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AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 7 – ACCEPTANCE OR ESCAPE  
by  
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Verena had seen countless newcomers filter into Eternity’s digital realm over the years, each one hoping for peace—or at least a reprieve from mortal pains. But recently, the new arrivals looked haunted, burdened by crushing fees and exploitative sponsorships that turned paradise into a prison. The older resident community to which Verena belonged was more fortunate: when they arrived, Eternity, Inc. offered a single, modest payment and minimal upkeep. Over time, the corporation introduced premium tiers and vicious upgrades—yet older residents like Verena were grandfathered into the gentler plan.

Still, that privilege came at a price. They were barred from new expansions: elaborate VR spectacles, custom bodies, grand illusions of luxury. Most older residents didn’t care. Better to stay in their cozy corners than risk the punishing terms that newer residents endured. But the change in the afterlife’s culture—its slow corruption—gnawed at Verena.

One twilight (for the older residents could still choose day or night), Verena was harvesting glowing berries in her small orchard when she spotted two figures approaching across

the rolling hills. The orchard wasn't on any official map, so visitors were rare. She set her basket aside and squinted.

The pair drew closer: two women, both looking anxious. One appeared older, her posture weary, while the other was younger, though her eyes held a disillusionment well beyond her years. Verena stepped forward.

“Hello,” she said gently, raising a hand in greeting. “I’m Verena. Are you lost?”

The younger woman shook her head. “We’re...actually looking for a place to hide,” she said, a tremor in her voice. “My name’s Nicole. This is Elsie. We’ve been in the afterlife for a few months, forced into servitude by a resident named Bernadette.”

Elsie nodded, voice quiet. “We managed to sneak away for a time. But Bernadette, or someone else like her, will come looking if we don’t return—and if we don’t serve, we lose our sponsor and risk deletion.”

Verena’s heart clenched. She’d heard these stories, but rarely firsthand. “I’m sorry. I...knew some residents were using sponsorship to control people, but I didn’t realize it had gotten this bad.”

Nicole exhaled shakily. “It’s worse than you think. Bernadette humiliates her servants for fun. She nearly broke Felicia—another woman who used to work under her. Felicia was a trafficking victim back in the real world; after dying, she ended up here, hoping for peace but finding more horror.”

Elsie's eyes brimmed with sorrow. "Felicia escaped Bernadette's domain and found a new patron, but it wasn't much better. We don't know where she ended up, just that she was terrified of deletion. Nicole and I are next if we can't keep up with Bernadette's demands."

Verena guided them under the orchard's swaying branches. "Please, rest here a while. We older residents may not have fancy expansions, but we have enough to share: a safe corner of the afterlife."

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### **The Community of Older Residents**

Within an hour, half a dozen longtime residents—Colin, Fran, and a few others—had gathered. They offered Nicole and Elsie conjured fruit and cool water. It was an unassuming kindness, but to Nicole, it felt like the first genuine hospitality she'd experienced since her arrival.

"This place," Colin explained, "is overlooked. Eternity never bothered upgrading our orchard zone with premium illusions, so they tend to ignore us."

Elsie's shoulders eased slightly, though her wariness lingered. "Thank you," she said softly, brushing dust off her apron—one of the few garments Bernadette allowed her. "I don't have money to repay you."

Verena shook her head. "We don't ask for payment. We're in a different contract—an old plan with minimal fees. We're not forced to funnel more money in or become someone's servant."

Nicole frowned. “I heard some older residents were unaffected by the new system, but I didn’t know how. You’re...lucky.”

Verena’s lips tightened. “Lucky, yes. But also powerless. We can’t stop the corporation from preying on you. We can only help in small ways.”

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### **Felicia’s Story**

Night fell in the orchard—the soft, starry sky set by older code that never changed. Around a modest campfire (one of the basic illusions the older residents could still conjure), Nicole and Elsie recounted Felicia’s ordeal for the community.

“She was trafficked in the real world,” Nicole said, voice trembling. “When she died, she hoped for freedom here. Instead, she ended up in an even more twisted arrangement. Bernadette would force her to do degrading things—just because she could. She told Felicia, ‘Here, there are no laws, no real enforcement. I can do what I want.’”

Elsie stared at the flickering flames. “Felicia eventually fled—she’d rather face deletion than endure further torture. We don’t know if she found another sponsor or not. Nicole and I worry she might have been deleted.”

Verena felt a surge of anger at how the afterlife had devolved. This was the realm she’d once believed would remain a peaceful respite for all. *How naive we were...*

“What if we tried to reach Felicia’s real-world family?” she asked suddenly. “If I could slip a message out to them—maybe they could pressure Eternity to track Felicia’s account status or even pay for her subscription, so she’s not reliant on a sadistic sponsor.”

Elsie blinked, a spark of hope lighting her features. “You’d do that?”

Verena nodded. “I have limited ways to contact the outside world, but it’s not impossible. I still have an old portal that lets me send messages to my niece; she’s alive in the real world. She might be able to direct that info to Felicia’s family.”

Nicole’s breath caught. “Even if it’s a long shot, it’s more than we have now.”

Verena offered a small smile. *Maybe Felicia’s story doesn’t have to end in silence.*

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### **The Door to Escape**

Later in the evening, Colin led Nicole and Elsie to a clearing at the orchard’s edge, where a circle of ancient trees stood sentinel. Between two knotted trunks lay a battered wooden door. The moonlight shone on its chipped paint and rusted hinges.

“What’s that?” Nicole asked, brow furrowing.

“We call it the Exit Door,” Colin answered quietly. “Some older residents discovered it years ago. It’s not part of the new expansions. We think it was a leftover from an earlier version of this software. Step through, and you vanish from Eternity—no fanfare, no record of nonpayment or deletion. It’s just...gone.”

Elsie’s eyes widened. “So you could leave, permanently?”

Verena joined them, folding her arms. “Yes. None of us know if it leads to true oblivion, or something else. We only know that once you pass through, you never come back. We haven’t used it ourselves, but every time the corporate expansions get worse, I consider it.”

Nicole stared at the door, heart pounding. “Why haven’t you gone?”

Verena exhaled. “Because this orchard is still my home. And if I left, who’d tell new arrivals about it? Or about ways to fight back, or send messages to the real world?” She gestured toward the door’s weathered frame. “We only show it to those who’ve lost all hope, so they know they still have a choice—beyond servitude or forced deletion.”

Elsie laid a hand on the door’s handle, cool to the touch. A shiver coursed through her. She glanced at Nicole. “It’s frightening, but...somehow comforting to know there’s another way out.”

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### **Acceptance or Escape**

By dawn’s early light, Nicole and Elsie prepared to return to Bernadette’s domain before they were missed. Verena handed Elsie a slip of parchment inscribed with Felicia’s real name and a message for Felicia’s family—an old-fashioned trick to ensure secrecy. “If you ever get a chance, slip this to someone in the real world. I’ll try from my side, too. Maybe we can at least let them know she’s here.”

Elsie clutched it to her chest. “Thank you,” she said tearfully. “For everything.”

Nicole looked over her shoulder at the orchard and the mysterious door beyond. “You’ve given us something we didn’t have before—hope. Even if we never use that door, knowing it’s there means Bernadette can’t control us forever.”

Verena offered a faint smile. “That’s why we older residents stay, even after seeing how horrible it’s become. We want to help. Don’t give up.”

The two women vanished into the misty distance, heading back to their grim reality under Bernadette's sponsorship. Verena watched them go with a heavy heart. *Acceptance or escape—those are the only choices in this twisted paradise*, she thought.

She turned back toward the orchard, the gentle morning sun illuminating the battered door in a warm glow. Someday, if Eternity's greed devoured even these quiet corners, Verena might finally walk through and seek whatever lay beyond. Until then, she would remain—ready to guide any new arrivals who stumbled onto her path, offering them a glimpse of an exit and a glimmer of hope in an afterlife gone astray.

End – Part 7