

AFTER

DAY 9

WE LEAVE FOR the Center absurdly early the next day, my second Monday in the afterlife. Faye wears a ridiculous pink polka-dotted muumuu, and I'm in the same white-tunic-PJ getup they provided at intake. I insist on walking (bus full of dead people? no thanks), and after a brisk twenty minutes, we arrive in Paradise Gate's downtown center: a tidy green park ringed by a cluster of dull gray buildings. Faye marches right up to the largest, dumbest one and pauses with a dramatic sweep.

Really? This is "the Center" that everyone's been going on about? I was prepared for a temple built of crystals and woo, but it looks more like the sort of place you'd go to clear a parking ticket.

A trickle of people flows up the wide steps, their faces as calm and expressionless as the colorless sky above. They are a range of ages, sizes, and colors—just like the folks in the intake ward—but these souls have swapped their tunics for a mix of business suits,

robes, and high-end yoga gear. I look down at my own attire and feel a vague but familiar unease.

Forever the new girl. Forever out of sync.

Faye reaches for my hand. I want to push it away, but the truth is I'm nervous. Also? I've always had a thing about revolving doors. As we reach the top step, Faye squeezes my palm like she remembers.

Deep breath. We plunge in, and several anxious seconds later, the door spits us out into a cavernous lobby. Massive burbling fountain. Giant gleaming portraits of Chairman Ted and Lady Lu. On either side, rose-colored banners insist: YOU'VE GOT THIS! YOUR ETERNITY BEGINS TODAY!

Faye pulls me toward a wall of scrolling screens. At first glance, I think it's some kind of arrivals or departures board—which, in a way, I guess it is. "The ascended," Faye says, pointing to the long rows of names. "You'll be on here soon enough."

I pause to scan more closely. Faye has told me my grandparents were part of one of the earlier cohorts to pass through the settlement. (Pop-Pop a firm atheist, Nonnie a "recovering Catholic.") Today, those cohorts are looked on as heroes, having carved a path for all of us.

Their names appear at the top of the screen: *Novak, Joseph A. Novak, Margaret C.* I rise on my toes to meet them. Nonnie and Pop-Pop's house—my home from first grade through fifth—was the last place I remember being truly happy. Nonnie's rules, like her love, were firm and consistent, and Pop's culinary skills were rivaled only by his ability to listen.

As their names slide past my fingers, I make a quick vow: If my grandparents are in the Ever After, then that's where I need to get. ASAP.

Faye pulls open the door to the main office, and together we scoot up to the counter.

"Can I help you?" croaks an old lady with glossy curls and a lipsticked smile.

"I'm here to register," I tell her. "For classes. Or support. Or whatever you call it."

I mark the blinking surveillance cameras in the corners above.

From all of the talk show snippets I've caught and the brochure pages Faye left scattered around the bungalow, I've gathered that the Center is more or less basic training for the newly dead. There are core courses everyone takes, with electives depending on your situation and interests. Faye, who bombed her midterm shortly before I arrived, recently enrolled in a more intensive program at one of the Center's satellite locations.

The receptionist—her nameplate says DORA—smiles wider. "You've come to the right place, hon." Her gaze flicks to my wrist. "And just in time, from the look of things."

Before I can cover my device's decidedly red glare or feel more than a quick flush of embarrassment, Dora turns her attention. "And you are . . . ?"

"Faye Novak. Mari's mother."

Dora looks from pale, petite Faye back to dark-eyed, big-boned me. "Will you be registering too?" she asks politely.

"Oh, no. Not me. I'm already enrolled—at the West Quadrant campus. I hit fifty days last week!" Faye beams, like it's a matter of pride.

"You don't say!" Dora breaks into another generous smile, but not before peeping the unhappy orange on Faye's wrist.

While the two of them chat about new course offerings and the

latest self-purification strategies, I fill out the blue form (Physical Condition at TOD), the green form (Mental Condition at TOD), the yellow form (Emotional Condition at TOD), and the pink form (Sense of Humor Inventory).

Once I figure out that TOD means “time of death,” the first three forms are easy to complete. I was an average sixteen-year-old, no happier than the rest, but no basket case either. I carried a lot of responsibility for someone my age, but I knew how to focus on what mattered and, more important, steer clear of trouble. I liked rules, liked school, the order and predictability of it. Grown-ups called me mature; my peers mostly ignored me, largely by design. I’d learned over the years how to linger below the waves of their complicated social dynamics, to blend in just enough to go unnoticed. *You’re good at adapting*, Ms. Crawford once noted before I turned the subject back to my preferred territory: grades and tests.

On a scale of 0 to 10, how would you rate your mood on an average day? I circle the 5, which seems like a safe bet. Not an outright lie, but also unlikely to raise alarm.

I read through the forms, checking off everything that sounds like the normal, middle-of-the-road choice. I only dip into the lower numbers on a question about sleeping habits. I figure if this tracker thing is working, they already know about my insomnia.

The Sense of Humor Inventory is the easiest. It’s a series of puns, jokes, and ironic statements, none of which are remotely funny. I check “not funny” on all but one: *According to official tallies, the most common last words among humans are “Oh, sh*t.”* I have to be honest and choose “mildly humorous” for that one.

Forms complete, I hand them off to Dora, who sorts them into their color-coded baskets, skimming the pink survey before pressing a button on a massive intercom. “Franny, send me Larisa.”

She holds out a scanner wand, and I place my wrist beneath it, wait for my device to bleep. **Eternity begins with a single step**, says my screen. **Enjoy 500 bonus points for registering!**

Maybe it’s my imagination, but the red light softens just a shade.

Dora replaces the wand on its rack and turns her attention back to me. “So,” she says.

“So,” I say back.

“So, what was your fate?” she says in a gravelly tone I read as compassion.

“My fate?”

“Was it illness? An accident? Or . . . ?” Her plucked brows lift in a question, sending an uncomfortable tremor all the way to my chest.

Faye takes the bait. “It’s a total mystery! She was fine one day, massive head injury the next, and no one knows how or why! She was a good kid, too, a real shining star, perfect daughter, ranked at the top of her class—”

“Hang on, that’s actually—”

Faye waves away my fact-checking.

“—not true,” I finish. (I made honor roll a few times, no better than most of my classmates.)

Faye, who is too absorbed in her performance to worry about details or the beep emanating from her wrist, lowers her voice dramatically. “My guess is it was stress related. Mari always worked so hard. She had so much discipline, and potential. It’s tragic, really.”

“Mmm.” Dora takes another long look at me, clucking gently. “Truth is? After sixty-some cycles sitting at this desk, I’m not so sure I believe in tragedy.”

My chin retracts. It’s like she said she doesn’t believe that garbage stinks. How can someone not believe in tragedy? It’s one thing to not give in to it, to not wallow in it or use it as an excuse to generate more of the same, but how can you not believe tragedy exists? Maybe if I told her a little bit about the things I’ve been through recently, she’d take her words back. But before I can object, the door swings open and in walks someone who looks even more irritated than me.

The girl in the doorway scowls. “I’m Larisa. I’ll be your afterlife ambassador. Or whatever.”

Her dark eyes shift from my simple bun to loose pajama bottoms, pausing briefly at the *Get Blessed!* logo peeking through my unbuttoned top. (Faye lent me a T-shirt in case I experienced one of her cold flashes.) The girl doesn’t know what to make of me, and I have to say, the feeling’s mutual. With black hair lopped jaggedly above the ears and a striped purple jumpsuit, she looks like she’s stepped off some sort of goth chain gang. She’s shorter than me, slimmer than me, a lighter shade of skin. She appears East Asian, or possibly mixed. Her sharp gaze tells me she doesn’t give a crap what I think she is, so quit trying. I’m okay with that.

“Speaking of excellent students, Larisa has been ranked at the top of her cohort since arrival. She recently hit thirty days and has made a name for herself as one of our hardest workers,” Dora proclaims.

Really? This girl? I look more closely at Larisa, who simply grunts. “You ready for your tour, newbie?” Without waiting for

my response, she tosses a “C’mon” over her shoulder and disappears through the door.

I step away from the counter, considering. I could skip all this (do I really want to deal with prickly peers? in the afterlife?), go back to the bungalow, and catch the next episode of *Dead Like Us*, or—I glance at my wrist, thinking of my grandparents noshing on warm pancakes without me—

I know what I have to do.

“Good luck, baby!” Faye shouts as the door whips shut behind me.

I run to catch up with my extremely rude afterlife ambassador. She leads me to the end of the hall, where she takes a left, then a right, another right, a left, a U-turn, five more turns, until I’ve lost the ability to trace my way back.

The halls are eerily quiet.

“Class is in session,” Larisa explains. “We’re expected to be productive at all times. Loitering: frowned upon.” She demonstrates with a pinched brow. “But you and I have this tour to take care of, so we’re good. Plus, I earned an extra self-study period anyway.”

At the next turn, she gestures toward a glass atrium dotted with fake plants and old people waving smoking wands of incense. Another classroom window reveals a cluster of women kneeling on a pebble-strewn floor. “Electives,” she says vaguely.

I try to make sense of the last one—it looks excruciating—and I feel Larisa attempting to do the same with me. “So what did you tell her?” she finally asks.

“Huh?”

“Dora. You must’ve said something ’cause she only gives me the toughest cases. I don’t blame her either. The other ambassadors

could scare off a lot of people with all their *enthusiasm* and shit. Oops.” Her wrist bleeps, and she stamps her foot. “Dammit.” She stamps again.

I step back slowly.

“Points off for cursing,” she explains to my raised eyebrow. “Expressions of explicit anger and aggression are strictly taboo, especially around the newbies. Might shock your freshly hatched spirit or something. Don’t worry, it’s not that many points. Not like if I punched you.”

I take another, larger step back. Wow. This girl. Also, “We just passed a door marked EXISTENTIAL ERADICATION. I don’t think we need to worry about curse words being the shocker?”

Larisa’s face shifts. I’m not sure, but I think I catch the flicker of a smile. “Well, they won’t help my karmic savings, that’s for sure.” She squints more closely at me. “Seriously, what’d you do in there? Temper tantrum? Sullen silence? Tearing up of surveys?”

I shake my head. Make a scene? Me? This girl has me completely wrong.

“Then did you put something wacko on the forms? Are you severely withdrawn . . . or a misanthrope? Promise, I won’t judge. I dislike most people too.”

Larisa seems weirdly cheerful about the last bit. I’m almost sorry to disappoint her. “No. I don’t *dislike* anyone. I mean, aside from . . .” Another shake of my head; no need to get into my mommy issues now. “Dora didn’t even read my forms, just glanced at the pink one and called for you.”

“Ah.” Larisa nods gravely. “The humor survey. You’re a not-funny chick. I see.”

“It’s not *me* who’s not funny. Those jokes were terrible.”

Larisa shrugs. “Dead-people humor. You’ll get it eventually. Or”—wry smile—“not.”

We resume our tour, traveling down another hallway, where Larisa points out several eternal rest rooms (“For naps,” she clarifies with a chuckle), a string of meditation carrels, and a doorway leading to the self-observation deck. She shows me a giant auditorium reserved for ascension ceremonies and a glossy-floored Youga™ studio—“It’s like yoga, but all about *you*.” To this, she offers a decisive eye roll.

“I thought this place was secular,” I say.

“It is.”

“Well, then what’s with all the talk of karma, ascension, and whatnot? Isn’t yoga technically religious?”

“Technically, sure. But not everyone who does yoga is religious, right? And we can all understand *karma*. Around here, we use a lot of traditional concepts minus the god stuff. It for sure gets weird sometimes, but secularists don’t have many of their own practices or even a real vocabulary for being dead, so”—Larisa shrugs—“I try to roll with it.”

What I’m beginning to gather is that Larisa is a straight shooter, someone who does what’s required while simultaneously seeing through the BS. I can respect that. In fact, I’m grateful for it—glad to know I’m not the only one who finds this place a bit odd.

Next Larisa shows me a series of self-expression studios and a small, sterile-looking chamber with complicated equipment where students go for “adjustments.” (Also, thankfully, elective.) As I try to make sense of a wall of knobs and screens and what appears to be a medical gurney, Larisa pauses again. “Hey, Not-Funny Chick, you want to know how this place really works?”

I pull my attention away from a rack of disturbing-looking pincers.

“Um, yes, please. I’d obviously like to get out of here as fast as possible. Can you tell me how?”

“Not funny, but practical.” Larisa’s angled face is softened by an unexpected starburst of dimples. “Listen, kid, the real trick is there’s no trick. It’s all about the basics . . .”

We walk the length of one long corridor and double back the next while Larisa explains the settlement’s point system in detail. The device on my wrist works like a karmic piggy bank, tracking points awarded for measurable efforts—classes attended, assignments completed, kind gestures—while deducting points for overt misbehavior. “Don’t bother trying to cheat the system,” Larisa warns. “It runs on AI—which isn’t one hundred percent perfect; like, if I call you a shucking trashhole, it won’t recognize those as curses—but it catches on to more than you’d think. I don’t think you’re a trashhole, by the way. That was just an example.”

“Got it,” I say. “Thanks.”

Each day, Larisa explains, we’re expected to practice positive actions and avoid harmful behavior in order to build our karmic earnings, which in turn fuel the whole grid. We need a minimum of a thousand points per day to cover food, rent, enrollment, and other basics. Surplus points can be spent on extras, like spa treatments to ease our vibes, or clothes that aren’t pajamas. (Larisa raises a brow.)

“You get two hundred points per day just for showing up,” she says. “Attending every class and completing assignments will get you more.”

“It seems like you could hit a thousand pretty fast,” I say.

“If you stay focused, sure. But you gotta watch out for the deductions. It’s like that game Chutes and Ladders. Do good things, you climb the rungs. Do the stuff they don’t like—as in, curse like the motherbreathing sailor you were born to be—and . . .” Larisa’s hand slides down an imaginary chute. “Seriously, though, cursing’s pretty minor,” she says. “It’s the other crap that’ll nail you.”

Laziness and mean-spirited behavior are the big no-nos—the ones the system is designed to catch—but Larisa lays out several additional ways people self-sabotage and get stuck: comparing yourself to others, getting caught up in negative feelings, blaming, doubting, undermining authority, worrying excessively, losing hope.

“You lose points for worrying?” I’m going to be in serious trouble if that’s true.

“Well, technically, no. The tracker can’t dock points for thoughts or feelings—I curse all the time in my head—but if you’re constantly doubting and worrying, you’re wasting energy better spent on the work. And all that anxiety will for sure drag down your vibes. That’s the other thing the trackers measure.”

She points to the red light on mine and the more pleasing limey-green on her own. Hers isn’t fully emerald yet, but it’s close. “Vibes are totally separate from points, unless earning points makes you feel happy inside, which is definitely true for me. The scale is based on some sort of algorithm that accounts for your breath, heart rate, aura, et cetera.”

“Et cetera?”

“The science is squishy, but it’s supposed to estimate your level of inner peace. Souls who’ve achieved a stable, pure green within ninety days are eligible to ascend.”

I look at the red light on my wrist and feel my shoulders pinch.

“Hey, pal, no need for sadface. If you do the work and stick to the rules, your vibes will improve. Probably. It’s worked so far for me.”

My shoulders soften a touch. If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s following rules.

“Look,” Larisa says, “your best bet is to stay calm, do what they ask, even if it’s goofy, and pray to the Powers that you’re one of the lucky ones who make it.”

The ones who don’t, I’ve gathered, end up in that awful in-between zone. I almost ask Larisa what she knows about *that*, but we’ve come to a set of double doors and it’s clear she’s eager to move on. She places a hand on the door, then turns once again to look at me. “One more thing, Not-Funny Chick. You listening?”

“Mm-hmm.” I pull out my mental checklist.

“Stay away from the virgins, the martyrs, and the wannabe prophets.” She must see my confusion. “Just trust me on that one,” she adds before bashing through the doors.

THE BRIGHT, HIGH-CEILINGED cafeteria buzzes with conversation. Larisa guides me along the side to the buffet, where she grabs a plate and begins heaping it with beige mush, wax-colored beans, and something called “tempeh tots.”

“They’re testing out a sugar-free, zero-chemical, all-vegan diet—cutting out stimulants and whatnot that might mess with your state of mind. And I guess eating simulated meat was too weird? I missed my hot wings and morning coffee at first, but this

stuff grows on you too.” She pops a tot in her mouth, concealing a tiny grimace. “Mostly.”

As she reaches for the pot labeled KALE MOUSSE, I feel my virtual stomach tighten. “You realize it’s nine a.m.?”

“And? Breakfast is for champions, my friend, the foundation of any reasonable self-care regime.” Larisa slops a pile of vomit-colored mush onto her plate. “Best thing about this place is the flat-fee meal plan. All you can eat. You won’t gain weight, lose weight, get sick. *Nothing* ever changes. Except the inner you. And my inner self likes to eat.”

She licks a bit of slime from her finger, and I decide not to press.

I grab something that looks like a sandwich and follow Larisa out of the buffet area and into the lunchroom, which is remarkably busy considering the hour. (“Rotating schedule,” Larisa explains. “Everyone gets two self-study blocks a day.”)

Long modular tables radiate out from the center of the room, forming four quadrants. Students in business suits cluster in one area, the old-school cassocks in another. The far-left corner is for the quiet folks, Larisa explains. Literally. They’ve all taken vows of silence. The newcomers tend to gather near the front. Larisa guides me past my fellow pajama-sporting newbies to a center table with a prime view of everything.

As I slide into the bench seat, it hits me: This isn’t that different from the first day in a new school, a realization that is simultaneously reassuring and depressing. After my first few moves with Faye, I learned how to read a room quickly, locate the safest group (student council nerds were a good bet), and settle along its edges. I never exactly fit in—never made actual friends or understood all the in-jokes—but my goal was far simpler: to avoid drama and

scrutiny. I'd never have chosen someone like Larisa as a ballast back then, but I am grateful for her now.

The “virgins” hover around the vending machines, she tells me between spoonfuls of slime. She introduces them like that: with big air quotes and a wink. They may or may not be actual virgins—no one cares about that here—but the whole group, all female-identifying, is weirdly obsessed with proving their inner purity. In matching lycra pants and crisscross tanks (“They’re really into Youga”), the virgins look like the afterworld’s version of a shapewear commercial—different shades, different body types, yet somehow identical.

Larisa points: “That’s Catherine of Newark in the pink, Catherine of Toronto in blue, and Milwaukee in lavender.” She sees the question on my face. “Don’t ask. I don’t get it either.”

“Cool,” I say. Staying away from that group shouldn’t be difficult.

The wannabe prophets are less noticeable at first. Larisa points out a few stray ones spread across the room, noting how they sit slightly apart from everyone else, holding their wrists aloft as they smile into the tiny screens on their trackers. “Documenting their path,” she explains. “These dudes can’t let a burp slide out without telling the rest of us how blessed they feel. I recommend getting familiar with your block button fast.”

Larisa reaches for my wrist and shows me the string of videos and uplifting quotes that have jumped onto my screen since we sat down, pushed onto my feed by proximity. Two prophets have sent DMs, requesting a follow.

“They’re trying to become spiritual influencers,” Larisa explains.

"These guys aren't real prophets, though, just tryhards." A few clicks, and she's blocked them from my feed.

"Wow, thanks," I say. It would've taken me a least a week to figure this out on my own.

Larisa returns to her plate with gusto. "The martyrs are the worst," she says, pointing her fork toward a table of brown-robed souls seated by the garbage cans. "They're constantly doing hunger strikes and trying to be heroic. Last week, two of them tried to start a free shuttle service, carrying people to class on their *backs*." She shakes her head. "That BS doesn't even get you points. It's empty sacrifice."

I glance over at the martyrs, who are sighing miserably into empty plates. "If it doesn't count, why do they do it?"

Larisa slops another forkful in her mouth. "Guilt issues? Fear they're too messed up to make amends the regular way? Or maybe they just like attention. There's no knowing why some souls do what they do. I swear, dying sends some folks off the deep end."

"Yeah," I say quietly. That part I can comprehend. "So which ones are your friends?"

Larisa jabs her fork into another pile of mush, no longer meeting my gaze. "I'm not really a joiner. You know, a group person."

"Yeah. Me neither."

Larisa looks up.

"We moved a lot," I tell her. "After a while, it just seemed easier to do my own thing. I'm pretty independent, I guess."

Larisa nods slowly, like she gets it. "Same. Also, most people are trashholes, so."

We both smile.

“Who are *they*?” I point to a group at the far end of the room. They look fairly normal, mostly on the younger side like us, dressed in muted tones. They aren’t doing anything strange that I can see. They just look . . . tired.

“Nope. Ignore.”

“Why? Who are they?”

“Literal deadbeats. Total lost causes. Most of them will be kicked off the grid before you learn their names, so don’t bother.”

“Kicked off for what?”

“Bad vibes, poor participation, general noncompliance.”

I find myself staring at one of them, a guy with pale skin and a swish of dark hair. He catches me looking, and an uncomfortable feeling slips up my spine.

“Bet you fifty points that one’s a dangler.”

“A *what*?” I pull my attention back to my companion.

“You know.” Larisa mimes a crude noose, lets her head flop, one brow cocked.

“Wow. That’s . . . dark.”

Larisa shrugs, pops another veggie tot. “It’s honest. And while we’re on the subject, what’s your damage?”

I blink.

“You know. What kind of trauma are you working with? You seem pretty unsettled. Do I sense some underlying shame? Are you a dangler too?”

“What? No, I’m not ashamed about anything or *traumatized*. I—”

My tracker lets out a beep.

“Discernible lie. Minus five points,” Larisa says as I swat at my

wrist. “Look, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Depression’s a monster. Suicide’s a top cause for our age group, you know.”

“Well, that’s really fascinating, but I didn’t—”

“Accidents are another big one. It was an SUV for me. Reckless driver, busted rotors, didn’t see him coming until it was too late. Them’s the brakes, as they say.”

Larisa busts up at her own joke, and I begin to laugh too before remembering that dying at our age isn’t funny. Not even a little.

“Look, if you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about it. My death. The past. All of that.”

Chin up, eyes ahead. A solid motto, if you ask me.

“Hmph,” Larisa says, stabbing at the last of her spongy tots. “Well, then good luck to you, kid. You’re gonna have a rough time around here.”