

Clever Clara

Most talentless people are blissfully & dangerously unaware of their lack; luckily for me, I am self-aware of my absence of usefulness. That may seem harsh--and it is, thank God--but it's always been important to know the hand of cards you've been dealt with in Life. Some people are just born lucky & talented & skilled &.....beautiful. I was not one of those. Still, no matter the cards you were given, dolt out by the Gods above randomly, carelessly, at a whim (I mean seriously, did they even bother to shuffle the deck?! Jeez Lousie!) one must still strive to make the best of what they were given, despite the odds stacked with/against you.

Luckily for me, and unluckily for some others, the Wars of the Clever Charmed Circles of the past couple of centuries have GREATLY increased by chances of survival and happiness. The charmed circles overthrew the Ancien Régimes left and right all over the world over the course of roughly 456 (what a perfect number!) years. The charmed circles, always great allies of the poor and the peasantry, joined forces during the Versaille-Vyzier Revolution, storming the great palaces of the monarchs, defiling the churches of the old, burning down the farmlands of the petty nobility and massacring enemies of the revolution via the now famous guillotine. Eventually, when they had exhausted even the enemies of old, they turned against themselves via systematic purges and blood trials by combat, imprisoning former revolutionary heroes like Marat, Mirabeau, Lafayette, de Saint-Just, Corday, Sylvain Maréchal, Déjacque. Of course, the Conspiracy of Equals eventually replaced all the vestiges and things finally seemed to have gotten on the right track as they destroyed "...the distinctions between great & small, rulers and ruled...".

If this sounds confusing, then that is because it is! Or was. Revolutions are always messy and while they may start out morally righteous, during the war everything just melds together into blood, fire and war crimes. Still, intentions have always mattered. But anyway, after the Conspiracy of Equals, the nation-states were dissolved. Nowadays, the lands are divided into autonomous self-governing direct democratic communities of about 100--300 or so people. The community I am part of specifically is called the Upper Isles and has about 90 people in it (we all wanted something a bit smaller); it was part of a former borough of the city of Amzivzck. We meet twice a week to discuss local community happenings and detail plans and policies for us all to implement. Some communities meet more often, some meet less often. My friend Mandavilja's Eastdowager community meets only once a month and they have 400 people in it! It all depends on the local communitarian circumstances I guess. Usually we try to decide things via consensus but we are willing to fall back onto majoritarian votes if we have to--extreme cases and the like.

Right now I am actually walking to one of those community meetings. I could've taken the underground metro (and enjoyed its newest underground art exhibition 'On the Metaphysics of Speed') but it's a nice summer day, and the wind is warm and cool. The solar paneled bike paths are especially busy today, as people whirl by in their chromatic bikes and scooters, the paths lined with trees upon trees upon trees upon trees, overgrown and gnarled. As you can imagine, the old 'car' (I am not sure what a 'car' is to be honest) roads were dismantled and nowadays they are just an endless crisscrossing array of forested bike paths, strewn across our overgrown city.

I pass by my friend Tlarei's apartment building, The Idyll, whose brick walls are strewn in blue hysteria and red ivy. Even buildings have devolved into art. The small little park besides is nestled atop one of our many seaside cliffs and it allows me to see the wind pillars of the Inland Seas, their cranelike turbines whirring in the rising winds. And at the edge of the horizon, I can see the rolling hills of the northern farmlands, their twisting vertical farms that reverberate across the horizon.

To the west--the shimmering saffron hills of the floodlands. And to the east-- the crystal trees wastelands, home of the petrified cities of the pre-war eras.

I mentally text Tlarei a simple: "YO! I'm here!" and she instantaneously talks out of the little red doors of The Idyll.

"Hey!" she smiles. "Sorry, I was putting the finishing touches on The Idyll's upcoming Harvest Moon Festival. We finally reached a consensus with Nora's Bakery of Decadent Sweets on how many mooncakes to make in case we have more people than anticipated. You sure you're not going to be able to come ya?"

"Unfortunately I have an assignment down in the southern lands for the Synagogue. Major major business."

"Ah.....I see." We both know what that means.

Most people are part of a charmed circle, and in some cases multiple charmed circles. Me and my family are part of the Synagogue of Clouds, the oldest (but not the most well respected) charmed circle in Amzivzck. It's run by Till-the-Earth-till-the-Day (which I am sure isn't her real name), a clever woman. Charmed circles provide services and support to the people and communities. About 3 years ago, Till-the-Earth-till-the-Day announced that she was looking to train a new shaman for the charmed circle and would be having a series of trials in order to prepare them to one day host and organize their very own charmed circle. I applied. I won't say that 'I never expected to win!' because to be honest I did expect to win. I had trained and prepared and I've always wanted to be one of those clever people that help the people and inspire change and all that hullabaloo. But still, I had expected maybe Mandavilja (the down on her luck social outcast) or Tollac (the outlander from the western isles) to take it instead. History has always made me root for the underdog. But I got it, passing with flying colours and high praises. Sometimes, the charmed trials are a huge and very public ordeal but sometimes they are very secretive--it depends on which circles you run in. For the Synagogue of Clouds, it was an intensely private and secretive affair--and nobody really knows that I was picked to be Till's trainee.

But a few have their suspicions, like Tlarei. And my mom. And my dad. And my other dad. And my little brother. And my older brother. Actually, a lot of people have their suspicions.

While I have learned a few spells here and a couple of rituals there from Till, I still have much to learn. Clever people like her are thought of to be somehow closer and more 'in tune' with the world than others. Which I guess does make some sense, seeing as Till always seems to be in a trance and hears and sees things that are not--are never--really there.

"Liamelie RSVPed ya know to the Moon Festival. Don't you have like a huge stinking crush on him?"

"Yeah but Synagogue calls. And he's attractive too."

To be honest, I am not really sure what I am doing. I really thought I wanted to learn from Till all the secrets and tricks of the trade about charmed circles and shamanistic practices

but nowadays....I am not so sure. And Liamelie....he's attractive. Which is the problem. When you're not. At least I know that I am not attractive. Beauty is a mask for mediocrity.

And of course I did catch him that one time having sex with that 60(? 50? 40? 70? I don't know. Old) man in the Synagogue bathroom. If I can be honest.....I still have mental scars from that. Like.....really? Why him? Why not me? I cannot understand people. I cannot understand me. Maybe that's why I don't think I am cut out for all of this, even though everyone talks our society up for being so utopic and beautiful and eco friendly. What even is the environment. But then again, I don't think I am supposed to understand people. I don't think I am supposed to think about (the) others. Just focus on yourself, Allajae. And then.....

"Allajae! Hellooooo. Are you going to respond?"

"Huh...? Oh I'm sorry I spaced out. What did you say?"

"I said you are heaps of attractive! Just have some confidence!"

To be honest, I hate when people say this. It tastes like pity to me. It makes me angry. It makes me feel like they are all lying. Even in this supposedly 'equal' world where poverty , homelessness & starvation are erased and equality, freedom & leisure reign there are still inequalities. Like beauty. Like me. Get that image out of your head, Allajae. Don't think about Liamelie. Don't think. Don't. I hate pleasure.

"I wish I was in a coma again."

I didn't say that out loud.

The meeting we are going to for the Upper Isles is actually an emergency meeting outside of our regular 2 weekly meetings. It's to deal with the dangerous and vicious swirling rumours and reports of a mysterious charmed circle made up of wannabe arsonists spreading in the western isles.

"I think...." says Tlarei, "that I will volunteer to be the spokesperson this time around."

"Really! That's new of you. Why's that?"

"Well Tollac is from the western isles and he and I have been seeing each other a lot recently."

"Doesn't he have a boyfriend?"

"They're poly."

"Ah.." I say but I can't hide my sadness; my voice cracks. Everyone has a relationship except me. 26 years of nothing, all down the drain.

"And Tollac is from the western isles so he was telling me a lot about the fires there so I consider myself pretty well informed on the subject matter. So I THINK I would be the perfect spokesperson for the borough level community council meeting."

"I totally agree Tlarei. Especially since you've been very reticent about being a spokesperson before. I am glad you are getting more confident." I am cheerful. I am happy.

While the communities may be autonomous, we send a spokesperson to higher levels when necessary to coordinate things like metro maintenance, park planning, healthcare access or in this case--disease prevention. Basically anything that would require a more organized borough wide response. And, if necessary, there are even higher levels. Above the borough there is the city level, then the state level, then the 'nation' level, then the international and then the intersolar level. Of course the intersolar level is rarely ever utilized seeing as the lunar settlements are more like scientific outposts at the current moment. And the crippling aurora heat up there makes it unlikely there will ever be any wide scale planetary settling. But I'm sure

you get the point--the more expansive a problem or policy is, the higher the level it necessitates. It's basically the same format, no matter the level.

"Do you think this new charmed circle is going to target Amzivzck??" suggest Tlarei.

"Tlarei. We are an ocean and a half away from the western isles. But regardless, I am sure we will be able to adapt. Remember that cataclysmic flood 2 years back? We held so many emergency meetings both in preparation for the actual hurricane and then afterwards to help rebuild and dole the medical supplies and food and whathaveyou. We are swift."

"The Chantry of Byazura *and* the Moonflowerlily Chapel both have put out reports that they believe this new charmed circle has a foothold in the southern lands...."

Oh I see where this is going. Tlarei seems to think that my Synagogue assignment in the southern lands has something to do with this new fire friendly circle. And to be honest.....to be honest I have no idea. I was just told I need to go down to the southern lands and meet up with some guy named Fareed who would be waiting for me at the end of the metro line in the town of Zamandale. Till said, in her usual cryptic fashion, that he would have more information about my assignment. God, does she always have to be so fucking cryptic all the time? I mean, how can I help if there are so many secrets swirling about? When I was younger, I thought I wanted to be beautiful but now that I am older and wiser I know that what I really want is power.

"Well, I don't know about *that*." I said. "What even is the name of this new charmed circle? Do we even know? And what is the name of its shaman? That's what I wanna know."

"Tollac only said that it is headed by some clever man named Alcermine."

"Okay who the fuck is naming these people these stupid ass names."

"You're one to talk Allajae. My tongue keeps tripping over those extra A's!"

I shake my head and push back my hair. "Is Tollac back yet from his little camping trip?"

"First off it's not a camping trip. It was a holy pilgrimage."

"Right right."

The people of the western isles are unusual insofar that they still keep to a nomadic way of life, which includes frequent religious pilgrimages. Most people have adopted a more sedentary way of life by now. But Tollac contends that humans were born to travel and you can only truly understand yourself and the world around you by going out and seeing it. What was that thing he was always soapboxing about? "I've read enough books about the world. Now I want to see!" Okay then loser.

Still, it does seem a bit attractive of a proposal. And Tollac says that when he is traveling he feels so much more in tune with nature and the environment and the way life is supposed to be. Whatever that means. I guess it is true that when you are traveling around, place to place, each day a new horizon, you don't have time to worry about things like will Liamelie be at the Moon Festival or what have you. And you can cast aside your worries about your future and your career and just focus on the 'right' 'now'.

Interesting.