

The Playground

“What is this place?” Marion asked quietly.

“We call it the Playground,” Rose replied with a gentle, yet sad smile. “Children who’ve somehow made their way to this realm are drawn to this place. Here they gather. Here they talk and play. Here they are kids again. At least for a little while.”

“Shall we go down and see who we can rescue?”

“Oh, we never try to intervene with the children we find here. This is a safe place for them. The way we look at it, if they come here at least they are getting some social interaction. No, we don’t try to take them here. But it is a good place to pick up their trails. To observe and listen. To get a better understanding of just who it is we’d dealing with.”

“It seems like such a good opportunity,” Marion countered with a frown. “Just a quick step and we could have two or three. Take them back to the people who love them...”

“Aye. That we could,” the older woman agreed with a patient smile. “But what about the one’s we didn’t get in that quick grab? What about the one’s who’d see us swoop down and take their friends away kicking and screaming? What do we do when they all stop coming here. The size of this world is truly mind boggling. Limbo is literally without limits or boundaries. And without the Playground to attract them to one another, the children’s spirits will further diminish and we will have made it ten times as hard to track them down.”

“Oh. I suppose I never thought...”

“There’s a great deal more to this job than meets the eye.”

“Yes.. I’m beginning to see that now.”

“How is your child psychology?”

Marion gave a tiny shrug, “Pretty good I think.”

“Good. If you are truly wise, it will serve you well. If not... well, you’ll find out soon enough.”

“So how do we learn about them from way out here? The swings and such are way over there and they seem deserted.”

“I’m glad you asked. I’ll show you a little trick. It begins with concentration. First you concentrate on where you want to hear. Then you.... I think it’s a little different for everyone. For me it’s like stretching out a part of myself while the majority of me stays in place. But the part I stretch out is the part that’s listening. Does that make any sense?”

“Umm... quite frankly, no. Sorry.”

“Alright then. Let’s give this a try. Pretend that swing over there has a conversation going on nearby and you want to hear it.”

“Okay. That’s easy enough.”

“Now, concentrate on listening through the swing set. As though you had your ear to a door and were listening but instead of a door, your hearing through the swing set. Remember, distance doesn’t truly matter here in the world of Limbo. It’s mostly an illusion.”

“How will I know if it’s working?”

“Why you’ll be hearing the people nearby, that’s how.”

“But there’s no one there now!”

“Right,” Rose agreed with a grin. “That’s because they’re in the drain room.”

“The what?”

“It’s a chamber below the ground there. See the sidewalk? Now see the gutter opening into the sewer? Well below that is a room. Dozens of variously sized cement storm drains run into that room. It’s how some of them get there and how some of them leave. It’s also where they often play games and talk. Once you’ve practiced enough, I’ll take you there.”

“But you said we can’t taken any of them away from here.”

“Who said anything about taking them away? No, when I take you there, we’ll be laughing and playing right along with them. Well, inasmuch as they laugh and play. Which, realistically speaking, is not much. We’ll try to learn their names and we’ll talk and listen. We will not try to lure any of them away. We will not press any issues that they don’t want to talk about. No, we’ll simple be there and soak up what information we can.”

“But... we’re not children. Won’t they run away?”

“We are not children. But we once were. And as talented angels, we can look like children if we so desire, can’t we? We can act like children. For a while we can *be* children again. And so long as we *are* children, they won’t fear us. And during that time we can hopefully get a step closer to understanding these poor, broken beings. Understanding them is the key to later finding and helping them.”

“How many of them are there?”

“Too many, my dear. Too, too many.”

“Okay, I’m ready,” Marion said with determination.

“No dear, you’re not. Today we’ll begin by simply listening. Later, after you’ve had practice, we’ll go play. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone will join us.” Seeing Marion’s frown, a compassionate smile came unbidden to Rose’s lips and eyes. “Have patience dear. I know you want to get straight to rescuing these poor, lost souls. But it’s not that simple. The consequences of our failing could be truly dreadful. Preparation is vital to our success.” She turned and looked back towards the apparently empty playground, “Vital to their success.”

Marion took a deep breath. “I’ll try to curb my enthusiasm.”

“No. Never do that. Simply mingle patience in with your enthusiasm. We need all the drive we can get. When you feel it diminishing, then it’s time to take a break. Go visit another world and see the sights. Visit past family members you were close to. Find old friends who are currently outside the living cycle and enjoy some time with them. You have to know your strengths and limitations. Otherwise, some other angel might have to be dispatched to go looking for *you*.”

“Your words ring true,” the younger woman said with an inwardly turned frown. “I guess I was just expecting to rush right in and start saving these poor, lost souls.”

“It’s not quite that easy... but neither is it monumentally difficult. Challenging. Oh yes, it is very challenging. But our goals are attainable. And with each success, you’ll be able to speak and talk to the fruits of your labor. I find that’s what truly restores my strength when I become tired.”

“That...that must be extraordinary,” Marion whispered as a new understanding gently washed over her.

“It is indeed. It is indeed. But enough of that. Let’s listen in on the drain opening and see what our would-be charges are up to....”

“Well, how was it?” Jack asked.

“Not what I expected, to be sure,” Marion replied, sitting down at the table he’d conjured from the grey mist that seemed to make up the Spirit World or the world of the dead as it was more popularly known.

“How so?”

“Well, I suppose I was being silly but I rather expected to just rush out and start dragging in lost souls. Maybe do something akin to talking a jumper down from a high rooftop. And it’s nothing like that at all. And where’s Alice?”

“Bit more subtlety and less dashing around?” he guessed with a grin.

“As it turns out... yes. Alice?”

“She’s visiting with her mother. Seems that now that her daughter is back amongst the properly dead, the lady has decided she’s going back into the living cycle. Alice and the rest of her family are having a last, long reunion with her before she takes the plunge.”

“How exciting,” the dark haired, young-looking woman replied.

“You don’t sound like you think it’s a good idea,” he observed.

“It’s not that... it’s just that I’ve only just begun to find out what there is to this world and the worlds around it. My curiosity about what’s to be found here isn’t sated. And until it is, I don’t think I’ll be going back into the cycle.”

Jack nodded. “I’m rather ambivalent at this point. I’m waiting in this world for Alex to show up but it may be a very long time indeed. I’ve gotten a pretty good read on the world of the dead. But I haven’t gone beyond. And I’ve done that on purpose. Since I haven’t seen it, I haven’t grown attached. And if Alice chooses to follow her mother....”

“Yes?” Marion asked, leaning forward a bit.

“I just might follow her,” he replied quietly.

“How romantic of you,” she said with a smile that quickly faded.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s very selfish of me,” she told him quietly. “But you and Alice are my best friends here. If you leave....”

“Then you’ll make more friends and you’ll be able to concentrate more on your chosen line of work?” he suggested.

“Perhaps,” she replied, obviously unconvinced.

“Remember what they say about time here. It’s a very loose connection. Alice is very fond of you as am I. Rest assured that we won’t be going anywhere until we’ve seen that you’re well established. And maybe not then either. Alice and I both made a lot of mistakes in our last lives. While we’re both interested in starting fresh, neither of us are relishing the possibility of repeating those mistakes.”

“I’m not what you’d even remotely consider an expert on returning into the living cycle,” she began, “but I’m pretty sure that you get to pour your highest desires and hopes into your new spirit.” She threw her hands up into the air. “That’s not even the right terminology. But I’m sure you’ve heard the same. Knowing you, you’ve probably heard more.”

“Yes, I’ve heard more. But you’re actually working with the angels now. I think I’ll trust what you’ve heard from them more than what I’ve heard just bouncing around learning new tricks with fluff.”

“Fluff?”

He laughed, “My latest nickname for the grey stuff that seems to comprise this world.”

“Fluff, huh? You know, I like it. And it’s fitting,” she said, waving her hand behind her and

through the nearest wall of the formless stuff.

“So, getting back to you,” he said with a smile. “What’s next on your agenda?”

“After I’ve rested a bit, I’m going back to Limbo. There’s an angelic city there where they work with those who’ve been recovered. It’s also something of a convenient stopover for travelers. I’m going back to spend some time there. I’ll do some training to improve my eavesdropping, dealing with recalcitrant children, and changing myself back into a little girl.”

“Now that sounds incredibly interesting,” he said, looking as interested as he sounded.

“I hope so,” she nodded. “This is one of the stopping points for me towards my goal of being able to help Alex.”

“They say that working in the real world is ten times harder than anything we do here,” Jack stated with a frown.

“All the worlds are real,” she replied with a smile. “Some more real than others to be sure. Still, I get your point. I’ve heard much the same thing. But angels seems to grow those muscles much faster. I don’t know what the cause is. Only that it seems to be true. But one step at a time. First I learn how to save lost children. Later, I work on my favorite vampire.”

“How are you doing?” Rose asked quietly. “I’ve heard you’ve been training in the city. Learn anything?”

“Lots,” Marion replied distracted, not turning her gaze away from the far distant playground. “Josh doesn’t like firemen and he and Peter almost got into a fight about it before both chose to move away from each other. Josh does like riddles but did not like Christine’s riddle about a candle. Which leads me to suspect that Josh died in a fire. Jules made a comment about him always having ‘black stuff’ over him that added to this suspicion.

“Jian Long enjoys fishing but hasn’t been able to find a good place to fish. Said he used to fish a lot with his uncle. He actually likes playing ‘hide and seek’ with the others. Most of them do not. Especially Peter. The fear stood out very plain in his voice. I’ve been making notes on all of them.”

“Oh Marion!” Rose said, giving the other woman a quick hug. “You’ve learned a great deal in a small time. You are going to be a great addition for us.”

“Thank you,” the younger woman replied with a slightly embarrassed smile.

“Have you practiced changing into a child?”

“Yes. Quite a lot actually. I think I’ve become reasonably good at it. Doing this right means a lot to me.”

“Then let’s get our background stories straight and go see who we can meet and who we can get to know.”

“Well?” Rose asked as they slowly walked through one of the quiet gardens surrounding the small angelic city. “What do you think?”

“So much pain and injury crammed into such small, tired souls.... Seeing them up close almost made me cry.”

“But you didn’t,” the other woman gently pointed out.

“No. I did not. That wouldn’t have helped them. For the moment, I won’t help me either.”

“Later,” Rose agreed quietly. They walked in silence for a while. Eventually Rose again spoke. “Tell me about what you saw. Sometimes it helps to see the same picture from different points of view.”

“There is no cohesion there,” Marion explained carefully. “The gathering children go there for as much socializing as they want and then leave. There are various groups that form. I had the impression that most members of these groups are well known to one another. That would suggest that they seek out certain people when they go there. I’m not sure I would go so far as to say it was friendship but perhaps it’s a precursor to it.

“This particular place attracts a certain age group. I was interested to see that there were no older looking children nor younger. All of them appeared to be in the six to ten year old range.”

“That’s a pretty good generalization of what goes on there,” the older woman said thoughtfully. “What specific details did you notice?”

“When you’re up close it’s not so hard to tell how most of them died,” Marion began sadly. “I’m not sure if Josh actually died by burning or from smoke inhalation, but his death was definitely fire related. Suki has those arrows sticking out of her back. Can the other children see them? No, I didn’t think so. The thin scar on Irenka’s neck went all the way around her neck. I’d guess she was beheaded.”

Rose nodded, “I don’t know that much about Josh yet. What you saw jibs pretty well with what I’ve seen as well. Mongols attacked Suki’s village. She died running away from them. Irenka’s parents were heretics. They were burned alive and as you guessed she was indeed beheaded.”

“How terrible for them,” Marion sighed.

“Yes. Each of these children is here for a reason. A terrible reason that being a child they were not able to understand. That happens all too regularly. What is not regular in the least is that these children did not stop at the land of the dead as they should have but instead passed beyond it into Limbo. And that’s where we come in. There are not many of us doing this. You are joining a very select band, Marion.”

“I know. My own childhood was unpleasant. Not nearly so traumatic as what these kids have experienced but no walk in the park either. I’d like to use my experiences to help these children.”

“That’s not all there is to it,” the older woman said with a smile.

“Not by a long shot,” Marion agreed with a smile of her own.

“Will you tell me about it?”

“Someday. Someday it would be my distinct pleasure to tell you all about my life.”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to it already. Now, let me change the topic slightly. Did you notice anything unusual about Eustace?” Rose asked with a little grin.

“Hmm? Eustace? Let’s see, she didn’t talk about her family at all. She carried a rag doll which Janie was jealous of and Peter kept staring at. She had scrapes on both knees and the palms of her hands as well. Looked as though she’d fallen down while running. Repeatedly fallen down at that. What do you know about her?” she asked with a frown upon seeing the older woman’s grin.

“Her name is actually Sandra. She’s one of us and Peter is her assignment.”

“No!” Marion gasped. Her scandalized look quickly turned into a laugh. “Oh, she’s good!”

“Indeed she is. And I think you will be too. I missed Janie’s jealousy of the doll completely. Since you spotted it, how would you feel about making Janie your first assignment?”

Without hesitation, Marion replied, “I would like that very much.”

“In that case, welcome to our small, but very dedicated club.”

