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AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 5 – IN SERVICE TO ETERNITY
by
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Nicole stood by the ornate marble fountain, listening to water trickle in mesmerizing loops. She used to find the elegance of Bernadette’s courtyard almost soothing—until she discovered the darkness behind all the glitz. Now, every polished tile felt like a warning she couldn’t escape.

Bernadette, her patron in this digital afterlife, swept into the courtyard with poised confidence, her long gown shimmering under the perpetual twilight that stretched across Paradiso Town. She wore an expression of practiced grace, the kind she reserved for her upper-class guests, who believed she was a charming hostess. But the moment they were gone, a different Bernadette emerged.

“Nicole,” Bernadette called, her voice lilting with forced warmth, “I want you and Elsie to prepare the grand salon for my gathering tonight. Fresh tapestries, rearranged furniture—something luxurious.”

Nicole bowed her head. “Of course,” she murmured.

Bernadette's gaze flickered with disdain. "And find Felicia. She's...late with her duties."

That chill tone sent a prickle down Nicole's spine. *Felicia. The newest servant.* Nicole had only met her once, a woman with haunted eyes who seemed perpetually tense. Word around the staff quarters was that Felicia would do *anything* to avoid deletion—and Bernadette took full advantage.

"Right away," Nicole said softly.

Private Cruelty

Nicole found Felicia in the laundry annex, a shadowy corridor off the main villa. Unlike the public halls—adorned with statues and gilded wainscoting—this area was dim, the walls bare except that Eternity, Inc. hadn't bothered to decorate. Felicia was kneeling on the floor, scrubbing what appeared to be imaginary stains from virtual linens. Even in a pain-free afterlife, the frantic motion made her look exhausted.

Felicia barely looked up when Nicole approached. "Bernadette wants you," Nicole said gently.

The other woman flinched, dropping the linens. "Did I do something wrong?"

Nicole shook her head, kneeling beside her. "I don't think so. But she's...irritable today."

Felicia's face filled with dread. "She's always irritable. And bored. She likes toying with me—says it amuses her."

Nicole's stomach lurched. She'd witnessed Bernadette's scornful put-downs, but suspected there was more behind the closed doors. "Come on, we shouldn't keep her waiting."

Together, they made their way to a secluded wing near the grand salon. The deeper they went, the quieter it became, a hush that made Nicole's pulse beat faster. At last, they reached a chamber draped with sumptuous fabrics—a private parlor Bernadette used only when her wealthy afterlife “friends” were gone.

Bernadette stood by a low table, her gown trailing across the floor. She cast Felicia a long, appraising look, then turned to Nicole. “That will be all. I’ll speak with Felicia alone.”

Nicole hesitated, Felicia's quivering form tugging at her conscience. But there was no refusing a direct command. Nicole slipped out, leaving Felicia with Bernadette's chilling smile.

She pressed her ear to the door for a moment, half-hoping she could intercept a conversation—some proof of Bernadette's cruelty. She heard Bernadette's voice, quiet but firm, and Felicia's hesitant replies. No screams or cries for help—just the tense hush of a power imbalance.

The Mask Slips

That evening, Bernadette hosted a lavish soiree. Well-dressed residents drifted through the villa, sipping conjured wine and admiring illusions of priceless art. Nicole and the others flitted about, topping up glasses and answering demands. Bernadette performed the role of gracious hostess effortlessly, showering her guests with compliments and breezy laughter.

Occasionally, she threw Nicole a warning look that said, *Don't embarrass me.*

By the end of the night, the guests finally departed. In the main hall, Elsie—an older servant who'd been here for months—approached Nicole. “Have you seen Felicia?”

Nicole shook her head. “Not since Bernadette took her aside.”

Elsie’s mouth set in a thin line. “I heard rumors Bernadette’s bored with her new toys...that she’s testing Felicia’s limits.”

Nicole exhaled shakily. “Testing how?”

Elsie lowered her voice. “Private humiliation. Making Felicia grovel or do demeaning tasks. She used to do that with a servant named Miko, until Miko ran off.” Elsie paused, glancing around as if walls had ears. “But there’s nowhere to truly hide in this digital world. If you stop paying, you get deleted.”

Shadows pooled in Nicole’s mind. “Bernadette can do whatever she wants, can’t she?”

Elsie nodded grimly. “No laws here. No accountability. Just money.”

Cruel Revelations

Nicole found Felicia hours later in the small chamber that served as the servants’ quarters. Her eyes were red—not from physical tears (those were a construct here) but from the emotional turmoil so evident in her trembling posture.

“Are you okay?” Nicole asked softly, crouching down beside her cot.

Felicia’s voice cracked. “I’ll survive.” She let out a hollow laugh. “That’s all that matters—surviving.”

Nicole hesitated, unsure if she should push. “What...what happened?”

Felicia looked away, her shoulders shaking. “Bernadette said I needed to prove my loyalty. She made me do... things. Degrading things. It’s a game for her, Nicole. She said back in the real world, she was *limited*—servants had rights, there were laws. But here, I have none. If I refuse, she can just cut off my account. Who’ll stop her?”

Anger flared in Nicole’s chest. “That’s monstrous.”

Felicia nodded miserably. “Monstrous, yes. But not the worst I’ve experienced.” She looked up, eyes haunted. “I was trafficked before I died. At least I had a chance of escaping if some Good Samaritan intervened. Here, in the afterlife, if I run, my subscription lapses. Poof—deleted.”

Nicole sat heavily on the edge of the cot. “So...there’s no one to protect you?”

Felicia’s laugh was brittle. “Protect me? Everyone’s too busy protecting themselves.” She curled her arms around her knees. “And you know what’s worse? Bernadette is still better than the last patron I had. He was a sadist, found creative ways to torment me for fun. I fled his domain in the middle of a system update, barely made it out before he locked me down. When I arrived here, Bernadette took me in, provided I do her bidding. She’s cruel—but it’s not constant physical torture. And I’m too terrified to be on my own.”

Nicole felt a sick twist in her stomach. It hadn’t dawned on her that escaping one tormentor simply led to another if you couldn’t pay your own fees. “This is supposed to be a paradise,” she whispered.

Felicia stared at her, tears brimming. “Paradise? The real heaven wouldn’t charge subscriptions. This place? It’s just a playground for the powerful.”

Bernadette's Confession

Nicole's chance to confront Bernadette came unexpectedly. She was tidying the lounge when she overheard Bernadette talking in low tones with the stern-faced man who screened new arrivals. He bowed respectfully, as if she were royalty.

"I found a fresh batch of *unaffiliated* residents," he said. "Some are quite desperate. Who should I send your way?"

Bernadette tapped her polished nails on the velvet arm of a couch. "Send me the timid ones, especially those with no external sponsors. They're easier to shape."

The man nodded, making a note on his sleek tablet.

Bernadette laughed softly. "You know, I never could *toy* with my servants quite so thoroughly in the real world. Too many laws, too many prying eyes. But here..." She swept her hand in a flourish. "Money is power. And power is freedom from consequence."

Nicole felt her blood run cold. Bernadette *enjoyed* the absolute control.

Suddenly, the floor creaked beneath Nicole's foot, and Bernadette's gaze snapped toward the doorway. Nicole flattened herself against the wall, heart hammering.

A moment later, Bernadette dismissed the man with a wave. Nicole stayed hidden, hardly daring to breathe. Only once the echoes of their footsteps faded did she slip away, shaken by the direct proof of Bernadette's narcissistic cruelty.

No Escape

That night, Nicole returned to the dingy quarters she shared with Elsie and Felicia. Elsie was already asleep, or pretending to be. Felicia sat hunched on the edge of her cot, lost in thought.

Nicole approached, voice trembling. “Bernadette...she’s worse than I thought.”

Felicia offered a weary shrug. “And we’re stuck with her unless we find another sponsor or we pay for ourselves. Which we can’t.”

Nicole sank onto her own narrow bed. She remembered the day she first arrived in the afterlife, relieved to be free of disease, certain she’d found solace. *All illusions.*

Gazing at Felicia’s worn face, Nicole said, “Do you think we’ll ever be free?”

Felicia studied her hands, silent for a long moment. Then, quietly, “I don’t know. But I’d rather endure Bernadette’s twisted games than risk falling into the clutches of someone worse. Or being deleted altogether.”

Nicole sighed, burying her face in her hands. *This was supposed to be salvation. Now it’s just another trap.*

Somewhere down the hall, Bernadette’s laughter echoed—soft, musical, and cold. The sound of a predator, secure in her private kingdom.

Nicole closed her eyes, wishing she could shut out the knowledge of how far this ‘paradise’ had fallen. No laws, no rights, only money and fear. And in that eternal night, the fountain still trickled, a mockery of peaceful living.

Tomorrow would bring the same cycle: tasks, humiliation, dread. For Nicole and Felicia, existence had boiled down to one thing—*survival*. They had no illusions left about finding genuine freedom in this afterlife. Only the grim determination to keep going, one day at a time, and hope that somewhere in the digital horizon, a crack in this gilded cage might appear.

End – Part 5