit, I guess? But at least we don't have to take a taxi there."

"The train is pretty nice, I have to admit. So this space, that became Midveil, was basically just a buffer between the two zones?"

"Exactly."

"And did anyone actually *patrol* it?"

"Not that I know of."

"Weird..."

The two stood before the Sunward office, and Morning Blossoms took a deep breath. "Let's get this over with," she announced. Following Stephen in they came to a modern looking reception area that was currently empty. "Of course," she muttered. "Pick a door at random I guess."

"Why is there no one here?" Stephen wondered, not really comprehending what was happening.

"You'll see. I choose... you!" She pointed at random and headed to the door. While it had a security panel next to it the door had been propped open, allowing her to slip inside. Stephen followed. They entered a cubicle area, again empty, and Morning Blossoms grumbled to herself as she stuck her head into various rooms. Down the hall they heard people talking and she snapped her fingers. "There they are. Come on." She led the way, and he pushed the door open. Everyone froze, the noise stopping for a moment, but then the group inside was all smiles and welcoming.

"Come on in! Grab some of this pizza!" said one man.

"Lots of cake left too!" a woman told him.

"Here, grab a coke!" a second man pushed a can into his hands. "Original recipe!" He winked and kept going.

Uh, what? Even if that's what I think it means, would that even have any effect on us?

"You see what I mean?" Morning Blossoms gestured angrily around the room. "Do celestials even have birthdays?"

"It's always *someone's* birthday," said a man. "Don't stress over it."

"Yeah, it'll all work out," said a woman. "Have a seat, I want to get to know *you* better."

"Let him get some cake first. He looks tense, nothing to worry about, man. Just relax. Everything'll be fine."

"Everything works out in the end," agreed another. They clinked cans together.

"Open up more of those chips. We've got the satisfaction of a job well done, and open up those fresh cut grass smell ones, I love those."

"Fresh cut grass smell... chips?" Stephen wondered.

"Don't let them suck you in," Morning Blossoms cautioned. "We don't want to be here all day."

"Why not? It's great here!" several protested. They all turned to each other and laughed.

Kinda want to try the chips though. So they taste like fresh cut grass smells or something?

"Focus, you Sunward celestial slackers! We're looking for someone. We need to get into your records. Can you do your jobs for two seconds and help us?"

"Help yourselves if you're so uptight about it," one man said. "Use any machine out there, we don't mind."

"Yeah, passwords are usually on a sticky note on the monitor."

"I keep mine under the keyboard!" one lady said.

"I just write mine on the whiteboard."

"You even lock your machines? What a hassle!" He laughed. "Why even bother?"

"You're right. He's right!"

"I told you not to get sucked in!" Morning Blossoms shrieked. Stephen looked up, startled. He had a plate with a slice of cake in one hand and a fork in the other. He had already had two bites of the cake, it was the most delicious thing he had ever eaten. The fork was now halfway to his mouth with a third bite. Somehow he had also opened the can of coke and drunk a good portion of it. It had all just seemed so natural, he couldn't resist.

"I didn't- how did I even- this is so good!" He stuck the fork in his mouth and shivered in absolute bliss.

"Isn't it though?" agreed most of the room.

"Come on!" She zipped out the door again.

"Uh, sorry, boss is calling. Thanks for the cake." He set the fork on it and grabbed the soda.

"Oh my goodness, *bosses?*" one man asked. The others all started laughing uproariously and slapping each other on the backs. The sound died out as he followed Morning Blossoms back to the cube area.

"Useless, all of them," she fumed. "Oh, it'll all work out, la dee da. What gives you that idea, morons?"

"So that's what Sunward has to offer, huh?" he asked, then took another forkful of cake. "I should bring some of this back to Dajuan."

"You really think you could resist it, on the train back? Look at this, passwords right out in the open. They should be ashamed!"

"Yes- no," he admitted, needing to be honest. "I suppose not."

"To answer your question, that's a Sunward celestial all right. Why do you think things were so bad for so long. You have to make things 'work out' they don't just happen. Lazy bums. Put that cake down, I need your thick, sausage fingers to work this keyboard if we don't want to be here all day."

He looked down at the cake, so delicious and moist. "You won't throw it away, or anything, when my back is turned. Will you?"

"I won't touch your precious, don't worry." She rolled her eyes. "I guess I should be glad there wasn't ice cream as well."

"Why wasn't there ice cream?" he wondered, setting the plate down but watching for any quick movements on the part of the fairy portion of the party. "Think if I went back and asked-"

"Typing! Clickity clack!" she insisted.

"Okay, okay." *What is wrong with me? Proximity to Sunward or something? Where does it 'begin' anyway? Can I get there from here?* He unlocked the machine with the password that was right there, and went about looking up Brenard in the records.

"At least they *have* a record of him," Morning Blossoms admitted. "That's actually more than I expected. Last known location, Library of Good and Evil. Shoot. So he didn't go Sunward? At least we're narrowing it down."

"I wonder..." Stephen backed out of that search and put in his own name.

"Oh, good thinking!"

No Results Found

"Too bad it didn't lead to anything."

"I'm actually not as shocked as I think I would have been ten minutes ago." He glanced back, towards the direction of the party. "Given what I just saw."

"Yup. A *shocking* number of souls have migrated to Midveil from Sunward, after they get tired of having every stray thought fulfilled instantly. Having everything work out for them. I mean what a bother!"

"I think I could get used to it. At least for short visits." He went back to his cake after taking a long swig of the coke. "Anything else we need to do here?"

"No. Come on. We'll ride the train to the other end. And word of warning- don't take any cake *they* offer you."

So the train took them to the Darkward office, which seemed quite similar to the Sunward office, at least on the outside.

"Sure, same architect," she explained. "Let me do the talking, please?"

"Of course."

She went inside and both looked around. It was soulless in here, with drab chairs, tables, and magazines a thousand years out of date. Two or three souls looked up from where they were sitting, then seemed to lose interest and go back to staring at their feet. Morning Blossoms flew over to the receptionist, who ignored her. Even when she waved her arms and shouted at the woman, there was no reaction. So she stood on the counter and cast a spell, lifting the phone that was sitting next to her and smashing her in the head with it. She looked down at it as it clattered to the floor and shrugged.

"Must have been the wind."

She sounds like she's smoked a pack a day for a thousand years!

"Oh, the wind, was it?" Morning Blossoms huffed, stomping a little foot. "Let's see how you like this one." She gathered mana after flying right in the woman's face and again threw her arms wide. "Let me become light!" she cast, and blazed with brightness.

"Ah, okay, okay, I see you! Cut it out with the light show!" the woman protested, trying to shield her eyes.

"You can see me now?" she asked sweetly, dropping the spell.

"You want me to talk to you, you gotta fill out the form so you can take a number." She grabbed a clipboard with some forms on it and shoved it at Morning Blossoms. "Hope you brought a pen, none of the ones around here work." She cackled.

"Fill out a form, to take a number, to talk to you?" she repeated, not believing a word of it.

"I don't make the rules, honey. I just follow them. In triplicate, now."

"Stephen!" She snapped her fingers and he took the clipboard, letting her see them as he raised each page. "Hey, this one says we're giving up our rights to freedom and agree to be tortured daily as any celestial in Darkward sees fit!"

"Oh my goodness, how did that form get in there?" said the woman, with total insincerity. "That's a totally different form, I can get you some copies of that form if that's what you want. I've got a guy- loves pulling the wings off of fairies. You would make his day signing that one. Pen, pen, need a working pen!" She started looking around the desk.

"Obviously I am not signing that form," she said icily, and gestured to Stephen to put them down. He did. "We just want to have a quick look at your database. See if a name is in there. That's all."

"I shouldn't even tell you this, as you didn't take a number yet, but what the heck? You want to talk to someone in our records department? Get access to the archive? You need to fill out some forms to talk to someone about what forms you need to fill out, to get access. And you would have to specify cabinet number, can't just let you poke into all our records, now can we? If you don't know the cabinet number, well, you'll just have to start at #1 I guess. Work your way up. You'll have to submit the forms each time. Two to six week waiting list."

"Just to type a search term into a database?"

"Hey, fairy! You listening to me? It's cabinets. All our records are on paper. We really should think about modernizing but, eh, it works for us."

"Wait, it's all just on paper?"

"That's what I said! Honestly, it's like talking to a wall."

"But... but... there's no way to narrow it down?"

"Oh, you could fill out the form to talk to someone that understands the filing system. They might be able to help. Six month waiting list."

"Six month- You know what, I don't even believe you!" Her aura lit up again. "Let me become light!" She blazed with light again, not quite as bright as before, and zipped past the woman and down the hall.

"Hey you can't go in there!" she protested, as though she was protesting someone adding a free scoop to her ice cream cone. *Darn it I want ice cream now.* "Oh she's gone, what a pity. But what are we going to do with you?" She started cackling again and rubbing her hands together.

"Uh, I'm not with her!" Stephen decided. "Where even am I? I think I came in here by accident. I'll just sit quietly until I remember where I actually want to be."

"Suit yourself. Haven't taken a number anyway. We. Never. Spoke."

Moments later the blazing form of Morning Blossoms screeched to a halt before Stephen and she dropped the spell. "She was right," she spat. "It's just millions of filing cabinets. I opened a few, just in case it was a trick, but there's actually stuff in them. Records. No rhyme or reason why anything is where it is, of course. Nothing's labeled. We would be here forever."

"Then I understand your hesitation to try this before," he agreed. "Sorry I put you through all that."

"Oh, it's okay," she softly said, looking down at her feet and swaying a little. "Let's go back."

"Yeah. Good luck, all of you!" The others in the place raised their heads for a moment, nodded, and went back to doing nothing. "Wow." *How long have they been waiting, and do they even remember what they came here to do?*

"So now you know why so many souls stay in Midveil," she told him, sitting on his shoulder after he sat down on the train. "It's between the extremes. It's what we make of it, rather than what was made and simply cannot change. Would a soul willingly subject themselves to that? I don't think so, so it's probably fine we couldn't get access to those records. I doubt even Stephen went there."

"I don't know, seems like it might be his jam," he protested. "We know he loved keeping records. He might have gone for the bureaucracy of that place."

She shook her head. "Souls in Darkward are tortured. Not even if they go willingly would they be given any sort of task. No matter how awful or soul crushing. It would be a step up. Unless... unless things are changing there." She crossed her arms. "Couldn't be. Right?"

Chapter 17
The Witness

So the group met again that night to report the *utter failure* of Stephen, who had once again been unable to perform the simple task of tracking down one man who could look like anything, take any name, and be anywhere in an infinite afterlife where most souls that ever existed now lived. His mind ran in circles, first berating himself for not being able to help Brenard if he needed it, then realizing the impossible nature of the task he had set himself. Lots of sighing from him the whole time.

"Do not be so hard on yourself, boss," Dajuan tried to console him. "The inevitability of success is undiminished so long as you keep trying. It is only in failing to try that you would truly fail."

Morning Blossom snorted. "Did you spend the afternoon coming up with that one, in case we came back empty headed?"

"I was far too busy serving our many customers to consider even a single aphorism. Perish the thought."

"Aforementioned?" Poppy wondered.

"No, I believe my usage of the word was correct, thank you Poppy. In fact, as Morning Blossoms would no doubt say, I am fairly certain."

"He's right, I would say something like that," she agreed. "I'm glad we're all in agrievement."

"I think you mean agreement," Poppy corrected.

Morning Blossoms' mouth dropped open. "Poppy, how *could* you? I thought we were friends!"

"Now, now, let's not get into a friendzy."

"All right, all right, mercy!" Stephen half shouted. "I appreciate you all trying to make me feel better but we really need to think of a solution here."

"We are simply conversing," Dajuan told him, looking confused. "Do you need cheering up, Stephen? I didn't notice. What a terrible friend I am. Here I was, thinking I was on point, but I should have tried nailing down your feeling better."

"Don't you start!"

"Start what?"

"So what other magical options do we have?" Stephen turned to Morning Blossoms, choosing to get the conversation back on track rather than further derail it. "Isn't the adage 'if magic isn't solving your problems, you're not using enough of it?'"

"I think that more applies to firearms," mused Dajuan. "But that's just a shot in the dark- what?"

Stephen had glared at him but slowly turned back to Morning Blossoms.

"What about a tracking spell?" Poppy suggested.

"Those are only good if the subject of the spell recently vanished," she explained. "Sure, we know he must have been here right before he vanished. The key got outside somehow, right? So he locked the door *from the outside* and threw the key away, and walked away never to return. I could- in theory- learn and perform a tracking spell, then cast it targeting a date around the time of the last report he made. Narrow it down to the exact minute he vanished and follow it from there. The problem is, he's been gone how many years? I would have to follow his trail basically in real time. Did he stop and get a bite to eat? We would have to go there. Did he take in a play? We would have to go there. Everywhere

he's been: crossing the city, leaving the 10,000-kilometer radius of the city, his usual trips to the hardware store, whatever. It's a *tracking* spell, not a "we know the man started here, where is he now" spell that can cut out all the middle part."

"Riiight," Stephen realized. "Because that's the ritual you just tried. It's the pesky distance restriction. You're picking up his trail in the local area and simply following it to another local area." *It basically was a tracking spell, but compressing things to simply tell us his current location without us having to follow it step by step.*

"Yes, exactly!" she agreed. "Repeating until we caught up to him. You got it."

"While we might move faster, on the other hand we might move slower too. If he crossed an area that was empty but now a building is there, we have to go around and pick the trail up on the other side. Souls will be in the way. How much concentration does the spell take? Will you always be bumping into stuff? No, we need to think of a completely different way of going about this."

"Is there no value in tracing his final day?" Poppy asked. "Where he went right after this- a taxi service, a portal, could inform us of his state of mind. If he went to get something to eat it's a different thing entirely than if he immediately went to a portal."

"I guess."

"If we could see his final moments in the library," Poppy spoke up after another moment of thought. "Could that inform us in some way? Perhaps he was with someone. Perhaps he had changed into a loud shirt against his usual Tennessees and we should check tropical locations."

"You think he went on vacation and simply never came back?" Dajuan wondered. "He's just sitting in a comfy chair on a beach somewhere, and he has been for the last ten years?"

"Perhaps he's catching up on his reading."

"I don't know..."

"Doesn't matter," Morning Blossoms told them. "That's one thing magic can't do. At least, not well. At least, it's complicated. Magic can do it, open a window through time, why couldn't it? But time isn't straightforward here. You just get a jumble of images. With all the people coming and going here it would be a huge mess. We wouldn't see him clearly, so it's not really worth the effort."

"Ah, we need a witness!" Dajuan realized.

She sighed. "Yeah, that could work. I guess it could be worth it? They could describe the scene to us, maybe give us a hint or two."

"Witness?" asked Stephen.

"There isn't much crime here," Dajuan explained. "How can there be? No death, free raw material and housing, if you want something either learn to make it (you have the time) or just trade a few points for it. But that's not to say crime is completely absent."

"Right," agreed Morning Blossoms. "If someone keeps getting squished by pianos because someone has a grudge against them, or some prized possession goes missing, you call a witness to solve the case. It's just a soul that's practiced their mana sensing to the extent they can read the history of the manasphere itself. Thus allowing them to thread our jumbled time and 'see' either the past or the future. Seeing the future isn't that much in demand of course, but some do go to them to see if they'll be happy with marrying someone, or choosing to study metalworking instead of woodworking."

"Couldn't hurt to ask around, right?" Stephen asked. "Maybe they could look around the office on the final day. Was he pacing around, worried? Was he focused like a long-term plan was coming together? Maybe he talked to someone on the phone and wrote something down we can use as a clue."

"Until we can think of something better, I guess it could give us some leads," Morning Blossoms admitted.

"We are agreed," Dajuan announced with a smile. "To that end, allow me to accompany you tomorrow, Stephen. In my wanderings about the city I am certain I saw the office of a witness and can lead us back there."

"It doesn't seem fair, does it? Me always going out with Morning Blossoms. Sure, that sounds fine to me."

"Does that mean I get to work the desk tomorrow?" Her eyes were shining. "Am I going to be head librarian?"

"Unless Poppy can become corporeal enough to work the computer..." He looked at her.

"I'm a ghost, sir, we do not become corporeal for anyone!"

"There you have it." He pushed his chair back and got up. "Come on, I'll show you the basic functions and you can practice working everything. Maybe we can set it up to be a little easier on you, even your mana isn't unlimited."

"I should put out a donation crystal of my own," she mused. "Wonder if we have any in the storeroom? I'll go check later."

"Have fun, you two."

Dajuan confidently led them through the city and past the fantastical buildings Stephen still couldn't get enough of. But he was at least getting used to them a little bit by now. They went into a tall building with a huge metal looking cat, of all things, sitting on top of it, and Dajuan led them to the lobby sign. He scanned it for a moment.

"Yes, still here!" he reported. Stephen looked where he was pointing and there was a business name "Official Witness" and the name Connor. "Floor seven, room 732. Elevator should be... that way." He started off, and Stephen followed.

They entered the office behind door number 732 and looked around. It was an open space for the most part, the desk shoved back against the right wall, making space for the pool table, ping pong table, beanbag chairs, and several arcade machines, one of which a young boy was playing. One wall was stacked with shelves displaying scantily clad woman in various poses, while another held mystical looking books, trinkets, and crystals. The far wall was just windows, looking out over the city.

"Be right with you! Grab some snacks if you want!" called the boy, taking his hand off the buttons for a second as he pointed. They both looked over to see a cotton candy machine and a rack of snacks in that direction. Beside it was a drink dispenser.

"Don't mind if I do, thanks," Stephen told him.

"I heard about the cake incident yesterday," Dajuan informed him. "Want to go out for ice cream after this? I heard you were disappointed you didn't get any."

"So it does exist here!" he answered excitedly. "Given the chip flavors I saw, I'm interested to see what else they've come up with. If we have time, sure."

"Some can be quite interesting, I'll admit."

The two helped themselves to some snacks and Stephen got himself a drink, and they politely watched the boy flying some kind of pixelized spaceship through various levels. *So is this Connor or is it his son and he's out on a case or what? Quite the collection of figures he has here...*

"Ah, you got quite surrounded there!" Dajuan announced, and Stephen snapped his attention back to the game. He briefly saw the boy's ship exploding, and his shoulders slumped.

"Yeah, this is the worst level," he admitted. "Anyway..." He quickly put in his initials, and spun to face the two. "Need a witness?" He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with a sailor suited, yellow haired young girl on it, her hair done up to make two balls on the side of her head. He meanwhile just looked like an average kid. Brown hair, green eyes, one cybernetic arm: a totally normal kid.

"We do," Stephen agreed. "Know any good ones?" He grinned, showing he wasn't being serious.

"Only one I'd recommend, come have a seat." He walked over to the desk, but sat down on it rather than on the chair that was behind it. The two shared a look and took seats opposite him. "I'm Conner, if you hadn't guessed. And you are?"

So this is the guy. Was sort of expecting the old 'fortune teller' motif. Crystal balls, candles, an old crone who speaks in riddles. Really have to watch that, he could have been that last week for all I know and is just trying something new here. "I'm Stephen, head librarian at the Library of Good and Evil. This is Dajuan, one of my librarians. Nice to meet you."

"Same here. I heard the place was open again, good for you. I should stop down, good selection of comics on the third floor."

"Come by any time! We're open normal business hours."

"I will. So what do you need a witness for?"

"The short answer is, the old head librarian abandoned his post, and we want to find out why. But we have no leads, and he's not within 10,000 kilometers of here. We checked. We were hoping a witness could see his last day, maybe give us some clues as to what happened to him."

"Okay, maybe," he admitted, rubbing his chin. "How long ago was this, in our subjective time?"

"If you need an exact date, I can get it." *The records stopped abruptly after all.* "But it's around 22 years ago now."

"I see." He betrayed nothing of what he thought of this. "Some might consider that fairly far back."

"In terms of how long this place has existed, with or without the city here, it's like yesterday."

"Some might consider it that, I agree." He hopped off the desk and started pacing around. "Should be a quick job..."

"In our subjective time," agreed Stephen. Connor smirked at him. He went over to his shelf of knickknacks and looked them over.

"You know what would look really good right here?" He tapped an empty space on the shelf. "A Firedrop. Always wanted one. Useful things, you know? That's my price. You bring me a Firedrop, and I'll help you look for your wayward librarian."

"That seems fairly steep," Dajuan remarked, as he knew Stephen was clueless.

"Consider the circumstances," Connor suggested, spinning to face them again. "Looking into the past is never easy, and while I'm confident in my skills, we are talking about more than twenty years. You want me to find a man that vanished from a prestigious position. It must have been for a reason. He learns it was me that helped you, it could complicate my own situation. My skill set is rare, so I want a rare reward. It wouldn't be impossible to get one, after all. And I'm not asking for *two*."

"In that case, I suppose we must see about procuring one."

"That's the spirit!" he agreed. "You know where to find me. Come back with one and I'll help you for a whole day to the best of my ability. Fair?" He stuck his hand out. Stephen looked at Dajuan, who gave a brief nod. *Hang on, what did the Madame want to know?*

"You're just going to display it? Not use it for evil?"

"Do I look evil?" he asked, dropping his hand slightly.

"Does all evil look evil?" he retorted.

"Only in stories," he admitted. "Sometimes the most evil person alive simply looks like a an old, run down man holding a golf club. You have my word, I won't use it for evil."

"Don't suppose you have some kind of truth telling orb- no, I suppose not. Very well, I'll trust you." He shook Connor's hand. "We have a deal."

"Aw ya! This is going to be sweet!" He pumped his fist. "You won't regret it!"

"I hope so. See you soon, then," he told the boy.

"C'ya!" He went back to his game and hit the one player button. Stephen finished his drink and tossed the cup and his snack wrapper in the trash on the way out, and they headed down the elevator again.

"So what have we gotten ourselves into?" he asked Dajuan when they reached the ground floor.

"Have you spoken to Morning Blossoms at all, in your travels with her, about magical materials?"

"We went to the forge and she told me about forging metals in a high mana environment. That changes the metal in various ways. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, though it is not metal I now refer to. A Firedrop is a specific type of diamond. A magically active one."

"Like the crystal Morning Blossoms used?" He nodded. "Ah, those are grown! Yes, Madame Bright said she grew some of her current stock, back at the shop! I recall diamonds can be created artificially as well, so I bet this is another sort of thing you can't get at a warehouse but have to make on your own."

"Indeed. The material to grow this type of diamond comes from a very specific source."

"Don't keep me in suspense!"

"I assure you, that is not my intention."

"..."

"..."

"...!"

"Apologies, I was just looking at that cutie over there. Very nice curves. The material used is the ashes of a recently deceased phoenix."

"A what?"

"Do you not remember any legends of them from life?"

"Like a fire bird? Those are real around here?"

"They are. Stories of them, possibly carried by those who returned to life, or just a strange coincidence, the mythical phoenix and the bird we call the phoenix are quite similar. Similar enough for our purposes. If you recall them at all, I won't have to explain their life cycle."

"Hold on, anyone that goes back wouldn't remember their time here, right?"

"Just as you hold some faint memories of your time in the living world, those that return can call upon vague memories of this world. Those that do typically make the best storytellers, for obvious reasons."

"I suppose. Are they themselves rare? Can we simply buy some ashes somewhere, or a Firedrop already made?"

"I can make some inquiries, but understand I do not typically 'rub shoulders' with those dealing in such rarities."

Right, he was living in a dumpster. I guess social stratification is everywhere, even in the afterlife. What a crock. "Where would we have to go to source it ourselves? Can we even do that? I don't want this to be the start of some 'quest chain' where we ask a dude about phoenix ashes, and he says he has some but he wants some troll's blood, and the troll's blood guy wants a 1,000 year old ruby, and the ruby lady wants a slice of a rainbow, and you get the point."

"Yes, agreed. Best to go directly to the source, then we would only have them to deal with. The phoenix fields are located Sunward. We could get a day pass, go and inquire directly if any phoenixes have recently expired. They are fair and noble creatures, they will listen to why we want it."

"That's all I can ask for," he agreed. "But day pass? You make it sound like some kind of amusement park."

"Yes. To further entice souls to work towards raising their point totals, Sunward allows those that live here to visit. We would be required to wear a talisman of sorts, making us unable to interface with

the place directly and have our wishes granted. But we will be able to talk to others there, and see how they get along there. Of course, we would stay on mission and not dilly dally, so I doubt we would encounter much temptation in any case. Also should we overstay our welcome, the talisman would drag us back against our will, so we didn't try to remain there against regulations."

"Uh, I almost don't want to ask this, but does Darkward have a similar program?"

"You're right, you don't want to ask that."

"Good thing I didn't. Well, no time like the present. You up for a trip Sunward? I just hope the celestials there are done with their party." *And maybe there's some leftover cake?* "Though just giving us the talisman and explaining it shouldn't take long, right? They didn't seem big on paperwork there..."

"Let us venture forth then, and see what Sunward has to offer. On the way we shall stop for ice cream, as promised."

"I can't give you a raise, you know."

"Ah, how foolish of me to have forgotten. Never mind."

"Nooooo!!!"

Chapter 18
Praise the Sun

At the urging of Dajuan, he and Stephen made their way to the Sunward office before dawn the next day.

"To curry favor with the sun heralds," Dajuan had explained, "it is best to arrive- quietly- before the celestial sun rises in the metaphorical east. Then join their morning song. Having earned some points with them, they will be more inclined to at least listen to our request."

Yum, curry! But isn't that a problem? "Points, points, or 'points' points?"

"Ah, you are worried because of your inability to gain or lose points. But no, it is not the type of points one would find by accessing one's ID card I now refer to."

"So brownie points." *Thick, chocolate brownies, all edges pan, huge chocolate chunks on the top...*

He chuckled. "Curious. You do have desserts on the mind, as of late. Yes. Though perhaps this is only natural, given calories don't exist here."

"Blame that stupid cake I had, have you had some of that? Fantastic stuff, but enough about that. I want to know all I can about these phoenixes, so I don't cause offense. How do we approach them?"

"A spokesperson will come to us after the song, there is no need to worry overmuch about that aspect."

"And I can just talk to them normally? They'll understand me? They aren't just birds, right?"

"They are as intelligent as you or I. They will not be unaccustomed to seeing our kind in their territory, they will know we're after something. It shall be up to your skills as an orator to convince them your need is a worthy one."

"I think you're much better spoken than me, though? Shouldn't you do it?"

He raised a finger. "But you forget. The way you perceive my speech is largely due to your own biases. It will be the same for them. You must simply speak from the heart, or what passes for it in our current metaphysical state, and trust they will hear the honest intent of those words."

"Maybe I should have looked into getting a suit or something..." He looked down at himself.

He laughed. "You could come looking like the most slovenly orc or the most radiant princess, and they would not bat an eyelid. It will be only the content of your character that they concern themselves with. Believe me, for such ancient and noble creatures, outward appearance is of little consequence in their eyes."

"Right, right, I keep forgetting that. As long as I'm not, like, wearing a phoenix feather headdress or something it'll be fine. Clothes don't 'make the man' here. So just be myself, is what you're saying it boils down to."

"Boiling down? Ah, a maple syrup reference perhaps? We could stop at a pancake restaurant on the way back home if you wished."

"Just because I wanted ice cream yesterday-"

"I am only teasing you. Yes, just be yourself."

The two entered the office and quietly debated, mostly with hand gestures, over waking up the man slumped back in the chair at the front desk. Stephen didn't want to get the man in trouble or anything, or himself for that matter by not filling out a form or following procedure. *Not that they seem big on that around here, I'm thinking of the other place.* He finally let himself be led through the building, up a few flights of stairs, and to a secured door. There was no surprise on his face when he saw that next to the keypad was the code one needed to punch in, and as this was his mission he took the responsibility for doing so. The door unlocked with a click, and he pulled it open, revealing little more than a closet full of rings on shelves. Each ring was carefully arranged on a specific cushion, and as Stephen stepped in he was surprised to feel that "pressure" on his skin he associated with the forge. *Mana is thicker here. I really can feel it! Amazing. Or am I just imagining it?*

"Yes, a fairly high mana density in here," Dajuan agreed when he mentioned it. "To help recharge the rings, no doubt. Come, they won't like us leaving the door open and letting all the mana out. No ring should be different from any other, just pick one and let's be on our way."

"You know an awful lot about this," he remarked, picking one up and following him out the door again.

"They give tours of the place quite regularly. It was something to do."

"Ah." He looked the ring over as Dajuan pulled the door shut, noting it had strange symbols carved on the inside, and tiny crystals adorning the outside.

"It's actually a fairly complex magical item," Dajuan told him, noticing him looking it over. "That's why it uses both techniques. Word of warning, it'll remain active for 24 hours once we put it on. And by active, I mean it won't come off again. If we're not in Midveil by then we'll simply find ourselves back home, and don't ask if the ring teleported us or simply killed us. The effect is basically the same. They will want it back, though they may not get around to tracking it down for a few... years. To avoid any cross and or disappointed looks on the faces of the recovery squad, let's remember to not overstay our welcome, and return the rings promptly."

"Okay," he agreed, having no choice if he was going to go through with this. He slipped the ring on, and while it sparkled a little, it was doing that before too. He resisted the urge to yank it off again, simply curling his fingers and putting his hand down. *Just forget about it for now. It's probably working fine, no need to test it or get antsy about it not coming off.*

"Now we head to the top," Dajuan told him, slipping on his own ring. "The elevator is the quickest way. Let's look for one."

The pair stepped onto the roof of the building, though the place was enclosed by an almost completely transparent substance, so it wasn't open to the elements. He could just tell, looking up, that the stars and clouds above were just slightly blurry, and that was the only indication anything was there at all. Straight ahead was a glowing portal, and an attentive looking guard looked up from his phone as they approached. He was awake and alert, at least, and stood to meet them. *Ah, so it is protected. I bet it's a very strong magical barrier, not physical glass or anything. To stop those from Midveil just flying up here with magic and zipping past the guard into Sunward. But this way the guard can still see the sky, or maybe the portal needs to be up high and this was a compromise?*

"Names?" he asked, picking up a clipboard from off the desk nearby.

"I'm Dajuan, this is Stephen."

He wrote that down. "Rings?" Dajuan held his up and Stephen quickly did the same. He looked them over. "Very well. Enjoy your stay." He sat back down.

That was easy. "Thank you," he said, and the guard nodded. The two stepped through the portal and found themselves as ghostly as Poppy. Stephen looked through his own hand and muttered "wild."

Past his hand he saw they were up in the mountains somewhere, on a stone platform. The light of the portal behind them somehow lit up the whole area, though the sky was just beginning to become lighter.

"They want to be extra sure we don't bring anything back with us," Dajuan explained.

"Ah, I see we have some visitors," said a voice, and a woman with white wings appeared next to them. She lightly came to a halt at the side of the platform, folding her wings back as if she had come from the air. "Do you have a specific destination in mind today?"

"The phoenix fields," Dajuan told her.

"A beautiful place to watch the sunrise. You should be just in time. Enjoy your stay!" She gestured, and between blinks Stephen found he was somewhere else, now looking at a forest full of fantastical trees instead of mountains. He looked around, considering.

"So security only *seems* lax, but really it's quite layered isn't it?" he realized.

Dajuan nodded. "The guard was more than enough to handle any number of souls that may try to get through, and of course he could shut the portal down in an instant. He was a celestial, make no mistake. The portal then takes you to one of any number of randomized starting locations, so even if you did get through you wouldn't exactly know where you were. *This* end is monitored by other celestials, one of whom you just met, who again could have tossed us back through or obliterated us with a thought. We had the rings, and our names were on the list, so she was nice and sent us on our way. They really do want us to end up here, you know? So, showing us what we're getting the points for is completely acceptable. Plus, they realize letting us visit those that live here is of benefit to both parties. Now, let's take our places in the 'human area' and wait for the song to begin. We can look over the words while we wait."

The two headed to a clearing where there was a boxed off space and some pedestals holding some sheet music, and the pair looked it over. The song seemed easy enough to follow, though Stephen wasn't exactly crazy about the iron bars making up the square they had stepped into. *They hardly go up to my chest, I could easily jump over them. I just feel like I'm being put in a pen. But this is their space, let's go where we should and not make trouble.* The song was simply about greeting the new day, and the glory of the light, and flame, and sky. He couldn't exactly read music, but he figured he could get a sense of it and sing along easily enough.

Perhaps a half hour later a voice, then another, was raised in song, and suddenly the forest was transformed into the largest cathedral possible. The song, which must have been coming from hundreds of phoenixes, rose in intensity as the area brightened, and Stephen felt himself being swept along by it. He was no singer, that he recalled anyway, but somehow, in this place, the song was within him. It simply chose this moment to express itself. He was simply a vessel, and he found himself feeling empty as the last of the voices died away.

"Now we wait," Dajaan whispered. "Don't seem impatient."

"Right, pacing around would be a bad look," he agreed.

It was fully morning by the time the phoenix swooped down to see them. Many had been coming and going from the time the song ended, and both men simply greeted any that looked their way. Most nodded back or raised a wing or claw, then went about their business. But one took an interest and landed on the nearby bar.

Oh, it's not to keep us in, it's to give them a place to land and talk to us. Duh!

"Greetings," Stephen said, knowing it was time to turn on the charm, or at least the sincerity of heart that Dajuan had spoken of earlier. "Thank you for stopping to meet with us." He did a bit of a bow.

"Ah, you want something," said the phoenix. "That's the time your kind is the politest. I am Flamalango. What can we phoenixes do for you?"

"You are correct, we do want something," he had to admit. There was really no way around it. "I am Stephen, serving as the head librarian for the Library of Good and Evil, and this is a fellow librarian, Dajuan."

"Honesty. How refreshing."

"We have come with a, shall we say, impertinent request? I'm not even sure how it will be received. Perhaps it is best if I start at the beginning."

"Ah, how are requests usually made here?" Dajuan spoke up. "Is there a council or... some other governing body? We don't want to waste your time if there's some kind of approval process and we have to tell the whole story again."

"Give me the short version, and we'll go from there."

"Very well," Stephen agreed. "I recently found myself in Midveil, unsure how I had come there. I did not enter in the usual way, you see. I immediately found a key, which happened to open the library I spoke of earlier. It turned out the previous head librarian simply walked away from his post, leaving it open for more than twenty years as the library sat unused. I cleaned and reopened it, hiring several librarians including a fairy and a ghost. The fairy performed a tracking ritual to discover where the old librarian went. It came up empty, and now we wish to hire a witness to tell us about the librarian's last day. This will hopefully give us insight into why they left, and if they need some kind of help or simply wished to disappear. Their price... is a Firedrop."

"I see. Impertinent indeed. You know what it means for one of us?"

"We must collect the ashes. That means a... rebirth..."

"An elegant way to put it. Now on the one wing," he raised a wing, "the ashes of a phoenix's rebirth are somewhat useless by themselves. To make from them something as beautiful as a Firedrop is a worthy use. But on the other wing," he raised the other, "we are long lived. To end our current existence is not like slipping on a new sweater, as you humans may do. Nor is it like your ending in Midveil, which at best is a minor inconvenience. We come back as different beings. Oh we remember our previous lives, it's true. But perhaps I like jazz music now, but will hate it in my next life. Plus growing up again is a pain, I always hate having such tiny wings in the beginning. And having some random adult vomiting food down your beak is not really as exciting as it sounds. It's a risk, what if I no longer like my favorite food in my new body?"

Wait, they have to eat? Here? That's rather shocking news. Or is he messing with us? "It doesn't need to be done right now," Stephen protested. "If there was an older phoenix, or a waiting list we could be put on? He's been gone this long after all..."

"Not at this time, no. Still, it does seem like a worthy cause. Come. Follow me." He flapped and jumped off the bar, taking to the air. The pair hurried to follow and were brought to a large stone table in another clearing. It was low to the ground, almost a simple slab of stone, but it had a strange set of carvings around the whole thing. The trees looked dead here, and both glanced around nervously as many phoenixes perched in them, looking at the two judgmentally. Flamalango landed on the table and pushed the ax towards Stephen who approached.

"Is this the stone table from that one book with the lion?" Dajuan asked, bending over to look at the symbols carved in it.

"I'm more concerned with the ax," Stephen told him. "What's going on?"

The phoenix lay down on the table and stretched his neck out. "Strike me dead by your own hand. You may then collect the ashes you so desire."

"Let the ax descend!" intoned the phoenixes around the perimeter. "Let there be a rebirth!"

"Wait, hold on," he cried, taking a step back. "How did they even get here so fast?"

"When visitors from Midveil come to visit, there is only one thing on their minds," Flamalango told him. "They know to come here. Do not hesitate. I will be reborn. Take up the ax and chop me in two. Chop, chop. Little gallows humor there. Oh and try to cut clean through on the first stroke. The ax is

sharp, but if your resolve is weak, if it takes many attempts... I will berate you most furiously when I am finished being reborn about the pain you put me through."

"Can't you self-immolate?"

"I could, if I desired to make it easy on you. But instead, I wish to know your measure. How far are you willing to go on this quest of yours? Is it so important to hire this witness you would end me? I wish to look you in the eye as you pick up the ax. To truly know your resolve."

"Are you old, then? Infirm in some way that is not apparent to me?"

"Me? No, I'm barely two hundred. I will live- would have lived- for hundreds of years more after today. Fret not, it will all be right after one swing of the ax. Did I mention the sharpness? We maintain it well for just such occasions. Though I see your arms are a bit scrawny, be sure to put your back into it. Lift high the ax and bring it whistling down upon the narrow flesh of my exposed neck. My agony will last only an eternal instant, I assure you."

"Two hundred- are you unhappy with your existence? Can we help you in some way, some other way, than just cutting your head off?"

The phoenix lifted his head and looked Stephen over curiously. "I don't understand. Was this not what you came here for? Do you not desperately long for my ashes? Does the method employed truly matter?"

"Of course it does! I wanted a volunteer, yes, but not like this. Not someone young, with everything to live for. Is there really none among you at the end of their life?" He glanced around, but the assembled crowd betrayed nothing to him. "An infirm phoenix, whose ashes I could take in a few years when they feel their time has come to be reborn?"

"That could be years from now!" protested Flamalango. "Did you not just now imply some urgency around this task?"

"Not that much. If it takes years, it takes years," he agreed. "Perhaps in that time I can learn the technique myself. Then I wouldn't need the help of another witness. I would rather put in the effort for the next ten years than take the easy way of picking up that ax. Or I'll find someone willing to sell one. Something. This is not the way." *Wait, can I even pick it up, in this state? I'm not supposed to be able to interact with anything in Sunward with the ring on.*

"Are you sure?" asked Flamalango. "I won't lay down like this for you again."

He nodded. *They are not souls, like us. They are living creatures who happen to be reborn in a strange way. I will not take his life. Finding Brenard isn't worth that, let him rot somewhere in that case. He didn't need to leave the library, but he did, and threw the key away. Does he deserve the life of this phoenix? No, he does not.*

"Interesting." He shimmered and was gone. Yet, he was there at the edge of the table, perched on another bar, where he must have been the whole time.

"An illusion," reasoned Dajuan. "Clever."

"A trick?" spat Stephen.

"Of course. You didn't think I would really just climb onto the table and let you strike my head off, did you? What if you had *taken me up on it*? That might have really hurt!"

"Yes, I expect it would," he agreed dryly. "So what happens now?"

"Now we confer," Flamalango told him. "We have taken your measure. The exact circumstances as to why you want the ashes are of lesser consequence. I will, of course, tell the others of your plight in the hopes of a more favorable result. Wait here. And Stephen?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks... for not chopping my head off." He flew off to the trees, and the phoenixes spoke in hushed tones for a few minutes.

"Did you feel any magic? You could have warned me," Stephen told Dajuan.

He shook his head. "Remember where we are. They don't need magic to do anything they can think of. It just happens here. Besides, if I had, and did, that would have ruined our chances, right? We- you- needed to pass their test. I think you did well, don't worry about it."

"Now you sound like the office workers here..."

"We have decided," Flamalango told him, coming back. "But first you must swear never to speak of the things you have experienced here. This test would lose meaning if the next souls that arrived here knew of it. And what I am about to tell you must never pass your lips."

"Of course, you have my word."

"Very well. Ashes will be brought to you. We do have a small stock of them, to give out at need. We know their worth, at least to you souls. If we have an interest in Midveil that you can serve, may we call upon you?"

"If you need a book, I'm your man. I'm too new for anything else at the moment. But yes, of course." *I'm not done being tested. If I said no, there's every reason to think these promised ashes would simply not appear.* "If the Library of Good and Evil can help the phoenixes in any way, we will."

"Very well. Wait a moment while they are brought."

"Thank you."

"It goes without saying, but should you be found to be lying to us..."

"I'm not. I will use the ashes as I have explained to you."

"Then you have nothing to fear! Pity, in a way. I've been thinking a righteous quest of vengeance would be just the thing for some fun. I guess I'll have to wait a bit longer."

"I'm not sure what such a thing would even look like!" *Would they all swoop down into Midveil and start pelting the offender with spells or what?*

"Pray you never do," he agreed with a twinkle in his eye.

Chapter 19

What the witness told them

The bell above Madame Bright's Crystal Emporium dinged brightly as Stephen and Dajuan entered, announcing their presence for all to hear. The Madame was at the counter with another customer, and a second was browsing the shop, so Stephen simply nodded to her and went to the side to wait. A moment later she came over to him.

"Ah, master librarian," she cooed. "Back so soon? And who is your friend? Actually, come to think of it, I don't think I got your name last time." She pouted. "You were all business, no pleasure. I hope it's the opposite this time around!"

Then you will be sorely disappointed. "We're still on the case of the missing librarian, and we need your help for that once again. I'm Stephen, and this is Dajuan."

"We are meeting for the first time, are we not?" she asked, taking his hand.

"That we are," he agreed. "And my life sparkles all the more for it."

"Twelve," she announced mysteriously. "So you aren't that fairy I saw before. Another friend of the library, Stephen?"

"Yes, he's a librarian I hired not long ago. He helped me to procure the material I'm hoping you can do something with." *That's right. Come to think of it, Morning Blossoms admitted she had a spell placed on her to more easily believe she was a fairy. With easy access to such spells, or illusion magic, or even just the natural tendency for people to see themselves differently in this place, keeping track of who's who must be a real challenge. Can you request that old system they used to use to display people's names or something? That would be a nice quality of life upgrade around here. Who would I ask about that...*

"Material? I'm not much of a crafter," she admitted. "Unless the 'material' is a massage oil?"

"No. You're the only person I know that grows crystals, that's what I mean when I say material. Can you help us out?"

"No fun at all! Very well, I'll stick to business for now. Bring it up to the counter," she told them, turning and leading them over there. He brought out the container of phoenix ashes and looked over his shoulder. The other customer was still there, but didn't seem to be paying them any attention.

"Don't make a big deal of out," he cautioned, handing it over. She scrunched up her face in confusion and twisted the lid, peeking inside. Her eyes widened a little.

"Sparkling ashes," she breathed. "Is this what I think it is?"

He nodded. "Can you work with it?"

"I do have the necessary equipment," she admitted, putting the cap back on and stressing the word *equipment* for no reason whatsoever. "Hang around until my other customer has finished browsing, and I'll make myself- I mean my workshop- available to you. We can head there directly."

Twenty minutes later the three headed out the back and down a level, through a lab full of impressive looking machinery.

"I'll have to verify it," Madame Bright told them, "but I've heard phoenix ashes are nearly pure carbon. I won't have to refine them very much, so there shouldn't be much loss."

"What about the sparkle?" Dajuan asked. "Isn't that an impurity?"

"It is distinctive, isn't it? I'm actually not sure if that's a magical effect or some kind of material mixed in. Not to worry, I'll brush up on the procedure now that I have some to work with. I never thought I would, you see." They entered a chamber and she pulled the door shut, Stephen noting the symbols carved into the metal of the door.

"These aren't just decorative, are they?" he asked, tapping them.

"No, they'll start increasing the mana density of this area. I can't imagine such a stone *not* needing a mana rich environment, so closing the door to raise the density *now* seems prudent. Though the three of us? In this tiny space? We could get up to something or other, while we waited."

He didn't take the hint. "Ah, like the dwarven forges. I bet your neighbors love you when their pressure drops..."

She smirked at him. "It's usually slow enough they don't notice. And the chamber is rather intimate, did I mention that? The forges go on for miles, I've heard." She sat down at a computer and wiggled the mouse, bringing it up and opening a search engine.

"Say, you're getting the hang of this place a little, aren't you boss?" Dajuan asked. "Look at you, knowing all about mana density and spotting the runes on the door."

"I just learned about it," he protested. "It would be more surprising if I had forgotten already. I just figured she brought us in here for some reason. I see there's a rather specialized machine here, but there was space for it out there with the other equipment. No big deal. There's still a lot I need to learn about this place."

"Once things quiet down we can get you started learning anything you want, boss."

"Thanks."

"You're interested in magic?" Madame Bright asked, seeming somewhat distracted by what she was reading. "Oh yes," she muttered, "I have everything we need to make this right here, I can only hope it will turn out like this picture."

"Who wouldn't be?"

"Hm? Oh, you would be surprised." She focused on him again. "Okay, I was right, this will be fairly straightforward, given the nature of the material you've brought me. We can get started right away, let me check the density though..." She got up and looked at a gauge on the wall. "Increasing at the usual rate it seems. Good, good. Let's see, what do I need for this..." She started gathering things up and powering her equipment on.

"We haven't talked about price though?" Stephen protested. "I mean you closed your shop for this."

"Bringing something rare and magical into the world will net me enough points, I won't need any more from you. I mean, unless you feel the need to donate some for my quick service."

"About that..." he hedged.

"Transfer fifty points to Madame Bright," Dajuan said to the empty air. She inclined her head.

"I do like a generous man. Thank you very much."

"Don't worry about it," he told Stephen, who looked depressed. Dajuan smacked him on the back. "You can owe me."

"Yeah," he agreed sourly.

She looked between the two but decided it wasn't her business and got back to work.

The crystal that formed in the machine, under a tremendous amount of heat and pressure, was flawless right from the beginning. It sparkled like it had been cut by a master jeweler and stood upright on a single point in defiance of gravity. When the machine was finished, and Madame Bright informed

them it was under an enchantment that sped the process up tremendously, she reached in and grabbed it out. It fit comfortably in her hand, being about the size of a soda can, with a sharp point at the top and bottom. It had a faint red sheen to it, and as she held it up to the light, he could see flickers of what could almost be flame swirling within. She had it balanced on her palm, then moved it to a single finger where again it stayed upright without wavering. "Perfect," she announced with a smile. "I actually got to see a Firedrop appear before my very eyes. What a fantastic day."

"I just hope the guy we're giving it to can get us the answers we need," Stephen mused sourly. "We've been going through a lot of trouble for this Brenard fellow. I hope he appreciates it."

"You checked the witness' return policy right?" Dajuan wondered.

"You were the one that suggested that one!" he protested. "I assumed you knew about that sort of thing already."

"Whoops."

He glared at the man but couldn't stay mad as Madame Bright handed the diamond over. He felt it was warm, which *no duh it came out of a furnace. The question is will it stay that way, given where it came from? I mean, conservation of energy doesn't mean anything around here. Wait, why do I remember conservation of energy?*

"Let's wrap that up," Dajuan suggested. "No need to broadcast we have one. Not that I think someone will try knocking us out in the street to grab it, but we don't want to be swarmed by people shouting offers for it like it was some kind of auction."

"Agreed."

"I'll get you a box from upstairs," Madame Bright told them, cracking the door open again. The tingly, crushing feeling Stephen had begun to feel went away, presumably as the mana rushed out. "And get you on your way."

"I really do appreciate this," Stephen told her. "I'm glad you were able to get it done right away."

"I told you, didn't I?" she teased with a wink. "I'm more interested in customer service. This was one type. I offer another type, after hours, if you're interested."

"Oh my!" Dajuan intoned. "Is that what all those hints meant? Good thing you said something, I might have completely missed it. I might take you up on that, if the offer is open to both of us."

"For such a generous soul? How could I refuse?"

"How could I?"

Oh boy...

The two headed back to the office building and let themselves into the office of the witness, who perked up at their arrival. "So soon? I should have asked for two," he pouted, looking at the box with Madame Bright's logo on it. "The place didn't actually have one for *sale*, did it?"

"No, we had her make this one," Stephen explained, handing the box over. He skipped over to the desk and tore the box up.

"It really is one!" he announced, holding it up. "Fantastic! Look at those colors. And so warm!" He nuzzled it.

"Do you two need a minute?" Stephen asked dryly.

"You're funny!" He went over to the shelf and carefully set it down, where it once again stayed upright. He gave it a little push and it wobbled, but didn't fall down. "The genuine article. I won't ask what throat you had to slit to get it, but I accept it as my payment. We're looking for a lost pet, or something? Remind me?"

"The previous head librarian. You'll have to come with us?" he asked, unsure how this all worked.

He nodded. "That's the way. I'll need to be where you want me to see. Lead on! As promised, I'll look through time for you and see what the man's last day looked like."

"That's all we can ask. Let's go."

Poppy and Morning Blossoms perked up as Connor looked around the library. Stephen introduced them, and Poppy rattled off the last date of the reports, meaning the last day Brenard had worked. Connor said that was fine, did they want to start from the end of the day or the beginning of the day?

"We know the key got thrown into the lawn," Stephen decided. He dug it out and held it up. "If you can focus on that, when it appears in the grass, you'll have a good idea what he looked like at the time and what happened for the key to be left behind. See if he left with someone. Then you can rewind I guess, or however that works, to see if that person visited the library during that day or if they met outside."

"Reasonable," he agreed. "And having the key from that time is actually helpful, believe it or not." He took it. "Show me where you found it."

With the date of the last report in hand, the witness seemingly had no trouble narrowing in on the event and reported he was seeing Brenard throwing the key.

"I'll rewind a bit more, now that I've seen him. Okay, he's coming out of the Library. He's throwing the key. Oh, he seems surprised. A lady has come into view. Doesn't look like he knows her. She's standing *awfully* close to him though. They're talking. Still talking. She's dangling something in front of him- a collar? Was he into that sort of thing? Oh, she's putting it on him. Her tail is really- devil tail? Now the leash. And she's leading him away. He's gone."

"She collared him?" Morning Blossoms gasped.

"That's what I saw, yes."

"So he went willingly?" Dajuan decided.

She made an "it's iffy" gesture with one hand. "He could have been put under a spell. Even if you didn't see her casting anything, she could have put something on herself before she got near. To make herself irresistible."

Great, now she tells me. I should look into some defensive magics right away if that's the case. I can't die here, but that's certainly not the only danger. "But a devil tail?" Stephen wondered. "That doesn't mean anything. We'll need a description of the- never mind." He hung his head in shame.

"It could, actually," Poppy spoke up. "Those celestials that work Darkward have, for some time, worn a traditional feature associated with Christmas Santa Tea."

"What what?" asked Connor.

"Christianity," everyone clarified.

"What would that even be?" Morning Blossoms wondered. "Peppermint tea, I would say, with just a hint of Childlike Wonder on Christmas Morning."

"I would start with a base of Bowl Full of Jelly," Dajuan decided. "Then add a hint of Kissing Under the Mistletoe and *then* have a peppermint finish."

"I would have pegged you for *starting* with Kissing Under the Mistletoe," Poppy told him. "You've surprised me."

"Oh I'd totally spike it up if the lady liked the taste, if you know what I mean?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

"I'm sorry I'm not getting paid by the hour," Connor remarked to no one in particular. He clearly looked like he was enjoying himself and their banter.

"Yes, if we could just focus here?" Stephen pleaded. "The devil tail?"

"Right, exactly," Poppy agreed, refocusing. "The most likely case is a celestial came themselves to see if Brenard would follow them. Any previously mortal soul sporting a feature usually worn by those in Darkward are either highly trusted agents, and thus are allowed to as a mark of honor, or flouting their

unconcern and daring them to come do something about it. Given the description of her actions, I would say she is not in the final meowegory."

"Shoot, could have used that one when we were catching the catcab," muttered Morning Blossoms snapping her fingers.

"So this lady, who we think has connection to Darkward- or is a celestial herself- simply showed up out of the blue, at the exact moment Bernard decided he was leaving the library forever?" Stephen recapped. "Not likely. And then collared him with only a few moments of discussion and led him away. He's been missing ever since. I didn't think anything would surprise me because this is Midveil, but it seems you have. Go check out the inside of the library on that day. See if she was hanging around or if Brenard was acting strangely. I know, you don't know his behavior since you've never met the guy. Poppy can go with you and see what she thinks based on your descriptions."

"I am at your dismissal," she agreed. "Please come this way, I will show you to the office. He spent most of his time there."

"I wouldn't dream of dismissing your insights into the man's character," he told her, as both headed inside.

"Not sure I'm following you."

"Oh you're definitely leading me, but what I meant was..."

Everyone here is crazy. I guess that's just what happens when you're dead.

"What about us?" Dajuan asked.

"Let's head back inside and sit down. We'll need to discuss what we're going to do with this information."

The three sat down at a table in the library and gathered their thoughts. "So, should we go after him?" Stephen asked.

"Go Darkward?" Morning Blossoms clarified. He nodded. "Easy in, hard out, as they say. They can't physically prevent those with good point totals from leaving, but they'll try every other method they can to make us stay. Out of sheer boredom if nothing else."

"Big place to search," Dajuan added. "Though it's emptied out in recent years. Some celestials have taken to holding ethics classes rather than torture. Trying to give the souls there the option to see the error of their ways and make some points through their own efforts. Still a lot of ground to cover."

"He's right, I think they figure if the place does eventually need a minimum of staff, those really into the place can stay and run it. Any other celestial can go find something better to do. Even they can get bored after millions of years doing the same thing."

Probably why the Sunward office was so lax. Most already left, and the rest are simply bored of the place. But do they actually have anywhere else to go? Could be a dangerous question to ask... "What are the actual chances of our success though?" Stephen asked. "Realistically."

"If we don't go? Zero," Morning Blossoms answered. "If we go? More than... zero."

"Thanks, that's really helpful."

"Sure!" She bounced in place.

"She's not messing with you, it's impossible to know," Dajuan told him. "It also depends on you. Are you talking about looking for an afternoon and then giving up, or as long as it takes? Is 'as long as it takes' really 'as long as it takes' or is it 'until I decide we've done our due diligence,' which could be a week? I mean I don't know your willpower. It's just going to be asking around, spreading the word you're looking for him and hoping luck is on your side. There's no shortcut for this; the place is too big, spread out, and full of unhelpful celestials who could very well lead you astray saying they know him, but they don't."

"So we won't know the situation on the ground until we get there," he decided. "We could run into some helpful soul or celestial- one of the ethics classes ones- right off the bat, and they know the

guy so we walk right to him. Or we could pass him by ten times because he looks totally different now and thinks our looking for him is some kind of trick and so doesn't speak up."

"All possible," both agreed.

"We've done this much, it would be poor form to stop at this point."

"Sunk cost fallacy," Dajuan warned. "Gets them every time."

"You don't have to come. I would appreciate a guide, but someone is going to have to stay here and keep the place running. I don't know if we can come and go, probably better to assume we shouldn't draw too much attention to ourselves by trying. We head there, stay until I either find Brenard or give up, and then come back. Maybe Poppy is best to take, come to think of it. She can't be held, trapped, that sort of thing. If we did get into trouble, she would be the best one to escape and come back here to tell you about it."

"Think it over tonight and ask her," Dajuan suggested. "Connor may find other evidence while looking around. I wouldn't decide anything right this second."

"Fair enough," he agreed, standing. "We'll see what he has to say. Back to work, librarians."

"Got it boss!" chirped Morning Blossoms, who saluted and zipped away.

Chapter 20

Walking Around the Dark

Poppy floated next to Stephen the next day, having agreed to come with him to the Darkward office and see about going past it, into Darkward proper. The two were on the train, Stephen seated while she simply hovered in the aisle. There were no other passengers on the train at the moment, so he figured this was fine. He did have a thought though, as he looked over at her and then down at her feet.

How fast can she hover? He looked back up at her. Then back down again. Then out the window. Then back to her. *The train isn't going slowly, but she seems to have no trouble simply flying along even though she's not touching anything. Are her feet 'pinned' to the floor and any amount of speed she experiences she simply keeps pace with? So if she was outside the train she couldn't keep up but because she's inside she can? She believes the train should carry her onward and so it does. That's the most logical explanation, right? Or can she go any speed and this is actually slow for her?*

"Penny for your thoughts," she offered, catching him staring.

"Not thinking about your feet!" he hastily assured her. "Er, anyway, there is something we were talking about yesterday that was somewhat glossed over, maybe you can clear it up for me."

"I can try," she agreed.

"So the celestials that are Darkward hold ethics classes? Why? That doesn't seem to make sense to me. I know Morning Blossoms said something about them making souls see the error of their ways but what does that mean, exactly, and why would Darkward celestials do that? I would have assumed Sunward celestials taking on that role."

"Ah!" she sighed, understanding his confusion. "You were probably raised in an area that followed the Christian faith to some extent. You're remembering the tail end- sorry tales- of devils and angels from back then."

"I guess?"

"A mistake many make coming here. I believe the orientation you missed covers that tropic."

"I should really stop in sometime and see this presentation or whatever," he mused. "That might clear up a lot of these questions." *I have to wonder why the agents that came to see me didn't suggest it. Probably saw how capable and together I pretended to be, and they figured it wasn't necessary. Or they figured if I wanted to, I could look into it myself. You don't only get one chance to go and I just missed it, did I? My situation was unique, who knows how it's actually set up to work? Has there been no soul in the past that said "I was too out of it to focus on much the first time can I sit in on it again?"*

"No doubt. But I can help in this briefcase. Far in what some might call the past, when all of these systems were put in place, celestials were assembled to the two areas we now call Sunward and Darkward. There was no rebellion, no fall, as the old earthen tale would have you believe. So no angels became 'demons,' and no favored son was cast out of paradise, to swear revenge against the father he loved so much. Celestials are celestials. Some enjoyed their work where they were placed, others did not. Some went about their assigned tasks with dispassion, others with gusto. When at last the founders came and decided Midveil must exist, the celestials realized that they were not so limited as they had first believed. They could leave their stations and not be punished by a creator they, to that day, feared

and respected despite their absence. Many did go to find differing things to do. Others remained behind to 'keep the cogs running' while still others enjoyed their work too much to abandonment. Unlike in Sunward, which needed no such agents directly involved with mortal souls, some in Darkward did not fit into any of these camps: they didn't really enjoy the work, thought the system was flawed, yet desired to fix it. They are the ones that started the classes."

"Cake in the break room," he mused. "They're the 'keeping the cogs running' group but goofing off and having fun while they do it. Can't blame them, I guess. The celestial we met through the gateway to Sunward was a 'doing her job because she liked it' type no doubt. As was the guard at the gate. They both seemed to be on the ball and not just going through the motions. So, hang on." He thought in silence for a moment. "There must have been many more celestials assigned to Darkward, if there were going to be all these souls to torture and Sunward souls and celestials didn't mix."

"I do not know the actual radio. But one presumes you are correct. This is one reason it is theorized that things got so bad. Too few celestials in Sunward that actually cared to make sure the system was operationing as it should. Things in Sunward tend to work out, and the souls there can simply ask for anything they need, and get it. So what need for celestials watching over them directly? The story is, over 200 earth ears passed without a single soul entering Sunward, and no one there saw fit to raise any warning."

So when Midveil happened, did most just leave? Go back to a higher plane, where the ascended souls live? Give up their status as celestials and settle on earth? Thanks for all the fish I guess... "Ouch. Given what I saw at that office, I can't say I'm completely shocked at that number. But why ethics classes specifically? Does that really help?"

"To reach Midveil, a certain point total must be gamed. The traditional method was through somewhat senseless punishment of the soul. Every hour- I'm not really pervy to the actual time increment as a note- perhaps a single point could be recovered. Repeat until the point total is high enough. But *these* celestials believe there is a better way. Make the souls see the error of their mortal ways and sincerely repent them. For example if one took many lives in life, a good way to restore that point total would be to find those souls cut short before their time, and convince them you generally regret your choices. If you can attain true forgiveness from that individual, your point total rises. Perhaps even enough to offset the harm to your point total the act precipitated. Of course, some that caused the deaths of millions will be tracking down souls and trying to convince them for a very, *very*, long time. But this could be preferable to the more 'creative' punishments the celestials of Darkward have divided upon. It's all up to personal taste and if a soul can be convinced they were, in fact, wrong in life."

He scoffed. "There can't be that many like that!"

She turned to look at him seriously. "Consider that the systems here are created to be perfect. Even as the modern world became too complex to ever allow a point total high enough to reach Sunward upon demise, still everything in the mortal realm could be tracked to the n-th degree. Say a person in power ignores a disease for far too long or doesn't enact policies to protect those they should be protecting. Any loss of life that occurs is, in a very real sense, that person's fault. Or consider policy changes to remove benefits that allow medicine to be purchased that keep someone alive. Every death, direct or as indirect as can be traced, can- and will- be laid at the feet of that individual. This is of course the most extreme example, but every act of petty cruelty, every lie, every game of golf you claim to have won but did not- it all subtracts a consummate amount of points."

Golf sounds familiar, why that specific example though? Also, just how many of her little slips are intended and how many are accidental? I'm starting to not be so sure. Wait was that even a slip? I can't even tell anymore! "So, wait, if I don't know I'm sick- or heck I do know and don't care!- and I talk to someone I don't know is immunocompromised, and they get sick, even if they don't die... that's still negative points for me?"

“Correct! Because you caused them a negative outcome. This is patently why so few go Sunward at the start. Every intersection you have can have far reaching consequences, and our system keeps track of them all. It is the cost of power. If you interact with few, and don’t try to control their lives but instead lift them up- rising point totals. If you take power, and make decisions that affect the world, you had better step lightly because of how far reaching those decisions are.”

“And these celestials have taken it upon themselves to hold classes for the very worst of souls, to try and instill a set of morals into them they lacked in life. Then get them to apologize *so sincerely* to their victims- one at a time I might add- that they are granted true forgiveness. Because I assume the system can actually tell, if it’s awarding points.” *Good luck to them! They really have taken on a task worthy of the name ‘celestial.’*

“You have the right of it. I’m sure they know the futility of the effort, but perhaps they like the challenge. Or they feel that they have nothing better to do with externally. I can’t know the mind of such a being, only what they do.”

He thought back to the lady being described by Connor, and the man he had helped finding his misplaced volume. “But what they do is... walk around with horns and tails and wings?”

She chuckled. “Yes, I think they take that whole thing as a big joke. Quite apart from the utility of something like wings, as flying around is fun and useful, you should try it some time.” She did a swoop and a loop in the air and came back to rest. “A celestial looks nothing like a human under their carefully crafted mask. Even Morning Blossoms or those that remain as unicorns or other equine forms are far closer to humanity than celestials. They are careful to remain masked if there is any possibility of intercourse with mortal souls, as they may truly appear to be huge, writhing masses of tentacles to our senses. It is simply a matter of perception once again, as our minds try to comprehend the unfathomable.”

“Hold on, back up. Humans and celestials can...” He made a rude gesture. *Or was that a slip? See, again I can’t tell.*

“Oh dear. I mean the word in the original sense, the way Charlotte Brontë used it, to mean simply communication. Do try to keep up, Stephen.”

“It’s precisely ‘keeping up’ that I’m worried about!”

“It does amaze me how most of you can know that you are dead, just as I do, yet retain some measure of physicality here. I really don’t know how you do it. We are souls, and we should act like it. Still, I hope you don’t turn into one of *those* types.”

If everyone was a ghost though, how would anything get built? It would just be a zillion transparent people floating around an empty field. That’s no fun. “What type would that be?” A certain foxy lady I recently both did and did not have “intercourse” with, depending on how you define it?

“Like Dajuan, but worse. At least he has the decency to only flirt, rather than be more explicit in his interactions. Perhaps because of his self-perceived youth.”

Thought so. “You mean his intercourse with cute ladies that come into the library?”

“You are becoming one of them. A librarian! For shame.”

But she doesn’t seem that upset about it? More secretly pleased maybe? “I think there can be all kinds of librarians. Let’s not limit ourselves Poppy. Here of all places.”

“I had such hopes for you too. Never mind, I shall do my best to ignore any antics on your part not related to the employment.”

Antics!?

Stephen stepped off the train near the Darkward office and Poppy floated down beside him. “As a matter of historical interest, this place too was once quite different, as I understand it,” she remarked, looking around. It looked like any other part of the city, with buildings crowded around it and souls going about their business.

"How so?"

"There were far more protective measures in place, in case souls wanted to slip out of Darkward. There were just so many pouring in at the time, it was almost impossible to keep track of them all. Also the train went directly there, once you got past the barrier that used to exist. We will have to pass through a portal to reach Darkward proper, so I am told."

"Just like for Sunward, that makes sense. I take it the population grew to such an extent that even this location got swallowed up by the expanding city, so they had to redesign it."

"That is my understudy."

"What sort of trouble should we expect, heading in there? I don't want to wait around and fill out forms all day long..." *Or have to fight our way in... somehow? That would be a disaster.*

"Once the area was remodeled, the new rules were distributed and I believe I recall them. Rather than preventing any movement between Midveil and Darkward, the barrier was reworked to simply look at a soul's point total. If positive, egress is so loud. Anyone may enter of their own free Willy. In this way, celestials may simply release those souls that have correct totals, and send them to the reintegration office, conveniently located just there." She turned and pointed to a large building with flashing signs, arrows, and friendly looking souls ready to guide one inside. "Now I realize you asked about heading *into* Darkward, but I felt leaving was the more important topic of dissertation at this time. 'Always have an escape plan' as they say. We should not be stopped from going in. But we do so at our own risk."

"Right, getting swept up by celestials who don't ask or care about our point totals."

"Yes- what? No. Hazards in the environment that prevent us from leaving. Mental angler fish from seeing all the tortured souls living in their own filth. That sort of thing. Celestials may offer us so called deals, try to trick us into signing ourselves over to them, but they would never directly lay hands upon us. They can see our point totals without asking, they will know in an instant we are just visiting. Even the most depraved of celestial would not dare to interfere with the creator's design- i.e. us."

"So don't sign anything! Got it."

"It's not that simple, but keep your wits about you and I'm sure you'll do fine. We won't need to speak to the attendant, though of course I've only heard from others who have taken 'tours,' not gone myself. I'm sure we can find the entrance with little trouble."

"We won't find it standing here. Shall we?" He indicated the building, and she nodded.

The two stepped in, looking over the waiting area which could have had the same souls sitting there? Stephen wasn't sure. The woman at the desk looked up at them, face lighting up at seeing Stephen who she no doubt recognized. She held up a clipboard and tapped it with a pen. He shook his head and she shrugged and went back to doing whatever it was that kept her occupied through the millennia. The two poked around, finding a hallway off to the side that was dimly lit by a single, flickering bulb, with two ways down. One was a rusty old elevator with a grimy call button and an actual, physical arrow above it, pointing to the current floor. It went from 0- where it was pointing now- to -1 at the other side. The other way down was a set of stairs. Stephen pressed the button for the elevator and there was a grinding noise and the doors jerked open a centimeter at a time. Finally, they were all the way open, but Poppy held up a hand.

"I think..." she paused, looking the car over, "that you should take the stairs."

"But I hate stairs!" he protested, throwing the door open and trying to look down. From what he could tell the stairs went on and on, with only the occasional light every several floors down. "And I doubt there's any item halfway down that will change to a better item on the way up the next time we come through here."

"I assure you I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It was a reference to something... I've lost it again. What were you saying?"

"The choice is yours, of course, stairs or elevator. But I don't trust this." She pointed to the sticky looking interior of the car.

How can it even be sticky looking? "Then we should both use the stairs!"

"I don't trust it for *you*," she clarified. "Nothing can happen to me. I think the ride down could be quite instructional."

"Split the party? I don't know. What do you have against stairs, anyway? Won't you just float down without any effort?"

The elevator doors tried to close, again screeching and grinding and not making it the whole way when the car seemingly gave way and plummeted out of sight down the shaft. They paused a moment, eyes wide, and the sound of a tremendous crash came echoing up to them.

"Let us both take the stairs," decided Poppy with finality. "I will be happy to keep you company."

"Someone should really look into that!" Stephen told her, sticking his head through the open door and looking down. He couldn't see the bottom where the wreckage of the car was no doubt lying. "What if I had been in there?"

"If you were not killed instantly at the bottom- and I feel the crash would have been just enough to make you wish you were reincorporated but not do so- I'm sure a celestial would have been *more* than happy to assist you with a healing spell or portion. For a price. Think no more of it, I'm sure the next time a hapless soul enters this hallway and presses the button, the elevator will once again appear, ready to ensnare them."

Right, it's a trap, not just shoddy maintenance. A trap can be easily reset. He grimaced. "I'm starting to see what you meant about keeping a clear head."

"You can still turn back."

He shook his head. "No, I've come this far. We'll find Brenard or give up trying." *Because we can't die trying, because we're already dead. Get it? I crack me up.*

"Fair enough." She led the way down the stairs, descending into darkness.

The pair finally emerged from the dank stairwell, and there was a celestial leaning against the strange looking machine that held the portal they would need to pass through. It was a man with red hair, bat wings, and he was smoking a thick cigar.

"Why hello there!" he said in a cheery voice. "Could I interest you in-"

"Whatever you're selling we're not interested!" Stephen cut him off.

He looked confused. "You're *not* interested in protection from further harassment if you make it into Darkward?" He indicated the clipboard and forms that both would swear were not there a second ago. "I guess it takes all types. Competition is pretty fierce these days, you'll be hounded left and right, as well as up and down, unless you have some kind of protection. I suppose you might be counting on it? Try to get the best deal possible? Smart strategy. Still, I recommend you sign on with me at once, I can match or beat any offer around here I tell you that for sure. Have a pen right here, no need to stress about what the contract says."

"Now hang on just a minute," Stephen started, but Poppy put up a hand.

"Classic magician's force," she told him. "The pitch would have been completely different if you had let him finish. We want nothing to do with any form, good sir," she told him. "No matter how ironclad they seem to be. I've heard the stories."

He put a hand to his chest. "Madam, you wound me! I am simply trying to ensure you have an unmolested experience, here in my tiny layer of reality. But if you would rather take your chances... simply step through this portal to proceed to your next destination."

"Very well," she sniffed, and headed forward.

He tried to hide his excitement.

"Hang on," Stephen commanded, knowing it was futile to try and grab Poppy. Thankfully she stopped anyway. "He hasn't said anything about *this* portal being the one to Darkward. This is a portal to, and I quote, 'his tiny layer of reality.' We want the portal to Darkward. Where is it?"

"This is the only portal that exists anywhere nearby," the celestial answered.

"Is that so?"

"I wouldn't lie to you."

"Sure..." He looked around, it seemed they were in a long corridor that went into darkness. *Why have this corridor, if there's a portal to Darkward like there was to Sunward?* "What's down that way?"

"What do you see down that way? That is what is there."

"I see darkness, and that is actually what I want to go towards. The clue is right there in the name, isn't it? Toward the Dark. Come on Poppy."

"Yes, you could be right," she agreed, and the two headed down the corridor. He kept one hand on the wall just in case, as it got darker and darker the further they went. But suddenly they were standing before a ruined city, a strange red orb in the sky lighting the place up, while all sorts of nasty smells reached them.

The 'portal' was, I think, the entire hallway. There is no aperture, not like to Sunward. We passed into Darkward somewhere along the way, and he's just waiting there for unsuspecting souls to grab up. Must be boring. Couldn't he be doing something way more productive? But I guess he's not torturing souls so that's something.

"It seems like we made it," Poppy announced, taking it all in. "Charming place."

"Not so much," he chuckled. "Let's go meet the locals."

Chapter 21
This Place is Lit

It seemed they were on a normal city street in some large metropolitan area, if that city street had been left to decay for about a thousand years. The buildings were run down and rusting, the sidewalk was more cracks and holes than flat surface, and the road was mostly holes as well. There were no souls in sight, and the distant sounds of horns reached their ears. Broken down bus stops, rusted out vehicles, and traffic signals long since fallen into intersections could be seen as they both tried to figure out their next move.

"We will need to move to a more populated area," Poppy decided. "I'm not sure how responsored the tortured souls that live here will be, but we must get some sort of direction."

"Yes, but what exactly are we asking for? We can't just wander around and hope we meet someone that knows Brenard."

"Agreed. I believe our best chance at success is to be found in seeking out a celestial dedicated to teaching the souls here about ethics. No other celestial is to be rusted. They alone will be able to advise us about our next steps here."

"So a more populated area, and something that looks like a school or classroom. There must be signs of some sort, so the souls here that want to take the classes know where to look. But we get around Midveil with taxis and portals and such. It seems this area has been completely abandoned, so we aren't getting anywhere fast." *Maybe I should have looked into getting one of those two wheeled vehicles, but trying to get one down the stairs? No way.*

"Let me see..." She floated down the street, Stephen watching where he put his feet so he didn't step into a crack and fall over. She stopped in front of a rusted out car and looked it over. "As you know, as a ghost I could possess something like this, and use it to get further into the city quickly. But the roads are rather bad, it would be a very bumpy ride."

"Actually I don't," Stephen told her. "What's this about possession?"

"I'm a ghost, Stephen. Don't tell me you didn't notice!?"

"Of course I noticed, it's just never come up. You have *ghost* powers? How does that work? Could you possess me?"

She leaned away from him, a strange look on her face. "Do you *want* me to?"

"No!" he replied quickly, raising his hands. "I was just curious. Shouldn't we check some of these nearby buildings though? Someone could live here, this close to the gate?"

"From what I understood, the buildings are not for the use of the souls that reside here," she explained. "But you are welcome to see for yourself." She gestured to the nearest building.

"Come on, let's not get separated."

The two headed to the nearest building, which was locked up and dark, as were the next seven they walked around. Some were simply locked, some didn't actually have what looked like a door, while others had doors that were boarded or chained up so they couldn't be opened.

"Why go through all the effort then?" Stephen wondered.

"I believe it as part of the torture," Poppy reasoned. "As there is the disparity in numbers, souls are tortured and then released. In this way one celestial may torture multiple souls in a local day. Any soul here with a negative total of points may be snatched up for more torture. Thus, waiting is also part of the torture. A soul that has been let go may be grabbed by a celestial the very next minute or may dread their next session for a month. Becoming more and more polaroid with each passing second."

"But they could wait in an empty field, why this fake city?"

"Perhaps as simply a way to keep too many from being in one place? To remind them of what they had lost, or to give them a taste of what their actions would have led to? Also, cities are generally unpleasant places to live: crowded, noisy, smelly. Telling the souls here that 'if only you could get into the buildings, you would see luxury beyond your imagining.' This too could simply be part of the torture. It is impossible to know. Perhaps the celestials simply like building things, forcing the souls here to look upon their creations but never enter them."

"But not maintaining them, by the looks. Doesn't matter. We're not getting any closer to an answer standing here. You want to try a car? I can be bounced around a bit, I guess. It'll be faster than walking- I think."

"Let us make the exempt. You can always tell me to stop if you feel too shaken up. Let me see where we might want to go..." She rose into the air, nearly vanishing out of sight as she cleared the buildings, and hung there looking around in a circle. After a moment she was satisfied and came back to the ground.

Poppy found the nearest car that looked the most intact, and flowed into it, vanishing. The driver side door popped open and he slid into the seat- what was left of it, anyway. The interior was no better than the exterior, covered with dirt, falling apart, and something was sticking into his back no matter how he wiggled around in the seat. He sighed and grabbed the wheel, then paused.

"I don't think I recall how to drive," he admitted.

"You won't need to, I'm in perfect control," Poppy's voice reached him from all over. The door gently closed, and the car seemed to shake. It lurched, popping up on the tires that were now straight again, and the car took off slowly down the street. "Yes, getting the hanger of it."

"Keep your hands and arms inside the car at all times," Stephen intoned. "Wait for the ride to come to a complete stop before disembarking."

"What are you slaying? Please, I'm trying to concatenate. This isn't as easy as it brooks."

"Sorry. Carry on." *Her attention does seem a bit more scattered suddenly. Taking over something like this and forcing it to move might be like crawling around on your hands and knees, but your hands and knees are wheels. You have to spin them at the same time to go forward. Plus she's going around all the holes as best she can.*

While the car didn't exactly get up to much more than a walking pace, due to the condition of the road, Poppy was able to pick the best path and riding was preferable to watching his every step. There was a strange clunking sound every now and again though.

"What is that?" he asked, looking around.

"I can't turn right," Poppy complained. "We're going to have to make a few left turns, there was something I wanted to Chekhov to the right of us."

"I am in your... car seat."

The place Poppy brought him was another building, but this one seemed to be on fire. He smelled and saw the smoke in the sky once they were pointed in the right direction and were getting closer, and both got out of the car to stand before the building. It was on fire all right, he could feel the heat of the flames and heard the roaring of the fire within.

I guess fire is a thing here. But what could have caused it? “You don’t think this is supposed to be on fire, do you?” Stephen asked.

“It would be quite strange if it was,” Poppy decided. “We didn’t pass any other buildings like this, and I only saw the one plume of smoke. So curious.”

“No one around to ask, either. There’s no way we can put it out, and it doesn’t seem to have spread, shall we just go?”

“Do you mind if I check out the inside?” she asked. “Perhaps that will offer us a clue?”

“If you don’t get affected by fire, I can wait out here.”

“You could also ignore the fire, if you had the correct state of mind,” she informed him. “I will return shortly.” She drifted past the doors and entered the building.

Hold on, really? Well, I suppose I could, at that. I’m already dead. If Poppy can float through walls, possess things, and ignore fire because of how she sees herself, I suppose I could temporarily assume those abilities if I could convince myself strongly enough- or remind myself strongly enough I suppose- that I was dead. Am dead. The problem would then come if I believed something strongly enough to do that, I might become more like Poppy, ghostlike. No thank you. I might like to take advantage of the fact there’s no pregnancy or disease here, once I’m settled and not worrying about what drove Brenard out of the library.

Stephen waited several minutes, nervously leaning against the car and trying to make it look like he was just chilling and watching a building burn down. As one does. Suddenly Poppy came flying out of the building towards him.

“There’s someone trapped inside there!” she announced.

“What?” He bolted upright again. “Impossible!”

“I too did not expect it, but the fact remains I cannot help him. You must go in there and do so.”

“Uh...” He looked up at the place, merrily burning away as flames shot out the windows above him. “Okay?”

“I can guide you,” she assured him. “We must hasten!”

“But if he or she just dies, they’ll just reform?” he recalled.

She shook her head. “Negative souls don’t do that. They could escape torture in that way too easily. The rules are different for them.”

Of course they are. Still a lot I don’t know. So, what, they broke in here to try and escape being swept up to the torture pits- or whatever facility they have- and accidentally set the place on fire? Or was that a separate thing and it’s just bad luck? “Fine. You’re sure I can do this?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I was onshore.”

“Great.” He walked over to the door and looked it over. It was a sliding glass door, and flames raged behind it. The door itself was out of the track, it looked like a good shove would get it open. He sighed. *I guess I have to try. I’m already dead. I don’t need to breathe. The heat of the fire isn’t real. It can only touch me if I allow it to. I am dead. There isn’t even air. Everything is soul energy. Heat doesn’t exist. I am dead.* He took a deep breath and let it out, forcing himself to not breathe in again. With the litany of “I am dead” still going on his head he shoved the door, forcing it open enough so he could squeeze through.

“This way!” Poppy called, hovering near some stairs.

Oh sure, she gets to talk, he thought as he passed into the building. *The heat will not touch me. I am already dead.*

Stephen tried not to focus on the fact his belief method seemed to be working as he climbed the stairs after Poppy, feeling no more heat than a usual summer’s day. The smoke did not make him cough because he was not breathing it in, and this fact didn’t seem to be bothering him. He pressed on, thankful he could somehow see Poppy despite the air being full of smoke. He followed her to a door and

into a room where a beam seemed to have fallen on top of a man who was lying there trying to reach for something. She pointed, and the man looked up in surprise. The object he was reaching for was a car jack of all things, and Stephen squinted at it, not quite prepared to believe his eyes. The man was wildly gesturing to it, and the beam, and Stephen shrugged and slammed the thing under the beam where he could. Pumping it up he raised the beam enough that he could help the man wiggle out, and the pair hurried back down the stairs.

They burst from the building and staggered to a stop some distance away, the man coughing and healing right before Stephen's eyes.

"You're crazy," he managed, looking at Stephen. "What did you do that for?"

"You're welco- wait what?" Stephen was taken aback. "Do what for? Saving you? Why shouldn't I?"

"Any number of reasons," said a deep voice behind him. "Care to explain yourself?"

Stephen turned to find a new figure behind him, a man that didn't look to happy standing there. He looked fairly normal, if you didn't count the red, slitted eyes that were now narrowed and looking at him angrily.

"He was in a burning building!" Stephen protested.

"Yes, I put him there." He looked over at Poppy then rolled his eyes. "Bright souls. I should have guessed. At least that one is. You're at zero points? Didn't think that was possible. Looking to do some good deeds or something, raise your total? Unbelievable."

"You put him there?"

"As part of his torture, yes. Now I have to put him back and he gets to start *all* over again!" He said this like it was some sort of huge imposition for him, but with a huge smile on his face betraying the lie.

"Please, no!" the victim cried. "I was in there so long."

"That's why the jack," Poppy decided. "More of the torture. He could see and almost touch the thing that might free him, but was unable to."

"A fairly standard scenario. He needs to understand what his victims felt."

"I do though, I get it!" he agreed. "I was wrong to do what I did!"

"Do you, though?" he asked. "I'm not convinced. Enjoy your reprieve while I deal with these two. You owe me for interrupting my work, making me come all the way out here."

"How did you even know?" Stephen asked.

"You think I don't have measures in place to alert me if one of my clients does something unexpected?"

"Clients?" Poppy asked skeptically.

"Stop trying to distract me. I need to get back to work. How are you going to make this right?"

"What do you suggest?" Stephen asked icily. "There can't be much we can offer you that you don't already have."

"I can think of a few things," the celestial decided with a grin. "Devise a new torture for this guy, something he hasn't experienced before. And believe me I've put him through a lot. Satisfy me that you understand the severity of what you did, 'rescuing' him before he was scheduled to be released, and I'll drop the matter. Alternately, trick someone into coming here and going through the scenario while he watches. I'll be able to judge if he feels the correct level of empathy for the victim, proving if he really is ready to move on to a different kind of torture."

"Trick someone?" Stephen repeated.

"Of course. *You* can't do it; you would be too willing. I need to see someone that doesn't understand what's going on and really is struggling to free themselves, so this guy here has no doubt about what is happening. I guess if you're not prepared for that, you could be my personal lucky for like a

month. Not sure I want one like that hanging around, but you'll do." He pointed to Poppy. "Think of it like a secretary job, I won't make you torture other souls- if you don't annoy me too much, that is."

"A month?"

"I could have said two months..." he threatened.

"Let me talk it over with my companion," Stephen requested. *I don't like any of those options, thanks.*

"Fine, just don't take all day." He turned and looked around at the place. "Forgot what a dump this part of town was..."

How long ago did you put him in there?

The two moved away from the demon and spoke in hushed tones. "What do we do now?" Stephen asked.

"We cannot get away, and he is within his rights to ask for some sort of compensation. My apologies, Stephen, this did not seem like a standardized torture scenario, I really believed this soul was stuck there and just wished to help."

"It's fine. But I'm not comfortable with his 'suggestions.' Create a new torture? Drag someone here? Or stay here a month ourselves doing celestials-know-what? Do you have any other good ideas we can use to get this guy off our back?"

"The problem is mine to solve. There is one thing I can do, that you cannot. I only hope..."

"Hope what?"

She shook her head and beckoned the soul forward. "How many points are you short for leaving this place?" she asked.

"Eleven thousand, seven hundred and eighty," he replied. "Why?"

She nodded. "That is not too onerous. Transfer eleven thousand, seven hundred and eighty-one points to this soul."

He looked completely poleaxed, as the celestial spun around and stomped over to them.

"What did you do?" he demanded, looking between them.

"This soul is no longer under your perfume," Poppy informed him. "As he is no longer your responsibility, you no longer have any hold on him, or us. You may return to your other 'clients' with due speed, and good day."

"You- you- you can't just come down here and start handing out points!"

"The system we all operate under seems to show I can, as I have just done so."

"Wait, did you say perfume?"

"She means purview, maybe?" Stephen spoke up.

He was mostly ignored. The celestial looked between the two, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. "You actually did it. You gave him your points, he's free to go now."

"It seemed a logical forth option, yes."

"Aarg!" He cried, flames burning around him and shooting into the sky. They cleared, leaving a charred circle around him on the sidewalk. "This isn't over!" He snapped his fingers and was gone.

"Is it over?" the soul asked nervously, looking around.

"For the time being," Poppy agreed. "Yes."

"Poppy, have you put yourself in danger? He looked pretty mad," Stephen wondered.

She looked a bit smug. "I have not done anything wrong. I can use my points as I wish."

"But this guy had so many to make up. And you just freed him early..."

"I'll pay you back," the soul insisted quickly. "I will. I see what I did wrong in life, honest. I'll do better now."

"I hope so," Stephen told him. "She's taken a big risk for you. That seemed like one of the 'loves his job actually' celestials rather than one of the 'going through the motions' celestials."

"Can I go now? Exit is somewhere over there, right?" He pointed.

"Oh no," Poppy told him. "You get to help us for 8-bits. We need to find a celestial that runs an ethics class, so we need a guide. As you owe me now, I'm calling it in at once."

"Sure, I guess I could help you find the ethics building," he agreed. "Least I can do, really. I'm Marcus, by the way. Nice to meet you both."

Stephen didn't take his hand, and he sheepishly put it down again. *Great, a Darkward soul that was released early, and a celestial that's really mad at us. We better find Brenard and get out of here fast before something else happens.*

Chapter 22
The Librarian

"And you're sure you know where we're going?" Stephen asked, as the two bounced and weaved down the street towards what Marcus said was the ethics classroom building.

"Up to a point," he admitted. "The classes were announced, and everyone was made aware of where the building was. Some new law or another that the celestials here agreed to. After all, if you wanted to take the classes instead of torture, you needed to know where to go. I think it's near that tall building there." He pointed. "Just keep that in sight and we should be fine."

"Who would pick torture over just sitting in a classroom and maybe having to admit the mistakes you made in the past? I'm surprised the class didn't just fill up the second after it was announced."

"Some, as I understand it, thought it was a trick. Or another, new, type of torture. Who didn't feel relief when their schooling was finally done, am I right?"

"I suppose," he admitted.

"It's gaining traction now, but there are those that will simply never admit they were wrong about anything."

"Like you," Poppy said to him.

"Wh- what?"

"You were in the burning building, rather than in a classroom."

"That's just because that celestial is a jerk! He left me there too long. I went to the class, of course I did! I can admit when I'm wrong about stuff."

Can you though? "Of course you can." Wait, if you did go to the class, as you claim, why aren't you more confident you know where it is? Suspicious...

"I can! But when the class isn't in session you can still be picked up for torture. They didn't change that rule. There's a lot to cover, the class goes on for months!"

"I believe you."

"You don't sound like you believe me."

"Doesn't matter anyway. Just stay out of trouble from now on, okay?"

"Hey, I don't want my point total dropping! I'm only slightly positive at this point, so anything bad I do will count against me and I'll be right back here. Don't worry about me."

It's Poppy I'm worried about, thank you very much.

Some time later, the group pulled up to a building in a much more populated area. That didn't mean the streets were in any better repair, but at least Marcus was right about that much. *Now that we've found others, even if he's wrong, we have plenty of souls to ask around here.*

"See, what did I tell you?" he asked, a triumphant smile on his face. "Took you right to it, didn't I?"

"I can't deny we're somewhere..."

"The sign even says ethics classes held here."

He peered in the direction Marcus was looking. "So it does. Thank you."

"So anything else I can do for you, or..." He clearly wanted to get out of there, and Stephen couldn't blame him. Both men got out of the car, and one of the doors fell off. "Whoops, sorry about that."

"Not at this time," Poppy told him, appearing out of the frame. "If you wish to wait, we will need to travel back to the entrance to Midveil at some point. You are welcome to rejoiner us."

"I'll get a head start," he decided. "If you see me on the way, of course I'll accept the ride. Thanks again!"

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Stephen asked him as he walked around the car.

"I didn't leave anything, I don't have anything to leave, not even a hat," Marcus reminded him. "What could I be forgetting?"

"Midveil is a big place. You've promised Poppy to repay her point totals. But I didn't hear you asking her how you could find her again. How are you going to keep your promise otherwise?"

He snapped his fingers. "Thank you so much for reminding me!"

Of course, do I want this guy hanging around the library? Maybe I shouldn't have said anything.

"You can find me in district 17, at the Library of Good and Evil," Poppy told him.

"Seventeen, got it. I'll save up some points and come see you."

"I'll look forward to it. Good luck."

"Thanks. Bye!" He took off down the street, back the way they came.

"You'll never see him again," Stephen told her. "That's my guess."

"Perhaps," she agreed sadly. "But everyone should be given a chance to make things right. Come."

The building was less run down than others around it, but only on the inside. It seemed it had been cleaned up and repaired as best they could, converting what looked like a store of some kind into classrooms separated by whatever they could find. Walking through the place it seemed several classes were in session, so they were in the right place.

"I hate to just barge in on one," Stephen told Poppy. "We'll wait in here, and the first class that finishes, we'll go talk to the instructor. They can't go for that long at a stretch. How does that sound?"

"I'm sure an ethics instructor will appropriate you acting in an ethical manner."

The two hung out in the "hall" talking about this and that, when a woman's head peered at them from out of a "room."

"Can I help you two?" she asked, coming out and walking towards them. She was well dressed in business attire, and her hair was up in a bun.

"We're waiting for a celestial to be free," Stephen told her. "I'm sorry if we were disturbing something. We can wait outside if--"

"Step into my office," she offered, inviting them down the way. "No need to wait."

"Ah, thank you. I'm Stephen, this is Poppy."

"I'm Carolina, currently in charge of the ethics institute. Nice to meet you."

"So what do you need?" Carolina asked as they seated themselves. It was an office in name only, with mismatched everything and not even a proper desk. At least she had what seemed to be a laptop on top of it.

"We're looking for someone," Stephen began. "A soul from Midveil we believe was somehow coerced into coming here and has been missing ever since. A witness told us that Brenard, the man we're looking for, left work one day and was met by a Darkward celestial. She collared him and led him away on a leash. His place of employment, the Library of Good and Evil, that I have taken over recently, has stood empty ever since. I want to find out what happened to him, and if he's in need of rescue."

"Why come here?" she asked. "It would be quite unethical to do such a thing. You won't find him here."

"We were unsure where to go," Poppy spoke up. "But we believed that celestials teaching ethics could be trusted to not lead us astral."

"Astray," Stephen clarified when she looked confused.

"Ah! Good thinking. Most around here *would* be too preoccupied with figuring out how to trick you into some kind of contract rather than help you. Brenard, you say? Can you describe him?"

"Certainly." Poppy, having known him the longest, gave a physical description, which Carolina wrote down. She was scowling at the pad.

"Is something wrong?" Stephen asked politely.

"I just feel this all rings a bell," she decided. "A Midveil soul on a leash... have I seen something like that?" She thought for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision. She stood. "Let's head to the central office. I'll ask around about something like this. Just stay close and don't sign anything. No one should bother you in the office itself, but you never know."

"Oh, thank you!" Stephen agreed, standing as well.

With their consent, Carolina teleported them to the main office, a bustling and modern looking office building. Expensive looking marble covered nearly every surface, and all the furniture was a fine wood and gleamed as though freshly polished. They attracted some interest, but when the celestials there saw they were accompanied by Carolina, they lost it again. She walked around asking various celestials about Brenard, and it wasn't long before they got a good lead.

"Is that his name?" one celestial asked, a man with small horns that came out the back of his head and curved around to the front. "Follows Xerena around like a puppy. Sometimes has a leash, but always the collar. Pretty sure that's your guy. Matches the description."

"I thought so!" Carolina crowed. "I must have seen them in here at some point. She really just leads him around?"

He nodded.

"So can we find this Xerena?" Stephen asked excitedly. "Can you take us there?"

"I can find out where she lives," she agreed. "Even take you nearby. But that's it. You're on your own at that point. I'm not getting involved further."

"This help is more than I expected, I wouldn't ask you to!" he agreed.

"Is she dangerous?" Poppy asked.

Carolina shrugged. "No more than any other celestial. Don't be disrespectful and you'll probably be fine. It is extremely taboo to interfere with a soul that has a positive point total. Or I suppose a perfectly balanced one." She looked Stephen over critically. "Some impressive control you must have."

"It's, uh, yes, thank you."

"Someone around here must know where she lives..."

Moments later the pair was standing in front of a penthouse door, Carolina having dropped them off and wishing them luck.

"Thank you for the help," Stephen told her before she vanished. "You've saved us a lot of time."

"I hope you get your answers," she replied, and was gone.

"No time for being timid now," Stephen said to himself. "Let's finish this." He knocked. A moment later a man in leather (and not very much of it) and wearing a collar opened the door and looked them over.

"Can I help you?" Brenard asked.

"It is you!" Poppy breathed. "You've been here this whole time?"

"Who is it, pet?" asked a voice, and the door opened wider. A woman was standing there, wearing a towel and nothing else. "Do you know this man?"

"This one doesn't know the man, mistress," Brenard told her, head down. "But this one does recognize the ghost. She used to work for me at the library."

"And you were so smitten with him you've spent the intervening years searching for your love? How adorable!"

"Not exactly," Poppy decided.

Yeah, more like crying in a corner and then going back to work. "You are Xerena?" Stephen asked. "I'm sorry to disturb you like this. I simply wanted to see if Brenard was all right. As it seems he is- you are okay, aren't you?"

"Of course he is," Xerena answered for him. "I would not have a pet that wasn't in perfect condition. It would reflect badly on me!"

"Pet?" Poppy asked.

"I would like to hear it from him, if that's allowed," Stephen said, trying to be as diplomatic as possible.

She waved a hand in a "get on with it" gesture.

"I'm fine, the mistress treats me very well," Brenard told him.

"Still, you've come all this way," Xerena told them. "Come in, come in. I'm sure my pet would love to hear about this ghost's search for him. Wouldn't you pet?"

"If the mistress commands it."

"Actually, the search was mine," Stephen told her. "I found myself outside the library, not having gone through the usual intake procedure for Midveil. Thus I opened the library and became head librarian almost by accident. I was the one who wanted to find Brenard and ask him why he left."

"Did you now? How interesting!"

"I'd like to see more of this beautiful building anyway," Poppy told them. "You go on ahead, Stephen, I'll meet you outside when you're done."

"Oh, if you want!" Stephen didn't want to protest too much but leaving him alone with these two? *Is that a good idea? Why is she suddenly interested in architecture?*

"Ghosts are tedious anyway," Xerena decided. "Can't have much fun with them. Off you go then." She turned back and headed inside, leaving Stephen and Brenard to follow after her. Poppy mouthed "good luck" and turned as if heading back down the way they came. The door closed and she was out of sight.

"Take a load off," Xerena suggested, shucking her towel and sprawling on a nearby couch. "Pet, you may speak to your-" she giggled "*rescuer* until he is satisfied. Oh but hand me my drink first, that's a good pet."

"You really went all in," Stephen told him, as Brenard served her and came back to talk.

"You'll feel the same way," Brenard insisted, sitting across from him. "In a few hundred years or so."

"What way?"

"Despair. The longer you spend in that library, the more you'll realize how pointless everything is. Then you too will want to give it all up. On that day, you too will finally crave freedom."

Stephen gestured to the collar. "Doesn't seem like freedom to me."

"Ignorance! I am free to be myself, to indulge in any act I choose. My mistress is very accommodating. Yes, she wishes various things in return but only things I am willing to give. This is a sign of my trust in her, not a shackle she chose for me. I asked for this."

"Begged!" Xerona corrected, amused. "On his knees! I still remember it like it was yesterday. He moved me! I spent so long picking out the prefect collar for my new pet. The ceremony we had for the collaring was so beautiful..." She wiggled around on the seat, clearly lost in memory.

"Anyway, back to the library. Why that place specifically? It's just books."

"It isn't," he insisted. "Haven't you noticed the books moving around?"

"Moving? What are you talking about? We've found some misfiled books, yes, are you suggesting that they're moving *themselves* around?"

"It's the only explanation I was able to come up with," he agreed. "I fired everyone. I watched the borrowers like a hawk. Yet still the books moved. Still books that should have been in one section were in another. The problem kept getting worse. Would you like to know my theory as to why?"

"Of course."

"The Library of Good and Evil is a reflection of the living world. It's not just a building with books in it. Oh, it may have been, at one time. But it's taken on a life of its own. As the living world becomes more corrupt, the books move to reflect it. Good and evil, side by side on the shelves until one can never be sure if a subject is good or evil anymore. That's what happened to me, and it'll happen to you, too."

"I don't know about that?"

"You think you're made of sterner stuff than me, is that it? You haven't started to *read* the books yet, have you? How long have you been there, been the librarian?"

"Not long. I haven't picked up any books to read, you're right. Why?"

"With a single history book, I could make you despair. Take my advice and shut the place down again. It's not worth it."

"Not worth it?" he asked, aghast. "Let's say you're right- that the Library reflects the living world. By abandoning it, isn't that just making the problem worse? If I can keep the books where they are supposed to be, do a daily sweep or something, couldn't that slow down this 'corruption' as you call it? I would assume it goes both ways."

"Why bother? They love it down there. The hatred and division. They yearn for it."

"Oh come on! I don't remember much about my time in life but that's got to be an exaggeration."

"Wide eyed optimism. Adorable. Is he not adorable, mistress?"

"His naive ideas have a certain nostalgic charm," she agreed. "I remember the time when the first human attacked another. Your species hasn't changed much in that time. Only the means and the scope of what you can do at once has changed."

"And did the celestials step in to show us a better way?" he challenged. "Or did you just lounge around places like this?" *Probably should not have said that...*

She didn't look offended. "Against the rules, of course. Had I been assigned to that sort of task I would have done it, no question. But I wasn't. No celestial was. And really, is a bit of compassion *really* so hard? Figure it out for-"

"Let's ask these unfortunate souls," Poppy said, drifting into the room. Behind her were a frightened group of souls of all kinds, some looking more animalistic than others, but all looking like they wished she hadn't drawn attention to them. Stephen and Brenard spun to face them, Stephen realizing why she hadn't wanted to come in. *She wanted to snoop around!* "Thankfully I was able to get away and then look around. Where one missing soul might be, thought I, could not more be found? And lo, the evidence is before us. You're in big trouble, lady."

"You dare?!" Xerena shouted, springing to her feet. "Return to your cells immediately, all of you!"

"I don't think so," she countered, throwing a hand across them as though to shield them. "One of the absolute laws of this place is that no soul can be physically restrained- if they have a positive point total. *All* of these souls are from Sunward, and each and every single one is walking out of here right now."

"You think I can't visit an eternity of pain upon you, little ghost?" she sneered. "You'll find you're mistaken if you think otherwise."

"If you wish to further break the rules, go ahead," she challenged. "By your own admission, you are bound to the laws set forth by the creator. I have a positive point total. I have signed no deals, agreed to no interaction between us. *We* are leaving. Make no move to restrain us now, and you have my word we won't spread the news of your little 'indiscretion' to every celestial we meet. Even you can be punished- by your own kind." She nodded to the souls behind her and started forward. The souls, clumped up and trying not to look at their former jailer, shuffled past and out the door.

"You've cost me my toys, pet," Xerena muttered. "There's a price to pay." She advanced on him with the knife that was suddenly in her hand.

Chapter 23
Xerena Lets Him Go

"No!" Stephen shouted, realizing he could never cross the distance as fast as the celestial had. He reached out anyway, wishing, praying, that he could do something as the knife came up and-

"Mistress, no, please!"

Xerena tossed the now severed collar away from Brenard and turned away from him.

Whew. I was afraid that was some kind of soul-destroying knife or something. But she was just symbolically severing her connection to him. Good. Maybe we can drag him out of here and get his life- you know what I mean- back.

He went on, dropping to the floor and clutching at her leg. "Mistress, reconsider! I left no trace. No word that I was going with you. I didn't even know myself all that time ago. I don't know how they found me, or why the ghost snooped around and took your toys away. Don't send me away. I'll do anything! Have I not brought you many toys in the- uh..."

Yeah, finding you was no picnic, I'll tell you that much. Wait. He looked Brenard over, who was looking at him in horror. "You brought them here?" he asked. "Really?"

"You're just digging yourself deeper," Xerena told him. "But fine. You want to get into my good graces again? Corrupt him." She pointed at Stephen. "Make him despair, like you said you could. When he comes here and begs me to collar him as I collared you, then I may take you back. But if you are both not crawling in here on his hands and knees when you return, I never want to see you again. I'm sure he can keep me distracted, for a time, now that I've lost all my toys. Then he can start bringing me new toys, just as you once did."

"Ye- yes, mistress!" he agreed, bobbing in place and scrambling away from her. "I'll return with him at your feet. You'll see!"

"And make it quick."

"Yes, mistress!" He backed out of the room and Stephen shook his head and followed. Once in the hallway, Brenard spun away from him. "I'm going to go get changed. Wait here."

"Where exactly are you going?"

"I have an apartment down the hall. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere without you. You heard the mistress, I need to convince you to beg to become her pet before I can return."

"Not going to happen."

"We'll see."

Moments later the two men headed outside, and Stephen was relieved to see Poppy there with the freed souls out in the street. They were looking around, most still seemingly very nervous that a celestial was going to pop out of nowhere and grab them up again. Brenard was in more normal clothes, which sort of surprised him. *She let him keep some normal stuff? Or was the apartment he had a secret from her?*

"Good, you're all in one piece," she greeted them. "And you got Brenard away from her? I have to remit, I didn't see that coming."

"He did not 'get me away from her,'" Brenard sneered. "I'm the one about to bring him back to her- to be collared."

She raised one eyebrow. "Oh really?"

"Let's just go. It's going to be a long walk back." He started walking, and the others hurried to catch up to him.

"We're free to go?" asked one of the souls, a man with shimmering skin.

"She's not coming after us," Stephen told him. "But if I may ask, how did you come to be here in the first place?"

"It was him," a woman answered, pointing to Brenard. "He tricked me. Tricked all of us!"

"I did no such thing," he sniffed. "You signed of your own free will."

"Lies!"

"Just- what happened?" Stephen asked.

"He visited us in Sunward," another man replied. "One at a time. Offered us 'new experiences' that he claimed we couldn't get there. I stupidly believed him."

"We all did," another man agreed. "We all came back with him, thinking no celestial would put us in a cage. But she did. We were trapped, couldn't leave. It was horrible."

"So you were her agent," Poppy guessed. "Because a Darkward celestial going to do her own dirty deeds in Sunward would raise alerts. So instead, she sent you."

"You just used the visitors pass?" Stephen asked. "You didn't have to touch them, just talk to them?" *They really followed him out of paradise? Have to admit, that's impressive...*

"It was part of our agreement," he agreed glumly with a nod. "I brought her new Sunward souls to play with, and she was my mistress. She allowed me to indulge myself in any way I wished. After I left the Library, I realized it was the only way to exist, and so ever since then I have. I'll win her back, just you wait."

What, did he buff his charisma or something with magic? "Uh, no, we're going to be reporting your little scheme to the Sunward celestials, so hopefully you get banned from going there. Plus there's nothing you can say to me that would cause me so much despair I would actively throw away my free will and let her put a collar on me." *Poppy promised not to call attention to her involvement, but nothing about his. He gets banned from the place and she will have to find someone else. They can start questioning those that seem to visit more often than- who am I kidding, of course they won't. But at least my conscience in the matter will be clear.*

"We'll see."

"If they were caged, how did you get them out?" Stephen asked Poppy.

"Simply. I merely possessed the cage and unlocked myself. It was not a complex thing, she had them under control for sure. It took some convincing to make them walk out of there, but as you saw, a celestial is honor bound to certain behaviors. Even one such as her."

"Good thinking, I wouldn't have tried sneaking around her place. Hopefully you'll get some points out of all this. Surprised you didn't lose any for it," he remarked to Brenard.

"You're assuming he didn't," Poppy warned him.

"Did you?" he asked, shocked. "Why would you allow that to happen? Did you not lose points and think maybe the universe was trying to tell you something?"

"The universe has been trying to tell me something for a long time," he answered. "It began with the Library. What's it's telling me is that all existence is pointless, humans are irredeemable, and we should just indulge ourselves and not worry about others. Even had I lost points, enough to not leave Darkward, they would recover quickly enough so I could return there. I didn't go every day or anything. My mistress would not have tortured me. I lost those points in her service, and I was under her protection. So no other celestial would have interfered with us."

"Nice work, if you can get it," Stephen muttered sarcastically. "Uh, you are going to be able to come with us, right? You can leave Darkward?"

"My point totals are not so low as that currently," he agreed.

"Fine." He gave a brief nod and then sighed. "We need a run-down bus or something for you to possess. Walking out of here isn't going to be fun."

And while it wasn't fun, they didn't really tire, get hungry, or need bathroom breaks. The group kept to themselves, ignored the stares of those with negative point totals hanging around in the streets, and finally made it back to the tunnel leading up to Midveil. No one insisted on using the elevator, which Stephen noted seemed completely repaired again, and a few thousand steps later they had made it out. The lost souls wasted no time in thanking Poppy for her efforts in getting them out, and rushed back to the Sunward portal so they could finally go home.

"Someone in Sunward must have missed this many people," Stephen mused. "Not collectively, but individually. Are things really so lax there no celestial looked into it? Was it not reported? Sunward souls simply having so much fun they didn't care to look for their missing friends?"

"Paradise is only as good as the souls that make it up," Brenard told him. "You're already beginning to see the cracks around here. Come on then, let's get this over with."

The three made their way back to the Library, Morning Blossoms and Dajuan expressing their relief at his return, but also their surprise that Brenard was back too.

"He won't be taking your position, will he?" Dajuan asked. "I work for you, boss, not him."

"His goal is to run back to his so-called mistress, and drag me along behind him," Stephen explained. "So I highly doubt it. He says he can change my mind with one history book. I'm looking forward to seeing him try."

"Come along," Brenard told him. "You'll be singing a different tune in a moment." The two went over to the history section, which wasn't large but had a variety of titles. "Of course, every history book ever written exists in the warehouses," he explained. "This is only commentary *about* history, a rather niche field for someone in the afterlife to write about. But with an unlimited number of souls, or close enough, all fields are covered by someone. Ah, here we are. The mid 2020s, this is the book we need." He took down a book titled *The Big Orange Mess* and started to flip through it. "It was when I got to this part of the library," he explained, "that I started to lose my faith in humanity. The books moving themselves around I probably could have dealt with. It was annoying, yes, but after I realized that it wasn't my staff playing tricks, I would have simply had them keep an eye out."

"You fired them all," Stephen told him. "Instead of just trusting their word they weren't doing it. You fired a ghost, for goodness sake, how would she even have picked a book up to move it?"

"Yes, yes, not my finest hour. I was getting a bit desperate at that point for answers. Ah, here we are. This part here I think will be a good place to start." He turned the book so Stephen could see it. "You remember about money, from the living world, right? How it worked?"

"Vaguely. Jobs, and taxes, and all that."

"Good, good, let the disgust flow through you. Now, take a look at this part here: The Kamala Harris campaign spent \$1,991,797,847 across all groups campaigning for her election. And she *lost*. So that money, basically donated in good faith by the people of the United States, was then simply burned up making TV ads, and putting ads on Facebook, and printing flyers, and whatever. Wouldn't it have been better to collect that money, and rather than fight a losing battle- and she knew she faced an almost insurmountable uphill battle right from the start, don't fool yourself- simply use it to solve some sort of societal ill impacting the living? Forget being president, do actual good on the ground. Imagine- instead of running attack ads, and flailing around, and doing interviews or whatever, she got *free* publicity from every news organization as she broke ground across the country on rent controlled housing for the disadvantaged. If instead of appearing at soup kitchens, handing out meals, she actually spoke to the

people there, learned *why* they were there, and used some of that money to actually solve their problems so those programs were no longer needed? Appeared in schools, and just handed them sacks of cash to make sure kids had good lunches and adequate supplies for a year. What good could two *billion* dollars do in the world? I'm guessing a lot. But no, the living don't think like that, do they? Solving problems is just too much for them. So instead, what did the world get? A lot of noise from a loser, and a felon in office. Now maybe she wouldn't have won either way, but it wouldn't have mattered. She would have made a difference. The world could have seen that, and started asking the other guy- hey, what difference have you made in the world with your so-called wealth? And his buddy, the electric car guy! Where's his contribution to the global bettering of mankind? Did he work to cure cancer? Get every child a great education? Eliminate poverty? Nope! He put a few satellites in orbit. Yay! One guy is running attack ads, but the other candidate is actually solving child hunger. Gee, which one should I vote for? But that's not how they think. It makes me sick."

"This is troubling," Stephen had to admit. "It does seem like, if the living actually wanted to solve their problems, they could. How many people donated money to the campaign? Probably less than half of the population. And they raised that much? Think of what they could do if they actually tried? But that's a one-time thing, it's not sustainable."

"You think so? Here's the thing, I'm starting low, we're working our way up. Here's the next one." He paged through. "Ah, yes. India signed a \$7,400,000,000 dollar deal to buy- get this- a mere twenty-six Rafale fighter jets. That's two hundred, eighty-five million dollars apiece. Now let's ask ourselves, what could India really use more of? Hospitals to care for the sick? Facilities to look after the elderly? Schools to teach their kids? Clean energy plants? A reactor that serves a million people daily could be had for less money, and it would eventually *make* money. But no. They took that money and bought a few war planes. Exactly what benefit does the average citizen in India get from those planes? None. Did the people of India collectively decide, 'oh, we have this pile of money here, let's convert it into a few jets.' No, I doubt it. Yet that's what the government decided they should prioritize? Really? It's insane. That money could have been far better spent, but there you go."

"Well, national defense is important," Stephen tried to argue. Brenard gave him a look like 'that's the best you can do?'"

"Okay, sure, say I agree," he decided. "Let's move on to something that *isn't* national defense. Virtual reality." He flipped a few more pages. "'Meta's Reality Labs posted a \$4.2 billion operating loss in Q1 2025. According to CNBC, cumulative losses since 2020 now exceed \$60 billion.' How does a company lose *that* much money and stay in business *at all*? Now again, instead of throwing money at some VR project that *no one in their right mind is asking for*, let's say Meta put that money into making reactors, as that's the easiest way to show tangible good in the world. They could have made 12 reactors in the United States for that money and actually have something to show for it. That's 12 million homes powered by some chunks of metal and some hot water, or about 30% of the population. Again and again, the living have a choice to better their world, to make a difference. Instead, they build rockets that explode or go nowhere, gaming headsets that only lose money, or instruments of war. All of their problems could easily be solved. They simply choose not to. But go ahead- convince me that I shouldn't despair. Show me some numbers that disprove my theory. Show me good done in the world that actually solved a long standing, societal ill, so that I can have some hope again."

"But I would need to gather evidence of that," Stephen protested. "I only just started this position. You clearly have the upper hand in this because you've been here longer. There must be counter examples, those in the world that did work towards real change."

"Ha!" he barked. "Good luck finding it. You think I wasn't desperate for some news of exactly that nature? The living will, as a whole, always sabotage themselves if they think it will hurt someone else more than it hurts them. In many cases, they don't even stop to think how it will hurt them. Thousands of years of history, and they still can't see past their own noses. But sure, go ahead and look."

You'll find the occasional bright soul, don't get me wrong. There are those that did fight for a better tomorrow, either in their individual lives or on a grander scale. But did the world *really* change for the better because of it? I think you'll find the answer is no."

"Then it seems I have my task for the next week or so," Stephen decided. "Prove to you that the living are getting better, that they are working towards a better tomorrow. You've made your pitch, and I'm not clamoring for a collar so you have to give me the same courtesy. Let me try to free you from yours."

"I'll take one of the empty apartments then," he decided. "There is still at least one, isn't there?" He nodded.

"Take your time," he said, turning and giving a curt wave over his shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere until one of us is convinced."

Stephen sat at the desk, idly paging through the commentary book Brenard had shown him. This seemed to be a particularly bad time for the living as disease, fires, and other natural disasters struck at a time when their leadership was simply not equipped to handle it. Things were not all that bad on the whole, but people *believed* that they were, mostly because of lies fed to them by various sources. *But it got better, right?* he thought to himself. *It didn't persist into the 2030's, right?* He reached for the next volume of historical commentary, and wondered if he shouldn't go right to the source, the library at the warehouse. He wanted only the facts of history, rather than one person's interpretation of those facts. But this was a good place to start, he felt. *Get a feel for how things shook out, look for problems that were solved you can counter his examples with. He must be wrong. The living must be looking out for each other in many ways. Maybe small ways, that add up; maybe there is no one, big, solution to the problems of the world. But the solution is just everyone doing their best at their own individual lives and having it add up over time. Is that enough to convince him? Basically, it's a battle for his very soul, I'll need to be ready to give it my all.*

Chapter 24

A Convincing Argument (or not)

Stephen was surrounded by history books and commentary on history books, piled around him on a table in the library. He had been looking through them for hours but wasn't sure he was really getting the information he needed to properly argue against Brenard's despair. The man had a point; the big social ills he wanted fixed, that he argued *could* be fixed if the living simply put their minds to it, had always existed. It was also a case of one step forward, two steps back. Some places among the living became more tolerant, more understanding, more open to different ideas and ways of living, while others stagnated or even got worse. Even in the case of certain areas that seemed the least likely to be affected, because of historical precedent, those established rights could be taken away with the stroke of a pen. It wasn't unheard of to see a turning of the clock back 50 years or more. People screamed about their "rights" while simultaneously stomping on the rights of those they simply didn't like or care to understand. It had to go both ways; you couldn't decry how horrible it was to be "canceled" for your postings on social media while lighting a pile of books on fire because they happened to "offend" you. Censorship was censorship, whatever the form.

He sighed. "I wonder if I'm looking in the wrong place," he said, and Morning Blossoms perked up from her seat nearby. She was sitting on a stack of books, "keeping him company" but really just slacking off if he was reading the situation correctly.

"You mean history books?" she asked, scrunching up her face. "Where else would you look? There's only books."

"Right, sure, but these are *history* books. They can tell of great events, show the outcomes of events set in motion a hundred years before and only realized in hindsight. But history is depressing. Mostly bad things are presented here. How did wars start? How did a natural disaster affect an area? He knows all this, he was reading them when he got depressed and decided to throw his job at the Library away. I need something to balance that, but what? Am I going to find the proper counter for that in the *very sources* his lack of hope came from? Probably not, and he didn't seem worried that I would either. He was right, looking in these books is just depressing me more. I need the indicators of, maybe not some big, sweeping gesture that solved a long-standing issue, but the fact that even in the face of the absurdities of life, there were people that didn't give up. That did make a difference, however small. Show him that it's not about waving a magic wand, but a journey of a thousand steps. Overwhelm him with so many positive stories he can't help but change his mind."

"Biographies?" she asked, scratching her head. "You can find those at the main warehouse too. They might have a different perspective on history, or talk about the people that made it, rather than just the rather dry facts a proper history book would entail. I could also suggest a great bakery."

"I'm sorry, a what?" he asked, immediately regretting having done so.

"I mean if you're looking for a great past-ry."

I should know better by now. "The biography route is one option," he agreed, ignoring her bright look that was clearly in anticipation of his reaction. "But that would take forever. He's going to get impatient to go back to his 'mistress' and I need something right away. Do you... can you learn any sort of

time-based magic to let me read lots of books all in a seeming instant? Or give me the knowledge of what a specific book contains? What can magic do, really?"

"Pretty much anything. And yeah, I could. Easier to simply give myself that knowledge and just tell you- There could be another option," she decided, looking thoughtful.

"I'm listening."

"It's rumored that, while we don't retain the memories of our time in life, those memories do remain. In the Sunward systems. Basically, so that any question about an act that gained or lost points can be reviewed, should it be called into question. If we were to, say, head over there, look into some good memories that are on file, it might get you a head start in getting Brenard's head back in the game."

Stephen rubbed his chin. "Right," he agreed thoughtfully. "A person that made a lot of points did good in the world. There's no denying it; the system *itself* proves it. We find some people that are top earners, see their memories, boom! There was no such thing as security over there," he agreed, eyes narrowing. "They invited us to use their systems, said most celestials just left their passwords out in the open anyway. If what you say is true, and we could access those records, of people with high point totals... would that really help though?"

"It's better than sitting here being crushed under all the books he looked at, the same books he got depressed under. You'll just get depressed too."

Is looking at people's memories really okay though? It's an invasion of privacy. But then, they are... dead. Would I want someone to see my memories? Wait, could I find my own memories? He shook his head. *One thing at a time, Stephen. Solve the Brenard issue, then play 'this is your life.'* "Okay. After we close, we'll head over there. I'll want you for magic support and Dajuan for 'breaking into the system.' If Poppy wants to come, she can act as a lookout or something. Otherwise, she can stay... and defend the base."

"Defend... the base?"

"I don't know, it just felt right to say it."

"You weren't some kind of nerd when you were alive, were you?"

"How should I know? And what if I was?"

"Oh nothing. Defend the base. Honestly. I'll see you at closing." She took to the air and flew away, shaking her head.

Stephen dragged Brenard to the train station with Dajuan and Morning Blossoms, Poppy deciding to stay at the library. They made it to the Sunward office without incident and walked past the snoozing celestial at the front desk.

"No need to bother them," he whispered as the group tiptoed past. *Weren't they sleeping the last time I was here as well? I guess it must be boring but still, they don't need to sleep any more than I do. They must put themselves to sleep, just like I do at night.* "Everything will work out, after all." He pointed to a poster on the wall with that very saying. Brenard rolled his eyes so hard it almost whipped his head back, but didn't say anything. In moments they had chosen a fairly isolated cube with the password on a sticky note stuck to the monitor. Dajuan was in and started poking around their system.

"These machines are a bit more responsive," he remarked. "I believe because they were simply procured from Sunward, whereas any computer system in Midveil had to be constructed from scratch. By us. So we had to work our way up from vacuum tubes, as I understand it. Now, we're looking for high point earners in the database, and to see if their memories are somehow stored so we can replay them."

"That's right," whispered Stephen. "Is the volume down? I don't want this celestial to have been blasting music the last time they used this system and so we get a blast of noise if we play a memory."

"Who is the computer expert here?" he wondered aloud, clicking to lower the volume in what he hoped was a non-obvious way. "You think I didn't think of that?"

"Did you though?" Morning Blossoms asked from her perch on the wall of the cube.

"Let's just concentrate."

"I could go for some orange juice," she agreed.

"It's a good thing this place is on easy mode," Brenard told them. "You are all super bad at this. Just chatting away while breaking into the Sunward computer systems. Honestly!"

"Is it breaking in, when we walked in the front door and the password is just there for anyone to see?"

"It kind of is."

"Found something," Dajuan announced. "Okay, I can do a search. Let's just see what we come up with." He clicked around. "Here's something. Professor Jean Abraham led a three-year study of 39 women with early-stage inherited breast cancer and how it could be managed with a new type of technique. All of them survived." He clicked and a movie, seemingly from her point of view, started playing. It highlighted her memories of the study, from doing paperwork to interviewing the women that participated. Each person saved raised her point total. "Let's see what else we can find." He kept searching. "Here's a kid from Tennessee who heard some other kids talking about literally blowing up their school. He reported it, and the police investigated. They actually found improvised bombs and guns, so the plot was stopped before anyone was hurt." Again, he clicked on something and the man's memories played. "Yassine Khelifi turned olive pomace into a log-like structure that can easily be burned, using up a waste product and saving literal tons of wood from that same fate. Dr. Timothy Olson helped 12-year-old Rahemeen Nabeel using gene editing therapy to cure her beta-thalassemia. He went on to help hundreds of others in his lifetime. Charlotte Lay's life was saved when her future husband, Dave, talked her down from ending her own life at a train station. She was left in the care of the police but reconnected with him and the pair started dating two months later. Mark Squires repaired more than 500 pinball machines, mostly as a labor of love."

"Oh, come on now," Brenard broke in. "I mean gene editing therapy, fine. But pinball games? This is what you're hoping will convince me?"

"They're not in any kind of order, you know," Dajuan told him. "Or if there is one, I can't figure out what it is. I'm just reading them as they pop up. These may be happening in real time for all I know, maybe I'm not even in the memory system. I am trying to do this quickly you realize?"

"It's not about the exact content anyway," Stephen told him. "It's about the fact that every day, in both small and big ways, people can make a difference in the world. This is the proof, you can't deny what Sunward shows us. That's what I want you to understand about this. You lost hope in the living because you say the big problems don't get fixed. And maybe that's right. But what about all of these people living their lives making sure small problems don't turn into bigger problems? Wouldn't we have so many more big problems if not for people like this? If everyone just took your route and indulged themselves endlessly rather than getting up every morning and doing the best they can?"

"But you're proving my point exactly. These are all singular people when these problems require the living to work together. That doctor doing the gene editing, great, glad he could help some people. But he didn't eradicate that problem in his lifetime, only treated a symptom. That lady making a wood substitute didn't obviate the need for burning wood completely. Those problems still remained. So what was the point?"

"You would rather they did nothing?"

"Not at all! They clearly have the drive necessary; their efforts are simply too minor to matter. If those people became the center of effort that included many, think of what they could have accomplished."

"Isn't that just businesses?" Morning Blossoms asked. "I think that's just businesses."

"Most businesses exist to simply make money," Brenard told her. "They don't make cars, or software, or tissue paper out of a need to better the world. They do it because that's the vehicle they've

chosen to make their money. Instead of coming together and causing problems, they should come together to solve them."

"You're talking about massive changes to the way society itself functions," Dajuan realized. "Can individuals really come together on that kind of scale? I mean there must be businesses that strive to help people and not just make money. Right?" He bent over typing again, probably looking for that sort of thing in the system. "How would I find memories of something like that?" he muttered.

"Can they?" he asked Stephen with an "I've got you now," sort of look.

He sighed. "Two billion dollars for a losing campaign," he admitted. "Billions to build jets. Billions lost chasing virtual headsets. We're right back where we started. That does sort of prove they can. All that effort just went to something useless in the end. If that money had gone towards society itself, helping to solve some big issue..."

"I'm glad you understand," he said smugly. "So you admit I'm right, and are ready to be fitted for your collar?"

"No!" he protested, looking shocked. "You haven't convinced me that this is all hopeless. That life can't find a better way. People do get into Sunward, they can't do that without doing good in the world and having at least some positive point totals to build upon. Small, every day, good. Even if there are problems, many simply want to live their lives and leave a better world for their kids. There's nothing wrong with that."

"There's everything wrong with it," he protested. "Those kids could inherit a paradise on Earth, if only they could be bothered to come together and make it happen."

"You don't know that," Dajuan protested, pointedly pausing his personal perusal. "You don't know how it would go. Some problems may simply be too big, even with unlimited resources to spend on them."

"And the solution matters a lot," Morning Blossoms added. "What if solving homelessness simply means shooting anyone that doesn't own a house? What if solving climate change is smashing every power plant and returning to the dark ages? The problem is 'solved' so who is in control of that solution? What if you don't agree with it? What then?"

"Obviously the best solution would have to be agreed upon before any work was done. Isn't any solution better than simply doing nothing?"

"Not really. If you get some poison ivy on your skin, is the best course of action to cut off the limb? Of course not. Doing nothing is the preferred solution in that case. Though that's not exactly doing nothing, it's just waiting for nature to take its course."

"That's totally different!"

"Is it?"

The two glared at each other.

"Okay," Stephen stepped in. "Clearly we are not going to convince each other. Morning Blossoms, it was a good idea, but Dajuan, let's lock this up again and head back. We'll need to think of something else if we're going to convince Brenard here to take up hope again."

"And I shall do my best to show you such hope is foolish, and you should simply live for yourself and indulge in whatever makes your existence bearable. Nothing you do will truly change the world, so why expend that effort?"

Seems like he went from one extreme to the other. Because everyone didn't donate everything they could to solving every problem in the world, there's no point in even trying. But isn't this 'middle of the road' approach the only real way to go? Do what you personally can, and hope everyone else is doing the same. Just giving up and indulging your every whim isn't going to help the situation any.

"All logged out, boss," Dajuan reported, leaving the computer at the password screen. "We can get out of here."

“Back to the train then,” Stephen announced sadly. “Brenard, as I said before you’re still welcome to stay until this is resolved, one way or the other.”

“Very well.” He paused, as if unsure if he wanted to continue, but nodded as he decided. “It is nice seeing my pictures and things again. I do thank you for saving them for me. I’ll convince you one of these days.”

“Unless I convince you first!”

Epilogue

Stephen sat in his office, staring at nothing. He had returned from the Sunward office some time ago, and had made sure the others were okay with him giving Brenard all the time he needed to come to a decision about what he wanted to do next. Slink back to Xerena and beg for her to take him back, despite the fact he had failed to corrupt Stephen, or actually start being his own person again. He had *insisted* the man call his parents, and they had stopped in to see him, to make sure he was all right. That had gone well, and Stephen was glad to bring them some closure. Brenard, seeing how his absence had effected them, promised to keep in touch more no matter how his future turned out. As for himself, he wondered what his own future held.

I have two choices, it seems, he mused to himself. I can despair, like he did, or I can hold onto hope. I can see the good done by the few as holding the line, keeping the world going so that these problems of the living can one day be solved. That's enough for me. But as it's not for Brenard, and I've invited him to stay, he's going to be around potentially causing trouble. As a former librarian himself, I have to hope he doesn't, but I can't be sure. It's a stalemate. I solved the mystery of where he went, why he left, so I know what to guard against in his place as head librarian. But it wasn't some big rescue, some mystical fight to free him and get away from a crumbling castle or anything- not that I could have done such things anyway. But I feel unsatisfied, like I've only partly rescued him, even though he's sitting right out there. He has to rescue himself, and in reality he always did. At least I've given him that push now.

I have to believe I did what I could. And I refuse to give in to despair, just because some living souls make terrible choices. My task now is to tend the Library, put the books in the right places and hope that effort is somehow being mirrored in the living world. Stop the good and the bad from mixing, so it's easier to tell them apart. It's all I can do. If he goes crawling back to Xerena saying he failed in his mission to corrupt me, well, that's on him. He made that choice. I gave him an out, and if he chooses the very path he's angry about the living making, what more can I really do. Each person simply must do the best they can, to be the best person they can be, living or dead, and rise above their own worst natures. This is the only hope the living have- to one day solve their problems and enjoy the kind of peace and prosperity you find here in-

He looked up at a knock, and was surprised to find Ezekiel standing there.

At least I can finally remember the man's name. "Hey, Ezekiel, what's up?" he asked, beckoning him into the room.

"Not bothering you too much, am I?" he asked.

"I'm not really getting anywhere with this," he replied sadly. "I welcome the distraction."

"All right then. I just came up to say goodbye, actually. I won't keep you."

"Goodbye?!"

He nodded. "That's right. Place has gotten too noisy for me lately. I don't blame you, opening the place up again," he hastened to add. "It needed to be done, and it looks like it's in good hands now. Pity, really, I liked the location."

"Oh!" Stephen realized what he meant. "You're just looking for new office space! You're not, like, heading Sunward or through the arch or whatever."

He laughed. "Oh no, too much to do for that! Don't worry, you'll be seeing me around. I'll drop in, ten years or so, see how you're doing."

"Come visit more often than *that*," he protested. "Getting new books in all the time now! There was quite the backlog, as we were shut down, and authors had no place to publish their works. We're adding new books daily, and thankfully we exist where we do, the shelves seem to grow to accommodate them instead of us having to manually replace them. You must like *books*?!"

"I sure do. You've convinced me. I'll try to visit at least once a year."

Stephen rose and took his hand. "Deal!"

"Good luck with things. I think you may have chosen librarian as a career for a quiet life but in this library, you'll get anything but. Have a good team though, so I have no doubt you'll see it through."

"Thanks, for everything. You were a big help in the beginning, I couldn't have done it without you."

"Eh, I'm sure you would have made it one way or the other. Anyway, until we meet again."

"Goodbye for now," he agreed with a nod.

Ezekiel turned and left the office, Stephen slowly sitting down again. *The place is too "noisy?" It's a library and he's in the basement. Plus the timing, we just got Brenard back and now Ezekiel is leaving? It's a little suspicious? I never did figure out how I got here, how I was able to bypass the normal entry procedure for Midveil. You don't think... something to do with it...*

Nah!