

Excerpt from *Ace of Shades* (Magic After Midlife #7)

“Celestial beings are colossal dicks,” Dumah, the angel currently presenting as my cousin Goldie, said. Her plastic clogs slapped against the rough-hewn paving stones of an enormous courtyard and orange blossoms fluttered into her frizzy gray hair from surrounding trees.

“Present company included.”

One second, I’d been in my living room, having the shock of my life realizing that the three angels Senoi, Sansenoi, and Sammaneglof had been the ones who killed my parents and Fred McMurtry. The next, Dumah-Goldie had appeared in a blast of trumpets and was ushering me into Gehenna. If only solving my jigsaw puzzles earned me this same kind of fanfare.

Hummingbirds in a rainbow of iridescent colors dipped and soared between patches of swaying wildflowers, while the air was fresh and sweet. I spun slowly, eyes wide. This was the land of the dead where wicked spirits resided?

“Stop.” I pinched myself, half convinced this was some go-into-the-light scenario, especially since my magic was gone. A distant part of me freaked out at my helplessness, but most of me fell into line with the chill vibe exuded here.

Not once in my life had I been described as chill.

“Are you compelling me into being calm?” I said, abruptly becoming even less calm.

“Compulsions are so passive-aggressive. If I wanted you calm, I’d say so.” The older woman tugged up her shapeless jeans with a little hip wriggle. It was such quintessentially Goldie behavior that I squeaked, plowing my fingers into my hair. Though my real cousin, who lived in Florida, veered less to jeans and more to floral capris these days.

At least the angel didn’t smell like tea tree oil, that fresh camphor scent from my cousin’s favorite lotion. It might have sent me over the edge.

“You look like you’re gonna plotz.” Dumah-Goldie jerked her chin at two elaborately carved chairs on the grassy bank overlooking the water. “Sit. Take a load off.”

Fumbling for the armrest, I crashed into the seat then squinted up at the sun, shielding my face with one hand.

The storm clouds and fog that were visible every time Laurent tore open a portal to this place were notably missing, and the fluffy cloud drifting overhead looked like a bunny rabbit. Not even a bunny rabbit with fangs or rabies of the damned. Huh. I peered into the crystalline

depths of the meandering river, but unless the fat koi sunning themselves were repositories for especially malevolent souls who'd been terrified of water, I had nothing.

Where were all the tortured dybbuks? It was one thing for Dumah to assume my cousin's image to accommodate the limits of my brain in looking upon the angel, but either the angel had done a massive cleanup campaign before I got here, or... I shook my head. Nope. I had nothing.

"Shouldn't it be black and ringing with tortured screams?"

She scoffed. "Oy. Who wants to listen to that 24/7? This is Hāzarmavet, the Courtyard of Death, also known as my happy place."

"Wait! So, I *am* dead?" I half rose up off my seat, feeling for a heartbeat.

She lowered herself into the chair next to mine, leaned over, and smooshed my cheeks with her hand. "Ah, matzoh ball, always with the worries. Stress and lack of fiber: they'll do you in far too soon."

I wrenched free, massaging my aching cheeks, because for a celestial being, she had a wrestler's grip. "Please don't call me by Goldie's nickname." My cousin's way of keeping my real initials—M.B. for Miriam Blum—alive after I took her surname; this was the second time the angel had used it in our brief acquaintanceship, and it was getting weird. "Also, being dead is a pretty fair thing to worry about."

"You're alive and kicking." She snapped her fingers and a black smudgy shadow appeared.

The demon was both too large and too small, had too many horns and too few limbs, but mostly I couldn't process the sight because its utter malevolence was causing my brain to curl into a quivering lump. I looked away.

It growled something, to which the angel replied, "Prosecco, I think. Thanks, Tad."

The air pulled taut and Gehenna's stench of rotting onions that had been missing from this courtyard suddenly wafted in, then with a springy snap, all was serenity and orange blossoms once more.

I cautiously looked back, but we were alone. "The demon is called Tad?"

Was that the most important question right now? Of course not, but my mind was screaming at me that I was in Gehenna and that angels had murdered my parents, and I could grasp only the low-hanging fruit of knowledge.