

Finding The Balance

Demongate High Book 4

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Demongate High

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ISBN: 978-1-312-27756-4

Published by Robert Ziefel

www.robertzprojects.com

Second Edition: 2022

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For the bullied

*I too, have felt your pain, your hopelessness
Be strong, for you are ever greater than you believe
And none can diminish that, if you do not let them*

1

High School Drama

There will be a king. I will be king! --Scar

“And there’s the bell,” said my physics teacher. “You should have noted your homework on the board when you came in, if you did not, do so now. See you all tomorrow.”

I looked around the classroom, people were putting away notes and chatting as they got up to make their way to their next class. None spoke to me.

Yasui says in Japan the teachers move and the kids stay put. Seems like a more efficient system to me.

I sighed and shook my head. This was pointless, we should be throwing everything we had at the island, getting *our* school back, but no. Granted, every time they started out, I had heard that something bizarre happened. Freak storms or equipment failure on a grand scale. Plus all those deaths by drive by shootings, what was all that about? Only six at present, not counting all the Foundation people that had been killed when this all began, but still too many. Others had escaped, either due to luck or skill, so the toll could have been higher.

At least they’re finally starting to rebuild the Eiffel Tower, that’s something, at least. It’ll be years before it’s complete again, but will the ley lines behave with the temporary measures they’ve put in place? I hate to think what might happen if they didn’t.

I had been back to school for three weeks now, and it was exactly the institution of love and tolerance I had expected. In Demongate High, the smallest cambion could have a strength three times normal, and the largest might be a total coward. You learned to look past the physical and respect the powers each person commanded. We didn’t have many bullies because they tended not to live long. Get some first year student riled a little too far

and their power, that they had only a tenuous control of, might lash out and destroy you. So people tended to be more civil to each other.

At least apart from the standard holy/cambion dynamic, of course. Sure, holy people think themselves “better” because they’re basically conduits for Heavenly might, but cambions think they are in a better position because they don’t have someone contently looking over their shoulders, complaining they should be praying or whatever.

In any event, that wasn’t the case here. Instead it was the very epitome of “beauty is only skin deep.” If you didn’t have the looks and style, or go out of your way to distance yourself from those with looks and style by going goth or whatever, you were a target.

I slowly shut my notebook and was about to put it in my bag, (my stupid, everyday, normal, not supernatural at all school bag) when Jeff came up behind me and pretended to trip.

“Whoops!” he said, knocking my stuff off the desk and onto the floor. “Sorry about that, your highness!” He smacked me in the arm and took off for the door.

Oh yeah, hate that guy. I went to go pick up my stuff, doing a quick healing acceleration on my arm. His blows only stung, but I felt if I didn’t use at least some power during the day I would go nuts.

It was bad enough, transferring back to my old neighborhood, where I had lived with Donald all those years. I hadn’t really made any friends in junior high, so those people I did know had no reason to hang around me. I couldn’t explain to them why I had left, where I had gone, or why I was back, after all. So it was best to keep my distance. That left me “the new guy” in my senior year, not a great proposition. I guess people just sensed something different about me. Before it was because I hadn’t gotten my spirit energy under control, so people felt odd when I was around. At least, that’s what I had believed at the time. Now it was the fact that I had attended Demongate High for three years and it showed. I knew I was the best at what I did. My creations proved it. So I didn’t walk around with my head down, I had confidence in myself. I had proven my worth time and time again, and if the future was any indication, I would be called upon once again to save the world.

That sort of thing tends to give you a big head. I wasn’t a teacher’s pet or anything, and I didn’t show off in class, or in gym. Sure, I was smart, but smart enough not to do something stupid like that. Sure, I could outlast anyone or lift massive weights because of my practice controlling my inner energies, but that would just single me out further. No thank you.

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Nor did I bully people myself, I mean honestly there was no point, and I would never lower myself to that level. People were counting on me, I had a reputation to live up to. Both in the Earthly sense and the Heavenly sense, I didn't want Bennu to have any reason to regret letting me learn some magic. So I stayed quiet, answered when I was called on, and tried to stay out of everyone's way. But I think they saw something in me that most high school kids didn't have.

Experience.

I had been to the Demon World, Japan, England, India, and many other places. I had seen the Great Wall, helped stabilize the lines in France when the tower came down- I was an adult, in all but age. You can't hide that. I figured keeping my head down and not drawing attention to myself would follow with people leaving me alone. And they did- for the most part.

Jeff- what was his beef with me, anyway? He started in with me right away, before the first week of school was even half over. I put up with his taunting and such because to do otherwise would invite disaster. The smallest thought and a word to activate my weapon talisman and he would be blown apart in an instant. Or I could have my spirit projection, a beaver I still needed to sit down and come up with a name for, tear him apart. He wouldn't have been able to see it, he would die ignorant of what was happening. I could stick him with a contain ward, shove him through a gate to the Demon World and leave him to his own fate there. I could set him on fire, sitting casually not 10 feet from him in class. I could use telekinesis to make him trip down some stairs. If I was feeling particularly vindictive I could even pull out his very soul. Of course, I would have to stab his body with my knife made of pure sunlight, and watch him bleed out because I couldn't stick his soul in something, but...

Ugh, where am I going with this?

I supposed it was a bit cathartic, but what really irked me is that guys like him benefited from my hard work just as much as nice people did. He was not enslaved by demons or tortured daily because of the efforts of people like me. And if, for some bizarre reason, he was attacked by demons the code of powers (so to speak, it wasn't written down or anything, it was just understood) demanded I go and put my life on the line to save his!

There's no justice in the world.

His little quips though, those were inspired. It started with stuff like "why is the dean of the school taking classes with us?" or "I don't know, ask the dean," and he had worked his way up to the current "your majesty" for some bizarre reason.

Inspired, yeah. More like... stupid.

Okay, obviously I wasn't thinking too clearly at the moment.

"Jeff is such a jerk," someone said to me as I picked up my physics textbook. I looked up. Standing in front of me, looking out the door after him, was the girl that sat two seats in front of me. She had long brown hair and green eyes, and was only a little shorter than me.

Lynsey, I think?

"You should do something about it."

"Do something?" I echoed, straightening up. "Sadly that would be a monumentally bad idea. You don't even know."

"You could take him."

"No doubt. As a point of fact he wouldn't even know what hit him, but that's not the point."

"I like your tattoo," she blurted.

Tattoo? Oh!

"Oh, this old thing?" I said, showing her the design on my palm. "Thanks."

"Does it mean anything?"

Death to my enemies maybe... "No, it's just a design."

"Oh. It's like the Starbrand or something. It's neat."

"The what?"

"It's some old comic. My brother collects them and I saw it. Supposedly this guy is hit with some weird energy from space, and he gets marked with a brand on his skin. He gets all kinds of powers because of it."

"I'll have to look into it, sounds interesting. Maybe I can show you the other one I have sometime."

Now why in the world did I say that?

"You have two? Cool! I wish my mom would let me get one."

"Oh, what would you get?"

We headed out the door, walking side by side.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe Twilight Sparkle or something. At least her cutie mark."

"You're a pegasister?"

"You're a bro-" she cut off, and looked around. "You're a brony?" she whispered. "Don't let Jeff find out. I mean if you thought he was bad now, think if he learns that."

"Is it really that big a deal? What is wrong with people?"

"Yeah, I wish I knew. Didn't you hear about that kid who almost killed himself over bullying? Part of it was because he was a brony."

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“What? No, I didn’t! That seriously happened?”

“Serious!”

I’ll have to keep a better eye on him, make sure he’s not doing the same thing to others who can’t handle it.

“So what’s your next class?” she asked, as my silence stretched.

Suddenly it hit me what I was doing. I was walking next to a girl and having a conversation with her. Why? What was she up to? I quickly did a spirit sense on her, followed up by a magic sense. She seemed “clean,” no powers and no magic.

Are you really that paranoid, Dean? I chided myself. Maybe she just does like your tattoo. It is rather... manly, isn’t it?

“Dean?”

“Hmm? Oh, my next class, sorry, spaced out there for a moment. I was singing ‘smile, smile, smile’ to myself.” She grinned. “French, though why is beyond me.”

“Oh?”

“My last school didn’t require a language unit, so I’m stuck with the freshman in that class. That means I’ll only take it for one year, which is pointless.”

Technically they required English as the language unit. Those from other countries took that. We that spoke English took business letter writing and such.

“That sucks. Why didn’t they require a language class?”

Ah, that’s one of the awkward questions I wish people wouldn’t ask me. The truth is I could easily whip up a talisman and understand any language, so what would be the point?

“We just did things the school thought was more important. Like if I was back there now I would be taking Law, Ethics, and Economics.”

“Wow, really? That must have been an advanced school.”

“Yup.”

“Well, uh, this is me,” she said, gesturing to her locker. “See you around.”

“Yeah, see you.” I gave her a wave and walked on.

Okay, maybe things aren’t all bad.

Still, I had enough girl problems without adding a third to the mix. Things were still unresolved with Yasui and Elizabeth. What was worse, with them being so far away now, and the current crisis being what it was, I didn’t have much chance to see them.

Yasui- I still wondered just how close we had come to not escaping the island before the nuclear missile hit it. I had activated my acceleration talisman, the other one I had told Lynsey about, on my foot. Time seemed to stretch out for me, and I was hauling people through the teleport wards I had thrown down. Yasui was on her feet in an instant, and hauled the boy up she had collided with. I grabbed another ward out of my pouch and threw it down in front of me, and she pushed the boy through, grabbed someone else, and dove in herself. Others followed. I threw down a couple more to avoid congestion and figured that was all I could do.

I threw myself backwards and put my arms over my eyes. Light and heat followed me through for an instant but then the wards burned up and were cut off. I looked around. Was everyone there? Had we all made it? How many actual seconds had it been since the last announcement? Where was Yasui?

But in the end, it seemed 95% of the students had made it out, which was still a tremendous loss for us. Yasui and Elizabeth both found me and hugged me tight, sobbing. I could only hold them and curse the fact I couldn't do more.

Eventually the situation was sorted out, and I found my parents as well. Everyone had gotten away from Porta, leaving me to breathe a sigh of relief. But now we all needed someplace to go. It was decided those that could go back to the normal world and live should do so. That is how I got stuck back in Kokomo, Indiana, living near my former foster father, Donald. Those that couldn't easily blend in, or had only lived on the island and had no other place in mind would be found temporary housing until the island could be retaken.

No more classes in my powers, that's for sure. I felt bad for those that would have been freshman, but were now, like me, stuck at regular schools. At least I had picked up just about everything I could in the three years prior. They weren't so lucky, and debates were still going on about sending tutors to them. When people with powers now coming under attack in the streets, sentiment was to let it go and try to make up the lost time later. Their thinking, as near as I could figure it, was that those not actively being trained would be left alone. Of course, that could backfire as they were easier targets, but with less developed powers they wouldn't register as well to spirit sense so I hoped it worked. The real trouble was that those coming into their powers sometimes activated them by accident, when under stress. This is the exact opposite of "keeping a low profile." Something bad would

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happen, and they would be totally unable to explain why. Then mundane law enforcement would get involved, and reporters would pick up the story- I guess living on the island did serve a purpose after all.

As for me, I had debated focusing on becoming an actual alchemist or even a soul wielder over the summer, but decided against it. *Stick to what you're good at until the crisis has passed*, I told myself. *Talismans!* As nice as it would be to have the more innate abilities of either of those power types, focusing only on them would limit me when I had talismans in mind to make. I didn't have easy access to the school library, of course. Those books were just copies of things from the main Foundation library, as backups. I could visit there without too much trouble if I needed to do talisman research. My parents had books as well, which helped.

Of course, their beautiful lab was now in the radioactive zone on the island, but that was quickly clearing up. Once we took the island back we would probably be able to just move back in, once any lingering areas of radiation were cleaned up. We had bought a small house near the school that had a relatively nasty basement, but it served. For my part, I got busy creating a few new talismans over the summer. A new weapon and something a little more fun. The weapon was a ring in the shape of a leopard my father made me out of silver. The head was hollow, and into it I fitted a small metal bead which was the actual talisman. It allowed me to create a line almost thirty meters, no a hundred feet long. (I was really used to thinking in metric) Anything crossing or touching the line got electrocuted pretty badly. I didn't make the ring a talisman directly because in a few years I figured I might have gotten even better at making them, and could swap it out, leaving the ring intact.

The fun one was a necklace I bought in the shape of a four leaf clover. One of the artificer teachers, Miss El-hashem, had created a talisman earring that increased her luck. She had been all too happy to provide me the notes on how she had created it, given the fact I was so good at making talismans. She noted if I went through with it I would probably become the luckiest person that ever lived. Given what we were facing, I figured I would need it. I made it permanent, no activation or energy required- you just slipped it on and became super lucky. It was working, when I wore it I found all kinds of loose change between my house and the school, (I walked there) even a 1909 S VDB penny. It was in mint shape, someone must have just dropped it on the sidewalk and not bothered to pick it back up again. I sold it on ebay for a thousand dollars.

As far as the island was concerned, according to seers it was now crawling with demons, but that wasn't the worst of it. These demons had guns, tanks, and a battleship floating nearby they had stolen from various places around the world. Apparently they were operating with some semblance of secrecy, remaining unseen and making the equipment unseen as well. So at least when normal people looked at the island it seemed deserted now.

As nothing else major had happened there, it had fallen off of news stories and would hopefully soon be forgotten. When we did retake it, however, something would have to be done to make sure it stayed forgotten. Perhaps the island itself could be made into a talisman, turning the whole thing unseen.

That's a problem for another day. For now, it's time for awful, stupid, useless French class.

Thinking about problems for another day brought to mind this chaos that still held the world in its grip, and the supposed "order" that I was hoping to stumble into at some point. Fires were more common, as well as places just falling apart or people dying from simple falls. The Foundation assured me that it worked in the other direction too, the upswing of healthy babies born was unmistakable, as was the number of marriages. This led us all to believe chaos didn't just want bad things happening, or couldn't do anything about them happening. Good things could be just as improbable as bad, after all. It's just news reports didn't cover a mugger getting knocked out by a falling brick. That sort of thing didn't get viewers like tragedies and such did.

Earthly resources had turned up nothing that could be any help, much less anything sentient enough to hold a short conversation with me from who knows where. It didn't even know, which didn't help matters. So angelic forces were called upon to do research in the libraries of Heaven. All the knowledge about everything from the beginning of time was there, if you knew where to look. The problem was that amount of knowledge meant kilometers- no miles now, had to remember to adjust my units, miles of books stacked in rows hundreds deep. Knowing the properties of some star a million light years away might be interesting, but not really that pertinent.

They were going through the "C" books, for "chaos" but those mostly detailed Primoris, which was "above" Heaven, and the beings you might encounter within. As that region was nothing *but* chaos, the books were revised on an almost constant basis. And as no knowledge was ever

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lost, (the shelves didn't need to obey regular physical laws, after all) the stacks just got higher.

Also, chaos touched the lives of every person, so many volumes detailed accounts of particularly interesting things that happened to the mortals that had ascended to Heaven, further muddying the picture. Not to mention the fact only a limited number of angels could be tasked with this, as they all had their own duties in Heaven which they had to fulfill.

Needless to say, it wasn't looking good for our side.

“Bonjour, class!”

“Bonjor!”

SO POINTLESS!

ROBERT ZIEFEL

2

Lucky Charms

“The propaganda Lucky Charms is trying to lay on you is the path to Christianity (which is no fun) will give you vitamins and keep you regular. And the path to Peganism, which is colorful and bright, and sweet, will rot your teeth and make you fat.” -- Patton Oswalt

Finally the weekend, I thought, walking home. I'm not sure I can take a whole school year at this place. I want to be doing something, not stuck here because some person hundreds of years ago decided I should learn physics this year. I should be making talismans for when the island is assaulted again. Or helping them plan the next skirmish, or something. Anything! It hasn't been a month and I'm going crazy here!

I was doubly annoyed because today at lunch Jeff had another of his “I'm so clumsy” moments and spilled a container of juice all over me. It wasn't a big deal, I went to the nearest bathroom and, getting my book of magic out, cast the hygiene spell on myself. That dried and cleaned my clothes, and I just went and sat down in the empty classroom I would have my next class in so I didn't raise too much suspicion. No one said anything to me about it, so I figured it was fine.

As I sat there waiting for the period to begin I brought out my talisman of luck. Staring at it I wondered why it wasn't protecting me from stuff like that.

*I mean, if I'm the luckiest person alive right now, why didn't that juice miss me? Why didn't he trip for real and just go **splat** on the ground? My eyes narrowed. Wait a second. What if this whole chaos thing is playing a part? With this on, maybe my chances of getting missed by that 'attack' were really good. But because they were, they got flipped around and it was guaranteed I would be splashed? But if I wasn't wearing it then nothing would protect me, right? So am I stuck either way? In the current climate should I have made a necklace of negative luck?*

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I was preoccupied with the question of luck the rest of the day, but I wasn't sure any real studies had ever been done on the subject. The problem, as I saw it, was that we couldn't see the outcome of any action for many years. Like if someone fell off a ladder and broke their leg, that would be called bad luck. But if that led the person to being more careful in the future, where they would have fallen off a ladder and broken their back instead, we could call that good luck.

How did one reconcile something as fickle as luck in those circumstances? There were very few beings that could look into the future on the scale needed to say if something that seemed bad in the present wasn't saving us from something worse in the future. Like a car cutting someone off and making them slow down just enough to allow a light to change, causing them to stop. If they hadn't stopped they would have been smashed into. Looking at the cars whizzing by even now I was struck by how little effort would be needed to make one slip on a patch of ice and careen into me. They were inches from me, and there wasn't really any barrier between the sidewalk and the road. Yet hundreds of cars passed me without incident.

Up ahead I heard a horn blaring, and as though my thoughts had triggered it, a garbage truck seemed to be careening down the street. It was skidding along the road, seemingly unable to stop. I tensed, getting ready to jump out of the way should the truck swerve to hit me. However, at that exact moment another car, going the other way, rolled its window down. The garbage truck rushed between us as shots were heard from the other side.

I was stunned as the garbage truck rushed by, my eyes wide. Behind it was a dark car, glass shattered, bullet holes riddling it. The man in the back was laying across the seat, bleeding from multiple wounds. The driver also seemed to be in shock as he looked back at his partner. Obviously they had just tried to kill me, but the out of control garbage truck deflected the bullets just as the man pulled the trigger.

The driver stomped on the gas, and the car started to skid away. I yanked my glove off, allowing the ring to make contact with the ground as I shouted "Thunderbolt!"

Okay, that was cheesier than I had pictured in my head. Oh well, too late to change it now.

The line sprang into existence, basically cutting the car in half and I saw the driver spasming from basically being plugged into a high amperage electric outlet.

Crap, the shooter was lying across the seat! I had forgotten, in my haste, this had been the case. I just wanted to knock the car out, not kill the two inside.

Not to mention I'm doing this in broad daylight! The Foundation isn't going to be happy about this! I better bring them a gift.

I pulled my pouch out of my pocket, then grabbed an contain ward.

But these two jokers are going to die before I can get this anywhere! Aarg, now what do I do? I had a thought. *Can my spirit projection go with them into the contain ward, and heal them enough that they don't die?* It couldn't go far away from me, but as long as I kept the ward nearby, that counted, right?

I had to risk it.

I called upon the power of my anklet, making it easier to call out my spirit projection, which I did. I made him jump through the smashed up window and put a hand on either man. That done I slapped the contain ward on the car and it disappeared. I closed my eyes and was rewarded with the view inside the contain ward, and yes, the beaver was still able to move and started healing both men. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Nice job, me, I congratulated myself. *Seems that works after all. Just don't drop it and walk away. Now for me.* I fished out an ignore ward and slapped it on.

I looked around. The whole scene hadn't taken twenty seconds, but there had been kids behind me, also walking home. They ran past me, looking around for what had happened. They got further down the street and stopped, then looked around, confused. The garbage truck was finally under control further up the street, and was now parked with flashers on. People were looking out their doors to see what all the noise was, but didn't see anything. I hoped that the time they took getting to their doors after hearing the gunshots meant most of them missed me making an entire car disappear.

Of course, that doesn't mean I wasn't on camera somewhere.

I didn't waste time. Picking up any bullet casings in the road and shoving the contain ward into the pouch, I took off towards home. As I ran I thought about what the Foundation was going to say. Shouldn't stuff like this be happening all the time? Sure, there were only so many people born every year that had powers, but people weren't perfect. They would slip up and be seen doing something amazing all the time. With the prevalence of cameras and time how was the Foundation going to keep us under wraps for much longer? Could they?

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Which led to me thinking again about the wisdom of keeping powers secret in the first place. Every time a fireproof cambion didn't rush into a burning building to save someone, was that a sin against their soul? If a person died and another person could have prevented it, did that mean the would be savior had killed that person themselves? Every person that died of cancer or some other disease that could have been cured with a sip of liquid it would take any half competent alchemist a day to make- was that laid at our feet? Holy chosen could heal with a touch- If I had been a holy chosen, and was held hostage in a bank robbery, and someone got shot, what would I do? I couldn't heal them because of witnesses, but on the other hand, allowing that person to die was the same as killing them myself. *Thou shalt not kill.* Was allowing someone to die killing them?

Obviously, not, because they retain their powers. Does that mean the All-Father would rather humans die then learn the truth about his existence? Because one would invariably lead to the other. What a messed up situation.

Back home I pounded down the stairs to the basement, throwing my school bag into a corner.

"Dean?" asked my father, Edmond. He looked concerned. "What's wrong?"

"I need to call an emergency Foundation meeting," I said hurriedly. "Get everyone to the headquarters they set up for this chaos situation."

"Why, what happened?" asked my mother, Barbara, turning from what she was working on.

"I was almost shot, that's what happened. I captured the shooters but they'll wake up any minute. We need to get them knocked out and someone to meld with them and find out what they know about all this."

"Are you okay?" asked my father.

"I'm fine. A garbage truck took the hit. I'll explain later. We have to hurry!"

"Where are they, in a ward?" asked my mother. "Dump them out, we can take care of knocking them out."

"I can't," I protested. "I took the whole car with me so there was no evidence at the scene. I'm hoping people just shrug it off or something, but that's the other reason we need to hurry, in case some memories need to be altered."

"Okay, let's go," said my mother, drawing out a ward.

We teleported.

After arriving in the temporary headquarters, I waited impatiently for everyone to arrive. Those who were there took action right away, taking the ward and going somewhere they could safely release the two men. As it went away from me I felt my projection disappear, my link to the inside of the ward cut off.

The pale skinned breath stealer, Martin DeVille, was already there, and people began to trickle in. There were cambions, old and young, men and woman, and every shade of skin. They were just wearing normal clothes, no pin or anything, so I couldn't tell what powers they had. Some seemed more alert than others, probably coming from different time zones around the world. Finally Martin said enough people were there, and I could get on with it.

I told them what had happened, and they looked concerned about doing what I did in public.

"It's because people are too afraid to act in public that this keeps happening," I protested. "Any number of people that have been targets could have captured their attackers somehow, but no, they always get away. Plus I wasn't going to stand there and let that guy who accidentally shot himself die. *We need answers*. Without information more of us are going to be picked off, one by one. Something or someone has done this. They attacked the school with something we couldn't defend against. That scattered us into the world. Now we're a lot weaker and can get killed one by one. You do want to get to the bottom of it, don't you?"

"Of course we do, Dean," said one woman. "But blatantly using your abilities like that is a serious breach of protocol."

"Forget protocol," I said angrily. "We've lost the island. Every day chaos seems to get a little more widespread, and if we, sorry, if *I* don't do something about it soon, it may be too late."

"Yes, we're all aware of your claims, Dean," said a man on the opposite side of the table. "Personally I believe the principal has been far too lax with you. Letting you run off whenever you please, for example. You're still a child."

"You mean, like, to save my parents? Break curses? Yes, tell me about how terrible that is. The point is we need to be seeing what those two know!"

"Someone is looking into it, don't worry. Whether we share that information with you is what we are trying to decide."

I was stunned. "What?"

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“You have to admit, you act a bit impulsively,” said another woman, next to him. “Taking an entire car off the street? Making it vanish? Even the dullest person will notice something on that scale. Plus your recent ‘adventures’ like the ghost in the sword. Imagine springing something like that on someone, honestly.”

“It was the only way that ghost could pass on!”

“Humm... was it? Or were you simply excited to bring another person into the fold, as it were?” asked the original woman that spoke.

“I simply wanted to do what was best, both for the ghost and the true owner of the sword. He had been denied for hundreds of years, is that really fair?”

“It’s not a question of fairness,” said the man. “What was best would have been for you to bring the sword in and let us study the situation. Make sure the man could handle being told what he was, or just allowing the son to inherit the blade when he was ready to start high school. This is just the most recent example, should we talk about arming your friends as you have?” He pointed to my tattoo. “And I feel you have another in your ring. May I ask what that one does?”

“Allows me to draw a line that, when crossed, electrocutes whatever crossed it. But I’m an artificer, making talismans is what I do!”

“But they’re so dangerous!”

“Yeah? Dangerous things happen. I need to be ready. So do my friends. Dangerous things like me being shot at in the street, trying in vain to bring this conversation back to the topic at hand.”

“The topic, Dean,” said Martin, “is one, do we believe your claim about some mad dreamer somehow gathering you together to solve our current situation, and two, what do we do about it?”

“You know dreamer power was real. Sayde proved that beyond any doubt.”

“True. I’m not denying the power was there, I’m simply questioning how you and your friends fit into the picture.” He sighed. “It’s just that no one else acts like you, Dean. You’re always on the move, trying new things, wanting to learn magic for instance!”

There were nods around the table.

“You all know about that? I don’t care one way or the other, but that was given to me by angelic beings. You don’t trust their judgement?”

“It’s just an example. Your group solved the cracks problem before, and closed off dreamer power. You messed with time, stealing a homunculus. Then this club you formed, getting people into your debt? I have to say it worries us a little.”

“My helping people *worries you*? Oh no, watch out for big, bad, Dean Chesterfield. He’ll solve problems you don’t even know you have.”

“You connect with people,” said a man that hadn’t spoken yet. “We don’t know where that leads.”

“Oh, I get it,” I said, understanding at last. “This is about me being immune to seer powers that predict the future, isn’t it? You can’t just peek ahead and see how it all turns out, and it’s driving you nuts!”

“That is a major point of our concern, yes.”

“Well, no need to worry. I’m harmless to those that don’t mean me harm.”

“What if you saw the Foundation as meaning you harm?” asked Martin.

“Why would I do that? Yeah, I question some of the longstanding tenets but I’m not about to rebel against all of you.”

“The problem is, we’re a little more careful now because of the Carlita issue.”

“The what? That Spirit Hunter girl from years ago? What’s she got to do with anything?”

“Suffice to say, she has sworn ‘vengeance’ upon the society for what she believes are corrupt or unjust feelings towards people like her.”

Oh, like Elizabeth, people with sundered spirits. Yeah, she said she had a tough time with them because of that.

He went on. “Our last report on her whereabouts placed her in the Demon World, undergoing constant training with the forbidden hunters to one day have her revenge. We are now screening people a little more closely to avoid such things in the future.”

“And you can’t do that with me. Well here’s a tip,” I said, leaning forward. “Getting on my bad side with this sort of shenanigans isn’t doing you any favors.”

“We’re just curious where you’re going with your life. You have to admit even in the supernatural community you are somewhat of an enigma. And arming your friends as you have, mainly against school policy, troubles us.”

I shrugged. “If it helps my friends stay alive, I’m going to do everything I can for them. I’m sorry that worries you, but it’s the truth. And to be blunt, this seems a little bit more serious than just career planning. I came to you with something I thought would help- a place to get information from. You turned around and started acting like I was on trial.”

They shifted uncomfortably. “It just goes back to what we said at the beginning,” said a man. “You were willing to use your powers in broad daylight in front of who knows how many witnesses. If you’re willing to

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flout the rules now, maybe you don't care for them at all. Or will continue to flout them until we have to do something about it."

"Are you worried you won't be able to?" I asked with a grin. They glowered at me. "Hey, just joking. I can't promise I won't do similar things in the future because I don't know the future. If someone tries to kill me again, I'm going to try killing them right back. Or capturing them, or something. That means powers, because I have powers. You can't ask me to sit still while someone shoots me."

"No, we can't ask that," said Martin.

"Then what are we still doing talking about this? You want to know you can trust me or whatever? Great! Include me in your plans. You've hit the island at least once I know about, but we're not there so you must have failed. If you're worried my friends and I are so powerful, why not take us along next time, put us to use?"

"And what would you do, to retake the island?"

"I thought you would never ask."

Retaking the Island

War. War never changes.

“What?” I asked, “is our greatest weakness?”

“Getting there,” answered a man. “We tried coming in by boat but that didn’t work, and teleporting in is not an option because they have the place totally covered with all that military hardware they brought in.”

“Any other ideas?” I asked, looking around the table.

“Not enough actual soldiers?”

“Summoned demons refuse to help kill their own kind?”

“Angels say we lost the place, we have to get it back on our own?”

“They can bring reinforcements through so easily?”

I held up a hand. “All things to consider, yes. But not our greatest weakness. That is something far different. You’re not even close.”

“So tell us already,” said Martin, a bit annoyed.

“Sure. It’s not letting go of the past.” Everyone looked confused. “Allow me to explain. What do the demons have that we don’t?”

“An army?”

“Nope.”

“The high ground, so to speak?”

I shook my head.

“Fanatical solders?”

I snorted. “You’re all missing the obvious. The guns. They have guns. Lots of guns. And tanks. And a battleship.”

“We know that,” said a man. “We had invulnerability words. We’re not stupid, you know.”

“Really? Then why am I not sitting in class there, rather than Indiana?”

“They had invisible demons waiting, and just tore them off and shot us.”

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“I see. So let me make sure I have this image correctly fixed in my mind. A small army of Foundation people, possibly including some spirit hunters, stormed the island. You said you went by boat, so let’s pretend you made it past the battleship and onto the coast. Then what? You started getting pounded by tanks, ambushed by invisible demons, and shot at. You were all forced to retreat under that kind of pressure.”

“That’s somewhat accurate. I suppose you have a solution?” asked Martin.

“I do. Fight fire with fire. Firepower, I mean. Train anyone that goes in how to shoot. Level the playing field. Bring in some tanks, sink that battleship.”

“Preposterous,” said a woman. “We have powers! We don’t need guns.”

“Really? That’s great! So you can use powers for an entire campaign to retake the island, can you?” I did a spirit sense in the room. “Forgive me, but most of you have energy totals far below my own, given the talisman I can draw on and my own natural supply. No, everyone here around this table is limited to how long they can fight. That limit is your natural energy total. Plus, a seer or mystic might be useless in combat- until you hand them a gun. How many people did you leave behind, unable to fight, because you won’t arm them properly?”

“I suppose you have a point.”

“I’ve seen it time and again with my friend Osman. I had to make him a circle of petitioning and wards of binding because his energy levels are so low. He wasn’t able to get anything here quickly enough without spending a significant portion of his energy. How many bullets equal one energy blast? How long can a true martial artist fight before they’re exhausted?”

“Ah, but carrying ammo is just as bad,” said a man. “Bullets are heavy.”

“They needn’t be,” I countered. “I bet someone could come up with a ward, stuck to the inside of a box, that makes whatever is put in that box weigh nothing. Or put clips into contain wards, and one person can carry hundreds. Or make the gun a talisman that doesn’t need reloading. There’s probably dozens of ways to get around that.”

“Still, guns?” asked a woman. “That sort of goes against everything we stand for. Doesn’t it?”

Everyone looked around to see what everyone else thought.

“What, winning?” I asked. “Look, they know you’re coming. They’ve prepared for you, because they know exactly what you’re going to

do. That's why you lost. To win the next time you need to do something you normally wouldn't do. I'm guessing they were wearing wards?" Several people nodded. "What do you want to bet they were immune to energy attacks and the like?"

"Probably. The trouble is if we don't win with the guns, they'll just adapt to that."

"So win, next time. Don't attack them for several months. Let them wonder what *you're* up to, this time. I mean they trained for this, I saw the training ground they used. I didn't know what it meant at the time, but it's obvious in retrospect. Do the same; Train up everyone who can shoot. Make wards to get to ammo faster. Go in with everyone you can, push them off the island."

"That would mean a lot of casualties, doing it that way," said Martin.

"More if you keep losing to them. There are ways around that, we could do it safely."

"How so?"

"First, head to the astral with a very large bomb. Drop it through a portal onto the battleship to sink it. Once it's gone, head in. In the front line are those that can make barriers you can shoot through. Songstrels, holy chosen, shamans. Back them up with spirit energists who are pumping them full of energy from behind. Have them hooked into the ley lines of the island for power. If you don't think they can keep up, have spirit battery wards on hand, keep them flowing like water. Behind them you'll find everyone else. Shoot the demons in front of you. Advance and repeat the process. With a long enough line you can sweep the island clean. Force them back into the school and through the demon gate if you must. Kill them all if you can't. Oh, and have a team taking the tanks out while the battleship sinks, I forgot to mention that. Again, explosives from the safety of the astral plane. Demons won't go there, they'll only guard the lower planes."

"Seems like you've thought this through," said the man.

"Yeah, I had all summer. I thought we would be attacking them immediately. But I was never even asked."

"We couldn't send kids!" said a woman.

"Why not? You think real armies, in actual war torn areas of the world, don't use kids? This is the sort of thing we're trained for! Not letting us fight makes all our efforts useless."

"That's a totally different thing."

"Sure, I agree. Those people live or die and the world goes on. Hardly anyone cares. We around this table die and demons have no more

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incentive to stay away from our world. Plus, who trains the next generation? We protect the world, and there's so few of us born each year we need to be a dozen soldiers, each."

"And where have you learned this brilliant military strategy, if I may ask?" asked a man.

"Starcraft."

"Excuse me?"

"Starcraft. It's a war game. You control various units to try and complete an objective. The best strategy, next to the Zerg Rush? Powerful, long range units, as many as you can build. Protect them with smaller, more expendable units that aren't even fighting. They just take care of anything that gets past the barrage."

"I see. We'll keep that in mind, should any of this battle take place in a virtual reality. As it stands, I think we have an answer."

The door cracked open, and someone looked in. "Yes, come in."

"If you could wait outside, Dean?" asked Martin. "We'll let you know if we're going to share the results with you."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Tell the person that's the key to all of this to leave. It's fine by me."

I left, heading down the hallway to the seats in the lobby.

My idea would work. No demon would expect to see a songstrel on the front lines. Nor would they expect Foundation members to be carrying guns. They don't need to spend energy to shoot, and heck, given the time it'll take to train people they could make thousands of bullets into wards. Yeah, do the same thing. I visualized it. A long line of artificers, backed by spirit energists hooked into ley lines. *The artificers exhaust their energy making twenty or so wards, then get energy transferred into them. At ten minutes a ward that's 6 an hour. In an 8 hour shift that's 48 wards a day. Do that for a month and that's 1100 wards or so. Now multiply that by... how many artificers are in the school right now? I think... maybe fifteen per year? That's 69,120 or so wards made by our class alone! No way they would shoot that many bullets in one skirmish, right? Mix them up so no one immunity can save them.*

But did they listen? No, they were too busy dismissing me as a kid, or telling themselves the way they did things was best. Obviously not, given the fact they messed it up. And what was all that garbage about me being some kind of threat? Yeah, I was a good talisman maker, and it showed in my work. Plus, given another few years I might have quite the large collection of them, but still. Did they have someone reading my

mind? That was a scary thought. I had been thinking about their dumb decisions to keep people in the dark still. Had someone picked up on that, maybe thought I would make some kind of play and put myself in power? Just how far did their new “little more careful now” go?

I debated activating the talisman that I had made to protect against mind reading and other ESPer powers. If they were reading my mind and it suddenly cut off, that could be quite suspicious. Of course, just the very act of thinking about whether I should turn it on gave it away that I owned one, if someone was reading my mind. I didn't feel anyone inside my brain, but if someone like me could craft talismans better than anyone on Earth, it stood to reason there was a person out there who could read minds better than anyone. That might let them do it without letting someone know they were doing it. It was a scary thought.

Well, as soon as I don't need to hear Katrina anymore, it's going up.

The door to the conference room opened, and they motioned me back inside.

I figured I would let them talk, rather than say exactly what was on my mind at the moment.

“We've decided to share what we learned,” said Martin. “Sadly, what we learned is nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. They were hired through some anonymous online thing they call a ‘Tor Network.’ They were given several targets in various areas, and told to pick up this for each job done.”

He gestured to a small sack on the table, and I peered inside. I took out a golden coin. “Demonic currency.”

“Yes. Cheap, given how expensive gold is on this side. A few coins like that and anyone would think about killing anyone they were asked to.”

“Hopefully more than a few,” I countered, tossing the coin back in.

“Well, perhaps that was hyperbole. But the sentiment remains. It seems we are being targeted, and this time, more indirectly than in the past. It worries me more than demons acting directly.”

“Because their souls are in danger?”

“I guess that's a part of it. Yes, it's true, they get to corrupt more people, who later become demons. I could see them thinking that. I just think it would be easier to accept if it was possession or shape-shifted demons than just plain old greedy humans.”

“Yes, it's harder to guard against something like that, isn't it? I mean, they can just pull up to you in a car and start shooting!”

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“No need to remind us, Dean,” admonished a woman.

“Well, I was out of the room for two minutes. Anyway, what’s the next step?”

“For you? Go home,” said Martin. “We’ll take care of the area around the incident, see if anyone saw anything. Make sure it isn’t reported or put up on... what is it called? Tubeyou?”

“You mean Youtube?”

“That’s the one. You have no idea how many people make our jobs easier, putting things they’ve seen up there. We visit them, they take the footage down, everyone’s happy.”

“I’m sure. And about my inevitable betrayal you think is coming?”

“Yes?”

“What can I do to assure you I have no such designs?”

“I’m honestly not sure. Maybe follow the rules a little more? Think before you act? Stop giving your friends super weapons?”

“The only person I haven’t made a weapon for is Yasui, and that’s because she already has the boots. Okay, Elizabeth too, but have you seen her ant? I don’t know if I could even improve what she’s got!”

“We know exactly how powerful she is, thank you, now that she has her inner demon under control and can call her projection out at will. Let’s keep it that way, okay?”

“Sure. I don’t suppose my friends and I, even with our so called super weapons, will be invited to the next skirmish at the island?”

“We don’t know how we’re going to approach that next, and the right people aren’t here to discuss it anyway.”

“I understand. I do just want to help.”

“And I’m doing my best to believe that.”

I was escorted back out, and stepped through a teleport ward to get home. Just for good measure I activated my mental immunity talisman and got out some paper.

Now, if it was just our group, how would we retake the island?

I drew up some plans, then did my homework for the weekend.

It was about 7:30, meaning it was 9:30 in the morning on Saturday for Yasui.

“Hey mom, do you mind if I go visit Yasui?”

“Oh, going to see your *girlfriend*?” she asked.

“One of the prospective ones, yes.”

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She looked at me. "You're no fun."

"Fun? Ah yes, the employment of time in a frivolous and non-practical way. No, no I'm not."

She sighed. "Go ahead. Be back by ten, okay?"

"AM or PM, your time or Japan time?"

"You know what I mean!"

"Yes, mother. See you tomorrow."

I have to go see a girl about a super weapon. Something odd is going on, and I want us to be ready.

Forge Fire

“And when the twelve blades had been forged at last, when he could raise them straight and glowing from the anvil- why, for the quenching, human blood would doubtless be best...” -- Fred Saberhagen, The First Book of Swords

“Hey Dean, come in!” said Yasui brightly after she opened the door. “Come on in.”

“Sorry to just drop by like this, I realized as I was knocking I probably should have texted you or something. Having powers really does make you a little blind to technology, huh?”

“It’s fine, you don’t have to apologize. My parents have been making me tell the stories of our adventures again, now that they realize they’re true. I think they’re sold on you.”

“That’s good.”

“You want to go for a walk or something?”

“Sure, that will be great.”

“Okay, just a second.”

She walked off and I heard her talking to her parents. Her mother stuck her head around the corner and waved at me, and I waved back.

“Let’s go!” she said, grabbing my hand.

“So, I’ve just come from the Foundation’s temporary headquarters,” I began, “and they pointed out to me an oversight on my part.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“The usual. Almost gunned down in the street, saved by an out of control garbage truck. Captured the people responsible, brought them in. You know.”

“What? All that happened?”

“No big deal. What I was more concerned with is their reactions. They treated me like I was a bomb that was about to go off. Talking about my club as if it was some nefarious plot to get leverage over people and later take over.”

“No!”

“It got worse. They’re almost afraid of me, telling me I shouldn’t make any more super weapons for my friends. Obviously referring to the thing I made Christina.”

“No wonder. You gave her something so she could shoot through walls.”

“Believe me, she could shoot *down* walls just as easily. I don’t know, it felt deeper than that.”

“Being friends with you has had advantages for us,” Yasui said patiently. “I mean you made Osman nearly invulnerable to attack, right? Plus anyone that hits him takes that damage instead. Plus you armed him with something amazing and then gave yourself the same treatment. You have contacts all over, not to mention this whole prophesy thing probably has them spooked.”

“Yes. I asked when I would be going to help them retake the island, and even gave them a plan I’m pretty sure would work, but they didn’t seem that interested.”

“Would you be, if the situation was reversed?”

“I hope I would at least consider all viewpoints. We have serious weaknesses, what I proposed would negate them.”

“What did you propose?”

“Guns. We need to level the playing field.”

“Ah.”

“Like I said, their reaction wasn’t overly positive. I’m worried.”

“About what?”

“That they are going to continue to fail to retake the island. That our group is going to have to do it somehow.”

“We can’t take out an entire island’s worth of gun toting demons! You nuts?”

I laughed. “Are you sure? You saw what Elizabeth did against those giants. She was holding back because she didn’t want to hit the house. Imagine if she wasn’t.”

“I suppose, but still, it seems like suicide.”

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“Oh, we would have to plan pretty much every step, but that’s why I wanted to come talk to you.”

“To get my thoughts about attacking the island?”

“No. To get your thoughts about what super weapon you wanted me to make.”

“Dean! You just said the Foundation didn’t want you making stuff anymore. Isn’t going ahead and making more the opposite of that?”

I considered. “No, I think the opposite would be going and wrecking the stuff I already made. Besides, it’s only because I’m so good at making talismans they become 'super.' I’m just making regular stuff for my friends, I can’t help that I’m so good at it.”

“I... guess.”

“Anyway, as they said that, it occurred to me that I had made Osman two things, Christina one really good thing with two functions, but had not made anything for you or Elizabeth. Well, I made you one thing, but not anything you could use in combat. I thought that was pretty unfair, so here I am.”

“Weren’t you the one that said I should learn to rely on my own strength before you would make me something? Like I could name what I wanted when we graduated?”

I shook my head sadly. “We graduated, Yasui. Our school is gone unless we get it back. But there’s no going back for us. I doubt the Foundation wants us disappearing from our regular schools now.”

“You’re right. I suppose I shouldn’t turn down anything that makes me a better fighter. I don’t know if I need that acceleration thing you have, I’m already pretty fast.”

“Up to you. It helps me dodge, but that’s because I can’t attack like you can. You would want to focus on attacking.”

“True. Maybe some kind of elemental effect when I hit something?”

“You’re on the right track, but we can do better than that, Yasui. Don’t think small.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You have something in mind, don’t you?”

“Maybe. I may have researched a few things over the years, what with all those talisman books I’ve read.”

“Spit it out, what it is?”

“Imagine, if you will, becoming the size of one of those virtue angels. Your clothes transformed into armor. Your boots sheathed in fire. You’re stronger, faster, and your attacks do flame damage to anything they touch.”

“How many things are you going to put into one talisman? That would take even you a year, wouldn’t it?”

I held up a finger. “That’s one talisman, it just happens to do multiple things. Like my acceleration one makes me faster, quicker, and better able to dodge. The books call it ‘Avatar of War’ and you can see why.”

“Wait, faster and quicker aren’t the same thing?”

“Not exactly. It makes me run faster and if I wanted to hit someone, I could hit them quicker with the talisman going than without.”

“Gotcha. I’m sold! Get started, minion!”

“Your wish,” I said with a flourish and a bow, “is my command. What form would you like it to take?”

“Tattoo?”

I made a face. “Something as cool as this, wouldn’t you want to hand it down to your kids, with the boots?”

“Yeah, I guess. Actually, that would be so cool!”

“What?”

“Making a complete set of armor. Each generation commissions a piece until it’s a full suit. Then someone could mix and match the various pieces as appropriate, or wear the whole darn thing and get a ton of powers.”

“That would be interesting. Keeping in mind though that this will transform anything you’re wearing into armor.”

“So a helmet?”

I nodded. “That would work. You would be leaving your head vulnerable otherwise, unless you wore a hat, I guess. Okay, I’ll go get out my notes, you can stop by later and we’ll get started.”

“Why not now? You’ve got me fired up about this thing, you know?”

I laughed. “I still have one more person to visit today. After all, the deal was I had to spend equal time with both of you, right?”

“Oh, very well. I’ll see you in a bit. I get it made first, though, I have seniority.”

“Of course!”

I walked Yasui back to her house and headed to Rochester, New York.

“Dean, didn’t expect to see you here! Come in.”

“Who’s this?” asked a woman behind Elizabeth.

“I’m Dean Chesterfield, Mrs Malkowitz. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, you’re that *boy* she’s interested in,” she said, shaking my hand.

“Ah, yes, that would be me.”

“Mom!”

“What? It’s a parent’s duty to embarrass their child.” She looked outside. “How did you get here? Don’t you live really far away?”

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I tapped my nose. "Trade secret."

"Oh, you used... you know? Okay."

I saw a little girl peeking around a corner. Probably not yet ten. She shyly waved, so I waved back. Elizabeth turned around. "That's Ivy. Zachary is around here somewhere, too. But we really don't need to see him. I'm going out mom." Ivy disappeared again.

"Now? It's dark!"

"I can take care of myself, and Dean would murder without hesitation anything that threatened me. Wouldn't you Dean?"

"If it wasn't human, sure," I said quietly, "a normal person I would just scare off."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable letting you go with a boy that is that powerful."

"Mom, I could take him myself, don't worry. We'll just take a walk around the block and be back. Promise. He must be here about a school thing and I don't want them overhearing." She tilted her head back in the direction of Ivy.

Mrs Malkowitz shook her head. "Our lives have been very different since... the incident. I guess I have to start accepting that sooner or later. If you trust him and you think you're safe enough, fine. But be back soon."

"I will mom. Thanks."

We went out the door.

"It's so frustrating. I wish I could show her what my powers are all about. But she can't see half of them, and just my chain isn't very reassuring."

"Chain?"

"I'm a spirit energist too, remember? I can conjure a weapon made of spirit energy, like Christina does with her bow." She held her hands out, and a ninja like tool dropped into her hands. It was spiked on one end, with a curved blade, and the other had a heavy weight. "It's some Japanese thing I forget the name of. Yasui would probably know. It's not very useful, as I am in no way a close combat fighter." We both laughed, and she made the chain disappear again. "So what can I do for you? Or were you just burning with the desire to see me?"

"Actually..." I went over what I had told Yasui about what the Foundation had said, and we walked on in silence for a moment. Her head was bowed in thought.

"I think part of that is my fault, not that blame is really the right word."

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been sort of hiding my true power from you guys. I’ve never really had occasion to show it off, but I was getting pretty good at it last year. I need to practice the final technique a little more, but it works a lot of the time.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know how I have a kumiho inside me, right?” she said, touching her hair. “My other half, ‘Dlizabeth’ as I call her.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, turns out I can let her out and still be in control of her actions. Last year some seers went into my mind to check my work of sealing her off. They said the prison thing I made was inspired, and it would hold. So we started working on letting her out and maintaining control.”

“So what does that mean for you?”

She thought a moment. “You know about the fusion technique that summoners and petitioners can do? Merge with a called being? That’s what happens when I let her out now. She merges with Anthy and becomes a sort of furry bug looking thing with nine tails.”

“And if I recall from my readings, she gets the demon’s power as well as her own?”

“Exactly. But I can take it even farther. I further fuse with that fused entity, turning all of us into a human/fox/ant hybrid. I haven’t looked in a mirror when I do it, I didn’t want to know what I looked like. But I did have six arms, wings, and nine tails.”

“You can do energy attacks from all of them!” I said, realizing where she was going with this.

“Not quite yet, but we’re getting there. I can then use Anthy’s power of ‘anthill’ to make copies of myself. Then I can release 45 energy attacks at once, with three copies.”

I swallowed. *She probably could take me. Even with all my talismans active.*

“Uh, wow!”

“Yeah. And if Christina is around and boosts my energy with her technique of spirit grades...” she trailed off.

“You could level a city in a few minutes.”

“Maybe. Never tried!” she said brightly. “But imagine having three figures flying over the landscape that are as tall as giants, as she can size change too. Plus with my spirit energist techniques I can draw energy from the environment and charge it if I needed a blast to do extra damage. My

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energy is through the roof, the ground is shaking, energy bolts are going everywhere—”

“I can imagine! I’d run away if something like that was going on, to say nothing about demons!”

“And I’m friends with you. The guy who is equipping his group with better than normal weapons and armor. You can see how they would be somewhat concerned?”

“It’s becoming a little clearer now, yes. Man. You don’t need any help from me, but my not making you something is kind of unfair. If you had any ideas of something you would like, I’ll be happy to work on it for you.”

“Let me think about it.”

“You’ve got ten minutes- go!”

She grinned and looked up at the stars. “Regeneration,” she said at last.

“What, that’s it?”

“That’s enough. You can make me something to regenerate pretty fast, right?”

“Sure, that’s not a problem, but why just that?”

“It’s something we found out during combat exercises. Anthy shrugs off most forms of damage, especially when she’s big. But if we are going to take the island back ourselves, there will be a lot of stuff shooting at us.”

“True.”

“So if I can withstand that, and regenerate at some crazy speed, how much harder would it be to take me down?”

“A lot, I’m guessing.”

“Exactly. I already have it all. Shape-shift, immunity to fire, incredible accuracy and size of my attacks, the help of the spirits, my own spirit energist techniques- what more do I need?”

“Healing. Makes sense. Okay, that’s what we’ll do then. I already know that one, it’s one I made for myself. Maybe I should improve it though, I made it years ago.”

“So, item or tattoo?”

“I said the same thing to Yasui, something like that you might want to pass down to your kids. Can’t do that with a tattoo.”

“True.”

“There is one thing though, you’ll want something you can wear all the time.”

“Why’s that?”

“Regeneration has a minor benefit too. You’ll live longer. Remember, your body will be constantly refreshing itself, and at my level, you might live more than a thousand years!”

“Makes having kids a little more troublesome. They would age and die long before I did.”

“Exactly. So it’s something to consider.”

“Simple earring?”

I shook my head. “Can’t be an earring. Your holes will close once you get regeneration. It would fall right out.”

“Ah, crap, you’re right! I didn’t even think about that. Ring then, one that will last a thousand years.”

“I can make it last that long, and longer, not a problem. Find something you like and we’ll get to it. I can start the process now, of course, we’ll only need the ring at the last minute.”

“Okay. I might get one a little bigger than I need, I may grow some more.”

“It could be adjusted by a real alchemist, don’t sweat it. But yeah, it’s probably a good idea.”

“Got it. Thanks, Dean.”

“Sure. You are willing to attack the island, right? I should have asked.”

“I go where you go.”

“Thanks. And thanks for telling me about your real power. We’ll probably have to have some kind of planning session, talk about how we’re going to do this. If the Foundation doesn’t manage it themselves. It’ll be a very different proposition because we won’t have any backup. And my original plan for barriers and such won’t be feasible. You’ll have to be our barrier.”

“No sweat. I would be out in front anyway, so I didn’t hit you guys accidentally.”

“Appreciate it. Okay, I’ll let you know when I’ve gotten Yasui set, and you can come by a couple of hours per week.”

“Looking forward to it!”

I escorted her home, more to be polite than out of any need to protect her, and went home myself. Of course, she could be shot from cover and be dead before she could react, so getting her the regeneration as fast as possible would also ease my mind about her.

FINDING THE BALANCE

A half hour later Yasui appeared and I got to work for a few hours making her new item.

Idiots! I thought, as I started making my spiral. *They complain we're so powerful, then don't use us in the attack to reclaim the island? What kind of sense does that make? None! We'll show them, we'll take it back ourselves and they'll see just how foolish they were.*

I worked feverishly on it, wanting to get it done, and spent most of Saturday and Sunday working. I could have just taken the risk and activated it that night, but I figured I would take my own advice and put in the extra few hours. I went over it carefully, finally going over to her place to finish it that Thursday. She had found a helmet she liked from somewhere, and I set it down in the paper I was working on and energized the spiral. Her parents and her both watched with interest as the power bonded to it, and then went quiet, the paper blank.

"Try it out!" I said, handing it to her.

"Dad, can we go into the dojo?" she asked. "I don't know about the ceilings in here if I'm really going to be bigger."

He agreed, and we found ourselves in the talisman space again. She activated it with her trigger word "Armor!" and gave a squeal of delight as she grew to be twice her size. Her legs were covered with flames, and she seemed to be wearing full plate armor, the helmet having resculpted itself to match the overall look. She did a quick kata, then asked her father for a spirit clone to fight.

He looked up at her. "Are you sure about that? It seems a bit unfair at the moment."

"I just want to hit you once, see what kind of damage I can do, that's all."

"Very well."

He made a clone and she whacked it in the chest, sending it flying backwards in surprise. It would have struck the back wall of the dojo and probably kept going if it hadn't burned up as it flew.

"Quite satisfactory," she said, a big smile in her voice. I couldn't see her face because it was covered by the helmet, but she seemed to see okay.

"Um, ow?" said her father.

Fairies

“Children know such a lot now. Soon they don't believe. And every time a child says 'I don't believe in fairies', there's a fairy someplace that falls down dead.” -- Peter Pan

It was now mid October. I had worked just as hard on Elizabeth's regeneration talisman, which also worked out amazingly for her. She could stab herself with my knife and be healed as soon as she pulled the blade out. The Foundation didn't contact me about making more items, either because I now kept my anti-mind reading talisman active more or the fact they had other concerns. I did work out various plans for taking the island back, trying to guess what forces might be camped there and how they would go about defending the place. The trouble was, with chaos still on the 'loose' even a victory could easily become a defeat.

I had been a little more cautious leaving school, as well, activating my armor talisman before walking home. I didn't want to trust to luck saving me the next time. I had also developed somewhat of the habit of checking to make sure my necklace was still there during the day. I wasn't sure what would have happened to me if I hadn't made it, as those two men would have had no problem gunning me down in the street. So I was a bit jumpy, always looking over my shoulder if I thought a car was slowing down nearby.

Which is how I happened to glance Lynsey following me a good distance away one day. I stopped and glared back at her, and she looked around as though seeking another way to go. But she knew I had spotted her, and jogged up to me.

“Lynsey,” I said, by way of greeting. “Walking home today, are we?”
“Hi Dean. Actually, I, uh, walk home every day.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Really?”

She nodded. “I, uh, I’ve seen you walking home many times, but I never got up the courage to talk to you.”

“I don’t bite, you know. I would have been happy to escort you, in these dangerous times.”

“Oh, really?”

We walked in silence for a moment. I looked at her out of the corner of my eyes, and she seemed troubled for some reason.

I really, really, really, really hope she didn’t see me make that car disappear last month. But she would have said something before this, right?

“They are rather dangerous, aren’t they?” she said at last.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know. The tower falling down. Stuff like that. People getting shot when their guns discharge by accident. Drownings in bathtubs by people taking showers. It’s all over the news.”

“Oh, that! Yes, very odd times we’re living in, huh?”

Curse you, chaos! Any more of this and people will really know something weird is going on!

“Yeah. Uhm, when you said you would walk me home, did you mean it?”

“Of course. Do you really feel that worried about it?” I sort of laughed.

“I saw-”

Crap! My blood froze, which had nothing to do with the cool October weather.

She started again. “I’m not sure what I saw-”

Whew. My heart started beating again.

“But I would feel better if you went the whole way with me. If you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind at all. Just let me let my parents know I’ll be late.” I pulled out my cell phone and texted them.

Mom, escorting cute girl home, shouldn’t be more than a few minutes late. Yes I’m a playa. She asked me.

Hey, I remembered, and didn’t use sending or anything!

“They won’t mind?”

“That I’m keeping a classmate safe? Hardly!”

“That’s good,” she said softly.

Trouble at home? “You aren’t in some kind of trouble, are you?” I asked.

“What, no!” she exclaimed. “It’s just, well, you’ll see. I don’t know who to talk to about this.”

“About what?”

“I’d rather show you, if it’s okay. You’ll think I’m crazy.”

I snorted. “I promise you I won’t. So what is it? Angry spirit? One of your parents got possessed by a demon? Your homework keeps getting done by brownies and they do every other question wrong to mess with you?” I grinned.

She didn’t grin back. “Uh, no, nothing like that.”

Uh, what? “I’m not sure, but that’s not the way you’re supposed to be saying that. What’s going on?”

“I’ll show you when we get there.”

“Now I’m really worried.” I was, too. I amended my text to my mother.

Cute girl with possible problem. Won’t say what, not a ghost, didn’t outright deny something odd. Check in soon.

We walked along in silence to her house, and she invited me in.

“Who’s this?” asked an adult as we entered the house.

“This is Dean, from my school,” Lynsey replied.

She glared at me. “You’ve never mentioned a Dean before.”

“He’s new. I think he can help us with our, you know.” She rolled her eyes in the direction of the upstairs. “Our little problem.”

“Oh. I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.”

“Please,” I said, holding up a hand as she went to walk away. “Allow me to present you a small gift, for the honor of your hospitality.”

“That’s really not necessary-” she started to say, but I was already pulling my talisman pouch from my jacket pocket. I shook it, then showed her it was empty. She glared at me out of the corner of her eyes.

“Dove,” I said, reaching into it, not breaking eye contact, and pulled out a small charm. I had made dozens in different shapes over the years. I knew intellectually I couldn’t get any better at transmogrification but that didn’t prevent me from trying. I had made keychains out of them, so I handed one over. She looked at it, interested.

“This is... how did you do that?”

“Magic?”

“Neat trick.” She started to hand it back to me.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“It is freely given,” I said, not taking it back.

“Thanks,” she said, looking a little confused. She went away again.

“Come on, she’s upstairs.” She opened a door and started to climb the stairs to the second floor.

She?

We went into her room and she threw her bag down on the bed. I put mine down by the door and went inside, looking around.

Typical girl’s room, if such a thing can be said to exist.

Lynsey still looked like she was trying to come to some conclusion, and finally took a deep breath.

“Here,” she said, pointing to a shoe box with a light shining on it. I stepped over next to her, and looked into it. My eyes got wide.

Inside, lying on some pieces of fabric and covered with a cloth was a real fairy. At least, it didn’t look demonic, like an imp, because for one thing it was female. For another it had wings poking out of the sides and long, golden hair. She was beautiful.

I smiled. “You are so lucky!” I said. “I’ve never even seen a fairy before. This is amazing- what’s wrong?” As I looked over at Lynsey she looked very sad, and I looked back over at the tiny sleeping creature. I did a spirit sense, and registered that her life force was very weak. “She’s dying,” I said with a touch of anger in my voice.

Lynsey mutely nodded.

“We tried getting her to eat something,” said a voice behind me, and I turned to see her mother standing at the doorway. She still had the tiny bird in her hand, but she had crossed her arms over her chest. “Honey, water, bits of bread. Nothing. She’s been like this almost a day, barely even breathing from what I can see.”

“How did you find her?”

“Our dog did, actually. He was sniffing around the bushes and when I went to see what it was, there she was. She collapsed after that. I brought her home and got her warm, but she was so weak, and now...”

“Can you help her?” asked Lynsey.

“I can try,” I replied, looking down at her. “But I admit to not knowing a lot about fairies. Usually they just go about doing their own thing. They’re actually getting more rare, as I understand it.”

“I thought there was something weird about you,” said Lynsey, as though winning a bet with herself. “You did get shot at, and that truck did save you, and you made the car disappear and then disappeared yourself!”

“Ah, saw that did you?”

“Yes. So who are you?”

“I can’t answer that question. I’m in enough trouble with... my superiors for the whole car incident. Just pretend you didn’t see it, believe me, that’s for the best.”

“What’s all this?” asked her mother.

“You know that nuke that went off recently?”

“Yeah?”

“That was my home. The things that hoped to take us out didn’t get the satisfaction, and now we’re scattered about. They’re trying different methods now. Really, please don’t make me say more. You’re safe, don’t worry, they only want people like me.”

“What do you mean, people like you?”

“People who don’t freak out when they see a fairy.” I pulled the cover off of her and looked her over. *Amazing, a perfect humanlike figure. Scaled up and hiding her wings, most people probably wouldn’t look at her twice on the street. At least no more than any other pretty woman, walking down the street. Pretty woman, the kind I’d like to...* I blinked. Maybe I had inherited a brain rot from my father. *Did the All-Father just get lazy with their design or something?*

I gently took her in my hands and lifted her out of the box. Easily fitting into my hand, she didn’t even groan or wake up as I transferred her. “She doesn’t seem injured,” I remarked. “But from what I understand, she doesn’t eat in the same way you or I do. She exists on energy, somehow. Exactly how... Your guess is as good as mine. But let’s see if this works. I just hope my energy is pure enough for her.”

Using energy transfer I allowed my energy to flow into her, as gently as I could. She began to glow and a few seconds later she stirred.

“She’s waking up!” said Lynsey excitedly. “Whatever you’re doing, keep it up!”

I put a bit more energy into her and did a quick healing acceleration too, just to be on the safe side. I didn’t see any damage, but she could be hurt internally. Her eyes fluttered open. I smiled. “Welcome back, little one!” I said softly. She looked around the room in a panic, and tried to fly away, but collapsed as soon as she pushed herself up. “Gently,” I said, concerned. “I’ve given you some energy but I’m sure it’s not what you’re used to. We mean you no harm.”

She looked up at me, then over at the other two, who were staring at her in wonder. It was a tense moment. Would she try to flee or attack? Did she even understand me?

FINDING THE BALANCE

Finally she spoke. “You have called spirits, yet you are not a shaman. Explain yourself.”

“I can do a little of everything, calling spirits included. One of my friends is a shaman, guided by the spirit of the ant. What can we do to help you?”

She seemed to ignore the question, looking instead at Lynsey and her mother. “They aren’t anything,” she remarked.

“They are still people,” I explained patiently. “And they want to help too. I know you don’t like humans much, and I understand why, really, I do. But they saved you as much as I did, so they deserve your thanks. It isn’t their fault knowledge has been kept from them, is it?”

She thought a moment. “No, I suppose not. I don’t suppose you could spare me some more energy?”

“I have it to spare,” I said, feeding her more with energy transfer.

“I noticed.”

She nodded, and I stopped the transfer. “Put me down please, and step back.”

I nodded, and did as she requested, gently setting her down on the dresser. She seemed a little unsteady, but sat up straight and then fluttered her wings, taking to the air.

“Feeling better?” I asked.

“A bit.” She flew over to the bed and landed on the edge, then suddenly started growing. She became the size of a child and sat down. “That’s better. Now perhaps I can talk to you without getting a crick in my neck. I do thank you for saving me.”

“Not a problem,” said Lynsey, looking her over. “What... what happened to you?”

“A couple of things. Something’s been polluting the park I maintain. Try to maintain, anyway. So the energy there hasn’t been that great as of late. Then this bat or something came after me, even though I told him I was a fairy. I mean, the nerve of that guy, you know? I don’t know much attack magic, so I tried an illusion of me flying a different way. Stupid, they hunt by sound, right? So I tried tough hide and just barely got it off and let him chomp me. Of course it didn’t work and I scratched him with my claws. He dumped me and flew away. By then I was lost, low on energy, and exhausted. That’s when that dog of yours found me.”

“That’s quite the adventure,” said Lynsey’s mother.

“Yeah,” replied the fairy. “Anyway, thanks for the energy. I guess I better get going, we’re not really supposed to show ourselves to normal people.”

“Wait a second,” I protested, “you can’t just leave. For one thing, do you even know how to get back to your park?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“And two, you say something is happening to the ley energy in the place? Maybe I can help.”

She blinked at me. “You’d do that?”

“Of course I would do that! I may not be a shaman but that doesn’t mean I want the natural world to disappear. Even if it was for purely selfish reasons, ley lines are useful. But forget that, how much longer will you last out there if you can’t eat? Or if the energy you are eating is making you sick?”

She looked down. “Probably not long. If I have to move, it’ll be another park that doesn’t have a fairy to look after it. I... don’t want that.”

“So let me help!”

“Yeah, I want to help too!” said Lynsey. “Even if I’m not a shaman or whatever you said, maybe I can learn more about your world. That is what you want, isn’t it? Maybe I can even help with whatever it is you do for the park!”

“Humans are just so careless, can you really learn anything?”

“Are you generalizing humans? Are all fairies one thing or another? Should I say they’re all mean spirited bigots who won’t give humans a chance?”

“We pretty much are, I think,” she replied after a moment. “Okay, okay, you win. We can all go down there, if I can find my way back.”

“You must know what it looks like from the air, I bet Google Maps could show where it was.”

“I’ll get my computer booted up.”

While we waited I pulled out my book of magic.

“A phoenix gave me this,” I said, showing it to the fairy. “I’m sure you don’t get much chance to learn more magic, anything in here you might want? What’s your name, anyway?”

“Oh, I’m Autumn Leaf.”

“Nice to meet you, Autumn Leaf.”

“You too.”

She paged through my book. “Hey, this is real magic all right! I already know a bunch of these, actually.”

“Oh. It was a thought.”

“This one though, extinguish. That could be very handy if there was ever a fire in the park. Give me a minute with this one.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Sure thing!”

She sat, kicking her little legs and rocking back and forth as she studied the spell. The tip of her tongue was stuck out of the corner of her mouth as she stared at it intently. “Okay, thanks,” she said, handing it back.

“Sure thing.”

“Here, does any of this look familiar?” asked Lynsey, showing her the map.

“That’s my park there, the long one that runs by the creek.” She pointed.

“Then that’s where we’re headed.”

Once outside I texted my mother again, updating her on my progress. The fairy had shrunk down again, and I had gotten a picture of her. She posed with a stuffed toy, and I had made it my phone’s wallpaper.

Met a fairy. Taking her back home, she got lost. May need to purify area. Will keep you updated. I also attached the picture.

I got a reply back.

You have all the fun!

The park wasn’t far away, and Lynsey was asking Autumn Leaf all about being a fairy and what magic she knew and about talking to animals. She was conserving her strength and riding on Lynsey’s shoulder.

“They don’t have much to say, really,” she said. “They’re kind of dull. I mean, they have very different concerns than you or I would.”

“Getting enough food for the winter, mating.”

“Exactly. And listening to a squirrel chatter on about all the nuts he hid and where and what kind and how he was going to find them again gets old really fast.”

Both laughed.

At least they’re getting along a little better now.

We arrived and took a look around.

“Ugh,” said Autumn Leaf, “they’re *still* here?”

“Who is?” I asked.

“Them,” she said angrily, pointing.

Bikers

Born to be wild!

We looked in the direction she was pointing and saw a group of bikers drinking and laughing at a picnic table. They were pretty young, probably not long out of college, and there were four guys and two girls. All were wearing leathers and sported various tattoos. I couldn't exactly see what sort from where I was, just that they had them. Nearby I saw five motorcycles, so at least one person was riding double.

"They're the ones messing the place up," said Autumn Leaf angrily. "Hate those guys!"

"What do they do?" asked Lynsey.

"Litter, pollute the air with smoke, throw stuff in the water, blast music. They never clean up after themselves, scare the animals away- should I go on?"

"The trouble is, we can't really get involved," I said. "They're not really breaking any laws."

"Get involved, are you nuts?" Lynsey said, concerned. "You could get shot, you can't just go over there and tell them to leave!"

I laughed. "Lynsey, maybe this isn't something I should be telling you, and maybe you'll become afraid of me when I do but I could kill all of them *from here*." I pointed to the ground. "I wouldn't have to move from this spot, they would just die. All of them, instantly. The fact one might have a gun really isn't a consideration. The instant I saw one, the person pulling it out would be paste."

"Seriously?" She looked at me incredulously. I nodded gravely. "That's why you let Jeff do what he does! You can't risk just killing him off by accident!"

FINDING THE BALANCE

“That’s part of the reason, yes. I can’t go around killing people because they’re jerks. Even these bikers are people, and they deserve the chance to live their lives as they see fit. Only the All-Father is audacious enough to say He can properly judge an entire human lifetime. It’s not for me to judge them, I leave it to Him.”

“Can- can I ask how? And why? Why would you need such a weapon?”

“The world is much more dangerous than you know, at least for us in the know. We fight so you don’t have to, and the things we fight necessitate that kind of response. As to what it is, no, I won’t tell you, sorry.”

“I guess that’s for the best.”

“So you can’t do anything after all?” asked Autumn Leaf.

I folded my arms. “I don’t know. I’m willing to help clean up the place, but that’s still only a temporary measure. It’s a public park, they have every right to be here. I would prefer if they hung out someplace else, or were more respectful of nature, but making them do it of their own volition...”

“But their behavior is killing a fairy,” protested Lynsey. “Isn’t that an act of war, whether they know it or not?”

I considered it. “I suppose if the resident fairy here has to leave because of them, the land will get worse because of that. If it gets worse the ley lines get worse. If the ley lines get worse the whole place dies, and then no one can enjoy the park. Man, this is the kind of stuff I’ve been thinking about!”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn Leaf.

“It’s... policy, for lack of a better term. There are policy guides written for exactly what we can and cannot do in the case of demon attack, humans with powers going rogue, ghouls showing up- all things dealing with supernatural creatures, like our fairy friend here. But nothing about how to handle a biker gang that’s messing up a park and making life miserable for said fairy. The organization is just no good on the small stuff.”

“Excuse me?” said Autumn Leaf, drawing herself up to her full height and putting her fists on her hips.

“Sorry. I meant to say they were no good with the minor, totally supernatural occurrences that happen in the world.”

“That’s better.”

“So do we just leave?” asked Lynsey.

“No, let me ask my friends,” I said, pulling out my cell phone. “Though I can guess exactly what they’re going to say. Let’s see here...” I

looked around and spotted a white building with a green metal roof. “Be right back.”

I went into the bathroom and called them each in turn. They all agreed to come help, and teleported into the place I sent them the picture of.

Lynsey’s mouth dropped open as my friends and I spilled out of the bathroom towards her.

“So naughty, Dean,” said Elizabeth. “I approve!”

“Are you referring to his interacting with a new girl from his school or the whole ‘don’t use powers where people can see’ part?” asked Christina.

“Yes,” she answered.

“I think it’s very noble of him,” put in Yasui, “trying to help this fairy and all.” It didn’t escape my notice she was hanging back, now that I knew what to look for. She really was shy about meeting new people!

“We have a duty to help,” said Osman, “but I sympathize with your position, my friend. What are we going to do with a biker gang?”

“I’m hopeful we can come up with something.”

“Where did all these people come from?” Lynsey sputtered, astonished.

“Lynsey, these are my friends from my old school. This is Osman, Yasui...” I went around and introduced everyone. “And everyone, our suppliant, the fairy Autumn Leaf.”

She gave a little curtsy and the girls cooed at her and told her how beautiful she was. Christina sort of rolled her eyes, but she was holding back a smile, I could tell. I thought she might have been just as excited to meet a real fairy as the other girls.

“So, you got us all here, you must have a plan,” said Christina. “Let’s hear it.”

“Not so much a plan as needing advice. Hopefully we can work together with what I’ve seen here and-”

“Who are you, and what have you done with Dean?” demanded Elizabeth.

“I know, what was I thinking? Come on, you guys have way better skills than I do in a lot of areas. I can’t do everything!”

Yet.

“What are your thoughts?” asked Osman. “You know we can’t be seen using powers. Just her being here bends the rules.” He indicated Lynsey. “She found the fairy, that’s fine, but if we’re going to do anything, send her home.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Hey, this is my home,” she countered. “If bikers are going to be messing up *my* parks I should have a say in how they’re handled. You just let me worry about seeing powers or whatever.”

“We won’t get in trouble for this, will we?” asked Yasui. “And by we I mean you, Dean. And by in trouble I mean more in trouble than you already are.”

“Not if we do things properly,” I said. “Look, it’s the aftermath of powers that is the biggest concern, right? Explosions without bombs, things moving about on their own, that sort of thing, right?” They all nodded. “So, let’s not do any of that. We have options and some big advantages. Number one, look at them- see the number of beer bottles they’ve got? They’re drunk!”

Osman looked over at them. “There do seem to be a lot of empties there.”

“You can tell that?” asked Lynsey. “I can barely make out that there’s even people over there.”

“My vision is very good.”

“Oh, is that why the sunglasses? Are your eyes really sensitive to light?”

Sunglasses? I looked over at Osman, realizing he *was* wearing sunglasses. *Come to think of it, he always is. I must have gotten so used to seeing him with them, I just look past them now. Weird.*

“Something like that,” he replied. “But mostly because they don’t look like regular eyes and I don’t like freaking people out about them.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway,” I said, “back on topic, we have drunkenness, and we have Osman. Hey Kat, how’s your illusion skill coming along?”

“Quite well, actually,” she replied, appearing in illusion form in front of us. “I’m guessing I can give them a bit of a show. Why?”

“I thinking we scare them off. Give them a reason never to come back here again. If it’s all illusion there won’t be any evidence. With no evidence there’s nothing for the Foundation to worry about. I mean a couple of drunk bikers talking about crazy stuff? No one would believe anything they say.”

“Good point. I’m sure I could come up with something.”

“Think about it. The rest of us will be ignored up and just mess with them a little. Move their beers, mess with their bikes, that sort of thing.”

“Who were you talking to?” Lynsey demanded, looking between us. “No one said anything but you were acting like they were!”

"I didn't include her, I felt she might react badly," explained Katrina.

"Good call," I muttered. "We have an invisible member of the team as well. She can only be seen by us, sorry. Her name is Katrina. She says hi."

"Hi?" she said nervously, eyes darting around.

Nice to meet you, she sent.

"You... too?"

"Boo!" shouted Elizabeth, having crept up behind her.

"Yaaa!" shouted Lynsey, jumping.

"Elizabeth!" I chided. "This is not the time."

She couldn't hear me for laughing. "Oh, the look on your face," she gasped, doubled over with laughter.

"Can we please get back to it?" asked Christina.

"I'm sorry about her," I apologized. "Apparently she's like a fox in more than one way, she's a trickster."

"We better get to it, if we're doing this," said Katrina. "We don't want them to leave and miss the show."

"Okay," I said. "Lynsey and Autumn Leaf, stay back, okay? We're going to get to this and you won't see us until it's over."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." I started applying ignore wards to everyone. "Honestly, Elizabeth, did you have to scare her like that? She's had enough of a shock just learning fairies were real."

"Oh, she'll get over it. What should we do?"

"You know how the ward works. Kat will distract them. When they're not looking our way, make a minor change they won't immediately notice. Our first target is the booze. Dump it out if you can and leave them the empty bottles."

"Sounds good."

We made our way over there, Kat floating along beside us. "I'm going to have to give up including you guys, it'll be enough of a stretch to get them all seeing what I want."

"That's fine, I'm sure we can figure out something. Operation 'haunted park' is a go! I repeat, it is a go!"

We got up to the bikers, two of which were making out, the others just were drinking and talking. We each chose one and got near them, then waited.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then one of the guys jumped up from the table, peering into the distance.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“What?” asked one of the others.

“Did you see that?” he asked, pointing.

“See what?”

“Over by those trees there. Some naked chick.”

“Naked chick?”

The bikers all looked up, and the two that were kissing stopped. The guy looked over to the trees as well while the woman just looked a bit annoyed.

Honestly, don't you have any focus at all?

“I don't see anything,” said another.

“No, there, look!” He pointed again.

“Hey, she is!” said one of the girls. “I didn't know that was allowed, I would have done it.”

“It's not,” said the other woman.

“I don't see anything,” said one guy.

“How can you not see her, she's right there?”

With their attention now focused elsewhere we each grabbed one of their drinks and started pouring it out. They ignored us.

“Is she saying something?”

“It looks like she is.”

“Think she wants to play?”

“Who would want to play with you?”

“Better than you.”

“Come off it.”

“Why's she just standing there?”

“Who is standing there? I still don't see anyone!”

“Dude, she's right there. You better get your eyes checked.”

“Maybe she's in trouble.”

“Someone else will take care of it.”

Humanity at its finest.

We put the empty bottles back, and I started grabbing bottles out of the open cooler they had and throwing them off to the side. The last one I hefted, then backed up. I let it fly over their heads, and they watched it sail away.

“What did you do that for?” asked one to the one nearer the cooler.

“I didn't do it. Why would I do that? No way I'm getting one far enough over there.”

“Someone threw it, fess up!”

Everyone looked around but of course none of them had done it.

“Go get it.”

“You go get it.”

“Ah, leave it, we’ll get it later.” The one that said that turned back to his drink and lifted it.

“What? I’m empty? I thought I just opened this?”

They all turned their attention back to their drinks, and found they were empty as well.

“All right, who’s the joker!” one demanded. “We can’t all be empty at the same time.”

“Maybe we’re more drunk than we thought. I’ll get us some more—The beer is gone!”

That got their attention, everyone clustered around the cooler. The woman sitting on the table rolled her eyes and got out a pack of cigarettes.

Must have an oral fixation.

She set the pack down to light it up and I took that opportunity to use combust and set it on fire. Meanwhile, Elizabeth was stealing the empty bottles and setting them on the lawn in a circle, bottoms touching.

“Hey, got some more ignore wards?” Christina asked.

“Sure, hundreds by now. Why?”

“Let me have some.”

“Sure.”

I took a sheaf of them out of my pouch and handed them to her. She started applying them to the motorcycles.

Nice one.

Having finished digging through the cooler they started looking around. One spotted the full ones I had tossed in a heap.

“Hey, they’re over there. Someone tossed them!” He glared accusingly at each member of his gang.

They all shook their heads. I took that opportunity as they went over to pick them up to slap another ignore ward on the cooler.

“Where’s the cooler?” demanded one, his arms now full of bottles.

They all looked around, oblivious to it sitting right there.

“This is Jack, man. Someone’s punking us, gotta be.”

“We only turned away for a second, where did it go?”

“I don’t know. Wasn’t my turn to watch it.”

“What do we do with these?”

“Drink them?”

“Hey, watch it!” said one, finally realizing the cigarette pack was on fire.

FINDING THE BALANCE

The woman looked down, cursed, and started trying to beat it out with her jacket. I reached over and pulled the ward off the cooler, then did a sending. *Throw some ice water on top of it.*

“I can’t, the cooler is gone, remember?”

“What?” The others turned to him.

“I can’t throw ice water on it, the cooler-” He looked down.

“It was right there the whole time?” demanded one.

“Don’t just stand there!” He scooped up some ice and water and threw it at the fire. I grabbed the blob of water with telekinesis and pulled it towards the girl, soaking her leggings.

“Oh, thanks a lot,” she said, glaring at him.

Elizabeth had run over to get the bottle I had thrown earlier and tossed it back over at them, where it hit the table and shattered. The woman scrambled out of the way, cursing again. “What are you trying to pull?” she demanded of the others. They all looked around.

“Something’s going on here, man.”

“Let’s get out of here!”

“Yeah, maybe we-” he turned to leave, but then froze again. “Do you hear that?”

“Wolf?” asked another, looking around.

One’s eyes lit on the “art piece” Elizabeth had made. “Look, who did that?”

The other’s looked, then nervously looked again to see if someone would own up to it.

“Hey, she’s coming over here!” She pointed, and everyone looked over at the grove of trees again. The woman on the table hopped down, so I took that opportunity to stick an ignore ward to it for good measure.

“I still don’t see any woman, you guys,” said the one. “But I do see a guy.”

Everyone ignored him. “Where are you going?” asked one. Everyone seemed to be looking at him, but it was as if he was walking away from the group.

“What answers?” said another.

“What do you mean, what answers?” asked the ignored guy. “What are you saying?”

They again ignored this, watching the phantoms in their minds. Suddenly they stiffened.

“What happening to her?” shouted one.

“She’s changing? Oh my God, what’s she changing into?”

“What are you talking about? Who’s changing? Hello?”

“Werewolf!” shouted the woman.

“You can’t be serious!”

They reacted again, one person started vomiting.

“She killed him. Just like that. Oh my God. Oh my God. We’ve got to get out of here. She’s, oh my God she’s looking at us.”

There was a panicked run towards where they thought the bikes would be, but of course they couldn’t see the table now so two of them face planted into it, tumbling over as their momentum carried them over the edge again. The others started frantically searching for their motorcycles.

“Someone stole our bikes?”

Most swore and started looking around. The one that was being ignored looked at the others like they had gone crazy, then suddenly jumped and fell backwards. He scrambled away from something only he could see, and took off running through the park. The others were backing away slowly, one swinging a chain.

“You can’t kill a werewolf like that!”

“What do you want me to do then?”

“We need a steak!”

“That’s vampires you idiot!”

“No, a steak, you know, meat? Maybe we could distract it.”

“You can distract it, I’m out of here!” That one broke off running, and the others followed, and from what I could see, they weren’t going to stop for anything.

It took us several minutes to calm down, we were all laughing so hard, even Osman. After we got the story of what Katrina made them see we started up again. Finally Lynsey made her way over there and we took the ignore wards off.

“What did you do? That was freaky.”

“Scared them, hopefully badly enough they won’t ever come back.”

“What about the bikes?” asked Christina, pointing a thumb in that direction.

“Oh, I’m sure we could come up with something appropriate.”

In the end we scratched “Don’t come back” onto the bodies of each bike, then I brought out some contain wards and popped them inside. We each walked in a different direction and found someplace interesting to leave them. By then it was getting pretty late and we regrouped back in the park.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“We’ll come by tomorrow with some bags and stuff and clean up the garbage around here,” I said to Autumn Leaf.

“I think the area needs a little more than that,” said Christina, walking around. “The energy here has been corrupted a little. Let me see what I can do.”

She paced around, feeling things out, then sat down and concentrated. I wasn’t sure what she was doing, but she did something, and switching over to the spirit viewing technique I could see energy swirling about the area. As she worked it brightened considerably, and Autumn Leaf perked up.

“Yeah, that’s the stuff. Whatever you’re doing, pour it on!”

Christina smiled and kept at it, finally getting up again.

“Never thought I would use the skill like that, but we did practice it in class,” she said, coming back over to us. “If they stay gone the energy around here should go back to normal soon.”

“Thanks. I guess I owe you.”

She shrugged.

“We’ll still come get the trash out of the creek and such,” I said. “If you guys don’t mind, that is?”

They said they didn’t, and went back into the bathroom after saying their goodbyes.

I escorted Lynsey home, after saying goodbye to Autumn Leaf. She said to come visit her any time, and admitted maybe some humans weren’t so bad after all.

“So, thanks Dean. I would never have guessed all that would happen when my mom found that fairy.”

“Keep an open mind and who knows what you’ll see in this world.”

“I guess you’re right. I see now why you don’t like it here, your friends are great. I don’t know if my friends would have come running like that if I wanted to clean up a park.”

“Hey, it isn’t all demon slaying, you know? We have to take care of the little things as well as the big.” I paused. “What a second, is my not wanting to be here that obvious?”

“Yeah, every second. Sorry.”

“I’ll have to be more careful. It’s bad enough knowing what I know, I don’t want to alienate people too.”

“You can hang with my friends and I any time you want. I’ll introduce you.”

“Thanks.”

“So, um,” she turned a little red. “Was one of them your girlfriend?”

“One of them might be. We’re still in the negotiation phase at this point. Yasui and I met on the way to the school right at the start, so we’ve always been together. Elizabeth I met more recently. After I saved her from a fate worse than death she sort of took a liking to me after that and started hanging with the group.”

“What happened?”

“Let’s just say her powers would have run away without her. Literally. It would have been very, very bad for all involved. I fixed it, and it wasn’t exactly easy, either.”

“Wow. She’s pretty lucky to have found you, then.”

“I guess. I’m just glad I was able to help.”

“In that case I guess I’ll just say goodnight then. Thanks again.”

“Sure thing. And remember, not a word to anyone.”

She zipped her lips up, then smiled. We waved and she went back into her house.

I guess it doesn’t have to be a large victory, even something as minor as saving a fairy’s home is worthwhile. Something the Foundation would never even have known they needed to deal with. Something has to be done.

Creatures Creeping

"It's close to midnight, and something evil's lurking in the dark." -- Thriller

Thinking that was the end of it, I was surprised when Lynsey came to find me one day in November.

"She's back, walk me home after school," she said simply.

"Sure thing," I agreed.

I had been getting to know her friends, who weren't bad, but demon fighters they were not. Still, it was an interesting exercise in seeing the differences between normal high school students and Demongate High students. You didn't have to worry about someone's demonic nature taking them over and trying to kill you, for one thing.

That afternoon I walked her home and she invited me in again, where I found Autumn Leaf and Lynsey's mom talking about the plants she had in the house. Her hair wasn't shiny anymore, and even her skin looked off color. Her wings drooped and she seemed tired, holding onto a nearby plant to steady herself.

"I was wrong," she said when we came over to her. "At least this time I recognized the signs early enough and came for help. That's good, right?"

"Sure, but wrong about what? Are you okay? You don't look so good."

"I know. I'm talking about that energy that's been polluting the ley lines in the area. It wasn't the bikers, they haven't been back. But the corruption is seeping back in. I can't understand it, I don't know where it's coming from."

“Not to worry, we’ll figure it out. What Christina did at the end, did that help?”

“Not for long, but yeah. I’ve been trying to figure it out myself so I didn’t have to bother you, but I’m guess I’m just stupid. Would you... mind helping out again?”

She looked so forlorn my heart went out to her.

“Of course we will!” said Lynsey at once. “Right, Dean?”

I nodded. “Don’t worry about a thing,” I told the fairy. “I’m sure we can get to the bottom of it. And you’re not stupid, you just aren’t a spirit energist.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking visibly relieved.

I texted Christina and she arrived a few moments later, appearing in the room with a pop.

“Hi, little one,” she said. “So your food supply is going bad, Dean tells me?”

“Something like that.”

“You don’t look so good.”

“It really shows that much, huh?”

“Yeah. Come here, let me try something.” She climbed into Christina’s hands and sat down while she concentrated. “Yeah, I can feel corrupted energy inside you. I’m going to try and purify you like I did with the park. Let me know if it feels weird or anything.”

Christina closed her eyes and used spirit mastery (I had looked it up on the Foundation website, which I could still access) to cleanse Autumn Leaf’s body. She visibly brightened, some color coming back to her skin and she perked up.

“Oh, that’s very nice. I can feel that corrupted energy flowing away from me.”

“Good. Now we just need to get you off that messed up energy diet and you’ll be fine again. Let’s head out there, maybe I can pick something new up since we know it wasn’t the biker’s fault.”

“I feel kind of bad about that,” said Autumn Leaf. “We scared them off and they weren’t even the problem!”

“Eh, the park is probably glad to have them gone. Come on.”

Lynsey’s mother agreed to drive us over there, saving us time, as it was a fair walk. I thanked her and we piled into her car. Along the way I answered what questions I could about Demongate High and why things were the way they were.

FINDING THE BALANCE

Mostly ‘that’s the way they’ve always been’ though, sadly.

Once there, Christina walked around the park trying to sense things out. Lynsey and her mom walked around too, looking for anything out of the ordinary. For my part, I wandered around with spirit viewing active and noted a few things.

Getting back together, we asked Lynsey and her mother if they saw anything they thought was suspicious, and they said they didn’t. Christina said she felt two lines that seemed more corrupted than others, and I agreed.

“I’m not as good as Osman, of course, but I got a vague sense of two lines coming from... crap, which way was I facing?”

So I had to walk around the place again and try to find them, which I did, and pointed them out. Christina did some sensing, and told us it seemed they were flowing from east to west.

“So what’s east of here?” she asked.

“Gee, let me check,” said Lynsey’s mother, getting out her phone. A moment later she had a map pulled up and we looked it over.

“Looks like there’s a graveyard about a mile directly east from here, past that a school, more parks, and then nothing.

“The Crown Point Cemetery,” I said, reading it off the phone. “Sounds like as good a place as any to start looking.”

We drove down, which took less than five minutes, and got out to look around. It was a pretty large place, with no fence or wall around it, just some small, sad looking trees dotting the area.

“Oh yeah,” said Christina as we walked around. “As the energy passes through this place it’s getting corrupted. The question is why.”

“What exactly are we talking about here?” Lynsey asked. “You guys keep saying energy and ley lines and whatnot, but what are they?”

“Energy conduits for the Earth,” I explained simply. “You can look them up at home, there’s a lot of information on them that’s escaped Foundation control. Of course, you guys can’t see or feel them, but they’re there. They’re important to us because we can hook into them, so to speak, and gain a bit of a boost for using our powers. But the greater long term concern is nature mirrors them. A place with a lot of them is green, healthy, full of life. A place that has few is dying, or has had something bad happen recently.

“Now see, there are some trees here, and this area does receive some attention because of it being a graveyard. The grass is tended, animals can

come and go, and the trees are healthy. So this would be a slightly below normal area for ley line density. We should see some, but not tons. More plants would help but there shouldn't be anything disrupting the flow. However, something is. That something is corrupting the energy as it passes through this place, turning it from an energy of life to an energy of death. That's bad news."

"Especially if you're like me," said Autumn Leaf, "and you live off the stuff."

"So, same deal. Walk around, see if you find anything out of place. A dead patch of grass, weird symbols... bodies missing, anything like that."

"Okay," the three said, and we started to look around.

The place was *big*. It took us a half hour to walk the place and I saw that they hadn't found anything by the looks on their faces.

"The energy comes and goes," said Christina, "but I can't place where it's worst. It's so weird. It feels like something happened here, but I don't know what."

"I hear you," I replied. "My ESP is tingling, but that could just be because it's a graveyard. We may have to get Osman here, have Katrina feel things out."

"Huh?" asked Lynsey.

"Long story. Hey, do me a favor- look over there." I pointed.

"What am I supposed to be looking at?"

"Just... look over there."

"Okay?"

She did, but rather than looking where she was looking I watched her eyes. *Just as I thought, they sort of slide over a certain section.*

"I don't see it."

"Exactly my point. Tell me, how many grave sites are in that direction?"

She tried to count but her eyes kept sliding past something. "I don't know, not many?"

"Strange to have an area with so few, isn't it?"

"I guess. Do you see something?"

"No, but I've used a certain type of ward more than any other, so if someone is using my own trick against me I'm going to be quite aggravated. Luckily, we can tell if my theory is correct quite easily."

I walked over to a nearby hose that seemed to have been left sitting there, and picked it up. *Thank you, luck!* "Christina, can you see where this turns on, then twist again, like we did last summer?"

FINDING THE BALANCE

"I think your brain is twisted, Dean, but I think I know what you mean. Be right back."

She went to follow the thing and shortly water was spraying out of it. I smiled and started just spraying the entire area with water.

"What the heck are you doing now?" asked Lynsey, looking around to make sure no one was watching. Luckily, there wasn't even anyone around, so it was fine.

"Wards have a grave weakness," I explained. "And that weakness is water. Normally they're just paper, so if they get wet, they stop working. I'm hoping- aha!"

As I expected, the water eventually reached the area everyone kept looking past and washed the wards away. An enormous number of dug graves appeared before us.

Lynsey's eyes went wide as she took in the number of empty coffins strewn about the lawn, and the piles of dirt next to each one.

"Thought so. They used them as barrier wards, created an entire area no one would look in, so we just kept looking past it." I waved to Christina to turn the water off, which she did, coming over to us again.

"Guess we found out what it was," she remarked, looking the area over herself.

"Sort of. We know what, but not who, when, or why."

"Who would do such a thing?" asked Autumn Leaf.

"Not many, surprisingly. Ghouls eat the dead, but they're not all that civilized about it. Never heard of an artificer Ghoul either, though I suppose it could happen. Stay here, we'll check it out. There could be traps in case someone pierced the wards."

"Okay."

We made our way closer.

"Can't be summoners," said Christina. "They would need sacrifices, not corpses."

"True. I just had an ugly thought, but the scale is too small. Not summoners, but demons themselves."

"Why?"

"Possession. They can possess just about anything, and that would make it much harder to kill them. The body would have to be totally destroyed, plus the psychological factor."

"Hey, look at this. Some of these have been rejected!"

I walked over to where she was looking, and she was right. This coffin was not empty, but held the decayed corpse of... someone.

“Why go through all this work and then leave it?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

I looked around. There must be at least two dozen holes dug here, and I had to wonder- there were lots of graveyards in the area, had others been hit like this as well?

“In any case, I better seal this area off again with some new ignore wards, before someone sees all this. Then we’ll have to see if whoever it is comes back tonight.”

“But then they won’t see the place, the wards will be yours and not theirs!”

“Ah, yes. That is a snag, isn’t it? Oh, wait, I can just put a ring of them now to keep people out, then disable it after dark. They won’t know the difference, they’ll think they’re just seeing past their own wards.”

“That should work. Gee, here’s another one they just left. Man!”

“Yeah. We’ll put them back in a moment.” I set a bunch of wards out to cut the area off again, then was about to help Christina put lids back on coffins. “Wait, we can’t touch anything, they’ll know someone’s been here!”

“Ah, you’re right. Guess they’re just laying here, then.”

“We can get them back later. Come on, we’ll head back for now. I have stupid homework to do and then we can all get back here after dark.”

“You too, huh?” she asked with a smile.

“Yeah. I mean, look at this. Look at where we are.” I indicated the grounds. “Is speaking French really going to help me here? I think not. The Foundation should have made other arrangements once the island was hit. Like renovating a regular school or something. We’re soldiers, not regular kids. Going to a regular high school is both pointless and stupid. We need to be doing this kind of thing. If this podunk town has this much supernatural stuff going on, everyplace does. How the world at large doesn’t already know seems like they actively go out of their way to ignore it. It’s ludicrous!”

“Preaching to the choir, Dean. You think I like it any better than you?”

“Hey, are you bullied?”

“Girls do it differently than guys, but yes, I’ve had to hold off blowing a couple of people up at my ‘new school.’”

I barked a laugh. “You too, huh? Honestly, what were they thinking?”

“Splitting us up, maybe?”

I was about to give a flippant response, but then sobered. “That’s actually a possibility I hadn’t thought of. Still, inconveniencing everyone just to make it so we have slightly less contact? No, couldn’t be. I mean I email and text you all, all the time. It’s one of the things that keeps me sane in this town.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Not the cute girls, fairies included?” She pointed over at Lynsey who was still trying to see us, squinting and moving her head this way and that.

“I don’t need a three way love triangle, thank you very much. But between you and me, the tiny, pretty, naked fairy is a nice perk.”

“You dog! Anyway, how do you know it isn’t a triangle already? This would be the perfect setting for me to confess, don’t you think?”

“Don’t even joke about that. Confess when we’re out of the graveyard, at least.”

She smiled. “Don’t worry. No harem for you! You’re a nice guy but I need someone a little more... pliable.”

“I don’t even want to know what that means. Come on, I have wards to replace now, too. Let’s go.”

“I’ll just head home from here, no one is going to notice. See you tonight!” She pulled out a ward and teleported away.

Pliable? What does she want, a dog to be trained? Wait, she didn’t mean it in the physical sense, did she? Like a gymnast? Not thinking about it! LA LA LA.

8

Revenge

*“Burn the bodies, and bring me the cold
ashes on a silver plate, with a glass of
chilled Sancerre.” --A certain Rimmer*

And so our adventure to find out what was going on turned into a stakeout. My friends and I were watching the graveyard that night, after using the Time Frame to verify the hooded figure had come to dig up corpses every night that week. We couldn't see inside the warded barrier even with the Frame, which I thought was a bit unfair. It just showed blackness, as the wards were active at that time. He always arrived shortly after midnight, worked for several hours, then left again.

“So where are the bodies going?” asked Elizabeth. “He’s not walking out with them, that’s for sure.”

“If he’s an artificer, and I sincerely hope he’s not, he could be putting them in contain wards,” I answered.

“Indeed, he could have just as many talismans as you, Dean,” said Osman. “I wouldn’t want to fight you.”

“I think I have what is known as an unhealthy obsession with them?” I hedged. “I don’t think most make nearly as many as I have over the years.”

“Still,” said Yasui, “even one of yours could be devastating. Attack or defense, there’s no telling what he might have at his disposal.”

“So where is he?” asked Christina. “He’s late!”

“He comes around this time, don’t panic for a few more minutes.”

Katrina appeared in illusion form. “I don’t know, I feel like waiting is a bad idea.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Is that a feeling or a power?” asked Osman.

“A power. I don’t think he’s coming back because he got everything he needed. Whatever he’s doing, I think he’s going to do it tonight.”

“Okay, I trust what you’re saying. The latest he ever came before was,” I looked at my cell phone, “five minutes from now. We’ll wait ten minutes, then try to find this guy. Osman, get started petitioning that sun crow you’ve been working with. We’ll need his help to track this guy down.”

“Right.”

He took the time to do the full prayer, and as the minutes ticked by, I got more and more worried. When the ten minutes were up the crow appeared, obviously asleep. I gently placed a bind ward onto him, so he could stay without draining Osman’s energies.

“Heavenly creatures sleep?” asked Christina, surprised.

“Some do, some don’t, just like demons,” Osman replied. “Excuse me, sun crow?”

He gently woke up the bird, who agreed to help us track down the body snatcher, and flew off to the area of dug up graves. We hung back, knowing all our impressive Spirit Energies would just confuse him. (Osman’s was impressive, just impressively small, comparatively.) He came back, looking worried.

“This place is torn up something awful. The energy here is all messed up.”

“We know. We’ll fix that later, once whoever is doing this is stopped. Incidentally, did you get a fix on whoever is doing this?”

“Sort of. There’s been only one person there, so that helped. But his energy is really weak. I mean, like he’s a normal guy or something.”

“That’s impossible! We watched him go in there, stay for hours, and come out empty handed. Those bodies went someplace. Even if he was a ghoul, he couldn’t have eaten that many people in that short a timespan.”

“All I know is what I feel. The dark energies around him sort of clung, because he was there so much, I guess? I can track those.”

“Great, let’s get going.”

“We shouldn’t have waited...” said Katrina, disappearing. “It’s going to go bad, I know it.”

We needed to hurry, so Elizabeth called out Anthy, who split, and we got on to ride. Following the yata-garasu as he or she- I couldn’t tell- winged through the city.

We came to a small house, which was dark.

“This is where he went back to,” said the crow. “I don’t sense anyone inside though.”

“Let’s go,” I said, holding out my hand.

“We’re just going to break in?” asked Osman. “Isn’t that dishonest?”

“We have to know what he’s planning with those bodies,” said Christina. “You can stay out here if you want.”

“I’ll keep the yata-garasu company, then.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll leave an Anthy out here too, in case you run into trouble.”

He nodded, and we linked hands and phased through the wall, using my trusty phase talisman.

Once inside we looked around, and I didn’t like what I saw. Books on the occult, various photographs of people using powers, usually from a distance, and more. Elizabeth whistled. “This guy’s as obsessed with us as you are with talismans, Dean.”

“At least my obsession is useful. Come on, let’s see what the other rooms look like.”

Every room was like the first, packed with odd symbols, books, charts, cork boards full of pictures.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” said Christina, looking around. “And it’s just a feeling, not powers, but it’s getting stronger.”

“Yeah,” I answered, “and no bodies yet. Come on, let’s check the basement.”

“Stairs were over here,” said Yasui. “Hey Dean, is this guy an artificer or what? He wouldn’t need all this stuff if he had been to Demongate.”

I nodded. “Yeah, something doesn’t add up here. I really hope I don’t see something in the basement I fear I’m going to.”

“What?”

“Just... it’s not going to be pretty. Come on.”

We made our way down there and as I expected, a pentagram had been chiseled into the floor. Burned down candles were set around it, and there were bowls, jars of powders and what looked like the remains of a rabbit that had recently been killed were scattered around the room.

“Oh, no!” most of us cried in unison. We knew what it meant.

“Here!” said Yasui, grabbing a heavy book off a shelf. “Summoning rituals, and they’re doing it the hard way. I don’t think he has powers at all, Dean.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

We checked it over, and she was right, the book contained information on how to summon specific demons in a totally mundane way. Just because a summoner could call a demon in seconds didn't mean a misguided group of (and let's be kind to them) idiots couldn't do the same with a lot more time, effort, and a little blood sacrifice.

"He's planning something," said Christina. "We need to find this guy. Now."

"I agree. Let's go."

"Here," said Yasui, handing me the book. "We can at least get this away from them."

"Good call," I said, hurtling up the stairs and pushing it into my pouch. We burst out the front door, surprising Osman.

"He's elsewhere, and up to something. We need to move. Can you find him, oh most excellent of Heavenly trackers?"

"No need to be sarcastic about it. What's up, anyway?"

"He's some kind of satanist or something. We think he summoned a demon and he's planning something. Why can't anyone try asking the help of an angel? It's always demons! Can you track him or not?"

"I can try. Wait, you're a shaman, are you not?" he asked Elizabeth.

"I am."

"Do you know a spirit that could help? Or can you help me to track better?"

"Wait, I think I can! Give me a minute."

She chanted for two minutes, and I recognized it as the moon spirit she was calling on.

"There," she said. "We both have it. I increased our insightfulness, and you can ask the moon spirit for guidance about anything the night touches."

Wow, that's handy. Spirits can be subtle but certainly powerful. I really need to learn to lean on my friends more rather than trying to do everything myself. This is the perfect example.

"Thanks," said the crow. He concentrated. "There's a weird disturbance, do you feel that?"

"Yeah," she said, looking over in one direction. "That way?"

"That's it. I think his energy goes that way too. Come on."

We all jumped on Anthy and took off again, speeding through the night as guided by the moon spirit and the tracking abilities of the yata-garasu. I knew we were nearing the place as the night was lit up by police lights from a dozen cars.

Oh, crap.

We landed and the crow flew on, as we were in front of a mall so he went to the roof, out of sight. An officer spotted us and walked over.

“What are you kids doing out here?” he demanded.

“Ah, let me answer that question with another question. Is there a lunatic of some kind inside? Possibly with what looks like a bunch of dead people?”

“I wish it was just one. There’s six of them, and they’ve been holding a store hostage for hours.”

“Great. Well, we’ll just be on our way then.”

“Wait a second.”

“Yes?” I smiled nervously, wishing Kat might use *compulsion* on him or something to let us get away. *Usually in this situation they would be happy to let us go, right? Right?? Get us out of the way, fewer people to deal with?*

“They’ve been raving about wanting to talk to someone specific, and that they would show up out of nowhere. You kids fit the bill, come with me.”

“Ah?” I said, at a loss for words. I turned and made a helpless gesture to the others, who shrugged back at me. We followed him through the entrance and past empty shops.

“What are you bringing kids here for?” asked another officer, running up to us.

“They just showed up. Maybe the hostage takers will talk to them.”

“At this point I’ll try anything. Come on.”

We were led to a store with the grating down and inside I could see a bunch of people sitting down. They were being covered by six people with guns and a whole bunch of undead wandering about. Around the front of the store were a whole bunch of officers, news crews down the hall, and some barriers had been brought in, probably in case they started shooting.

Yeah, that’s them, all right. Six of them? This is going to get ugly.

“Hey, you in there!” shouted the officer. “This who you wanted to talk to?”

The guy who must have been the ringleader called his zombies to himself, making a shield as he walked over to the entrance. He peeked around them. “Maybe. Stick them with the piece of paper.”

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“Seriously?”

“You want these people out of here alive?”

“Fine. Where’s that piece of paper?”

Someone handed it to him, and he went to go stick it on Osman. He leaned away from it, not knowing what sort of ward it was.

“Yeah, forget it, they’ll do. Get those cameras over here!” he called. “We’re ready to start the show!”

The officer looked down at the paper in his hand, then at Osman. “What’s going on?” he asked. “What’s so special about this paper?”

“How to explain...” Osman said, clearly uncomfortable. He was saved from further grilling by the news crews racing forward, setting up their cameras.

The officer groaned.

“Those cameras rolling? Good. I’m going to tell you a story that’ll make all your careers. They’ll back me up, won’t you?” He pointed to us. “Because you know the truth, and now everyone will.” He stepped out from behind his zombies. “Everyone, you’ve been lied to for years, thousands of years. You’ve been controlled, left in the dust, by people like that.” He pointed to me, and I did my best to look confused. “You see,” he said, gesturing to his horde. “Supernatural powers are real. There’s an organization that’s keeping us all in the dark, and has probably been doing so since the beginning of time.”

Yeah, kinda figured it would be something like that. Great. This is the worst possible thing!

“Don’t believe me? You will, after tonight. I’m going to force the issue. The next rain comes along, you’re going to find all the graves of these people we dug up. Ask yourself how you missed it for so long. The answer is going to be supernatural power. Isn’t that right? Am I lying or not? Go on, tell the world!”

“I’m not really qualified to do something like that,” I hedged.

“But you don’t deny it, that this group is controlling the world with supernatural powers?”

“You talking about the illuminati or something?”

“Don’t play games with me!” he shouted, shoving the gun up against the grating.

“Armor,” I muttered, activating my talisman.

“Maybe you should just play along for now?” suggested the officer.

“All right. Yes, you’re absolutely right, okay?”

“Now we’re getting somewhere, but not far enough. I’ll show you what I mean, show all of you!”

He shot me.

The bullet bounced off my armor with a bang, and the officer drew his weapon and tried to pull me away. The others did the same, backing away. I stood my ground.

“Come on!” he said to me. But the other guy was just laughing, and ducked behind his horde again.

“You see, not a scratch! You believe me now?”

“Drop your weapon!” shouted the officer, still trying to pull me away.

“It’s fine,” I said to him. “I think he’s proven his point. He won’t shoot again.” *I hope.*

He stopped grabbing me. “What?”

“Look, what do you want?” I asked the guy. “You went through an awful lot of trouble to set this up. Why?”

“Like I said, the world is going to know the truth, tonight.”

“The world doesn’t want to know the truth,” I said. “Let it remain ignorant. I might not totally agree with the policy, but it’s worked up to this point.”

I can't believe it's me making this argument. Talk about a reversal...

“HA! Get off your high horse, you’re as bad as the rest. Leaving us powerless, ignorant. Is that really better?”

“That’s good, get him talking,” whispered the officer.

“Better? I don’t know. Safer? I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about it a lot myself, lately. You know, with all that’s been going on in the world?”

“Yes, the tower falling down, all those weird happenings. That’s your kind doing things, isn’t it?”

“We aren’t doing those things, we’re trying our best to find out what’s doing them, so it can be stopped. We’re only human, even we don’t know everything.” *Well, apart from those that are part demon.*

“Human? What about the demon that gave me magic? You call that human?”

“He probably was human, once. He went to the Demon World when he died, was tortured, and became what he is today. You won’t be so lucky. You’ll be used as money, or just siphoned away for power and your soul will be destroyed. Or maybe he’ll let you out every few years, for just a little torture and serving him drinks like a slave, before stuffing you back into your container again. I’m sure they’re quite inventive down there.”

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"I'm prepared to accept that. The devil was quite accommodating with us once we pledged our souls to him. Gave us the spell for the zombies, and those pieces of paper we used to make it all work. I'm sure it won't be as bad as you say."

I shook my head. "You really did it then?"

"Oh yeah. I know, stupid, right? Well, I'm willing to do anything to get the truth out, and so are my friends here. It's time we did something about the messed up state of the world. Caused by people like you."

"We're trying to fix it, the state of the world is not our fault. You have no idea what we have to go through, trying to protect people like you!"

"And what about us? Don't we get any say? Oh, no, you people know what's best, that's what you're telling me."

"Not me. I'm still a kid, I don't make policy."

"But you will, and you'll no doubt keep things as they are."

"You can't know that. And pointing that gun at me isn't helping me change my mind."

"What if I pointed it at myself, instead?" He put the gun up to his head.

"What are you-"

"Quiet! You admit powers exist in the world and you have them?"

I glanced over at the officer. He shrugged.

"I admit it."

"What about your friends there, they have powers?"

"Yes."

"How many? How many people in the world?"

"I don't know, maybe four hundred a year, tops? It's a drop in the bucket, honest. It's not even one percent, we may as well not even exist."

"But you do, that's the problem. That there are so few just makes it worse, you one percenters. Get this grating up," he called to the others. Several zombies went to lift the metal sliding door that separated us. The others clustered around the hostages, who shrank back in fear.

"You're coming quietly?" asked the officer, gun still trained on the man. "Letting the hostages go?"

"Not exactly." He smirked. "Hey, kid, you know what happens if we die and the zombies are still around?"

"It's probably too much to hope for they just go back to being corpses rather than zombies?"

"Nope. Not big on magic then, huh?"

"Not Pluto spells. I know a couple, but nothing relating to necromancy like you obviously do."

“Should have studied harder. Well, it won’t help you anyway. We ready?” he called to his companions.

“Ready,” they all shouted, bringing their guns up.

“What are you doing?” I asked, not liking where this was going.

“Proving my point. I’ll tell you what happens, as a little preview. They follow the last orders they were given. Zombies- rampage about the city and kill everyone you see!” The others echoed these orders. “For the truth,” said the man, raising his gun. The others did the same, putting the guns into their mouths.

“NO!” I shouted as they all pulled the triggers.

The noise was tremendous, and the zombies sprang into action. I had been counting, and there were indeed six zombies for each person, meaning there were thirty six of the things. Eight were right in the store entrance, and all leapt for the nearest person. The others went for the hostages, who were now screaming and trying to get away. The six bodies started to fall.

I lost track of that as one zombie lunged at me, pinning me to the ground. It swung at me, but the blow glanced off my armor. He went to bite me instead. It too scraped against the armor, now visible as he tried to get through it.

Crap, I don’t have any short range weapons. I use either of mine right now and I get hit too. Can’t combust him, wait energy attack, that’s directed away from me. If I can just get my hand up to his head...

I was struggling to raise my hand when I found myself grappling Yasui instead of the zombie. Looking over I saw one hitting it, where she had just been standing. Her face was very close to mine, and she leaned in and lightly kissed me.

“Is this really the time?” I asked as she pulled away and hauled me up.

“I didn’t want to fall behind,” she said. “Liz said she kissed you. It was too good an opportunity to pass up.”

“Fall beh- I’ll kiss you all you want later, we have people to save!”

“You all heard him!” she said, grinning. She spun, catching the zombie that was coming towards her in the head and making it fly into the two that were trying to figure out what had happened. All three went down in a tangle of limbs. She laughed and jumped in the air, landing on the one next to me who was trying to claw the officer’s face off. This drove it into the floor with a mighty blow.

She must be doing something, there’s no way she’s hitting them that hard.

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Osman got the yata-garasu back, who threw himself into the fray, lighting zombies on fire as he touched them. Others were being flung back from people in the store, probably by Katrina. Christina was backpedaling, bow out and calmly putting arrows through heads, which actually wasn't doing as much as I would have expected. They were still coming. Elizabeth was dancing back and forth, her two Anthys trying to get a good shot.

"Have them grow some more, then knock the zombies over. Energy blast them into the ground!" I shouted at her.

"Nice idea!"

For my part, I lined up and sent an energy blast into the cameras, which were helpfully all in a line. The operators and anchors looked at me fearfully. "Get out of here, you want to be zombie food?" I shouted at them. They took off.

Probably too much to hope for they weren't broadcasting that somehow rather than just recording it. Worry about that later!

"Acceleration," I said, activating my favorite talisman. I rushed into the store and dodged a few zombies until I was standing in the middle of the store. The zombies were chasing the now "released" hostages, and only one was currently eating someone.

Crap, I was too late, but at least I can help the others now.

I touched the ground and activated my electric line, weaving it back and forth across the area and cutting the zombies off. They stumbled into it and fried themselves.

The others fell quickly enough. Yasui had a clone out, smashing zombies from the front and back at the same time, causing them to burst apart. Christina had switched to shooting legs off, slowing them down so Katrina could set them on fire. At least every time I saw one go down, it caught fire, so I assumed that's what was going on.

Good thing they're all dried up, easy to put to the flame. I just hope she doesn't burn the whole place down. As if on cue, sprinklers started going off, and they started to go out. Thanks a bunch, I thought to no one in particular.

Suddenly it seemed our side had a lot more troops, as Foundation members suddenly showed up and helped finish the job. In moments all the zombies were still and the officers were looking around, confused. They had all been shooting, but bullets hadn't seemed to do much against the lurching bodies.

"What just happened?" demanded the one I had been talking to, raising his gun to point at the newcomers. "Who are all you people?"

ROBERT ZIEFEL

The man in front, who I saw was Mr DeVille, looked to the side at one of his people. That man began to sing, and suddenly all the normal people in the place slumped over, asleep.

“Dean Chesterfield,” said Mr DeVille, looking over the carnage of the area. “I should have known.”

Blame Game

“Now then, who can I blame this on?”

--Every person, anywhere, after something goes wrong.

“Start the cleanup,” Mr DeVille said to the others, “and get some ES-Pers here. We’re going to need to come up with a story for the memory alteration.”

“Ah, some reporters got away, already,” I said.

He looked over at the smoking cameras. “Technology,” he snarled. “I suppose they caught at least part of this debacle?”

I nodded.

“Great! Stay there, I’ll talk to you later.” He started issuing more orders, and checking over the body that had been chewed up by the zombie.

Looks like only one person was killed, I suppose that’s a victory of sorts.

Osman came over to me. “Kat wants to apologize, she was using sending to try and reach someone in the Foundation, but everyone she knew was asleep. It took some time to get the message through. We couldn’t exactly get out our phones, could we?”

“No, you couldn’t. You did good, Kat. I didn’t even think about that.”

“She would say all this herself, but we’re wiped out.” He raised his hand, “you’re going to offer energy, better leave it for now though.”

I was going to, he knows me pretty well. The five of us gathered and sat down on some benches, watching the Foundation people go to work.

“Think it got out?” asked Elizabeth.

“We should probably assume it did,” said Christina. “Safer that way.”

More people were arriving in bursts of air, probably had been sent pictures of the place. They discussed what the situation was, and what story they wanted to plant in these people’s memories, then got to work. As they

did they dropped a red card on top of each person, probably to let the others know they had been “processed.”

With everyone working, Mr DeVille came over to us.

“What else do I need to know?” he demanded.

We looked at each other.

“Uh, there’s a bunch of open graves at the Crown Point Cemetery,” said Elizabeth.

“And probably others,” said Osman. “There were more zombies here than graves we found at that one. Unless we only found that one spot they were pulling from.”

“We’ll get some seers to check the local graveyards. What else?”

“If someone gets into the house this guy owned they’re going to find a lot of evidence for his claims,” I said. “Oh, and he had this, and probably others. We hurried here once we figured out what was going on.” I handed him the book of rituals.

“Great,” he said sarcastically, looking it over.

“Probably all the members had similar setups, we’ll have to find out where they all lived, get someone there before those reporters do,” said Christina.

“These reporters, what news agencies?”

“Wasn’t really paying attention to that when we got in here,” I said. “We can get the Time Frame out if you really need to know.”

“Yeah Dean, we really need to know. And here’s another thing we need to know- how did you get mixed up in this? I mean this is just too much, wouldn’t you agree? It’s like chaos swirls around you, and now that Lucian can’t censor his reports to protect you I’m getting a much clearer picture about your... involvement in things.”

“Censoring? What do you mean?”

“I mean making excuses for you, or not telling me the whole story. Downplaying your part in certain events, that sort of thing. I know he felt a sort of kinship with you, as you’re both artificers, but I think there was more that he didn’t tell me. For example, everyone that was displaced from the school has been keeping their head down. Blending in. Doing what they’re *supposed to be doing*. But not the great Dean, no. He has be running around in the dead of night, fighting zombies!”

“And a good thing, too,” said Elizabeth, defending me. “If they had gotten bored and started without us, all those people would have died. They were waiting for someone- a Foundation member, who would invariably try to stop them, and show the world powers. If we hadn’t happened by the only people here would have been regular police personal with guns. Bullets

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weren't doing much to those zombies, so they would have been overrun. Imagine the kind of chaos outside if they had!"

"I'm not talking to you, Elizabeth," said Mr DeVille. "Don't make it worse for yourself."

Her two Anthy copies perked up, walking to either side of the bench. He chose to ignore it, looking back at me again. "Well?"

"Well, what? You want to know how I came to be here? I'll tell you. A fairy was found dying by a classmate. She saw me putting that car into the contain ward and figured I might be able to help. I did. We thought it was a gang messing up her park and souring the energy but it turned out to be a bit further away. The graveyard was torn up, and that was corrupting the energy that was flowing into the park. We then traced it to this guy, and the yata-garasu led us here, to the standoff."

"What classmate is this?"

"Psi barrier," I said instead, activating my protection talisman. *Just in case he tries to read my mind, he's not getting the name that way, either.* I shook my head. "No, you're not going after her. I've vetted her, what she knows stays in her head. To do otherwise would be exactly like murdering her and replacing her with someone who is not quite, but almost, the same person. I like her just how she is, thank you. To do otherwise would be wrong. Don't worry, I told her only minimal information about us, and she has no physical evidence." *Apart from a new friendship with a fairy, I guess.*

"That's not for you to decide."

"Tough."

We stared at each other for a moment.

"Fine, at least for now. Anything down the road is on your head. Back to this, at no point did you think, 'Hey, maybe I should tell someone about the dozens of bodies missing from the graveyard?'"

"Not really, no. In the first place, Elizabeth is right. If seers aren't noticing this sort of thing then it's either too small a scale for them to worry about, or you're stretched too thin to bother. This is what the Foundation is supposed to be doing, and even those guys knew it. They expected someone to swoop in and try to stop them right away, that's why they were prepared to shoot themselves and turn the zombies loose. In the second place this sort of thing is what I thought we were being trained for. You know, dealing with supernatural stuff."

"I admit, our seers are at work trying to figure out a good way to attack the island, and making sure the demonic force there stays put. We've been letting other areas falter a bit."

“I’ve already given you a totally sound battle plan.”

He ignored that. “As for the second, if you really wanted to do this sort of thing you would get a job with the Foundation, where you would be given further instruction. You would be put on a team of experienced individuals who knew what they’re doing and be given orders. If you followed those orders over the years one day you would be given the right to issue those orders. As it is you are still just students, and quite frankly more dangerous than any number of zombies running around.”

I looked at him skeptically.

He continued. “I mean look at this mess- no regard for the safety of the officers involved. One civilian dead, several injured, plus the perpetrators all killed themselves.”

“Seems like a bonus to me,” said Christina. “They freely admitted to being demon worshipers, and handed over their souls for this fool crusade of theirs.”

But even so, I find I can’t blame them. They were willing to die and face an unknown future for their beliefs. Can I do less? Do I even believe in anything that strongly?

“That is not the point,” he almost yelled. “We might have been able to pay off the demon that gave them power, get him to rescind it. Maybe get those people their souls back. Too late for that now, they’re all dead and currency by now. Doesn’t that bother you in the slightest?”

I started to answer, but a young woman came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. She was a beautiful girl, not much older than we were, and she smiled kindly at us. She had long, red hair, and when she spoke, a trace of an Irish accent came through. “Come on, Martin. These kids have been up for hours and are probably exhausted. They did what they could, let’s leave it at that for now. Tempers are high, and what’s done is done. Let them get home and get some rest. You can talk about this tomorrow when everyone’s a little more calm.”

“It’s just, over and over, Dean and his merry band come to my attention!”

She laughed, clear and strong, and I found I liked her laugh. Somehow it seemed familiar to me, but I couldn’t place it. *Haven’t I seen this person before? Something about a talisman? Missing powers? No, I would have remembered that face.*

“Were my friends and I any different, growing up? I mean how would we have handled this?”

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“Don’t remind me about the headaches I had with your group,” he said, rolling his eyes. “All right. Fine. Go home, all of you. But please try to stay out of trouble for a day or two? If that isn’t too much to ask? Dean? We’ll be talking again soon.”

“Looking forward to it!” *Not.*

Elizabeth saw me home, and then used a ward to get home again. I let myself in and looked at the clock.

Great, I have to get up in five hours. Maybe my father has a brew that can pep me up in the morning.

He did, so I got through the day in one piece. I was anxiously watching the news sites during the day, but no mention of the incident came up. *I guess they are good at what they do. Of course, they’ve had a lot of experience. It was naive of me to believe that sort of thing hadn’t happened in the past and been covered up.*

I told Lynsey to tell Autumn Leaf the energy surrounding the park should stay clear now, as everything had been taken care of. She thanked me, and wasn’t too disappointed I couldn’t give her more than a brief overview of what happened.

Naturally I had my mental barrier talisman up the entire time, from the moment I saw her to the time I went home. *I doubt they would spare the people to continuously try to read my mind, hopefully Mr DeVille isn’t that petty. But you never know.*

And when I got home, the devil appeared. More accurately, the DeVille.

I felt him inside, made sure my barrier was active, and let myself in. He was sitting with my parents in the living room, obviously waiting for me to get home.

“Just having a quick chat with your parents, Dean,” he said, by way of greeting.

“I see,” I answered curtly.

“They seem to think you can do no wrong. They’re actually quite proud of all you’ve accomplished.”

“As I am.”

“Yes, yes. I just want to understand what drives you. Why you specifically get caught up in so many things.”

“You think I know? Stuff happens, I react to it. No big mystery there. As for what drives me- keeping my friends safe and making amazing talismans.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all. What, do you think I’m planning some takeover or something? I don’t want your job. I want the island back, my old life back. To take real classes again and help my fellow students with their problems. Failing that, because we won’t get the island back soon enough to start classes there this year, to make sure that never happens again. I want to do good in the world, protect those that don’t have powers. Is the best way to do that ignorance? I don’t know, it has been for a long time but now, maybe that should change. Is that so wrong to at least think about this sort of thing?”

“I suppose not. It just worries me, the fact that you seem to be at the center of all this.”

“Wait, you don’t think I’m this chaos force, do you? I haven’t been near Paris since that one field trip we took there, years ago!”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I just have to make sure I cover every possibility. Nowhere else have zombies attacked, for instance. But here, all kinds of things have gone on, since you returned.”

“But I’m not to blame for that! I’m not the enemy here, I want to find this source of order that sometimes talks to me and get the world back on track. You think I like being in danger? Having my friends in the line of fire? Why do you think half the things I’ve made for them are defensive in nature?”

“I hope I can believe you. All right, the Foundation will keep you up to date about anything more we found out about the chaos thing.”

“Anything more? Have you found out anything at all?”

He sighed. “Actually, no. We still have angels looking, though. Have you changed your mind about letting me know the name of this classmate of yours? We just want to look into her background, make sure she isn’t a threat. We won’t wipe her memory without talking it over with you and her, you have my word.”

“I wish I could believe you,” I said, almost echoing his words. “But believe me what I say she’s not a threat either. She’s just a plain old girl, living with her siblings, not involved any more than this. With this issue over she won’t have any excuse to talk to me about our world, and the matter will drop. I gave her a summary so she didn’t pester me about it, and that was that. She accepted it.”

“All right,” he said at last. “But if I see any websites or whatever they’re called, and they come from students at your school, there will be consequences.”

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“I’m not worried. If that’s everything, let me show you to the door.”
He said his goodbyes to my parents, and teleported himself away.

“He’s not that bad, once you get to know him,” said my father.

“It’s just he’s in a situation he’s never dealt with before,” put in my mother. “And that makes breath stealers like him very nervous. Especially really old breath stealers, you think being our age makes accepting new things harder? Try living a dozen lifetimes and see how tough it is. Please try to be a little patient with him.”

“I’ll try, but having him dropping vague hints I’m to blame for all of this? It doesn’t help.”

“Just do your best, I’m sure he’ll be relying on your help soon enough.”

“That’ll be the day.”

That evening, I sat up in bed, thinking about how the previous night could have gone differently.

What if we had called the Foundation in earlier? There’s no reason they would have believed us, especially given Mr DeVille’s dislike of me. They might have sent one person to verify what I was saying, but no matter what, it would have been too late. Maybe we could have found him before he went to the mall? But they couldn’t have done much more than we did, it was broad daylight.

I played out my head the various ways things could have gone. Thinking about the various delays that would have resulted in trying to get the “perfect” team together. *Would they have known to look for magic? I didn’t, but then I wouldn’t have felt any, the traces would have been long gone.* An angel that was better at it could have been petitioned, of course. But there was no reason to suspect it was a normal person who had gotten hold of a little magic to create zombies. The possibilities of it being ghouls or something else entirely was equally likely. *Could they have found him earlier?* I didn’t see how, but perhaps if I had called Osman in, had him teleport into his own walled off area of ignore... Then put two wards on the yata-garasu.

Yes, maybe that would have been the way to go. I should have acted faster, instead of waiting to capture him that night. But if he did have the bodies inside contain wards, there would have been no proof! We would have knocked on his door and gone away empty handed. Plus we didn’t know about his friends, they would have gone through with the plan, right?

We wouldn't have stopped what happened.

I turned the situation over and over in my mind as I tried to fall asleep, unsatisfied with any of my ideas for what would have been the best solution.

Those men died for their belief in a nebulous organization they learned about only through piecing together various scraps of information. An organization they were right about, and one I respected until recently. They thought if they brought the story to light, misguided as the attempt was, the world might change. They were even willing to hand over their souls to do it. At least most others who do that get long lives of power and riches here on Earth to balance it out. They got a couple of months to throw a plan together? Some reward.

And even after all that work, nothing will change. The Foundation swept in, covered the whole thing up, and those people will just have "disappeared." The Foundation must have done this so many times it's largely automatic now- look at those little red cards they used. They didn't spend ten minutes coming up with a story, they just looked around and sort of agreed what they wanted those people to remember. I wonder, if I looked into their activities from outside, how many odd occurrences in the world would I find their fingerprints on?

Is that... right?

10

Escalation

“Bullying is killing our kids. Being different is killing our kids and the kids who are bullying are dying inside. We have to save our kids whether they are bullied or they are bullying. They are all in pain.” -- Cat Cora

Over the next weeks, Mr DeVille didn't come to share any information the angels had found about chaos. I couldn't say I was surprised, I really didn't expect him to. Nothing else odd happened, at least in the supernatural sense. Lynsey and I walked to and from school together, and I hung out with her and her friends at lunch. They weren't a plucky group of would be demon hunters, but they were okay. At the very least I got to find out what having "normal" friends did together by watching them. I wasn't accepted into their little group without some reservations, but they tolerated me and I was nice enough to them. They weren't getting any super weapons from me, but I helped with homework and stuff when they asked.

Of course, Lynsey couldn't say exactly why she had invited me to eat lunch with her group when they asked. She made excuses that we had gotten to know each other because we lived so close together, which when I thought about it, was actually sort of true. If she hadn't seen me dodging those bullets and then putting the assailants into that contain ward, she never would have asked me about the fairy. If she hadn't asked me about the fairy, she probably would have died. The mall thing would have happened without us, and the world might now know about real zombies. Plus she wouldn't have a fairy friend to go see, and what normal girl could claim an acquaintance with the local park fairy?

Which wasn't to say everything was pizza and movie night, every night. While there were no large scale mishaps like the tower coming down, there were still plenty of little annoyances that were beginning to

creep into daily life. For some bizarre reason toasters seemed particularly vulnerable for a while, turning bread into a burnt slab the world over. For a week you couldn't find a toaster in stores anywhere, as people bought them thinking they needed replacing. That stopped as suddenly as it began.

The weather was also not immune to this phenomenon. It was coming up on December which usually meant a steady decrease in temperature. Not so this year, where it might be eighties and sunny, then in the mid teens and snowing- often in the same day. People started wearing shorts to class and bringing pants they later changed into on the way home. I trudged to school one day in full winter gear, snow and wind blasting at me as though it wanted my jacket off. Before I got halfway I had to shrug everything off as the clouds melted away and the temperature rose at least fifty degrees in minutes. *What was that old story about the clouds and the sun trying to get a man to take off his jacket?* I felt like that guy. Everyone was telling stories about card games, coin tosses, the weather- all going crazy. Several casinos had shut down as all their games were gone over- every player the day before had been a winner.

It's almost as if whatever is driving chaos has backed off the big stuff, preferring to make a bunch of people's lives chaotic instead. It hadn't escaped my notice that it was after something big had happened that the "voice of order" usually sounded in my head. I figured this was because as chaos "rested" that "order" could contact me with less chance of being caught. If chaos figured this out and didn't want us in contact, it made sense to expend power on a smaller but wider scale. If anything about chaos could make sense.

The other not so great thing was Jeff. He seemed to take my becoming friends with Lynsey as a personal insult, and stepped up his "game." He was careful never to cross any lines that might get him in actual trouble, but he, and to a lesser extent his "friends" went out of their way to hassle me. I came to school one morning with hundreds of posters hung on walls that featured my face photoshopped onto a male body. The body was further photoshopped into a scene with several barnyard animals, positioned in such a way as to convince the onlooker a non-consensual act was in progress between the animals and the body. I gave it a 6 out of 10, I mean they didn't even bother correcting the shadows. Plus the printing was awful, like the equipment he used didn't dither the image properly, or printed it too dark or something. It looked terrible, though the intent and my face were clear enough.

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Sloppy work, now that is just something I can't abide.

There had been other, minor incidents. Spiders dumped into my hair, (*I mean where did he even find that many spiders, anyway?*) a rat put in my book bag (I cast animal speech on him, explained the situation, and he was cool with it. I let him ride around on my shoulder the rest of the day and called him Charlie) and other odd "attacks." It was almost as if he was testing me to see exactly what would push my buttons.

He had no idea that it would take a lot more than those feeble efforts. He was really beneath my notice, honestly, because I had much bigger problems to worry about. And I think he knew it, too, which is partially what drove him to come up with bigger and bigger "stunts" that he could still get away with. I would just laugh his efforts off, sometimes right to his face, or turn them around, like the rat thing. With the spell going the rat was quite interested to stick around and see things from my perspective, and as he was quite "tame" lots of girls cooed over him and gave him morsels at lunch.

Oddly, it was Lynsey who took the photoshop thing much worse than I did, grabbing my hand and marching me down to the principal's office that morning. I told her she should just "Let it go, let it go, turn away and slam the door," but she was adamant about talking to someone about it.

"What are you going to do about this?" she demanded, slamming the poster onto his desk. It was before homeroom, but it seemed everyone had already seen them. How could they not, given they were plastered all over the walls?

He glanced over at the clock on the wall. "You've got ten minutes or so, take them down. If you want I can write you a pass if you think you'll need more time."

"Shouldn't the person responsible be punished?"

"Oh, you know who did this?"

"Jeff Shirkey of course!"

"Oh, of course. I suppose you have a picture of him, caught in the act?"

"Well, no," she hedged. "But he's been bullying Dean ever since he came to this school!"

"Well, Dean?" asked Mr Beirne, "is this true, what your ombudsman says?"

"My what?"

He sighed. "What are we teaching at this school? Your advocate, Dean. Your legal council, girlfriend, whatever this girl is to you."

"It's true he's been annoying me, certainly. I'm not really that bothered by it."

“Yes you are!” protested Lynsey. “He is. He just doesn’t want it to get worse.”

“Which it probably will, coming in here like this,” admitted Mr Beirne.

“So do something about it,” she said.

He shrugged. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“I don’t know, I’m not a principal, I don’t know what you can do. You must have some ability to keep him from being harassed every day.”

He sighed and opened a drawer on his desk. “Very well, I don’t usually do this, but let me get my wand out and I’ll make him disappear.”

Lynsey gasped and threw her hands over her mouth. “What will the Foundation say if you do that?”

I couldn’t be sure he was joking or not, and did a quick magic sense on him. Nothing around here seemed to be magical, including him.

Meanwhile Mr Beirne was staring at Lynsey as if she had grown an extra eyeball. “You do realize I was joking, right?”

She seemed relieved, then realized as she glanced over at me that she needed to cover herself. “You can never tell, can you?” she asked in a haughty tone. “For all I know you could be some kind of wizard.”

“I assure you I am but a lowly principal. Back to the issue at hand, if he’s not being physical with you, the most we can do is ask him to lay off. I have a really high success rate doing it that way,” he added sarcastically.

“This is why I said don’t bother,” I explained. “He’s careful not to do anything that could get him suspended, and honestly if he was that much of a bother to me *I* would make him stop, one way or the other.”

“You know what that would mean though,” said Lynsey cautiously. “You don’t want to go down that road. We have to try things this way first.”

“Uh, what are you two talking about?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Look, I’m sorry to have bothered you, but she insisted. Come on, we only have five minutes now. And it’ll take him a minute to write that pass for us.”

“Just go to class,” he said, waving us out. “The janitorial staff knows what to do, I’m sure they’re gone already.”

“How did he even get in?” Lynsey asked. “He must have done this last night when no one was here.”

“Probably rigged one of the windows not to lock or something. We’ll check. Though there is something you could do for me, Dean.”

“Does it involve surly comments? I can do surly comments, sharp re-torts, frosty glares-”

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“Your signature,” he said, pushing a clipboard towards me, “is all I require at the moment.”

“What’s this?” I asked, picking it up.

“A petition, of sorts. You see, if I was able to put cameras up in the hallways, as I wish, this sort of thing wouldn’t happen because it would be recorded. But the district is against it because of the cost. If you signed, as a student, that you would feel safer with cameras than without them, that gives me a little bit more traction the next time the issue comes up.”

“Sure, why not!” I said flippantly, whipping out a pen and clicking it down. “Indoctrinate them early, that’s my motto.” I sighed with a flourish. “Get the kids used to being on camera all hours of the day, then they’ll be less resistant to cameras on street corners, the office, on drones, in glasses, and wherever they start showing up next. In fact, you should go a step further and surgically implant an RFID tag so you can track the kids every moment!”

“Don’t think I haven’t thought about it,” he said, taking the clipboard back. He checked that I hadn’t signed a name like “Gilgamesh Openstien” or something and put it back. “Thanks. Good luck with your bully problem. My advice? You only have six months or so, tough it out and try not to think about high school ever again once you leave. Though I suppose as a responsible adult I should also point out we have a counselor on staff, if you wanted to talk about it to someone.”

“Or I could simply punch him out, marry the girl of my dreams, and publish a sci-fi novel.”

“If you punch him, he better have thrown the first one.”

“You got it, mon capitaine!”

“That could have gone better,” said Lynsey as we headed off to our homeroom.

“Thanks for trying, I do appreciate it,” I said gratefully. “It’s just, what he said was right. He can’t do much, and any half measure would only make things worse. He would have to do something pretty terrible to get expelled, especially this late in the game. Hopefully if I ignore him enough he’ll just get bored and move on.”

“You really think that’ll happen?”

I shook my head. “No chance.”

It seemed the poster had sapped Jeff’s creative spirit the rest of the day, as he hardly even looked at me. When he did look at me it was with a

scowl, like he was angry about something. It couldn't have been that all his posters had come down, though the odd one was still cropping up, like in the girl's locker room.

"Ugh, to think he was poking around in there last right..." said Lynsey in disgust. "Don't they lock those things at night?"

"It could have been moved there, maybe there's a farm animal fan among the girls who wanted a copy for prosperity."

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that."

Even the next day he was a bit subdued, and I began to hope that perhaps he had come to his senses and was tired of this little game. Others in the school continued to pester me about the poster, but when I pulled out the copy that I had saved and started pointing out all the technical flaws in the work, they lost interest. That, or they thought I was insane for carrying the thing around with me. I think people expected me to be all bothered by it, and when I wasn't it didn't fit into their worldview, and they didn't know how to respond.

Jeff himself really didn't know what to do when I presented him my copy and asked him to sign it.

"After all, if you become a famous artist someday, and I have one of your first works, it'll be worth a fortune!"

He just crumpled it up and bounced the ball off my head, then walked off.

"Give you ten bucks for a color copy!" I shouted after him. "Or email me the original!"

No response.

That afternoon, walking home, I tensed up as a white van pulled up behind me and someone shouted my name. I had gone past my house to walk Lynsey home, and was headed back to mine, and I was pretty sure I had seen that van drive by at least once before.

Am I going to get shot at again? Was someone waiting for fewer witnesses?

Imagine my surprise when Jeff and several of his "crew" jumped out.

Please don't make me kill the lot of you, I silently pleaded to them.

"Dean, glad I caught you," said Jeff, as he and his buddies crowded around me.

"What can I do for you, Jeff?" I asked him as he planted himself in my path.

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“Hey, I just wanted to apologize,” he said. “That poster was out of line. I admit it, I shouldn’t have done it.”

“Uh, what? You’re apologizing?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And you need all of them to help you with this?” I pointed to the others.

“They helped me with it, and I didn’t put them all up by myself. They’re here to apologize too.”

“Yeah,” they echoed. “Sorry.”

“Okay, fine. It wasn’t that big a deal, not to me. Does this mean you’re leaving me alone, then? Live and let live, all that?”

“Sure, sure. You, uh, you’ll tell the principal I apologized, right? We can just let the whole thing drop?”

“Why bother? He didn’t much seem to care in the first place.”

“You mean I’m not in trouble?”

“Not for that. He said as we had no proof it was you, there wasn’t anything he could do. He wanted me to sign some weird petition to put cameras in the halls or something. I don’t know. If you’re in trouble for something else, I sure don’t know about it. How did you get in, anyway? Isn’t there some kind of security system in the place?”

“On the doors and stuff, yeah, but not on the upper story windows.”

“You got in via ladder? I have to say, that’s ballsy.”

“Thanks! Say, you aren’t allergic to styrofoam or anything, are you?”

“Allergic to- what? No. Why-”

“And you weigh about, what, one twenty?”

“I guess. Why do you want to know?”

“Oh, no reason.”

“Great. I’m going to go now.”

“Sure, sure. I’ll see you later okay?”

“Yeah.” I started to walk away but he didn’t move.

“Oh, just one more thing.”

“Yeah?” I asked, getting exasperated.

That’s when one of his friends cracked me in the head with something from behind, and everything went dark.

Turns out, I had forgotten to activate my armor talisman as I had left school. Stupid of me, I admit, but I blame chaos.

Awaking to Darkness

*“Darkness beyond twilight, crimson
beyond blood that flows...” --The Dragon Slave spell*

When I awoke, I found myself in a dark place, being pressed upon by all sides. I tried to move, but couldn't, and my head felt bruised from front to back. I was pretty sure my eyes were swollen, my nose felt funny, and I had an ache in the back of my skull.

For long minutes I was paralyzed, unsure what was going on or what had happened. I last remembered walking home, talking to Lynsey about something. What had happened after that? Had someone jumped me? I knew that, unlike in movies, being knocked out made you forget the last few minutes because the brain hadn't had time to shift any short term memories over into long term storage. That, and getting knocked on the head probably bounced it around a fair bit. People didn't just wake up with complete memories of what knocked them out, they felt like I did. Confused.

Thinking of being bounced around, I felt I was moving, and I was freezing. This, I found, was to be expected as I seemed to be naked. I moved my hand, trying to figure out what was around me.

Packing peanuts?

I felt a mask on my face, the type you might wear when sanding something, which was keeping whatever was pressing against me from suffocating me. But the air felt stale and it was hard to breathe.

Okay, this can't be good.

I shifted a little and the peanuts moved a bit, at least allowing me to breathe a little easier, but that didn't help the air quality. Having nothing much else to do, I took stock of my situation. I was hungry, cold, and my head was pounding. I had no talismans on my ankles or really anything on,

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and I seemed to be in a box of some kind. Outside I heard the muffled noises of the road, and felt a vibration like I was in a moving vehicle.

Am I being shipped somewhere? What's going on?

I wasn't sure, but I knew I needed to escape. Through the ache in my head I tried to think of the best way out of this situation. I tried pushing up a little on my densely packed prison but the space above me seemed unyielding.

Okay, if I make the peanuts go away I think I'll then be crushed by whatever is above me.

So that was out. I still knew one spirit, that of hummingbird, which I knew would let me teleport out of here. I did vaguely recall something about teleporting from a moving object being a bad idea.

I could try calling out my spirit projection, but in the confines of this box I had no idea what would happen. Would it explode outward? Would he just be unable to appear? I didn't relish finding out.

I could try a sending, but how would I tell anyone where I was? No, that was out as well.

I suddenly have a new appreciation for that voice in my head that calls itself order.

Setting the place on fire didn't seem like a good idea either, it was hard enough to breathe in this place. Aura reading? No. Soul appraising? No. I realized I was probably drifting in and out of consciousness, the vibration of the vehicle I was in was just so nice. It made it hard to think, and I was just sort of numbly going through a list in my head of skills I had picked up.

You have to focus, Dean!

Okay, first priority was these wounds. healing acceleration could probably take care of most of them, but I felt pretty damaged. Would I be able to overcome my own pain and use the skill well enough to help? I decided to try a trick my spirit manipulation teacher had mentioned. By concentrating (no easy task at the moment) I could put an even greater burst of energy into a single task than my skill in manipulating my own energy would allow. I usually didn't bother, because using my dragon talisman was much more convenient. Now, however, I needed to put as much energy into my will as I possibly could.

At least I can do this, trying to heal myself with alchemy skills would be impossible. I'd never reason out exactly how to put my face back together.

I gathered my thoughts and willed energy through my body, then focused it on my head as I visualized my bruises healing. I poured most of the energy I had built up into my will, hoping it would be enough.

For a wonder, it worked! My eyes felt better, for one, and my nose didn't hurt anymore. I sent another healing burst into my head for good measure, not recalling if that would help or not. Some healing skills only worked once, and I didn't recall if this one was that way or not. I still couldn't see, and I had no idea what happened, but at least my head wasn't pounding anymore.

Now to get out of here.

I had never used analysis on styrofoam, figuring I would never need to manipulate such a material to any degree, so I was forced to now. I had to try five times, each time taking about a minute, before I reasoned out how it worked.

No rush, I suppose, I've got nowhere to be. Good thing I have patience in abundance, right?

Even as the thought crossed my mind, I went colder than my situation was forcing upon me. My pouch! Was it even now trying to make its way back to me? Was some freak windstorm picking it up and hurling it towards me, only to have this vehicle I was in move away from it? I really had to get out of here.

With styrofoam under my "belt" so to speak, I thought about how best to use that information. I didn't want to shift the peanuts too much, whatever was above me could crush the box I was in, leaving me in a worse position. Plus, were the individual peanuts packed tightly enough to manipulate as one object? They didn't really weigh anything, so I figured I could probably get all of them at once, if so. But what to do with them?

I finally decided on trying to compress them into supports for each corner of the box. As I was hoping, the peanuts flowed into place easily at the corners on the first try, and the box held.

Now I had a new problem- my limbs cried out in protest as I was finally able to move them. Plus, with the insulation gone I was now feeling even colder. I wrapped my arms around myself and wiggled my fingers and toes, trying to ignore the prickly feeling as my circulation was resorted. Finally I felt well enough to try getting some better air in here.

Once again it took me several tries to use analysis on the cardboard box, but I managed it and used transmogrification to lift a circle of the stuff from the side nearest my head. I made it nearly as big as the side of the box so I could potentially stick my head out, but of course there was no light here, so I wasn't much better off. Fresh but more frigid air poured in, further clearing my head and making me shiver.

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Okay, now what?

It seemed there was a box right next to mine, as I could feel it only inches from mine. But I needed to shed some light on the subject... and I thought of a way. Remembering the first spell I had ever performed, a grade 0 sun spell to make a tiny light, I focused on magic and wiggled my fingers. I was rewarded with a single speck of light, hanging in the air before me. It seemed painfully bright as my eyes adjusted, and I peeked out the hole I had made. The boxes were packed pretty tightly in here, but I thought they could be shifted with a bit of effort, at least enough to allow me to stand up. I was going to need more leverage though.

I didn't see much choice in the matter, so I winced as I used transmutation on myself, creating a small cut on my arm for some blood. Luckily or unluckily, flesh didn't weigh that much either, and blood welled up from the small wound I had made.

Why is it always easier to destroy than to heal?

Getting some on my finger I scrawled a quick shape on the bottom of the box, and put energy into it. This was a technique I had hoped never to use, that of blood wards. This allowed making a ward using not ink and paper but my own blood, which was all I had at the moment. It was also faster. The creation ward I had made flashed to life, creating another box inside the one I was in, but out of metal rather than flimsy cardboard. This box, however, didn't have a side where I was facing, so I was able to tear the cardboard apart with my hands. This made a hole big enough to crawl out of, so I braced my feet against the other end of the box and shoved, trying to shift what was in my way so that I could do so.

Nothing moved.

I sighed only slightly, I hadn't expected it to work without putting extra energy into my muscles, something I wanted to avoid, given I had only my own natural reserves to draw upon. So I wanted to conserve as much as I could. I shoved again, this time straining to move whatever was in the way, and was rewarded with enough space to wiggle out of the confines of the box I had been placed in. The light went with me, allowing me to see the interior of the truck I was currently in the back of.

Some sort of freight carrier? I thought as I looked around. All the boxes here were big and the truck wasn't completely full. It was long though, and had boxes haphazardly shoved inside. *Thank the All-Father, I never would have shifted those boxes if it had been tightly packed.*

However, glancing around, I wondered if my situation had, in fact, improved at all. I had gone from being slightly cold and in a small box to

being quite cold and inside a larger box. Plus I was still hungry, and now bleeding slightly from my arm. I thought about making a warm blanket with creation, but as the blood ward would be stuck to whatever I scribed it on, I would be stuck there as well.

If I can't get this truck stopped soon, I may have to wait it out.

Plus, I would have to wound myself again, fresh blood was required for wards, not clotting blood. I thought about my options.

I know there's a tire here, I thought, touching the floor of the truck, But I can't risk blowing it out with my wind talisman because the driver could lose control and crash. Plus I made it for destroying demons, so pinpoint accuracy, especially to a place I can't even see, is impossible. I could accidentally tear the wheels off this rig. What else can I do? If only I had learned more spirits! But no, I had to go learning wards, and not that many even then, because talismans are so much better. One phase ward and I could be home right now. Pop a phase ward on myself, then step though a teleport one- I could go winging through the air like a ghost, being totally unhurt at my destination. But no, make a phase talisman, Dean, not a phase ward. It'll work out great!

I walked the inside of the truck, hoping something would jump out at me, but nothing did. Just boxes, stuff on pallets wrapped up in plastic, and darkness were inside.

I suppose if I were a less polite individual I could just blast my way out with an Energy Attack, then jump out with grasshoppers leap. But I'd rather save that as a last resort. Come on, Dean, think!

Suddenly, an idea came to me- where was I? The trailer of a truck, right? In essence, a box on wheels connected via a hitch to an engine. A separate object, in other words. An object I could make temporarily "disappear!" I created another wound on my arm and scrawled the blood on the wall of the trailer, this time an ignore ward. Hopefully, being a professional, the driver would constantly be checking his gauges, mirrors and surroundings rather than just staring ahead. With luck it wouldn't take him long to realize his *trailer had vanished* and stop to inspect the situation. I empowered the ward and held my breath, willing the truck to come to a stop so I could escape.

I spent a tense moment wondering if the driver would ever notice, but finally the truck slowed and I wounded myself in the leg. Quickly scrawling a teleport ward on the floor I wiped the blood off the wall with my hand and stepped through, back to my room.

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I had done it, I was back home!

I was digging in my closet for the warmest clothes I could find when my door banged open, making me jump.

“Dean!” said my mother, running to hug me. “You’re okay!”

“Mom, I’m fine, ow!”

“Ow?” She looked me over. “You’re like ice, and you’re bleeding? Let me get some healing wards.” She turned to go out of the room but my father came in.

“Bleeding? Let me see. Ah, that’s not so bad. I’ll take care of it.” He also hugged me and expressed relief I was back. “But where were you?” he asked, touching my wounds and knitting them back together.

Really have to become a real alchemist at some point.

“A truck somewhere, do you know what happened to me?”

“You mean you don’t?”

“I just woke up there, had to escape from a shipping box full of packing peanuts.”

My parents looked at each other.

“What? What happened to me?”

“We better call them off,” said Barbara. “Yasui and Elizabeth, who knows what they’ll do to that poor boy.”

“What boy?” I demanded. “What happened to me?”

“You really don’t remember?” asked Edmond. “You got jumped coming home from school, and knocked out. Some kids your age, apparently, and they put you in a truck and drove away.”

“Jeff,” I said, jaw tight. “He’s gone too far this time. But wait, how do you know this?”

“When you didn’t come back or let us know where you were, we got worried,” said Barbara. “We called your friends to see if you had gone to see them and we just missed a message or something, and they all said you weren’t around. In fact Osman showed up here as I was calling Christina, he said Kat had a bad feeling about you and they came to check it out. We went out looking, and with that Time Frame you made we saw you leaving school, then watched what happened to you.”

“Needless to say, your friends were *livid*. They figured out who he was somehow and rushed off to find him. We stayed here in case you came back.”

“Well, he stole all my stuff too. I need to get it back. I’ll call... Osman.”

That way I won't be calling either Elizabeth or Yasui, making the other feel bad I didn't call them first. I'm so gentlemanly.

My mother handed me her phone and I dialed Osman.

"Mrs Chesterfield? Has Dean come back?" he asked, panicked.

"It's me, Osman. I'm back," I replied.

"He's okay!" Osman shouted, making me wince. "You're okay, right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Where are you?"

"I'll send you a picture. You better get here fast, the girls want to murder this Jeff guy."

Be my guest, I almost said aloud, but rather "Send me the picture."

My mom hurried to get a teleport ward as I waited for the picture to come, and then teleported over there, surprising him.

"So that's what that looks like from the other side," he remarked. "Come on, you better show them you're okay."

He went into the house, and I followed. What met my eyes was an odd scene. Anthony was sitting on top of Jeff, and the girls were looking at him with daggers in their eyes. As I entered the room Yasui and Elizabeth threw themselves at me, both trying to kiss me at the same time.

Strangely, this might almost make it worth it.

"What happened?" demanded Christina. "And do that some other time," she chided the other girls.

"Yes, Jeff," I said, stepping closer to him and squatting down. "Share with the whole class what you did to me. I'm all for a great prank and such, but shipping me? That's going a little too far, don't you think?"

"How did you get back so quick?" he asked. "And why can't I get up? What did they do to me?"

"You mean my friends?" I asked, indicating the others. "And yes, I have many friends, Jeff. I know you thought I didn't, but I do, as you've seen. You should thank them for their *restraint*, any one of them could have killed you many times over."

"He wouldn't tell us what he had done with you," said Yasui. "So we had to keep him alive."

"We were trying to convince Osman to allow Kat to do a meld with him," said Elizabeth.

"I didn't feel it was right, what they were doing," he explained. "I knew you could take care of yourself."

"Yeah, it was a near thing though. The question is, what to do with you?" I asked, looking down at the struggling figure.

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“Let me mess him up!” said Yasui. “Maybe two broken legs will discourage this sort of thing in the future.”

“We can talk about that in a moment,” I forestalled her. “Right now I’m more worried about my pouch.”

The others looked panicked, but Jeff just looked confused.

“All the stuff we took off you, and you’re worried about that empty pouch?” he asked. “You sure do wear a lot of jewelry.”

“Jewelry, he says,” I snorted. The others laughed, and he looked between them, flummoxed. “Jeff,” I said sweetly. “What’s holding you down?”

He struggled some more. “I don’t know, they did something to me.”

“Not exactly.” I shook my head. “Jeff, Jeff, Jeff. Did you never wonder why I was so unconcerned about your little antics? It’s because you’re small, Jeff. No matter what you do with your life, and let me tell you, you’re off to a great start, you will always be small.” I shrugged. “It’s not your fault, you can’t even see the way the world really is, so it’s not that you’re dumb, you’re just ignorant. I pity you more than anything, lying there, totally unable to grasp what’s happening. So believe me when I say that what you took off me was no mere jewelry. And if my pouch remains away from me for too long, it represents danger on a scale you can’t comprehend.” I got close to his face. “Where. Is. It?”

“I don’t know, I threw it out of the truck somewhere after we stripped you.”

“You did what?” I nearly screamed. “Do you have any idea the number of hours I put into that- no, of course you don’t. At least tell me you have the other stuff.”

“Yeah, I kept your charm bracelets and stuff. I was going to make you pay me for them once you got back.”

“You would have paid, all right. Where are they?”

“My room.”

“Fine, don’t bother getting up to show me, I’ll find it myself.”

Back From Heaven

“He had it hidden in the square root of the second time dimension”

-- Bob the Angry Flower to Freddy, after opening a Heaven Portal

I straightened up and walked about the rest of the house. I saw a man sitting on a couch, watching TV and drinking beer. He seemed unconcerned all this was going on in his house, and I shook my head and moved on. I found a little girl's room, pink and decorated with girly stuff. On the floor a little girl, probably about five, was coloring. She looked up as I poked my head in.

“Hello!” she said brightly.

“Hi,” I said. “You must be Jeff's sister?”

“Yup. I'm five,” she said. “I've never seen you before.”

“I'm Dean, what's your name?”

“Morgan,” she said, getting up. “Will you play with me?”

“Actually I'm looking for your brother's room. He has some things of mine I need to get back.”

“If I show you, will you play with me?”

Starved for attention? I suppose if her so called “father” is any indication, that's probably the case. I could always leave a clone here for an hour or so...

“Yes,” I said, nodding.

“Promise?”

“Pinky promise!” I assured her.

“Say it!”

Say it? Say what? Oh... “Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye.”

“Okay.” She came over to me, and as she did I saw she was wearing a necklace in the shape of a clover around her neck.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“That’s a pretty necklace,” I told her. “Did your brother give you that?”

She nodded.

Great, how do I get my necklace away from the luckiest little girl on the planet?

“He actually took it from me, it’s one of the things I’m here to get back.”

“Mine!”

“I don’t deny that. I’m willing to trade for it.”

“Trade?” she seemed curious.

“That’s right. For something you’ll like even better. Tell you what, how about your favorite animal?”

“Bunny!”

“Okay, bunny it is.” I looked around the room, and luckily there were two nickels in plain sight. “I’ll show you a magic trick, and trade you one bunny necklace for one clover necklace, okay? But you can’t tell anyone how I did it, okay?”

“Okay!”

I took the nickels and showed her, then curled my fingers around them. “Abara-,” I said, concentrating on the metal. I figured I could make a small bunny charm pretty easily, and sent power into it. The little girl, had she told me her name, watched with interest. “Cadabra.” I felt my power go wonky for a second, and I wasn’t sure what I would find when I opened my hand, but I did. We both stared. Instead of the small metal shape I had been envisioning, there was a rabbit seemingly made of some sort of crystal, which glittered and sparkled in the light.

Did I just accidentally make diamond? I suppose, if that’s what she wanted, and there was a million to one chance of my accidentally doing just that... or is this chaos’ work? Oh well.

It didn’t seem to matter to her, as she grabbed it and started dancing around with it.

“Bunny! Bunny!” she cried.

I smiled. “Is that a fair trade?” She nodded. “Then may I have my clover back?” She nodded again, and turned around so I could unhook the chain. I slid the clover off, thanking the fates for getting me that back first, as being lucky would certainly help me find my other stuff. I threaded the bunny, which I noticed had a similar crystalline loop attachment, to the chain and put it back on her. *I can get another chain anywhere. The talisman’s the thing.* She skipped off to her brother’s room, necklace bouncing. *She’s actually kind of adorable, strange that she’s in the same family as Jeff. Never thought about having kids, but maybe a girl or two would be okay.*

We looked around his room and found my two charm chains, and I hooked them back on my ankles. I activated the regeneration one, which did nothing for my hunger but at least banished any lingering aches in my muscles.

Now where in the heck is my dragon and ring?

“Thank you, little one,” I said. “I’m going to go finish up with your brother, then I’ll come play with you, okay?”

“Okay!”

She skipped off, and I went to leave Jeff’s room. I happened to glance over a picture frame hanging on the hallway wall, and stopped to stare at it. It showed Jeff, probably growing up, from a baby to almost his age today. They were individual pictures all set in the same frame, separated by the mat board which had been cut into ovals for just such a purpose. The beginning ones were all Jeff and his mother, then suddenly she dropped out of the picture. Looking around the house now, I began to suspect something.

“Where’s your mother?” I asked Jeff, coming back to the kitchen where he was still pinned to the ground.

“She died years ago, after Morgan was born.”

“Ah, I see. I’m sorry to hear that. It’s good news for me, though, I’ve decided what your punishment is going to be.”

“Really?” he sneered.

“Really!” I assured him. “Now, where’s the rest of my stuff? My ring, and the dragon, and my clothes?”

“The clothes we put in a donation box at that church up the street. Dan took the dragon and Andy took the ring.”

“Fine, I’ll settle up with them later. Osman, a word, if you please.” I grabbed him and dragged him out of earshot. “Can people in Heaven be petitioned?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Why- you want to bring his mother back here?”

“Wow, you’re quick. That’s the ticket all right. I want his mother to see what he’s become.”

“I’m not really sure that’s a great idea. Besides, I don’t know how, I’ve never needed to bring back just a person, so I never- wait.” He listened a moment. “Kat says she knows how and can teach me. Apparently they’re pretty easy, she says it’s no problem.”

“Will you do it?”

He sighed. “I suppose it’s better than what the girls were talking about doing to him. I’d need her name and what she looked like would be helpful.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Pictures I can get you.”

We went back and got her name, and Osman went outside to listen to Kat tell him how to petition who I wanted.

I looked down at Jeff. “Oh, let him up,” I decided at last. “If he tries anything he’ll just be hurting himself,” I said to Elizabeth.

“If you say so. But I’m keeping her nearby just in case.”

“Actually, I might have a job for you.”

Anthy got off him, and he sat up again. “Who are you people? What is going on?”

I laughed. “It gives me great satisfaction to inform you that I can’t tell you. So there.”

“Fine, whatever. Like I care.”

“Oh, I think you do. Now just sit quietly until your punishment shows up.”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Elizabeth brightly.

“You’ll see. Anyway, about that job? That church he’s talking about is really right up the street. Can you get my clothes back? The undershirt in particular, as that’s my armor talisman. The others I don’t care about.”

“Sure, but why not just go together?”

“I’m not sure Osman would appreciate me breaking into a donation box, even if it is to get a talisman back.”

“Oh, I gotcha. Be back in a little while then.”

She and Anthy went out the door and I saw her through the window climb on her back and take off.

“You people are weird,” said Jeff.

“No,” I countered. “We know what we are talking about. We have already determined you are just an ignorant person in a world you can’t even perceive a bunch of. So I will thank you to be quiet.”

“Oh, you’re a big man now, with your girlfriends here.”

“Jeff, think back to what you did. You... what, knocked me out?” I looked over at Yasui. She nodded.

“He had one of his friends that was behind you knock you on the head. Like a coward.”

“Well, most bullies are. Why do you think they pick on people they perceive as weaker than themselves? Anyway, you knock me out, strip me down, and put me in a box. Then I am loaded onto a truck and shipped to...”

“California.”

“Nice touch. How did I escape from that box?”

“I have no idea.”

“Exactly. You can’t even conceive of the means I used to escape and get back here. Look at me, do you even see any bruises? You guys messed my face up pretty bad, yes?”

“We had some fun, and we wanted to make sure you didn’t wake up until you were well on your way.”

“Fun?” spat Yasui. “You make me sick. Have you no honor or decency?”

He ignored her. “How did you heal so fast?”

“Ponder it in silence. Think also about this- if I can heal myself that easily, maybe I could do the opposite to you just as well.”

He eyed me, but fell silent. We sat in an uneasy silence until the door opened again, admitting Jeff’s mother, Lillian, and Osman.

“Ah, your punishment has arrived!” I said, jumping up.

“What’s all this about?” demanded Lillian. “I’m pretty sure I’m not supposed to be here.” I gestured to her son. “My son? I’m very certain I’m not supposed to be talking to him.”

“Well too bad, you’re here,” I said. “And he’s going to tell you about all the things he’s been up to since you’ve been gone. Starting with shipping me to California!”

“Who are you talking to?” asked Jeff. “You’re all crazy! Stay away from me!”

I looked back and forth between them. “Tell me they aren’t useen,” I pleaded with Osman.

“Ah, that would be a lie.”

“Come on!” I said to the ceiling. “Make it difficult for me, why don’t you?”

“Maybe you better start from the beginning?” she said. I explained how he had been treating me, and what he had done recently, while Jeff stared at me like I was a crazy person talking to thin air. “Very well. I didn’t raise him to be a bully, so I guess I’ll have to talk to him.”

“Can you do that?”

“I can make myself visible to others, yes.”

Suddenly, Jeff fell out of his chair and scrambled backwards.

“It’s okay, honey, it’s me, your mom,” she said. “These people brought me back to talk to you. Is what he said true? Have you been doing these terrible things to him?”

“Mommy!” cried a voice. *Oh, crap, forgot about her.* Morgan ran into the room and threw her arms around Lillian’s legs.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Hello Morgan,” she said sadly. “You’re growing up so fast!”

“Are you staying?”

“Oh, my daughter. I can’t. I can’t stay, I have to go away again, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t want you to!”

“What’s going on in this house?” demanded a new voice. We all turned and I saw the man I had seen earlier, standing in the doorway of the kitchen. “Lillian?”

“Now see what you’ve done?” she asked me.

“But you’re dead!” he insisted.

“Yes, I’m dead,” she admitted. “But these kids have brought me back because apparently you’re doing a terrible job raising our children!” He sputtered something, but seemed unable to articulate his thoughts. “I got so caught up being in Heaven I almost forgot you all...” She trailed off. “Oh, get up Jeff, you look ridiculous on the floor.”

“How?” managed the man, “you’re dead. I know you’re dead!”

He seemed a bit shocked, but I figured that was normal for someone confronted with the supernatural for the first time. Especially something like this. “Let’s just say that all things are possible,” I told him. Then I turned to Jeff. “And now my revenge is complete. From this day forward you will know, beyond doubt, that your mother’s spirit lives on. Every action you take, every person you hurt, you’re going to know deep down that you’re disappointing her. Go ahead- look into her eyes and swear you’ll change your ways before it’s too late. Can you even do that?”

“Wow, that’s way harsher than what I suggested we do to him,” remarked Christina.

“You have to go away again?” asked Morgan.

“I’m sorry, dear, but I can’t stay.” She crouched down to look at Morgan. “It would kill this young man here if I did. He’s the only thing keeping me here.”

“Will I ever see you again?” she said, tears falling from her eyes.

“I don’t-” she started to say.

“Yes,” I said, interrupting. “Yes, Morgan, you will. If Osman is willing to put in a little work, I will leave you the means to call upon your mother, say... a dozen times in your life? Sound reasonable?” I asked Osman, who nodded. “Twelve times, for a few minutes each time. You can write her letters that she can take back and read, and share the occasional holiday with you. I can only promise you a few minutes per time you bring her back here, but that’s more than most people get.”

“That is seriously breaking Foundation law, you know,” Osman reminded me.

“Forget the Foundation, they don’t have to know. We’re giving her a limited number of uses to last her whole life. I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“But they would.”

“And somehow this concerns me less than it might have, not that long ago. Anyway, I’m not letting her summon up a demon or anything. She’s a Heavenly being, I’m sure she won’t cause trouble.”

“No, no trouble,” she said, giving her ex-husband an odd look.

“Besides, they care about the world finding out, not one family that I think we can rely on to stay quiet about the whole thing. You can keep a secret, can’t you?” I asked Morgan. She nodded. “You see? All taken care of.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Course I am! Now, you can manage...” I glanced at the kitchen clock. “An hour right now, right?”

“Easily.”

“Great. I’ll leave you to talk while I get my pouch back. After that she’ll go back to Heaven. I’ll get you the wards I talked about that can bring her back here in the next couple of days, okay?”

The man looked at me, almost terrified. “You’re leaving?” he asked.

“Don’t worry, she is your wife. Ex-wife, I guess? Not a demon in her shape or anything. She’s come straight from Heaven, I swear it. You have nothing to fear.”

“Of course,” said the man, which sounded forced. “What would I have to worry about?”

“Exactly. Catch her up on your life, she can tell you about Heaven, whatever. After the hour is up Jeff and I can visit his friend’s houses and get the rest of my stuff back. Sound fair?”

“Sure, sure. Whatever.”

“Great. Come along, everyone.”

We left, and Elizabeth flew up with my undershirt in her hands, which I hastily put on.

“Making this permanent when I get a minute,” I said to no one in particular. “Not getting taken by surprise again, I can tell you that much.”

“What’s the plan now?” she asked.

“I suppose you all can head home. Not you, Osman. Can you talk to Iris, get him to bring us that descry object spell so I can figure out where my pouch is?”

“Sure thing.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“You’ll need a lift,” said Elizabeth. “So I’m staying.”

“I’ll head back,” said Christina. “Nice to see you’re okay, Dean. Don’t scare us like that again. Especially because of some normal person.”

“Yeah, sorry about that, but if it helps, I’m suitably embarrassed about it. Thanks for coming.”

“Sure.” She threw down a ward and disappeared.

“What?” asked Osman. “Are we just using our powers out in public now, along with illegal petitionings?”

“There’s no one around,” Yasui said, “don’t worry about it. I’ll stick around though, if Elizabeth is.”

She rolled her eyes. “Worried I’ll sneak a kiss in?”

“Maybe.”

“You’re probably right to be.”

They giggled.

Meanwhile, Osman seemed to be talking to thin air, and then started petitioning. We walked around to the back of the house as he did, and several minutes later Iris appeared.

“Missing that circle you made me,” Osman remarked.

“Thanks for coming,” I said to Iris. “Sorry to bother you with this.”

“Not a problem, I’m happy to help out. I kept a copy of the spell near at hand, figuring you might need it again.”

“Smart. You’ve seen my pouch, right?”

“Sure. I can track it down for you.”

Less than two minutes later, we were all astride a very large Anthony, hidden from the sight of normal people. We walked because it was easier to hide Iris that way, and there was no hurry. We needed to kill an hour before I could go back and get Jeff, so we took our time. Iris had to cast the spell a couple more times, but we finally tracked the pouch down to a lawn where it was still sitting.

“Oh no!” I said, picking it up and shaking it. “There’s nothing inside!” Somehow my friends didn’t appreciate the joke. I tied it back on my belt loop with a sigh. “I’m starting to feel whole again!”

“So now what?” asked Elizabeth. “The Anthony train can take you wherever you want to go!”

“Home, for the moment. I want to get something to eat.”

“Sounds okay to me.”

Osman thanked Iris and he vanished, and we walked back to my house. I told my parents what had happened, and they agreed modifying my current armor talisman was probably the way to go.

“Modifying your current one should be possible,” my mother said. “But we’d have to look up exactly how. You’re not adding a second function, just changing the one that’s already there. That should be easier than starting from scratch.”

She offered all of us a meal, which I think the others accepted more to be polite than anything. They all had come from different time zones, after all. It was nearing the time to go back when suddenly Osman jumped up.

“We have to get back there, Kat says something terrible will happen if we don’t!” We all looked at each other. “Come on, hurry!” he urged. I pulled a teleport ward out of my pouch (*So happy to have that back*) and we went directly into his kitchen.

The scene was distinctly different from when I had first arrived. Jeff’s father was now on the floor, bleeding profusely from what looked like multiple stab wounds. Jeff was shielding his sister’s eyes, crouched over her, and Lillian was standing over her ex-husband, brandishing a knife.

“Don’t move,” she said, hearing the displaced air from our teleport and turning around. She held the knife up to his throat. “Or I’ll kill him where-”

The knife flew out of her hand and thwacked into the wall on the opposite side of the room.

“Get away from him!” Elizabeth raised a hand and sent a narrow energy burst at her, but she leaped out of the way, going for the knife block.

Yasui went to tackle her, but again Lillian swiftly dodged out of the way.

“We cannot be having this much trouble with a Pneuma!” I cried, unbelieving.

“I don’t want to hurt her!” said Yasui, flipping herself up again.

Lillian had hold of the knife block now and was drawing a knife.

“Acceleration,” I said, slowing the world around me. *Need to heal that guy. Who-* “Elizabeth, heal that guy!”

“On it,” she said, starting to make her way over there.

“No, I must have my revenge!” cried Lillian.

She disappeared, and the knife she was drawing slid back into the block.

“Thanks Osman,” I called.

Elizabeth touched one of his wounds, and it started to close. I activated my talisman of skill, then called out my beaver who also bent over to help with healing the man. Within moments he was fine again, and looking around.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he protested, making sure his kids were okay. Jeff carried a crying Morgan to her room, then came back. “She just, you know, went crazy.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” said Osman. “She said something about revenge.”

“I have no idea what she was talking about. We talked, and when she noticed the hour was almost up she disappeared. The next thing I knew I was stabbed.”

“And you did nothing to set this off?” asked Elizabeth.

“Before you answer!” I told him, and pulled out a ward that had detect lies built into it. I stuck it on myself, then indicated he should continue. “As you were.”

“You did nothing to set this off?” asked Elizabeth again.

“No, I swear I didn’t do anything right now to set her off!”

They looked at me.

“He’s telling the truth, but that’s awful specific. So you did something to her before, when she was alive, that she would want revenge for?”

“Yes, how did mom die?” asked Jeff. “You never could give me a good answer to that.”

“I... I told you, don’t you remember? Someone broke in and she was stabbed.”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not the full story, is it?”

“Did you kill her?” Jeff asked, stepping up to him.

“No, no, I didn’t kill her!”

“He did, he’s lying,” I said, shocked. “He killed his own wife.”

Jeff took a step towards him and started to swing, but Anthy was suddenly between them. Jeff got shoved to the ground, screaming about killing his father, who just scrambled away and pressed himself into the corner of the room.

“I didn’t mean to,” he yelled. “It was an accident. You have to believe me! It was an accident!”

Accidents Happen

It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye.

“He admits it!” shouted Jeff, still struggling to rise with the use of Anthony atop him. “Let me up, he killed my mother! He has to pay for it!”

“Keep him away from me!” shouted his father, whose name I still didn’t actually know. “And don’t you use none of your freaky powers on me, either!”

“Good idea!” I said, reaching into my pouch. I pulled out a ward, then another, and slapped one on Jeff. He immediately stopped struggling and closed his eyes.

“What did you do to him?” His father backed away from me as I approached.

“Just put him to sleep, he’ll be fine.”

“Stay away from me!” The man’s eyes darted about, then he lunged for the knife block himself. “I’ll-” Suddenly he let go of the knife he was now holding and held his arms wide at his sides. He looked very surprised, then slapped his hands over his eyes. “What’s happening to me?” he cried, and I stuck the ward on him, causing him to go limp and start to fall. I caught him and lowered him so he didn’t wake up.

“Uhm?” I asked, looking around.

“Yes, that was Kat,” said Osman. “A technique to control someone’s physical body.” He seemed to listen for a moment. “She says she was trying emotional influence and mind blast as well, but he was shrugging them off.”

“I’m just glad that worked. Thanks, Kat.”

“So now what do we do with them?” asked Elizabeth. “This is messed up.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

"I agree. I don't understand what's going on. Osman, let's get that woman back and get an explanation. I just wish I knew some sort of circle we could keep her in."

"I can't force her to answer, or anything. You know that, right?"

"Let's see what she'll volunteer. She wants us on her side, I think."

"I don't know, you've been a bit off today."

"It's been a long day, could you just do it please? Away from them, of course."

"Of course."

We went to the basement and Elizabeth blocked the stairs off with Anthony. Satisfied, Osman began his prayer and soon we had Lillian back.

"Did he die?" she asked.

"No, thank goodness," said Osman. "You know I probably would have lost my powers if you had succeeded in killing him? I'm responsible for what you do here, because I brought you. What possessed you to stab the man?"

"It seemed fitting, since he stabbed me."

"What? He murdered you?"

She sighed. "Yes. We were arguing one night, probably over something stupid like money. We were both shouting at each other and he grabbed up a knife and stabbed me."

"So why's he still living here and not rotting in a jail cell?" asked Yasui.

"I don't know, exactly. I was taken up to Heaven, where I waited some time to get in past the gates. Once there I had to figure out how to get around there, and then how to go to the Astral plane to see what was going on here. Of course once in Heaven I sort of stopped caring because, you know, Heaven? But here he is, apparently no worse for wear, if you don't count all the beer cans around the place."

"Where I conveniently brought you back to, so you could complete your revenge."

"I really didn't plan anything like this. I mean, honestly I didn't expect to come back here, ever. But when I saw what he was like now, what our children were becoming... I couldn't help myself. I'm sorry."

"You've certainly put us in an awkward position," I said. "Now that the truth is out, Jeff is a bit angry at his father."

"Rightfully so, I think."

"Yes, but what happens now? He's not going to want to live with his father anymore. He's not going to want his father running around, either, not when he's just admitted to murder. Where does this leave your daughter?"

"I didn't even think... I really screwed this up, didn't I?" Tears were beginning to form in her eyes.

I began pacing. "Yes, you have. Kat, I hesitate to suggest this—"

She appeared before me, as an illusion. "Wait, Morgan is getting up, you better keep her from waking either of them!"

"Right." I made a spirit clone, which went up to deal with her, then continued. "As I was saying, can you alter their memories?"

Katrina looked thoughtful. "It's not something I've really practiced. You said something similar before, I think, Dean. Being mostly a mental being myself, doing that would feel like I'm murdering someone and leaving a different person in their place. Even putting that aside it would be tough, for one thing it just happened, and it's something they're not going to want to forget. That matters, from what I've been told. Plus we have his bloody clothes to explain, the trauma Morgan went through— we miss anything and they're going to know something's up. I would probably have to try and change a couple of hours of memories, ever since you got back. Otherwise he'll wonder where your stuff went. I don't know if we should chance it."

"One thing leads to another," I said quietly. "Okay, that's out. Let's think about it, then. Send her back, she's of no further help." I pointed a thumb at Lillian.

"I really am sorry," she said, before she faded away.

Yeah, so am I.

"We're in trouble, aren't we?" asked Yasui.

"I am, anyway. Maybe, I guess. I don't know. This was not supposed to happen. She was a freaking denizen of Heaven, for crying out loud. Why's she going around stabbing people? I mean who does that?"

"He did, apparently," said Osman.

"Yeah. We can't exactly let a murderer go free, now can we? But how do we even turn him in? He won't go in quietly, that's for sure."

"Actually, I could force him to call 911 and confess to the crime," said Kat. "There must have been some suspicion cast on him originally."

"But that'll wear off. He knows about powers, and I don't want him stuck in an asylum when he babbles about his dead wife coming back and hearing that I escaped from inside a box on a moving truck."

"Plus he knows something was holding Jeff down," put in Elizabeth. "Even if he couldn't see what."

FINDING THE BALANCE

“We should admit everything,” said Osman.

“Are you nuts?” we all cried at once.

“It’s the only way. Call someone in the Foundation, have them get an ESPer here that’s better at altering memories. Explain what happened, deal with the punishment.”

“Osman, there’s no way I’m calling them, there must be something else we can do. I’m already in hot water for the talismans, and then the whole zombie thing. If Mr DeVille hears I’ve gotten myself into another mess like this...”

“He can’t punish all of us if we stick together!” said Yasui confidently.

I think he could. “But I don’t even want him knowing you girls were here,” I said. “Keeping you out of it is all I can do for you at this point.”

“We all honestly thought it would be okay. We could have stopped you, that makes us equally guilty.”

“This was my crackpot scheme, I wanted revenge on Jeff for what he did. I shouldn’t have used powers to do it. I guess I see a little bit more where the Foundation is coming from now. Even the most innocent of uses can have major repercussions.”

“What, the grown ups know what they’re talking about? That’s crazy talk,” said Elizabeth.

“I don’t know. Let’s... I don’t know, let’s wake Jeff up down here. Can you get him down here, Kat?”

“I’ve been drawing a lot of energy off Osman, trying to do things. I don’t know how much he has left in him today.”

“That’s not an issue, I can just give you-” I patted my pocket. “Right, stolen talismans. Let me look around for a ley line, get you some more energy.”

We went outside, past the two sleeping figures in the kitchen, and I found a line to hook onto. A few minutes later we were both at full strength again, and Kat used telekinesis to move Jeff downstairs. Anthony once again was in the stairwell, and I took the ward off, shaking Jeff awake.

He seemed confused for a moment, then glared at me.

“What did you do to me? Why am I down here?”

“I put you to sleep,” I answered. “You were getting a bit out of control there, we needed to separate you two.”

“He killed my mother!”

“I realize that. But killing him is just going to make things worse. You’ll go to prison for murder and your sister will go into foster care. Is that what you want?”

His shoulders sagged. “No. So do you have some magical means of making this all better, then?”

“Ah, no, not as such. And it’s not magic, it’s spirit energy manipulation.”

“I don’t care if it’s the multiplication tables. My dead mother came back and nearly killed my father, who it turned out killed her. And you and your so called friends made that all happen. Doesn’t that suggest something to you?”

“I don’t know what you want us to do, that’s why we woke you up. It’s called a discussion, let’s have one. And taking it back a step further, if you hadn’t *put me in a box, and stolen my stuff*, I never would have come here. So think carefully about assigning blame, okay?”

“So what can you do?”

“Admittedly not much that’s useful in this exact situation. Our powers are more geared towards slaughtering demons and such than making a guy go away for a murder he committed years ago. Especially with Morgan to think about.”

“Morgan? Where is she, anyway?”

“It’s fine. I’m upstairs playing with her. At least I hope I’ve calmed her down enough to play, I have a Pinky Pie promise to keep, after all.”

He looked up the stairs, then back at me. “No, you’re right here in front of me. Who’s looking after Morgan, seriously? Is it that chick with the glasses?”

“Christina? No, she went home. It’s fine, I’m in both places, it’s a power thing, don’t worry about it.”

“Your stupid power thing got us into this. I’m going to see for myself.”

He turned and tried to go up the stairs, but bounced off Anthy. He glared back at us.

“Very well. Do not wake up your father. We’ll be watching. I don’t want her to see me here twice, so go satisfy yourself she’s okay and come back down here.”

Used by him, Anthy moved out of the way and followed him up the stairs.

“Is this wise?” asked Yasui.

“He’s going to have to come to terms with it one way or another,” I replied. “If he can leave the man there now maybe he’ll be a little more reasonable later. Besides, Anthy is there.”

Elizabeth nodded. “He’s gone past him into Morgan’s room. He

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seems a bit surprised to find you there, Dean. He's asking her if everything is fine. Okay, he's coming back down."

"Satisfied?" I asked when he returned.

"I guess. Must be handy, being in two places at once."

"Somewhat. So, what do you want to happen?"

"What are my options, do you think?"

I thought a moment. "The option you'll least like is do nothing. While he won't face human justice, know that he is probably doomed unless he truly repents his actions."

"You mean like going to Hell doomed?"

"Going to the Demon World, yes. Hell is actually just a city there, like Bhogavati. He'll be tortured, turned into a demon, and then forced to fight in the last battle with Heaven when the judgement comes."

"Seriously?"

"That's how it works. Believe me, I've seen both places, and the Demon World is not a place you want to go."

"Oh. And the other option?"

"Turn him in, or persuade him to turn himself in. Know this will be trickily legally, because you're still in school. I don't know what will happen to Morgan."

"I'll take care of her."

"You may not be allowed to. Do you have other family in the area?"

He shook his head. "No, they're all over the place."

"I am not a lawyer, and my law class would have been this year at my old school. So I don't know what's down that road. Even if you get custody or whatever, it's going to be tough. You'll be taking the place of your father, making sure she gets to school, providing meals, all of it. You might get some aid from the state but I can't imagine it would be enough."

"She's the only family I have now, I have to take care of her. I'm willing to do what it takes."

Oh, sure, now you're all "big brother steps up," pretending to be a decent human being and whatnot. Jerk.

"Sounds like you've made up your mind."

"Yeah, I'll turn him in. I won't let her grow up in the same house as the person that killed our mother, now that I know the truth." He paused, and looked pained. "I might need your help with this."

I raised my hands. "I don't think using more powers is the answer here."

“No, I mean, we have to come up with a good story, and get it right. Let me think.” Now he was pacing around. “Okay, he was drinking, the cans in the living room and his blood alcohol level will show that. Morgan was being a brat and pestering him about what happened to her mom. Finally he shouted something about killing her himself, and we got scared and ran off. We can mess the house up a little, make it look like he sort of smashed some stuff and passed out after we left. We call the cops, they haul him off, end of story.”

“But what about us?” asked Osman. “If he starts talking about seeing his wife again, they’ll think he’s gone nuts.”

“I won’t even mention you guys, or any of this. He’ll keep his mouth shut about that if he knows what’s good for him.”

“But what about Morgan?” asked Elizabeth. “Is she going to go along with this little story?”

“Actually,” said Kat, “I can probably rewrite her memories a lot easier than an adult’s. She’s really young, which helps, and she probably doesn’t want to remember watching her dad get stabbed by her invisible, dead mom. Meeting you all will have to go.”

“Is he...” I asked, pointing to Jeff, meaning was he included in her illusion. She shook her head.

“It can be taken care of,” I said to him. “You can take her somewhere and she’ll remember whatever we want her to about this situation. If the cops start asking around though, and someone tells them some kids were in and out of the place, it could get tricky. We’ll have to leave our way, and you’ll have to be seen running from the place.”

“Oh, uh, okay. So I just need your help to get his clothes fixed up and stuff.”

“Will he sleep through that?” asked Osman.

“He will if I sing to him,” said Elizabeth. “I can put the...” she looked at Jeff. “I can do a thing that will keep him asleep. But it’ll put anyone in the room to sleep as well, so I’ll have to handle the cleanup alone. Get me a shirt similar to the one he’s wearing, or better yet I’ll get it off him, you can patch it up, and I’ll put it back on him.”

Ah, she can put the spirit of the robin on herself, which allows her to basically become a songstrel that knows one song. And one of those songs must be some kind of sleep song. Clever.

So we put the plan into action. Elizabeth chanted for a few minutes, making Jeff look at her like she had gone nuts. She then chanted again, this

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time directed at Anthy, who turned into a human and looked at her new hands with interest. After that she went upstairs and started softly singing. With some effort, and help from Anthy, she got his shirt off and threw it down to us. Cloth was easy enough to manipulate, so I was able to repair the knife wounds easily. With some hydrogen peroxide we got the blood out, and tossed it back up to her. She stopped singing, let us through into the house, and Jeff knocked a few things over, as though in a drunken rampage. Morgan came out to ask what he was doing, and he told her they were going to play a little game later, that everything was fine.

She believed him.

That done he went over with Osman what he wanted Morgan to remember, and I had Elizabeth pull the ward off him. Now under the influence of the song rather than the sleep spell, he would sleep naturally. She would stop singing when he left, hopefully allowing the police to arrive before he woke up.

Finally there was only one thing left.

“I need you to hit me,” Jeff said. “Hard enough to bruise me, maybe in the face? We need to sell this, that he’s dangerous, so they take us seriously.”

“As tempting as that offer is,” I replied, “Yasui is the martial artist. She’ll do it.”

“With pleasure!” Jeff looked down at the boots she was wearing.

“You’re going to use your fists, right?”

“I know Muay Thai, not Karate. I can punch, but I’m not that strong in my arms. Don’t worry, I know how to hold back. Trust me.”

“Right. Okay, go ahead.” He closed his eyes, expecting the hit.

She lashed out, kicking him “lightly” in the face, and causing him to fall over.

“Yeah, that’ll do it,” I remarked as he got up. There was now an ugly bruise forming around his eye.

“Ow!” he said, lightly touching his fingers to it.

“Sorry,” Yasui said, unconvincingly. “Consider it payment for Dean’s trouble with you.”

“All right. I’ll carry Morgan, do you know where Dan lives? He’s closest, I’ll go over there to make the call and be seen.”

We shook our heads.

“All right, you go down-”

I waved him off. “Osman will go with you. When you’re about to ring their bell Morgan’s memories will be modified. After that he can get whatever item Dan has and you’ll be on your own.”

“Fine. Look, Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not sure if I should thank you for this or plan your eventual assassination. You’ve turned my life upside down, but at least I’m not going to be living with a murderer anymore. So thanks for that, I guess.”

“Sure. Sorry it worked out this way, really.”

“Whatever. Just stay away from me from now on. I’ll get you the other item soon, okay? I don’t know if I’ll be in school much now, depending on how things go. But I’ll get it back.”

“Fine.”

“You ready?” he asked Osman.

I stuck an ignore ward on him, and told Jeff he was ready. He picked up Morgan and ran out of the house, down the street.

“He actually came through for us,” remarked Yasui, watching him go.

“Sort of. I mean, he didn’t know how much trouble I would have been in with Mr DeVille if this all got out. He just wanted what was best for his sister.”

“Still, there is something to be said for that.”

“I know. It could have gone worse. He’s got a lot of tough decisions to make, now. I hope he makes it. He may be a bully, but I don’t wish him any personal misfortune, especially considering what that would mean, now. Come on, let’s go over the house, make sure we don’t leave any sign we were here. And do it fast, I don’t know how long it’ll be until the police show up.”

My clone packed the game up he had been playing with Morgan and helped go over the house. That done we teleported away while Jeff’s father continued snoozing on the kitchen floor.

Half an hour later Osman handed my energy talisman back, and I petted it while muttering about how precious it was. The others seemed fairly revolted.

“I really hated seeing Kat put those memories into that little girl,” Osman remarked. “I saw her change. She was looking around one minute, then the next she was terrified and crying.”

“I guess that’s good, if they see her in that state. I am sorry you had to do that, but we didn’t have a lot of other choices.”

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“I know. If it’s all the same to you, the next time you ask me to leave a petitioned being somewhere ‘to talk’ I’m going to have Kat take control of you and act like a chicken or something.”

“That one did get away from us, I admit. And hey, we solved a murder mystery, right? Right?”

“See you later Dean,” said Yasui.

“Yeah, later,” said Elizabeth, and both girls used wards to teleport away.

Wait, aren’t I still the victim here?

“You know the saddest thing?” asked Osman. “Morgan will have forgotten all about seeing her mother again.”

14

The Stone is Found

*Is a stone in the hand worth two
in the bush, not unlike birds?*

For several days I was a bit worried, but no summons came for me from the Foundation. Jeff gave me my last talisman back, but wouldn't speak of what had happened after he left his house that day. I didn't feel right pressing the issue, and silently wished him well. I was conflicted about what to do for Morgan, who I had promised would see her mother again. As she had forgotten totally the events leading up to this promise, and had no idea that she had seen her mother in the first place, was I still under some obligation to follow through? Also there was Osman to consider, I wasn't sure he would be willing to go through with it, given what had happened the first time.

I eventually decided to let him take the lead. If he approached me and wanted to do it, fine. If he didn't, I would let the matter drop and that would be that.

As Christmas approached I modified my armor talisman as directed by my mother, making it both more effective and permanently active. The first because I was much better at making talismans now and the second to avoid being ambushed in the future. *With my luck talisman* (which was once again back on a chain) *and this, am I basically untouchable?* Still, I could be slammed into the ground or assaulted mentally or magically, so letting my guard down would be foolish in the extreme.

It wasn't until after Christmas, during break when all my friends were visiting, that the Foundation messenger arrived.

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“Dean Chesterfield?” he asked, after I came to the door.

“Yes?”

The others came to see who it was, no doubt having heard the man asking for me.

“Ah,” he said, looking past me. “The rest of the gang, as well. That saves me some effort.”

Gang? That doesn't sound good. I began to feel a bit ill. *But they wouldn't have waited this long, right?*

He handed all of us some envelopes, and departed, coming inside and teleporting away before offering us any explanation.

That doesn't bode well.

We tore into the slim packets and found that each of us got an identical letter. Basically it was just a location, a picture, and a time to appear; nine o'clock the next day.

“You don't think this is about... you know?” asked Elizabeth, looking a bit scared.

“Couldn't be,” said Osman. “We're still standing here.”

“Yeah, but they know a little of how powerful we are,” said Christina, shaking her cross at him. “If they can get us to show up ourselves, so much the better for them, right?”

“You don't think they'd engage in trickery like that, do you?” asked Yasui.

“Plus I'm underage,” protested Elizabeth. “They would need my parents to come if it was some sort of trial, right?”

“Did you ever tell your father about all this?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“Then probably not. If they somehow sealed your powers and returned you, he wouldn't have to know anything about it. You would be the same as you always were, from his perspective. And your mother would probably be glad they were gone, as you wouldn't be in as much danger anymore.”

“Can they even do that?”

I thought a moment. “Not practically, no. I mean sure, could it be done? Yes. But to do it five times all in a row? Plus it would have to be some kind of talisman tattoo, which you could just slash apart with a knife and you would get your powers back. So no, not really. As far as trickery goes, Yasui, I don't know enough about how they operate to even tell you.”

“Spirit hunter society wouldn't bother, they would just show up to kill you,” put in Elizabeth.

“True,” I added, and everyone nodded.

“I’m not going to worry about it,” said Christina.

“Sure, you weren’t even there for half of it,” protested Yasui.

“Right, and I still got one of these.” She waved the letter at her. “So it must be about something else. Maybe they finally want our advice on how to attack the island or something? Hey, it’s possible they found something about chaos and need to tell us.”

I shook my head. “Then why not just come here and tell us? No, this is something else. I just wish I knew what.”

The atmosphere had changed after that, and we weren’t in the mood to continue our little party. We said our goodbyes and everyone made ready to leave again.

“Oh, wait a second,” I said. I ran downstairs and got out a pair of surveil wards my mother had made. She had stacks of different kinds of wards, she wouldn’t miss them. I passed one to Yasui.

“I’ll stick this on myself before I go. You come a few minutes late, but watch what happens to the rest of us. If it seems like a trap of some kind, or it cuts out suddenly- obviously don’t come, or bust us out if you think you can.”

She nodded solemnly.

“Do you really think that’s necessary?” asked Osman.

“That and more, my friend,” I answered. “For all we know this isn’t the Foundation at all, but chaos looking to trap us. I’ll check it out before we all go. Remember, I was almost murdered in the street once already. And what’s the current death count? Over a hundred, I’ve heard. People with powers are getting targeted, and the Foundation can’t do anything because it’s regular people hired to do it.”

“How is that being done, anyway?”

“The internet, sadly. There are sites not accessible through normal means that you can use to hire assassins. As it’s all done in code and apparently random, it’s tough to track down or prevent against. As I understand it, seers would have to ask individually, every day, if a certain person is going to be killed or not that day. The question of ‘Who is going to be killed today’ is just too broad to get any sort of answer to.”

“Actually, I meant how is the actual killing being done?”

“Oh. Same as the attempt on my life, the good old stand by ‘drive by shooting.’ Somehow the victim is brought into a situation near a road, a car drives by and guns them down, and drives away.”

“That would kill most anyone, even people with powers, wouldn’t it?” asked Elizabeth. “Probably not me though, thanks to my regeneration, courtesy of Dean. They would have to totally explode me to get past it.”

I shook my head. “Don’t forget, people are wearing invulnerability wards, and still dying. Current theory is some kind of death magic, worked into the bullets that the assassins are ordered to use.”

“Plus it’s chaos,” put in Christina, “so I’ve heard of wards failing right before the hit, or getting washed off somehow, that sort of thing. People who thought they were immune to that sort of thing still find themselves gunned down. The Foundation keeps trying different things to keep people safe, and the gunmen just work around it on the next hit.”

I glumly nodded. “So yeah, be careful, all of you.”

“Same to you, if you’re heading to this place to check it out. When will you go?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll have all my talismans active, and sometime tonight when there should be fewer people around. Right now we can’t be too careful.”

“Want company?” asked Elizabeth.

“You don’t think I’m going there myself, do you?” I asked, looking shocked.

“But you just said-”

“It’s the attack of the clones,” I explained.

“Oh!”

As good as my word, that night I created a spirit clone and watched as he activated his regeneration, acceleration, and psychic barrier talismans. “Good luck,” I offered him. I knew he would activate the phase talisman as well, which I had turned into a bracelet so it didn’t interfere with the psychic barrier one. He needed to activate that one at the destination, as he needed to be solid to walk through the teleport ward’s field of influence.

He nodded once, threw down the ward while looking at the picture, and stepped through.

I paced around, waiting to have him dissipate and get his memories. I didn’t have long to wait, it turned out to be a completely normal Foundation building. Made useen, yes, but otherwise with people coming and going even at this hour. “I” had enquired within, and was told that yes, my group were expected at a certain time tomorrow, and would be shown to the room when we arrived. My clone thanked them for the information and allowed himself to vanish, letting me know what he heard.

That's at least one worry off my mind, I guess.

The next day I slapped the surveil ward on myself, activating it. I made sure I had all my equipment and steeled myself for whatever would come. I stepped through after my parents wished me luck, finding myself in the lobby of a regular looking office building. I had cast the sleep spell on myself the night before, having found myself unable to drift off. It was a bit tricky, casting from writings while being in bed, but I managed it. I had done a light spell and propped the book up, then cast the sleep spell. When I fell asleep the light spell went away, leaving me in darkness. So even though I was rather nervous at that point, at least I wasn't both nervous and exhausted. I had woken up that day kicking myself. *I could have just have a clone do it!*

I hadn't told my parents about the whole Jeff issue, only that it had been resolved and that he wouldn't be trying to shove me into any more shipping boxes again.

"He is still alive, right?" asked my father.

"What do you take me for, of course he's still alive!" I said, exasperated. "I'm not just going to kill the guy you know."

"No, but Yasui or Elizabeth might of, when they saw what he had done to you. I was more worried about them doing something they would regret, not that you would."

"They didn't." *Osman did, but of course you wouldn't suspect the petitioner. Who would?*

Soon after I arrived, my friends, minus Yasui, appeared. Inwardly I smiled a bit. She was sticking to the plan, or had just plain overslept. Honestly I was the deep sleeper, not her, so I wasn't worried.

Wonder if that's why I didn't wake up very quickly after Jeff and his buddies jumped me? It wasn't due to my head wounds at all, just me wanting to stay asleep?

I had no time to ponder this further as we were taken into a room with several tables put together to make a square. Several grizzled looking Foundation members were already there, sipping coffee and finishing off donuts. Martin was among them.

"One is missing- Yasui, right?"

"She'll just be another minute or two," I assured him.

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“Very well, sit down. Help yourself to a donut.”

Would they give a condemned man a donut?

Looking at “our” side of the square, a folder had been put in front of each chair that had our names of them.

If this is a list of our crimes or something, they aren’t very thick, I couldn’t help but think. You would think I would rate a lot more paper in mine than Osman, for instance.

“Leave them for now,” one of the men said, sitting down in front of his own folder. I saw he was talking to Elizabeth, who had started to open hers. She let the cover fall back into place again. I grabbed a donut out of the box on the way over to my seat. *May as well have my ‘last meal’ or whatever. Plus, I don’t want to show them how nervous I am. Curious, that’s me, not worried at all. No sir.*

Of course I had my psychic resistance talisman turned on, but as a similar protection could not be extended to my friends, there wasn’t much point.

“You’re probably wondering why you’re here,” said Martin, sitting down. *Uh, yeah?*

“Yes sir,” I said instead.

“Oh, let me introduce the others, this is Daniel Baccus. Arturo Han. Ludmiła Kucharska.” Each raised a hand as their names were called, and I nodded my head to each. Daniel looked American, and like the others seemed over 50. He had greying hair and a sculpted beard. Arturo looked Puerto Rican, balding with dark hair and thick eyebrows. Ludmiła had light red hair, cut very short, too vibrant not to be dyed, and glasses. Arturo I also saw was carrying a sword at his hip, so was probably an inheritor or had the weapon made for him.

“We were all involved with the attacks on the island,” explained Ludmiła, having been called last.

Oh, that’s what this is about! I thought, trying not to let my relief show. *Duh, what else could it have been?*

“I figured,” I said, hoping none were seers. I attacked my donut, thinking *I never did work out if this talisman worked against their ability to tell the truth from lies.*

“I guess we’ll get the projector warmed up while we wait for Yasui. Can one of you handle that?” Martin asked.

Daniel got the laptop and projector started up, and as he did Yasui walked in, obviously believing these three probably meant us no harm. And if they did, there probably wasn’t anything we could do that Martin hadn’t seen before, so we might as well stick together. We greeted her, and she refused a donut.

“It’s about two in the morning for me,” she complained. “I hope this doesn’t take too long.”

“It shouldn’t,” explained Martin. “Now, as Ludmiła implied, this is about the island. We’ve tried to retake it several times, and every time we are driven back by this man.” He indicated the screen, and Daniel opened an image that was on the desktop. It was a grainy photo of a flying man, hovering over a battlefield. “I don’t suppose any of you have any clue who he is?” he asked hopefully. I shook my head and looked to the others, who were similarly shaking theirs. “I’m not surprised. In any case, the pattern is the same. We arrive, and start pressing inward to the school. Some minutes later, but never the same number of minutes as before, he shows up. At that point the battle turns in favor of the demons, and we are forced to retreat.”

“What happens?” asked Christina.

“Anything you can think of.” said Arturo. “Lighting from the clear sky. Waterspouts. Our own weapons turning against us.”

Ludmiła continued. “The demons suddenly start hitting us better with their guns, and we start missing them more often.”

“In other words, chaos,” said Daniel.

“Wait, it’s a guy?” I asked, aghast. “Chaos is a dude? An out of shape, overweight, sappy middle aged guy is causing all of this?”

“As far as we can determine, yes,” said Martin. “Maybe that’s just the form it shows us to lower our guards or something-”

Arturo snorted. “We’re professionals, Martin. We’re not going to be swayed by looks.”

“Whatever the reason, as soon as this... creature... shows up, all our progress is lost and we’re forced to retreat. This is the only picture we’ve managed to get of him. Oddly enough, the camera that was being used was knocked out of the person’s hands and landed on the button. It just happened to be pointing in his direction. Every other time we tried something got in the way, or the camera broke, or the batteries fell out for no reason-something.”

“How random,” I remarked. *Something we can use, there?* I resolved to think about it a little more.

“So why are we here now?” asked Christina. “It’s obviously not so we can discuss strategy, you made it clear you don’t want to use Dean’s idea. So there must be something else.”

“Oh, is he the one that suggested learning how to use guns?” asked Ludmiła with a laugh.

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“Yes, they’re better than powers in a lot of ways,” I explained. “Mostly because we don’t kill ourselves a little bit at a time pulling a trigger.”

“We may become desperate enough to resort to stronger measures,” said Martin, obviously not liking the idea. “As a last resort we bomb the island ourselves, and move in like they did to us. But that is not a discussion I will have with a bunch of teenagers. No, you are here because we have finally found out who this man is.”

“Seriously?” asked Elizabeth.

He nodded firmly. “Take a look in your packets, it’s all there.”

We did as instructed, and there were scant notes on a man named Bryan K. Lewis. Originally from Charlotte, North Carolina, he was unmarried and had worked at Planet Pizza of all places. According to records, he disappeared suddenly, saying he was going on a trip to find something. Those that worked with him said he complained, for about a year before he left, that he was hearing voices. He wouldn’t seek help because the voices were pleading with him rather than suggesting he do things.

Gee, sound familiar, much?

However, he did reveal to a co-worker right before he quit that the voice was telling him to go somewhere, and he had decided to see where it took him.

Guess they’re pretty tight in the pizza business? I wouldn’t tell someone I was hearing voices if I was just John Q. Public.

“As you can see,” Martin went on, “we have his old address as well. We’ve gone over it, but there’s really no clues there. We hoped maybe you might have some suggestions or ideas about him, given your unique position in all of this.”

“I know what our next stop is going to be,” I said, looking at Yasui. She nodded.

“I didn’t bring it, I didn’t think we would need it. But we can go and get it.”

“What’s this?” asked Ludmiła.

“We’re going to peek in on our esteemed host, see what sort of man he was. Come on, everyone,” I said, gathering up the folder and standing. “We’re heading back to Japan, then out to Charlotte.”

About a half an hour later we were standing in Bryan’s trailer, watching his actions through the Time Frame. It was a lot of random gibberish as he talked, seemingly to himself. He would do random things, put a random

channel on his TV every few minutes, and sometimes plead to be released from whatever was controlling him. The three Foundation soldiers (or whatever they were exactly) were interested in learning more about him, and were watching his every move with interest.

“What’s with his arm?” asked Elizabeth, as we watched him getting undressed one night, about two months ago. “That black stuff seems to be crawling up it.”

It was true, Yasui had been keeping track of when he visited the place, which wasn’t often, and was able to ask for specific times to be displayed. As she went closer to the present the tendrils were higher each time. Also the ‘bulb’ at the end got smaller in comparison.

“It’s taking him over?” suggested Daniel.

“So really it isn’t the man we have to be concerned with, but that thing he’s holding?” remarked Martin. “Not that this knowledge really helps us any.”

“Maybe it does,” I said. “In the dream, the man we spoke to kept saying ‘the vessel’ of chaos.”

“Right,” said Osman. “He said ‘the vessel’ would both destroy and save us.”

“And that one of us would have to take it up, but that we should beware it,” said Christina.

“Something about balance, too,” said Yasui. “You think- you don’t think there’s something else like that out there, do you?”

“It could be what’s talking to me,” I guessed. “Like maybe this thing that’s taking over poor Bryan here called to him. Drove him mad and told him where to go to get it. Once he picked it up, though, it started taking him over. Perhaps I must take up something similar and become a vessel for order? The Dreamer talked about them almost like they were one object, but they could just as easily be two.”

“We can’t have something like that taking you over,” said Martin. The “you’re dangerous enough as you are” hung in the air, unsaid, though both of us knew it was there.

“At the same time we can’t fight this vessel of chaos without some kind of balance,” I protested. “The thing that talks to me calls itself order. If there’s a... stone of chaos then there must be a stone of order, right? Balance.”

“I suppose. But we’re still no closer to finding it.”

“Aren’t we?” asked Osman. “We’ve narrowed the search, at least. The angels are still looking in the Heavenly libraries, aren’t they?”

Martin nodded.

“So have them look for records of objects meeting the description of this one. A black material, seemingly stone or rock, about the size of a softball. It can obviously change itself, and is at least partially sentient. It can take people over and then use them to move around. I bet if we looked, we would find this guy somewhere nearby at every weird happening in the world lately.”

“The man is obviously talking to it,” put in Yasui. “Even if we can’t hear the thing’s reply, it’s carrying on a conversation. It knows what it’s doing.”

“What do you figure it is?” asked Arturo.

“Could be a lot of things, given what people have tried to make in the past,” said Martin. “Some sort of talisman that went wrong, or something like the stone of knowledge.”

“The what?” asked Yasui.

“One of the early attempts to make a philosopher’s stone,” answered Martin. “It went wrong, and absorbed the mind of the man making it. Oddly, however, he succeeded despite that, and now the stone is owned by one of his descendants. Every few hundred years they tire of life, give the stone to someone, and pass on. We see it at the school every so often. It’s knowledge is rather out of date now, in a social sense. But alchemy hasn’t changed much since then, so it’s worthwhile for an alchemist in training, having it around.”

What must it be like, talking casually about a few hundred years passing between sightings of a single object?

“If someone made this chaos stone, they forgot to include a manual,” said Christina. “But isn’t that always the way? Nobody likes to document anything.”

We all chuckled at that.

“Seems like these kids know their stuff,” remarked Ludmiła. “Can’t imagine why you didn’t want them brought in earlier, Martin.”

He just glared at her. “Give me a minute to record all of this,” he said, pulling his notebook out. “Then we can figure out our next steps.”

Pet Rock

*Not to be confused with Hard Rock,
Soft Rock, Rock 'n Roll, 'dude that
totally rocked' or Pop Rocks.*

“If we’re not attacking something in the next few hours, can I go back to bed?” Yasui asked.

“Do you mind leaving this?” asked Artuno.

“No, it’s fine.”

Martin nodded. “You can go. Thanks for coming out.”

“Sure thing.”

She got out a teleport ward. “Sorry I keep using these up,” she said to me.

I waved it off. “They’re easy enough to make, I don’t mind doing it.”

“See you later.” She threw it down and was gone.

“So what’s been done around here?” I asked, looking around. The place bore some resemblance to Jeff’s living room, obviously a “bachelor pad.”

“The usual,” answered Martin. “We had ESPers and seers to go over his stuff, see if any clues could be gained from that. I really must remind myself to have Lucian make one of those Frame things, that seems much easier.” He got out his notebook again and made a note.

“I wonder,” I remarked, going over to his trash can.

“What are you doing?” asked Daniel.

“Looking for clues. Bring me all his trash cans, would you?”

The others shrugged and went off in search of them.

“What sort of clues?”

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“We need to find out where he went, right? Chaos doesn’t seem much for cleaning the place up, maybe he still has receipts somewhere for things he bought to go on his little journey of discovery.”

“After this long?” asked Ludmiła.

“I admit, it’s a long shot. But with chaos loose in the world, the long shot doesn’t seem quite as far away anymore.”

The others brought the baskets they had found, but a search didn’t reveal anything. I also had them check any desks, drawers, anything that might hold receipts that he might have just thrown somewhere and forgotten.

“One from out of state would even help,” I told them. “It would tell us what direction he was going.”

But they found nothing like that.

“What else is around here?” I asked in desperation. “Look for anything out of place. I mean we’re looking at a man of simple tastes here, an empty chip bag from a company that doesn’t sell around here could be the key!”

We split up, though as small as the place was it didn’t take long for even a single person to cover the whole thing.

“He was apparently an outdoor enthusiast,” said Artuno. “Look-snowshoes. That doesn’t really match up with the rest of the place, right? That’s about all I found. Either after being taken over he made sure there were no clues, or there just was never anything to find.”

“Now why in the world...” asked Elizabeth, shaking her head. “Snow, yuck.”

Nothing else presented itself, and I stood in the living room, looking around impatiently.

“Someone is going to have to sit here,” I said, “listening to his rantings for other clues. Plus they’ll have to go back through the time he was living here before being ‘infected’ and see if he let slip somehow where he was planning to go.” I snapped my fingers. “The Foundation controls everything, right? Can’t we get his credit card records, see what tickets he bought? There must be a trail somewhere.”

“Credit card records from a year ago? I don’t know, but I can ask someone to look into it.”

“I see what you’re doing,” Artuno said to me.

“Earning brownie points?” Daniel said jokingly.

“No,” he replied, “he’s attacking the problem as though he didn’t have powers.”

“Exactly. You guys tried power stuff and didn’t get very far, unless there’s more you aren’t telling me?” Martin didn’t say one way or the other when I looked over at him. “Well, whatever. But just like a curse creates a spiritual connection that leads back to the person that spoke it, as people move through the world they leave a trail. Finding the actual ticket stubs would be ideal, but just knowing he bought snowshoes means he didn’t go to a tropical paradise to find this chaos thing.”

“Unless he was already being influenced by chaos,” put in Daniel, “and was doing random things already. He could have bought these to throw us off, and gone to your tropical paradise. Heck, the thing could have been buried on his lot, and that’s how he found it. It just so happens he likes to go snowshoeing somewhere.”

“Ah. Well, now here ESPer techniques would be helpful. Kat, can you see where these things have been?”

“She says there’s only one problem,” relayed Osman.

“What, only one?”

“She doesn’t know how far back to go. Plus if he only used them a week she would have to go through their past days one at a time.”

“Really? I admit, I’ve only used the postcognition skill once, and that was to see how that progenitor Charna created Tyrfake. How did I do it? I couldn’t have known exactly when in the past to look.”

“She says you probably knew roughly when it was made, because it would have been made just before it was handed over. Then just hunted around in that time frame.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Plus the majority of the time, even if she found the right week, would just be him tromping around in the snow. That’s not very useful, right? Though she says she doesn’t mind looking into their recent past, see if they were used within the last month or so. If he bought them to use once, while on the trail of chaos, they would have just sat under his bed since then.”

“That’s a good thought.”

“And doing something now doesn’t mean we can’t do more later,” said Arturo. “We can give them to a seer, rather than an ESPer. They could ask specific questions of the universe pertaining to these shoes. Like ‘where did they go to be used’ or ‘what is the furthest they traveled.’ Things like that.”

“I’ll take them with me,” said Martian. “See what we can get off them. Anything else we can do around here?”

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I thought, and the others looked around too.

“Some sort of talisman, Dean?” asked Elizabeth playfully. “I know that’s what Yasui would say, right?”

“Not this time, I think. We need answers, and to track this guy down. That’s a job for seers, not me.”

Osman had taken the shoes, and sat down to let Katrina work.

“Are you going to attack the island again?” asked Christina.

“We’re hesitant to,” said Artuno, “until we get this chaos situation under control. At least they aren’t spilling out into the world that we can tell.”

“Why do you think that is?” asked Osman.

“Several reasons,” answered Daniel. “The island is defensible. This chaos person may be keeping them there for his own purpose. Maybe most demons don’t even know about the gate being unguarded at the moment. Maybe some demon lords are using it as a resort, to reward their more successful underlings. There’s too many reasons to even speculate.”

“Plus,” put in Christina, “if we knew they were trying to leave the island, our response would be greater. For the moment the Foundation is content to allow them to stay there, provided they don’t make trouble.”

“What makes you say that?” demanded Martin.

“Easy. You haven’t swallowed your pride and asked the spirit hunters for help. You say the chaos guy appears some time after the battle begins. I bet if you teleported in every spirit hunter on Earth, they could clear the place out before the guy got a chance to react.”

“Do you even know the nightmare it would be to get all spirit hunters in the same place, and attack simultaneously?”

“No, but I bet it would be doable. And you would try that before bombing the place yourself, which you mentioned. I’m sure they would say yes to killing a bunch of demons, even if it was to liberate the island. They may not like your methods, but I’m sure even the most hard nosed member of the society realizes young people with powers have to be trained, and the gate guarded again. Both things that can only be done there.”

“They might want concessions though.”

“So you admit to not even asking them? Isn’t it better to get everyone working on this, rather than waiting until it’s almost too late to go begging for help? Then they would just be able to demand more, because they would know you were over the barrel, or whatever that expression is.”

“Please don’t presume to know anything about Foundation policy or actions in the past.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I just hope the Foundation knows what it’s doing.”

“The shoes have been sitting there for at least the past month,” said Osman, looking up from them. “She checked a random number of days going backwards from last week.”

“That’s something, I guess. At least we know they might be a possible clue.”

“Perhaps?” asked Elizabeth.

“I’m positively, almost certain,” I said.

“All right,” said Martian, grabbing them. “Let’s head back. Oh, and will you let us borrow the Frame, at least until we can make our own?”

“It’s not really mine to let you borrow, it’s Yasui’s. But I’m sure she would say yes.”

“Great, thanks.”

Like I really could say no...

“Congratulations, Dean,” said Osman, as the rest of the group had followed me home through my teleport ward. “It seems you’ve managed to hide your latest activities from the Foundation after all.”

“I don’t really take any pride in it, I think most of them are distracted with this chaos thing.”

“You think they’ll catch up to all this stuff after it’s over?” asked Elizabeth.

“Probably not. Remember, they’ve got a whole island to rebuild. They’ll have to make sure the radiation is gone so people can move back in. Repair all the houses, get the talismans repaired, as we can guess they’ve been torn up. It’ll go on and on. No, even once the island is back in Foundation control, there will be years of work ahead of everyone before things get back to normal.”

“Plus, that assumes this Bryan guy can even be captured and held when the island is retaken. As they can’t seem to find him he’s either using his chaos powers to hide somehow, or went into the Demon World.”

“Plus, how do you build a prison to hold chaos?” I asked. “He could probably manipulate probability to spring the lock on the door, or make wards fail or just cause the place to crumble to dust around him.”

“That is an interesting question,” remarked Osman. “Let’s say you find this concentration of order and let it start taking you over. How does that help against chaos?”

“I would have to guess it could keep chaos in check, at the very least. Presumably it did before chaos got loose. Either by directly negating the ability to change probability or just putting things back afterwards.”

“Problem is,” said Elizabeth, “unless you spend months training... no, wait, it probably doesn’t work like that.”

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“Like what?” I asked.

“I was imagining it to be like a power we had, that needed to be trained. But really all you would need to do is carry the thing around and let it bat chaos around like a kitten bats a toy mouse. You wouldn’t necessarily need to actively oppose it.”

“Obviously this guy was normal before all this happened,” said Osman.

“Ah,” I countered, “but it’s also taking him over. You heard him, he’s losing his mind to the thing. Is that going to be required of me, or am I just carrying the thing around and letting it go at it?”

“Hopefully carrying,” said both of them.

“That raises another question though,” said Osman. “Why you?”

“Why not me?”

“No, I mean, this chaos force somehow got away from its opposite, order. Right?”

“Presumably.”

“And it chose a random person on Earth, possibly because that’s just how chaos works and possibly because it doesn’t need any more powers than chaos powers.”

“That’s all reasonable, but so what?”

“So then why did order seek you, specifically, Dean? Why not someone with lots more experience, like Cain himself? He’s supposed to be you on steroids, right?”

“That’s what I’ve heard, yeah.”

“Or Mr DeVille, he’s been alive a long time, and he’s all about rule following and keeping things the same. Wouldn’t a guy like that be perfect?”

“I don’t know. Even my father has more experience being a child of Cain, just by the fact he’s lived longer. Not that he’s interested in becoming anything but a really great alchemist who can do a little bit more on the side. Whereas I am, somewhere down the line, going to master all forms of power because, hey, I can! As far as this situation goes, we would be identical, especially if order doesn’t need any other power but itself.”

“Didn’t you say that Dreamer guy told you we were the solution to the whole ‘dark times’ that were coming? That’s why he messed with the past and made us what we are now? Maybe order picked you because if an alien said ‘take me to your leader’ I would take you out of my Poké-ball, not bring them to the president or whatever.”

“Wait, I’m a Pokémon now?”

She colored. “I, uh, didn’t mean to say that. Because I certainly haven’t been writing a crossover ship-fic where all my friends are Pokémon.”

“Do I even want to know who I’m being shipped with?” She just whistled and looked around. “I didn’t think so. In any case, it’s a moot point. Order choose me so it must have a reason. That reason doesn’t really matter, especially if we haven’t found the dang thing yet.”

“Agreed,” said Osman, then paused. “How does a Demongate High/Pokémon crossover even work?”

She snorted. “It works. I saw a Demongate High/Friendship is Magic crossover when we still had an island. It was on our restricted website, but the author was pretty inconsistent with updates.” She sighed wistfully. “I wonder if we’ll ever see any more chapters of it? Poor PlazmaticBrony, I hope you survived the explosion and will one day update again.”

“I suppose if one of the instructors can create a web comic about things that go on around the school, someone else can do other crossovers. Was it approved to be posted outside our network?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea, I didn’t need to look for it outside the Demongate Network.”

“Gee, you think I should write a series of books about what happened to us over the years?”

The others considered a moment, then shook their heads.

“Nah,” the both said.

“Yeah, who would read them? Oh well, we have a mystery to solve.”

“Hopefully now that we know something about what we’re looking for, we can find more information,” said Osman.

“To that end,” I said, pulling my book of magic from my pouch, “let’s call ourselves up a bit ‘o that old black magic.”

“And by black magic you mean...”

“White magic, given and approved by Heaven.”

“Just checking.”

So I read over the research spell to reacquaint myself with it, then cast it three times simultaneously. It was only slightly harder, but I had the energy to spare to put into the spell, and I could take a total of 12 minutes to properly envision the mystical symbols. With that done, three separate but identical books dropped into our hands from nowhere, and we started going over them.

“Here’s something,” said Elizabeth, about two hours later. “Take a look at this:

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And did the All-Father look down upon the Earth and see that chaos had left it as He had commanded, leaving perfect order. But in His wisdom He knew that too much order would leave His world unyielding and unchanging. Thus did He gather order and chaos together, setting them opposite one another that His world might remain in balance for all days."

"Naturally it wouldn't say where," Osman complained.

"Still, at least it seems we know now how it happened. It wasn't something that went wrong and was hidden away, like that goblet we destroyed. Remember, Osman? They somehow must have gotten out of alignment, and that allowed chaos to get free."

"But why didn't order get free at the same time?" asked Elizabeth. "The way you tell it, this order thing sounds almost frightened of chaos finding out it's active."

"That's a good point," I admitted. "Obviously chaos would know where its counterpart was, right? Especially if they were 'placed opposite each other' like that passage says. So why hasn't chaos just gone there and destroyed this distillation of order?"

"I doubt one could approach the other without being destroyed," said Osman. "Fire and ice, so to speak."

"Could something as fundamental as order or chaos really be destroyed, though?" asked Elizabeth. "I mean, what would happen if both order and chaos disappeared from the local scene? There would be no driving force for anything."

"Let's hope we never have to find out. Of course even if the chaos vessel was afraid to approach order, it could send others, like demons, to go fetch it."

"Ah, but could they be trusted?" asked Osman. "I wouldn't trust a demon to go fetch something that could shut me down. No matter what assurances it gave me that it wouldn't work against me."

"Wait a second, what did you say a second ago?" I asked Elizabeth.

"Uh, could something like chaos be destroyed?"

"No, before that. Something about being active, right. Maybe this chaos force isn't supposed to be sentient, but became that way after so long. So maybe order doesn't want chaos to know it is, too. That way chaos would leave it alone, thinking it wasn't a threat."

"If it did figure it out, it would be able to get there faster than we could, and then maybe hide it somewhere else," figured Osman.

"It makes sense. Well, we found one passage that references it, so maybe there are others. We'll just have to keep looking. That's the problem with this spell, you get everything jumbled up inside the book. In a real library I could now look for books referencing hiding places the All-Father used, or the process of distilling order, or where the balance stones were or something."

Osman jumped up. "Dean, get out your circle, I have an idea!"

I jumped a little but pulled it out, smoothing it out onto the floor and activating it. Meanwhile, Osman was talking to himself, and I heard him addressing Iris.

Moments later, he was standing in the room with us.

"Hello, everyone," said Iris. "Osman tells me you've made some progress with the whole chaos situation?"

"Some, but I'm not sure why he's called you," I replied.

"It's obvious," said Osman excitedly. "Iris, look, did you bring the spell?"

"I've got it memorized by now, given how useful it is."

"That's great. We're looking for a distillation of order. It's... what do you think, guys? The chaos one was black, would this one be white?" Elizabeth and I looked at each other and nodded. "Okay, it would look like a white rock, about so big," he made a shape with his hands.

"Oh, you want to try and descry such a thing?" I asked him. "Is it really an object, though?"

"What else is it? It's not a rabbit, or a demon."

"I suppose. Well, it's worth trying I guess. Is that enough to go on?"

"I can certainly envision a white blob, and such a thing would be unique if it's not actually rock but distilled order."

"Wait a second," said Elizabeth. "We think it was round because the chaos one is round *now*. But it's chaos, it was probably a blob shape, random, to start out with. The roundness is just what's left sticking out of his hand. Wouldn't the distillation of order be... more orderly? Like a perfect cube or something?"

"Or a pyramid?" asked Osman.

"Or a perfect sphere," I put in. "I mean any perfect shape would represent order, right?"

We looked at each other.

"So what do you want me to try looking for, exactly?"

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“Would you mind trying a few different shapes?” asked Osman.

“I guess. I don’t think the spell would backlash if I look for something that doesn’t exist. After all, if there is no distance I can go to find it, the distance is zero, and so the difficulty of the spell is zero.”

“Magic is so weird,” I said. “Like how does magic know the distance to the object anyway? Is it creating an invisible bubble that’s cataloging every object within when you cast the spell? That could be trillions of objects. Yet, even if the bubble isn’t big enough it still knows where the object is because if you do that poorly and it’s so much further away, you backlash. But if that bubble is ten miles from the thing you’re trying to find- totally fine, the spell just fizzles.”

“Hey, I didn’t make the rules,” said Iris, beginning to cast.

In the end he tried several times, but reported failure each time.

“It’s either protected in some way, which I wouldn’t doubt given it was made by the All-Father and not to be disturbed, or it’s different than you say.”

“Or it’s a bunny,” said Elizabeth.

“Yes,” said Iris slowly, “or it’s a bunny.”

“Thanks anyway,” said Osman. “It was worth a try.”

“It was. Sorry it didn’t work out. Anything else I can help you with?” There wasn’t, and seconds later he was gone.

“Any other bright ideas?” I asked.

Found. Sort of.

“I was always a master of Hide and Seek as a child. It’s not a skill you lose.” -- Arnold Rimmer

It was coming up on March and I had looked into, and created, (what else) a new talisman. It took the form of a simple sphere, which fitted nicely into the upraised claw on my dragon. My father whipped up some adhesive which bound the two together, making them one object. I made it always active, and it made sure anyone, including myself, was safe from powers that spied at a distance. As I figured I would have the dragon with me wherever I went, and this was infinitely easier than adding that function to the dragon itself, it seemed a great fit.

In addition, life around school had been much better these past few months. Jeff had left me alone and Lynsey didn’t press me for any more details about the supernatural, so I was still hanging out with her group. It was in math class one afternoon when my phone beeped, indicating I had gotten a text. I had an ignore ward stuck to the back of it as a precaution, so no one else in the room acted like they had heard anything. In reality, they hadn’t. I pulled it out and took a look. I expected something from one of my friends, perhaps they were in trouble? What I didn’t expect was the official Foundation number to be there on my screen, but I saw it anyway. I brought up the message:

Dean, our friends upstairs found the book they were looking for. Come by the place you went before after school.

Or, I thought to myself, Given the nature of the news, I could find a quiet spot between classes and send a clone. Or keep a clone here and go

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myself. In fact, why am I sitting here when a clone could just as easily take these classes, give me what it learned at the end of the day by disappearing, and I could sit home and play video games all day? I'm so stupid!

In any case, I left the clone and went to the building, mentally kicking myself. *Wait, mentally have Yasui kick you, it'll have more impact.*

Walking into the building I saw Yasui sitting on a bench in the front waiting area, and she waved me over.

"Hey, you're here!" she exclaimed. "They didn't expect you for hours."

"I left a clone, he'll be fine. So they found it, huh?"

"I guess. I didn't get any more information than you. They said it would be a while before everyone got here because of the time zone differences and such. They wanted to brief us all together rather than separately. I left a clone behind too, probably thinking the same thing you did. I was regretting it because now I have to sit here until everyone else is here."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. *I should have realized they would call the whole group, not just me. Man I really have to work on that ego problem of mine. It'll only get worse, after all.* "At least now we get to sit together." I sat down next to her.

"How are things?" she asked. "No more zombies and such I hope?" She laughed.

"No, it's been pretty quiet. Apart from all the chaos stuff, I mean."

"Yeah, it's getting weirder. Do you know, for two weeks every Subaru that rolled off the assembly line just split in half for no reason?"

"Really?"

"Yup. But that's not the worst. There was some concern that Mount Fuji was going to erupt."

"That would be a disaster!"

She nodded. "Apparently a bunch of Foundation people came to see what they could do."

"They stopped it, obviously. Or is there still a danger?"

"No, they stopped it- sorta."

"Sorta?"

"My parents didn't get the whole story, but they have contacts in the Foundation. Well, I mean nearly everyone that has powers does, right? You know what I mean. Anyway, the more they tried to stop the eruption the closer it seemed to get."

I narrowed my eyes in concentration. “Chaos seems to manipulate probability. Like that glitter circle, making the impossible, possible.”

“That’s why they decided to go the other route, and try to make it erupt themselves.”

“What?”

“It worked.”

“That seems backwards. Keeping a volcano from erupting by trying to make it erupt. I guess if you could balance the two forces you could get it stable. Man, I’m glad I wasn’t part of that team.”

Yasui agreed with me. “I guess there were a bunch of seers there, making sure everything proceeded right.”

“Wow.” I paused. “So that must be what’s taking up most of the Foundation’s manpower? Keeping stuff like that from happening while keeping the public away from knowing stuff like that is happening?”

“I would have to guess. I mean look at this place. I don’t know how busy it is normally, but the Foundation can’t have many meeting places like this, it’s a hassle to make sure they stay hidden. I’ve been sitting here,” she checked her phone, “probably about a half hour, and I’ve seen maybe a dozen people through those doors? That can’t be right.”

I scowled at nothing.

“What?”

“It’s just... not right. We could help, we could pull our weight. All the seniors from Demongate probably could, in one capacity or another. Heck, everyone could do something! Look at Elizabeth; She went through so much and got so little real training, but look what she accomplished despite that. But no, we’ve been stuck back in regular schools like we were useless. What were they thinking?”

“True, learning physics and precalc and whatnot, given the state of the world, does seem like a waste of resources.”

“It’s that stupid thousand year old mentality they have. ‘You’re not graduated, hence you must graduate before you are worth something.’ I mean, honestly.”

I didn’t mention my own lapse in judgement, having a clone attend school for me. I had been so caught up in the “Dean has to go to school” mentality that I hadn’t considered my clones *were* me.

“I’m sure they think it’s for the best.”

“But there’s so few of us. Resource management, people.”

“I hear you, but what can we do about it?”

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I slumped down in my seat. “Nothing.”

The hours flew by like a snail crawling from one end of the building to another, but finally my friends and the people we had met before arrived and we went into the meeting room.

“Thanks for coming,” said Martin.

“Like we would miss this!” exclaimed Elizabeth. “You found something?”

He nodded. “With the additional information we got we could narrow the search, and it paid off. The Heavenly agents we had looking found a book that detailed the creation of the so called ‘Stones of Balance’ and their placement into the world by the All-Father.”

Yeah, yeah, we found that much out ourselves. Get to the good stuff!

“So where are they?” I asked, impatiently.

The other people all shared a look between themselves.

“We don’t exactly know, by that I mean we can’t just reach out a hand and grab one,” hedged Martin. “We do know that one was placed as far north as possible, and one placed as far south as possible.”

“Opposite each other,” remarked Osman. “Canceling each other out.”

“Yes,” said Daniel, possibly suspicious that he had come to that conclusion so quickly. “The book describes that as the situation exactly.”

“So let’s go,” said Yasui, probably wanting to do something, anything, after sitting around all afternoon.

“Ah,” said Martin, holding up a hand. “It’s not that easy.”

Again, the adults looked a little uncomfortable and reluctant.

“What is it?” asked Osman. “Does an angel guard it, like the tree of life?”

“Oh, no, at least, nothing we read suggests that,” said Artuno.

“No,” said Martin, “the problems are more mundane than that.”

“What do you mean?” asked Christina. “Aren’t mundane problems the easiest for us to solve?”

“There are several issues,” said Martian. “The first is figuring out if we should go north or south to find this embodiment of order. That means either doubling the search time or losing people to our ongoing efforts of keeping the world together.”

“We haven’t been able to attack the island lately because the chaos in the world is getting worse,” explained Ludmiła. “It’s all we can do to keep up now.”

“All sorts of groups are helping us out, like the Watchers, and smaller groups we wouldn’t normally ask for help,” said Artuno. “We’re

holding our own, but it's a near thing. People are getting scared because we're letting some things that are not truly dangerous, but still wouldn't normally occur, happen. But even we can't do everything, so we have to prioritize."

"Seems an easy enough solution," I said. "Just send us. We're the ones that have to deal with chaos anyway, right?"

Again, that look passed between the people sitting across from us.

"That brings us to another point," said Martin. "Two more points, really. First, do you realize how enormous an area you would have to cover? Not to mention the extreme environments at the poles. You're still in school- you would have to drop out and disappear, possibly for weeks. We don't want that, it would be very difficult to explain your absence, and then eventual return. Plus there's your end of year exams to take, you wouldn't want to fall behind, right?"

"I'm pretty sure if we spent our time *saving the world* that the Foundation could work something to get us our diplomas anyway," said Yasui. "You do still run a school, even if it's occupied by demons at the moment. No one is going to know the difference."

Martin shook his head. "No, you have to graduate the regular way. Just because there's some crisis doesn't mean the rules get suspended."

"Yeah, they'd get suspended every other week!" said Daniel, managing a weak laugh.

I heard Katrina's voice in my head. *Be careful, Dean. I sense they're trying to hide something from you. They know something they aren't sharing with us, this school business is just a cover.*

Which reminded me I hadn't activated my psychic barrier talisman, which was sloppy of me. *A mistake like that later could get you killed, Dean*, I thought to myself. Of course, I planned to make it permanent, once I didn't have a disembodied friend to talk to all the time. It was troubling, however, that I had forgotten twice now to activate a talisman, and regretted it. How many times had I forgotten to activate one and believed I had, or just totally forgot about it? *Simple slip-up, or chaos at work?*

"I've made clone wards before," I said. "I could make them for the others so they could still walk around the school and continue their classes. Even graduate, if it really did take us that long."

Martin shook his head. "That's risky, relying on a ward for that long."

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“How long would it be, though? I mean, we could get there quickly enough, right?” I asked.

“An ophan could get us to where we needed to go,” put in Osman. “Even if they’ve never seen the poles, they can just open a gateway there and we can step through.”

“Still,” hedged Ludmiła, “trying to find exactly where this object is, even if you managed to get to whatever ‘furthest north or south’ means, won’t be easy. We assume it’s buried underground, or at least inside the ice somewhere in the case of the north.”

“There must be some kind of permanent structure there,” said Christina, her phone out. “There’s just ice floating about in the north, and if these two objects have to remain in place...”

“This was all set up by the All-Father,” Artuno reminded her. “He could have just as easily willed a large chunk of ice to remain motionless up there, rather than building any sort of holding area for this thing.”

“Or he put it underwater,” said Daniel. “You really want to go paddling around in freezing cold water for hours at a time? Keeping in mind it’ll be dark, and down deep.”

“Something could be worked out,” I argued. “There must be people with talismans they could lend us. Darksight, invulnerability for the depth, a little bit of withstand weather magic for the cold. It’s doable!”

“You’re not listening,” said Martin. “Any search like that would take a team weeks, if not months. There’s only a couple of you.”

“Then why did you call us here?”

“Dean, you have a tendency to rush off. Can you at least admit that?” I nodded curtly. “Good. We told you this not to tease you or something but to show we are making progress. And so that when we do locate the embodiment we can get you there in a hurry. I just don’t want you getting incomplete information from somewhere, like your magic for instance, and rushing off.”

How about that? He knows me pretty well. Though, given his age, I suppose he’s dealt with all personality types at one point or another in his life.

“Don’t worry, if it really is at one of the poles I know how dangerous the area is.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. So I have your word that you won’t go rushing off to try and do anything yourself?”

“I will not rush off and try to do anything myself,” I promised him.

I will carefully plan everything and go with my friends. Perhaps not the intent of the oath he wanted me to give him, but certainly following the letter of it.

He seemed to relax a little.

“All right then. We’re going to keep trying to narrow the location down. At the very least, eliminating half the area from the search will help a lot. Or if we find the man himself, which our seers are having no luck with at the moment. We’ll let you know, but for now, you might want to get some heavy winter gear around. Even magic might have a little trouble with the weather in a place that doesn’t get anywhere near even zero degrees. Tinted goggles for a start.”

“I’ll look into it. Thank you for being up front with me.”

“Of course!” he answered easily. “Now, let’s get you kids home. Can I offer you our services, so you don’t need to use up your own wards?”

I think he wants to separate us, Kat sent to me. Keep us from discussing things. I think he forgot how easy that is because of the internet.

“That would be great, saves me some work.”

“Splendid. I’ll go get things set up, you can say your goodbyes.”

He left the room, leaving the others to talk softly among themselves. We said goodbye to each other and were escorted out separately, then teleported home with an ESPer.

I hadn’t missed his words at the end there. *“You kids” indeed. Is that how he sees us? We’re almost adults, and we’ve been through a lot. Why does he think this is different?*

Moments later we were all online, having a video chat across the world.

“So, what did you pick up, Kat?” I asked her, as she was currently using projection to stand near Osman.

“I got the feeling they knew exactly where the thing was, or at least roughly, and wanted to keep that knowledge from you for some reason,” she answered, sounding soft and further away than she otherwise did while using illusion instead.

Pity that wouldn’t work over this sort of channel.

“I’m no seer,” she went on, “I can’t tell if they were lying, as such, but I could tell their emotional state. It was caution and concealment, and both went up when they were talking to Dean directly.”

“That seems dumb,” said Christina. “He’s the guy order is talking to, after all. Hey, has it said anything lately?”

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I shook my head. “I don’t think chaos is really making a concentrated effort like he used to. Like it used to. Whatever. Before it was almost, I don’t know, having fun? Making trouble for us and seeing what it could do. Now it’s just focusing on absorbing that guy and getting stronger. At least that’s how I take it, maybe it’s doing the same thing but now that the Foundation is on alert, we aren’t hearing about stuff like towers falling down. Or maybe it needs less rest time now or something. It’s impossible to know.”

“Wait a second,” said Yasui. “If it is focusing on the guy rather than causing trouble, then shouldn’t order be more powerful at the moment? I mean, if chaos went into the Demon World or something, and that’s why our seers can’t find him, that means order is stronger here.”

“I suppose,” said Elizabeth. “But who can say what that means? All we see is the end result, and it doesn’t really matter if it’s order or chaos making things wacky. We just need to stop it.”

“Plus,” said Katrina, “order may be holding its power back so that very thing doesn’t happen. It knows the balance is upset, can’t do more because chaos hiding could be an act to draw it out.”

“But what-” Osman started to ask, but then realized. “Oh, right, it only spoke to you after chaos did something big, so it could know the communication probably wouldn’t be noticed.”

“Exactly.”

“I was going to say,” said Christina, “why wouldn’t they want Dean to put an end to this situation? Get him in there, defeat chaos, get the island back. Sounds good to me, right?”

“I think it comes back to that fear I was feeling from them,” answered Kat. “I think they’re afraid of Dean getting his hands on this order power.”

“Aw, afraid of little old me? That’s sweet.”

“This is serious, Dean. Remember, Mr DeVille has been worried about the stuff you’re making people, and who knows what you could do with something as powerful as a concentration of order itself.”

“But I’m the good guy!” I protested.

“You don’t need to tell me, think of it from their perspective. Here’s you, able to make talismans better than anyone they’ve ever seen, and your skill probably isn’t near its limit yet, if it even has one. You’ve used that skill to make a bunch of really powerful items for your friends and yourself, learning from each battle you take part in to make a new item that compensates for any weakness you showed. Isn’t making talismans all

about condensing energies into an object? That sounds like order to me, so maybe this thing could supercharge that ability and allow you to instantly make talismans out of whatever. It's impossible to know what you could do with that power!"

"Yeah, for an artificer your attacks and defense are pretty top-notch," said Christina. "You have speed, armor that doesn't weigh you down, range, and two elements. Then you went and made all of us more effective, way more, in some cases."

"Stop, you're making me blush. Anyway you forgot my luck." I took the clover from under my shirt.

She snorted. "The point is, I can see where they're coming from. To a guy like Mr DeVille, you're just a baby. A baby with a lot of power and the potential for more. Personally, I'd keep an eye on you just so something similar to what happened to your parents doesn't happen to you. You get caught somehow and are forced to make stuff for others that makes them as good as you made us. Or someone is held hostage until you do."

"I never thought of that. That's actually a really good point."

"Keep it in mind, okay?"

"I... will."

I was a bit shaken. I had no problem taking things apart in combat that were trying to take me apart. The problem there was, anyone that heard about a fight involving me would know that, and not attack directly. A craftier enemy would attack me through others, something I might find hard to work around. I had already proven I was willing to rescue people, I had done it years ago. But if someone I knew was hidden away and threatened, would I be able to let them die if it meant not making some item for the culprits? It was a scary thought.

There was a moment of silence as I mulled this over.

"So what's our next step?" asked Yasui.

"They've given us most of the information we need," said Kat, "we just need to know if we should go north or south."

"They were right though," said Christina. "The south pole is huge! We couldn't hope to cover even a fraction of it in any reasonable time. Plus, trying to find something the All-Father didn't want found? Forget it."

"I'm hoping that, if I got closer, the order construct could direct me. It could use less power to contact me, and could tell me if I was getting closer or not. The chaos one was found somehow, after all, right?"

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“Pretty thin hope, when you’re freezing your butt off in the middle of the Antarctic,” said Yasui.

“For the moment it’s all I’ve got. If that doesn’t work we’ll just have to figure something else out.”

“It’s a moot point anyway,” said Osman. “We can’t go anywhere until we know which half of the world to search. Is there any way to find out?”

“There must be some sort of-”

“Don’t say talisman!” said Yasui.

“I was going to say magic,” I said, a little hurt.

“Oh, that’s okay then. But we tried that.”

“We tried finding the object. Perhaps there’s some other spell we could use.”

“I could get a virtue here, see what they have to say.”

“There’s nothing you could do, Kat? Or Elizabeth, you can ask the spirits, right?” asked Yasui.

Both shook their heads. “Even if I knew a spirit whose domain was ice, I don’t think I could ask ‘is order around there someplace’ because that just, no. Just no.”

“And my seeing ability is too vague,” said Kat. “All I would get a sense of is ice, if I saw anything at all, which would be quite unhelpful.”

“Maybe that’s why order couldn’t tell me itself where it was,” I mused. “It just saw ice around it, and didn’t know any more than we do.”

“Magic it is!” I said. “Osman, chop-chop.” I mimed cracking a whip.

“Yes, master! Immediately, master.”

“Finally,” I said with a laugh. “Getting the respect I deserve.”

Being Refused

“I reject your reality, and substitute my own.”

Osman stepped over to my house through a ward and I handed him two more, one which he put away. (He would need one to get back home again, after all) I got out the circle of petitioning as a virtue was pretty hard to get here. He stood in it and began to pray, calling upon an angel to come and aid him.

Moments later, one did.

We both bowed to the sphere of light that appeared, and it took on a more human like form, and looked around.

“Holy virtue,” Osman began, “we beg your aid in setting the world right again as it relates to chaos. Can you help us?”

“Perhaps,” he answered. “What would you have me do?”

“Dean?”

I spoke up. “Heavenly agents recently discovered that the All-Father created two objects to keep order and chaos in balance throughout the world. He hid these two ‘stones’ and now, as one has been found, we’re trying to find the other to counter it.”

“A worthy goal, I would say. Continue.”

“We know the ‘stones’ were placed at the north and south poles, but we don’t know which is which. To avoid going to the wrong place and wasting time, we would like to know if you could use your magic to somehow tell us.”

“I suppose I could,” he said hesitantly. “But have you really been placed in charge of finding this out? You seem quite young to be worrying about all this.”

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“I’m worried about it because order has contacted me, telling me that I must be the one to claim it and restore balance.”

“Really? Well, I sense no falsehood regarding that statement. However, I do still feel that something else is going on here. Perhaps you are not telling me the whole story?”

I glanced at Osman. “The fact of the matter is,” he said, “we think the Foundation knows which hemisphere to look in, and is not willing to tell us.”

“Then there must be some reason for that.”

“None that we can see as being valid.”

“So you wish me to go over their heads, so to speak, and give you the answer anyway?”

There was silence for a moment.

“I suppose when you put it like that, it sounds bad,” I said. “But they’re wrong to keep it from us! My friends and I exist to solve this problem, we’ve been told that directly.”

The virtue chuckled. “The young often believe that they know best, when in fact experience usually is shown to be correct. Plus I would be very interested to know exactly who told you this wild story.”

“An... insane dreamer that manipulated the timelines. But he was proven right, don’t you see? He said something bad was coming and spoke of the vessel that would cause the destruction. It was true, chaos took a vessel and if it isn’t stopped, our world will become more and more chaotic.”

“An insane dreamer.” The angel seemed skeptical. “I don’t even know what a dreamer is, some sort of specialized seer?”

“No, someone that could draw upon a portion of the All-Father’s power to manipulate reality while they were asleep. We closed off the barrier that let the power through a few years ago. I could tell you the whole story, if you’d like.”

“I can tell you are telling the truth, but I can scarcely believe it. What happened to this so called dreamer?”

“He vanished before our eyes. Without the power sustaining his existence, and his body being long dead, he soul was finally free. We aren’t sure who he was originally, only that he claimed to be the first, and had lost his body when the power came upon him.”

“Are you certain he was talking about this situation?”

“Quite sure,” said Osman. “After all, we’ll graduate and go our separate ways after this year. This is really the only time we’ll be together like this.”

“That’s not strictly true, is it?” he asked, pointing to the computer, where the others were still watching what was going on. “You have means, both technological and supernatural, to stay in contact.”

“Sure, but if something worse than this is coming, I don’t want to think about it,” Yasui spoke up.

“I see,” said the angel, sitting down on the bed and tapping his temple with one finger. A moment of silence stretched. “You realize, of course, that you have put me in an uncomfortable position.”

“I do apologize,” said Osman. “But none of us can get the information any other way, our powers do not extend into those areas. That is why we have called upon you.” He thought some more. Finally he stood up again. “I’m sorry, but in this case I must refuse you.” We started to protest, but he held up a hand. “No, if your superiors do not want this information in your possession, I cannot go above them and give it to you. That is my final word.”

“Very well,” Osman said, sighing. “Thank you for your consideration and your time.”

“Of course. I do hope the situation on Earth gets resolved soon. We in Heaven are watching with great interest how you all deal with it.”

But of course you won’t lift a finger to help us, even though someone up there must know exactly where the All-Father put the darn things and could take us there.

He went on. “I’m sure your Foundation has the matter well in hand, and you are worried about nothing.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said, wishing it was true but doubting it all the same.

Osman let him go, then started apologizing.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” said Christina. “We made our case, he refused. It may be stupidly short sighted of him, but he’s an angel. He’s all about hierarchy, right? His superiors tell him to do something, he has to do it. Going above someone’s head would sit badly with him.”

“We could ask Iris,” suggested Elizabeth.

“Sure, but he would have to look into a spell, and I don’t want to get him in trouble,” I said.

“Like you ask your mom and she says no so you ask your dad?” asked Christina.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“We’re not giving up, are we?” asked Elizabeth.

I shook my head. “No, but for the moment I’m not sure what else to

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do. I think seers can get answers to questions they just put out there, but I never learned how. I was told it probably wouldn't be worth it, because my skill would never be enough to get anything meaningful. Of course, now I know my skill can be artificially raised, like with circles and the dragonfly spirit."

"I know that one!"

"Okay, we may need it. Trouble is, where am I going to find a seer to teach me now?"

"Couldn't you work it out yourself?" asked Christina.

"I'm going to have to try, I guess. But just sitting there and thinking about a question isn't going to do it. They do something with their power. Now maybe a real seer could figure it out on their own with some practice, but I'm not one. I really would need someone to sit down with me and explain exactly what I should be doing."

"I guess that's it, then," said Christina. "Let me know if you guys come up with something or not."

"We will," we all said, and she logged off.

The others also got off, but Elizabeth did say she had never heard of an ice spirit, but she would head over to the Foundation library and do some research to see if one existed.

Osman went home, and I sat and thought about any power I was missing that might be able to help us. My mother called that dinner was ready, and I sighed and went downstairs to eat.

I was quiet through dinner, slightly upset that being the luckiest person on the planet wasn't doing more for me. My mother was trying to get me interested in something she was working on, but I was hardly paying attention. Something about a talisman, which normally would have gotten me to listen, but really, I had bigger problems.

"A seer is coming over Saturday to have a talisman made," my mother was saying, "but she really doesn't want to wait around. I thought maybe you could take care of it, as you're a lot quicker at making them than I am. It's a pretty simple one, it actually might not take you that long."

"Sure, whatever," I said, still not really paying attention. I lapsed back into silence for a moment, then dropped my fork. "What did you say?"

And so the weekend couldn't come quickly enough for me. I agreed to put in two solid days of work over the weekend, saving my mother the three days of work it would have taken her. This got the seer back in the

field quicker, and let my mother work on something else at the same time. She wanted something to protect her while she used her seer power, and a dome of force that would surround her when she activated it had been decided on.

When she arrived I offered her my line of elemental energy instead, showing it could just as easily be drawn in a circle, and showing that anything that tried to cross it got fried to a crisp. (This part I demonstrated with a clone.) She said no, the dome would be fine, so I didn't press the issue and got to work.

Initially she was confused that I was doing the work, but my mother explained. She told the woman that for no extra cost, I was not only shaving a day off the time, my item would be as much as twice as hard to actually penetrate as hers would have been, because I was so much better at making talismans.

"Not that my mother is in any way bad at making them," I hastily assured her, "I just seem to have the knack for it."

"You certainly seem to believe it," she said. "Whatever you think is best."

As I worked, I asked about the various seer powers she could use, hardly having to fake an interest about pulling information I needed to know out of the air. I managed to persuade her to tell me all about how she used seeking to find the best talisman maker, which is what actually led her here in the first place.

That was lucky. Tehehe. Odd that it didn't tell her about me, or did her power take into account that I would be the one making the item, even though I had never done so before?

Given what she told me about the mental processes she went through, that night I practiced and asked for some more information the next day.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked, looking suspicious.

"Because it's something I don't know," I answered truthfully. "And I'm always looking to learn about how various powers work. The more I understand about what's possible, the more choices in talismans I can offer in the future."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Well, imagine a talisman that had various things written on it, say sixteen for arguments sake, and then you could ask it questions. Put it in a bowl of water and ask the question, and it would spin to show the answer.

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Even just putting a yes or no on it would be enough in most cases. Of course I would probably need a seer to help me make it, but imagine the possibilities!”

The seer looked horrified. “That would be the most powerful object on Earth! To get answers like that without regard for the consequences? Turning a seer power into just a machine you could ask things of all day long? Is such a thing even possible?”

“Ah, I suppose not. Still, something to shoot for, right?”
Somehow that didn’t reassure her.

But I got enough information out of her to figure out the seeking technique, and she got an amazing talisman, so I thought it was a pretty good trade, all things considered.

I had everyone come over Monday night to attempt to learn if we should go north or south to find order. Elizabeth gave me the spirit she thought would be most helpful, and then put dragonfly on me so it could aid my efforts. Naturally I had put a ridiculous amount of energy into a circle of concentration in order to further aid me. Then I settled down and started the ten minute mental ritual needed to pull information out of nowhere.

Ten minutes later I had the answer.

“South,” I said dramatically. “That is where our destiny leads.” I pointed.

“I think that’s East,” said Christina.

“Whatever.”

“You’re getting us there, right, Osman?”

“Ah,” said Osman. “Now there, we might run into a snag.”

“What?” I asked, confused. “But you know how to petition ophan, right?”

“That’s not the problem. The problem is, he or they, however you call them, is going to want to know why we need to go there. Thus we’ll probably have to tell him. He may refuse, just like the virtue we asked before.”

There was a moment of silence.

“There must be pictures of the place,” protested Yasui. “We can just use your wards, right?”

“I suppose I’m good enough at making them now to get all the way down there, and I can put energy in, that’s not a problem. But pictures of the exact middle? I’ve been looking into it, the ice down there actually

moves around. It moves towards the coast, where it's melting faster than scientists predicted, actually. There's some concern that nothing we do now will stop it melting, but that's not here or there. The point is, that may be what caused this whole problem, the ice shifting enough that the two weren't totally opposite each other anymore. Then chaos found someone he could communicate with, and the rest is history."

"Wait, does your ward work the same way ESPers teleport?" asked Katrina, appearing next to Osman as an illusion.

"I don't actually know how ESPers teleport," I admitted. "That's way too advanced a skill for me."

"Picturing the destination, basically."

"Oh, yeah. I mean you can pre-load them with a destination, the principal gave me one like that. I just activated it, because I hadn't been to where I needed to go. But yes, you still have to have seen your destination, and it can go wrong, like when Achintya got us stuck in that mountain."

"That devil gave us some like that to find the Rose, remember?" asked Yasui.

"That's right. So if that's the case, we would need to be extra careful. There's not many landmarks there, right?"

I shook my head.

"So we could wind up thousands of kilometers away from our destination."

"And not even know it," I finished. "You're right, I don't think that's a good idea. Great, and here I thought our problems were over."

"I'm afraid," said Martian, appearing suddenly in the room with us by peeling a ward off himself, "that your problems are just beginning." We stared at him, now knowing how it felt to be on the other side of an ignore ward. "Man, I've always wanted to say that!"

I threw out my hand, shouting "Win-" but just barely in time realized who it was. The others jumped, and Christina suddenly had her bow out.

"Let's not do anything hasty," said Martin, looking at her. She didn't lower it.

"Prove you are who you look like," she challenged.

Oh yeah, good point!

"Shall I drain one of you of energy?" he asked with a grin. "That would prove it. But perhaps you'll believe her?"

He gestured, and the seer I had made the talisman for appeared, also pulling a ward off herself. She, at least, had the decency to look embarrassed about the whole situation.

“It was a setup,” I snarled.

“Naturally,” said Martin. “After that barrier went up that prevented us from watching you, we needed to know your plans. This seemed as good a way as any.”

“I’m sorry, Dean,” she said. “You do great work, we tested this talisman and it’s worth way more than I paid for it.”

“So why are you here?” asked Elizabeth.

Interestingly, she also held a bow and looked ready to fire, should the situation require it. *Oh yeah, she has that mimic power.*

“Because the Foundation hopes I’ll be able to make you see sense, rather than some other random operatives sent to bring you in.” There was a knock at the door. “Ah, that’ll be them, now.”

“Where are my parents?” I asked.

“I requested they not get involved in this. They’re fine.”

The door opened, and six people, men and women, young and old, filed in. I didn’t recognize any of them, but none were openly threatening. One had a pair of daggers held at their sides, but I was sure all of them were good fighters. Age and youth didn’t matter much when an ESPer could take a person out without lifting a finger.

“What do you mean, bring Dean in?” asked Osman. “He hasn’t broken any Foundation laws. We were just talking!”

“Yes, talking about doing something he promised me he wouldn’t do.”

“I haven’t done anything,” I protested. “As a wise alchemist once told me, thinking about making gold is not the same as actually making gold. Besides, I promised I wouldn’t rush off, and I would have planned the trip very, very carefully.”

“So you admit to having the intent to go?”

“I could intend to blow up the Earth, that doesn’t mean I have the power to do so.”

“I know you, Dean, somehow you would have gotten there.”

“So you think I’m guilty of a crime *in the future*, so you’re here to make sure I don’t commit it, thus making me innocent of the crime, so you’ll have to let me go. Why not just walk away now and save us all the trouble?”

“I’m not arresting you, Dean,” he said with a rakish grin. “Think of it as protecting you from yourself. Once the essence of order is found and it’s deemed safe to use, we’ll have some... carefully supervised trials to see what you can accomplish with it. Then you can help us take back the island, and save that man from chaos. Both essences can then be restored to their proper place. That’s what you want, right?”

“Partially, yes. You’ve already admitted the Foundation is stretched too thin, can you really wait that much longer? How many are feeling the bite of chaos while they stand there?” I indicated the people, now standing behind him, looking warily at Christina and Elizabeth.

“Come with me right now and they can get back to work.”

“And do what? Rot in a cell until you decide I’m really the only one who can fix all this and let me get on with it?”

“Dean, Dean, you keep saying cell and such. It’s not like that. You wouldn’t be imprisoned.”

“If I’m not imprisoned then I’m free to go. See you later!”

“Let’s just take him,” said one of the men. “He doesn’t look that tough.”

I raised my hand again. “Try it,” I growled at him. “Then you’ll find out why there are six of you for one of me.”

“Now, now, there’s no need for any of that,” said Martian.

“Then why are they here?” asked Yasui. “If this is all for Dean’s protection and such like you keep saying, convince us it’s for the best, and we’ll support you. He’s not going to go there alone, right? He knows he needs us.”

I nodded. “I do, actually. Even I can’t do it all.”

“You see? If you really just want to talk, they can wait outside.”

“We’re not going anywhere little miss,” said the man who had spoken before.

“Want to see how big I can be?”

“People, please, let’s not let this get out of hand,” pleaded DeVille. “Look, I may have handled this badly, but we did catch you in the act, Dean. I can’t trust you. I mean you made a talisman specifically to block our efforts to-”

“Spy on me? Yes I did, and thanks for admitting I needed one! Is that legal then, spying on a kid in his own home, who is not breaking any Foundation law?” I glared at the seer, who didn’t meet my gaze. “Seriously, I just want to see this situation through. Give me the resources to do so. This... ‘bringing me in’ stuff just makes it so I trust you even less.”

“Doing it while we were here was also a rather stupid move,” put in Christina.

“Yes, why did you pick this exact moment to signal us?” asked one of the women. “I’ve read their files, and if they’ve received the benefits of Dean’s talents as you say, I’m not sure we would be enough if they decided to... be difficult.”

“There will be no fighting here,” repeated Martin. “I know you don’t want to hurt these people, any of you.”

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“But we don’t want to see Dean taken away, either,” said Elizabeth. “His skill at making things and doing things isn’t going to go down, and he knows he’ll have to give up the essence of order to make the world in balance again. You don’t have to treat him like a child.”

“Power has a way of changing the equation,” said the first man. “How can you guarantee it won’t be worse, giving him whatever this order thing is?”

“I swear,” said Martin. “No harm will come to Dean, we just want to make sure- yes, make sure he stays safe until we find the essence of order. That’s it exactly!” He seemed rather pleased with this line of thought.

I stared at him, uncomprehending. The others seemed equally baffled.

“Wait, we’re guarding him now?” asked another man.

“However you want to think of it. But we aren’t leaving this place until Dean is with us. Come on, Dean, be reasonable. All you have to do is come with me, and everything will be fine.”

He reached for me.

The world went white.

Frying Pan to Freezer

“The cold never bothered me anyway”

-- Queen Elsa of Arendelle

White light stabbed into my eyes, and I and the others all reacted by throwing our arms across our faces. The next thing I realized was that I was freezing, literally.

“What happened?” Yasui shouted, as though we weren’t standing right next to her.

“Kat brought us here, but I think maybe that was a mistake!” said Osman.

I cracked my eyes open and immediately shut them again. The glare from the sun was intense, and I was starting to shiver uncontrollably.

“Where is here?” asked Elizabeth, sounding like she was dreading the answer.

“The South Pole,” he said.

“We’ll freeze to death!” said Christina. “We have minutes of life left right now, you realize that, right?”

“Can’t someone do something?” asked Elizabeth. “Dean? Are you here?”

“I’m here,” I said. “As far as doing something...” I fumbled for my pouch with fingers quickly becoming numb from the frigid air, and got it open. “Shelter ward,” I said, pulling out a ward I had earlier put the spell of shelter into. This made a magical house appear, and would give us time to plan our next move. Holding it up I activated it, and I felt ice crunching as it settled. “Get inside.”

“Inside,” shouted Christina. “Are you nuts? What inside?”

“Just follow the soothing sound of my voice,” I said, quoting Claptrap. I felt around until I found the door, cursing the weather and my situation in

general so they could follow me. I finally got the door open and stumbled inside, blinking my eyes to try and clear them.

“It’s still freezing in here,” remarked Christina, hugging her arms to her chest and running in place.

“I’m working on it, okay?” I said, still blinking away tears. “You want me to do everything around here?”

I got out a bunch of withstand weather wards (*thank you Iris*) and passed them out. Everyone visibly relaxed after slapping them on under their clothes.

“Can someone explain to me what we’re doing here?” asked Yasui.

“Osman, you okay?” asked Elizabeth, looking at him. He was leaning against the wall, looking exhausted.

“Never used those techniques one right after the other before, I hate that I have so little energy!”

“What techniques? Where are we?” asked Yasui, trying to look out the window.

“Kat didn’t want him touching you,” he explained. “So she stopped time for a few seconds and had me grab you all. Then she teleported us here.”

“Stopped time?” asked Elizabeth and Christina together.

“That’s possible?” Yasui asked.

“She’s been working towards the technique for years now,” explained Osman. “It’s basically the ultimate ESPer skill.”

“I can see why,” I exclaimed. “But we could have gone anywhere, right?”

“This was the only place she could think of pretty much guaranteed to not have witnesses to our arrival.”

“I could probably think of a few places.”

“Not under pressure you couldn’t,” said Elizabeth. “She got us away from that situation, no one got hurt, and we can go anywhere we want from here. So thanks, Kat.”

“Don’t thank her,” Osman said, looking up sharply. “Aren’t we all fugitives now?”

“I don’t know,” said Yasui. “He was acting kind of funny, don’t you think?”

“He does seem different from the Mr DeVille I met a couple of years ago. That guy was all ‘hey, come work for the Foundation later, you’re awesome,’ and stuff. Ever since this whole chaos thing started he’s been odd.”

“Like possessed odd?” asked Elizabeth.

“I don’t know, he hasn’t tried anything like this before. Just a ‘stop being so awesome’ in general, every time I see him. It has gotten worse, though. I suppose he could have changed, when dreamer power left the world. He’s old enough to have been around for a lot of changes to the timeline.”

“He’s nowhere near us now, though,” remarked Christina. “So, this new talisman of yours, Dean, does it protect us from being found, or what?”

“It does! It extends some distance in all directions, pretty sure it’ll get the whole house and then some.”

“And this wonderful house you’ve whipped up out of hopes and dreams- when should we expect it to return to that state?”

“Twelve hours.”

“Great,” said Osman, “I have time for a nap.”

“I can give you some energy,” said Christina. “But I doubt we’ll be tripping over ley lines around here. So no recharging for us.”

“The talisman Dean gave me after he made his dragon acts like a ley line,” he said, pulling a chair out from under the table and sitting down heavily in it. “Several, in fact. You can hook into that and draw power out of it.”

“That’s right! Dean put that suppression thing on it, so I don’t feel it and forgot about it. Come here then!”

As he got recharged I looked around. This was my first time actually seeing the spell in action, and it was pretty cozy. The place had three rooms, the room we were in with the table and chairs, a sort of old fashioned kitchen area with a fireplace, and a bedroom. This bedroom had several beds, directly relating to how good you were with magic. As I put energy into every spell I cast, just to make sure it went off and didn’t blow me up, we got a fair number.

“At least we’ll all have a place to sleep,” remarked Elizabeth, also looking around.

“Forget sleeping,” said Yasui, “what are we going to eat? And I notice there’s no bathroom around here, either.”

“Ah, food could be a problem,” I admitted. “I have a few vials of aqua vita but not nearly enough. I also have some snacks and drinks in my pouch, again, not nearly enough.”

“Plenty of snow though,” said Yasui, trying to look out the window. “Couldn’t you turn that into something? It’s solid.”

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“Sure, snow doesn’t weigh that much. The problem is, it doesn’t weigh that much.”

“Say that again?”

“I still have to conserve mass. One hamburger, for example, weighs the same as a lot of snow. So I could give you miles of cotton candy, for instance, if I had ever analyzed cotton candy. Which I haven’t, by the way.”

“Oh. What food have you analyzed?”

“Soma fruit... and the snacks in my pouch if I can spend a minute or two with them before we eat them.”

“Super.”

“We can always teleport somewhere and get food,” said Elizabeth.

“Yeah, but getting back where we left off, that’s the tricky part. Though I suppose the inside of this place would count as a destination.”

“Here’s another question,” said Yasui. “Moving around outside. It’s just snow, which seemed pretty solid but I wasn’t paying much attention, and that sun is brutal. I don’t suppose you have a bunch of tinted goggles in that pouch of yours?”

I shook my head. “Nope, sorry. I’m not sure what we’re going to do about that yet.”

“Couldn’t we just travel at night?” asked Christina. “We don’t have to worry about the cold, right? And the stars should... what?”

We were all shaking our heads. “Sun doesn’t set here for a couple of months yet,” said Osman. “Learned that while looking at pictures of the place. It just goes around and around the horizon.”

“Oh. Can’t wait that long!”

“So we’re heading back, then?” asked Yasui.

“I hate to just leave again, after all the effort it took Osman to get us here,” I replied. “I don’t know, let me think a minute.” I sat down myself, going over what we could do here. “I actually think we can make do. Apart from the food issue, that is. I could make food, but we spend too much time here and we’ll start getting vitamin deficient. But at least in the short term we wouldn’t go that hungry.”

“You just said you couldn’t make food, it was too heavy!” protested Elizabeth.

“Ah, but if you guys will assist me again, I think I can compensate for that.”

Elizabeth had given me the spirit of the dragonfly for an hour, roughly half, I estimated, was remaining. She hadn’t known if I would have to try the seeking more than once, after all. So I had my friends move the

table and chairs out of the way, then got out a marker from my pouch and started drawing on the floor. Interestingly, the spirit was even able to help me with that, and when I was done, I had another copy of the concentration circle on the ground.

“I’ll have to do this in stages,” I explained. “Because each circle can only be used for one thing.”

“That’s dumb,” said Elizabeth.

“I didn’t make the rules.” I got out the snacks, my sunglasses, and asked if one of the girls minded me touching their hair for a moment.

“I suppose not, if it helps the cause,” volunteered Yasui.

“Thanks.”

I then proceeded to use analysis on the objects before me, aided by both my own circle and what the dragonfly spirit could tell me about using my power better. This helped considerably, and within ten minutes I had analyzed all of those materials, plus the cloth of my pants for good measure. That done, I had the others heap snow onto the chairs so I could reach it easily, and started work on a second circle, this time for the skill of transmutation. That done I touched each in turn, turning snow into snacks, soma fruit, a large lump of dark plastic, wood, cloth, and a mess of hair. I hardly failed at any of that, then scribed a third and final circle on the floor, again aided by dragonfly.

This time I used transmutation, changing the shape of the materials I had earlier created. I pulled off thin sheets of plastic in the shape of square, boxy glasses, so we could dim the sun down. The snacks I broke into more manageable pieces, as they were basically now solid forms. The Soma fruit I had just made out of snowballs, so it was already portable. I pulled wood off the huge block of wood I had made, bending it to make frames for the snowshoes I was envisioning. Around the frames went the hair, woven by my power into a solid shape, with a pocket for the foot. I figured we could cut the cloth into strips with the sunlight knife, and use it to further tie the shoes on. I just hoped the hair would be strong enough, but given how much I used, and it really did look like a solid black sheet, that it would.

I suppose I could have just used the cloth, but this seemed more snowshoe like.

“That should do it, which is good, because I think dragonfly just went away,” I said to Elizabeth.

“That’s dumb,” she said, and I smiled.

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“I didn’t make the rules.”

“We should probably just stay here the so called night,” said Yasui. “Try to get all on the same time schedule, and let you rest, Dean. That looked like a lot of work.”

“Are you all certain that you want to stay?” I asked. “He was only after me, you could go back if you wanted to. It’s not going to be easy out there.”

“We won’t just leave you here!” protested Yasui. “We’re all in this together.”

“The only way we’re really going to get out of this is if we fix it,” said Osman. “Find this essence as they called it, and take back the island. If we can hand them everything they couldn’t do, I think even a paranoid DeVille would have to admit we were right.”

“You do all have school and things to worry about though, I just want to make sure you’re all okay with leaving your lives behind, at least for now.”

“They’ll make up some excuse for us,” said Elizabeth. “And the people that really matter, well, maybe Kat can send them a message from us that we’re okay, and what’s going on with us.”

“She says she’s willing to try,” put in Osman.

“And think of it this way,” said Christina. “Apparently we should have graduated years ago, at least some of us, right? What’s repeating our senior year again, this time in the school we took back? We’d be heroes, everyone would look up to us.”

“That actually doesn’t sound too bad,” I remarked.

There were nods of agreement from everyone.

“Well, try to get some sleep,” I said, heading to the bedroom. “And if you go out to take care of business, don’t get lost out there!”

“And don’t go too far,” cautioned Yasui. “If what Dean is saying is right, his talisman doesn’t extend much past the house, and we don’t want seers finding us when we pop out of that protective ‘bubble’ we’re in now.”

“That would be rather embarrassing,” agreed Osman.

The next morning I felt myself being shaken awake, and Osman was excitedly calling my name to try and get me up. I’m pretty sure I ignored him for some time, but they finally got me up and I sat on the edge of the bed.

“So what’s all the excitement about?” I asked sleepily.

“Kat says she had a dream yesterday,” explained Osman. “A question we could ask to find out which direction to go in to find the essence.”

“Do tell!”

“She says the reason the magic failed- sorry, she says the reason she believes the magic failed is because it reached out to try and find the object. But more than likely it’s protected against things like that. So what’s the solution? Use techniques that target us, instead.”

I thought a moment. “That sounds reasonable, what question did she see me asking?”

“What direction should we go in to get closer to our goal?”

“Okay, but couldn’t she do that herself? Making the circles and everything is pretty time consuming. Plus with the question spell taking ten minutes, that’s probably a half an hour we would have to wait. Can’t she just use premonition and see what direction we’ll ultimately be the happiest going in? Well, you, she can’t ask about us, but you know what I mean.”

“She says yes, that actually makes a lot more sense. Please stand by.”

While Osman muttered to himself and stood facing various directions, I got out my book of magic. Putting energy into the spell I cast hygiene on everyone so we would at least be clean and handed out some Soma fruit to eat.

“Some sleepover that was,” remarked Christina, coming back in from outside. “Three girls and two boys, and we didn’t play spin the bottle once!” She took off her darkened goggles and grabbed some fruit. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to do that tonight, you know, after slogging through the snow for hours,” Yasui said. “I’m sure we’ll all be up for it.”

“I know I will be!” I created a spirit clone, then got out a blank strip of paper and a pen and sat down.

Might as well replace the shelter ward, I thought. I have a few more, but we might need them in an emergency.

“Are we walking?” asked Elizabeth. “I figured we would all ride on Anthy.”

Yasui looked at her with a big grin on her face. “Liz, you’re the best!”

“I know.”

Having made the ward, eaten a bit, melted some snow for water, and trugged a little ways away from the house to take care of other business, we were ready to leave. We made sure nothing had gotten left behind, and stepped out the door in our goggles. They weren’t perfect, but they were

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way better than nothing. The snow reflected the sun, which hung low in the sky, and even with the thickness of the “goggles” I had made it was tough to look in that direction for long.

Probably because of a lack of pollution in general, meaning the air here is pretty clear. Plus, no clouds, birds, bugs, or anything else for that matter.

Whiteness stretched as far as we could see, glittering like a beach of endless white. Standing there I could feel a wind blowing past us, catching the girl’s hair and making it fan out. It didn’t touch me, as it had to do with weather, and I again sent a silent word of thanks to the phoenixes that made standing here possible.

Still, it could have been worse. The All-Father could have hidden it at the bottom of the oceans or something.

Elizabeth called out Anthy, who enlarged herself and then made a clone. Osman rode with Elizabeth and Christina, while Yasui and myself took the other.

“Which way?” asked Elizabeth.

“As far as Kat can tell, directly away from that corner of the house,” he replied, pointing.

She looked over there, then at the horizon, which basically looked the same in every direction. “How in the heck are we going to keep going in one direction once we’re out of view of the house?” she asked. Anthy pawed at the ground, but it was actually pretty hard packed. “I was thinking of just flying low to the ground and making a trail, but this is more ice than anything else. I don’t think that’ll work.”

“Kat says she can use the power periodically, make sure we’re still headed for happiness.”

“I have a more mundane idea,” I said, sliding off Anthy again. I went back inside, then reactivated my circle of transmutation from the day before. Inactive, it would have stayed there for a few days, but as it happened once the house went away it was going to disappear as well. I got out the longest blood iron pipe I had left and my dagger made of sunlight, then widened one end of the pipe to let me slide the dagger inside. I then clamped the end down tight, and wiggled the blade. It seemed solid, so I went back out and jumped on Anthy again. This time though I was facing behind us, rather than ahead.

“I’ll stick this into the ground so it at least makes a groove,” I explained, showing it to them and then jabbing it into the snow. “Just stick fairly low and I’ll keep us on course.”

“Won’t that ruin the knife?” asked Yasui, twisting to look at what I had done.

I laughed. “Albert made me this knife, remember? You couldn’t damage it if you tried. Anyway, it’s made of sunlight, how would that chip or dull?”

“Okay then,” said Elizabeth, and both ants started hovering. “Let’s go.”

She oriented both of us against a corner of the house and side by side we sped towards the place Kat’s power said it was best for us to go.

We flew for some time, I had no idea how long because I had turned my cell phone off. No sense running the battery down, there was no recharging it out here, after all. After a while Yasui leaned over and put her mouth near my ear.

“I’ve been thinking about that whole ‘I didn’t make the rules’ people keep saying,” she said. “Iris said it once too, about magic.”

“What about it?” I said back to her.

“We know who did make the rules. The All-Father. Do you think they were originally so restrictive?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know the story as well as I do. The first people were like you, they could learn anything.”

“But they could master it, I can only learn the fringes. And they were immortal by design.”

“I know that, the point is they weren’t responsible enough, or got tempted by demons or whatever and had to be wiped out.”

“True, but so what?”

“Think about it. It takes Osman ten minutes to call an angel. It takes you ten minutes to make a ward or a circle. Elizabeth gets ten minutes per minute she chants for spirits.”

“That’s all probably just coincidence though, right?”

Yasui shook her head. “Can’t be. All of this comes from the rules of the universe He set up. I can’t help wondering if, in the beginning, powers didn’t work like that. Were they easier, did they last longer? I can understand, after the original people didn’t work out so well, the All-Father decided something needed to be done.”

“So he made everything take ten minutes?”

“What other reason can you see for it? I mean does it really take that long to slap some symbols down on paper? Or draw a circle with chalk on the ground?”

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“No, not really.”

“There you are then. The problem was that as soon as he set a time for summoners, for instance, not doing the same thing for anyone else would have been unfair. Right?”

“I guess. Hey, wait a second.”

“What?”

“Isn’t gravity like ten meters per second or something? Yes, in fact I’m sure it is.”

“It’s not exactly ten though, right?”

“No, it’s a little less. But still, that’s awfully suspicious, isn’t it? I mean maybe it started as ten and is going down or something? I mean it’s been millions of years, who knows how it changed since the beginning of time?”

“I have no idea. But I can tell you one thing that’s a sure ten, and I don’t just mean you and Elizabeth. I mean we have ten fingers and toes.”

“You’re so nice! There’s ten recognized celestial bodies in our solar system, even if Pluto isn’t considered a planet anymore.”

“It’ll always be a planet for me.”

“Me too!”

We both thought for a moment.

“Ten commandments!”

“Ten Sephirot!”

“The island is ten kilometers long!”

We stared at each other.

“He’s obsessed with the number ten,” I breathed. “Got to be.”

“I almost think you’re right.”

She turned back to looking ahead, and we were both lost in our own thoughts. The number ten came up time and time again, that had to be more than coincidence, right?

Did we just crack some big mystery of the universe, or is this place getting to us already? No, it’s real, it’s there too often to be just coincidence. When I was learning to make wards it took me ten minutes to make one. My mother says I’m as good as she is, and she has years of experience. However it still takes us both ten minutes to make one. Yes, we can make them faster, just like Osman can petition faster, but it takes more energy and they don’t work as well afterwards. That’s why both she and my teachers said it wasn’t worth trying to rush them.

She also says I’m twice as good as she is at making talismans, but I only managed to reduce the time making that barrier one by a third. If I’m

twice as good, shouldn't it take me half the time? If I was learning to knit, wouldn't my first creation take hours, but making that same thing after knitting for twenty years take dramatically less time? Same with whipping up a cake or carving something out of wood! An experienced craftsman should always be able to beat a beginner in a test of speed, and still get an excellent result.

There was no way around it, that I could see. The All-Father had purposefully, perhaps even maliciously, made sure no matter how good we were, how much we studied and improved, some things about our powers remained unchanging. The easiest way to do that- set durations. My talismans were amazing, so much so one of the top members of the Foundation seemed terrified of them. But not because I could create them at the drop of a hat, but because of the sheer power I could shove into them. They still took me just as long as when I was starting out making them.

I suppose I can't blame Him, though. After His first attempt at humanity went so wrong, He had to do something to limit our ability to call up power at a whim. Did He have to make it so blatant, though?

Winter Storm Warning

*Visibility may be low at times,
due to blowing and drifting snow.*

We flew for several hours, occasionally flying high to make sure the line was still straight. Even watching it as carefully as I could, we might start to drift to one side or another without realizing it. Osman was able to get high in the air but still get a look at the line, keeping us on track. He also said Katrina, at regular intervals, was making sure her happiness was increasing in the direction we were going. It was, so we were on the right track. It was just a question of how far we had to go. Would we fly another hour, or two months?

I was relying on the fact that once we passed where we were supposed to be going that Kat's happiness would start to go down in our current direction. We could then use that as a rough guide to approximately where it was we should look. With luck it would be a shrine or something, but even being lucky wouldn't change what happened millions of years ago, when the thing was put there. What luck could do is make sure we arrived nearby the thing, which, given the size of the landmass, could still be hundreds of kilometers away. I could only hope our time here was more on the hours scale than the months one. I could continue to provide "food" but not what you would call a "balanced part of this complete" any-meal.

How long can we survive on fruit and snacks, anyway? I suppose like Elizabeth said, one of us could teleport back to civilization, order takeout, and get back here. Heck, with the research spell maybe I could even figure out how to make a circle of bridging, hand her the twin that was left here, and guarantee passage back to wherever we were at the time.

We had done very well, thus far, given we had no time to prepare for our coming here. We weren't freezing to death thanks to me, we had transportation thanks to Elizabeth, and Osman and Kat were keeping us on track. It wouldn't surprise me if we would have to fight some sort of guardian that only Christina or Yasui could take out. This team had been assembled for a reason, and that mad dreamer seemed to have accounted for everything.

"Hey, snow!" said Yasui, pointing.

"Uh, yes? This place is a frozen wasteland, there's snow everywhere. Are you feeling all right? Do you need to stop? I could thicken your glasses if the sun is getting to you."

"No, Dean, look! It's snowing!"

I called to Elizabeth, who stopped, and we looked around.

"It is snowing," I said, looking around in wonder.

"Is that odd?" asked Christina.

"You didn't look much into the conditions here when we knew we might be coming, did you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not much, why?"

"It doesn't snow here. Look, hardly any clouds." I pointed straight up, and sure enough, we all looked and the sky was perfectly clear.

"Could be it's blowing around," Osman said. "It's hard to tell how windy it is, with flying and not feeling the cold."

"True enough. I guess we should keep an eye on the situation," I suggested.

"It's just a little snow, who cares?" asked Christina.

"We care because it's odd, and shouldn't be happening. Remember who our opponent is."

"Oh, yeah, I guess you're right."

"Okay then. Come on, let's get going."

We flew onward, but the snowing continued to get worse. Our visibility started decreasing, and Anthy was having trouble staying on course, as gusts of wind started pulling at her.

"I don't like this!" shouted Yasui over the wind.

"Neither do I, but what can we do? Stopping isn't going to help us find the essence, is it?"

"It's just getting worse."

"I see that, but hopefully it won't get so bad we have to stop."

But of course it did.

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Moments later we could hardly see the other copy of Anthy, only their supernatural connection to each other kept us from being separated. All around us was white, as winds from every direction sheered off ice crystals from the ground and whirled them around us.

“Do you think chaos knows we’re here, or is this some random thing?”

“I really hope he doesn’t know we’re here.”

“Are we stopping?”

I thought a moment. We could go higher, but we wouldn’t be able to see the line if this storm kept up. Getting even a few degrees off could mean a detour of hours, so was it better to try traveling in spite of being effectively blind, or wait this out?

If it does ever stop. That was a chilling thought.

“We’ll stop. Hey, Elizabeth!” I shouted over the wind.

“Yeah?” came the faint reply.

“Put us down, I’ll get the house up!” *And hope it doesn’t blow away.*

We descended, and I grabbed the ward I had made that morning with the shelter spell in it. Setting it up we hurried inside, and three of us had to force the door closed as the wind suddenly gusted and tried to keep it open. We managed it, leaning against it as snow started coming in through the cracks.

This spell was not meant as a shelter in a storm, I thought sadly, as the door rattled.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Osman, looking up. We followed his gaze and the roof was being torn apart by the wind.

“It’s only thatching!” I cried. “Quick, before it totally blows away! Elizabeth, get the dragonfly going and I’ll make a circle, maybe I can thin some of the stone and flow it up over the ceiling, at least in one room!” *Which of course will take me ten minutes, thanks very much All-Father, by which time the roof will be completely gone.*

I pulled out a marker and shook my head. I could make a blood ward in a couple of seconds, why couldn’t I make a blood circle? That would come in handy right now. Perhaps when I survived this, I could try making a ward that simulated the effect of the circle, allowing me to access it faster. Or spend a few months making permanent circles for every skill I knew.

I calmed myself and started drawing, Osman and Yasui had already moved the table so I had a space to work, but that meant the ceiling was too high to reach.

Actually, using a circle just means standing within it, nothing I read said anything about standing directly on it. Now wasn't the time to experiment, so I hoped it worked. Wait, no, I have to touch the walls, not the ceiling. I want to shift the stone, not change the thatch.

I moved over and started drawing a new circle nearer the wall, cursing my haste that was costing me time. I had only just started making the circle but seconds could count here. *If only my acceleration talisman could help me. You would think I could draw faster while it was active, but no, it would take me ten minutes regardless.*

As I started work I couldn't help but wonder if a circle was literal or just traditional for this sort of thing. Would triangles work? Squares? Straight lines would be much easier than trying to get a curved line to meet up with itself. Could I make a talisman with Kat's help to channel her ability to stop time? If I could do that, drawing a circle would still take me the normal time, but seem to others to appear out of nowhere. *Two more things to research once this whole chaos deal is over.*

I wasn't even half way through when the roof blew off completely, surprising Yasui. This made her flinch and throw her arms above her head as snow and wind gusted into the place. I was too busy trying to make my circle to notice, but Christina shoved everyone into one corner of the room and put up a hand. A crackling Energy barrier sprang up, cutting off the wind.

"Sorry about that," said Yasui, breathing hard. "This storm isn't something I can attack, and it's freaking me out."

"Don't worry about it," said Christina. "We all have fears that get the better of us sometimes. You think talking about it would take your mind off of things here?"

"I guess," she replied. "Let's see, Osman is afraid of using his power because it might get taken away."

"Not so much now," he protested. "I've been talking with Elizabeth's friend, Matt. He just sort of uses his power whenever and doesn't even think about it. Of course, he wasn't told about the possibility of losing it until he got here. I mean that guy wasn't even supposed to be a petitioner, and Heaven still listens to him. I don't think they can complain about me."

"Still, you're pretty cautious about it, right?"

"Sure, I wouldn't call an angel for any old thing."

"There you go. Dean uses his powers without any restraint, right?"

"He sure does!"

"I'm right here, you know," I said, "trying to concentrate on this circle?"

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“Take your time,” said Christina. “I can just keep this barrier up for hours, you know?”

“I didn’t make the rules!” I protested, “and there’s no way to speed this up.”

“Elizabeth must be afraid of something,” Yasui went on, “probably... oh, that inner demon of yours?”

She nodded. “I don’t think there’s any chance she could get loose again, but in a world of chaos, who can say?”

“If only,” said chaos, “but at the moment it’s still just a world of hope, and not enough of a world of fear.”

Everyone pressed themselves up against the wall, away from the figure that had seemingly just appeared out of thin air. I whirled around, the marker dropping out of my hands and clattering to the floor.

There stood chaos.

More accurately, the man with the essence stuck into his hand stood there. I looked in desperation, but it still seemed to have a little ways to go before it disappeared totally. Black ropy protrusions could be seen under the flesh of the man’s arm, disappearing up the sleeve and presumably starting to spread across the rest of his body.

So with a little luck he’s not at full power, or the man he took over might be able to still resist a little!

I raised a hand to attack, but so did he, grinning. I hesitated.

“Now, now, Dean, don’t do anything you’ll regret in a second,” said chaos. *Why does that sound familiar?* “That little charm of yours makes things interesting for me, but I’m still chaos, you know? Who knows what could happen if you try to attack me. I assume that’s what you’re planning, given that weird symbol on your palm. The same goes for the rest of you too. I’m quite well protected, as you might imagine.”

“What do you want?” I asked, wondering how we were going to get out of this situation.

“Now what do I want?” asked chaos, wheeling and pacing as much as he was able in the small room. “I know it was something. Pot in every chicken? Garage inside every car? No, that’s just silly. Oh, how about you tell me which of you is the bearer of order! That would be fun, right?”

“How about one of us just chops that arm of yours off?” asked Christina. “See how smug you are without a pair of legs attached. Then take the other arm for good measure.”

"I'll make you a deal! You, and you alone, get to try it. Of course that means you'll have to drop that pretty little barrier you've got going there, leaving me free to attack your friends in the meantime. Care to take me up on it?" She just glared at him. "Pity. I was curious how you might attempt it."

How she might- of course, if he's just been watching us, he doesn't exactly know what our powers are. We haven't really been attacking anything around here, just trying to survive. Maybe Kat can surprise him with something.

"How about you just go back where you were and say you've had your fun?" Osman suggested. "What's your goal, exactly?"

"Oh, I try not to have too many of them," said chaos with distaste. "Smacks too much of order. I mean if you have a goal then there's probably something you'll have to do before that, and before that, and before that, like a checklist or something." He seemed disgusted. "Going from one thing to another, linear fashion? That's not me at all."

"But you were watching us?" asked Yasui.

"Once you put up this house, yes. Wasn't easy getting you to set down, either. I mean it's so boring out there!" He went over to the window and looked out. "Still, the chances were minimal that you would stop at this exact spot, and look, you did!"

"So now what?" I asked. "We all try to kill you simultaneously and hope something gets through?"

"Oh, I think you'll be far too busy for that," he said, turning back to us. "I mean, you were saying something about how little chance something had to happen, and I just couldn't resist. It just reminded me of your pathetic struggles with Zephyr, little Liz."

"It was you?" Elizabeth spat. "Yes, that explains everything, doesn't it?"

"From the beginning. You think Zephyr could have done what they did without me? It was ninety percent my power that gave you all powers, given how little chance you all had to manifest them at that little dance of yours. And what came after!" He smiled, remembering. "Oh, the look on your face when Rosalita was stabbed. I wish I could have taken a picture."

"What's all this, now?" asked Dean.

"He was behind everything that went on after I got powers, that much is clear," explained Elizabeth. "All the bizarre stuff that went on, the totally improbable things that happened, me almost losing my mind because of Elizabeth murdering people- all your fault. Wait, you were the one the demon was talking about, when Derek was killed. Why didn't I realize that earlier? Was I suppressing those memories?"

FINDING THE BALANCE

He gave a mocking bow. “Indeed, it was me all along. I was hanging around watching you, seeing what you would do with your new powers. Also I was gathering forces in the Demon World, and they wanted some proof I was who I said. I didn’t have this little bauble at the time, after all.” He showed us a ring he was wearing on his other hand. “It was good practice for me, making sure I had control of this body and it would do what I wanted it to. You were the perfect test case, Liz, I couldn’t have chosen better. Cautious, but dangerous. Moral, but responsible for immoral things. Powerful, but afraid to use that power, lest you be taken over and lose yourself. But enough about the past, honestly this conversation is getting boring. Let’s spice things up with an old friend of yours. I’m guessing she’ll be thrilled to get some screen time again.”

Again, out of nowhere, a beautiful woman appeared, looking quite startled. She had long black hair and looked... well, like a hotter Yasui’s mom, actually. She was oriental, and had nine tails fanning out from behind her. On the top of her head were perched the cutest little fox ears, and she was dressed in a Korean looking dress.

“No!” shouted Elizabeth, going white.

“What in the world?” asked the woman, sounding a lot like Elizabeth. “Now that was unexpected.”

I realized who this woman must be- Dizabeth, the inner kumiho of Elizabeth. I had never seen her, as this version of me (according to the letter the other version had written for me, he had seen her be freed) saw only me cutting the progenitor down that was threatening Elizabeth and her friends before they could be cursed. With no curse she had never been allowed out, and Elizabeth took no chances with her that I ever saw, never fusing her with Anthy for greater power.

Probably because she usually copies Christina’s spirit grades instead, so she hardly needs any more.

Chaos was looking her up and down with approval. “So nice to see you again, Dizabeth. We’ve never met, but I know you well. You can go ahead and thank me now, as I’m the reason you’re out.”

Dizabeth looked at him. The difference between the two was striking- chaos’ clothes were beginning to look a bit ragged, obviously he never bothered to change them. A hint of hairy belly showed though his shirt, protruding above his pants. His hair was greasy and messy, and given the state of him, without the barrier going he probably smelled pretty bad.

"You?" she asked, amused. "Whatever. I'm out of here." She looked around, spied the door, and flung it open. Looking out into the barren wasteland, she seemed to realize where she was. She put a hand over her eyes, trying to pierce the storm, but soon gave it up. She closed the door, then looked up, seeing the place was roofless as if for the first time.

I suppose she was just reborn, have to cut her some slack for not realizing exactly what was going on.

"It's horrible out there!" she exclaimed. "Where the heck are we? What have you been *doing* since you locked me away, anyway? I mean you don't even want to talk anymore, I'm lonely, you know?"

"Are you trying for sympathy?" Elizabeth asked, not believing her ears.

"I know we really never had fun together, but we came to an understanding there, at the end, didn't we? Anyway, who's this joker that... why are you guys behind a barrier?"

"You seriously didn't notice until just now?"

She shrugged.

"We're in Antarctica, trying to get the thing that'll stop that guy behind you. That's the embodiment of chaos, by the way, our current enemy." She looked over her shoulder at the man, who gave a little wave and pointed to his shirt. There was now a sticker there reading "Hi, I'm chaos." "Don't try frying him or anything, something will just happen to you if you do."

"Happen? I don't get it, he doesn't look like much." She turned all the way around to look chaos over more seriously.

"Say, pretty lady," he said smoothly. "What are the chances you coming to work for me, right this second?"

She snorted. "You've got to be kid-" Suddenly she stopped and cocked her head. "Pretty good, actually. What can I do for you?"

"How about a kiss?"

"No-" Again, that hesitation. "Okay."

She stepped over and kissed him, making Elizabeth gag a little.

Meanwhile, I was thinking furiously. *He's actually changing the probability of her actions, or something? But if he can get her to change sides, why not us? Are we being protected by order or something? Could I attack him now when he's focused on her?*

But the kiss ended.

"Oh yeah, that's the stuff," said chaos. "Tell you what- kill all these guys and I'll take you anywhere on Earth you want to go. Someplace warm, hopefully. We could have some fun together. I throw a killer party, and whatever you want is yours."

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Anything? Even people to eat?”

“Definitely. My word as chaos... no, that doesn’t work, does it? Well, you’ll just have to trust me.”

“All I have to do is kill them, huh? I’ll have to leave Elizabeth, her life and mine may be tied together still.”

“Would you mind if I chopped off her arms? Hard to be a bearer of order if you’ve got no arms to pick stuff up with. Unless one of you wants to speak up now, tell me which of you it is? It might save your friends? Maybe?”

We said nothing.

“Pity. Chopity chop it is!”

“Then someone would have to feed her,” protested Elizabeth, in disgust. “It’s not going to be me, I’ll tell you that much.”

“I’m sure we can work something out. Maybe I could turn her into an animal, the chances of her spontaneously becoming a frog are pretty low. Once away from this place...”

Wait, are we close to the essence?

“That would work, I always wanted a pet.”

“Excellent. Get to it, then!”

“Eh, why not?” she said, suddenly becoming a huge fox, rather than a lady. To make matters worse her size kept increasing. The fox smiled. “It should be pretty easy, they won’t want to hurt me in case they accidentally kill their friend.”

Oh, great.

Huge Fox

This fox says 'die, die, die'

The fox, having become larger than an elephant, was now rather squished into the house with her head poking out where the roof would have been.

“This is bothersome,” she remarked.

“Do something!” shouted Osman, trying not to get stepped on as the kumiho’s limbs trashed back and forth inside the tiny space.

“What do you suggest?” I shouted back to him, “try to talk her out of it?”

Christina willed her bow into her hand. “Can I attack this thing or not?” she asked Elizabeth.

“I don’t know, Anthy is still out so I have no idea what that means!”

“Great.”

She pulled back an arrow and hesitated.

Yasui grabbed a ward out of her pocket and activated it, suddenly holding a helmet, which she jammed on her head.

“Here goes nothing!” shouted Elizabeth, throwing a hand out and shooting an energy blast at Elizabeth. Her eyes widened in shock as, close as she was and big as Elizabeth was, her shot went wide.

Chaos waggled a finger.

“Right!” I said, “don’t attack the fox, attack chaos!”

He curled his fingers up into fists and started doing a very bad boxers impression.

“Acceleration,” I said, activating my foot talisman. The world slowed in a familiar manner.

I followed that up by slamming my fist onto the wall, willing my electric line to travel along the wall, then down and across the floor where chaos was standing.

FINDING THE BALANCE

Shrug this off, I thought. *Your body is still human.* “Thunderbolt!”

But at that instant, Dlizabeth’s body was wreathed in flames, and the walls of the house exploded outward as she both pushed her way out and set them on fire.

“That’s better,” said Dlizabeth, as snow threatened to obscure our vision again. The remains of the house flickered and disappeared, as the magic that held it together vanished.

With no walls to travel along, my attack fizzled, and chaos looked over at me with a grin.

“You really think you can fight me?” he asked.

With the walls of the house gone, both Anthys were free to take a shot at chaos, and their blasts disrupted the snow, leaving a clean corridor for a second, which rapidly filled in. When the blast cleared, however, chaos was nowhere to be seen.

“Does anyone still see him?” asked Christina, looking around wildly.

“Atop Dlizabeth, on her back,” said Osman, “use the bow’s power!”

“Oh, right.”

Sadly, I had no means of finding him atop Dlizabeth, so I focused on what I could do. I got out an acceleration ward and stuck it on Yasui.

She gave a quick nod and activated her armor talisman, growing in size herself and becoming completely armored.

I grabbed another ward and ran over to stick it on Elizabeth, who was looking up, trying to pierce the snow now swirling around her demonic counterpart.

“I can’t get control of her, I’ll keep trying though,” she said as I slapped the ward on her back.

“Sounds good to me! Will hurting her really hurt you?”

“No idea!”

Osman, having sighted Chaos, fired off a wind attack against him, careful to put it high in the air above both of them so Dlizabeth wouldn’t be harmed. However, as it reached him, snow gathered into a solid wall, bouncing it back and leaving him unharmed. The snow puffed away randomly again.

“Maybe if we throw more than one thing at him?” he asked in general.

I thought I saw an ant get ready to fire another beam of energy at chaos, but she suddenly disappeared.

“He can even cause that?” Elizabeth wailed. Her other Anthy swooped down by her side, and she touched her back, concentrating.

Yasui leaped into the air, heading for Dizabeth, and disappeared into the swirling snow.

Great, what am I supposed to do on my own? I can't tone down my electric attack, it's one strength only. Even directing it to just hit one leg might blow one of Elizabeth's off, so that's no good. Aarg! I really need to create some sort of non-lethal weapon for situations like this.

Dizabeth seemed to grow larger again, now towering over us and being lost in the snow high above. I could see flashes of her nine tails as they whipped through the air, and of course the bottoms of her legs were visible, but I at least took some comfort in knowing that she would have just as hard a time seeing us now.

Do her flame attacks get bigger as she does? From what I knew of elemental attacks, the size was based on the skill of the user, so probably not. Still, just stepping on us would be enough to kill us, with or without magic armor. How were we suppose to beat something that could grow as big as a mountain and that we didn't risk attacking for fear of hurting our friend? I could only hope Elizabeth managed to get control of her again.

Yasui landed beside us with a thump, ice cracking under her boots. “She grew again before I could get close,” she yelled, exasperated. “Stay away from her, I'm going to try knocking her off balance.”

“Right,” I said, backing up a few paces. She took off again, leaping upwards towards where she guessed her face would be.

Beside me, Elizabeth seemed to merge with Anthy, as she became a half human, half ant looking construct. Wings protruded from her back, and her black carapace gleamed in the snow. Her face was a mishmash of mandibles, huge eyes and red hair. I could only spare a glance before she took off into the air, wings churning the surrounding snow.

No wonder she doesn't do that very often, she looks kind of freaky. Imagine what she would look like if you threw Dizabeth in the mix as well!

Christina gave a yell of frustration as she obviously missed chaos, then drew back another arrow. “It's like he knows I'm about to fire,” she said to me.

Yasui fell through the air and landed on her back with a thump. Though it was difficult to tell with the helmet covering her face, she seemed a bit shocked. Dizabeth started laughing.

“I didn't even feel that!” she shouted down to us. “What was that supposed to be?”

FINDING THE BALANCE

Obviously, whatever she tried didn't work out.

Osman, also backing away, got out a ward and was suddenly holding his shield above his head. Just in time, as bolts of fire started raining down on us from above. It seemed Dlizabeth felt she was big enough finally, and was now going to start making an effort to kill us. Four huge columns of flame stabbed into the ice around us, filling the air with heat and light. The pillars were easily meters across, leaving us little room to dodge them, but we all tried in our own way. It seemed she didn't need to see us, if she could just fill an area as long as a bus with supernaturally created fire.

Osman was jerked back, thrown out of harms way by Katrina, and went down on his side with a grunt.

Energy flashed around me, my armor taking the attack as I tried to dodge out of the way. The column of fire was too big to escape completely, but with the combination of my own speed, luck, the armor, and the snow I plowed into I felt fine as the heat subsided. I just had to get up again before I got stepped on.

Yasui also tried to dodge but even she wasn't fast enough. As the flames cleared around her she looked down at her hands.

"Am I immune to fire in this suit?" she asked no one in particular.

Did I forget to mention that to her?

I saw a barrier wink out around where Christina was standing, and she also seemed unhurt. The ground here was now all torn up, making moving around much more treacherous. Huge gouges in the ground from the flame could be seen, and again you could see where they had been as the snow was vaporized in a line from her tails to the ground. It quickly filled in again, and I wished there was some way to blow this snow away so we could see more what we were doing.

"Did I get them?" I heard Dlizabeth asking above us.

Chaos' reply, if any, was lost.

"Fine by me!" Dlizabeth yelled, sending more bolts of fire down to us and spinning in a circle. Her huge paws stamped holes in the ice and snow, and I could feel the ground shake with the impact of her weight.

I was up in a flash, running as hard as I could to be directly underneath her. As I ran and dodged, more bolts of fire shot from her tails, usually four at a time. They were now going rather wild, rather than filling an area she was somehow targeting us, even though I was sure she wouldn't be able to see us any more than we could see most of her. The bolts tore up more of the earth here now that some ice had been melted. I was running towards her because she was big, and not moving much from that one spot.

I figured being underneath her was safest; She wouldn't be able to hit me with fire there, and as long as I kept to the middle of her body, hopefully I wouldn't have to worry about being stepped on, either.

I heard chaos laughing atop Dlizabeth, even as the fused form of "Athzabeth" as I now named her, tried blasting him again and again. He just seemed one step ahead of her, always taking a step or ducking down just as she fired.

She's being too careful! I realized. *She doesn't want to hit Dlizabeth and hurt herself in the process. Too bad she doesn't have a fire attack. Kumiho I think are immune to fire, but he wouldn't be. If only we could get her to use her elemental touch power, I bet he would get fried up there on her back.*

Chaos is using his power, suddenly rang in my mind. It was Katrina, using sending as the bolts stopped momentarily. *That's how she keeps coming so close to hitting us. I sense he's really having a good time right now.*

It made sense, even as big around as those bolts of fire were, we were moving around sort of randomly trying to get away. So she really wasn't tracking us, as I thought, but rather just firing them off randomly. If chaos made the improbable act of hitting us more possible, that's why they were coming so close and keeping us off balance like this. It would only take one mistake for one of us to be seriously injured. I knew we had to finish this quickly, somehow.

We have to get out of here, she continued. *I sense something big is going to happen.*

Bigger than a huge kumiho? I thought to myself. But she was right, something was happening- that must have been why Dlizabeth stopped shooting at us, she felt it too. The ground here was rumbling, it was easy to tell now that the impacts of a furry creature twice as big as an elephant had stopped.

"Do they have earthquakes here?" Christina shouted to me.

I threw up my hands, I didn't know.

"You know," said chaos, now standing beside me. "It's a real burden, being who I am sometimes." The man sounded wistful, of all things.

I had just enough time to look over at him in confusion when part of the ground collapsed under Dlizabeth's back legs, and she started scrambling to try and stand up. She was whimpering and pawing at the ground, but the crack that had formed kept growing, swallowing her, while the ice made purchase difficult.

"Help me! Please help me!" she cried, now half stuck into the ground. "I can't get out!"

FINDING THE BALANCE

“I guess playtime is over,” he remarked.

I reacted, putting my hand down on the ice and willing another line out to try and strike him. It passed harmlessly underneath him.

“Good reflexes,” he said. “But if you’ll look closely, for no reason whatsoever I suddenly started floating. How crazy is that?”

I put my hand on his chest. “What if I fired off a wind blast, point blank, right now? My armor would probably keep me safe, but what would protect you?”

“Who can say,” he answered, seemingly unconcerned. “Perhaps the ground would swallow you up before you could do it. Maybe ice would drop out of the sky and chop your hand off. Perhaps you would just lose all your powers. Why take the risk? Why not go see to your big fuzzy over there and then move this battlefield to a more stable location?”

I took my hand away from him. “What, you don’t even know what would happen? I thought you were causing all these crazy things to happen?”

“I am, who did you think was doing it? Maybe I just like to keep my options open. Did you ever think of that?” Suddenly he wasn’t near me anymore, I saw him appear over by the whimpering Dlizabeth.

“Stop playing around,” he told her. “You can get out of there easily, so I can’t do anything about it. You want your freedom, don’t you?”

Really wish I could make some notes right now, he’s probably telling me some things that could be important in the future.

“You get away from her!” shouted Antzabeth, landing. “This is all your fault!”

“Of course it is,” chaos replied, confused. “I wanted her to kill you.”

“Why not just kill us yourself, like a man?” asked Christina.

Chaos sputtered for a few seconds. “It’s more fun this way. Anyway, I don’t have to answer your questions.”

“Please, will someone help me?” wailed Dlizabeth. “I don’t want to be stuck here forever!” The ground rumbled and the crack widened, pulling her in a little more.

Katrina’s voice sounded in my head again. *I was able to change her emotions, she’s feeling very scared and lonely right now.*

“There, there,” said Athzabeth, patting her muzzle. “We can get you out of there no problem.”

“You’ll just want me to go back inside you,” said Dlizabeth. “Lock me away forever in your little prison. I never get to come out anymore, it’s not fair.”

"I know, and I wish there was something I could do about that. Maybe... maybe I can at least come visit you more often. You are a part of me, after all."

"You would do that for me?"

"Now that I know how you're feeling, of course I would."

"Oh, please!" said chaos. "Can we get back to the killing?"

"Take your shot, big man," said Christina. "We're all right here."

"Don't think I won't! It'll come when you least expect it, mark my words."

"Uh huh, whatever."

"What about meeeeeeee," whined Dlizabeth.

"Just shrink already, you'll be fine," chaos said, rolling his eyes. "Honestly, how old are you?"

"Um, two, I guess?"

I suppose she hasn't actually existed that long. And Elizabeth has kept her on a pretty short leash. Not that I blame her, I'm not sure how we could have taken out something as big as her. Plus she could throw that much flame around, just how much spirit energy can she spend at once?

Dlizabeth started shrinking, but as her legs were still stuck in the collapsed area, she shrunk backwards, away from us. Antzabeth flew over there and helped haul her out of the hole as she became human again. Dlizabeth hugged her tight. "You saved me," she said, amazed. "I didn't think you cared."

"I wouldn't have let you fall, you should know that."

Yeah, it might have killed her too. But I saw no need to mention that out loud.

"As touching as this... whatever this is that's going on," said chaos, "I'm on a schedule here. It's time for round two, so I hope you're ready!"

"I won't fight them for you!" shouted Dlizabeth.

"Bah, who needs you!" chaos shouted back.

"Oh, finally stepping up?" asked Christina.

"That's right," he said, taking a giant step backwards. "Or not. No, actually I was thinking of finding some new playmates for you."

"Where?" asked Osman, looking around. "And what's down that hole? Is that a tunnel?"

"Never you mind!" shouted chaos, stepping between the collapsed earth and him. "Hey, quiz time- who knows their Demon World geography best?"

FINDING THE BALANCE

We looked at each other.

“Probably Antzabeth,” I replied. “She’s always reading one book or another, and has the best memory of any of us. Why? We’re not in the Demon World.”

“Are you talking about me?” asked Elizabeth.

“Yeah, I mean you’re fused now, right? Elizabethy just would have sounded silly,” I said.

“I agree,” said chaos.

“You don’t get a vote,” she spat at him. “Now what does something in the Demon World have to do with what’s here?”

“Funny you should ask that. My question for you all is, what’s in this spot in the Demon World? Any takers?”

We all looked over at Elizabeth.

“Don’t look at me,” she said. “I was only at the school for a year, remember? Before it got *blown up*? Remember that? I assume that was your doing, by the way. So thanks for that,” she said sarcastically, looking at chaos.

“Not at all.” he said, inclining his head. “Now, you really don’t know what’s here?” he asked, sounding really excited and clapping his hands together. “It’s going to be a total surprise?”

We all looked worried, wondering what we were in for.

“Oh, this’ll be such a treat.” Chaos snapped his fingers dramatically. “Let me introduce you!”

There was an odd tearing sound behind us, and red light spilled out onto the snow. I also saw the snow around us melting, and it started to disappear, clearing off. Something stepped up behind us, I could feel the spirit energy radiating off it. Chaos looked pleased, and gave a little bow to whatever was now behind us. “Welcome to Earth!” he said. “Let’s make a deal.”

Battle Four Demons

*“It’s over to quickly if I use the nunchucks.
Give me three throwing stars...
and a blindfold.” --Patton Oswalt*

We all spun about to see a jagged “tear” hanging in space a few meters behind us. Behind the four figures that were standing there, looking about interestedly, was an obvious portal to the Demon World. It looked nothing like a standard portal, being little more than a peeling back of our world to show the Demon World behind it.

My gaze fixed on the four that had just stepped through. A goat demon, standing on hind legs, was first out. Behind him was a frightening looking thing with a large grin, obviously a cruciatu, or torture demon. Beside him was a fallen angel, a grigor, with large black wings and a tail that swished back and forth.

Behind them, bending down to fit through the portal, was a giant creature with tentacles for legs, three heads, and multiple arms.

Oh, goody.

“Welcome, friends!” said chaos, stepping past us and moving towards them. They bowed a bit to him. He stopped, then looked behind himself, jerking his head from left to right.

“Hey, where did the hot chick go?” he demanded.

“Oh, her?” said Antzabeth innocently. “Funny thing- you’ll appreciate this. Do you know the odds of her just spontaneously going back? Massively low, let me tell you. But somehow, it happened all the same.”

“What did you do?”

“Aw, chaos doesn’t know everything,” she said mockingly. “Poor baby.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

Wait, when he used his power to open this gate, did she mimic it and put Elizabeth back inside herself? Brilliant!

He waved a hand at her, turning back to his little group of followers. "It doesn't matter, you'll all be dead soon anyway. This just makes it easier, as now one of you won't be left."

"We really get to kill them?" the big one said, looking over at us.

"You certainly do, my friend," chaos replied with a grin. "And then you get to go free, anyplace on Earth, or the Demon World, just like I promised."

"Help us kill the fat guy," Christina said, "and I'll offer you the same deal. Heck, I'll even sweeten the deal! I'm sure we could find you some gold somewhere, or whatever you wanted."

"What are you doing?" I hissed at her.

"It's worth a shot," she shot back.

The demons looked horrified. "Go against the master," said the torture demon. "No, we can't do that. He freed us, just as he said he would. We follow him forever."

"What?" said Christina. "How in the world did you manage that?"

Chaos smiled at her and held up a hand. "I told you earlier, remember? I really must write some sort of thank you letter to that nice artificer for screwing this up for me."

The cursed ring, I remembered, smacking my forehead. "You had it the whole time."

"Right-o, Dean. I tell you, leaving something like this just lying around where any old agent of chaos could just swoop in and grab it? They really need to teach better security in that school of- oh, right, it got all blown up, didn't it?"

"We'll take it back," said Yasui.

"They're taking it back right now," said Christina. "while we're here distracting you."

"Liar!" he yelled.

"Are you sure?"

"Kill them all!" he shouted, pointing at us. They tensed.

"Wait!" she shouted, holding her hands up. They hesitated.

"Yes?" asked chaos.

"Look, we can't beat all them, not with you around. We surrender."

"What?" Everyone, demons and humans alike, gaped at her.

"Seriously!" she said, nodding. "Come on, Dean, he'll just protect them, you know that. We won't get a blow in."

“We can’t just give up!” *Where are you going with this, Christina?*

“We can, and we will. Look, I’ll even close my eyes. You watching this, demons?”

She closed her eyes.

“What’s she up to?” demanded chaos.

“I.. don’t exactly know,” I admitted. “I think maybe she went mad. We’re not surrendering.”

“We are!” insisted Christina. “Look, I’ll even make myself dizzy to make it easier for you.” She started spinning around in a circle, very fast.

“I like it,” said chaos. “It’s random, and I can appreciate that. You guys really don’t know what she’s up to?”

“Stop talking,” said Christina, still spinning. “I have to do this properly.”

“Do what?” shouted chaos.

“Shut up!” shouted Christina, equally loud.

He made a questioning gesture at us, but we all shrugged.

Christina nearly slipped on the ice, but righted herself. “Wonder if being drunk would be better? Oh well.”

She raised her bow and let an arrow fly at random.

Everyone gasped as the arrow slammed into chaos’ chest, staggering him.

“Did I get him?” she asked, smugly.

“How?” he croaked, taking a step backwards as the arrow disappeared. It left a bloody hole in his chest, but he was still up.

“Simple,” she said. “But I’m not telling you. What’s it going to be, boys?” she shouted, and Yasui turned her so she was facing them again. “Oh, thanks. I just shot your boss with my eyes closed. Think you have any chance?”

“Get them,” he said, fading out. “I’ll be back when I figure out how she did that.”

“You can still walk away!” said Antzabeth, growing taller now. “Go back through that door and don’t come back.”

“We’ve been imprisoned longer than you can imagine,” said the goat looking demon. “We’ll take our chances. You know why? Because I need a drink.” Without warning he was holding a sword and shield in his hand.

“One for each of us,” said the fallen angel. “That was nice of the boss.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Wait, aren’t there five?” asked the giant.

“What, really?” He seemed to look around. “Oh, yeah, that bug looking one. What is that, anyway? It’s so short I didn’t even see it before.”

They all laughed, making Elizabeth click her mandibles together in impatience.

“I want the holy one,” said the torture demon. “I want to hear him scream.”

“We all want the holy one,” said the big one. “I want to skewer him on my swords.”

What swords?

“You better get them out,” said the goat demon, indicating his own weapons.

“Oh yeah!” The big one concentrated, and suddenly was holding four swords in his five hands, all connected by a long chain. “Wish I had my shield,” he said. “Maybe I’ll take that one from the holy one! Looks kind of small for me though.”

What in the world?

“Look,” said the fallen angel. “There’s one with wings. I’ll take that one. You,” he pointed to the big one, “take the one in the armor.”

“Yeah, all right.”

“I want the holy one!” repeated the torture demon.

“Look, save him for last,” said the goat demon. “We’ll all take him, after his friends are dead. Think how much better it’ll be then.” The others considered, then nodded. “I’ll take the one with the bow, you can have the normal looking one.”

“I don’t know, he doesn’t look all that sturdy. I might punch his head off by accident.”

They all laughed again.

“I think we’re being underestimated,” I said. “We should teach these bozos a lesson.”

“With pleasure,” said Antzabeth, taking to the sky.

Luckily, with chaos gone, the storm is dying down. At least we can see what we’re doing.

“Guess that’s my cue,” said the fallen angel, also taking off.

“Charge!” screamed the giant one, and shot forward.

The battle was on. The torture demon ran towards me, yelling a battle cry and aiming a fist at my face. I crossed my arms and waited until the

last second, shifting a little bit to make sure my armor talisman activated. I wasn't sure how "intelligent" the talisman was, after all. If I wanted to show off and let the thing bounce off my armor, how did it know? If I didn't at least make some effort to move out of the way, it might think I wanted to be hit. It knew the difference between someone hugging me and someone stabbing me, after all. If that was triggered by "dodging" then...

I shouldn't have worried. The demon stopped, fist in my face, not even near enough to activate my armor.

"You saw through it, didn't you?" he asked, looking disappointed and pulling back.

"What are you talking about?" I asked him, confused.

"You mean- wait, you were just going to- what would have happened if I had hit you?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Why don't you go through with it and find out?"

"Nah, I'll try something else, if it's all the same to you." He took a couple of steps back.

"Well make it snappy, I have stuff to do today, you know?"

"You just want to help your friends."

I didn't move. "They can take care of themselves."

"Oh, confident, aren't we. Shrug this off!"

Suddenly he disappeared, and I took a step forward, looking around for where he had gone. A bolt of electricity passed through the space where I had been from my left.

"Oh, come on!" he said. "That's just unfair!"

"How did... you guys are ESPers, aren't you?"

"I'm not telling you anything!"

"Though I suppose ESDer would be more appropriate, as you're a demon."

"That's a good- shut up. Okay, I'll get you this time!"

He vanished again. At least, he thought he did, I saw through his illusion this time.

I've seen enough of them, being around Kat. Wonder how that first one fooled me? Now, do I just take him out or activate my anti-ESPer talismans? What to do...

"Look, I can see you're right there," I said, pointing at him. "You tried to cover the area with an illusion that the space you were in was empty. Nice job. But you can't win against me. Go back through and don't look back."

FINDING THE BALANCE

“You don’t know what it’s like there!” he protested, “it’s a prison, you know that? I failed a task and so I got stuck in there to rot. I’d rather die than go back.”

“Very well,” I said, bending down. I sent a line of electricity to surround and then pierce him, so even if he tried to jump out of the way he would still cross it.

He did, and fried instantly. His body charred to ashes, and started blowing away in the wind.

Huh. Maybe Mr DeVille is right. Maybe I am a little too dangerous.

I looked around, and the others were wrapping up their fights as well.
Or not.

Later, Elizabeth told me her fight went something like this:

The demon flew up and tried to hover some distance away from me.

“Can you just give me one second?” he asked, holding up a finger.

“Sure, take your time,” I answered.

“Great, thanks!” The demon did something, and suddenly was holding what looked like a cross. “Ah, great, it wasn’t found and destroyed.”

“You’re threatening me with a cross?” I asked, confused.

“Not exactly,” he answered, taking a small bottle from inside the thing and sprinkling it. I figured it must have been hollow, as he chucked the bottle to the ground and got out a match, lighting it.

“Feel better?” I asked, as the cross started to burn.

“Getting there,” he replied, then started speaking in a low voice.

I didn’t have to wonder what he was doing for long, as another fallen angel popped up next to him, gave a yelp, and pumped its wings to stay aloft.

“You?” he said in surprise. “How did you get out?”

“Shoot, I was hoping for two,” he said. “Oh well. Anyway, does that matter? I’m out now, aren’t I? Let’s kill this thing and we can get out of here.”

The other demon looked over at me. “Eww,” he said, looking me over. “What is it?”

“Who knows. Will you help me or not?”

“I guess I’ll have to.”

“Wait a second,” I yelled. “Two against one? That’s not exactly fair, is it?”

“Fair?” sneered the first one. “I love a good unfair fight.”

“Great!” I said, brightening, and calling upon Anthy’s “Ant Hill” power to create some clones of me. “Then you’re gonna love what happens next,” said the three of us together.

“Unfair!” both of them screamed as we all sent energy blasts at them. Both died instantly.

Christina said her opponent went down just as easily, as he leaped high in the air towards her.

“He was covering himself with his shield,” she told me, “but that didn’t really matter with the bow I was using. I just willed the shot to hit him in the head from behind, and he was dead before he hit the ground. He burned away to ash and that was that.”

Listening to that just reinforced what Mr DeVille had been saying.

I. Am. Awesome. At making talismans.

Yasui had a bit of trouble with her opponent, and with good reason. Those gigante things, as I later learned they were named, had a pretty freakish strength. Not only were they huge, but this one seemed to be a spirit energist to boot, which made him even tougher.

“The thing barreled towards me on those tentacle things it used as legs, and I got ready to clone step out of there,” she explained. “Two blades whistled towards my neck, ready to cleave it off my shoulders and I knew I had only an instant-”

“Just tell us without all the drama!” said Christina, exasperated.

“Fine.”

The gigante swung two swords at me and I did my now trademark evasion of leaping, with spirit step, into the air while leaving a clone behind to take the blow. I narrowly avoided getting sliced but my clone wasn’t so lucky. I did notice, however, that the armor took it, hardly staggering the me I had left behind. I think if it had just swung one blade, I would have been knocked over. Since it hit me from both sides, though, I didn’t go anywhere. While it was stupidly staring at me, as though wondering why my head hadn’t flown off, I came down from the sky again. I kicked out with both feet as I came down behind it, hoping to at least take out one third of my “opponents” with one blow. I didn’t use the Knockdown technique because I figured it wouldn’t work, based on what had happened with the Kumiho. I just went for damaging it.

FINDING THE BALANCE

Both went forward, so I had hit them, but as I impacted them there was a flash and they didn't seem hurt. It still seemed to be standing there, just slowly turning around-

"Thanks to my acceleration ward," said Dean.

Yasui rolled her eyes and continued.

It seemed to be just standing there so as I landed behind it, my clone grabbed its arms and did a spinning vertical kick straight up into its chin-

"You did a Guile 'Flash Kick?'"

-into its chin but the blow actually missed as the clone flipped backwards, out of the way of the blades.

The others groaned, that would have been a perfect move if it had connected.

I of course know now that the thing was immune to fire, which is why the flames from my boots didn't seem to bother it. So I leapt up from behind and kicked it again. I'm not sure how it knew, but it managed to dodge by throwing the head to one side. It then began to counter attack, swinging blades in one set of hands at myself while the other set tried to strike my clone. We both dodged out of the way, somewhat successfully, but his blades clanged against our armor and knocked us over. We were both up in an instant, but it was still rather embarrassing.

"Better embarrassed than dead," Dean remarked.

The armor was performing its job, and I figured as long as he didn't try to stab me with the blades, but rather swept them in an arc, I would be okay. My clone again lashed out with an iron boot, connecting but I saw that flash again, and he was totally unhurt.

"Guess you can't hurt me," he boasted. "So why not just surrender for real?"

At this point I was rather stuck, it seemed that whenever I went to hit him, he protected himself with some sort of technique. Plus the fire wasn't doing anything, so I wasn't sure what I was going to do. He didn't have armor I could tear off with shattering strike so that was out.

So I just focused on hitting him harder.

I connected with my next blow, and again there was that flash of energy at the point I connected with. He winced a little bit, making me think that perhaps, finally, I had succeeded in wounding him. My clone also struck out, hitting him with a booted kick to the body.

"Ow!" he said, so I knew we were getting through whatever technique he was using.

He struck out at my clone, again with that two handed swing but this

time straight down, trying to bash her into the ground. She threw herself backwards, blades scraping on metal as she wasn't fast enough, even with your acceleration ward going, Dean.

"Not my fault."

I struck again, figuring it would be distracted by attacking my clone, but now I realize it was like fighting three people at once, each head acted independently. Again there was a burst of energy but this was a solid hit, and I finally staggered the thing.

My clone hit again, tearing the small wound we had made open and it fell to the snow. I looked over to see everyone waiting for me, their demons long since dispatched.

"Hey," said Yasui, "that thing was twice as big as I was!"

"Get away from it!" shouted Osman, beckoning us to run. "Kat says it's going to blow!"

I looked over at it, and it was glowing quite ominously, a good sign of having the so called "death burst" ability. Similar to those vessel things, some actual demons could explode upon death as well. Yasui leapt away from it, while her clone leapt in the air, smashing it further into the ground with knockback strike.

I suppose that might work, given it's more ice on the top layers than frozen ground.

There was a mighty explosion behind us, and heat washed over us, more heat than this area had known for a long time. Looking back I saw a huge crater in the ground where the beast had been, and looked to make sure my friends were all okay.

"Everyone okay?" asked Osman, checking each one of us. Yasui landed, of course she was unhurt, though her clone was gone.

"My fire didn't work out at all this time!" she said to me. "I think it was immune to it!"

"A lot of demons are immune to fire," Osman said. "Why did you pick fire damage for that armor, anyway?"

"Wasn't my choice, that's how the book described it. I didn't want to go messing around with the formula, I'm sure it's fire for a reason."

"Whatever," said Yasui. "Man, last again. I can't believe you guys, what, did you all take your demons out in one hit?"

We all had the decency to look embarrassed.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“You would have too,” Elizabeth said, gently. “If you weren’t facing something like that. What was that, anyway?”

“I forget what it’s called,” answered Yasui.

“I was going to throw you my shield, but then it looked like you got an idea and started kicking it,” said Osman, hefting it.

“Yeah, it’s fine- wait, that would be something, wouldn’t it?” Her eyes lit up. “Hey Dean, maybe for my next birthday you can make me a gauntlet with the same power as that shield. That’ll get incorporated into the whole armor, and anything that hits me will be in for a surprise.”

“Sure. But we have to get through this place first. Is everyone all right?”

No one had injuries, so we went over to look at the hole that had been created in the ground.

Christina whistled. “That’s a deep hole. Glad none of us got hit by that blast.”

If I was figuring it right, the hole was almost twenty meters across, and almost that amount down as well, making a nearly smooth indentation in the earth.

“By the way,” Elizabeth, who once again looked like herself, asked. “How did you hit chaos like that?”

“Oh, yeah! You guys will love this,” Christina answered excitedly. “Remember that photo that was taken of him?” We all nodded. “And then he was talking about not knowing exactly what his power would do if you attacked him, Dean. I got to thinking, maybe he can’t turn his power off, or really direct it in any meaningful way.” She paused, grinning.

“What does that have to do with it?” asked Osman.

“Don’t you see? The camera was randomly knocked out of someone’s hand, then randomly fell and just happened to hit the shutter button while pointing at the guy? No way, that was his power messing with probability. So I figured, why not do the same thing? So I spun around to make myself dizzy and then just fired randomly.”

I nodded, understanding. “Therefore making the chances of you actually hitting him remote, which caused you to hit him.”

“Exactly!”

“Wow, Christina, that was good thinking.”

“Thanks.”

“He can’t even guard against that, can he?” asked Elizabeth.

Christina shook her head. “Not and still be chaos, I think.”

“You see something?” asked Yasui to Osman, who was looking down into the crater with interest.

“Yeah, I think there’s a tunnel down there!”

Seals

*“If you wish to cross this bridge by me,
first you must answer questions three!”*

-- bridge keeper

We carefully made our way down the slope of the crater that had been created by the explosion and stood before the mouth of the tunnel. It stretched in both directions, the explosion simply cutting a chunk of the ground out which intersected it. The tunnel was large enough to stand in without bending over, and there seemed to be a slightly warm breeze coming from within. The walls were smooth, obviously artificial, rather than created from some tunneling machine or creature. Unless that thing took all the dirt and rock with it, which I doubted.

“Naturally, it would be underground,” said Christina, looking nervously inside.

“You want to wait here?” I asked. “When we find something we can come and get you.”

She shook her head. “No, I’ll come. But I won’t like it.”

“It shouldn’t be so bad,” said Yasui. “You can use your bow to see the outside any time you want.”

“I’ll still know I’m in an underground tunnel!”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Wait, are we going into the underground tunnel?” asked Osman.

“Just a second,” said Elizabeth, holding up a hand. She looked one way, then closed her eyes. After a moment she looked the other way and closed her eyes again. “I think we want to go that way,” she said, pointing to the entrance we were currently standing in front of. “Anthy says it continues down and there’s something powerful down there, too.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“My point is, don’t you all find it a little bit suspicious that we found this here?” asked Osman.

“You’re traveling with the luckiest man alive,” I reminded him. “We were bound to come near the place we needed to be. And even if I wasn’t so lucky now, chaos is loose in the world. I mean the guy was just here, and the chances of us finding the essence were remote, right?”

“I get what you’re saying. Because the likelihood of our finding the place was so low, we were sure to find it.” I nodded. “Oh, Kat says she’ll be happy to check the tunnel out.”

“By all means,” I said, sweeping my hand towards it.

We waited a few moments, and Osman said she had returned.

“What did you find?” asked Elizabeth.

“She says the passage just goes and goes, without end. She’s extremely fast in that form, we timed it once. She might as well be teleporting, she went from one end of the island to another so fast. Of course she says she can’t really make out any details at her top speed, but it’s worrying that the tunnel kept going and going.”

“Does she have any way of telling how far she went?” asked Christina.

He shook his head. “She kept going faster though, as the tunnel is just a straight line. She figured if she ran into something that would be a good indication to stop. But she never did.”

“It can’t go on forever, can it?”

I sighed. “There are wards that can make a space seem to go on forever. Perhaps she got caught in something like that?”

“Could she travel along the ground, then just duck back down every so often?” asked Christina.

Osman shook his head. “Too risky. With no landmarks around here, she might never find her way back here again!”

“Right, better to be safe. Okay, troops, pile in.”

We walked for some time, stopped to have some food, then walked again. I had the knife out, still attached to the pipe, which I used to gouge the floor every few minutes. “This way,” I explained, “if we see a line I’ve made we’ll know we repeated and we can look around for the ward.”

The others agreed this was logical. As we walked I kept my eye on Christina, but she seemed to be keeping it together pretty well. She was talking to Yasui about the suspicious circumstances that led to us being down here.

“I mean, first the tunnel collapses under the weight of that huge kumiho. That would have been curious, right? We would have looked down here, seen what made that happen. But no, there had to be a huge hole blown in the earth to make it totally obvious. They may as well have put a sign out. ‘This way for order.’”

“I guess,” she answered, obviously lost in thought.

“Earth to Yasui!”

“What? Sorry, I was still thinking about how my fight went, what I could do better.”

“I think it was a spirit energist,” said Osman. “That’s what its power looked like to me.”

“I suppose that flash could have been the spirit shield technique,” said Elizabeth. “I’ve not learned too many spirit energist techniques, especially now that I can fully control Anthy without Elizabeth getting out. At least, usually.”

“Yeah, I read about it,” said Christina. “I didn’t bother learning it either, for a couple of reasons.”

“What’s it do?”

“Something similar to what you can do naturally, if I understand things right,” she answered. “You can increase your toughness for a second, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what my clone does after I leave it behind, when I’m not in the armor, anyway.”

“We need a special technique to do it. But it’s way harder for us, and the boost isn’t all that much.”

“Yeah,” agreed Elizabeth. “I do remember reading about that. My teacher said don’t bother, we could hardly increase our toughness enough to take a sword blow, much less an energy blast or something like that.”

Christina nodded. “Better to master the energy barrier than rely on something like that.”

“So why did it work for him?” Yasui demanded.

“He was probably already tougher than a regular person is, so he didn’t have as far to go to make the skill worthwhile.”

“Oh. Yeah, you’re probably right. It just seems so wrong, a demonic spirit energist able to get more benefit out of a technique than we do.”

“You see?” asked Elizabeth, throwing her arm around Yasui’s shoulders. “It was a special case. Fighting a normal one of those or something that big that isn’t immune to fire, and you’ll take it out just as fast as we took out ours.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

"I guess. Did you say there was another reason you didn't learn the technique, Christina?"

"Yeah, why would I let something get that close to me?" She jingled her cross.

"Right."

"Hark!" I said, coming to a halt and raising the glowing knife up higher. "There's something in our way!"

"Cave in?" asked Yasui, looking at Elizabeth.

"Anthy says it's not natural," she replied.

"Be on your guard," I said, gripping the pole and creeping forward. As we got closer I realized it was a door, though from further away it just looked like a slab of metal with weird script running across the top. I could see that it was two pieces of dull, brushed metal, held in place somehow by an archway of the same material. I had no way to know how thick it was, and I didn't see any sort of hinges or handle to use to swing it open. It seemed solid from a distance, but holding the knife close to it, we could tell they weren't a solid piece, but two pieces closely fitted together.

"Kat apologizes, she doesn't know how she missed this."

"Maybe the tunnel acts differently for anyone trying what she did? I don't know. This was set up, if we believe what Mr DeVille said, at the beginning of humanity by the All-Father. Really anything could happen down here."

"Then that language..." said Elizabeth, trailing off.

"Probably angelic script," said Osman. "I could always petition an angel to read it for us. Wait, Kat wants to try something." He put his hand on the letters, and waited. "She says she's not very good at this. Oh, really? That's too bad. She says she just remembered it doesn't work on Demon-script, so it won't work on this either."

Elizabeth went up to it, looking intently at one part.

"You see something?" asked Osman.

"I once paged through a book on angelic script," she said, "just for fun. I'm pretty sure this is the number 10."

Yasui and I looked at each other. "Of course it is," Yasui said.

"It couldn't be anything else," I replied.

The others waited for an explanation.

"Hey, if you haven't worked out what ten means for yourselves, we're not going to spoon feed you, right Dean?"

"That's right."

"So, what?" asked Christina. "Do we need ten people to walk through this door or something?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "That's all I can give you."

Yasui walked over to the thing and shoved the part that looked like it opened. It didn't budge. "Seems solid," she said, stepping back.

"We can phase our way through," I suggested. "Unless you really think it's important to get an angel down here?"

"It could be some kind of warning," said Yasui. "And that ten bothers me."

"Yeah, better see what it says, it shouldn't take long, right?"

"Okay. I'll get something easy, no need for the circle, Dean."

"Your choice."

He prayed for a moment, and a startled looking angel playing a harp appeared in the tunnel. He got up, setting the harp aside and looking around. This was a "typical" angel, the kind a normal person would think of, rather than one of the more odd looking ones, like a throne or a cherub. Not really male or female looking, draped in white robes, and with large white wings coming from the back.

Why wings, anyway? They certainly don't need them in Heaven to get around, they can just wish themselves from place to place. Seems kind of wasteful to me.

"Odd place," he remarked, looking around. "What can I do for you?"

"I wondered if you would be willing to translate this for us," Osman said, pointing to the script written on the metal.

"Where are we?" the angel asked, looking around nervously.

"On our way to find the essence of order, hopefully," I answered. "Why? Does it speak of danger ahead or something?"

"Essence of order? What's that?"

"Do you know what's going on in the world today?" asked Christina. He shook his head. "Not my task to know that."

"I see."

"Basically the world was thrown into chaos because some distillation of the stuff was moved from where the All-Father put it," said Elizabeth. "We now need to find the opposite, order, to put things right."

"Sounds innocent enough. Very well, I shall translate." He cleared his throat dramatically.

*To possess order you must pass though the ten sealings.
Beware: Those with power will be destroyed by it.*

Yasui and I looked at each other knowingly.

"At least the first one shouldn't be too bad," remarked Elizabeth.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“We can blast this out of our way easily enough.”

“And bring the whole tunnel down on our heads?” shrieked Christina. “No thank you!”

“Oh, I guess you’re right.”

“Thank you,” Osman said to the angel. “Would you like to return, or remain in case we have other messages to read?”

“I don’t mind staying, this may be an interesting part of history I am about to see.”

“Would you mind wearing this?” I asked, getting out a Bind ward. “It’ll reduce the burden on Osman, keeping you here.”

He turned to the side and moved a wing out of the way so I could stick the ward onto him, which I did.

“So how are we getting past this?” asked Yasui, again checking the door over. “Do you think there’s some kind of hidden switch or something?”

“Who knows,” I said. “We’ll just phase our way past it.”

The others nodded, and joined hands. I activated phase, and tried to step through the door.

No luck. I bounced off, just like trying to enter that building in the Demon World.

“Got any other door busting tricks up your sleeves?” asked Christina.

“Lots!” I assured her. “I think the next easiest will be to just put the door into a contain ward.” I got one out. “As it’s a separate piece, it should come right off.”

I applied the ward and activated it, but was surprised when it didn’t budge. What it did do, however, is show a glowing symbol in the middle that wasn’t there a second ago. The symbol, I recognized, for Alchemy, which was used on the pins for actual alchemists at the school. I took the now useless ward and shoved it in my pocket, figuring I would just throw it out later.

“I see,” said Elizabeth. “You have to use a specific power to get through the door?”

“Seems that way. I’ll try hitting the door with intrinsic alteration, maybe it will go from impeding our progress to facilitating it.”

This skill was quite easy, even I could succeed on the first try, and I did, finding myself past the door. I spun, worried that the others had been left behind, but no, they were right behind me, in the same position they had been in on the other side of the door.

“At least the door was nice enough to tell us what power it wanted to see,” remarked Osman. “The All-Father could just as easily have wanted us to guess.”

“That was just the first one, though,” Christina cautioned. “They might get harder as they go.”

Osman agreed, and we headed down the tunnel.

We didn’t have long to walk when we ran into the second barrier. This one seemed to be a portcullis, thin bars blocking our way. I inserted the pipe I was carrying but they wouldn’t bend.

“Could you use contain on each one?” asked Yasui.

“Probably. I wonder if that’s the thing to do, though?”

“There’s a lever there on the other side,” said Elizabeth, pointing. “At least, that’s what Anthy tells me.”

I shoved the blade part of the pipe forward, through the gaps, and she was right. On the wall was an innocent looking lever just sort of stuck into the side of the passageway.

“Kat says she can flip it, if you want,” Osman said.

“Why isn’t she talking to us directly as much?” asked Elizabeth. “I’ve noticed that lately. We didn’t do something to make her angry with us, did we?”

“What? No, nothing like that! Even using illusion takes some energy, and she doesn’t want to squander our resources. I can’t pull energy from things like most of you can, you know.”

I blinked, then smacked my head. “I’m such an idiot!”

“What?”

“Of all the things- I didn’t even think about something like that! I could have made you a talisman that allowed you to do that, just like Christina’s bow allows her to use your vision.” My eyes widened. “No wonder Mr DeLefeu called Tyrfinng the supernatural equivalent of a nuke. A spirit energist could carry it around and constantly replenish their energy supply. Sure, it would take time, but I bet I could create a talisman to automatically do it, whenever they spend energy. And we were carrying that thing around for years!”

“Maybe that’s what DeVille is really worried about,” said Elizabeth. “You figuring stuff like that out. He must know that you know how to create objects that act as ley lines.”

“Yes, I’m sure that was reported. I gave all my notes to Mr DeLefeu when I was done. Man, to think, all this time... anyway.”

“Yup, plenty of time for more talismans later,” said Yasui. “Can we get on with it?”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Wait, but up a barrier first,” said Christina. “I don’t want that to be a trap and collapse things on us.”

Both girls backed off, leaving Osman out in front so Katrina’s power could reach the lever. “Nice knowing you!” shouted Elizabeth through the barrier.

“Oh, very funny,” said Osman, and looked back at the lever so Kat could see it.

It clicked down.

We found ourselves back down the tunnel, in front of the first door we had come to.

“Okay, not exactly what I was expecting,” I said. “What went wrong?”

The others looked around, but didn’t offer any suggestions.

“The writing on the door changed,” remarked the angel, pointing to it.

“What’s it say now, if you don’t mind telling us?” asked Osman.

“Oh, it’s no trouble. It now reads:

*While friends are a great asset, mastery comes from within.
To master order, you must first master yourself.”*

“Er, what?” asked Elizabeth.

The angel looked thoughtful. “Why not try to figure it out for yourselves? I don’t have the answer, but I do have a suspicion.”

“Okay,” I said, “what do we know so far?”

“There are ten doors or puzzles to get through along this corridor,” said Christina.

“Whatever is maintaining this area didn’t like Kat flipping the lever and we got brought back to the beginning,” said Osman. “Which, again, is nice, they could have just filled it with flame or something.”

“That dreamer guy specifically said someone like me would be needed to solve the crisis,” I added.

“Someone who could use a variety of powers?” asked Elizabeth.

The angel was nodding.

“But why?” she asked. “Wouldn’t having a lot of friends be an asset? Especially as that might protect against what happened with chaos, one person getting it- hey, how did that guy get it?”

“Yeah, it must have been sealed away, just like this one!” Christina said indignantly.

“I expect it was found because it was highly unlikely to ever be found,” I said.

“Cheater!” said Elizabeth, grinning. “He’s a cheater.”

“Anyway, back to this,” said Christina.

“Maybe because only someone that had the desire to learn a lot of different skills would have the discipline needed to use the essence of order?” asked Osman.

“But that means a progenitor,” protested Elizabeth. “And the All-Father wiped them out!”

“Possibly further guarding the thing,” I said. “As I doubt He forgot about it.”

The angel looked shocked to even consider such a thing.

“The Bible does say He doesn’t change His mind. When this was set up, everyone could learn every ability. He probably didn’t want to reset the traps in here, as that would constitute interference in the world.”

“Wait a second,” said Christina. “Isn’t wiping out the progenitors changing His mind? I mean He created normal people, i.e. modern humans, to replace them.”

The angel looked uncomfortable.

“I’m sure there’s some religious scholar that could answer that,” said Osman. “In any case, let’s test the theory out. We’ll let Dean try moving the lever and see what happens.”

So I again used my power on the door, and once again we found ourselves on the other side. We walked to the second test, and I “easily” flipped the switch with telekinesis. (It took me three tries)

When I did, the bars silently and swiftly retracted, and we moved forward again. The next door we came to looked identical to the first, but had no writing across the top. In front of it, rising from the ground, were two columns made of the same stuff as the door. Atop each one was some sort of crystal, one which was glowing and one which was not. We looked them over.

“Do you need to charge it up?” asked Osman. “Kat suggests electrokinesis, if that’s so.”

“I hope not, you need to have a good grasp of telekinesis to master moving actual electricity around.”

“I’m not sure that’s the case,” said Elizabeth, studying the crystals.

“Oh, you can be assured it’s the case. I looked it up.”

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“What?” She glared at me. “No, I mean that’s not the case for this. Think about it- there’s ten seals, right?”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Why use a skill from the same power type more than once? The lever was an ESPer technique, while the first door was alchemy. Doesn’t it make sense this needs something else?”

“Some sort of energy attack?” asked Christina.

“We don’t want to destroy it!” protested Yasui.

“Whatever is in here,” Christina said, pointing to the glowing crystal, “it’s spirit energy. You can feel it.”

We all concentrated, and she was right, it was some kind of spirit energy.

“Do I have to try putting some spirit energy into the other one to match it?” I asked the group.

“I’ve never seen spirit energy like that, though,” said Osman, gazing at it.

“So, move it, then?”

“If you can.”

“I think so.” I handed Osman the knife/pipe and stepped up between the two crystals. Tentatively, I touched both of them, one after the other. I considered pretending to be electrocuted, but thought that might be in bad taste, given the situation. I concentrated, pulling the energy out of the one crystal at my left. It worked, and I felt that odd energy flowing into me. It felt prickly, like it didn’t want to be inside me, so I hastily used the energy transfer skill again and got rid of it into the crystal on my right.

Again, we found ourselves past the door.

Three down!

We all looked pleased that had worked, and Osman handed me the light back. We continued.

The next thing we came to was a cave in, totally blocking the tunnel.

“Is this a seal, or just a natural occurrence?” Yasui asked Elizabeth.

She shook her head. “Anthy says she can’t tell. It was too long ago, it’s been here as far back as the rocks themselves can remember.”

“Please, no one suggest blasting it!” Christina pleaded.

“I suppose I could phase myself through it,” I said. “But that didn’t work with the door, so...”

“Right, so maybe phasing would work now!” said Yasui.

“I’m not sure. phasing isn’t really a power anyone but a cambion can learn. Demons can do it, and ESPers can sort of do it, in a way, but no one else can. If it is a seal, it’s going to need a specific power.”

“What power can move tons of rock?” asked Christina. “And don’t say blasting it!”

“Gee,” said Elizabeth. “You suggest not using energy attack one time, and they never let you forget it.”

“There is something,” I said, getting out my book of magic. “Give me a second.” I paged through it, and as I thought, I had been given the passageway spell. “All right, let me read this over again, hopefully it’s not too thick, the size of the passage relates to how good the caster is at Uranus magic.” I pronounced it “Ur-a-nus,” making Elizabeth roll her eyes.

“Uranus,” she said.

“Ur-a-nus,” I corrected.

“Uranus.”

“I’m not saying it.”

She just sighed and shook her head.

To The Tenth

“No one of illegitimate birth may enter the LORD’s assembly; none of his descendants, even to the tenth generation, may enter the LORD’s assembly.” --Deuteronomy 23:2

“Honestly, what is the All-Father’s obsession with the number 10?” -- the author

Once past the cave in, which magically flowed away from us after I cast the spell, we walked on.

“What were you worried about?” asked Yasui. “That seemed to work just fine.”

“I think it was a seal,” I explained. “And it was the act of casting that spell that released it, rather than actually pushing the rocks around with magic.”

“Why did Bennu give you that particular spell?” asked Osman. “He couldn’t have known you would need it down here.”

“He just gave me things I couldn’t do normally. That was one of them. He didn’t know I would usually just phase through stuff like that. I mean there’s always the possibility of a cave in,” I said, glancing at Christina. “I mean if someone was trapped underneath, this spell would free them pretty easily.”

“Oh, you miss one little flying head and bury one of your friends in a cave-in, and they never let you forget it!” she replied.

All of us but Elizabeth laughed.

The next seal was again a door, but this one had something stuck into the center. As we approached we realized we had seen something like it before.

“That’s a soul container, isn’t it?” asked Osman.

“Sure looks like it,” I answered.

Stuck into the door was a perfect sphere, seemingly glass. It was more than halfway stuck inside, needing no device or fastener to hold it in place. At least, that we could see.

Inside, a pale sort of mist swirled, never still. I gave a slight yank and it easily came out of the indentation it was sitting in.

“This one seems straightforward enough,” remarked Osman. “Take the soul out.”

“And do what with it?” I asked. “If I let it go, it’ll just go back into its container.”

“What’s this?” asked Elizabeth, looking into the depression in the door. “Is that a slot?”

“Hey, I wonder if that soul becomes something, like a key!” said Osman excitedly.

“Usually it’s weapons or armor,” I said. “But I can try it. Man, I haven’t used this skill since my training exercises. I hope this soul isn’t too strong willed!”

Putting my hand on the container I concentrated, drawing it out. Passing the now empty container over to Osman, I concentrated on turning this soul into an object. This also seemed to work, and just Osman suspected, it was a key.

“Can I call them, or what?” he asked.

“Apparently,” I said, sliding it inside. As before, the door didn’t actually open but we found ourselves on the other side.

I was still holding the key.

“Great, now what do I do with it?”

“Let it go?” suggested Christina.

“That might put us back behind that door.”

“Can you pocket it? Put it in your pouch?” asked Yasui.

“A soul? I don’t think so. That would count as letting go of it. I guess I’ll just hold onto it.”

“Is that a problem?” asked Elizabeth.

“Not as such, but it does take a bit of concentration to keep around. I’ll be worse off trying whatever the next door wants me to do if I’m holding this.”

“Oh.”

The next door was not far, and there was a circle on the floor in front of it. It seemed like a standard artificer circle, much like I would have

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made, if my line-work was absolutely perfect. This seemed carved into the floor, and radiated a faint glow. It was even the standard size, about a meter across, big enough for someone to stand in.

“It reads soul,” spoke up the angel, pointing to the angelic word written inside.

“I guess we know what to do with this then,” I said, carefully placing the key into the circle. The circle glowed brighter, and the key disappeared. In its place stood a generic looking person, what you might get by averaging a few hundred people together. It was dressed in just a loose sort of robe, and didn’t seem to be surprised to finally be free again. In fact, it didn’t seem much of anything, it just sort of stood there.

“Hello?” Elizabeth said to it. “Can you hear us?”

It didn’t respond.

“Strange,” said the angel. “This soul seems incomplete, in some way. Though you all would have better skills at sensing that sort of thing than I would, honestly.”

It continued staring blankly ahead, even when the angel got right up next to it.

“Guess it’s time to try and get it to move on, then,” I suggested, stepping up. I placed my hand on it, which again it did not react to, and concentrated on sending it on. I used the “standard” passing script, about how great Heaven was, and how happy he would be to be there. I didn’t feel any resistance, and as it disappeared we again found ourselves on the other side of the door.

“We’re tearing these challenges up,” said Elizabeth. “And by ‘we,’ I mean you, Dean.”

“Thank you for clarifying. I don’t know, it seems only a token effort is needed here. You’re right though, they haven’t really gotten that much harder.”

“Which could mean any number of things,” said Christina.

“Like what?” asked Elizabeth.

“That we’re doing it all wrong, and making no progress at all. We just think we are. Or the last one is going to be super tough to make up for it. Or the penalty for screwing one up is really high now. Or-”

“Okay, I get it. Don’t mess up, Dean.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

The next door had images of various animals on it, and we stood for a moment and looked it over.

“Don’t tell me we have to pretend to be animals or something,” Christina said.

“No, it must have to do with powers,” I said with a chuckle. “But what I’m not sure.”

“All these animals, it must have something to do with shamanism,” said Elizabeth. “But I can’t imagine what.”

“Let me try this!” I said, activating my talisman to help me call out my spirit projection, which I did. I had it walk up to and touch the door, but nothing happened. “Guess not.”

“Animal powers. Animal powers,” chanted Osman. “Isn’t there some advanced technique to turn yourself into an animal, or like a younger version of yourself? Something to do with spirit energy, not like a shape-shift thing. Something anyone can learn. Kat says she’s pretty sure there is.”

“There is, we met a...” I looked over at the angel. “I’ll tell you later.” I wasn’t sure if talking about that Power we had met in front of an angel would be the best thing to do. He was sort of hiding out from Heaven now, after all. “The point is, thus far I’ve had to prove I knew a certain power, and just turning into something wouldn’t do it. Spirit shape is something anyone can learn, it’s not associated with any one branch of power.”

“Can you put a spirit on an object?” asked Yasui.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Elizabeth. “Putting a spirit on an- wait a second.” She thought about it a moment. “Actually, it’s never occurred to me to try. I could see that working, actually. Like making a sword invulnerable with the armadillo spirit, or invisible with the raccoon spirit. I always just assumed it had to be on something alive, but I can put a spirit on my spirit projection, and it’s just a cohesive mass of spirit energy.”

“There, there,” I said to my beaver, patting its head. “You’re not *just* a cohesive mass of spirit energy!”

“You know what I mean!”

“You’ll hurt his feelings,” I said, covering his ears. “You apologize right this second.”

“I’m not apologizing to a spirit projection.”

I sighed. “Have it your way. See ya.” It disappeared. “So you want me to try putting a spirit on the door? I only know the one, hummingbird. I guess it could teleport away, but I ask you this:” I lowered my voice, “where would a door want to go?”

“Mostly I think it’s the principal of the thing, right?” asked Osman. “You were just saying it was easier than you expected.”

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"I'll give it a shot." I totally screwed up trying it the first time, and tried again. This went better, but still nothing happened.

"Think we can assist with the dance?" asked Yasui.

"It's worth a shot," replied Elizabeth. "He's still the one doing the actual calling."

With the assistance of the two girls I managed to put the spirit onto the door, and we found ourselves past it.

Whew.

The next door we couldn't get close to, there was a deep pit in front of it.

"Air step?" suggested Christina.

I waved the pipe through the open space where the pit was, that disappeared into darkness. There was no resistance.

"It's no illusion, this part really is gone."

"You don't think it collapsed, do you?" asked Osman.

"It's too regular for that," answered Yasui. "There might have been holes, but this is a gap, which seems to have been put here."

"Kat seems to agree with you. Can you hold that light up?" I did. "Don't just jump across, the pit ends right at the door, there's nothing to grab onto or land on over there."

"True. If that wasn't the point, I might just go falling forever. I suppose a barrier, placed here, would allow us to walk over," I said, "but we already used telekinesis, the ESPer technique, and moving energy around, like a spirit energist. Those are the only two power types that can make barriers."

"Grasshopper's leap?" suggested Yasui. "You could get over it easily with that."

"Same problem with air step. I could get over there, but what then?"

"Already used alchemy, or you could build a bridge across," said Christina.

Osman suddenly bent down and began feeling around the edge of the pit. "Ah hah," he said, coming up with a piece of paper. "Kat thought she felt something around here."

"Some kind of ward?" I asked, taking it.

"You're the expert there," he said, handing it over.

I looked it over. "I have no idea what this does," I announced proudly. "Wait a second," I added. "Or do I?"

"Make up your mind!" said Christina.

"Sorry, it's been three years since I practiced figuring someone else's wards out. Give me a minute." The others patiently waited while I felt it out

and tried to work out what the brushwork was telling me this ward did. "It opens the door," I finally decided.

"It took you all that time to figure that out?"

"At least it wasn't ten minutes," I grumbled. "Anyway, it sort of looks like an unlock ward, but it's not the same. And like someone said, I don't really want to get it wrong."

"I mean what else could it do?"

"Anything! Create a bridge by putting the original material back, if it was a contain ward. Make a new bridge with conjure. Send out a beam to destroy the door, letting us jump through. Let me stick on the walls so I could spider-man my way over there."

"We get the point."

"You did ask." I used actuation to activate the ward, targeting the door, and once again we found ourselves past it.

The next door had a different sort of barrier in front of it. A thick line had been perhaps painted or simply willed on the ground. Looking forward I saw more angelic symbols painted on the floor, which the angel that was with us said were the numbers one through five.

"There must be some trick to it," said Osman. "There's no way just stepping on those numbers is enough."

"That line worries me, too," said Christina. "Like a warning not to go any further."

"You're right," I agreed. "This should be the second to last one, by my count. So something must be up about it. Plus, I don't want to get sent back all the way to the beginning again!"

"Would we even be able to get back here?" asked Yasui. "That soul wouldn't be shoved back into the container, would it?"

"Wow, I hope not," replied Elizabeth. "If that's even what it was, and not some kind of illusion."

"Regardless," I said. "It won't matter if we don't screw this up. This must have to do with powers, somehow. We just need to figure out how."

"What sort of abilities do we have left?" asked Christina. "That would help narrow it down a little, right?"

"I guess. I think we can safely throw out demon artist and cambion powers."

"Mystic?" asked Elizabeth.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure brewing potions or curses is applicable here."

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“Same with breath stealer,” said Yasui.

“Holy chosen?” asked Osman.

“No, they wouldn’t have been around at the time this was made. That power flows from Heaven to worthy individuals. And honestly, progenitors wouldn’t need it.”

“Songstrel?” asked Christina hesitantly.

“I... honestly? I don’t know enough about their powers to say. They’re the one type of power I really, truly ignored. Mainly because I would have had to focus on just that power for like a month. They just sing or play an instrument, and stuff happens. I could learn to sing, but without being one myself, nothing would happen even if I learned songstrel songs.”

“Then I guess all that’s left is true martial artist and seer abilities, right?” asked Yasui.

“I only have one seer skill, I guess I could try it. As far as true martial artist skills, I really only know spirit clone.”

“You could have to stand on all five at once. And didn’t you learn seeking? That’s a seer technique.”

“Hey, you’re right!” I turned back to the line, studying the floor. “I don’t know, you said this was a family technique, Joe Random progenitor wouldn’t know it, would they?”

“No, you’re probably right. I don’t see how attacking these markers on the floor would really help.”

“My one seer technique it is!” I cheerfully said, activating my spirit viewing technique. I saw a mess of energy and closed my eyes again. “Okay, that hurt.”

“What happened?” asked Osman.

“It’s too much. There’s a bunch of energy flowing through there, I need to refine my vision to help me pick out detail.”

“I might be able to give you a spirit that can help,” offered Elizabeth. “You’re still using the final technique, so that should be allowed, right?”

“I hope so,” I said. “Because I’m going to start making a circle on the ground here to help me out.”

Ten tedious minutes later I had a rough circle scratched out, dedicated to this skill. Elizabeth called two spirits to aid me, first the dragonfly to make my skill better, and then the moon spirit to increase whatever it thought might make my chances of picking the lines out better. It worked, and this time I saw there was a sort of lattice of spiritual energy crisscrossing the room.

Gingerly stepping onto the numbers, in order, I avoided breaking any

of the “security beam” energy as I went back and forth across the floor. I heaved a sigh of relief as the final number lit up and the energy went away. I expected to find myself on the other side of the door, but this time the metal slab just disappeared, allowing us all to walk through.

We walked for several minutes.

“Is it getting hotter?” asked Elizabeth. “Anthony seems to think so.”

“Hard to tell. You want to take your weather ward off, see for yourself?” I asked.

“No, we might have to go back outside, thank you very much.”

“Thought so.”

Not long after that we sighted the end of the tunnel, and a glow that showed a large room beyond.

“Finally!” said Christina, “looks like we might get a little breathing room at last.”

“Stay sharp,” I cautioned. “The tenth seal is in that room.”

“Not much in it at present,” Osman said, obviously having taken a look. “But the room itself could finish us off.”

As we stepped in, we saw that he was right. The room was large, very large, at least forty meters across, and ringed with lava, as near as I could tell.

“Want to try analysis?” Elizabeth joked. “Lava is a weather phenomenon, right?”

“I’m not sure about that. Anyone see any exit around here?”

Everyone looked around, trying to see any detail that might be relevant, but no one found anything. It was just a perfectly square room, carved out of rock, with bubbling, red hot, melted stone forming a sort of reverse moat. There was no reason to seal off the walls that I could see, they were featureless. No exits, no hand holds, nothing on the ceiling we could climb or jump up to.

“Nothing,” said Yasui. “Think it got scared by how quickly we passed all the challenges?”

“You don’t suppose something got here before us somehow, and stole the essence away, do you?” asked Osman, worried.

“If it were me, I wouldn’t just have it lying around,” I said. “I would put it on a pedestal, at least. I mean the only thing here is the lava. It wouldn’t have been sitting on the floor, right? There’s no empty pedestal-”

“The lava!” interrupted Christina. “You don’t think that’s the final seal, do you? Trying to move the lava?”

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I made a face. “That wouldn’t be pretty. What sort of technique could make all this lava disappear?”

“Uh, guys?” Yasui said, concerned. We all looked over to see tiny flickers of light appearing around her. She had her hands out and was staring at them. “A little help here?”

“Is it hurting you?” I asked.

“No, but it’s freaking me out. They came out of the floor!”

The “motes” of light gathered around her boots, moved up her body to the helmet, and then zipped away from her, heading towards Elizabeth. She put up a barrier but they passed right through, gathering around her like fireflies. Once they had swirled around her a moment, they leapt for Christina, then Osman and myself. They seemed to really like me, spending a lot of time clustered around my talismans, and finally they relented and sank back into the floor.

“That was freaky,” said Yasui, coming over to take hold of my arm. “What do you think it meant?”

“Was there some kind of puzzle behind those lights? Something we had to do, in a certain amount of time?” asked Osman.

“If so, we failed miserably,” I said wearily. “Some kind of lost power or something? They went through the barrier, I doubt we could have caught them.”

“You know something?” said Christina, getting out her bow, “I think we’re about to find out.”

We all turned to look at what she was aiming at, and a blob was rising out of the stone floor in the exact center of the room. It grew to normal person height, then kept growing, until it was twice as tall as any of us. Features began to emerge, hardening into the shape of armor. But armor unlike anything I had ever seen- It looked like a cross between an ant, a fox, Yasui’s stylized armor and what my armor looked like when someone hit it. One arm sprouted a shield, the other a replica of my sunlight knife, only bigger. Nine tails sprouted from the back of it and started moving as though on their own. The ground started to tremble, and as more and more details became clear, the thing started radiating energy, shoving us back towards the edges of the room where the lava waited to burn us alive.

With growing horror, as color started to blend into the features of the armor, I realized what this monstrosity was. It no longer looked like rock, it looked like metal, and as the eye holes of the armor started to glow, I felt I was looking at my death.

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“It’s us!” I shouted, and activated my acceleration talisman. “It’s all of us, that’s what the warning meant. Destroy it before it-”

It moved.

Fighting Yourself

“If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change.” -- Michael Jackson

The construct blurred forward, obviously as much under the influence of my acceleration talisman as I was. It covered the distance between us in a flash, and that’s what it looked like to me. I couldn’t imagine how it looked to the others, probably like it had just teleported- but no, as I shouted it turned towards me and ran, knife held high. I barely had a chance to dodge out of the way as the blade came down, which to my surprise missed completely. The thing looked at the blade in its hand as if confused.

“Get out of here, we need to come up with a-” I started to shout, but the thing took off, running around me and heading to the door. It looked at the opening, then bent down and placed a finger on the floor.

Nothing seemed to happen, and the construct tilted its head as if listening to something.

Taking advantage of its seeming confusion, I touched the ground with my ring and shot a line of energy across the floor, headed straight towards it. The thing, with seeming innocence, took a step to the left just as the line reached it, causing it to miss. It hadn’t even looked up as it touched the side of the cave this time, and obviously used my ability of transmogrification. To my horror, the cave entrance sealed itself up, and the figure nodded as though satisfied. It turned again, probably wondering which of us should be the next target.

“Come on, try again!” I shouted at it, hoping to buy time for someone to think of something. I knew I was probably the best at dodging, and

thus could hopefully keep the thing's attention for a bit. Plus I was armored, while Yasui wasn't yet.

How fast is this thing?

It took my invitation, this time stabbing with the knife as it got close, again closing the distance between us with no time at all. Again, I easily dodged, and the thing again looked at the knife as though it was betraying him.

I heard Yasui shout to activate her armor, and Osman was edging away from the combat, praying to get something here. The other angel was missing, so I figured he either thought it couldn't help, or was trying to get something powerful here.

The thing swung for me again, and as it did, an arrow appeared out of nowhere which just missed hitting the head of the thing.

Crap, it's got my lucky talisman as well, doesn't it? How are we ever going to hit this thing? It can dodge stuff without even trying because it's so lucky, and if it has the armor of both Yasui and myself- oh crap, the shield will reflect- That's the answer!

"Kat, get me the shield!" I yelled, putting my arm out and dodging another knife stroke by the construct. It sailed into my hand, and I grabbed it, now resolved not to dodge anymore.

Your shield may reflect anything we throw at you, but it can't reflect a reflection. Go ahead and hit me!

As I didn't bother dodging its next stroke, the knife made a pinging noise as the various powers that protected me went into operation. My armor and Osman's shield seemed to struggle to decide which would actually protect me, but in the end, I wasn't hurt in the slightest.

The problem was, I don't think the construct was, either. At my side Anthy appeared, and the armored figure swiveled its head to look at it. It looked over at Elizabeth, then stabbed out with the blade, not towards me, but towards Anthy. I dodged into the way of the blade this time, and again it bounced off my protections.

"Leave them alone!" shouted Yasui, coming towards us. She slammed a boot into the thing, and I silently hoped she knew what she was doing. It seemed she wasn't going for damage, but rather using her new favorite technique of knocking stuff around.

Naturally, the thing went nowhere.

I got an acceleration ward out as the thing stabbed at Anthy again, sticking it on Yasui, who nodded her thanks to me. Anthy got out of the way, and it now had all three of us to choose from. It went for Yasui, who

tried to kick it out of the way, but missed. The knife scraped across the armor, unable to penetrate.

Anthy meanwhile had shot an energy beam at the thing, which was right in front of it. Somehow, impossibly, the thing was stepping out of the way to attack Yasui just as she fired it off, so while the wall got torn up, the construct was again perfectly unharmed.

I couldn't risk a wind attack, everyone was too close to the thing, but Yasui tried again to push the construct back. I didn't think things could actually get worse, but they did. Rather than dodging, suddenly there were two of them, as the construct used Yasui's technique of clone step to make another one of itself. The clone took the hit and remained unmoved.

"Oh, no!" she wailed, "this is going to be impossible!"

"Spirit clone!" I shouted, now knowing what I had to do. Keep them busy until someone thought of something. I managed to get two clones myself, one which I positioned near the clone of the construct, and the other some ways away, to observe and maybe think of something.

Construct clone slashed at me, and I dodged again, figuring trying to damage it was not worth it, better to just keep it busy until it disappeared.

If it disappears, but if it's the same technique Yasui uses, it won't last long. The trouble is it's so fast.

My other self dodged the construct clone attack, and near the center of the room a large angel appeared. "Please help us!" Osman shouted at it. It looked over at the, honestly, quite terrifying construct and clone, both of which were still radiating energy unlike anything it had probably ever seen.

Man, even cutting that thing's energy in half didn't help us very much.

The angel looked back at Osman like he was crazy, but raised a hand, probably to summon his holy blade.

The clone ignored me, instead looking over at the angel. Two arrows, exactly like Christina's energy arrows, appeared in mid-air over the thing's head. Without even gesturing, the arrows sped towards the angel, who tried to dodge. They stuck and exploded, tearing a hole in the floor and throwing up debris.

When they cleared, the angel was gone.

"Come on, I worked so hard getting that here!" Osman shouted.

Wait, why isn't it offing us like that?

A clone of Yasui appeared, followed quickly by a clone of Anthy.

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If I didn't already have "decoys" out, after seeing that, I would have made some too. The reason it had used such dramatic force against the angel and not us still bothered me, however. In any case, there were now twelve various figures in this room, and I still had no idea what we were going to do about this guardian thing.

Yasui though, seemed to have a plan, as she (or her clone? I couldn't even keep track at this point) leapt sidewise, aiming a kick not at the construct, but at the shield it was carrying. The construct wasn't expecting this, I think, and actually moved to block the attack with the shield. This proved to be a mistake, as when Yasui connected with it, the shield shattered into a million pieces.

Ah, that will at least allow close combat strikes to hit it without fear.

Of course, Yasui was the only one who would do that anyway.

I was surprised to find the clone construct still looking at me after the arrow attack on the angel. It wasn't moving, almost as if it was trying to get me to realize something.

"What?" I said to it.

It said nothing back.

I could see, out of the corner of my eye, my clone dodging another attack by the original, too busy to think of anything more elaborate at the moment.

Is this how people that fight me see me?

The construct, having lost the shield, shrugged, and tossed the knife into the lava, where it slowly started sinking. It took a fighting stance, and Yasui backed up a step to see what it was going to do. Her clone stepped in beside her, and the construct sent a flurry of blows at each, but they were able to fight as one, and with the help of my armor and acceleration ward, managed to avoid being wounded, at least. His blows rang on their armor, it seemed much more competent at martial arts than it had been with the knife.

Of course, it's drawing off Yasui's skills now, not mine. I never really trained with the knife.

Christina tried something, but it obviously failed as she yelled in disgust; "That didn't work either. What am I supposed to do against this thing?"

"Keep trying!" said my "thinking" clone.

Anthony and her clone were dancing about, trying to get a good shot at the construct, but held off, probably not wanting to chance hitting Yasui.

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I knew the feeling, I wasn't using my attacks for the same reason. If she accidentally went over the line, or I made the wind attack a little too big...

As the construct and Yasui team traded blows again, the clone in front of me generated two more arrows.

"Incoming!" I shouted as he launched them against an Anthy, though a clone or the original, I couldn't say. It tried to dodge, but got hit and engulfed in the explosion.

I looked at Elizabeth in horror, but oddly she seemed fine, only wincing slightly and clutching her chest.

"Don't worry, I'm tough," she said, "and you made me that regeneration talisman, remember? I'm already healed."

I did, now that she mentions it.

Thankfully, the construct clone disappeared.

The other continued trying to pummel Yasui, though as I watched it seemed that it was favoring one of them over the other.

Which of you is the clone? I used sending to ask them, not wanting to risk the construct finding out if he was attacking the wrong one. The one it wasn't attacking made a gesture I thought meant that it was the other, striking it in the leg as she did so.

I thought so.

My "thinking" clone seemed to come to the same conclusion. He turned to Osman.

"It's Punch Out!" he said. "It's not trying to kill us, just like the other seals. It wants us to figure this out!"

"So what do we do?"

"On three, Kat, knock it into the lava. Elizabeth, copycat it!"

"Right," she replied.

I used sending again, targeting Yasui. *On three, knock it straight back into the lava. We'll help!*

They nodded, and I shouted "One!"

The two Yasui switched from attacking to defense, looking for an opening.

"Two!"

Everyone tensed.

"Three!"

Both Yasui jumped in the air, striking out with both feet. The construct tried to dodge, but was also caught in Kat's telekinetic attack, augmented by Elizabeth. (What I didn't realize was that Anthy, being

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basically Elizabeth's soul made solid, also had the ability to duplicate powers she saw performed, and was also helping out) I added my pathetic ability with telekinesis, as did my clones, helping for what that was worth.

With all that, plus four separate knockback strikes performed by Yasui as she threw herself forward, feet first, the construct went flying backwards, into the lava.

Everyone cheered as it struggled to get free.

"No, no, it'll get out!" I called. "Kat, freeze the lava with cryokinesis!"

Osman ran over to the edge and so did Elizabeth and her clones, so they could help again. The lava started to harden, swiftly becoming rock that trapped the construct. Katrina couldn't maintain the power for long, and Osman collapsed to the ground, his energy gone.

"The edges will start melting again," I said, noticing the hardened rock had not gone all the way around the edges of the room. "We need to find the essence and get out of here!"

In answer, the two Anthys looked up, got next to each other, and sent a massive energy blast upwards, blowing a hole in the ceiling. Frigid air and sunlight poured in, making me think the rest of the lava in this room would probably be hardening pretty soon.

Whatever power governed this place must have believed the same, as the armor started turning back into rock and melting away. The tiny motes of light escaped from it, shimmering and disappearing into the air.

"Everyone all right?" I asked, looking around. Yasui ran over to check on Osman.

"I'm just tired," he told her.

"Anthy will be fine," said Elizabeth. "Never actually had occasion to test that little ability. I'm glad it worked."

"What ability?"

"Anthy's health is tied to her energy level," she explained. "Plus, I take less damage than I normally would when she gets hit. Looks like that came in handy."

"What did you mean, 'it's punch out,' before?" asked Osman, sprawled out on the floor.

"It's a boxing game. Sort of. It's a puzzle game disguised as a boxing game. You don't beat your opponent by simply pummeling them, you look for clues in their facial expressions and such to avoid their attacks."

"You thought something similar was happening here?" asked Christina. "And what was that, incidentally?"

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“It was us. All of us, all our powers and skills, probably added together in some way. You noticed how fast it was?”

“I noticed,” she grumbled.

“That was because of my talisman, I’m sure of it. That energy attack was yours, and it knew Yasui’s style of martial arts.”

“The All-Father wanted to see what we would do, when confronted with something like that. You’ll notice it didn’t try very hard to kill us.”

“No, just the clones, and that angel that Osman petitioned,” said Yasui.

“Exactly. That showed that it could have killed us just as easily, but it was totally holding back. I mean it could have filled this room with a double wind attack, or crisscrossed the place with electricity lines.” I indicated my two talismans. “Did you feel the energy coming off it? I don’t know how much it could have spent at once, but it was using spirit grades, not Grade Four, thank goodness. That might have killed us right off!”

“Probably,” remarked Christina.

“Well, knocking it into the lava was good thinking,” said Elizabeth. “But where’s the essence?”

As if asking triggered something, the motes of light reappeared, and swirled around the center of the room. Slowly a shape took form, a stone pedestal with a perfect white cube a couple of centimeters across sitting on top of it.

“Ah, so it was a cube!” I remarked. “I thought we-”

It changed into a pyramid.

“Oh.”

“Another protection?” asked Osman. “Making it hard for anyone to get a fix on it?”

“Must be.”

“So pick it up!” said Christina, “and let’s get out of this hole.”

I shook my head. “Not yet. We’ve been through a lot today, and I want some food and a bit of rest. We can grab energy, true, but once we take up the essence, I think chaos will know. We’ll be in for a fight, and I mean to have it on the island, rather than here. It needs to be cleared out anyway, and what better way to do it?”

“Plus we’ll need some sort of plan,” said Elizabeth, “to take the island back. We can’t just storm in there.”

“Exactly. We stay here, work something out, and get some sleep. When we feel up to it I’ll take the essence in hand, see what I can do with it, and we’ll force a confrontation with chaos.”

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“I just hope that’s enough,” said Osman. “He’s had a lot more time than you to figure out what he can do.”

“All I need to do is make sure to counter his power of making things happen. The rest I leave to you guys.”

“It’s true,” remarked Yasui. “We have each other, he’s alone. That’s how we were able to keep up with that armor thing, being outnumbered is no fun in a fight.”

“It isn’t, you know, talking to you, is it?” asked Christina, looking at the essence, which had changed into a sphere.

I shook my head. “Not a word. It might not even know we’re here. It doesn’t exactly have eyes.”

“True. I hope we’re not just staying here for the night.” She looked around. “Unless you can repair the ceiling somehow, I’m not sure I’m comfortable sleeping with a big hole over my head.”

“I’ll make another house, I have several more of them pre-made. Hopefully, if I stick it right here, the essence will be inside, ready to grab if chaos does show up. Which I doubt, he wouldn’t want to approach his opposite, even just sitting here like this.”

“You’re the boss.”

So I did just that, and we set up a watch so that at least someone was up, should chaos appear. We spent an uneventful several hours, and soon everyone was up and ready to take the next step in getting our school back.

“Ready?” I asked, with everyone clustered around the essence. They nodded, and I reached out my hand to touch it.

Achieving Order

“Do you want fries with that order?”

“Wait a second,” I said to the others, pulling my hand back. “What always happens in movies at a time like this?”

“The place holding the object gets destroyed?” asked Elizabeth.

“Exactly,” I said, pointing to her. “But even if that doesn’t happen here, chaos may know the essence has been disturbed. We need to take immediate action once it’s in hand.”

“How do you know you’ll even know how to use it?” asked Osman.

I stared down at the pure white form, changing regularly from one perfectly shaped example of a geometric solid to another. “I don’t. But will chaos know that?”

“You’re going to bluff him?” asked Christina. “That’s a little crazy, even for you.”

“I admit that’s a last resort. I hope some knowledge of how to use the thing will be given to me when I pick it up. Or that it just has an on/off switch that I can throw. Remember, chaos wasn’t actively doing anything, he was just letting his power flow out into the world.”

“You’ve got me there.”

“Plus, even if I get nothing from this, you all know what you have to do. Wound the guy carrying chaos around with some sort of random attack that we know is sure to hit him, even if it doesn’t seem like it will. I pick this up and we go the island, agreed?” Everyone nodded. “He shows up, fine- we take him out if we can. If we can’t, you can at least drive him away again, giving me time to figure out this essence. That’s reasonable, right?”

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“What about our plan for the island?” asked Yasui. “There’s just six of us. Okay, we can call up more forces with clones, angels and spirit projections, but we still can’t beat an entire army.”

“Can’t we?” I asked. “I mean, isn’t that basically what DeVille was driving at with his ‘stop making talismans for your friends, Dean’ speeches? That we would literally become too powerful to stop?”

“The Foundation must have sent their best people though,” she protested. “Time and time again!”

“And chaos drove them back by making things go haywire for them. This time we’ll have the advantage, one way or the other.” I pointed to the essence.

“We can take them!” said Christina confidently. “Let’s do this!”

“It’s now an island full of demons!” Yasui went on. “Elizabeth, Osman, back me up here!”

Osman considered. “We would have to have a pretty good plan before we started our assault. I suppose we’ll have surprise on our side, to start with.”

“See, that’s the spirit!” I said. “But you’re right, Yasui, we should come up with a plan before we leave.”

“Thank you. I guess we all have our specialities. Maybe that’s why we were brought together by that dreamer? If we do what we’re good at, maybe we have a chance.”

“Let’s do this...” I went over to the table and got out some paper and a marker. I drew a quick cross shaped blob on the paper and then a tiny rectangle labeled “battleship” over by the dock. “Of course, it could have moved by now,” I said. “But we’ll plan for it to be there.”

“That thing starts pounding us from afar, and we’re done for,” said Osman.

“Okay, priority one, take that ship out. How do we do it?” I asked.

The others looked around. “I suppose we sink it somehow,” said Elizabeth. “But sinking a battleship of that size? That won’t be easy.”

“I wonder,” I said, thinking hard and looking around the table at my friends. “We do have a lot of firepower here, actually.”

“You’re not suggesting we actually assault a battleship?” asked Yasui.

“Done properly, maybe. Keep in mind, we don’t have to do it directly.”

“You mean strike from the astral or something?” asked Christina.

“Yeah, exactly! We teleport from here to, say, the beach outside Porta. Once there I open a gateway to the Astral and we step through. I have plenty of wards made for that. We each take one, I can put the Flight spell on us and we head over to the ship. Demons won’t be wandering around there, so we can easily get inside. Once there, we use the same sort

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of ward to open a small hole, big enough for an attack to get through. We each attack in our own way through the hole, not whoever is there, but the walls of the ship. Sure, the outside may be armored, but blowing it out is a lot easier.”

“I don’t have an attack like that,” said Yasui, looking disappointed.

“I can give you one,” said Elizabeth, “before we go.”

“Ah, a spirit!”

“Exactly.”

“While the ship is sinking we start our attack on the other side of the island, having flown there,” said Christina.

“That’s right. So, you all know what you can do, how do we drive these demons back?”

“Demons using modern assault weapons, might I remind you,” said Yasui.

“I can’t take a bullet,” said Osman. “But if I still had the ability to fly, I could watch the battlefield from above. Kat could then keep you all coordinated with sending.”

“Great idea,” I encouraged. “And you can fight off any flying demons with the wind attack talisman, or Kat stopping time for you.”

“Can’t do that a lot, but in a pinch, yeah.”

“I could leave an Anthy with you, or send one if it got too hot up there for you.”

“Thanks.”

“That would really help,” said Yasui thoughtfully. “If some demons were sneaking up behind us, or trying to cut us off, you would know. We would have a great advantage.”

“Plus, it would turn the whole thing into a real time strategy game for you, Osman.”

He paled. “I’m not that great at Starcraft, you know?”

“You’ve never had units as powerful as us!”

“There is that.”

“Speaking of that, how are we avoiding the bullets and other powers they’re going to be throwing at us?” asked Yasui.

“The way I see it,” I said, drawing some arrows on the map, “we have our air units, that’s the Anthy brigade, sweeping beams across the landscape and basically knocking any demons flat.”

“Your energy blasts are rather big,” said Christina, pointing up.

“I can get up to eight meters across,” she said proudly. “In the air Anthy can fire four at a time, so that’s thirty two meters across.”

“So with three clones, that’s ninety-six meters. But how many can you fire off?”

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“Ho Ho Ho!” she said, raising the pitch of her voice. “If I get a little help from my buddy, my pal Christina...”

“You want my spirit grades again.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, please! Plus, I can really cut loose, as this is the real thing at last.”

“Real thing? Cut loose?” Christina paled. “As if your projection’s energy level wasn’t insane enough? There’s more?”

“Sure, that isn’t enough, not by a long shot. I’ll be fused with Anthy- who is going to be fused with Dizabeth. Not to brag, but ‘unstoppable’ is a good word for what I would be at that point.”

She shook her head. “Still, even that’s not enough to cleanse the island, it’s like ten kilometers across! Even you would run out of energy eventually. That’s why Dean wanted the people that tried to take the island back to use guns.”

Yasui and I shared a look.

“Yes,” I said seriously. “Yes, it is. Ten kilometers across, that is. Funny that, isn’t it?”

“Huh?” The others looked at us, confused.

“Private joke,” said Yasui. “Anyway, you aren’t going to be necessarily destroying demons left and right. We want them gone from the island, and making them run away accomplishes that.”

“Kat wants to say something,” said Osman. “Just a second. Okay. She says to remember that demons are used to fighting in our world while they are summoned. These demons are not summoned, meaning if they die, they die for good. How many are going to stick around and risk that when enormous energy beams are lancing out of the sky towards them? Plus, you can get really, really big if you’re fused to Dizabeth, right? Just like she could?”

“Yes I can,” admitted Elizabeth. “Another reason I would be very hard to take down. And really, there’s ley lines aplenty around there. I could have a clone attached to one in an out of the way place, just replenishing my energy while the others attack. I can, after all, give energy to my projection. I’ve never tried it, but as I would technically *be* my projection at that point, couldn’t my clone give the other clones energy?”

“That’s a thought,” said Christina. “Your energy gets split up between the clones, right?” Yasui, Elizabeth, and myself all nodded. “But you get any unused energy back if the clone goes away, right?” Again, we nodded. “If your way didn’t work, I just thought of another. Why not have a clone frantically drawing energy, then disappear when they can’t hold any more? You would get filled back up, then could easily make another clone, then repeat.”

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We stared at her in wonder.

“That would actually work!” I said.

“Not for me,” grumped Yasui. “Some of us can’t just pull energy out of the sky.”

“So you know what talisman to buy when I open my shop, after graduation,” I joked. “Something that lets you draw energy into yourself like a spirit energist.”

“I guess.”

“Anyway,” said Christina. “I guess I’m hanging back and sniping these suckers out of nowhere?”

I nodded. “Super demoralizing tactic number two. Or is the huge bug/fox/girl number one, her energy attacks number two, and you’re number three? Anyway, Kat can probably tell you where they’re about to panic, and you can send a few arrows their way, which will no doubt push them over the edge!”

“You’ll be keeping chaos away from us,” said Yasui, looking at me. “Where does that leave the one person without long range attacks?”

“You’ll be guarding me,” I said. “If chaos shows up, it’ll probably be with more of those demons he found at that prison, or in his travels in the Demon World. In other words, tough opponents. I can handle myself, but if I have to actively do something to lock down chaos, that’s what I’ll be doing. I’ll be relying on you to protect me.”

“Oh,” she said softly, looking a little unsure how to take this.

“But if you wanted to send a clone or two in to crack some heads, that’s fine with me. Just keep the original you at my back, where you belong.”

She colored. “Kay.”

Osman snapped his fingers. “The ley lines!”

“What about them?” asked Elizabeth.

“Usually I have Dean’s circle he made for me, so I don’t bother. Little hard to hold a circle in mid-air though. But if I was at the center of the island, I could hook into all twelve of them.”

“So?”

“Don’t you see? That increases the amount of angels I can bring into this world! Right now I can support two virtues and maybe some other minor angel. But hooked into all twelve lines, I could get a total of nine of them. Think about how that amount of magical power would help us!”

“Now that has some possibilities,” I admitted. “And ley lines exist across dimensions, so you could be snug in the astral and send them through.”

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“But then I couldn’t direct the battle,” he said, torn.

“Why not? We’ve used wards to make clones of people before, remember? I’ll whip up a cache ward for you, if you don’t mind, Yasui.”

“What about me?” asked Christina. “I mean, if you don’t mind?”

Yasui shook her head. “I don’t mind. I suppose you can be stationary, just find a line and stick there while you shoot.”

“That’s the plan!”

“I guess we are sort of a small army by ourselves, aren’t we?” asked Osman.

“Sure. Let’s see, two of you, three of Yasui, two of Christina, I don’t think I should clone that,” I pointed to the essence and shuddered. “Who knows *what* would happen. Anyway, three of Elizabeth, then add nine freaking virtues, and who knows what they can do with magic? That’s...” I paused, adding the numbers up I had been writing down on the map. “Nineteen of us. Nineteen big and scary armored things, invisible arrow shooters, huge demon killing machines from the sky- how can we lose?”

“Tanks?” suggested Osman.

“Oh yeah, they did steal everything in that battle zone, didn’t they? I guess that includes tanks and maybe planes. The only thing they’ll really see to shoot at is Elizabeth, and she’s invulnerable if she’s fused to Anthy. I highly doubt they modified their tank shells to hurt invulnerable things.”

“I guess I better hope that’s the case,” said Elizabeth. “Though being bigger than a giant would mean I could probably take a tank shell, and just let my regeneration shine though.”

“Couldn’t you clone yourself, then pick it up?” Yasui asked me.

“I really think I should stay in one piece while I’m connected to it.”

“Yeah, that’s probably best. I guess we have our plan, then?”

“Anything else?” asked Christina, looking around the table.

“While you make those wards, I’ll call the spirit for Yasui. Might call some help for myself, now that I think about it.”

“We’re in a good position, being able to plan and do various things before a fight,” I said. “Usually we just have to wing it, because something comes up suddenly. Oh, let me get acceleration wards on everybody, as well. That will double our effectiveness right there!”

So we prepared. Yasui got the spirit of the deer and of thunder, for protection and attack. Apparently the deer spirit could help her generate a constant field of energy that kept harmful things out, like a barrier a spirit energist could make. This one was superior in that the people inside could

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shoot out of it. She gave herself dragonfly, figuring the boost to speed and doing supernatural things better would be helpful in the coming fight.

I made wards with Yasui's help and put them on Osman and Christina, along with acceleration wards for everyone. I make sure to put extra energy into activating those, having three wards on could make them fizzle, so I wanted to make sure they stayed strong for what we were about to do. I also put the flight spell on those that needed it, which was everyone but Elizabeth. I gave everyone a ward with the dimension gate spell on it, so they could open their own holes to sink the battleship.

Christina went outside with Elizabeth and Anthy, then looked back in the window at me. The plan was for me to grab the essence, have a short talk or at least see what would happen, then they would get ready. Once Elizabeth went into her "battle form" as she called it, she would only have a few minutes of time before she couldn't hold it anymore.

"You mean ten minutes, don't you?" asked Yasui.

"That's right, how did you know?"

She just rolled her eyes and shooed Elizabeth out.

Yasui and her clones were already armored and ready, and she seemed nervous, fiddling with her armor as though it could be straightened. She caught me looking at her.

"Usually I don't have time to feel nervous," she explained. "Stuff just happens, and we deal with it. But this time... I don't know, it could be bigger than we can handle."

"Maybe, but keep in mind we'll have order on our side, this time. If chaos could mess up people trying to retake the island, it makes sense order will help us do that very thing. Plus, the originals can hang back, let the clones take any risks. You can always make more clones if they get squashed, but we can't make another you."

"I guess you're right."

"It'll be fine, you'll see. Everyone ready?"

Everyone nodded, and outside I saw Elizabeth give a thumbs up.

"Then let's rock and roll."

I picked up the essence.

Dean? The voice was faint now, even holding the essence, I could barely make out what it was saying.

I'm here. What do we have to do to make things right again?

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So weak, it replied. Chaos is strong in the world. It may be too late.

No!

I'm sorry. Don't want to take you over, that would change you.

I don't think I want to be taken over either. Unless we could separate again?

No, permanent. Too late, chaos has walked the world, gathering strength. He will flee from me until I am powerless against him.

So you still have some strength?

A little. I can do no more than one thing at a time. You would have to direct my power.

You mean instead of blanketing an area, like chaos does? Bringing order to a city, for instance?

Exactly. If we could get him near, I could at least negate anything he tried to do to you.

Right now I'll take anything I can get. My friends and I are going to fight, drive the demons back from where they've come into our world. That should restore some order, right? Even if we have to build up your strength little by little, we can keep chaos on the run.

No, worst you could do! He would thrive on the chase, too chaotic. No, he must be separated from the host, and one of you must do it.

Very well. I'll tell them, whoever gets a shot takes it. I just hope he comes to defend the island, it may be our only chance to trap him.

No doubt he will come. We do attract, after all.

So how do I use you? What do you do?

I am order. It seemed surprised I even had to ask. Chaos chooses to make things different, and then modifies reality to claim the most unpredictable result. I strive to keep things the same, and modify reality to claim the most predictable result.

So when you two are in balance, things don't swing too widely one way or the other.

Correct. But now chaos has added a person to the equation, and traveled the Earth making trouble. Chaos breeds chaos, my counterpart need only spark the fire and little else for events to spiral out of control.

So getting him away from that guy he's taken over and putting you back will naturally restore the balance, if slowly. As those 'fires' as you call them are naturally put out by the world.

We must both be placed back in our original positions, yes.

I'll do my best. What do I need to do, exactly, to use your power?

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Simply will it, and I will respond. I will be able to grant you a clarity of vision, for a time. You will be able to see chaos' touch upon the world, allowing you to negate it.

All right. Is there anything else I should know?

Nothing more that I can tell you at this time.

I nodded to Christina and Elizabeth outside, and they got ready. Power flooded out from both of them, making the walls of the house tremble as the force of their energy vibrated them. Elizabeth started growing, she was going to get as big as she could before going through the portal, then make clones of herself. I used actuation to put the teleport point out on the ice, as I doubted the ward would last too long in the ice and snow that was out there. We streamed through and found ourselves on the island.

Home at last!

Spinach Eaters

If teamwork wins battles, and both teams use it, which team wins? The ones with the shinier toys!

I had the ward with the dimension gate spell ready, knowing we might only have seconds after arriving, and we plunged through that as well. I went last, tearing the paper once we were all through and closing the gate.

We looked around as Elizabeth made some clones of herself to get ready. The beach was mostly unchanged, there wasn't really anything out here to despoil, after all. We could see the hulk of the battleship out on the water, and there were a few demonic guards patrolling the area. The nearest two, some Oni, ran over, looking in vain for where we had gone.

I waved to them. "Suckers!"

"Come on," said Elizabeth, "time is wasting."

We lifted off the ground, using my flight spell, and made a beeline for the ship. Coming in low, we sped toward the hull, with the intention of plunging straight through and getting into position to open more gateways. As we got near, however, both Osmons started shouting and waving their arms to try and get us to stop.

"What?" I asked, concerned. I looked around, but it didn't look like we were in any danger.

"Kat says there's something odd going on. Don't go through full speed!"

"Don't tell me..." I muttered, flying close and putting a hand up to the hull. "She was right. Darn it all!"

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“What?” asked Elizabeth.

“It’s been sealed off, like that wall. What’s that ward called? Solidify? We can’t get through this way.”

“So what do we do?” asked Yasui.

“I wonder if solidify also makes the walls vulnerable to attack?” I mused. I shook my head. “Have to see about that later. For now we can head up top, make our way through the normal way. If the whole darn ship has been warded, anyway. Otherwise we might be able to go through the deck.”

“Let’s go,” said Christina, taking the lead.

We flew up the sides of the ship, and started looking for an open door or something we could use to get inside.

“Watch out!” yelled Osman, shoving Yasui out of the way as a beam of energy shot past us.

“Oh no,” his clone said, looking ahead. “They’re actually here. I thought they looked a little more solid than everything else.”

“Who is?” I asked.

“A bunch of weird looking people, and they’re standing in front of the only open door.”

“Shoot- demons really are thinking ahead now, aren’t they? Well, let’s go beat the crap out of them.”

“That might be tough,” said Osman.

“What? We took out the last things that attacked us easily enough.”

“You’ll see. I think they have a hostage.”

“Oh.”

We flew over to the group, which we all looked down at. Osman was right, it was a pretty odd looking bunch. There were six... individuals all together, three woman and three men. The woman, oddly, looked identical, and were dressed in black leathers that somehow screamed “witch.” They weren’t all that attractive, with long, unkempt hair and darting eyes. It was a little creepy to watch them, actually, as they seemed to move simultaneously.

“Is everyone stealing my technique now?” Yasui asked no one in particular.

The men were more varied. The most prominent was the guy towering over the others, who looked sort of human but the more I looked at him, the less human he appeared. His face seemed vaguely wrong, but I

didn't really want to get closer for a better inspection. He had a spear in one hand, and was wearing some kind of armor on his upper body. He had black, leather pants on, and was drumming his fingers on his spear impatiently.

Some sort of cambion?

The other man was more normal in height, but not girth. Great black wings sprouted from his back, not angel wings though, bat's wings. He stood nonchalantly with the thumb of one hand hooked into his pockets, as if content to wait for us to come to him. You could hardly see his hand, given how overweight he was, and I wondered if even large wings could get him off the ground. His other hand held a chain which was connected to a ring that surrounded the neck of the third man, the hostage or prisoner they had taken. There was an off feeling I got when I looked at him, but whether that was due to the odd energy aura that surrounded him or something else, I couldn't say. He was dressed the most "casually" of the bunch, in a huge t-shirt and jeans that would have made me three outfits.

The last man, who was sitting dejectedly in a heap in the middle of the group, was gaunt and dirty. Rags, which had once probably been clothes, hung on his thin frame, and his uncut hair hung over his eyes.

"Oh, we have to save him!" said Elizabeth breathlessly, magnified by three as her clones said the same thing. "He's gorgeous!"

I suppose if you cleaned him up he might be good looking?

Oddly out of place, a lyre was set nearby, just out of reach of the man. The metal collar around his neck had glowing symbols on it, with the chain hooked into a link that had been welded onto the front. He was looking down, and seemed to be mumbling to himself.

"Come down and play!" shouted the huge guy, shaking his spear at us. "We've been bored to tears down here. It's been ages since the last attack, I was beginning to despair anyone else would come!"

"Looks like our plans have changed," I said. "We'll only get in each others way if we all take these guys on. Elizabeth clones, it's the guns we have to worry about, do you think you could slag them from above? We wouldn't have to actually sink the ship, just take them out of action."

She nodded. "I don't see why not."

"Great. After that, start clearing the village out. We'll join you when we're done here. Osman clone, I'll give you the best ignore ward I can with energy. Get to those ley lines and start your petitioning."

FINDING THE BALANCE

“Got it.”

“Real Osman, this will be a good warm up for you. Hang back and have Kat direct us.”

“Of course.”

“That gives us one more person than they have, which I think is about right. Good luck.”

“You too!”

I warded the Osman clone, and he flew away with the Elizabeth clones, leaving three Yasui to get close, two Christina to snipe, Osman and Kat for support and of course myself if things really got out of hand. I wanted to hang back though, save my strength for when chaos showed up. We descended.

The one holding the chain looked up at the ones that were leaving. “I think we’re being underestimated, crew,” he said with a grin. “Are you sure you don’t want to-”

Christina didn’t hesitate, she drew an arrow and fired before the man finished his sentence. The arrow smashed directly into his face, it couldn’t have been a more perfect shot, she got him right through the right eye.

It disappeared, leaving him totally unharmed.

“You know, there’s a thing called manners,” he said. “I can’t say I’m not eager myself, if you want to skip the pleasantries. Ladies?”

The three women nodded, and started casting spells, each one creating a different circle around the group. That was a lot of overlapping magical energy, and when it cleared, they looked like we did- accelerated.

Oh, great. But what did the other two spells do? I did a double take. It now looked like there were nine women standing there, all jammed into a small area. *Okay, magic users first then?*

I can’t tell who is real and who isn’t, Kat sent us. *Sorry.*

I did notice, however, that the prisoner was being shown a small vial of something, and he was uselessly trying to grab it from the man. The guy was easily pushing his head back with one arm, and looked pleased to be tormenting the guy, holding the vial out of reach. He released the chain he was holding, and it wound around the other guy’s body. He then tucked the vial away and touched the collar, saying something. The glow vanished, and the prisoner reluctantly got up and grabbed his lyre. His hands touched the strings.

FINDING THE BALANCE

“All ready then?” asked the big guy. “Because here we come.”

Figuring I might as well take out the magic users first, I bent down to touch my ring to the floor and just electrocute all of them at once. They barked a word and suddenly I couldn't see anymore, which was rather inconvenient. I pulled out my sunlight knife, having recently come to the conclusion I didn't actually need to open my pouch to activate it. (Yes, this had been incredibly stupid of me the last four years) The pouch was the object that allowed access to the dimension, not “opening the pouch” or “putting something in the pouch.” All I needed to do was touch it and speak the name of the thing I wanted out, and it was at hand. (And yes, my friends teased me about this for some time after I figured it out)

It seemed I'd been blinded. The knife, which I could feel in my hand, didn't seem to be lighting up my life as it usually did.

Well that's just great!

You're inside some kind of sphere of darkness, Kat sent to me. Move!

Oh.

I threw myself to the side, colliding with Yasui, who steadied me.

“How did you know?” she asked.

Know what?

The guy with wings was looking rather surprised, and I wondered if he had just done something I had narrowly escaped from. The darkness vanished.

Yasui, one of them, pushed off the ground and leapt towards the big guy, no doubt trying to drive him into the ground. He, for a wonder, didn't even try dodging, no doubt trusting to whatever magic the witches had cast on him. This proved to be a mistake, as he was driven down into the deck in surprise. Yasui landed next to him.

The guy with wings threw a baseball sized energy ball at us, which exploded when it got nearby, forcing us to dodge out of the way or be singed with fire. We did, and he almost seemed pleased to be facing some opponents who didn't die immediately.

Wish I could return the sentiment.

Yasui drove her foot into the big guy she was standing next to, slamming him into the ground at close range. Or at least trying, as he rolled out of the way, just missing being struck.

Now I finally appreciate what our opponents must feel like. That spell has got to go!

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I again went to bend down to touch my ring to the deck, not wanting to risk hitting the guy with the lyre, but again the witches noticed and cast a spell at me. Hot lights seemed to stab their way into my eyes, staggering and blinding me.

Oh, that is it! I don't even care if I hit that guy. Just as soon as I can see again, they're getting wind to the face.

Though my watering eyes I could see a Yasui speeding towards them, and one of the doubles got taken out by Christina.

Another Christina fired, but the arrow went speeding past them, totally missing the whole group.

Yasui tried pounding the big guy, who kept rolling and avoided the blow once again.

"Stay still," she snarled at him.

At this point, several things happened at once- The witches cast something at Yasui, forcing her to stop running as she pinwheeled her arms as though on ice. She didn't fall, but she crouched, trying to stay upright. Christina managed to destroy another witch image, making her "tisk" as she was obviously hoping to get a real one this time.

Elizabeth and the winged guy both shot energy blasts at the opposite group, knocking them both off course, while the second Yasui clone started running at the witches.

It was at that instant the man in the middle of all this started playing his lyre. To say his skill was angelic would be to belittle angels, because even through the dazzling of my senses I could tell his skill was absolutely perfect.

Is that lyre some kind of talisman? I thought it must be, as the tones that issued forth from his fingers were as pure as clean mountain air. As crisp as a perfect fall day. As seductive as the most perfect sunset. I braced myself, but nothing seemed to happen.

The battle continued.

His music is protective in nature, Kat sent to me. But I can't tell exactly how. He'll start singing in a second.

So at least we didn't have to worry about an attack from that quarter.

The big guy, having grown tired of rolling around the deck trying to get away from Yasui struck out with his spear, trying to trip her up. It banged into her armor, possibly even beneath her notice, as she slammed him into the ground with knockback strike.

Christina took out another witch image, leaving six still standing there.

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The guy with the wings now decided to help his companion out, sending an energy blast at the Yasui who was trying to hit the big guy. She dodged out of the way, giving the big guy a breather and a chance to get on his feet again.

Elizabeth shot earth energy at the group of witches, but it seemed she had been anticipated. The guy, his other hand raised, sucked in her energy blast like he had done with Christina's arrow. He smiled at her.

The witches saw the two Yasui clones closing in, and again simultaneously cast something.

How are they doing that? Just practice?

Both clones were thrown backwards.

At the same instant as Christina fired her next arrow the man, who was clearly a songstrel, began singing. It was difficult to find things to compare his voice to, except to say that it was even better than his harp playing, which I wouldn't have said was possible. The arrow left the portal as normal, but immediately veered off into space, where it disappeared.

The witches looked a bit relieved.

Arrows and energy blasts entering that space, from all three clones and Elizabeth, now harmlessly bent around the group. The two Christinas looked down at their bows in disgust, and looked over at me to see if I had any ideas.

"Hey, are you all right?" one of them asked me.

"Hit with magic, think of something, this isn't working!"

"Yeah, I see that. I've got an idea, keep them right there!"

Do what? I can't even see straight yet. What did they hit me with, anyway?

Christina moved off, calling to her duplicate to help her, and ran off. One of them called "Cover me," to someone, and they went behind me, not that I could see them very well at the moment in any case.

Yasui tried knocking the spear out of the big guy's hand as he got up, but missed. The spear flew out of the guy's hand anyway, surprising them both as it hovered in midair.

A Yasui clone used spirit step, not letting the witches react and getting right up to them. She kicked one of them, but they all said a word and there was a flash, which shielded the one she was going for.

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The other one tried the same thing, but was also blocked.

Yasui tried once again to knock the big guy back, this time stepping to the left to try and shove him into the guy with bat wings. He dodged out of the way, probably realizing that's what she intended.

My vision finally cleared, but now there was a new problem- there were two Yasui over engaging the witches so using my wind attack was out of the question. For that matter, so was my electric line, I didn't want them stepping on it by accident. I couldn't tell if they were both clones or not, so I couldn't risk it.

I saw another witch image be destroyed, as Yasui kicked right through the protection spell they tried. *Hah, take that!* There were now only two fake ones left! Looking to see where Christina had gone, I saw a portal back to the lower plane open, guarded by Elizabeth. *Okay, what can I best do to help?* Still trying to decide, I touched my pouch and willed the knife back inside. *No sense having it knocked out of my hand.*

The big guy was trying to get his spear back, which was floating out of his way, but totally missed it.

I thought I heard my name through the portal, so I turned to try and get a better view, which caused the bolt of fire the guy with bat wings had shot at me to miss. He glared at me in disbelief.

We were basically stalemated. The witches acted in unison to help guard the others, who had yet to be hurt in the slightest. There was some more back and forth, when suddenly another portal opened and Christina stuck her head through. It was situated just behind the songstrel, and she dropped her bow over the guy's head and started yanking him through. Her clone (or the other way around) grabbed him around the middle and also started helping, but it didn't seem like he was really struggling to get away.

Combat stopped for a second as the man was yanked through the hole in space, which closed immediately afterwards.

Everyone on our side smiled.

"Surrender!" cried Yasui, suddenly standing next to me. "You don't have a hostage anymore!"

"Do your worst!" cried the big one. "You still have no chance to win."

"You asked for it," she said. "I'm the original."

They looked at her oddly, but I realized what she was saying. Grinning, I said "wind," hearing Osman do the same behind me. Elizabeth shot

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earth energy at them from both hands, while Yasui added electricity from hers.

When the blast cleared, only the winged guy was down, the taller guy and the witches were fine. The big guy looked a little worried, his armor was all torn up, but he still smirked at us.

“Is that all? You’re not too shabby,” he said to Yasui. “What do you look like under all that armor, huh? I’ll spare your friends if you agree to be my love slave.”

“Ew.”

The witches must have done something with magic, they didn’t seem wounded in the least. Naturally the two Yasui clones were just fine, my stuff was built to last, though their armor was a bit scuffed. Still, only taking out one of them with all that was a bad sign.

He seemed to have forgotten about the spear, which was still floating around, and had been working all this time to get around him. It suddenly shot forward, sinking into the guy’s neck a little bit.

“Wondered where that went to,” he said, reaching up and pulling it out. “Hey, how about some healing?” he shouted to the witches.

They started casting, but one of the Yasui clones saw a chance and appeared next to one, kicking it. It was apparently one of the real ones, as she connected, sending the witch flying and making it burn. The two fake ones that were left disappeared, and the other two gave a cry of despair and collapsed.

“Well, crap,” said the one guy left. “Guess maybe I shouldn’t have beat into them that they had to follow my orders instantly. I’m going to have to make a new team now, you know that?”

“Cry me a river,” I said, finally able to touch my ring to the deck of the ship. My “thunderbolt” shot out, making him scream, but he remained standing.

“Fight me like a man,” he said. “Stop using your tricks from way over there!”

“No, I don’t think so. But I’d be happy to send some girls...”

The three Yasui clones converged on him, not going for anything fancy this time- they just smashed their boot heels into his chest.

“Kill you,” he said, as he fell to the deck with a crash.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Yasui.

Island Adventure

“A scratch? Your arm’s off!”

“No it isn’t!”

“What’s that then?”

--Monty Python and the Holy Grail

“That was intense,” said Elizabeth. “Hey, he’s here.”

“Who-”

Coming through the portal that Christina had originally opened was the harper, who leapt through the portal and started frantically searching the body of the man with the black wings. Christina, carrying his harp, followed after.

“Sorry we missed after that, we needed to take care of some demons on this side.”

“He kept singing for us though,” said her clone. “So their attacks never even got close.”

“Elizabeth took out the guns, I haven’t seen any angels yet, though.”

“Let’s get going then,” I said. “That battle felt like it took a long time because of our acceleration, but I doubt it actually did. I know that was a hard fight, but we still have an island to retake. Hopefully we’ll get some reinforcements soon.”

“I can replenish your energy,” said one or the other of the Christinas. “There’s a line near the ship.”

The man gave a cry of relief and pulled out the vial I had seen earlier. He twisted the top and shook out a pill, then went to swallow it.

“No,” I cried, but it was too late, his eyes rolled back and it looked like he was in ecstasy.

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“They addicted him to something?” said Osman. “That’s going to be rough for him.”

“Give me that,” said Elizabeth, flying over to him and grabbing the bottle. He didn’t resist, he was too out of it. “What is this stuff, anyway?”

The man opened his eyes, a big grin on his face. “Hey. Thanks for saving me. You’re pretty!”

She blushed. “You’re high!”

“Totally. What can I do for you, for getting me away from those guys?”

“Stop taking the drug, for one,” I said, walking up to him. “And help us take Demongate Island back.”

“Won’t matter in the long run,” he said wistfully. “That’s all I’ll have left. I don’t know what it was they hooked me on.”

“Can you walk? We have to get going, the demons will be alerted now, this wasn’t supposed to be a big battle.”

“Man, I can do anything now, just say the word. I’m the best songstrel in the world you know?”

“I believe you,” I said, rolling my eyes. *That’s the drugs talking, right?* I thought back to hearing him sing and play his harp. *I suppose if I can be the best talisman maker, I can let him be the best songstrel.* “Let’s go.”

My flight spell had long since expired, so I got out the writings and cast it again, this time including our new friend. We stepped across back to our own plane and the Christinas started filling our energy back up. The deck was cleared of demons, so it was hard to say how many there had been, as they tended to burn up when killed. Looking over I saw the barrels of the guns had been melted to slag, and wondered how long it had taken.

Probably not long.

Our energy restored, we started the second part of our plan, driving the demons back and somehow taking care of chaos.

Elizabeth now took this opportunity to get even bigger, then stood in front waiting for us to move. Osman took to the skies to direct us.

“I may as well set up here,” said Christina as we landed on the beach again. “There doesn’t seem to be much action nearby.”

“Sounds good to me,” I agreed. “One Yasui, stay here. If you’re going to be concentrating on long range stuff, you need someone to watch your local area.”

Yasui nodded. “Got it.”

“Then let’s go.”

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The six of us that were left skimmed the ground, heading for the town. Demons had made some changes here, building barricades and setting up traps. There were forces in the air and on the ground, and as we got near the songstrel started singing again. I had underestimated the amount of firepower the demons had stolen, and mounted guns opened up on us as we got into range. The bullets veered away, allowing the three Elizabeths to do their thing, taking them out with energy attacks in large groups.

Kat warned us several times as we moved through the village that demons were coming out of houses to circle around us, so Yasui and I easily took care of them.

As we got to about the middle of the town, we started seeing unfired guns and other equipment abandoned.

“Looks like they’re running away,” remarked Yasui.

“I know, it’s so hard to find good help nowadays,” said chaos, suddenly standing before us. My left hand, the one holding the still changing essence of order, suddenly jerked as it tried to fly towards its opposite. His hand did the same, and we both grabbed our essence and held it back.

“You came,” I said, with a little nod of my head. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

“I couldn’t miss the fun.”

“It has been pretty fun, actually. Taking our town back, it’s pretty satisfying.”

“I see you found order. Congratulations.”

“It’s all thanks to you. If you hadn’t made that demon that exploded when he died show up, we would never have found that tunnel.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. The question is, can you use it?”

Looking at him, I was able to somehow see him twisting probability. He was trying to make something happen, and from him dozens of “lines” seemed to shoot out from his body. Some were thicker than others, and I realized those were probably things that he had a better chance of making happen. He wanted us to be killed, so the world was basically figuring out how to make that happen. Suddenly the lines converged on the electric wires overhead, and I knew they were probably going to snap and be blown towards us somehow. I willed them to stay where they were, and another line of similar thickness sprang from the essence I was holding. It severed the line connecting him to the wires, which vanished. He looked stunned.

“I guess you can. Still, that was just a test. Let’s see how well you do when we *attack!*”

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As he shouted this, the demons that had been abandoning their posts poured out of hiding, running towards us.

Sorry, he obscured them somehow, I heard Kat thinking to me. We both thought he was alone. More on your left!

With the demons abandoning their firearms and trying to rush us, our songstrel switched to the demotivate melody, causing them to only halfheartedly attack us. Chaos created more probability lines, trying to influence events, but I managed to shut down the thickest ones as they appeared.

You're doing well, said order. Bringing more order to this place is helping restore my powers a little bit. I bet I could do two at once now, try it.

I figured order meant he could cut two of chaos' lines at once, but I got more creative. I shut down one of his lines and focused a line on a demon near Yasui. It wasn't attacking, but it was moving into position. It tried to bring up a claw to slash at Yasui, but found it couldn't, it was stuck in a "not attacking" state. Yasui easily bashed it to dust, as it couldn't dodge either, because it hadn't been dodging when order's power went into it.

"No!" shouted chaos, obviously displeased I had figured out another way to use the essence.

Suddenly, brilliant spheres of light descended from the sky, and magic flashed around us and the demons. The virtues had arrived! Osman, true to his word, had petitioned a staggering number of them, and they were eradicating demons and enhancing us with their magic.

"We've locked him into this dimension with magic," one of the virtues said, hovering near me. "What will you do with him?"

"See if I can't separate that chaos essence from the man. I hate to kill him, he may be innocent."

"An enlightened viewpoint. We shall--"

Without a word, chaos turned and ran, disappearing out of sight even faster than I could track him. And I was accelerated thanks to my talisman.

"I did not expect him to move so quickly," said the virtue. "But he is still bound here."

"What about the demon gate? Maybe he can't escape on his own, but could he step through that?"

"I admit, I do not know. I have never tested such a means of overcoming the planar hold spell."

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“We have to get down there,” I said, touching my pouch and willing a teleport ward out of it. “I just hope...” That was when I realized I had never actually seen the demon gate from this side- I had no idea what the tunnel looked like. I had seen the other end, at a great distance, when we visited the “training camp” a while ago, and from above when Nagatobimaru had grabbed us up. “We’ll have to walk down there,” I decided, visualizing the entrance to the school at least, getting us somewhat closer.

“Your virtues can handle things here, can’t you? Though I wouldn’t mind you coming along, if you’re willing.”

It bobbed in the air. “We shall go together, young one.”

“Thank you. Come on!”

We stepped through.

Pounding through the school, I saw the place had been totally trashed, as expected. Walls were torn down or defaced, rotting meat and other garbage littered the halls. One Elizabeth had come with us, smaller now to fit through the halls. We raced to the door leading down to the tunnels beneath the school, and flew down them without touching a single one.

We might as well not have bothered.

At the bottom of the stairs was chaos, bleeding to death. The stump of his arm and the ground here were soaked in blood, and the virtue immediately started casting a spell. The arm, a little distance away, was burning up, leaving behind the “roots” of chaos, which were slowly reforming into a blob. I hung back, afraid if I got too near, it might fly towards me, attracted to the order essence.

“What happened?” asked Yasui, looking around. “Who took him out?”

Yasui and clone went a little way into the tunnels but found no one, and both came back shaking their heads.

“There’s another mystery,” I said. “I expected demons to be pouring down here, trying to get back home. We haven’t seen a single one since we got here. Why is that?”

But no one had any answers, and we were now stuck trying to figure out what to do with the essence that had been seemingly handed to us.

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“I don’t recommend any of you picking it up,” I warned. “Even with your armor, Yasui.”

“My clone could do it!” she said. “Even if she got taken over, I can just dismiss it and poof!”

“Well, okay. I don’t want to leave it lying here. Go find something to put it in. Elizabeth, go with her.”

“Sure thing.” She leaned closer to me. “To make sure she doesn’t go nuts and try to escape, right?” I nodded. “Got it.”

They went off, allowing me to relax my grip on order, which had been straining a bit to fly towards chaos. By this time, the man had regrown his arm and was groaning like he was going to wake up soon. We didn’t have long to wait.

“What happened?” he weakly asked. “I feel strange.”

“No doubt,” I said. “Do you remember what’s been going on?”

He looked with terror at his hand, jerking wide awake. “It’s gone! I mean it’s back! I mean... did that really happen?”

“Did what really happen?” asked a Yasui.

“It’s been so hard lately to focus. That... thing was taking me over. But I could have sworn an arrow shot my arm off when I got down here.”

“Arrow?” I trailed off. Suddenly, a lot of things made sense to me.

“Christina!” said Yasui. I nodded.

“Yeah. That’s why she had to be here. That’s why Osman had to be here. That’s why I had to be here as an artificer. Without all of our contributions, he would have gotten away for sure.”

Yasui thought for a moment. “I think I get it. Without Osman there would have been no eye power for you to put into Christina’s talisman. Without that talisman she wouldn’t have made the shot that severed chaos. And you tied it together.”

“Exactly.”

“So what about us? Elizabeth and me?”

“You think any of this would have been possible without your support? The clone technique, I wouldn’t have had that without you. Plus the group needed a close in fighter.”

“Excuse me?” asked the man. “What’s going on?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Just shop talk. We need to get you out of here. Can you walk?”

“I think so. I feel oddly whole, given what I think I’ve been through.”

FINDING THE BALANCE

“You can thank the angel for that. regeneration magic, if I don’t miss my guess.”

He smiled weakly at the angel and we helped him up, steadying him as he went up the stairs.

“Look, would you be okay if we just left you in the nurse's office?” I asked the guy. “If it isn’t too trashed, I mean. We still have the rest of the island to clear out, our day is just starting.”

“No need for that,” said a voice. “We’ll take him from here.”

A man and a woman in Foundation uniforms were heading up the hall towards us. Yasui stepped in front of us.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Whoa, take it easy,” they said, holding up their hands. “We’re with the force that attacked the other side of the island while you were clearing the town, Dean.”

“What?”

“Take a look,” the man said, pointing a finger out the window. I went over to it, not taking my eyes off the pair, and quickly looked out. Then I took a longer look, and they were right. The courtyard outside seemed to be swarming with people, all in Foundation uniforms. Demons were being secured, and there were some people being healed as well.

“You did it, Dean,” said the man with a smile. “You let us take back the island.”

“We already won?” I asked, shocked.

“Come and see for yourself.”

So we went outside again, and Christina ran up to us.

“You’re welcome,” she said, a huge grin on her face.

“No, you’re welcome,” I countered, “for the talisman.”

“Plenty of congratulations to go around,” I heard someone yell, coming up to us. It was Mr DeLefeu, cane in one hand, an old looking revolver in the other. “Well done, everyone.”

“Okay, stop. Wait a second,” I said angrily. “What’s all this? How did you even know to come here?”

“Ah, that’s a good story,” he said. “To shorten it a bit, we got smart and had our seers ask ‘When would be the best time to attack the island.’ We were hoping to catch chaos asleep or something, but the answer we got back was ‘When Dean does.’ So we’ve been waiting for you to resurface, and came to help.”

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“I see. So hopefully Mr DeVille isn’t going to be coming after me anymore, now?”

“He has been acting a little strange, but he says he’s thinking a bit differently now. He... may or may not apologize to you.”

“Great,” I said sarcastically.

“Ah, now don’t be like that. The five of you are celebrities now, you know that? Taking on a whole island of demons at once.” He chuckled. “That’s worth a book deal or two right there.”

“HA! I want at least four, telling of all my adventures, and those of my friends, of course.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” he said laughing. “In the meantime, let’s do something about those... things you’re carrying.” He pointed to the essence in my hand, and being carried by a Yasui clone.

We all looked at the man who had been carrying chaos around.

“Nothing I can do about it,” he said. “I’m still trying to piece together what I’ve been doing the last few months. It’s so fuzzy.”

“As long as you can remember where you picked the essence up from, that’ll do. We can take the image from your mind.”

“Are they going back there, though?” I asked. “I mean those locations have been compromised now.”

“Perhaps. For the moment we’d just like to secure them. Not that we think you’ll go berserk carrying the thing around, but let’s be safe rather than sorry. We have some warded safes to put them in while we figure out where they’re going.”

Is that okay with you? I asked the essence.

My power is growing again, and placing me in a ‘safe’ will not diminish it. Let them separate us if that is their desire. We have accomplished the task our being together required.

“Order agrees.”

“Great!”

And so the long cleanup began. seers headed teams to make sure all demons had been chased off the island. Returning them through the gate if willing, or destroying them, if not. Everyone with powers was invited back to help rebuild their town, which took about two months all told. Even with the presence of alchemist and spirit energists to “refuel” them, there was still only so much they could do in a day. And the place was pretty well trashed. Plus, it had to be done properly, which meant actual engi-

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neers overseeing the work so everything was structurally sound. There weren't many with that experience who also had powers, so they were stretched pretty thin.

Kat apologized for not directing us more. She said Osman had seen the other force attacking the opposite end of the island and they both decided they needed help more than we did. The others had been surprised to hear her sendings, but they had helped tremendously, so I could hardly be angry with them.

My parents moved back to the island, and I said my goodbyes to Lynsey and the others I had met in my old neighborhood. I only told Lynsey the real reason we were moving again, and she was pleased that the world would go back to normal, finally. She asked what was happening about my friends and I graduating, and I said the Foundation had graduated us for our work in the field.

They had also given me a job, remaking the talisman that was the Eiffel Tower. I accepted, it seemed a job worthy of my talents, and useful for when it was finished. Being the guy who did that would drive business for when I started making talismans for people like my mother did. After all, making things ran in both sides of my family.

As for the chaos and order essences, it was determined that the ice in both places had shifted enough over the millions of years since the Earth's creation to let their powers be unable to directly oppose each other. This let chaos choose an 'avatar' and get him there to take up the essence. Now that we humans knew it existed, it looked like the task of keeping them directly opposite each other fell to us. They went back to the poles, with new guidelines to tell future generations to keep an eye on them.

I argued something else must have happened, if the system had been set up by the All-Father, it should have been perfect. Osman countered that, yes, it had been set up perfect, but with allowances for us to learn about it and take over worrying about it. When we were ready- which clearly we were. I wasn't convinced, now that it was known someone could just pick up chaos and start wrecking havoc with the world, they would have to be very carefully guarded.

"I guess we'll have to get a good talisman maker to really secure them, then," he joked. "I'll look online to see if I can find one."

The man that had held chaos for so long became a touched, and went to special classes to control his new powers. It seemed a sliver of chaos remained inside him, allowing him a small measure of probability

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control. The training was more for the sake of others than him, in the beginning he used it unconsciously, causing problems for those around him. But with time and a little effort he got it under control, and now helps the Foundation out with certain things.

Elizabeth and the songstrel we had rescued got to know each other. Once the drug was out of his system and the long, painful recovery process was over, he got well and started working through some mental issues he picked up from being captive. Apparently the group had been a nephil, a descended, and a witch that apparently had a divided soul. That explained how they were able to act in unison, and why all three had died when only one of them had been killed. They had been some mercenary group, and the Foundation was pretty pleased they didn't have to worry about them anymore. (Not that they paid us any sort of bounty or anything for taking care of them.)

Cheapskates.

Elizabeth herself seemed relieved to have some of her questions answered. Now that she knew that chaos had been behind the odd things happening in her life before she came to Demongate, and chaos was now safely returned, she felt justified in leaving that part of her life behind her. She told us all about the bizarre happenings she lived through, and I gained a real respect for her strength of character. She went back to Demongate High when it reopened, ready to finally complete her training.

Yasui and I stayed together, and life went back to normal for all of us.

As normal as life for a graduate of Demongate High could be.

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Epilogue

Three years had passed since the retaking of the island. While demons had, under the direction of chaos, learned to think ahead more and combine their abilities, they were slowing going back to their old ways. This was not what was making me nervously pace the hallway.

Business was good. I had finished, after two years of intense effort, remaking the talisman that was the Eiffel Tower. I had as much work as I wanted, making the most amazing talismans the world had ever seen. My name was spread far and wide across the world, and a “Dean talisman” would fetch a very high price on the open market given how well they were made. Of course, I didn’t put my full potential into everything, the Foundation and I had long discussions about that. But for certain trusted individuals, or for certain high risk missions- they came to me. This was not what was making me nervously pace the hallway.

Elizabeth and Rainero, the songstrel, were getting married in a few weeks, and I was hoping to get their wedding rings done by that time. It was going to be tricky, given what was going on in my life now, but even this was not the thing that worried me, making me pace the hallway.

The new policies were being debated in the Foundation, to allow modern weapon training for anyone that wanted it. seers especially would be encouraged to take at least a basic gun course, so that every person that graduated from Demongate High could at least defend themselves in one way or another. The vote was coming up, and it looked like it would pass, allowing guns on campus for the first time ever. Oh, there had been the occasional one, handed down in a family as an inherited item, but nothing on a large scale. Most demons could be killed with bullets, so why waste energy using powers on them when guns were so much more efficient? But even this was not what had me pacing the hallway.

“You can come in now, Mr Chesterfield,” said the woman, popping her head out the door.

I couldn’t help but groan a little. *Mr Chesterfield. Isn’t that my father, not me?*

“Is she all right?” I asked.

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“Both are fine,” she answered with a smile. “Everything went smoothly.”

I stood next to my wife’s bed, and she turned the little person so it could look up at me.

“That’s your daddy,” she said with a smile. “Dean, meet your new daughter, Ericka Chesterfield.”

“Hello, little one,” I said softly. “Welcome to the world.”

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Glossary

Air Step: Many different ways exist of standing on air as though it was solid ground. They all share the characteristics of being easy to remain in place, but extremely difficult to remain in the air and move at any reasonable speed. Can save your life if you fall, but forget chasing someone via this technique.

Analysis: An alchemist must first experience the molecular structure of something before they can use abilities on it. Using this skill, which takes about a minute, can tell them about the substance in question. More experienced alchemists get more information as they practice this skill.

Bloodiron: An invulnerable metal, mined in the Demon World. Bleeds instead of rusting, if not taken care of properly, hence the name.

Cache: A ward that allows the storage of another power, to be activated later.

Charna: progenitor who tried to destroy the three major dimensions around Earth with a super canon she built on the moon. Killed by several students who graduated the year before Dean enters Demongate High.

Compulsion: An ESPer skill to force a person to believe or take some action you suggest.

Dreamer: Extinct power, at one time could draw upon a fraction of the All-Father's power, while sleeping, and change reality to an extent. Dean cut this power off, see Book 2.

Grasshopper's Leap: A true martial artist technique allowing one to jump great distances.

Uealing Acceleration: An ESPer technique to speed healing times dramatically.

Illusion: An ESPer technique to implant false images, sounds or physical sensations into another person's brain. Katrina uses them to give others

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something to talk to, as she has no physical form apart from her brother, Osman.

Magic Sense: As with spirit sense, allows one to get a feel for magic in the area, or guess what planet of spells a spell is from.

Seeking: A seer technique, to literally pull an answer to a question out of nowhere.

Sending: An ESPer or seer technique that can put thoughts in the heads of others. The person you are sending to must be known and the difficulty varies by distance.

Shattering Strike: A true martial artist technique to destroy something, like a car or a boulder, in a single attack.

Songstrel: Able to create supernatural effects through song or music.

Spirit Energy: What allows people to put effort into doing something, such as lifting something heavy or running long distances. Most supernatural powers also consume at least some energy.

Spirit Clone: A true martial artist technique of creating temporary bodies made of spirit energy to confuse foes. Disappear after being struck. Must be called out to create, as this focuses the power for the technique.

Spirit Grade: The ability of certain people to achieve, through concentration and will, an excited state giving them a temporary boost of energy. There are 5 grades, each one granting significantly more power than the previous. Higher grades cause damage to physical surroundings and electrical equipment in an expanding radius.

Spirit Manipulation: The ability to use more energy than your normal physical body allows. Using this skill is automatic for the most part, but by concentrating, an even greater amount can be expended for a brief instant.

Spirit Mastery: A technique used by spirit energists to manipulate energy in the environment, and can allow them to use techniques that normally only affect them to be used on others.

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Spirit Projection: An ability of shamans to project part of their soul outside their bodies to fight on their behalf and protect them. Usually takes the form of a stylized animal, and is unseen and invulnerable to start. It can learn to use other powers as the shaman grows in experience.

Spirit Sense: A technique anyone with powers can learn to feel out another's power level, ley lines in the area, or hidden foes. Taught as a second year course.

Spirit Step—Using spirit energy rather than physical motion to move about. Tiring, but allows instantaneous movement from one place to another. Short range.

Spirit Viewing: A seer technique allowing the flow of spirit energy through a person or place to be noticed visually.

Talisman: More durable than a ward but taking much longer to create, a talisman shows no outward sign of being supernatural. Like a ward, can be activated and used by anyone, and they can in theory create almost any effect. Most inherited items are talismans created long ago in history and passed down in a family. As with wards, almost any effect can be placed into a talisman upon creation.

Time Frame: A talisman made by Dean, shows the past.

Transmogrification: An alchemist skill able to reshape matter into new forms.

Transmutation: An alchemist skill able to turn one form of matter into another, for example wood into steel. Density must remain consistent between forms, so turning a pound of steel into cardboard will result in a greater volume of cardboard than steel.

Tyrfake: The name given to a sword, created by Charna, to fool some people into thinking they were using the sword of Tyr, when in reality she had stolen it.

Ward: By drawing symbols with ink on a surface and charging it with spirit energy, an artificer can create one time use objects with certain ef-

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fects, such as paralyzing or healing someone the ward is attached to. Other types of wards such as origami folding or wood burning are also known. Can be activated by anyone but an artificer can spend more energy to increase the effect upon activation.